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**RAIN WASHED THE OLD WORLD AWAY:
EMPIRE AND THE NOVEL IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

with an emphasis in CRITICAL RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES

by

Kelsey McFaul

December 2023

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**Rain Washed the Old World Away:
Empire and the Novel in the Horn of Africa**

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A Note on Language

Horn of Africa writers are referred to in the text first by their full name, then their first name; in the bibliography they are organized by their first name, for instance as Afäwärk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus. In cultural naming conventions, the first name refers to the person him or herself, the second to their father, and the third (for Somalis) to their paternal father. If writers have adopted Western conventions and published under a particular last name, Igiaba Scego for example, this last name is used for in text references and in the bibliography. In the case of English publications by Horn of African writers, I have maintained authors' transliterations of their own names and non-English words.

In the case of English translations, I have maintained translators' transliterations. Somali place and personal names in this text follow Somali orthography: the Latin "c" stands for a sound close to the Arabic ع (ayn), "x" denotes the strongly-aspirated ح (ha), while long vowels are indicated by doubling them, as in Faarax. For the transliteration of Amharic words in the dissertation and the translation, I have followed Sara Marzagora (2015)'s transliteration scheme presented below, which I found clear and simple to understand.

All translations from Amharic and French are mine unless otherwise noted. For texts composed in Arabic, Italian, Tigrinya, and Somali, I rely on the translations of others who are cited in the text. All errors in transliteration and translation are my own.

Vowels

1st order	2nd order	3rd order	4th order	5th order	6th order	7th order
ተ = tä	ቲ = tu	ቲ = ti	ታ = ta	ቲ = te	ቲ = tə	ቲ = to

Consonants

Amharic has five explosive (glottalized or ejective) consonants which have been transliterated with a dot below (ṭ / ṣ / ḳ / ṗ / ḅ).

Amharic fidel	Transliteration	Common alternative transliterations	Description	Pronunciation examples
ሀ, ሐ, ሓ	ha			Like h in English <i>hail</i>
ለ	lä			Like l in English <i>lion</i>
መ	mä			Like m in English <i>mother</i>
ሠ, ሰ	sä			Like s in English <i>sun, song</i>
ረ	rä			Like r in Italian/Spanish <i>rosa</i>
ሸ	šä	sh		Like sh in English <i>share</i>
ቀ	ḳä	q	Explosive k	
በ	bä			Like b in English <i>boy</i>
ተ	tä			Like t in English <i>toy</i>
ቸ	čä	ch, tch		Like ch in English <i>chair</i>
ነ	nä			Like n in English <i>name</i>
ኸ	ñä	ny, gn, ñ		Like ñ in Spanish <i>piña</i> Like gn in Italian <i>gnocchi</i>
ከ	kä			Like k in English <i>key</i>
ወ	wä			Like w in English <i>water</i>
ዘ	zä			Like z in English <i>zone</i>
ገፍ	žä	j		Like j in French <i>jeudi</i> Like s in English <i>leisure</i>
የ	yä			Like y in English <i>young, yes</i>
ደ	dä			Like d in English <i>dice</i>
ጀ	jä	ǰ		Like j in English <i>joy</i>
ገ	gä			Like g in English <i>girl</i>
ጠ	ṭä		Explosive t	
ጨ	čä	ch, tch	Explosive č	
ጰ	pä		Explosive p	
ጸ, ፀ	šä	ts, tz	Explosive s	Like z in Italian <i>ragazzo</i>
ፈ	fä			Like f in English <i>fox</i>
ፐ	pä			Like p in English <i>pear</i>

Abstract

Rain Washed the Old World Away: Empire and the Novel in the Horn of Africa Kelsey McFaul

The literature of the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Somalia) together composes a regional literary ecology. While largely erased in literary and African studies, the Horn and its literatures—written in languages including Amharic, Tigrinya, Somali, English, French, and Italian—emerge in relation to compounding scales of social and environmental loss across the long twentieth century and into the twenty-first. By attending to the aesthetic language of nature and weather in Horn of Africa novels and the divergent, unmappable, and undisciplined ways of being and thinking they engender, this project argues that Global South literary cultures such as the Horn’s have long been aware of and lived with real and metaphorical extreme weather. Moreover, writers use imperially-contaminated literary forms such as the novel to narrate, bear witness to, and grieve the losses caused by empire that traverse personal, communal, and environmental scales. Working with a multinational, multitemporal, and multilingual archive, this project develops a ground-up critical analytic that enacts methodological and disciplinary alternatives to the siloed categories of academic study. It presents African literary texts as modes of environmental theory, situated knowledge, and critical and creatively productive grief, and it insists on critical recognition of the Horn of Africa outside the well-trod registers of natural disaster and social conflict.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the lands on which this dissertation was conceptualized and written and to their original inhabitants. These include the lands of the Tongva (Gabrieleno) and Fernandeano Tataviam peoples and of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, as well as the traditional lands of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band of the Ohlone people (UC Santa Cruz) and of the Spokane Tribe of the Interior Salish people (my hometown). I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which I work and pay respect to indigenous elders past, present, and emerging. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be indigenous land. I recognize the past atrocities against indigenous peoples of this land and that the United States of America was founded on the genocide and dispossession of Native American people. I acknowledge that settler colonial structures and policies remain in place today and stand in solidarity with the ongoing struggles of Native American peoples in dismantling those structures. I affirm that all anti-imperial struggles are connected and that this dissertation's attention to ontological, epistemological, and relational loss also bears on the lands on which I work. I support the equitable distribution of land. I join the work to remember and address imperial pasts and to seek justice, the necessary requirements for individual, collective, and ecological healing.

My deepest gratitude to all those whom I have learned from and thought with throughout this project. You and your insights have irrigated, cultivated, pruned, and brought fruit to it and to me. Thank you especially to my committee Vilashini Cooppan, Sharon Kinoshita, Gina Dent, and Nidhi Mahajan for your steadfast support and for your scholarly mentorship and example. Vilashini, thank you for your vision and your constancy. Sharon, Gina, and Nidhi, thank you for the gifts of your time, close attention, and situated perspectives.

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And thank you to Matt, the deep roots in the dark, for always being there.

But a storm is blowing in from Paradise...one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage...[ever] skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

—Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

brush in hand the wind sketches
landscapes of words
sculpted mountain slopes
shadow plains
horizon enclaves

—Abdourahman A. Waberi

The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies. *Ecology: the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings...*

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

Introduction

Extreme Weather: Storms as critical methodology

Mihret Sibhat’s novel *The History of a Difficult Child* (2023) begins with a rainstorm: “God is trying to get rid of all the water in His possession, so He [hurls] down the water with all his might...where it lands on a small town in southwestern Ethiopia, where this phenomenon is known as bokkaa or zinab, depending on which language your family speaks” (Mihret, *History*, 1). The rain comes down with violence, “the liquid blanketing your face;” the thunder starts “GOU-GOU-GOU-GOU-ing” and the lightning “cuts through the thick black cloud like it’s trying to open the sky for the Return,” the Christian end of days (Mihret, *History*, 1). The rain “pound[s] on the corrugated tin roof” and the “flood” from the gutter takes away everything—“pieces of paper, plastic bags, somebody’s rubber shoe, eroded soil, orange-tree leaves, small balls made of old socks stuffed with pieces of fabric and sponges”—enough water to “wash away a whole country’s transgressions” (Mihret, *History*, 1, 4).

A similarly dark and foreboding storm barrels through the middle of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* (1908), a foundational fiction of Ethiopia written in Amharic by Afäwärķ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus a century earlier. At first clouds appear as “something black” on the horizon, then materialize into “clouds [like those] in the month of heavy rains,” a swirling “cloud of dust,” and finally, the horses and soldiers of an invading army [ጠቁሮ፥ የሐምሌን ደመና፥ ቧሂት ያካላችው የመሰለ አባራ ቀጥ] (Afäwärķ 34).¹ Since in the Horn

¹ All translations of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, also known as *Tobbya*, are from my translation of the text found in Appendix 1. For a full reading of the novel, see Chapter 1.

of Africa where the narrative is set, rains and dust storms occur in alternating seasons, their co-mingling in a single storm evokes an collapse of space-time, an anticipated existential scale of destruction comparable to multiple natural disasters occurring in the same season and the same place.

In *Adua* (2015), an Italian-language novel by Igiaba Scego, a heavy rainstorm in Addis Ababa transforms the Ethiopian capital into “an endless expanse of mud” on the heels of the arrival of Italian imperialists in 1935 (Scego, *Adua*, 87).² The Italians fill their conversation with “meteorological matters” and complaints about the chilly conditions, the opposite of what they had been led to expect in their hot and dry coastal Eritrean colony (Scego, *Adua*, 87). For their translator, a Somali-Muslim, the weather recalls memories of past storms in the rain-soaked city:

[In Addis] the sky seemed like it was about to crush the residents with its destructive fury. Nature was not kind in Addis Ababa and even the air was hostile...the cold breath of the highlands hit him square in the face...But as his father, Haji Safar, always said, that city [also]...had a heart that cradled the dreams of babes on stormy nights. (Scego, *Adua*, 88)

The hostile-tender nature of the storm captures the concentric circles and telescoping nature of time and space that characterize not only this novel, but also the larger multispatial, multitemporal, and multilingual archive of this project. Seeing through the eye of this storm as the translator does, we are both in the immediate present of 1935 and in overlapping circles of previous storms: those witnessed by the father (whose name references both the journey to Mecca and the Islamic month of high winds); those imagined around earlier generations of babies including those who

² All translations of *Adua* are from Jamie Richards’ English language translation with the same title.

witnessed the Battle of Adwa; those that mark the translator's reunion with his daughter (also, like the novel, named Adua); and those always swirling around the city itself. In short, the storm is past, present, and future. As it sweeps down from the highlands, across the plateau of the city, and—in the translator's mind—to the coastal lowlands of his childhood, the storm gathers up and sutures together the interrelated geographies of the Horn, each freighted with their own histories and relations to the “destructive fury” of European colonialism and the modern Ethiopian state that exceed typical colonial, precolonial, and postcolonial temporalities and spatialities (Scego, *Adua*, 88).

Hardly background features, the storms moving through these Horn of Africa novels are active environmental and narratological forces, freighted with non-human agency and laden with the debris of human history. Storms pick up shared historical, intertextual, linguistic, cultural, religious, and ecological material—for instance names for rain, relations to God, seasons, and recyclings of the name Adwa—and carry them around, dispersing, reconfiguring, and recontextualizing them within an archive of texts in different languages, times, and spaces. Just as distinct landscapes can be drawn together by the shared effects of a storm path, so the movement of storms' swirls, eddies, absorptions, dissipations, and disseminations connects texts to one another even as it disorients a reader used to the typical conventions of literary study. Such a reader would be unlikely read texts written in English in 2023, Amharic in 1908, and Italian in 2015 together.

Yet the presence of storms is hardly unique to these three novels. The regional Horn of Africa literary archive sketched in this project is storm-dense and far exceeds the nine novels from the Horn of Africa considered in this dissertation: there is “rain in the air” and on the skin in Sulaiman Addonia’s *Silence is My Mother Tongue* (2020, English) and “the unmistakable tick tack of warm raindrops...the scent of damp soil...so strong it left an indelible trace” in Shirin Ramzanali Fazel’s *Far From Mogadishu* (2016, Italian and English) (Sulaiman 68; Shirin 16). Haji Jaber’s *Black Foam* (2018, Arabic) begins when “[t]he sky was bleak [and] the weather verged on chilly;” in Nadifa Mohamed’s *Black Mamba Boy* (2009, English), “a deep murmuring came from the skies, a torrent...*bhesh, bhesh, bhesh*, and land slid down the hillside...rain washed the old world away” (Haji 1; Mohamed 198). In Gabriella Ghermandi’s *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007, Italian), there is “water, more water...[then] with the water came hail, balls as big as peanuts;” in between storms “the rainwater formed pools” and “rivulets” and just as they began to decrease, “wind brought another storm and the water started up again” (Ghermandi 52). In Girma Fantaye’s *Self Meda* (2014, Amharic), “the rain itself was disorderly,” with a mind of its own; “when [it] wants to it blows with the wind and disturbs the environment, and then it calms down again” [ዝናሙ ራሱ መላ ያጣ ነው። ሲሻው ነፈሕ ቀላቅሎ አካባቢውን ይመስቃቅለውና ከዚያ ደግሞ ጋብ ይላል] (Girma 13, my translation).

Like conversations about the weather, eruptions of atmospheric activity and extreme weather might appear to be mere background material, quotidian, diversionary, and empty signifiers. Yet by taking storms seriously as animate forces

blowing when they want to and an object of literary study—not only the literal presence of storms in texts, but also the storm as metaphor, as ontological and epistemological index, as aesthetic paradigm, and as formal mode—storms emerge as a means of tracing shared political histories; environmental epistemes; and linguistic, cultural, and religious worlds. In so doing they unsettle conventional assumptions of what the novel is, its teleological temporality, circumscribed spatiality, and anthropomorphic scale. By suspending such interpretative categories, storms provide the grounds, or set the atmosphere, for a reading of the novel as a “storm form,” an unwieldy and tempestuous, organic and melancholic structure that keeps alive what might otherwise be lost to the real and metaphorical, ontological and epistemological storms that have plagued the Horn of Africa region across the long twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Storms also unsettle the argument, made most prominently by Amitav Ghosh, that contemporary epistemological and imaginative modes are insufficient for dealing with the extreme nature of today’s climate events. Ghosh maintains that the novel genre and its allegedly human scope cannot fully apprehend what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). Nixon’s examples of slow violence in literature range from the impacts of oil extraction in Nigeria and the Middle East and deforestation in Kenya, to the environmental consequences of the Iraq war and the tourism industry in Antigua and South Africa. Slow violence is also

evident, I argue, in the Horn of Africa's extreme drought and flood cycles caused by anthropogenic climate change, and soil erosion and loss of biodiversity due to the curtailment of traditional land management practices.

Ghosh begins his argument about the novel's insufficiency by describing a cataclysmic storm, a "freak funnel-shaped whirlwind" that hurtled through Delhi in 1978 (Ghosh 13). He recalls that

my surroundings had been darkened by a churning cloud of dust. In the dim glow that was shining down from above, I saw an extraordinary panoply of objects flying past—bicycles, scooters, lampposts, sheets of corrugated iron, even entire tea stalls. In that instant, gravity itself seemed to have been transformed into a wheel spinning upon the fingertip of some unknown power. (Ghosh 12-13)

Despite the storm's "irreducibly mysterious" effect, when Ghosh asks himself what he would make of "such a scene were I to come across it in a novel written by someone else," he settles on "incredulity" and "improbability" (Ghosh 14-15, 16). Relegating such extreme events to the purview of fantastical genres like fantasy and sci-fi rather than "serious fiction," he neglects to theorize his own description of the storm further nor acknowledge the great multiplicity of literary fiction, some of which has been sampled above, in which storms register believably in a number of critical ways (Ghosh 9).

This dissertation argues that it is precisely the dismissal of "meteorological matters" in literary texts and the divergent, unmappable, and undisciplined ways of being and thinking they represent that leads to claims that contemporary imaginative modes such as the novel cannot address today's multi-scalar and accumulative climate realities (Scego, *Adua*, 88). Attention to the presence of storms and other

natural material in novels makes clear that literary cultures such as the Horn of Africa have long been aware of and lived with real and metaphorical extreme weather while creating literature that narrates, bears witness to, and grieves it. Approaching literary texts as modes of environmental theory, situated knowledge, and ecocritical consciousness, this project develops a ground-up critical analytic of the storm. The storm analytic initiates methodological and disciplinary diversions to the spatially, temporally, and linguistically siloed categories of academic study and invites critical recognition of the Horn of Africa outside its well-trod registers of natural disaster and social conflict.

Fracturing ground, fracturing time: the Horn of Africa in context

The Horn of Africa—home to the present-day nation-states of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland³—is named for the tusk-shaped curve of land that extends out from the northeastern corner of the African continent, one curve jutting into the Red Sea and the other into the Indian Ocean. Not only English but many of the region’s languages use the metaphor of a material from the animal world to delineate a geographic space: Amharic [የአፍሪካ ቀንድ / yäafrika qänd], Arabic [القرن الأفريقي / al-qarn al-'afriqī], French [la corne de l’afrique], Italian [corno d’Africa],

³ This project recognizes Somaliland’s sovereignty, which was self-declared in 1991 but remains unrecognized by the international community. The Horn of Africa is commonly defined as including the five countries (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland) within the horn-shaped peninsula that extends out into the Indian Ocean, but the Greater Horn of Africa region can include Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, and in some instances, Uganda.

Oromo [Gaaffaa Afriikaa], and Tigrinya [ቀርኒ ኣፍሪቃ / q'ärnī afīrīqa].⁴ The black rhino, whose historic grazing range includes parts of Ethiopia, is one possible source of the metaphor, but the region is home to many other horned animals including the gazelle, kudu, beisa oryx, and waterbuck. In its zoological inspiration, the metaphor centers the nonhuman world and draws attention to the Horn as a regional form not immanent but *produced* through the human process of being read. An act of spatial interpretation, the Horn encodes a regionally recognized significance for natural environments and nonhuman life within its narrative forms, a feature we will trace throughout this project.

The Horn's residents refer to its geographies according to a series of distinct yet interconnected ecologic zones—mountain highlands (däga in Amharic, buuraha in Somali), interior plateaus (wäyna däga in Amharic, oogo and haud in Somali), and coastal lowlands (kōla and bārāha in Amharic, guban in Somali)—created by the rumbling and buckling of a triple junction of the earth's tectonic plates (Mesfin). The collision of these plates (the Red Sea Rift, the Aden Ridge, and the East African Rift) makes the Horn one of the most active seismic zones on the planet, a present-day example of continental rifting in which the ground itself is unsettled, alive, and on the move. Like each of the ecological zones, the geologic depression created by the junction, the Afar Triangle, overlaps the borders of Eritrea, Djibouti, and the Afar region of Ethiopia. A sunken cauldron of boiling temperatures, dry winds, and hard

⁴ The region is also known as the Somali peninsula, or in the Somali language, Geeska Afrika, Jasiiradda Soomaali or Gacandhulka Soomaali.

ground, it is the lowest and hottest spot on the African continent. Turning inland, the depression lengthens into a tear in the lithosphere, the layer between the Earth's continental crust and its mantle, branching into two main rifts: the Eastern Rift Valley crumples up into the interior plateaus and mountain escarpments of the Horn, some of which soar as high as 4500 meters, while the Western Rift Valley opens basin lakes interspersed with mountain ranges as far south as Tanzania and Mozambique.

Caught within the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), monsoonal winds, Saharan sandstorms, ocean currents and jet-streams, tropical cyclones, and neighboring Indian Ocean and Red Sea conditions, with the ground literally shifting under its feet, the Horn is a place of extreme weather. Most parts of the highly varied topography have a bimodal rainfall pattern, with a small (bälg in Amharic, dayr in Somali) and long (kärämt in Amharic, gu in Somali) rainy season intersected by a harvest (mäkär in Amharic) and followed by a dry (bäga in Amharic, jilaal in Somali) season, though some parts of northern Ethiopia have only one long rainy season. Average rainfall and temperature can vary from over 78 inches and 59 degrees Fahrenheit in the highlands to less than 7-12 inches and 75-95 degrees Fahrenheit in the lowlands; some areas on the coast receive less than two inches of rain a year (Regassa et al.).

When rains fail, drought comes. With some variation in location, the Horn has had close to forty droughts in the last century, roughly one every three years, and drought frequency has doubled in the past two decades (Abera et al.; Luseno et al.; Regassa et al.; Baxter et. al). At the time of writing, the Horn is in the midst of the

longest drought in western record, six consecutive below-average or absent rainy seasons that have affected more than 3.3 million people, displaced more than 1.75 million, and caused the death of millions of livestock (UNHCR). Drought creates soil erosion and powerful sandstorms that bury entire towns; in early 2023, it was exacerbated by intense heavy rains that created flash flooding that submerged towns “like an ocean” (Gabobe and Mahmood; Reuters).

The century-long drying period in the Horn is the most rapid of the last 2000 years and coincides—coincidentally according to climatologists—almost exactly with the fragmentation of African environments into European colonies beginning in the late nineteenth century. While the drying of the Horn of Africa has long confounded climate models, an anomaly called the East African Paradox, recent scholarship suggests that the region’s intense and unpredictable weather is attributable to anthropogenic climate change, including but not limited to Indian Ocean warming as a result of greenhouse gas emissions (*Climate Change Profile*; Tierney et al.; Baxter et al.).

Contributing less than one percent to global emissions but among the ten percent of the planet most vulnerable to present and future climate changes, the Horn of Africa and its increasingly extreme weather exemplify the effects of Nixon’s slow violence and what Farhana Sultana calls “climate coloniality,” or the spatial and temporal extension of “colonialism’s racism and environmental destruction...through climate impacts in the post-colony” (*Climate Change Profile*; Sultana 3). Like Ghosh,

Sultana uses the personal experience of an extreme storm to initiate her thinking, including an extended journal entry:

[I clearly remember] that night in April 1991 when a massive tropical cyclone barreled into desh [Bangladesh], how the sound of the storm, the trees churning, and buildings shaking scared me throughout the night. I was terrified by the deafening sounds across the land and howling winds outside that battered everything, knowing instinctively a disaster was unfolding. (Sultana 2, brackets in original)

Unlike Ghosh though, Sultana uses her “situated” and “partial” account of the storm to put forward an understanding of climate coloniality “theorized and grounded in lived experience...the fleshiness of climate, the pasts and presents in our bodies, minds, soils, kin” (Sultana 3). While alternative epistemologies and cosmologies of climate emerging out of lived experience are devalued in the Eurocentric modernity that created climate coloniality in the first place, Sultana argues that attending to them—what she calls “feeling with climate change”—opens up an apprehension of climate coloniality’s seeping “heaviness...the erosions it propels, the suffocations it creates, the intergenerational traumas” that persist far beyond the temporal boundaries of the colonial period (Sultana 3).

Pastoralists and farmers in the Horn of Africa have long used alternative epistemologies and cosmologies of climate, including ancestral knowledge of geography, micro-climates, weather forecasting, cosmology, animal husbandry, and cloud and plant observation, to navigate life in harsh and constantly changing environments (Girma and Zelalem; Yohannes and Gebratu; Luseno et al.; Wassie and Fekadu; Alemayehu et al.). In *Terminology and Practice of Somali Weather Lore, Astronomy, and Astrology*, Muuse H.I. Galaal gathers some of “knowledge of

weather, stars, and planets,” as well as songs signifying or portending “prosperous years, droughts, death of important persons, wars, or storms” known and used by Somali weather-lorists (Muuse 1). Weather-lorists were simultaneously astronomers, astrologers, pastoral geographers, mathematicians, record-keepers, meteorologists, and soothsayers responsible for, among other things, leading herders and their cattle from one grazing land to another in the interior plains following the presence of nuro, “a life-giving, intangible substance... ‘grazing nourishment’ [found] in certain areas at certain times” (Muuse 10). For instance,

If...the land is very green, if there is plenty of water, if every other sign is favorable, but the animals are still unhealthy and undernourished or give little milk, the expert knows there is no NURO in the area. Conversely, if drought occurs and pasturage is sparse, but the animals are healthy, then it is present. Acting in his role as record keeper, the weather expert observe and mentally notes the place and time of its occurrence. (Muuse 10)

Other forms of traditional knowledge are documented among farming communities in the Horn’s plateaus and highlands. Farmers use the direction and strength of winds to plan the time to sow cereals such as barley, wheat, beans, and peas, and the color of the clouds to predict seasonal weather conditions: “heavy and black clouds are strong signs of rainfall while prolonged white color clouds indicate drought to appear in the near future” (Alemayehu et al. 5). The direction of swirling clouds can signal sufficient rainfall (clockwise) or little to no rain (counterclockwise), while a “hasty change of wind direction and the appearance of swirl winds” also suggests heavy rainfall (Alemayehu et al. 5). Meanwhile changes in animal behavior, insects, and plants are also predictors of weather:

Amgne (a local wheat variety...) ... does not bear flowers every year during the dry season [but when it does] farmers trust the flowering of *Amgne* as an indicator of good rainfall conditions for *Belg*....Similarly, when *Sama* bears abundant fruits almost everywhere unusually in a dry season, it is an indication of convenient weather condition[s] for beans and pears during *Meher* (the main cropping season). (Alemayehu et al. 7)

Traditional forms of knowledge can be passed down through oral tradition and memory, often with the aid of poetry and stories. Fekade Azeze documents drought experiences and knowledge stored in oral poetry in northern Ethiopia in *Unheard Voices: Drought, Famine and God in Ethiopian Oral Poetry*, one of the only academic texts to seriously consider literary representations of climate disaster. As we will see, ecological epistemes also appear as traces in written literary forms such as the novel.

Yet according to Horn-based climate researchers, traditional knowledge and methods of predicting and responding to climate events such as rainfall and drought are “becoming less reliable as climate variability increases” (Girma and Zelalem 477). Weather experts respected for their precise predictions now find their knowledge to be “unreliable” and their reputations “eroded;” Ahmed Ibrahim Awale writes that the “disturbance” in indigenous Somali knowledge can be “directly attributed to the effects of climate change” (Ahmed Ibrahim 6-7). Similarly in Ethiopia, farmers notice that

the rain doesn't come on time any more. The rain used to come regularly, and we were able to plant and harvest on time. [Since 1984-85] the rain has become quite erratic...After we plant, the rain stops just as our crops start to grow. And it begins to rain after the crops have already been ruined. (Regassa et al. 25)

Invocations of situated experience and indigenous knowledge of climate are increasingly common in Anthropocene scholarship which, David Chandler and Julian Reid point out, often instrumentalizes indigenous peoples as caretakers of the environment or as teachers about environmental responsibility and survival, thereby reinscribing extractive imperial logics. Rather than seeking to extract indigenous knowledges for new (Global North) audiences, thereby reinscribing imperial logics, this project begins from the representations of climate coloniality and critique of empire implicit within Horn of Africa indigenous knowledge systems and their deployment in literary forms.

Produced within environmental variability and social precarity, the Horn of Africa's literary archive raises questions that are increasingly common in our contemporary life but rarely taken seriously in scholarship on African literature or environmental humanities and the Anthropocene. What does it mean to continue living after the end of the world, whether via the reduction of natural environments to territories for human possession, the curtailment or loss of access to land and the freedom to manage it in sustainable ways, the irrelevance or elimination of traditional knowledge and lifeways, or the elimination of one's town, livestock, or family? When one is emplaced at the conjunction of multiple human social and ecological disasters, the residual climate coloniality of the past compounded with new losses rolling in, is it possible to bear witness to these multi-scalar losses? What forms can hold the sedimentation of individual, communal, and ecological grief, "the fleshiness of climate...in our bodies, minds, soils, kin"? What role does literature play in the

context of compounding, layering, and accumulating scales of disaster? These questions animate this project's engagement with the Horn of Africa's regional literary archive. Not all the novels considered here directly engage the historical experience of colonialism in Africa or the neo-coloniality of the present. But they and the larger archive of which they are a part all express a situated eco-consciousness and imbricated relationship with the natural world, as well as a critical attention to localized iterations of climate coloniality empowered by imperial modernity.

Using a specific instance of Horn of Africa social and environmental reality—the storm—to surface critical engagements with nature, human-nonhuman relation, and social and environmental disaster in literary texts, this project argues for the discernible but yet to be articulated work of the novel as a form of grief, melancholic holding, and animacy in the era of climate coloniality. In this respect my argument departs from scholars of the literary Anthropocene such as Ghosh who disbelieve the novel's ability to address the mammoth scale of anthropogenic climate change, as well as those who dismiss the novel on the grounds of its imperial origins. Instead my thinking builds upon the work of scholars excavating climate change and Anthropocene fiction from disciplinary disregard, as well as those who take as given the genre's imperial contamination.⁵ As it is employed in the Horn of Africa, the novel not only formally encodes and narratively represents the historical conditions

⁵ For the long history of environmental and climate change fiction, see Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* and Adeline Johns-Putra's *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*. Jacques Derrida writes of genre forms as always already contaminated and impure, Edward Said of the linked history of the novel and empire; postcolonial scholars too numerous to mention follow Derrida and Said's lead.

and imperial ideologies that bring about the rupture of human beings from each another, nonhumans, and the natural world, but also functions as a structure for holding epistemologies, ontologies, relationalities, and materialities—Walter Benjamin’s “wreckage upon wreckage”—that have been or are in danger of being lost. The novel moves these forward by means of intertextuality, history, language, and poetics, enacting a melancholic mode that, contrary to melancholia’s typical association with loss and death, keeps what is lost animate and alive, even if only in textual form.

This project’s theorization of storms understands the two most common forms of extreme weather in the Horn—rainfall and drought—not as oppositional or mutually exclusive, but as intertwined and mutually constituted manifestations of climate coloniality. Consequently, storms are not one-off natural disaster “events” but eruptions of complex systems involving seasonal wind patterns, the earth’s surface temperature, landscape formations, and the actions of humans and nonhumans. Here I follow Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick’s rethinking of “natural disaster” in the context of Hurricane Katrina, where they point out that framing the hurricane as a natural disaster naturalized, or made natural, its disproportionately racialized effects. Thinking with the storm “[brings] into view the ways in which physical geographies are bound up in, rather than simply a backdrop to, social and environmental processes;” similarly in literary contexts, descriptions of weather and landscape are rarely only background material but rather the very places where indigenous

epistememes are articulated and where environmental change is registered (McKittrick and Woods 3).

This project builds on a whole range of scholars who have operationalized natural phenomena—the hurricane (Malcolm Ferdinand), the shoal (Tiffany Lethabo King), the wind (Julius S. Scott), and the weather (Christina Sharpe)—to theorize the naturalization of difference and global systems of inequality.⁶ While literal storms are present in this literary archive and do play a role in my analysis, I am most invested in showing how storms and other natural material typically treated as background almost always animate these texts in multiple ways: storms as literary metaphors for transformative environmental and social changes, caused for example by European colonialism; storms as indexes of literary aesthetics; storms as a formal feature informing a text’s polyvocality, fragmentation, or nonlinearity; and storms as a discursive index of an entire apparatus of situated and localized knowledge of land, weather, plants, and animals—an ecocritical consciousness.

Planet-traversing and environmental forces, storms also have localized, perspectival, and iterative cascading impacts. They decenter the human subject as the only source of literary subjectivity and expand conceptual categories in non-anthropocentric directions to acknowledge the entanglement and interconnectedness of human and non-human existence, while affirming that critical theorizations are

⁶ See Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*; Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*; Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*; and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

conditioned by one's particular location in space and time and formed from situated knowledge and experience.⁷ Thinking and reading with storms requires a telescoping and ambivalent critical posture capable of both zooming out to apprehend the storm as system and zooming in attend to its localized ecological and social impacts.

Unpredictable, unmappable, and undisciplined, storms unsettle inherited histories and categories; enable revisions, refractions, and multiplicities of meaning; connect, reshape, and are shaped by landscapes and materialities they encounter; dissolve, destroy, and form new shapes. In this, storms invite us to think differently about spatial, temporal, and linguistic divisions, as well as the generic work and nature of the novel's transportive, recombinant, and animating energies as they are signaled by the swirling presence of natural material in literary texts.

Natures of Africa: a situated ecocriticism

In drawing attention to the proliferation of storms in Horn of Africa literature, my goal in this project is first, to develop a ground-up ecocritical analytic for an anti-imperial, non-human-centric reading of literary texts; second, to make a case for the novel as an organic and melancholic genre suited to mourning the multi-scalar climate coloniality of our present; and third, to demonstrate the critical affordances of this method through the analysis of a literary archive of novels spanning the long

⁷ In this project, readers may detect echoes of a number of recent scholarly efforts to move beyond the human, including new materialism, critical animist materialism, posthumanism, and object-oriented ontology. Committed to centering African ontological conceptualizations of the entanglement of human and nonhuman life, I find these efforts helpful insofar as they deconstruct the ideology of universal humanism that underpins anthropocentrism. See for example Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* and Stef Craps, "Ecological Grief."

twentieth century (1908 to 2021) and composed in Afrophone (Amharic, Tigrinya, and Somali) and Europhone (English, French, and Italian) languages. The novels included in this project are *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, written in Amharic (1908) by Afäwärk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus; *Silence is My Mother Tongue*, written in English (2018) by Sulaiman Addonia; *The Conscript*, written by Tigrinya (1927, published 1950) by Gebreyesus Hailu in 1927; *Adua*, written in Italian (2015) by Igiaba Scego; *Regina di fiori e di perle*, written in Italian (2007) by Gabriella Ghermandi; *The Shadow King*, written in English (2020) by Maaza Mengiste; *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl*, written in Somali (1974) by Faarax M.J. Cawl; *Passage des larmes*, written in French (2009) by Abdourahman A. Waberi; and *Black Mamba Boy*, written in English (2010) by Nadifa Mohamed.

I list the novels as they appear in this project rather than according to national affiliation, publication date, or language to sketch the nonlinear, recursive, and undisciplined *storm-like* range of the project. Reading this assemblage shows what becomes visible in African literature when we bracket inherited interpretative categories and approach texts through their own ground-up analytics. This project is roughly organized according to the ecological zones used by the Horn's inhabitants with each chapter imagined as a landing, an occasion to apprehend both the locality of a specific geography and its role in constellating a literary topography. Outside of Chapter 1, which focuses on one novel, each chapter discusses a handful of texts composed in different languages and time periods and whose writers have different national identities.

Storms enact a mode of situated African literary criticism that considers texts on their own ontological, epistemological, and relational terms, thereby departing from established traditions of African literary criticism whose genealogic terminology centers national and language issues derives from the mid-twentieth century independence era. Cajetan Iheka notes that a similar naturalizing impulse characterizes both colonial modernity, with its desire to “civilize the Africans and their environment” by distancing both from “their ‘natural’ state,” and African literary and postcolonial studies, whose “emphasis on the portrayal of rational, modern subjectivities [clashed] with those indigenous practices that connect people to their environment” (Iheka 10). By foregrounding individual subjects and bildungsroman plots that were allegorical of social units, this critical tradition also portrayed African writing as transparently sociological and/or as writing back to colonial centers.

Conversely this project positions Horn of Africa literary texts as writing primarily to themselves and to each other, staging conversations about the representation of situated environmental knowledge and the role of literature in bearing witness, storing memory, and expressing grief about social and environmental change. Like Olakunle George I regard novels as “mode[s] of theory” in which the presence of natural material provides the grounds for a regionally-specific ecocritical consciousness *and* an ecocritical reading method (qtd. Mwangi 13). Suspending categories imported from elsewhere, African novels emerge, in Jeanne-Marie Jackson’s words, as a “complex negotiation between shaping and being shaped by the world” in which the world being referenced includes not only human social relations

and histories but also humans' connections to the nonhuman world and their environments (Jackson 32).

While it recognizes literary texts as forms of environmental thinking and ecocritical consciousness and falls within the purviews of literary, environmental, and African studies, this project distinguishes itself from postcolonial ecocriticism, defined by Byron Camerino-Santangelo and Garth Myers as drawing “attention to both global imperial contexts and parts of the world often elided” by mainstream ecocriticism’s Eurocentrism (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 6).⁸ Often adopting a comparative approach emphasizing resonances and dissonances between Euro-American environmental discourse and postcolonial settings, postcolonial ecocriticism seeks to “fill in” the elisions of centuries of racialized hierarchy without deconstructing their ideological underpinnings. For instance, Ghosh notes how the contemporary era of anthropogenic climate change inverts the relationship between global centers and peripheries, since “those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits us all” (Ghosh 63). Similarly William Slaymaker terms the slow response of African literary cultures and studies to ecocritical concerns

⁸ Ecocriticism was a term first used by William Rueckert in 1978 to suggest “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world” (Rueckert 73). The first collection of essays on ecocriticism, *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996), completely overlooked formerly colonized spaces. Later interventions such as Lawrence Buell’s *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) are still largely focused on Euro-American texts even when they cursorily attend to a few postcolonial examples; Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010) draws on a number of works by African writers but treats them thematically rather than individually. Yet a greater issue than the lack of representation is the ideological underpinnings of much Euro-American ecocriticism, which maintain the notions of objectivity and universality that characterized imperial relations to nature and racial and gender others.

(as defined by Global North scholars) “ecohesitation...conditioned in part by black African suspicion of the green discourses emanating from metropolitan Western centers” (Slaymaker 133). Both Ghosh and Slaymaker’s perspectives operate within a generalized postcolonial framework that maintains the colonial as the primary point of reference. The suggestion that postcolonial settings such as Africa are the new centers of Anthropocene survival knowledge replicates the colonial modes of intellectual and material resource extraction that created global environmental disaster in the first place, while ecohesitation echoes colonial discourse’s representation of African belatedness.

In the last decade, a growing body of scholarship has drawn attention to forms of African environmental thinking in literary texts. Some, like Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) and Laura Wright’s “*Wilderness into civilized shapes*”: *Reading the Postcolonial Environment* (2010), take a comparative postcolonial approach, putting texts by African writers—Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*; Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*; J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*; Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*; and Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother*—in conversation with those by writers in other postcolonial settings. Others highlight a continental range of environmental texts to argue, as F. Fiona Moolla puts it, that “the natural world and animals have been active agents in African cultural forms” and “fundamentally constitute the worldviews and lifeways that have created [African] cultural ‘texts’...for as long as these forms have been in existence” (Moolla 9). If, Moolla argues, the nonhuman world has not been a

deliberate and critically studied dimension of African cultural forms up until now—having been superseded by questions of anti- and post-colonial resistance, national identity, and gender and sexuality—it is only because “[n]ature and animals are so fundamentally constitutive of African culture that they form *an invisible backdrop*” (Moolla 9, my emphasis). Caminero-Santangelo argues that the neglect of African environmental writing is the result of dominant conceptions of nature and environmentalism shaped in the Global North. He excavates legacies of African literary environmental writing that far predate the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Kenyan Wangari Maathai, co-founder of the Green Belt Movement, in 2005, including literary East African ecological precursors Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* (1966) originally written in Acholi Luo and *Song of Ocol* (1967), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). In *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology* (2014), he highlights how writers including Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Zakes Mda, Nuruddin Farah, Wangari Maathai, and Ken Saro-Wiwa challenge destructive forms of imperial development and resource extraction in their writing.

Building on Caminero-Santangelo and Nixon, Iheka’s book *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2017) analyzes how African literary texts by Amos Tutuola, Wangari Maathai, J. M. Coetzee, Bessie Head, and Ben Okri address ecological disasters such as the Niger Delta oil pollution in Nigeria, civil war in Somalia, and animal abuses.

Challenging the tendency to focalize the human scale in representations of environmental problems, Iheka shifts attention to the interconnection and “proximity” of human and nonhuman beings in African literary texts. A number of recent monographs and collected volumes⁹ including Ogaga Okuyade’s *Eco-critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* (2013), F. Fiona Moolla’s *Natures of Africa: Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms* (2016), and James Ogude and Tafadzwa Mushonga’s *Environmental Humanities of Extraction in Africa: Poetics and Politics of Exploitation* (2023) also provide valuable contributions to the study of African environmental literature, though like Caminero-Santangelo and Iheka they are survey-like in nature and foreground a similar group of canonical, almost entirely Anglophone, authors. Outside of Nuruddin Farah, hardly any writers from the Horn of Africa have been discussed in the context of African environmental literature.

If, as both Moolla and Camerino-Santangelo argue, “African ecocriticism must be informed by specific material and cultural conditions” and not simply draw on more universal—or even continental—frameworks, it is somewhat surprising that regional frames, with their situated ability for rich description, detailed specificity, and up- or down-scaling, have not played a more significant role in this emerging field (Moolla and Camerino-Santangelo vii). Enacting a situated ecocritical reading of a multilingual Horn of Africa literary archive, this project contributes to addressing

⁹ In addition to those already noted, Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt’s *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Poetics and World Narratives* (2010) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley’s *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011).

representational and methodological gaps. When approached on its own terms—of human language and culture, weather, or the ground itself—the Horn emerges as a region of dynamic conjunction, movement, exchange, and transformation, a generative organizational and analytical category able to flex and scale to accommodate multiple meanings and sets of relations, to acknowledge the fragmentation of environmental and social histories, and to hold together shared but distinct geographies and narratives.

While representations of ecological crisis and disaster—deforestation, oil spills, resource mining—have been a main feature of African environmental literary criticism thus far, and while ecological crises abound in the Horn of Africa, my main critical focus is less on representations of particular crises for which the Horn is already known—such as drought—and more on the portrayal of quotidian environmental epistemologies and relational ontologies which the presence of real and literary storms draw attention to. As we will see, environmental thinking and relational ontologies between humans, non-humans, and the natural world are not foreign or imposed frames, but rather such integral parts of the Horn’s cultures and central thematic and animating forces in its literary production that they have been treated—naturalized—as an “invisible backdrop.” Part of the work of this project is to *denaturalize* the natural material in literary texts, moving away from simplified narratives of disaster and emergency and toward storms of historically, linguistically, relationally rich signification.

Area impossible: Horn of Africa historical and political contexts

Perhaps the simplest—on the surface—narrative about the Horn is that it is a no man’s land, an exotic imaginary geography evoked by Homer and visited by Arthur Rimbaud, “in but not of” Africa. In the long term, seismologists predict that the active ground of the Horn of Africa *will* continue to fracture until it breaks away from the continent altogether, creating a new sea and an island composed of Djibouti, eastern Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, and other parts of eastern Africa afloat in the Indian Ocean. In the present this speculative future topography ironically inflects the Horn’s contemporary global image as already off the edge of the map. Not only is the Horn home to a multitude of natural disasters, as we have seen, but its history also encompasses one of Africa’s two uncolonized nations (Ethiopia), two socialist revolutions (in Ethiopia and Somalia), a successful secessionist movement (Eritrea), multiple civil wars (Somalia and Ethiopia), and the only US military base on the African continent (Djibouti). All these are qualities deployed in global discourse to suggest that the Horn is a zone of exception, what Geeta Patel and Anjali Arondekar call an “area impossible.” Simplified within totalizing discourses on the one hand and caught between the disciplinary fields of African, Arab, Islamic, and Indian Ocean studies on the other,¹⁰ the Horn is an opaque junction whose multiplicities exceed,

¹⁰ As Arondekar and Patel note, the establishment of area studies in the United States is tied to the consolidation of US imperial power and its intelligence-gathering priorities between World War II and the Cold War and surging again post-9/11. The United States sponsored international scholars from and funded research and language programs regarding “sensitive areas” including South and West Asia, the Levant, and North Africa. Notwithstanding its ties to neoliberal and neoimperial political and economic interests, area studies is notable for its “thick, linguistic, cultural detail” and “regional and disciplinary specificities” which are often occluded by a generalized postcolonial studies framework (Arondekar and Patel 155). In addition to the larger fields noted above, the Horn also fractures into

obscure, and resist transparent representation and render it largely unknowable within the dominant categories of organizing thought.

Globally recognizable attempts to increase the Horn's legibility, such as the 1984 Bob Geldof and Midge Ure song "Do They Know It's Christmas?", would be laughable were their representational modes not so damaging. Composed to raise money for the 1983-85 drought and famine in Ethiopia, the song uses an environmental and social disaster, described as "biblical" and "the closest thing to hell" by the BBC journalist who first reported it,¹¹ to reduce African subjects to a homogenized, ignorant mass of sub-humanity. Riffing on the song's flattening pronoun, the narrator of Mihret's novel *The History of a Difficult Child* quips that "they" must refer to

Ethiopian children, half of whom are Muslims or followers of Indigenous religions who, drought or not, don't give a quib about anybody's Christmas, whereas the other half are Orthodox Christians whose ancestors were so well acquainted with the Virgin Mother and Her Son for at least a century longer than Bob Geldof's and celebrated Christmas on January 7, Jesus's real actual factual birthday. (Mihret, *History*, 2)

multiple regional areas of focus, including Ethiopian, Oromo, and Somali studies. Ethiopian Studies is historically a Euro-American-led, Orientalist field that understands Ethiopia as a Semitic-speaking, Christian land geographically delineated by historic Abyssinia. Early scholars such as Edward Ullendorff, Richard Pankhurst, and Donald Levine were invested in the civilizational superiority this "Ethiopian" sub-group vis a vis the country's other religious and language groups. Oromo and Somali studies were developed in large part by local and diasporic scholars to address the flattening of their communities' histories and political concerns within global and Ethiopianist discourses.

¹¹ "Do They Know It's Christmas?" was inspired by BBC journalist Michael Buerk's reporting in 1984 that famously drew attention to the famine in Ethiopia. The most affected regions were in Tigray, Wollo, and what would in the next ten years become Eritrea. Ten years before, in 1973, the severity of a famine in Wollo was suppressed by Haylä Selasse's imperial regime. When news of it finally got out and starving people began arriving in the capital Addis Ababa, the disaster was transformed into a rallying cry for anti-imperial dissidents who complained that the wealthy classes and the Ethiopian government had ignored the famine and the people who had died. In 1974, a group of military officers overthrew Haylä Selasse and established a military junta known as the Derg. A decade later, the Derg was fighting a civil war against its own opposition groups and Eritrean separatists; these conflicts, in combination with low rainfall and drought, created the conditions for the 1983-85 famine.

The narrator's sarcastic humor demonstrates a shared Horn of Africa literary technique we will follow throughout this project that puts pressure on a simple, or simplified, term to open up a multitude of situated complexities.

For all the ways it has been isolated, stereotyped, or othered, the Horn of Africa has been a zone of vibrant diversity, ancient traditions, and self-determination since pre-modern times. In addition to early mentions of "Aethiopia" in Homer and Herodotus, where it could refer to anywhere in north-eastern Africa outside Egypt, in the mid-first century navigational text *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* written in Koine Greek, the Horn of Africa is studded with ports and trading hubs that link it to the ancient Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds via the Red Sea. Ports on the Somali coast traded in frankincense, myrrh, spices, gold, wax, ivory, grain, and timber while the kingdom of Aksum, a landlocked empire in the highlands, traded goods and minted coins to facilitate trade between the Roman empire and Indian subcontinent. In the early fourth century, two young Phoenician boys abducted from a Red Sea port brought Christianity to the highland kingdom. They converted the heir Ezana, who when he gained the throne formalized Christianity as the religion of the empire at around the same time Constantine did in Rome.¹² In the following centuries Orthodox Christianity was a definitive attribute of the highland kingdom, its political

¹² When Ezana took the throne, one of the brothers Frumentius travelled to Egypt to visit Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, asking him to send a bishop and missionaries to Aksum. According to Athanasius' account, he consecrated Frumentius as bishop, believing him best for the job. Frumentius returned to Aksum, where he supported Ezana's Christianization, established the first monastery, and became the first head (abuna) of the church. Subsequent Ethiopian tradition credits him with the first translation of the New Testament into Ge'ez. Adom Getachew notes that the founding myth of the Orthodox Church and its Semitic and Byzantine influences often render Abyssinia as a site of exceptionalism and non-Africanness within Ethiopian and African diasporic studies.

formations, and the written literary tradition in Ge'ez, the Semitic language precursor to modern Amharic and Tigrinya. Orthodox Christianity inspired the creation of the rock-hewn churches in Lalibela in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the fourteenth-century composition of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, an epic myth tracing the origins of the highland empire and its rulers to King Solomon of Israel. In the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* the Queen of Sheba travels from Abyssinia to Israel and has a son with Solomon named Mənilək I. Mənilək returns to Abyssinia with the Ark of Covenant, establishes the Solomonic line of highland kings, and converts the people to Judaism.¹³ A remnant of these who refused the later conversion to Christianity call themselves Beta Israel.

As with Judaism and Christianity, Islam's presence in the Horn stretches to the earliest days of the faith. Both Ethiopian and Islamic tradition hold that the Prophet advised his early followers fleeing persecution in Arabia to take refuge in Abyssinia, where the ruler would respect their religion. Thanks to this migration, the first hijra, and the constant exchange and interaction between sailors and traders on both sides of

¹³ The *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* (The Glory of Kings) builds on the oft-quoted Bible verse, "Ethiopia shall stretch her hands to God," to relate how the Ethiopians replaced the Israelites as God's chosen people (Psalms 68:31). According to the epic, Ethiopia's covenant with God was established through Mənilək I, the son of King Solomon of Israel and Makedda, Queen of Sheba, identified in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* as the Queen of Ethiopia (the capital of her kingdom was Debre Makedda, the mountain fortress of Makedda, generally assumed to be Axum, though the text never mentions Axum) (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 74). In the Orthodox version of the Solomon and Sheba story, the two royals sleep together and Sheba conceives a son, Mənilək, who is raised in his mother's kingdom and travels to visit his father in Jerusalem when he comes of age. He returns with the Ark of the Covenant which contains the Israelite Ten Commandments and deposits it in Axum where, according to the Orthodox Church, it is still located. According to *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, upon Mənilək's return his people convert from their pagan indigenous religious practices to Judaism and he initiates a bloodline of rulers known as the Solomonic dynasty. The ability to trace (or fabricate) one's relation to this genealogy is central to subsequent iterations of highland politics and claims to the imperial throne. (Marrassini)

the Red Sea, Arabic culture and Islamic religion became formative qualities of coastal and pastoral culture, literature, and politics, fueling the Afar and Somali Sultanates. In the thirteenth century, the Islamic teacher Sheikh Yusuf bin Ahmed al-Kowneyn travelled from Arabia to the Horn where he taught the Quran and created a modified Arabic script for writing Somali, while the legendary saint Abadir Umar al-Rida's presence in the eastern Ethiopia city Harar (Gey) helped initiate its flourishing as a center of Islamic culture and religion (Ali Abdullahi 343). In the sixteenth century, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, or Ahmed Gragh (the left-handed), used Harar as his base to push back the ever-expanding highland kingdom; his successor was responsible for building the city's famed stone walls.

From the time of antiquity to the present, the Horn has never been governed by any single political entity but rather functions as a collection of various interacting and competing systems including loose networks of Christian feudal allegiances, centralized and localized Islamic sultanates, and the Gadaa system of the Oromo. The Oromo have their own richly developed indigenous ontology, cosmology, and systems of governance, yet Oromo subjectivities have been portrayed derogatorily in Abyssinian, Islamic, and European writing as "pagan, savage, uncivilized, uncultured, enemy, slave or inherently inferior" (Mohammed Hassen 3).¹⁴ The derogatory portrayal of Oromos and others who speak Cushitic, rather than Semitic, languages as both inherently African and "newcomers to Ethiopia" is a key ingredient in the myth

¹⁴ Until the late twentieth century, the Oromo were referred to as Galla, a derogatory slur, rather than the name they chose for themselves. "Galla" was also used in East African Swahili literature.

of non-blackness promoted by the grand narrative tradition of Ethiopian historiography (Mohammed Hassen 4).¹⁵ While Oromos and other groups of the wäyña däga would occasionally opt in to Islamic or Christian political formations, their autonomy is a significant factor in the Horn's histories of deflecting attempts at hegemonic rule whether by local powers or outside forces.

In the mid-nineteenth century European interest in the Horn of Africa—a constant since Roman times—reached fever pitch in the atmosphere of imperial greed for new territories and raw materials in Africa. The Suez Canal opened in 1869, expanding access to Arabia and India through the Red Sea, and by the meeting of European leaders at the Berlin conference in 1884-85, the British, French, and Italians had snatched up many portions of the Red Sea coastline. In 1839, the British had already established the first settlement on the Red Sea's east coast at Aden, a port and coaling station to service the route to and from British India. On the other side of the Red Sea, the French purchased the port of Obock in 1862 and later Tadjoura from local Somali and Afar rulers, creating the contours of colonial French Somaliland. The French also set about constructing a port to offset their dependence on Aden and later a railroad, which by 1916 stretched from the coast to Addis Ababa. In 1869 an Italian priest purchased the port of Assab on behalf of the Rubattino shipping company. The port was acquired by the Italian government in 1882, followed shortly by Massawa in 1885. At the Berlin conference, these acquisitions were recognized as French Somaliland and Italian Colonia Eritrea (so named for the Erythraean Sea from

¹⁵ For more on the grand narrative tradition, see Chapter 1.

the Greek word for “red,” erythros). Meanwhile Britain also acquired Somali territories southeast of the French which were administered by the garrison in Aden and referred to as the Somaliland Protectorate.

European presence in the Horn of Africa had significant geopolitical, epistemological, cultural, and linguistic effects commensurate with colonial experiences in other parts of the continent. For instance in 1862 the Abyssinian emperor Tewodros wrote to Queen Victoria’s government in England seeking weapons to fend off Ottoman Turks making inroads via Egypt and Sudan. Britain refused, and Tewodros retaliated by capturing the British consul in Ethiopia and several Swiss and German missionaries. The British responded with a ground invasion known as the Napier expedition. At the battle of Maqdala, Tewodros’ fighters were overpowered, but rather than be captured the emperor committed suicide with a pistol originally gifted by the Queen. As part of a deal with conscripted fighters, Napier agreed not to pursue a British colonial presence in the country, but he looted the Maqdala citadel for many historical and religious artifacts, including hundreds of manuscripts which remain in the British Museum and British Library today.

A decade later, the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897 split up the Somali territories into five different jurisdictions: the French and British colonies along the Gulf of Aden, the Italian colony facing the Indian Ocean, a substantial portion of British Kenya, and a large central zone (the Haud and Ogaden) occupied by Ethiopia. The imposition of political boundaries “severely limited and hampered the traditional

ways in which the people used and managed the land” and led to cattle raiding and “wars of pacification and resistance” between Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan’s Dervish movement, the nascent Ethiopian state, and the Somaliland Camel Corps (Jama 537). Jama Mohamed writes that the effects of the colonial period “broke the traditional migratory pattern of the pastoralists,” leading to “‘soil erosion on a large scale’ from which the country ‘never fully recovered’” (Jama 541).

Yet while European control may have looked straightforward on a colonial map, attempts to divide and colonize the Horn of Africa’s territories and peoples were met with fierce resistance and even defeat. By far the most impactful resistance was the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Italian forces seeking to expand from their Eritrean colony to the highland empire were met by a coalition of fighters from across the Horn of Africa led by Mənilək II. One hundred thousand strong, the African force routed their would-be colonizers, driving them all the way back to the Mereb River, the contemporary Ethiopian-Eritrean border. An embarrassment for the Italians and a testament to the superior geographical knowledge and political solidarity of African fighters, the Adwa victory insured that a portion of the Horn’s territories would remain independent of colonial rule.¹⁶

A “complex nexus of various historical processes,” Adwa and its meanings and significations “overflow the social and political conditions that made it possible,”

¹⁶ The Adwa victory initiated a multiplicity of far-reaching effects that extend into the present. For more on Adwa, see Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, as well as Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia (eds.), *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory against European Colonialism*; Raymond Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire*; and Maimire Mennasemay, “Adwa: A Dialogue between the Past and the Present.”

extending far beyond its own space and time, including into many of the literary texts in this project (Paulos and Getachew 3, 5). Adwa proliferates as title, as female protagonist, as embodied memory in the absent limbs of veterans, as horse's name, as battle cry, and as settler screen, blowing into novels with its freighted history which is held, taken up, reconfigured, and passed on differently in each text. Moreover Adwa was not merely "an encounter between Europe and Africa, or Italy and Abyssinia" but travelled as rallying cry for anti-colonial and freedom movements around the world, shattering the "planetary sovereignty of Europeans" and figuring as a beacon of resistance, dignity, and "hope and pride" for everyone seeking independence from oppression (Michael 24; Dugan and Lafore 3; Teshale 426).¹⁷ Global Black imaginaries produced the Abyssinian highlands and the Ethiopian nation-state to come as sites of exemplary blackness—the sole African geography that was never colonized. From the Ethiopianism of the nineteenth century to the Rastafarianism of the twentieth, Ethiopia became a "space of African redemption," a location of future homecoming envisioned in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, in the nationalist movements of Marcus Garvey and Kwame Nkrumah, and in the Pan-Africanism of W.E.B. Du Bois and George Padmore (Adom, "Roundtable;" Ayele).

¹⁷ Historians Joseph Dugan and Lawrence Lafore characterize the battle as an "Ethiopian triumph... [in which] the black emperor of *a big and empty land lost in the high mountains*, encircled by a confusion of deserts, jungles, and undrawn frontiers sounded reveille for a sleeping world" (Dugan and Lafore 3, my emphasis). This account links Ethiopia to global ideas of blackness while ventriloquizing an European imperial view of both generalized empty and wild African landscapes and Horn exceptionalism. For more on how Adwa is operationalized in accounts of Ethiopian exceptionalism, see Teshale Tibebu, "Ethiopia: The 'Anomaly' and 'Paradox' of Africa" and Michael Girma Kebede, "Beyond Exception and Supremacy: Adwa in the Black Radical Imaginary."

As significant as its international export was Adwa's impact on the development of internal political formations. For much of the Horn of Africa, the transition to statehood was forced, carried out by European powers and tying the Horn into the familiar story of European colonialism throughout the continent. Despite activism for a single independent Somali state uniting the fractured territories, in the midcentury period UN commissions facilitated a number of staged handovers. The State of Somaliland (former British Somaliland) existed for five days between 26 June 1960 and 1 July 1960 before it joined the Trust Territory of Somaliland (former Italian Somaliland) to form the Somali Republic.¹⁸ The French Somali territory was one of the last colonies on the continent to achieve independence in 1977. Following the Italian defeat in World War II, the Eritrean colony was federated to Ethiopia in 1950, then forcefully annexed in 1962. Hailed by many Ethiopians as the final step of Eritrea's reunion with the "motherland," the forced reunification sparked nationalist resistance movements and guerilla warfare that lasted over thirty years until Eritrea's secession and independence in 1993.

In Ethiopia, state formation was enacted internally. Before Adwa, Mənilək II was vying for the Solomonic throne; after, he capitalized on the victory and the allegiances pledged to him in battle to solidify his position as emperor and continue an aggressive expansionist campaign from the highland core to the east, west, and south. Motivated at least in part by the desire to shore up strong borders against

¹⁸ The State of Somaliland's brief political autonomy and colonial-era territorial boundaries provide the foundation for present-day assertions of sovereignty by the Republic of Somaliland. Somaliland's independence is unrecognized by the international community but acknowledged by this project.

European imperialism, Mənilək’s government engaged in forced territorial occupation and cultural assimilation, transforming a regional empire into a modern state. A unified Ethiopian national identity emerged not by an “egalitarian synthesis” of the cultural traditions of all the newly unified peoples, but rather a forceful imposition of one culture—highland, Christian, Amharic-speaking—onto others (Marzagora and Ayele 435).¹⁹

Overlapping European and Ethiopian imperialisms impact the Horn’s language politics. The region is home to over 130 languages, of which Tigrinya and Amharic (both descended from Ge’ez and spoken in the northern, and central and southern, highlands respectively), Oromo, and Somali have the greatest number of speakers. Historically, language suppression was rampant but looked different depending on which imperially orchestrated borders one found oneself caught within. In the European colonies, colonial administration and education was conducted in English, French, or Italian, and writers from the former colonies such as Nadifa Mohamed and Abdourahman Waberi, or who moved to the metropole like Igiaba Scego, were educated and write in European languages.

Conversely in Ethiopia, Amharic had supremacy. Expanding from a highland lingua franca, Amharic was well-established as the language of government by

¹⁹ The argument in favor of cultural assimilation was twofold: on the one hand, national unity was believed to bolster perceptions of Ethiopia’s modernization and social cohesion, deter European imperial ambitions, and usher Ethiopia into the global international community (symbolized by their 1923 entry into the League of Nations). On the other hand, cultural assimilation was undergirded by Ethiopian ruling elites’ belief in the superiority of their cultural heritage over newly annexed peoples who were considered “un-Ethiopian.” Not unlike colonial policies elsewhere, linguistic, religious, and cultural assimilation was seen as a way to “uplift and enlighten the ‘less-developed’ cultures” outside the highland core (Marzagora and Ayele 433).

Mənilək II's time when one of the first African-owned printing presses was imported to the new capital in Addis Ababa.²⁰ State modernization and national unity policies privileged Amharic as the sole language of education and religious instruction. Literary production in Amharic was encouraged and supported, leading to the development of a homegrown novel genre called *ləbb wälläd* after *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, the 1908 text by Afäwärk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus, as well as a proliferation of poetry, drama, and novels in the twentieth century. While European languages have long been present, they “resonate differently in Ethiopia than in other African countries” (Kurtz 189). Where in the rest of the continent writing in European languages and especially English has become the norm, with writers working in African languages swimming “against the current,” in Ethiopia “the burden of the argument [rests on those] who wish to write in foreign languages” rather than in Amharic (Kurtz 202).

Still the dominance of Amharic should not “blind us to the internal colonialism manifested in Amhara [and Amharic] hegemony;” until 1993 Amharic was the only official African language of Ethiopia and instruction and composition in other languages such as Oromo and Somali was suppressed (Kurtz 202). Some of the prime targets of the state's Amharaization policy are Oromo-speaking people “whose literature, as a result, was systematically marginalized” and developed independently and often antagonistically to state power (Marzagora and Ayele 429). Yet literary

²⁰ There is a long history of printing in the Horn of Africa stretching back to at least 1863 when an Italian priest brought a press with Amharic script to Massawa. A large amount of printing occurred in colonially-occupied Eritrea. For more on the history of print culture in Ethiopia, see Richard Pankhurst, “The Foundations of Education, Printing, Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia.”

production in Amharic has also been “subject to state control and censorship,” and Amharic is used by many writers to express opposition and resistance (Marzagora and Ayele 431). As Sara Marzagora and Ayele Kebede point out, any abstract and essential typology between language networks risks “rigidifying...relationships that were porous, variable and often ambivalent” (Marzagora and Kebede 431). This is true not only of language politics in Ethiopia but in the Horn more generally, where multilingualism remains a constant and relations between European languages, Amharic, Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, and other languages are not self-contained and mutually exclusionary, but constantly fluctuate, overlap, and reconstitute themselves as a reflection of broader regional power relations.

Contaminated ecologies: The novel genre in Africa

Despite the Horn’s diverse, swirling ecology of literary languages, there is only a single book-length work dedicated to Horn of Africa literature, *The Road Less Travelled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn of Africa* (2008) edited by Somali scholar Ali Jimale Ahmed and Ethiopian scholar Tadesse Adera. While the anthology begins with an overview organized along nation-state lines, its larger structure brings together a collection of essays that traverse national, temporal, linguistic, and generic boundaries. Ali Jimale’s introduction emphasizes the multiplicity of the Horn’s metaphorical significations and their impact on how the Horn of Africa has been read as a place of “internecine bloodletting” (the horn as weapon), of turning on those it was meant to defend (the horn as protective tool), and

of many creative forms that “bear witness to lives lived or imagined” (the horn as musical instrument) (Ali Jimale 15).

Picking up again the animal metaphor of the Horn, this project adopts the non-human-centric metaphor of ecology—meaning the relationships between living organisms including humans, plants, and animals, and their physical environments—as a framework for how regional novels relate to one another as well as other genres and the extra-literary world. Ecology shares many features with network theory, Marzagora and Ayele’s preferred methodology for apprehending the complex and coexistent relationships, connectivities and disconnectivities, intertextual linkages, and asymmetries of power between different language literatures in the Horn of Africa. Network theory aims to break open siloed categories such as the nation and language through attention to “branching structure” and “currencies of flow” and is generative for drawing attention to, in Vilashini Cooppan’s words, qualities of “circulation, sedimentation, and linkage; distinct objects such as languages, cultures, identities, and aesthetic forms that move rhizomatically” (Cooppan, “Net Work,” 616). Network theory is also able to highlight the role of capitalist markets in creating and influencing the environment of scarcity and competition in which texts relate to one another.

Yet ecology is especially generative in regard to a literary system such as the Horn’s where inputs are not equivalent to one another, and where it is important to keep the significance of various inputs distinct. As Alexander Becroft puts it, whereas networks tend to simplify our understanding of complex systems,

ecology is more comfortable accepting that complexity may be inherent to the system. [...] Ecologists examine the interactions between the different forms of life that exist in a particular region, as well as the interactions of those living things with their non-living environment. Particularly useful...is that ecology understands, accepts, and insists on, the distinct and mutually interactive nature of these various inputs, so that changes in the external environment (more or less than usual, habitat destruction) can have complex and shifting impacts on the various species found in a given context. (Beecroft 18)

While Beecroft does not develop his framework for ecocritical interventions, ecology is naturally suited to describing how literary texts shape and are shaped by the natural environment, as well as literature's "ecological relationship" with other human-centered phenomena such as history, politics, culture, religion, and language (Beecroft 19). An ecological frame helps us envision the relationship between novels in the Horn of Africa, between novels and other forms of literary texts (poetry, orature), and between literary texts, human society, and the nonhuman and natural world.

Ecology also reframes the history of the novel in Africa from a simple story of centers and peripheries to an entangled set of contaminations, complicities, self-determination, and melancholy. This is nothing new for postcolonial studies, which from Edward Said onward has recognized the linked history of the novel and European empire, two entities "unthinkable without each other" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 71). Early novels like Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) set in New World territories thematized the imperial gaze's view of "wild, uncorrupted virgin landscapes," either empty of subjects or inhabited by "human creatures still in their natural state," while formally extracting

and consuming other genres in the creation of new forms (Iheka 10).²¹ As part of the colonial education curriculum's civilizing mission to "naturalize" African subjects and their environments into global modernity, novels participated in the colonization of the cognitive process (Ngũgĩ, *Moving the Centre*). In British colonial classrooms in Kenya, Ngũgĩ writes, "English language, literature, history, and geography [were] first" (Ngũgĩ, *Globalectics*, 39). British literary classics such as Defoe, Dickens, and Shakespeare enforced narrative forms of linear teleological progress and individual human development, as well as the idea that real literature was written in European languages while distancing students from their environments and the forms of knowledge and story-telling associated with them. In Ngũgĩ's words, colonially educated students were more likely to know the "many natural, historical landmarks of London" before they knew "a single street of their own capital, let along the major rivers of their country" (Ngũgĩ, *Globalectics*, 39).

Many colonially educated African writers—including Ngũgĩ in Kenya and Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria—became the continents' first generation of creative and political leaders, turning to the novel form and to European languages to reclaim the tools of oppression for liberation and the production of national culture. In Achebe's view, the novel and the English language were certainly imperial forms, but they could be made to "carry the weight of my African experience" through

²¹ Colonial discourse's practice of representing Africa and Africans as in a state of nature has been thoroughly critiqued in postcolonial scholarship. See for example Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* and Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.

alterations “to suit [their] new African surroundings” (Achebe 349). Meanwhile Ngũgĩ took the opposite tact, abandoning English for Gikuyu—“African literature can only be written in African languages”—but retaining the novel genre alongside other forms (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 27).

In the Horn of Africa the literary decisions were hardly so straightforward. The early novels (*Labb Wälläd Tarik*, *The Conscript*, and *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl*), some of which predate Achebe and Ngũgĩ by fifty years, were written by colonially educated writers currently or formerly under colonial sponsorship but in African languages. Contrary to assumptions, these novels neither conform to nor mimic their imperial analogs, nor is their primary concern to “write back” to the metropolises and epistemologies in which they find themselves. To borrow from Evan Mwangi, who criticizes postcolonialism’s writing back obsession, resistance to imperial epistemologies and narratives by early Horn of African texts in African languages is located most “potently in [their] disregard or demotion of the West as the categorical and ineluctable point of reference” (Mwangi 1). They seek neither to hide nor apologize for their imperial conditions; *The Conscript* goes so far as to use them as a framing device. Asserting autonomy for themselves and their subjects, the novels devote themselves to the emergent questions and concerns of their localities, including the articulation of pre-Fanonian anti-colonial thinking, the complexities of regional history and conflicts, and the textualization of oral aesthetics, narratives, and forms.

Envisioning an ecology of Horn of Africa literature maintains the complexity of relations not only with “imports” like the novel but also with existing literary traditions in orature and poetry. The relationship between orature and the novel is a persistent question in African literary study generally delineated by two approaches: those who seek to establish the indigenous origins of the novel in Africa based on continuity between the oral and written, and those who argue that orality itself is what makes the continental African novel authentically African (Julien). While the first reinforces an evolutionary paradigm, a natural and teleological progression from oral past to literate future, the second is embedded with the belief that orality is the source of a mythic nativist African consciousness.

From an ecological perspective however, oral and traditional forms of knowledge about the natural world are neither evolutionary raw material from which the novel is made nor its lost essence, but rather something that exists symbiotically with literary texts. When parts of that ecological system are lost or in danger of becoming so, these texts treat oral and traditional knowledge about the natural world not as dead things which can only be stored and memorialized in writing, but as living materialities and forms of organic life which remain as literary traces in the Horn of Africa ecology and whose absent presences animate the novel genre.

Accepting the impossibility of restoration or reclamation, literature turns its attention to creating narratives that anticipate, bear witness to, and grieve loss in the genre embedded with responsibility for the loss. Thus it is precisely *because*, not in spite, of the novel’s inextricability with empire that it is a useful literary form for this

archive. Adopting the novel is not to acquiesce to imperial epistemologies and representations but is rather a strategy for formally encoding contamination and complicity with empire as the environment within which narrative priorities are formed, choices of language and genre are conditioned, and composition takes place.

Grief at the end of the world: Toward a productive melancholia

Its movement between outside significations of imperial imbrication and internal protective opacity, and its animation by absent-present natural objects and knowledge, mark the novel in the Horn of Africa as a melancholic genre. Melancholy, meaning the relentless and repetitive return to grief over something that has been lost, is typically traced to Sigmund Freud in his famous distinction between two grieving processes: mourning, from which it is possible to move on and which Freud considered normal and healthy, and melancholia, which, due to the grieving subject's unfinished relationship with the lost/dead loved object, cannot end and which he considered pathological.²² While the Horn's literary archive does exhibit a pattern of consistent return to and narration of loss, it develops a form of melancholy distinct from Eurocentric versions in several important ways.

²² In his famous 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud explains that the grief over the loss, combined with unprocessed resentment and guilt regarding the loved object, are introjected and directed toward the self, leading to what was, for him, the classic melancholic presentation of uncontrollable self-reproach, self-diminishment, and withdrawal from the world, repeated without end. Yet even in the attempt to distinguish between mourning and melancholia, Freud admits that it is primarily our sense of proportion, what we believe to be a "reasonable" amount of time and emotion, that differentiates one from the other. Both mourning and melancholia have been taken up in postcolonial studies' treatment of the past including Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*; Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*; Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*; and Rey Chow, "Translator, Traitor; Translator, Mourner."

First, contrary to Freud’s individual grieving subject and György Lukács’ transcendently homeless hero, the melancholy expressed in these novels is communal, collective, and relational in nature, tied to the existential loss of epistemologies, relational ontologies, and lifeways as a result of the imperial-colonial system.²³ As Sam Durrant makes clear regarding the collective and cultural traumas of slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust, losses are not felt just by individuals but “disrupt the ‘consciousness’ of the entire community” (Durrant 4).²⁴ While melancholia is often connected to national communities in postcolonial studies, this project invokes it in a regional context and in relation to questions of ecological destruction and survival. Rather than grieving a loss of sovereignty or loss of land, the melancholia delineated here grieves ways of *living with* the land. While melancholy is experienced uniquely by families separated by imposed borders; an elder whose weather predictions no longer hold; cattle who starve to death; towns lost to flood, drought, or civil war; plants that die without proper rainfall; and writers writing in an imposed language, communal loss seeps across imposed spatial and temporal

²³ The novel as an expression of individuated melancholy can be traced to Lukács, who distinguishes between the pre-modern hero of epic poetry, firmly embedded in material and spiritual community, and the protagonist of the novel who, in the context of secular capitalist modernity, is unmoored from a sense of material and spiritual groundedness and increasingly lonely. Thus the novel genre is an “expression of transcendental homelessness” characterized by internal melancholy (Lukács 35). I do not dispute Lukács’ melancholy form here, only seek to expand its scale from the novel as individualized to communal expression of loss.

²⁴ In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy also shifts from the individual to communal scale but critiques communal melancholia as a form of postimperial nostalgia. While I am aware and cautious of melancholy’s tendency toward nostalgia, especially in the context of Ethiopian empire (see Chapter 3), my primary interest is in a positive expression of melancholy that bears witness to loss without romanticization or seeking to restore.

boundaries. This explains why, in the texts considered here, the national gradually recedes as a concern in favor of regionally-shared concerns and frames of reference.

Second, the melancholia traced here grieves not only human-centered losses, but also planetary-level environmental and ecological loss—climate coloniality piling up in the present. The anthropocentric frame of climate melancholia or climate trauma can also be attributed to Freud and his reading of the story of the Germanic Crusader Tancred and Ethiopian princess Clorinda, an episode from a sixteenth-century epic poem. Freud narrates the story this way:

[The] hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into the strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (qtd. Craps, "Climate Trauma," 280-281)

While Freud interprets Tancred's second wounding as an example of the repetition compulsion inherent to trauma, Cathy Caruth draws attention to the "moving and sorrowful voice that cries out...through the wound" (Caruth 2). Stef Craps notes the Eurocentric bias that shifts attention away from the Ethiopian princess and blurs the line between perpetrator and victim, as well as the anthropocentrism that underlies and unites both Freud and Caruth's readings. The poem and its readers are quick to "trope away from environmental destruction, turning it into an image for human suffering," a manifestation of what James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler call "plant blindness" or the "inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment" (Craps, "Climate Trauma," 281; Wandersee and Schussler 3).

Contemplating mourning and melancholia in contemporary Euro-American poetry, Margaret Ronda suggests that individualized Anthropocene grief emerges out of one's awareness that they are a destructive agent of the climate. While for Freud the melancholic's grief is out of proportion to the original loss, for Ronda the climate melancholic's self-reproach is "entirely appropriate and never adequate" to the scale of climate change wrought by imperial modernity (Ronda). In recent years melancholia has been joined by a number of invented or repurposed terms for naming and communicating the emotionally-induced distress over climate change Ronda identifies, including solastalgia, ecological grief, ecosickness, environmental melancholia, Anthropocene disorder, and pre-traumatic stress disorder. Solastalgia, a portmanteau of "solace" and "nostalgia" created by the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht, describes a specific kind of homesickness and the loss of comfort (or solace) when one's home is transformed mostly or completely beyond one's control by external forces—both naturally occurring and human-induced—into something barely recognizable.²⁵

Useful as these terms are in drawing attention to human grief about planetary-level environmental and ecological loss, they rarely move beyond the individualized

²⁵ Similarly post-humanist scholars are beginning to reconceptualize trauma, originally conceived as a solely human experience, in non-anthropocentric terms and to acknowledge the entanglement of human and non-human traumas. For instance Reza Negarestani extends psychological trauma toward geology and cosmology: "Since there is no single or isolated psychic trauma (all traumas are nested), there is no psychic trauma without an organic trauma and no organic trauma without a terrestrial trauma that in turn is deepened into open cosmic vistas" (qtd. Craps, "Climate Trauma," 282). For more see Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*; Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman (eds.), *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*; and Stef Craps, "Climate Trauma."

frame of a single poet or human observer. What distinguishes Horn of Africa melancholy is its collective expression of climate grief, meaning the communal scale of loss *and* a polyvocal archive of prose texts bearing witness to that loss, as well as its clear view of the systemic and structural causes of loss.

Even as the Horn of Africa becomes a home socially and environmentally unrecognizable, the novels in this project continue to tell its histories, bear witness to its grief, and anticipate future losses to come—insisting on the role of literature to keep something alive even as more and more is gone. Its distinctive positive and animate charge is the final quality that distinguishes Horn of Africa melancholy. Contrary to the conventional understanding that mourning is the healthy form of grief while melancholy is associated with death, this literary archive makes clear that moving on is neither preferable nor possible in the context of accumulating human and environmental transformations, disasters, world-endings, and losses. Moreover melancholy need not be fatalistic or pessimistic, but is rather a positive lived practice of survival and creation under precarious, persistently imperial conditions. Literature and the novel formally structure these practices of return, remembrance, and grief in a number of ways we will trace throughout this project.

Despite being located off the map of almost every contemporary scholarly debate, the Horn of Africa literary archive addresses issues pertinent to our present moment and to our future: the experience of intersecting anti-imperial contexts and their forms of control, localized manifestations of slow violence and climate coloniality, species extinction, the delicate interstices of environmental, relational,

and epistemological loss, and the extent to which it is possible to survive and create under disaster conditions. The Horn's archive is evidence that these experiences and the question of how to deal with them are nothing new but have long been a topic of literary inquiry lingered over and narrativized in deeply emplaced, experiential, embodied, and empathetic ways across times, borders, and languages. In pointing out the Horn's longstanding engagement with these questions, I do not mean to suggest the novels here be treated extractively or exploitatively as if they offer some sort of survival guide to the Anthropocene; indeed, their operationalization of the storm resists and frustrates any such attempts. Rather, this archive, which has already witnessed and withstood many world-endings, compels recognition of an already-existent sense of embeddedness, connectivity, and mutual dependence between humans, nonhumans, and their stories. Engendering a critical yet positive melancholy, these stories will not save the world, but they constitute companionship for weathering the storms to come, the "storms in our future" (qtd. Craps, "Climate Trauma," 279).

Storm form: Organization of the project

Through its organization and critical methodology, this dissertation aims to create an open-ended, always shifting, and re-forming portrait of the Horn's literary ecology guided by the storm. Deployed as a textual form, cultural referent, and discursive index, storms foreground both the systemic and situated scales on which the novels considered here and the larger project operate. Storms' multivalent, swirling,

undisciplined, and occasionally-opaque significations work both to index ecocritical thinking *and* to destabilize and shatter inherited critical formations, formulating a “ground up” approach to African literature with applicability to a wide range of postcolonial, marginalized, and occupied contexts. Lastly, storms as registers of multiplicity do not present the readings and relationships to nature conceptualized here as definitive, unassailable interpretations. Rather the dissertation itself is storm-like, an open-ended, networked, associative set of related conversations inviting critical engagement, conversation, and further modification.

Each chapter stages the consideration of a situated Horn of Africa locality or literary geography: island exceptionality (Chapter 1), interior plains (Chapter 2), highlands (Chapter 3), and lowlands (Chapter 4). Throughout this project I note the presence of not only real storms but also metaphorical, aesthetic, formal, and discursive storms which constellate the texts within a chapter and relate the chapters to one another. The organization of texts within chapters is also storm-like, moving across artificial boundaries to connect texts across space, time, and language. The dissertation is bookended by the Horn’s two forms of extreme weather—rainfall (in the Introduction) and drought (in Chapter 4)—and at its center is a discussion of the most literally storm-dense novel, *Adua*, the project’s swirling eye.

Chapter 1, “Unsettling the ground: On origins, the nation, and ambivalence in Afäwärq Gäbrä-Iyyäsus’ *Läbb Wälläd Tarik*,” stages an investigation and deconstruction of genealogical and nationalist modes of reading in African literary studies through *Läbb Wälläd Tarik* by Afäwärq Gäbrä-Iyyäsus, the 1908 text widely

regarded as the first novel in the Amharic language and which I translated as part of this dissertation. The chapter enacts the Ethiopian poetic mode *sämmænna wärk* as a reading method to unpack the novel's various layers of interpretation as foundational fiction, national allegory, and melancholic holding structure for the losses produced by Ethiopian exceptionalism. Foregrounding textual elements dismissed in the critical tradition but emergent in the translation, the chapter unsettles the originary, brackets the nation, and positions *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* in the midst of a regional literary archive.

Chapter 2, "Blood flowers and citrus: Productive melancholy in Sulaiman Addonia's *Silence is My Mother Tongue*, Gebreyesus Hailu's ሓደ ማንታ / *The Conscript*, and Igiaba Scego's *Adua*" foregrounds questions of ecology, environment, and human relationships with nature and animals in the study of the novel, acknowledging the genre's colonial trace while foregrounding trajectories beyond colonial inheritance. Enacting the interpretative method of the storm outlined in the introduction, it teases out threads of connection between three texts separated by close to a century, written in three different languages, and featuring distinct regional identities. Attending to shared histories of loss caused by Italian colonial conscription and Ethiopian imperialism and the animate movement of natural material like storms, flowers, fruits, and animals across texts, the chapter puts forward a ground-up theory of the novel as a productively melancholic structure that carries loss forward as the conditions for literature in the present, turning in on itself in internal heteroglossia and outward to the world through the explosion of narrative conventions.

Chapter 3, “Təzəta hauling possessions: Highland romance and embodied memory in Maaza Mengiste’s *The Shadow King* and Gabriella Ghermandi’s *Regina de fiori e di perle*” follows the movement of a romantic highland imaginary of nature, religion, history produced by Adwa into later literary texts. It develops the Amharic song form and term for memory, təzəta, as a melancholic mode that borrows losses from the past and future to create a structure for memory in the present, then reads the two texts as təzətas in narrative form. Both novels foreground the role of women as holders and transmitters of embodied memory absent from official histories. While *The Shadow King* demonstrates that təzəta can move forward the hierarchizing violences of the highland imaginary, *Regina* shows that the melancholic novel can bring the embodied memory and mnemonic topographies of the past forward without mythologization or romanticization.

Chapter 4, “A sandy grave: Climate coloniality in Faarax M.J. Cawl’s *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl*, Nadifa Mohamed’s *Black Mamba Boy*, and Abdourahman A. Waberi’s *Passage des larmes*,” turns to the low-lying geographies of the Horn and storms of drought as an index of the Horn’s ongoing climate coloniality. Tracing the presence of real, metaphorical, indexical, and discursive droughts across three texts, it foregrounds the novels’ view of drought and desertification as processes of compounding alienation from sensory epistemologies of environment. Using the Somali term for literature and sap-filled evergreen plants, suugaan, the chapter shows that drought does not necessarily signify the absence of life or literature but is rather the very grounds from which an inconsolable,

melancholy, and regenerative literary ecology comes forth. Following Chapter 4, the dissertation concludes with a brief Coda.

Given melancholia's persistent movement of re-inscription and return, it is hardly surprising that it emerged gradually from my reading of these texts gradually through the process of many readings and writings, rereadings and rewrites. Just as the novels included in this project are the ones I continued to return to, so too melancholy is not a term I imposed on this project but one that arose from the "ground up" of these texts and my many returns to them. The practice of allowing texts, their representations, ideas, poetics, and movements, act on me has shaped the contours of this project. Consequently, the project has also shaped me, inviting increasing awareness not only of my situated relationship to the specific land and landscapes of my life (the place I grew up, the various places I lived while working on this project, the Horn of Africa), but also to the histories and structures that conditioned those relations and have bearing on my scholarly perspective.

Unlike Ghosh and Sultana, I do not have an "originating storm" but rather a collection of experiences which together inform and animate my situated relationship to this project. I come from interior plains, or rather from a history of white settlers occupying fertile places in the US Northwest. Coming from a lineage of farmers and nomads, my early sensibilities were shaped by an entitlement to land as an object to traverse, own, and control, but also by a detailed attention to and dependence on the weather, changes to trees and plants, and movement of seasons as elements with agency and consequence. Unlearning extractive relationships and learning the erased

and forgotten histories of the land I come from, as well as how my family's meteorological obsessions inform my own perspective, have been key to my intellectual journey. I was also shaped by a trip to Ethiopia as a young person, a journey that initiated many of the questions about globally produced ideas of Africa this project takes up. Thus this dissertation is itself the product of a set of nested and deepening concerns, experiences, and returns which, as they keep coming back, enliven and animate it.

Chapter 1
Unsettling the ground:
On origins, the nation, and ambivalence in Afäwäṛḳ
Gäbrä-Iyyäsus' *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*

The text that has been called the “first-born of Amharic fiction,” Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus’ 1908 text titled ልብ ወለድ ታሪክ / *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, begins in media res (Yonas). The aftermath of a battle, the most recent in a longstanding geopolitical conflict, sets up the main conflict of the plot: a Christian land is invaded by its non-Christian neighbors, and the tensions caused by conquest, religious difference, and settlerism are resolved by a young Christian woman named Tobbya, who orchestrates a union between the two. Tobbya, a colloquial name for Ethiopia, also becomes the text’s title in the 1950s when part of its original title (*ləbb wälläd*) is adopted as the term for the novel genre in the Amharic language (Asfaw and Nosnitsin). On one hand, Tobbya as title reflects the interpretation most common among critics that the novel is a founding fiction in the mythology of a continuous and exceptional Ethiopia; genealogical designations of the text as “Ethiopia’s first” (Fellman) or “the first-born” (Yonas) corroborate this. Conversely, Tobbya as title indicates both the central and complicating role of the novel’s female protagonist whose contribution to the work of Ethiopian state-formation exists outside of her ability to socially reproduce. An interpretation that centers the female protagonist and her situated relationship to the land paradoxically dissolves the critical language of origins, reproduction, and development that characterizes nationalist and novel discourses and offers additional perspectives through which the novel might imagine political

community. Through its protagonist, herself an ambivalent figure who finds herself in the midst of ongoing geopolitical conflict and spends most of the novel disguised as a male, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* unsettles its allegedly ordinary status.

Beginning with its composition date (1908) and language (Amharic), *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* confounds the critical tradition invested in tracing the origins and lines of transmission of the novel genre. This diffusionist tradition assumes that modern ideas and innovations such as the novel emerged in Europe and were then spread throughout the rest of the world, often on the back of colonial conquest, where globally “peripheral” intellectuals adopted, appropriated, or reacted against them. As it relates to the African novel, this genealogical account typically begins in the mid-twentieth century around the time colonialism ends and regards almost exclusively English language texts, the first generation of which were often composed by African intellectuals who had been forced to learn the language of their colonizers and were now “writing back” to their oppressors in those languages. The genealogical account of the African novel often focalizes individual subjects and their narratives of development, reading them as stand-ins for social community and identity formation; in Fredric Jameson’s famous formulation for instance, the destiny of the private individual functions as an allegory for the fate of the nation. This account of African literature has been well-critiqued for its circumscription of entire critical debates and archives of writing, yet even alternative accounts which seek to establish the African novel as the inevitable progression of indigenous orature or that consider the incorporation of orality as the marker of authenticity in the African novel find

themselves caught up in the evolutionary paradigm of origins, firsts, development, and progress in which Africa and African narratives are always already behind, backward, or delayed.

Given that *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* was written in Amharic, since 1941 the national language of Ethiopia,¹ and that at the time of writing there is no publicly available English translation, only Tadesse Tamrat's 1964 gloss published in the *Ethiopian Observer*, the novel has rarely appeared in literary scholarship outside the self-enclosed space of Ethiopian studies. Outside of passing treatment by scholars who do not read Amharic (Jack Fellman, Thomas Kane, Albert Gérard), the critical reception consists of several scholars who dismiss the novel as tale-like, written for a child (Luigi Fusella), or purely aesthetic (Redulf Molväter); one (Fikre Tolossa) who recriminates it for not conforming to the (European) conventions of the realist novel; and a handful who treat it as both a serious aesthetic and ideological text. This latter group, what I mean when I refer to the established critical tradition, is constituted by two essays by Taye Assefa and Yonas Admassu in *Silence is not golden: a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature* (1995) and several essays by Sara Marzagora, including "The first Ethiopian novel in Amharic (1908) and the world: critical and theoretical legacies" (2022). Taye, Yonas, and Marzagora enact admirable context-sensitive readings of the novel's aesthetics, genre and style conventions, intertextual

¹ From 1941 to 2020, Amharic was the only official national language of Ethiopia. In 1994, a new constitution federated the country into nine regional states and two multiethnic "chartered administrations" along ethnic lines; each state was given autonomy in legislative, executive and judicial affairs and could adopt additional languages outside Amharic. Only in 2020 were Afan Oromo, Afar, Somali, and Tigrigna added as official languages of the federal government.

frames of reference, and sociopolitical environment. At the same time, they conclude that the text situates itself as both a foundational fiction of historical Abyssinian empire and an unapologetic national allegory of the modern Ethiopian nation-state. The continuous trajectory from ancient kingdom to modern nation is characteristic of the grand narrative tradition of exceptionalist Ethiopian historiography, about which more below. But it also, rather surprisingly for a context-specific and situated reading, takes on board two of the forms most critiqued as European imports to Africa, the nation and the national allegory.

I begin this dissertation with *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* not to (re)produce a genealogical or nationalist account of the novel or the larger literary archive considered here, but rather to, through an allegedly “first” text, unsettle, deconstruct, and dismantle these forms of reading. Even though I began reading and translating *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* in part because of its status as a “first,” the iterative process of translating the novel began to teach me the novel’s internal conceptual, aesthetic, and linguistic strategies, formal movements, and intertextual frames of reference so that it became difficult to read it as originating a national literary tradition. In this chapter I read the two textual elements which most stood out to me in the translation process and which are most commonly associated with national allegory: the young protagonist’s journey as it is aided by gender ambivalence, and representations of land and geography. Surprisingly, both elements have been dismissed as inconsequential or background aspects by Taye and Yonas’ readings, causing me to reflect, as Serawit Debele does, on what may be hidden in plain sight as a function of

how *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* has been normativized as a national allegory in the established critical tradition. In my reading, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* recasts these elements (gender and geography) in nonreproductive, ambivalent, and contested directions, thereby unsettling a purely originary national reading and instead presenting itself in the midst of, rather than initiating, forms of political, social, and literary relation.

Through the protagonist Tobbya, I argue, the novel invites a reading that does not maintain the nation (with its fixed boundaries and identities) as the base structure of allegory but opens itself to the more flexible, situated, and ecological category of the region as cultural context and frame of reference. Tobbya's gender ambivalence is an assimilative strategy and mode of translation which allows her to move between a number of different landscapes, preventing her from becoming fixed in place and ensuring her survival through a series of lateral and affiliative, rather than reproductive, relations. The novel puts Tobbya and her environment together in a way that circumvents the linkage between femininity and national territory while also questioning how the idea of an exceptionalist Ethiopia is constructed through imperial imaginaries, religious assimilation, settlerism, and independence. Moreover, by extending a consideration of gender to one of genre, this chapter uses the reframing of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* to put forward an account of the novel genre that bypasses the typical fixed categories of literary study and instead opens onto a regional ecology of literary texts affiliated across nationality, temporality, and language.

Origin stories: Afäwärq Gäbrä-Iyyäsus and *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*

Throughout this chapter I refer to the text as *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* (rather than its secondary title *Tobbya*) to avoid confusion with its protagonist. The title is a neologism of three Amharic words: *tarik*, meaning history; *wälläd*, to be born out of; and *ləbb*, heart. In the Ethiopian context, the heart is the place in the body “where imagination originates;” thus the title can be translated as an “invented” or “imagined” history (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 76). At the time *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* was written, the majority of Amharic language texts were religious hagiographies, political treatises and letters, or royal chronicles—“*tarikä nägäst*,” or the history of kings. From *tarikä nägäst* Ethiopian readers were familiar with the *tarik* (history) genre, and Afäwärk’s new text resembled it but with a twist: *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* was a history not of real events but of imagined ones, events that *could* have happened in reality but were actually born out of the writer’s imagination. In addition to *tarik*, the text mixed in imaginative elements of myth, legend, adventure, romance, quest, and fantasy, creating a synthesis of genres that defied easy categorization.

The imaginative and speculative qualities of the text go some way toward explaining its lack of spatial and temporal markers. *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* is set in an environment that generally resembles the Ethiopian territories but references all three major Horn of Africa geographies (*däga*, *wäyna däga*, *ḵola*), in a time of sustained regional conflict. Its plot can be divided into four acts.² The first, which begins with a two-line poetic aphorism, contextualizes the main action within a period of fierce

² While the established interpretative tradition (Taye, Yonas) identifies three main plot movements, I adopt the four-act organization suggested by Serawit whose reading centers the female protagonist Tobbya and her subjectivity (*Presentation*).

conflict between a Christian community and their non-Christian neighbors, the arāmāne. In the battle with which the narrative begins, the Christian forces are annihilated, three of their four generals killed, the country laid to waste, and the king dead from grief. The fourth remaining general is captured and sold into slavery but his master, noticing his pedigree, sends a message to the general's wife, son Wahəd, and daughter Tobbya seeking an enormous ransom. Lacking the money, the family send Wahəd out to find work, where he meets a generous caravan merchant who promises to help. The second act begins when Wahəd returns home followed shortly by his father, who has been freed thanks to the merchant's benevolence. Wahəd leaves home again to repay the family's benefactor but instead gets swept up in the chaos of the battle's aftermath as the country is being re-invaded, plundered, and occupied by the victorious arāmāne. He becomes disoriented in desolate and destroyed landscapes, suffers days without food and water, and is eventually captured and sold to a slave trader.

In act three, a year has passed, and the general and his daughter, increasingly concerned by Wahəd's absence, set out to search for him. To hide her identity, Tobbya shaves her head, wears male clothes, and speaks and acts like a man. Intending to search for Wahəd, Tobbya and her father must quickly pivot to fleeing for their lives from the conquering arāmāne forces. Isolated from their fellow countrypeople, they climb a craggy hill at the center of a vast plain but are surrounded by the invaders' massive army and discovered by the invading king and his scouting party. In a surprising turn of events, the king offers Tobbya and her father protection and a place

in his court, while also promising to let them return home once peace returns to the land. The novel's fourth act is comprised of the father and daughter's stay in the king's camp, a time marked by tensions of concealment and desire. Still in disguise, Tobbya worries constantly about the discovery of her identity. Meanwhile the king and his female cousin, believing Tobbya is male, are each deeply attracted to her; the king appoints her to his court and helps find Wahəd, while his cousin falls madly in love. Eventually a plot hatched by jealous courtiers reveals Tobbya's identity. Relieved by the opportunity to act on his desire, the king asks Tobbya to marry him, but she refuses on grounds she cannot marry a non-Christian. Compelled by Tobbya's virtue and their own love, the king and his cousin convert to Christianity. The novel concludes with the mass conversion and baptism of the arämäne army, a double wedding for Tobbya and the king and Wahəd and the king's cousin, and two closing poems celebrating the inauguration of pax Christiana in a newly-unified Ethiopia.

Marzagora argues that, regardless of the nonspecific setting, the novel's resolution makes it clear that *Ləbb Wälləd Tarik* was "inspired by recent historical events" (Marzagora, "The First Ethiopian Novel," 73). The story of a land plagued by war and religious factionalism that becomes politically united under a single Christian king loosely resembles the "process of political centralization" that the Abyssinian empire underwent from the mid-nineteenth century onward (Marzagora, "The First Ethiopian Novel," 73). The initial period of conflict may refer to the Zämänä Mäsafənt (1769-1855), a century of political fragmentation characterized by the weakening of the highland empire's central authority and persistent incursions of

wäyna däga and qola leaders, including the Muslim Ahmed Gragn. The novel's final pacification is perhaps an analog for the reign of Mənilək II who, in the endorsed version of Ethiopian history, consolidated the process of imperial centralization begun by the rulers before him (Tewodros and Yohanes) in the context of increasing European presence and colonial ambition. Still, the novel omits any obvious historical markers, presenting a narrative of imagined rather than real events.

Certainly Mənilək played a significant role in the author of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* Afäwärķ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus' life and was directly responsible for the conditions under which the novel was written. Afäwärķ was born in 1868 on Zege Peninsula on Lake Tana, in the highland region considered to be the seat of traditional Abyssinia and its Christian Semitic culture. Zäge and Lake Tana are home to ancient Orthodox monasteries dating from the thirteenth century, a refuge for mystics and monks who spend their time among religious icons, illuminated manuscripts and paintings, and silence, and it is in this monastic context that Afäwärķ was schooled. Sometime after 1880, he was introduced to Mənilək's court where his intellect and painting skills marked him as a "luminar[y] of the Ethiopian intelligentsia" (Bahru, *A History*, 99; Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 268). Like the other court attendants he enjoyed close contact with Mənilək's European visitors, including the Italian Count Pietro Antonelli. In 1887 Antonelli arranged for Afäwärķ to travel to Turin with Mənilək's blessing and study fine arts. Afäwärķ returned to Ethiopia in 1890 and fell out with the Empress Taytu, a distant relative, over his Italian affiliations at a time when the relationship between Ethiopia and Italy was souring (Marzagora, "The First

Ethiopian Novel,” 78). Mənilək arranged for Afäwärķ to go to Switzerland in 1894, where he then crossed over into Italy and offered his services to the Italians in their 1895-96 invasion of Ethiopia (Fellman, “Ethiopia’s First Novel,” 183).

Following the Battle of Adwa, Afäwärķ remained in Italy and taught at the Orientale University in Naples, an exemplar of the colonial production of knowledge about African “others” (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 79). At Orientale University, “under the gentle prodding and watchful eyes” of one of the most prominent Italian scholars of Ethiopia, Francesco Gallina, Afäwärķ composed his major works, including *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* (1908); a satirical travel guide in Amharic and French, *Guide du voyageur en Abyssinie* (1908); a biography of Mənilək II, *Dagmawi Aṭe Mənilək* (1908); a handful of Amharic grammar books; and a new edition of the Psalms of David (Taye and Shiferaw 27).³

Ləbb Wälläd Tarik was initially used by Afäwärķ to teach his Italian students about Ethiopia and to read Amharic, but its challenging prose style, “a rich, flowery syntax that only advanced students of Amharic would have been able to penetrate lexically and grammatically,” and its lack of explanation for cultural references and practices refused to center European readers (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 86). Moreover, unlike many early Afrophone novels *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* was not, or at least not obviously, a narrative of African encounter with imperialism but

³ Italians were influential in the beginnings of modern twentieth-century Amharic literature. In Luigi Fusella’s terms, if Afäwärķ was the father of the Amharic genre, then Francesco Gallina was its midwife and Italy its cradle. Fusella suggests that Gallina not only encouraged the writing of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, but also contributed to its improvement by suggestions and advice and was integral to getting it published. (Taye and Shiferaw 61)

rather a celebration of Ethiopian empire, complete with an unapologetic presentation of Ethiopia as God's nation and a glowing portrayal of its enlightened ruler. Since Afäwärķ's other publications from 1908 and 1909 all deal with Mäniläk's reign, it's a reasonable assumption that the converted arämäne king who restores peace and justice, is tolerant, and promises to rule according to the principles of Christian morality is meant as an analog for the Ethiopian ruler and, in an echo of the tarikä nägäst genre, is understood by the author as the novel's central protagonist.⁴

Despite Afäwärķ's distance from his homeland, copies of his works circulated in Ethiopia and were "read by other prominent intellectuals" of the day (Marzagora, "The First Ethiopian Novel," 80). A decade after *Läbb Wälläd Tarik*'s publication in Italy, Afäwärķ returned to Ethiopia on Tafari Makonnen (Haylä Səlasse)'s invitation, bringing copies of his works with him and serving important government roles in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa. In 1932 he returned to Italy again as Ethiopian charge d'affaires. While Afäwärķ's association with the Italians during the first Italo-Ethiopian war is murky, his collaboration in the second Italo-Ethiopian war is "completely unambiguous" (Marzagora, "The First Ethiopian Novel," 80). He proactively defended and advanced the Italian colonial cause to such a degree that "the Fascists gave him the title *Afa Qesar*, the 'mouth[piece] of the Caesar' (i.e. Mussolini)" (Marzagora, "The First Ethiopian Novel," 80). After Ethiopia's liberation he was condemned to death for treason but lived in exile in Jimma, where he lost his

⁴ For more on the comparison and connections between *Läbb Wälläd Tarik* and *Dagmawi Aṭe Mäniläk*, see Marzagora, "The First Ethiopian Novel."

sight and finally died in 1947 (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 268-269; Yonas, “Afäwärq Gäbrä Iyäsus”).

Meanwhile, Amharic literature developed extensively in the post-independence period thanks to an ever-expanding number of readers, and fictional narration “took root in Ethiopian literary taste and acquired a degree of popularity, [with] *läbb wälläd* – the novel – taking the position of the leading genre” (Asfaw and Nosnitsin 532). While in 1927, the prominent intellectual Həruy Wäldä-Səlasse created a catalogue of “books found in Ethiopia” using the French term *roman* transliterated into Amharic script, Marzagora suggests that the distinction between genres that were products of the author’s imagination and those that were not “must have already been operative in those years” (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 77). In 1931, Emperor Haylä Səlasse publicly introduced Ethiopia’s first constitution by explaining that it was *not* *läbb wälläd*, meaning it was a binding document rooted in reality rather than the idiosyncratic product of the imagination (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 77). After independence, the first book to be printed in Addis Ababa was a 150-page anthology of 50 praise poems compiled by Yəлма Därresa, whose preface encouraged Amharic writers to turn to modern genres like the novel, short story, and drama (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 35).⁵ By the 1940s *läbb wälläd* had become the commonly used Amharic term for the English word “novel” and novels published in this decade used “*läbb wälläd tarik*” as a

⁵ The collection is entitled *Yaddis Zämän Mäzmur Səla Näšannät Kəbər YäItyopya a Wätat Šəhafiwöčč Yädärrəsut* (*Hymns of the new era in praise of independence composed by Young Ethiopian Writers*, 1941).

subtitle to denote their genre; from a specific story by a specific author in a specific year, the term had come to designate “a whole genre” of co-emergent texts (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 77). It is hardly surprising that, when *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* was reprinted in 1958, it was given a new title, *Tobbya*, to distinguish it from the genre. *Tobbya* as title also reflected a switch in readers’ understanding of the novel’s true protagonist—from the male king to the female Tobbya—and the novel and its protagonist’s relationship to the modern nation-state that had come into being since their composition.

Sämmønna wärķ: a method for melancholy

My reading of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* in this chapter uses the concept of sämmønna wärķ (wax and gold) to organize a multiplicity of textual significations and their relations to one another. Sämmønna wärķ is a method of material creation—gold casting—that also functions as a metaphor of literary poetics and interpretation; while the Amharic phrase is particular to Ethiopia, the concept exists, according to Teshome H. Gabriel, in most African languages.⁶ Teshome explains that

[sämmønna wärķ] refers to the “lost wax” process in which a goldsmith creates a wax form, casts a clay mold around it, then drains out the wax and pours in molten gold to form the valued object. Applied to poetics, the concept acknowledges two levels of interpretation, distinct in theory and representation. Such poetic form aims to attain maximum ideas with minimum words. “Wax” refers to the most obvious and superficial meaning. But the “gold” embedded in the artwork offers the “true” meaning, which may be inaccessible unless one understands the nuances of folk culture. (Teshome 31)

⁶ For more on the history of sämmønna wärķ, see Gedamu; Levine, *Wax and Gold*; and Mohammed Girma.

In addition to being a form of literary innovation and style, the *sämmønna wärk* method is also used for hiding secrets. Mihret Sibhat writes of her experience in Amharic language class, where students were taught “to locate the *hibre-qal*—the word or phrase that is hiding the Gold—before digging to uncover the real message” (Mihret, “Wax and Gold and Gold”). For example, a couplet seemingly about piles of fish lying in the wilderness could, when the *hibre-qal* was identified, actually be a jab at a promiscuous woman (Mihret, “Wax and Gold and Gold”). Used to embed humor and insults, *sämmønna wärk* is also a kind of double-speak that can be coded with secrets, criticisms of power, and political resistance. Its political uses became almost ubiquitous in Ethiopia as the twentieth century progressed, Amharic became the nation’s only official language, and political and literary censorship and social surveillance were widespread.

While Teshome’s explanation of wax and gold maintains a clear distinction between “two levels of interpretation,” Mihret points out that the emphasis on two layers can “reinforce a kind of binary thinking—everything being sorted into Wax and Gold” which are themselves treated as two bounded and essentialized categories.

The metaphor’s binary configuration

create[s] the idea that there could be only one layer of Wax scaffolding, one layer of Gold, and a sense that that single layer of Gold is the only and most important truth. If other layers of Gold existed, they would have to be of lower quality—so why were they even important? (Mihret, “Wax and Gold and Gold”)

Mihret suggests a method of “wax and gold *and gold*” to draw attention to additional interpretative layers that have been made absent, erased, or lost as a function of

privileging one reading over others. Teshome’s formulation, notable for its attention to material details and process, also notes the way the metaphor indexes loss, namely the “lost wax” that has been drained away. The materiality of the metaphor makes it clear that the wax, even after it has been removed from the mold, remains as a present absence that creates the conditions for the gold to come into being. In this way *sämmønna wärķ* can be considered a melancholic form since what is *there*—the gold—can only be known by the hidden contours of what is *not*—the wax.⁷ After all, the gold object cast after the wax has been removed still bears its fatty film, its material trace. Melancholia expresses a porous uncertainty around the temporal and spatial boundaries of what has been lost, making it both present and absent, a spectral presence. Moreover, and addressing Mihret’s point about bounded entities, melancholia draws attention to the dissolution of material boundaries between the wax and gold since it is their relationality—the contact and porosity between them—rather than their distinctiveness that creates the conditions for signification and meaning.

Synthesizing Teshome and Mihret’s formulations with a melancholic reading, this chapter uses *sämmønna wärķ* to draw attention to what is *not* there, what has been

⁷ In its Freudian configuration, melancholia refers to a mode of grief in which the bereaved subject constantly returns to the object that has been lost without consolation or moving on. The griever simultaneously turns back on themselves as substitute lost object and perceives the lost object as always already distant from them. In Judith Butler’s account, melancholia draws an intensely social outside (the world of others, with their promises and ruptures of connection) within the psychic inside, so that the social and psychic are swirled together despite being portrayed as distinct in this topography. Butler says that “only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all... The ego comes into being on the condition of the ‘trace’ of the other, who is, at that moment of emergence, already at a distance” (Butler 32-33).

lost but remains as absent presence, in *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* and its endorsed reading as national allegory. Rather than preserving wax as wax and gold as gold, my method emphasizes the relationality, porosity, and transformation of the two entities, both as natural objects and as stand-ins for differing significations in a literary text. First I show how melancholic sämmønna wärķ works by analyzing the novel's most significant literary geography, a high hilltop surrounded by a vast flat plain. Moving beyond a dismissive aesthetic reading, I show how this literary geography is embedded with multiple significations that bear on both *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik's* established reading tradition and the registers of meaning that have been hidden, erased, or lost as a function of the dominant reading. In other words, taking geography and other natural elements of the text seriously is for me a way of deconstructing and suspending national reading paradigms and reorienting, or perhaps even returning, to regional literary frameworks. The hilltop literary geography frames the subsequent discussion of the novel, which turns first to *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik's* engagement with the hilltop perspective, meaning the myth of Ethiopian exceptionalism, and then the perspective from the valley below, meaning what has been left out of or erased within the exceptionalist narrative. While I touch on translation throughout, expanding the literal definition of carrying meaning between languages to the transfer of meaning *within* a monolingual text, in the final section I reflect briefly on my experience translating the novel and the role of melancholy in both the novel's reception history and my translation process.

Ləbb Wälläd Tarik's hilltop encounter occurs at the halfway point in the novel. Beforehand, Tobbya and her father traverse “the wäyna däga, then the low kōla” and then come to a “very fertile däga,” a “beautiful highland landscape” whose inhabitants are in the midst of harvesting their crops [ከወይና ደጋው ወደ ቆላው፣ አንድ ለም ደጋ፤ ያንም ደጋ...እጅግ አምሩ] (Afäwärk 26).⁸

Grain was heaped up on one side; on another, the harvest was in process; and further away the piles were sorted. Elsewhere piles of seeds sat ready for planting. Some fields had just been planted and others had young crops. It was a beautiful sight, enough to make someone full without eating a bite of food.

[ባንድ ወገን ክምሩ፣ ባንድ ወገን አጨዳው፣ ባንድ ወገን እሸቱ፣ ባንድ ወገን ዝርዝሩ፣ ባንድ ወገን ቡቃያው፣ ባንድ ወገን የበልጉ ዘር እየሆነ አቀማመጡን ሲያት ሳይበሉ የሚያጠግብ ይመስል ነበር።] (Afäwärk 26)

This abundance fills them with joy and they spend the night in the home of generous villagers who warn them of the approaching arämäne invasion. In the morning before they can even decide on a direction, the sky fills with smoke signaling the invaders' arrival. Where yesterday there had been fields of crops and piles of grain, today the enemy begin killing and capturing people, “burning houses and harvest piles... trampling the rest of the harvest under foot; burning churches; destroying the forest; [and] cutting the vegetables” [ቤትና ክምሩን እያቃጠለ...የቀረውንም በግሩ እየዳሸ፣ ቤተክርስቲያኑን እያቃጠለ፣ ዱሩን እየመደመደ[ና]፣ አታክልቱን እየቆረጠ] (Afäwärk 30).

Fleeing for their lives, Tobbya and her father leave the ravaged richness of the däga and find themselves on a vast flat kōla. With the arämäne bearing down on them from the horizon, Tobbya and her father identify a tall hill, a peak “like a large

⁸ All translations from *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* are mine unless otherwise noted. The translated novel is available in Appendix 1.

island,” in the center of the field [እንደ ትልቅ ደሴት] (Afäwäṛḳ 34). After a breathless climb, they summit in time to watch in terror as the army passes by “like a flood of water” on both sides of them [እንደ ውኃ ሞላት] (Afäwäṛḳ 34). Hopeful that the significant vertical separation will conceal them, they are almost immediately discovered by the invading king and his scouting party, who after halting the advance climb the hill to view the land they have conquered and the layout of their camp, spread out like “a calm sea completely abandoned by the wind” [ብቻ ነፋስ እርም ብሎ የተወወ የረጋ ባህር] (Afäwäṛḳ 40). The king treats Tobbya and her father with surprising kindness, especially given the destruction they’ve witnessed his army cause, and invites them into his court and household, initiating the second half of the plot. We will return to the consequences of the king’s containment of Tobbya below, but first I want to linger on the geographical setting—the tall and rocky hilltop soaring above a dusty plain—of Tobbya and the king’s first meeting.

A surface-level reading might dismiss the geographic descriptions and setting as negligible background detail or a display of aesthetic language. As we have already noted, a significant portion of scholarship on *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* emphasizes its aesthetic and non-realistic elements to the exclusion of narratological skill or ideological meaning. Molvaer claims that the novel “can hardly be called a realist work” though it can be valued “for its style;” “the author may have written it as a purely artistic exercise...art for art’s sake” which has no bearing on “the social and cultural life of [its] time” (Molvaer, *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia*, 8, 1). Taye for his part regards “purely ornamental descriptions of landscapes [and] interiors [as]

rare” in the novel unless they explicate the developments of the plot (Taye 81). In this view, the description of the different landscapes Tobbya and her father cross and the dramatic hilltop, the “eternal residence” and “sanctuary” of crows with its sprawling valley below do little more than intensify the drama of discovery [የላዕኔታ ርስት፣ ገዳም] (Afawärk 32).

Yet the descriptive landscapes are not merely background. The rich abundance of the highland region Tobbya and her father visit and the cultured generosity of their hosts represent all the positive qualities of the Christian community, which are then shattered and destroyed by the arämäne. The juxtaposition of the beautiful landscape with its subsequent spoiling clearly conveys the invaders’ depravity and the environmental and social scales of their destruction. This is further emphasized in the scene of first encounter which is a kind of hibre-qal with several interpretations. In the first place, the description of Tobbya’s hilltop as an island in the midst of a vast sea is a literary representation of a historic geopolitical idea, Mənilək II’s description of his kingdom as a “Christian island surrounded by a sea of pagans” in an 1891 letter (Rubenson). This metaphor embeds the association between islands and isolation, exceptionality, and being surrounded or besieged on all sides and supports what historians of Ethiopia refer to as the “great tradition” or “grand narrative” of Ethiopia.⁹

⁹ This hegemonic historiographical discourse has been variously called the “great tradition” or “grand tradition” (Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History”), “Ethiopianist tradition” (Crummey), “Ethiopianist nationalism” (Semir), “Church and State tradition” (Triulzi), “Greater Ethiopia approach” (Triulzi), “Pan-Ethiopian ideology” (Triulzi), and the “grand narrative” (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*). Preferring the attention to narrative construction implied by Marzagora’s term, I use “grand narrative” throughout this chapter and project. The grand narrative is prominent in

In the grand narrative, the modern Ethiopian state has maintained a continuous existence as a political unit from the ancient Christian kingdom (Abyssinia) “born out of divine will in a biblical past” to the present (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 71).¹⁰ Marzagora and Ayele note that the continuity narrative leads to an anachronistic and ahistorical use of the term “Ethiopia” to conflate the Abyssinian empire, which was “multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic,” with the modern Ethiopian nation-state whose formation, beginning with Mənilək in the late nineteenth century, sought unity through enforced practices of “sameness and homogeneity” (Marzagora and Ayele 433). The modern state has been constituted by a clear power dynamic between those who are inherently “Ethiopian,” meaning Christian, from the highlands, and Semitic (Amharic or Tigrinya) speaking, and those who aren’t. In Christopher Clapham’s words, the grand narrative is “explicitly non-African, even anti-African” in its desire to connect Ethiopia to the Christian and Semitic worlds of the Red Sea, Arabia, and the Mediterranean while disavowing and excluding its indigenous Africanity (Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History,” 48). This cultural and racial exceptionalism is heightened by the claim that “Ethiopia” has

present-day Ethiopia, from academic scholarship to public history to history instruction to high schools and higher education settings. Abroad, the “romance of Ethiopia” remains strong among diasporic Africans and black nationalists (some of whom are Ethiopian) who uphold the grand narrative against racist stereotypes and ideas of Africa in the global north (Dagmawi et al).

¹⁰ As Marzagora notes quoting Clapham, “there is no single way ‘this familiar tale of Ethiopian history’ has been narrated” (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 73). Each version stresses different elements and factors. The foundational quality of the *Kəbrä Nəgəst* is almost always present, and other common elements are “Ethiopia’s” historical antiquity, privileged or chosen indigenous Christianity, political autonomy, and autochthonous cultural creativity (in form of written script, calendar, and musical notation systems).

maintained an uninterrupted society for millennia, despite being surrounded by hostile “others” on all sides.

Adopting the geographic metaphor and placing Tobbya atop a hill surrounded by a sea of arāmāne tents, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* appears to align itself with the grand narrative’s notion of Ethiopia’s “island” exceptionality and historic continuity. The dramatic literary geography stages a binary conflict between “civilized” Christians, represented by Tobbya and her family, and the Horn’s “uncivilized” or “pagan” non-Christian communities, represented by the text as Muslims.¹¹ As Taye puts it, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* portrays “an abstracted Ethiopia whose very survival is threatened by religious conflicts and which ultimately attains salvation and glory through the consolidation of Christian hegemony” (Taye 77). For Yonas, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* tells the story of “a contemporary fictional interpretation” of the “founding of an empire, very much echoing the mythical allusion in the Bible to Ethiopia” (Yonas 94, 93). While the empire may have allowed a degree of multiplicity and tolerance, in the text’s temporal slippage (i.e., continuation) from the Christian empire to the formation of the modern expansionist state, assimilation to a narrowly-defined national identity comes to the fore. Marzagora affirms this reading, regarding the novel as “unapologetically nationalist” in which the national community is envisioned as “a

¹¹ According to Marzagora, the term arāmāne (አረመኔ) can be translated as unbelievers, barbarians, or savages and in the context of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* has been interpreted to refer to pagans and/or Muslims. Taye Assefa makes a good argument based on textual evidence that the antagonists are followers of Islam (Taye 90). For example, Tobbya and her father meet a couple who report that their son was kidnapped and sold into slavery by “Islamic merchants,” and the invading king refers to “Allah” [አስላሞች ነጋዴዎች; አላህ] (Afework 20, 39). Ge’ez religious texts such as the *Metsihafe Senkesar* reference Muslims as arāmāne (አረመኔ), and Afework himself in his biography of Mənilək II refers to the Dervishes as both “Muslims” and “arāmāne” (Taye 90).

community of believers, whose social unity and social harmony [are] regulated by the Christian values of generosity and tolerance” (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 75). In this reading Tobbya atop the hill becomes an image of the ideal nation; as Yonas puts it, “For T’obbiya read *T’obbiya* and you have the ideal state, the ideal community – of what else, but Ethiopia” (Yonas 101). 86

What, a melancholic wax and gold reading asks, is not there, hidden, or suppressed within the established critical tradition of continuous Ethiopian exceptionalism? Mənilək’s island metaphor has typically been understood to reference relations within the Horn of Africa region,¹² but recent scholarship suggests the geographic figure of speech was developed in the context of diplomatic communications between Ethiopian and European leaders and may have first been suggested by the latter. According to Samuel Rubenson, who analyzed nineteenth-century archival material from Ethiopian rulers and notables and gathered in the *Acta Aethiopica*,

Ethiopian letters from the first half of the nineteenth century contain few references to Christianity and Islam at all and even fewer to any Christian-Muslim conflict. References to a common identity uniting Ethiopians and Europeans and to Muslim hostility can always be traced back to European initiatives. (Rubenson 120)

Rubenson observes that the perception of Ethiopia as “isolated, surrounded, and threatened by forces antagonistic to its heritage,” an isolated island in a hostile sea, “pervade[d] much of European literature on the history and culture of Ethiopia”

¹² In particular the attitude of Christian highlanders toward inhabitants of the plateaus and lowlands, often followers of Islam or indigenous religions, whom Mənilək incorporated into his expansionist state.

(Rubenson 118). This image was reinforced by the tales of sixteenth century European travelers who identified the Abyssinian emperor as the mythical Christian monarch Prester John, “King of the Indies,” an eager and enlightened ally in the struggle against Islamic expansionism (Bahru 9). Considered in this context, Mənilək’s use of the metaphor in a letter addressed to prominent European powers appears as a strategy to claim respect for his people and territory and to avoid being made a target of colonial or missionary ambition. It might seem strange for the emperor to refer to Christian vulnerability from religious others when the real enemy was a European one (namely Italy), but his reference plays into ideas already held by his interlocutors about a fundamental conflict between Christians and non-Christians.

As Chinua Achebe would later write of Joseph Conrad’s representation of African subjects in *Heart of Darkness*, Mənilək’s use of the island/sea metaphor meets the “psychological predisposition” of his readers and removes the need to “contend with their resistance” (Achebe 4). From Achebe’s point of view, Mənilək might be a “purveyor of comforting myths,” or, someone who employs the narrative tools at his disposal as a survival strategy to fend off European colonial ambition (Achebe 4). Clearly Mənilək’s state formation is a self-preservationist response to the political imperatives of the time, yet he and the novel’s exceptionalist nationalism work at the expense of regional neighbors who are not only otherized, but will also bear the brunt of European conversion and colonization practices.

A melancholic sämmønna wärķ reading makes clear that in addition to the national allegory, *Ləbb Wälləd Tarik* is also embedded with a colonial one.

Historically speaking, Ethiopia has had an ambivalent relationship to the “colonial,” meaning the act of forced occupation, political administration, and social transformation of a place and its inhabitants by outsiders, as well as the threat of that act. Marzagora notes that in the grand narrative of Ethiopian historiography, “the concept of the ‘colonial’ is conspicuous for its forced absence” (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 99). On one hand, the narrative of exceptionalism sought to position Ethiopia as a peer of European nation-states, a status that in some senses was realized when Ethiopia was admitted to the League of Nations in 1923 and further bolstered by Haylä Səlasse’s constitution (*not löbb wälläd*) in 1931. As Adom Getachew points out, Ethiopia’s presence in the League highlighted the persistence of an unequal international hierarchy, since its conditional admittance was “designed to disciple and civilize Ethiopia so that it could raise itself to the ranks of the other member states” (Adom, *Worldmaking*, 58). The Italian invasion and occupation of Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941 was justified as a means of more direct oversight, especially over the abolition of slavery, “an indication of African backwardness” (Adom, *Worldmaking*, 55, 59). Adom argues that Ethiopia’s efforts toward global recognition were part of a larger “anticolonial nationalism as *worldmaking*” movement that sought to inaugurate a postimperial world, but that this ambition was frustrated by residual structures of unequal integral and racial hierarchy (Adom, *Worldmaking*, 2). Thus even as Ethiopia presented itself as a sovereign state (with its own settler colonial practices) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it found itself imbricated and fixed within globalized hierarchies that assumed its

subaltern status. It's hardly surprising that representations of Ethiopia's colonial relations are subordinated, obscured, or hidden within its own narrative of exceptional autonomy and self-determination; nonetheless "the colonial permeates the perception, representation and theorisation of Ethiopia's history and identity...*in a hidden way*" (Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*, 100, my emphasis).

The absent yet present colonial allegory is discernible in *Labb Wälläd Tarik's* landscape descriptions and hilltop scene. The description of the abundant *däga* before and during the invasion makes clear how the *arämäne's* presence transforms the land and highlights their destructive and extractive practices. Not only do they occupy the land, but they treat it and its human and nonhuman inhabitants disposably by trampling, plundering, burning, thieving, and stealing them away. Nevertheless, the spatial hierarchy of the hilltop scene presents the *arämäne* as inferior vis a vis *Tobbya* and her father who occupy the spatial and ideological high ground. Their position on the crest signals their cultural and religious superiority, and as a sign of this they believe themselves hidden from view and able to see the situation as it truly is.

They didn't sit but laid down so they wouldn't be seen, sticking their necks out like turtles. Of course they were incredibly frightened. Even if there were a full-grown elephant with a white tusk on the top of the hill who wanted to be seen, it would look like a fly from the perspective of a person on the field looking up. Indeed, everything would look like a fly from that point of view.

[መቀመጣቸውም ቀረና እንዳይታዩ ተጋደመው አንገታቸውን ብቻ እንደ ኤሊ ብቅ እያደረጉ ሆነ የሚያዩ። እንዲያው ቢፈሩ ነው እንጂ፣ እነርሱ ታሉበት አንድ ኮረምቱዝሆንም እስከ ነጭ ጥርስ ቁሞ እየኝ ቢል ከሜዳው ላለ ሰው ዝንብ ይመስለው እንደሆነ ነው እንጂ ምንም ከዝንብ ልቆ አይታየውም ነበር።] (Afäwärk 33)

Despite the scene's focalization through *Tobbya* and her father, the narrative offers another point of view, that of a viewer located at the bottom of the hill looking up.

The hypothetical situation—an elephant reduced to the size of a fly—suggests a great vertical distance but not one so great as to conceal absolutely. Both the high and low perspectives are situated and partial, relative to location in space and time, yet the plot grants the perspective from below some additional credibility when Tobbya and her father are discovered by those geographically and culturally “lower” than them.

The novel’s brief glimpse of a situated perspective from the plain below unsettles the hegemonic view from above which sees only a smooth, undifferentiated, and inferior landscape of people in a natural “pagan” state. Even though the people in the valley are the occupying, colonizing force, the novel’s allowance for the view from below also makes space for alternate perspectives on the hierarchy of Ethiopian empire and statehood symbolized by Tobbya and her father. Those perspectives, like the arāmāne in the narrative, are assimilated and suppressed within the Ethiopian grand narrative but nevertheless exist as a trace.¹³ When the king and his entourage crest the hill, the balance of power reconfigures: from being ideologically superior, Tobbya and her father become fixed subjects under the king’s occupation, surveillance, and rule. Tobbya’s temporary experience as a colonial subject reflects Ethiopia’s status as an object of colonial ambition, a history hidden and suppressed by

¹³ The practice of foregrounding “from below” perspectives in historical and literary study is often traced to Lucien Febvre and Bertolt Brecht but its iterations are discernable throughout the world. Sometimes referred to “people’s history” or “radical history,” history from below takes ordinary and subaltern people, those who have been left out of “elite, top-down” historical narratives, as its subjects; the central concern of history (or literature) from below is the recovery of voices missing from the historical narrative or official record. As Marcus Rediker notes, “history from below is always connected to history from above” and concerns itself with the critique of official narratives and their forms of erasure while also positioning ordinary people as both subjects and makers of history (Rediker 297). Similarly reading from below draws attention to perspectives and subjectivities that have been left out of or erased from official narratives and canons, as well as institutional or inherited ways of reading.

the grand narrative. In this sense *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*'s colonial allegory works in two directions at once—signifying Ethiopia's internal settler colonialism on the one hand and its external subaltern status on the other.¹⁴ Through its multiple absent yet present significations, the novel unsettles the binary interpretation of national allegory.

Reading *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*'s hilltop geography through *sämmønna wärk* highlights the novel's melancholia, by which I mean its relationship to the losses instantiated by the imperial-colonial conditions of its creation. These include but are not limited to autonomous self-determination and political sovereignty, as well as linguistic, cultural, and ecological worlds, relations, and knowledges which were damaged, destroyed, erased, silenced, or otherwise lost, or under threat of loss in the global imperialism of the early twentieth century. Desiring to keep what has been lost, or is danger of becoming so, alive, melancholia enacts a double move in which what has been lost is simultaneously placed at a great distance and internalized into the self. In *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, melancholia manifests in the packaging together of loss into a discrete mythology of continuous Ethiopian exceptionalism and its outward projection to the world, as well as, at the same time, the novel's introjection or swallowing of the conditions of its creation in exceptionalist mythology.

For some critics of African literature, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*'s combination of simultaneous colonial imbrication and autonomous literary expression and identity would be politically untenable. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, for instance, identified the

¹⁴ For more on internal colonialism in Ethiopia, see Asafa; Asafa and Schaffer; Ayele; Jeylan; and Marzagora, *Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*.

disorientation of an African elite, of which Afäwärk was a part, whom he considered brainwashed by colonial education and/or time spent in the colonial metropole. According to Ngũgĩ, such experiences alienated Africans from their traditions and shifted their centers from Africa to Europe and from Afrocentric to Eurocentric perspectives. Beyond what he calls a culture of apemanship and parrotry, Ngũgĩ saw the politics of language and culture as part of a larger problem of a colonial mentality among an African intelligentsia which might manifest, in its most extreme forms, in assimilation to Europe and betrayal of one's native culture (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 1-2). The only way to decolonize the African mind, in his view, was to do away with colonial languages, cultures, and political ideologies; in his famous truism, "African literature can only be written in African languages" (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 27).

By adopting an African language under colonial conditions, *Ləbb Wälləd Tarik* complicates the simple bifurcation between colonial complicity and anticolonial resistance that has come to characterize the debate about language in African literary studies and especially the assumption, flowing out of Ngũgĩ's position, that African language literature might somehow be more liberated and "free" from coloniality than texts composed by African writers in European languages. This romantic view of Afrophone language texts persists in part due to barriers of language acquisition among critics, but *Ləbb Wälləd Tarik* is just as likely to be dismissed in Ethiopia and elsewhere because of its supposed colonial taint. Yet the novel's complex and equivocal handling of literary composition in an Afrophone tradition alongside colonial education and affiliation hardly warrants such neglect. At the levels of

narrative and form, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* enacts a conflicted and melancholic movement that acknowledges the losses already incurred under conditions of global European empire (an internal bearing witness) and, more often, an assertion of Ethiopia's continuous and exceptional empire (a survival strategy for outside antagonism) which enacts its own additional forms of loss. The novel's multi-directional movement, "a kind of two-part harmony where incorporation and externalization, the turn in and the turn out, coexist," constitutes part of its melancholic structure (Cooppan 2).¹⁵

Ləbb Wälläd Tarik's melancholy is also evident in the structure of displacement and exchange that constitutes its material and textual form: initially the novel has one title, then another, and the first title is picked up in reference to a much larger body of subsequent work by a number of different writers. The porous boundaries surrounding the edges of the novel are part of its melancholy. While Freud posits that melancholia is, in comparison to mourning, an unhealthy form of grief, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* suggests the possibility of a positive, even productive melancholia. Since the difference between mourning and melancholia is by Freud's own

¹⁵ The melancholic novel is traced most often to Geörgy Lukács, who in *The Theory of the Novel* delineates the novel's simultaneous representation of a detailed objective reality and a complex psychic interiority. According to Lukács, the novel owes its "inner form" not to the narrative of "the problematic individual's journeying towards himself, [and] towards clear self-recognition," but rather to the *process* by which an external reality is internalized into the subjective space of the individual (Lukács 80). The novel's wandering movement and incessant venturing out into the object world and into the self—what Lukács calls its "transcendental homelessness" and Vilashini Cooppan, reading Lukács, calls its "melancholy of form"—constitutes the novel's inherently contradictory form (Lukács 85; Cooppan, "The Novel as Genre," 37). Building on Lukács, Fredric Jameson identifies the novel's ability to register the presence of buried or repressed historical realities as a kind of contradiction necessitating the dialectical reading practice of the political unconscious. Cooppan, referencing Edward Said's imbrication of the novel and empire, suggests that the novel genre has always been "ghosted by global difference," its haunting evident in the way its past, particularly "the imperial-colonial system and its aftermath," is brought forward as "a set of structuring circumstances or a code of ordering practices" in the present (Cooppan, *Worlds Within*, 38).

admittance only a matter of proportion and perspective—one’s sense of what constitutes a “reasonable” expenditure of time and emotion—it is hardly surprising that melancholia appears reasonable when considered from perspectives whose orientation to the world is characterized by closeness to and familiarity with multi-scalar (individual, communal, environmental) loss and grief. Recalling complaints about the lack of realism in *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, perhaps an entirely realist mode (such as a *tarik*, or history) is insufficient to convey the novel’s melancholic inhabitation of its imperial-colonial conditions, which require a synthesis of realist and imaginative genres. The proliferation of *ləbb wälläd* in the years following liberation suggests that rather than disavowing the novel and its contamination, Ethiopian writers find something compelling about the genre for giving shape to stories, materials, structures, and relations which keep coming back. The novel’s associations with empire encode melancholia in its project to bear witness to, grieve, and remember.

Mountain high: *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* and Ethiopia’s continuous empire-state

The first interpretative layer—the gold—of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* is that it represents the continuity from Ethiopian empire to nation-state. In addition to the historical references to Abyssinian empire we have already noted, the novel also translates aspects of European imperial discourse in service of an imaginary of continuous exceptionalism. Here I depart slightly from nationalist readings that see the novel’s poetics purely within a local context: for instance the claim that the novel’s concluding triumph of “the ‘light’ of virtue over the ‘darkness’ of vice” is rooted in “a

Christian religious worldview” but unrelated to the religious civilizing ideology of the European colonial project (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 74). We have already seen how the novel picks up the island/sea metaphor from Mənilək’s historical letter and translates it to a literary context. Contemporary versions of *Labb Wälläd Tarik* also include a glossary which translates some Amharic and Ge’ez language terms for readers. The sometimes highly interpretative definitions transmit regionally specific understandings of social relations. For instance the adjective describing a guard employed by slave traders, ጥብልያኮስ (ṭəbləyakos), is defined as black (ጥቁር) and devilish (ዲያቢሎስ), and the symbol on the arämäne’s war banner, ሶበድአት [sobäd’at], is described as an image of a half-man, half-beast [ከወገቡ በላይ ሰው ከወገቡ በታች ግን አውሬ የሆነ ሥዕል] (Afäwärk 80, 73). Both literary descriptions contribute to the representation of the invading army as immoral and pagan, associated with reprehensible practices like slavery and idol worship, and the opposite of the morally upright Christian society they are invading.

The existential nature of the conflict is reinforced by another environmental metaphor, this one of a storm on the horizon (referenced briefly in the dissertation’s introduction). In addition to the clouds of dark smoke from the burning houses and fields, the arämäne’s invasion is also compared to a storm. Initially described as “something black” before materializing into “rain clouds” then a swirling “cloud of dust” and finally the horses and soldiers of an invading army, the storm signifies not only the outsize strength and destructive capacity of the invaders, but also their spiritual, racial, and civilizational darkness. This darkness casts a real and

metaphorical shadow over the land and communicates the existential consequences of the invasion, which collapses seasonal time and bring a level of destruction akin to multiple concurrent storms.

Through its use of aesthetic language, metaphors, and a glossary, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* provides the terms for evaluating its conflict as a clash between good and evil, civilized and uncivilized: the simple binary of European imperial narratives. This binary relies on naturalization, meaning the narrative means that make whatever is under consideration appear ordinary, normal, timeless, and universal—in a word, “natural.” Naturalization was a common tool of European imperial discourse to reduce Africans and African environments to a state of nature, justify the colonial enterprise, and normalize the exploitation of humans, nonhumans, and their environments in the name of civilization and progress. Writing by explorers, missionaries, and administrators portrayed lands and peoples as always already in natural (meaning non- or sub-human) states, either “a wild, uncorrupted virgin landscape devoid of people, [or] a space peopled with human creatures still in their natural states” (Iheka 10).¹⁶ Naturalistic representations were predicated on an idea of

¹⁶ Moreover, as Cajetan Iheka discusses in his study of African environmental literature, imperial naturalization also sought to “naturalize” African lands and people to global modernity through the civilizing effects of environmental transformation (roads, railways, plantations, borders) and colonial education. Iheka notes that this mode of naturalization is also evident within postcolonial criticism that emphasizes the production of rational modern subjectivities and, I would add, nation-state communities, as opposed to indigenous practices and subjecthoods that connect humans to their environments and each other.

humanism that defined itself against racialized and gendered others and took for granted human mastery and control over the natural world.¹⁷

While *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* does not directly engage the history of European encounter, it nevertheless appears to adopt some conventions of naturalizing imperial discourse. For instance, Tobbya and her family represent all the positive qualities of a moral and civilized Christian culture. Her mother is longsuffering and her father so generous he has nothing saved to pay his ransom.¹⁸ Her brother Wahəd is inherently righteous; his actions are guided by an unshakeable determination to return good for good as he does with the merchant, the peasants who shelter him, and even the slave traders.¹⁹ While he has a propensity for disorientation—“[not knowing] whether he was in the lowlands, the highlands, where he was headed...[going] wherever his feet took him”—this is better attributed to the eruption of sudden and violent social change and the fragmentation caused by the swirling storm of the arämäne invasion, rather than any personal shortcoming on Wahəd’s part [የሚደርስበትን ሥፍራና የሚሄድበትን አገር ቆላማ ይሁን ደጋ አያውቅም ነበር...እግሩ እንደመራው ነበር] (Afäwärk 20). As for Tobbya herself, she is “‘perfection’ personified” (Yonas 106). Brave, sacrificial, wise, and

¹⁷ Postcolonial critics including Achille Mbembe, Iheka, Mary Louise Pratt, and Anne McClintock have shown the ways that naturalizing imperial discourse was employed to justify the colonial enterprise and normalize the exploitation of humans, nonhumans, and their environments in the name of civilization and progress. For the deconstruction of universal humanism, see Mbembe; Said; Wynter; and Yusoff.

¹⁸ The generous male elite (often a landowner/landlord) becomes a trope in Amharic fiction following *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*; for more, see Marzagora’s discussion of Amharic-language novels (*Alterity, Coloniality and Modernity*).

¹⁹ Taye reads Wahid’s character and actions as an illustration of the two epigrams that preface the novel: “The one who does good lends, the one who does evil is hurt themselves. / When a generous person gives, they are in fact lending and not giving as such.” The proverbs, whose meaning is to reciprocate good deeds and to always be generous, provide the terms for translating Wahid’s actions (Taye 74).

pious, she is also exceptionally beautiful, her beauty an outward manifestation of inner virtue:

Her eyes appeared so silvery they rivaled the morning star. On top of that, her eyelashes appeared as thick and luscious as the harvest of autumn grass. Her nose was straight and her lips were like a morning rose beginning to bloom. Her hair cut like a man's was like the spread of sprouting grain in Säne month or teff flowing left and right in the wind like a sheaf of silk on a piece of new land... Like the elegant neck of a tej bottle her straight neck bent and lengthened as if she was tired. Her slender, seemingly boneless fingers were as straight as the threads of handcrafted fabric. Her waist was as fluidly flexible as a queen bee or the thin leather of a horse's reins.

[ዓይንዋ አስቀድሞ ብር አሎሎ መስሎ ካጥቢያ ኮኩብ ጋር የተፎካከሩ ነበር[ና] ሽፋሽፍቷ እንደበልግ ሣር ተጨብጦ የሚታጨድ ይመስል ነበር። አፍንጫዋ ቀጥ ያለ፣ ከንፈሯ መፈንዳት የጀመረ የማለዳ ጽጌረዳ ይመስል ነበር። እንደወንድ የተቆረጠችው ጠጉርዋ እንደ ሰኔ ቡቃያ ወይም እንዳዲስ መሬት ጤፍ እያጋሸበ የሐር ነዶ መሰለ። ... እሞብርሌ የመሰለው አንገቷ እንደደከመው እያረፈ የወጣ ነው። አለዐጥንት የተሠራው የእጅዋ ጣት እጅ ሠራ ከበዘበት አመልማሎ ጋር ይፎካከራል። እንደ ፈረስ ለኮ ሳብ ረገብ ያለው ዐጥንት የሌለበት ወገቧ ከንብ አውራ ጋር ለካካል።] (Afäwärk 47)

While this imagistic and sensorial description is highly naturalistic and shares some qualities with European colonial discourse's sexualization of African bodies and environments, the operative difference is the positive and celebratory quality of Tobbya's comparison to various landscape and cultural elements. The locally situated set of references—grass and grain, a tej bottle, a bee, leather—imply not that Tobbya and her environment are in a state of nature but rather that they are similarly beautiful and cultured. While some components of her description can be traced to Amhara or highland culture (tej, teff, bees), others are regional referents (the morning star, a straight nose and fingers, leather) shared across the Horn of Africa.

The established critical tradition reads this description as transforming Tobbya into an allegory for Ethiopia. In Yonas' words, "[w]hat appears to be a mere physical description [is also] a discourse precisely on the perfect state" (Yonas 106, my

emphasis). Yonas acknowledges that the aesthetic attention to Tobbya’s beauty, far from being background description, makes ideological claims about what constitutes an ideal identity and community. His reading creates a binary set of equivalences between women, nature, and nation which, albeit positive, do as much to foreclose forms of political belonging as to create them.

In the novel Tobbya’s beauty and virtue contrast with the ugliness, darkness, and evil of the invaders who constitute the other side of the imperial binary. The arämäne are either horrifying and grotesque as in the case of the king’s jester and dwarf or else intimidating and bloodthirsty killers like the king’s thousands of soldiers. The jester and dwarf are described in animalistic terms, the jester so ugly “even hungry hyenas were disgusted” by his appearance, his body resembling a “vulture,” and his facial expressions a “monkey,” while the dwarf has a grotesquely misshapen body, “a nose more prominent than his height, ears larger than his palms...[and] buttocks that dragged on the ground” [ለተራብ ጅብም ያስጠይፍ ነበር፤ አሞራ፤ ሻንጅሮ፤ አፍንጫው ላቅ ያለ፤ ተመዳፋ ጅሮው ሰፋ ያለ...ከተረከዙ ቀድሞ ቁቱን አቃቅማ የሚወጋው] (Afäwärk 37-38). Dehumanizing descriptions reduce the jester and dwarf to a state of nature intended to reflect a malevolent, jealous, and deceitful inner character; they mock Christianity, call Tobbya and her father derogatory names, and hatch the plot that reveals her identity.²⁰ Other aspects of the invaders’ inherent vice include their

²⁰ Tobbya and her father are called ካራሮች (kaffirs), a derogatory term defined by the glossary as “apostate in Arabic” and used to refer to the fact they are not followers of Islam [ባረብኛ ከሐዲ ማለት ነው] (Afework 37, 78). The glossary definition reflects the Arabic meaning of kaffir as “non-believer or infidel,” coming from the root meaning closed and suggesting someone whose heart has been closed to the truth of Islam (Baderoon 2). Arabs on the East African coast used the term to refer to all non-Muslim Africans, perhaps especially those in the south and southeastern regions, but the Kaffa region

delight in battle and bloodshed and their association with and participation in enslavement. Tobbya is horrified to witness a procession of fighters singing victory songs and parading their battle trophies, including fabric soaked in enemy blood and armbands tallying their kills. The king watches the procession flanked by two “šanqəla swordsman each carrying a sword the size of an elephant's neck...[their] faces clear and shining as sunflower oil” [ሰይፈ ጃግሬ ሻንቅላ የዝሆን አንገት እንደዝሃ የመሰለ ሰይፍን እየመለጠ...ኑግ ልጥልጥ የመሳሰለ] (Afäwärk 42-43). In Amharic šanqəla is a derogatory term used primarily to refer to “‘black’ lowland populations at the margins of [Ethiopia] who were regularly victims of slave raids” (Smidt 525-526). The physiognomic description of the swordsmen’s features and color distinguishes them from the king, who is “just a little darker than St. Michael” and demonstrates a clear regional taxonomy of race that associates blackness and enslavement [ብመካከሉ

in southwestern Ethiopia also exported a high number of slaves in the nineteenth century (de Silva Jayasuriya 14, 22). Common within precolonial Indian Ocean traffic in goods, slaves, and languages, the term kaffir was picked up and transformed by Europeans upon their arrival, first by Portuguese beginning in the 15th century and later the British and Dutch. For instance the 1939 Standard Swahili-English Dictionary defines “kafiri” as “unbeliever, non-Moslem,” while the 1967 Swahili-English Dictionary contains “kufuru” meaning “1. to offend, 2. to abandon a religion, turn apostate[,] 3. sacrilege, atheism” (Baderoon 3). The 1939 Novo dictionario da lingua portuguesa acknowledges the term’s connection to Islam; the first definition of “cafre” is an inhabitant of Cafraria, meaning the large region of southern Africa inhabited by non-Muslim people, or the language of Cafraria; the second is “an uncivilized man” (Baderoon 4). A later Portuguese dictionary (2001) adds additional definitions for kaffir: “A black person from the western coast of Africa, not Muslim, who used to live in the so-called Cafraria...a barbarous, crude or ignorant person,” and “A greedy or miserly person” (Baderoon 4). Even before the “comprehensively abusive” and dehumanizing use of the term under apartheid, both Dutch and British settlers in South Africa used kaffir during the colonial era (Baderoon 2). The 1996 Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles catalogues how the term was operationalized in colonial naming of flora and fauna to denote “indigenous” and wild”: for instance, “kaffir cherry,” “kaffir corn,” “kaffir finch,” “kaffir fowl,” “kaffir horse,” “kaffir mushroom,” and “kaffir plum” (qtd. Baderoon 5). Transforming nativeness into otherness and reinscribing the land as barren, wild, and empty, the term kaffir colluded with other elements of the European imperial project to deny humanity to Black Africans who, under apartheid, were designated as inhuman.

ከጠይምነቱ በቀር ቅዱስ ሚካኤል] (Afäwärk 43).²¹ Notably the scene also portrays slavery as a practice associated with the invaders, in other words, not part of the “true” Ethiopian character.²²

In its derisive and dehumanizing portrayal of the arämäne, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* stages a spectacle of otherness that translates the novel’s antagonists as brutal, uncivilized, and morally bankrupt—the negative side of the imperial binary. To construct this representation, the novel enacts an implicit act of cultural reflexivity in which “one’s own” culture, rather than an exotic or little known other culture, becomes the occasion for distance and estrangement, taking on, in Rey Chow’s words, “the otherness of the obsolete, the irrational, the barbarous, and so forth” (Chow 567). Considering that Christian and arämäne groups are eventually consolidated into a united Ethiopia, the arämäne are part of the novel’s “own culture”

²¹ The border of what is “in” and “outside” Ethiopia has racial as well as territorial (highland vs. lowland), economic (agriculturalists vs. pastoralists), and religious (Christianity vs. Islam, or Christianity and Islam vs. paganism) aspects. Amharic has a four-part taxonomy for inter-Ethiopian color distinctions: ቀይ (red), the lightest and most privileged category; ቀይ ዳማ, an intermediate shade; ጠይም, chocolate-colored, a darker but beautiful tone referenced in the above quote; and ጥቁር (black). Internally ጥቁር is used in a comparative or relative sense, meaning “darker than,” but it is also the only term applied outside Ethiopia, where it refers to all other Africans and diasporic Black people regardless of skin tone.

²² Slavery and the slave trade were well-established in the Horn of Africa from antiquity through the first half of the twentieth century. In the Ethiopian territories slaves were sourced primarily in the southern and southwestern regions through raiding and warfare and brought to the coast where they were exported to Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula. Both Emperor Tewodros (r. 1855–68) and Yohanes (r. 1872–89) issued edicts against slaving, but an illicit trade persisted, and under Mənilək (r. 1889–1913) the state resumed discretely trading captives from the imperial consolidation campaigns in southern Ethiopia. In 1923 the League of Nations granted Ethiopia membership contingent on its agreement to outside oversight and the abolition of its “backward” practices of slavery. In Adom Getachew’s words this form of membership which sought to “discipline and civilize Ethiopia” was “unequal and burdened,” not to mention perverse given Europe’s central role in the transatlantic slave trade and forced labor in the colonies (Adom, *Worldmaking*, 58). In 1935 Italian representatives to the league justified their country’s invasion of Ethiopia as the “logical conclusion” of abolition efforts (Adom, *Worldmaking*, 55). For more on the history of slavery in Ethiopia, see Abdussamad; Bahru; Fernyhough; Pankhurst; and Seid.

from the narrative perspective. Chow argues that “such [a] reflexive rendering” is akin to “an act of translation” in which the narrative translates an aspect of its culture into otherness to shore up its ideological point of view (Chow 568). In *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* the narrative privileges Tobbya and her family; despite sharing the same language and culture, the invaders are portrayed as opaque, a language the text must translate into “another code, another language/literacy” of otherness (Chow 569). Their representation reflects Ahmed Hussein’s observation that “the Muslims of Ethiopia have been consistently described at second hand, through the eyes of some other group [who] had politically and ideological reasons to see them as foreign to Ethiopia” (Hussein 19). Just as a translator may be perceived as a traitor to their native culture, so too may translation within a monolingual text enact a form of cultural betrayal.²³ In *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*’s desire to create an ideal Ethiopian community of unified and harmonized opposites, the text creates a subhuman antagonistic other and betrays its own community—in reality one of great diversity and multiplicity—by portraying parts of it within the colonial lexicon of uncivilized and inhuman.

²³ The Italian phrase “traduttore, traditore” expresses the idea that since direct equivalence between languages is impossible, translation is always already a failure and a betrayal of language. In literary study the impossibility of translation, or untranslatability, is often traced to Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, who both suggest that language is never completely identical with itself and thus fails to reach its destination. In postcolonial contexts, untranslatability generally has a positive valence as a strategy for resisting pressures toward monolingualism and is deployed as a means of recognizing and negotiating, in Emily Apter’s terms, “singularities as part of geographies of aesthetic and cultural difference” (Apter, “Untranslatability,” 195). Chow points out that in colonial and postcolonial situations, “the figure of the translator foreshadows the predicament faced by the native intellectual,” since to be a mediator between cultures is to be “a traitor—in particular, a traitor to one’s native culture” (Chow 570).

Ultimately the opposition the novel stages between good and evil, Christian and Muslim, civilized and uncivilized is resolved through Tobbya and the invading king's relationship. The king—young, handsome, wise beyond his years, peace-seeking, and a religious pluralist—is the novel's one suggestion it may be conflicted about its othering representation, though his features more effectively intimate a “natural” affinity with the Christians than complicate the portrayal of the arämäne. The established interpretative tradition reads Tobbya and the king as stand-ins for their communities and their marriage as a symbol of a continuous exceptional polity made possible, allegedly by religious and cultural harmony, but actually by forced conversion and assimilation.

Valley low: *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* and the hidden colonial allegory

We have seen how the island/sea literary geography opens up a mode of reading that unsettles a strictly national paradigm and its privileged national identity and opens up a broader and dispersed set of non-hierarchical perspectives we might call regional. In this section, I turn specifically to Tobbya and the king's relationship in the fourth act of the novel and the mechanisms of the triumphant marriage to explore the novel's fleeting trace of perspectives from below. Recalling Ethiopia's ambivalent relationship to the “colonial” which nevertheless permeates Ethiopian narratives “in a hidden way,” I argue that *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* functions as a hidden colonial allegory that places both Tobbya and the king in positions of colonial subjugation and fixity at different times. Following Serawit's attention to what has been hidden in established

readings of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, I argue that Tobbya’s ambivalent gender identity within the relationship is obvious in the text but hidden or unaddressed because of the way scholarship has normativized the novel as a text of empire and nation consolidation. Consequently, drawing attention to Tobbya (and the king)’s non-normativity unsettles the national allegory and refracts its singularity into additional interpretative perspectives from below.

The established reading tradition emphasizes Tobbya’s influence over the king but does not consider the larger political context of conquest and control in which she seeks to retain agency and autonomy. The arāmāne king’s actions in the conquered Christian territory resemble colonial tactics: he occupies the country by force, disrupts its ecosystems and communities, makes political proclamations, sets up administrative structures, and begins constructing a capital city. Initially he claims to bring Tobbya and her father into his camp for their own safety, promising that “when peace returns to the land we will set you free,” but his control of their movements seeks to turn them into fixed subjects [ሰንብታችሁ አገር አማን ሲሆን እንለቃችኋለን] (Afawärk 40). When they remind him of his promise of freedom he conceives reasons for them to stay, insisting on making Tobbya a member of his government (creating native roles in colonial governance) and expending resources to find Wahəd (initiating relationships of dependence and indebtedness).

Despite their clear desire for mobility and to make decisions as they please, Tobbya and her father are constrained by the king’s disproportionate power and control, couched in supposed benevolence and concern. Unbeknownst to them, the

king also watches Tobbya’s movements day and night, sometimes using binoculars. The novel attempts to naturalize this surveillance as an expression of love even though it far predates the disclosure that Tobbya is a woman. Indeed, Serawit points out that both the king and his female cousin initially classify Tobbya as male, reading her face and seeing what they want to see: a trusted peer, an attractive suitor. Not only is the king engaged in securing and transforming stolen land into settled property, but he also enacts a targeted and individualized dispossession and subjection: fencing Tobbya in, fixing her gender identity, giving her work, and making her an object of desire.

Under such colonial conditions, Tobbya demonstrates an understanding of self and signification that evades attempts at containment and control through obfuscation, opacity, and changeability.²⁴ Her personhood is autonomous and does not consider itself peripheral in any way. Tobbya uses her disguised and ambivalent gender to attain greater agency for herself and to achieve her and the text’s goals. Initially she leverages the hardships caused by the occupation to create opacity: her face, exposed to the elements, “battered and darkened by the sun and the cold” as she fled for her life, appears rough and is easy to read as masculine [በፀሐይና በውርጭ የተጎሳቆለውና የጠቆረው] (Afäwärik 47). In this set-up, weathering harsh environmental and social conditions directly contributes to Tobbya’s ability to evade a fixed colonial subjectivity. The weather and its elements—heat, cold, wind, etc.—are forces acting

²⁴ For more on strategies of subversion and opacity, see Glissant; Harney and Moten; Hartman; and Wynter.

on her and not merely (as in the description of her beauty) natural objects allegorical of her beauty. Thus the weather works not only to obscure her ability to be fixed by the king, but also denaturalizes and denationalizes the straightforward allegorical reading that equates woman, nature, and nation.

Even when she begins to recover and, according to the text, her femininity emerges in “all-consuming charm and disorienting beauty,” Tobbya maintains an elusive gender presentation, “walk[ing] and talk[ing] like a man so [her] identity isn’t revealed” [እንዳይገለጥብሽ አረማመድሽንም አነጋገርሽንም እንደ ወንድ አድርጌ] (Afäwärk 47). This performance is critical in the all-male camp, where she believes she will be assaulted if she is discovered. Her status in between genders grants Tobbya a certain, albeit limited and highly precarious, modicum of mobility under colonial occupation, while her inherent freedom and self-determination is never in question. Her feminine charm attracts everyone, while her masculine presentation allows her to build political relationships with the king that unsettle the settlement of her self, her people, and her land, bring peace, and find her brother.

Tobbya defies representations of women, common in imperial and nationalist narratives, as conduits of social reproduction or caregivers confined to domestic space.²⁵ Similarly *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* does not proscribe strictly normative forms of

²⁵ Tobbya’s portrayal differs from common representations of women in colonial and postcolonial African writing. Colonial writing on Africa typically marginalizes women as third-class citizens or sexualizes and conflates them with African nature in a perverse colonial idiom. Texts considered “early” African novels, such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1994) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* (1962), portray women as victims of colonial and African patriarchal ideologies without critiquing these gender relations. The anticolonial struggle and its writing often ignored or sacrificed the issue of women’s liberation in the name of preserving culture, dignifying the past, and

sexual attraction and desire. The reader knows the truth of Tobbya's identity, but she becomes an unfixed and undefinable character when seen through the eyes of the young, handsome, and humble king. Serawit points out that the king's desire ignores, or perhaps even builds on, Tobbya's ambivalence; he likes her regardless of how she presents. His attraction is so strong it unsettles his own status as a leader, an arämäne exemplar, and a paragon of normativity. From his first glimpse of Tobbya atop the hill, the king demonstrates behavior that surprises his advisors and followers: he espouses ecumenical views on religion, questions masculinist performances of heroism, and reflects on the inheritance of ancestral violence. His proximity to Tobbya unsettles his own normative performance of a conquering leader and moves him into an in-between space where he begins to align—politically and philosophically—with the object of his conquest and his desire.

The revelation of Tobbya's identity transforms the power dynamics of the novel a second time. Rather than the typical pattern of sexual conquest, the king, now able to realize a heteronormative romance, is subordinated by his desire to the overarching narrative of Ethiopian empire. Meanwhile Tobbya returns to her hilltop superiority. Even as the novel represents the role of heteronormativity and family structures in empire consolidation, Tobbya remains a complicating figure, a woman who inserts herself into the work of empire- and nation-building by setting the terms on which the romantic and political unit can be formed. Ambivalent about gender and

instituting a new political order of African (male) elites. Conversely *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* offers an alternate vision of African political autonomy and independence orchestrated by a woman.

the idea of romance (it is the king who expresses desire, never her), she is unmovable in her religious commitment. Even when she appears as a man, her faithfulness is well-known; the king worries about his cousin's growing love since he knows that "Tobbya [will] not agree to marry an arämäne" and she predictably refuses his offer of marriage on the same grounds [ጦቢያ እኚ ብሎ ያረመኔ ወገን አያገባም] (Afäwärk 53).

The novel and its established reading tradition interpret the king's decision to convert as a "triumph of Christianity;" after being threatened by religious conflict, Tobbya and her community attain "salvation and glory through the consolidation of Christian hegemony" (Taye 85, 77). Tobbya's gender ambivalence is an "accidental attribute necessitated by the exigencies of the plot" and her religious hardline position—refusing non-believers access to Ethiopian community unless they convert—reifies the grand narrative of continuity (Taye 85). Conversely a second-gold-layer, from-below reading reframes the king's conversion as a form of identity ambivalence and switching foreshadowed and initiated by Tobbya's own. While the king's conversion is presented as permanent and sincere compared to Tobbya's temporary switching, both can be seen as strategies of assimilative performance to survive, retain agency, and get what they desire under systems of coercion and control.

Despite its celebratory conclusion, *Labb Wälläd Tarik's* anxious obsession with Tobbya's ambivalent gender and its possible discovery index a posture of

melancholic return to what has been seen as a function of the novel’s final triumph.²⁶ This obsessive preoccupation and repetition is evident in Tobbya’s father’s anxiety: he constantly her advises her to act like a man in her mannerisms and her speech “so your identity isn’t revealed” [እንዳይገለጥብሽ] (Afäwärk 47). While Tobbya spends her days at the king’s court he stays home asking himself, “How is it going with my child? Has our secret been discovered?” and when she returns questions her about everything and whether her identity is still hidden [ልጄ እንዴት ውላ ይሆን ነገራችን ታውቆብነ ይሆን] (Afäwärk 53). The narrative continually notes the tension between Tobbya’s public persona and her hidden identity—“her dress was completely masculine and no one suspected her femininity”—while also noting her exceptional beauty [ልብስዋ ፈጽሞ እንደ ወንድ ነበርና የሴትነቷን ነገር ማንም አልጠረጠረም] (Afäwärk 47).

Tobbya’s qualities create desire among both sexes: the king “liked her very much...[but] he didn’t suspect Tobbya was a woman. He liked her only with a pure heart,” while his female cousin “[d]ay and night, in her dreams and in real life...thought about nothing but Tobbya” [ወደዳት...[ግን] የጦቢያ ሴትነት አልጠረጠረም ነበር[::] ብቻ በንፁህ ልቡ ነው የሚወድዳት / በመሸም፣ በጠባም፣ በህልሚያም፣ በውኃም፣ ከጦቢያ በቀር ሌላ የሚታያት ነገር አጣች] (Afäwärk 48, 47, 53). Tobbya, herself drawn to the comfort of female friendship in the all-male court, becomes close with the cousin, even as she feels the “burden [of] keep[ing] secret something that can’t be revealed” [እርሷም፣ ያለበት ይበንበት

²⁶ According to Chow, melancholy makes it possible to hold onto the idea of a certain original condition (a language, culture, relationship) while simultaneously making the claim that this original has been compromised, injured, interrupted, or stolen—in a word, lost. Both essentialized and gone, the lost object takes on a spectral presence. A melancholic text continues to return to the lost object, mourning its loss without being able to let it go.

እንዲሉ ሁሉ] (Afäwärk 53). “What innocence!” the narrator crows of the cousin’s desire for Tobbya, since “Tobbya was also a woman—she just wasn’t dressed like one” [ወይ አለማወቅ! ጦቢያ ግን ባትሉብስ ነው እንጂ እንደርሷው ሴት ነበረች] (Afäwärk 53). Jealous courtiers use this intimacy to set a trap and Tobbya, in her male disguise, is caught alone with the king’s cousin, leading the accusation of rape. While the simple solution is to reveal her femininity, Tobbya remains in disguise. Only later does her father reveal it to the king in private.

In its constant anxiety- and delight-tinged returns, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* marks and records the presence of non-normative difference and the entangled anxieties, tensions, and desires it creates under conditions of subjugation and oppression. At the level of plot, these formulations and affects are closed down and normativized by the novel’s conclusion of triumphant Christianity and heterosexual marriage. The text cannot mark the king and his people’s cultural, religious, and epistemic conversion as loss due to the foundational fiction plot, but they are nevertheless being held within the novel’s structure of melancholic returns. Insofar as the king’s and Tobbya’s forms of assimilation are linked, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* indexes and continually returns to the pressures, entangled affiliations, strategic concessions, and ambivalences—the traces—of life under imperial-colonial conditions which are also the novel’s own. A melancholy reading attunes us to how the novel, like a storm, picks up, holds, and carries those experiences of loss as traces within an otherwise celebratory and exceptionalist narrative.

Born out of: translation as critical methodology

The melancholy sämmønna wärķ reading of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* I have conducted here opens up possible interpretations of queer or same-sex desire,²⁷ yet I heed Serawit’s provocation to reflect on the critical and readerly desires at play in enacting a queer reading. This is especially important when, as is my situation, the scholar-reader does not share a cultural background with the text despite being a practitioner in its composition language. This is the situation in the case Serawit considers, Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner’s translation of the seventeenth-century hagiography of a female Ethiopian Orthodox saint Walatta Petros, from Ge’ez to English, and Belcher’s interpretative essay on same-sex intimacies in the text.²⁸ Serawit takes issue not with the identification of same-sex intimacies but with the interpretative posture that presents queerness in an African text as an “object of discovery” excavated by a benevolent western scholar (Serawit, “The Politics of ‘Queer Reading,’” 8). The framework of “discovering” queerness not only reflects European empire’s mode of extraction (i.e., look what I found in Africa) and imports non-local terms of analysis, but also can imply, as in this instance, that “homophobia has its roots in Africans’ ignorance of their history” (Serawit, “The Politics of ‘Queer Reading,’” 8). What

²⁷ For instance, the novel’s portrayal of gender ambivalence is reminiscent of queer melancholia, the term Judith Butler famously delineates in *Gender Trouble*. Butler suggests that the normalization of heterosexuality imposes a sacrifice of the capacity same sex/queer desire. Consequently, the straight person is forever haunted (made melancholic) by the loss of their homo- or bisexual desires and the unrealized relationships they signify. “[I]nfinately enabling” in its ability to make visible what has been repressed by dominant culture and its re-emergences, Butler’s formulation flags the novel’s portrayal of the coercive economy of empire that suppresses difference in all its forms—racial, religious, cultural, and sexual (Chow 572).

²⁸ Specifically Serawit addresses Belcher’s article “Same Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wälättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint.”

could be different, Serawit wonders, if instead of marshalling evidence of specific instances of non-normativity (reading the king as a queer-desiring subject, for example), we take queer reading “as a political act” that appropriates normative texts within their contexts and “infus[es] them with new meanings that unsettle the taken-for-grantedness” of various forms of normativity (Serawit, “The Politics of ‘Queer Reading,’” 8).

This mode of queer reading *Labb Wälläd Tarik* points out the ways the text portrays a social performance of ambivalent and blurred gender as a survival tactic under hostile conditions, as well as the way Tobbya is not slotted into the (normatively heterosexual) reproductive role characteristic of nationalist narratives. Tobbya’s pivot toward lateral “beside” affiliations with the king, his cousin, and her own brother evoke and embody queer theory’s vision of alternative forms of relation and temporality outside the “logic of reproductive futurism” (Sedgwick 8; Edelman 17). Queer temporality is marked by a “perverse turn away from the narrative coherence” of genealogy and the teleological bent toward reproduction, a posture Tobbya shares (Dinshaw et al. 182). Her decision to adopt a different gender role routes her outside of a bildungsroman narrative of progress and development, and even upon “returning” to being female she resists a social reproductive function and relates to the king as a strategic political peer.

The non-reproductive yet laterally affiliative and tactical nature of their relationship draws attention to Tobbya and the king’s shared function as representatives of their respective communities. *Labb Wälläd Tarik* certainly intends

for Tobbya to be read as the epitome of Amharic-speaking Christian culture, “perfection personified,” but whereas the grotesque nature and vast number of the king’s community is made obvious by the novel’s otherization, there are few representations of the ideal national community she allegedly symbolizes—only two families who feed and shelter Tobbya and Wahəd, one without children and the other whose son was sold into slavery, respectively. Even Tobbya’s mother, the most obvious reproductive figure in the novel, never reappears in the triumphant conclusion, an issue often noted but not expanded on in the established critical tradition.²⁹ Despite her name and perfect character, Tobbya’s gender ambivalence and her lateral non-reproductive relationship with the king do not perform the allegorical fix that would link her to a narrow definition of national political identity (meaning Amharic-speaking and Christian). Rather Tobbya’s inbetweenness draws attention to the gaps and discontinuities of allegory, what Jameson calls its polysemy, in which what an allegorical figure such as Tobbya signifies is “in constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text” (Jameson 73). While the novel’s conclusion imagines a happiness that extends from Tobbya and the king’s relation “to their children and grandchildren,” a strong kingdom, and faithful religion, this future is largely speculative, open-ended, and non-specific [አስከልጅ ልጅ] (Afäwäṛk 69).

If Tobbya represents a form of Ethiopian identity, it is a far more elusive, conflicted, and speculative one than a nationalistic reading would suggest. Pushing

²⁹ Fikre Tolossa and Asfaw Damte point out the complete absence of the mother in the second half of the novel and in the concluding unification. Serawit suggests that this omission is characteristic of the attitude toward mothers in both Ethiopian social life and literary representation (“Q&A”).

hard on the elements most stereotypical of a one-to-one allegorical reading—the protagonist’s journey and the text’s descriptions of natural elements—paradoxically opens up a multiplicity of significations that denaturalize and denationalize the state as the only frame of reference and open up—or more precisely *return to*—more nonhomogenous, unfixed, and speculative configurations of social life such as the region. Tobbya’s queer performativity and the novel’s significant literary geographies—the hilltop/plain, as well as the diverse landscapes *däga*, *wäyna däga*, and *ḵola* both Wahəd and Tobbya pass through in their travels—constitute the text’s recognition of the absent presence of “non-Ethiopians” and their territories who have either been subsumed within the Ethiopian state or function as its otherized foil. It is precisely those textual elements dismissed as aesthetic wax that produce the text’s ability to break out of national reading paradigms. In their place are more expansive relational paradigms in which it is possible to apprehend supposedly bounded and distinct entities—be they wax and gold or peoples, languages, cultures, and environments—as always already interacting, relating, and co-constituting each other.

Extending from a reading of queer melancholic gender to one of queer melancholic genre, Tobbya’s allegorical ambivalence unsettles *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*’s status as a “foundational fiction” and the teleological genealogy of the novel genre from originary text to national literary tradition and identity. The etymology of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* as genre term reflects this; while “wälläd” contains the root of “to birth” (መውለድ), its passive form (መውለድ) means to be born *from* or *out of*. The term that proceeds it, *tarik* (history), is born *out of* the one that follows, *ləbb* (the heart or

imagination). In coming up with the name of his text Afäwärķ does not position it as “birthing” a new tradition but rather as being in the midst of, laterally affiliated with, and “in relation to existing genres;” not a firstborn but “a new offshoot of an existing textual tradition” (Marzagora, “The First Ethiopian Novel,” 76). In Afäwärķ’s conceptualization, the novel is born from *tarik* or *tarikä nägäst* (the history of kings), a known literary genre, while also differentiating itself through the work of imagination and other imaginative genres. In both its incorporation of the past and its turning around, altering, remaking, and returning to it, the novel is a melancholic form preoccupied not so much with what it produces as in what it carries forward by bearing witness, grieving, and remembering (Cooppan, “The Novel as Genre,” 39). Nevertheless, the *läbb wälläd* genre tradition does produce a great proliferation of co-emergent (rather than linear genealogical descendent) texts at a 25-year temporal gap and through a process of displacement and exchange. In this way *Läbb Wälläd Tarik* suggests that the novel genre in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa is characterized by both a productive melancholia and a nonreproductive and nongenealogical relationship to genre.

Melancholia is hardly just a theoretical concept in this chapter or in the larger project but has also characterized my relationship as translator and critic to *Läbb Wälläd Tarik*, while being a mode I noticed organically recur in each text considered here. My “origin story” with this novel began as a student of Amharic literature, admittedly interested because of its status as a “first” and because it lent its name to an indigenous Afrophone novel-writing tradition. Already working with an Amharic

tutor, I decided to translate the novel because I was curious about how this “first” *ləbb wälläd*, written so early in the twentieth century, might revise the established genealogy of the African novel, its mid-century origin point, and its Europhone language bias. Translation was also a matter of necessity if I wanted to include the novel in the project. While Tadesse’s gloss translation serviceably renders the novel’s main plot points, it effaces many of its more literary qualities; clearly addressed to a Global North audience in a way that *Afäwärk*’s text is not, it explains cultural elements that would be familiar to Ethiopian readers and omits the Amharic glossary. Of course these differences only became apparent to me as I engaged, with my instructor, in the translation process. Our method was that I would read and produce a first draft translation of several pages; then we met virtually to read the pages, first in Amharic, then in English. I would make adjustments to the translation based on instructor feedback and our joint consultation of dictionaries and other resources; then I revised and edited the translation; then the instructor read the English version side by side with the Amharic. Over roughly 18 months, we produced a full translation of the novel which is cited in this chapter and available in full as Appendix 1 of this dissertation.

Translating *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* provided the occasion to reflect on the establishment of literary genealogies for African literature, the degree to which my work as translator and critic participated in them, and melancholy and translation as critical methodologies. If this project was committed to moving away from the categories of nation, colonial periodization, and siloed languages that have subdivided

literary study (especially but not only in the Horn of Africa) up to this point, what was I doing translating and analyzing a novel whose established critical tradition regarded it as a national allegory and as a first in its language tradition? Moreover, how could I justify translating a text whose descriptive language and binary conflict seemed to translate some of the most damaging of European imperial ideologies and representations into an African context? Would I, by translating, participate in replicating practices of harm, and would my decision to translate lend credence or approval to such literary language and representational ideologies? Like many postcolonial critics before me, I found myself turning melancholic, returning to the descriptive scenes of otherization that troubled me most and wishing to find the traces of those who the novel had translated into others.

Yet this iterative method of return, which I practiced not only in regards to unsettling scenes but also to the translation project as a whole, constantly returning, rereading, revising, and reading again, in one language and then the other, gradually opened my awareness to aspects of the novel that also recurred: aesthetic language and surprising metaphors in descriptions of landscape and setting, as well as the repetitive anxiety about the discovery of Tobbya's gender. Both were effaced in Tadesse's gloss translation and were barely treated in the established critical tradition. Yet the longer I sat with, read, translated, and revised these elements, and their representations of inbetweenness, ambivalences, disorientation, and opacity, the more I thought about and traced what gets blown in, out, unsettled, layered, picked up and carried, housed, and let go, in the text; the less *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* conformed to the

conventions of straightforward imperial mythology, national allegory, or conventional “origin” text. Even if I placed *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* as the first text in this project, I thought, it would hardly function as a first or inaugurate a genealogical account to come. Rather, positioning the translation and analysis of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* at the beginning was an opportunity to stage the expected conventional approach to African literary texts, then to enact a reading that not only unsettled, deconstructed, and dismantled it, but also allowed different conceptual categories and methods “born out of” the text to inform its critical method.

Taking its cue from the text’s own melancholic structures and highlighting rather than effacing these aspects in the translation, this chapter has enacted a situated reading of a “first” novel that honors its entanglement and double movement, and its posture in the midst of rather than initiating its historical, material, and intertextual contexts. *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* makes it clear that the novel as a genre—in Africa as elsewhere—is always already imbricated within multiple overlapping global and local iterations of the imperial-colonial system, that its origins, identities, norms, borders, and lines of demarcation are, in Derridean terms, impossibilities constituted by contamination, impurity, and dissemination (“The Law of Genre”).

The notion of a pure starting point, whether for the genre or for national identity, is the only myth here. As the novel puts it, returning again to an aesthetic description of the flat plain covered in a far-reaching sea of tents, “it was so crowded that if someone threw a lemon there was nowhere for it to fall” [ሎሚ እንኳ ቢወረወር የሚወድቅበት ምድር የማይገኝ መስሎ ታየ] (Afäwärk 35). Similarly, there is no position from

which to compose a novel outside of empire's contamination, but it does not follow that novels composed under imperial-colonial conditions are necessarily derivative, apologist, or "writing back" in any way.

Rather, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* formalizes the expression of a self-determined creative and political freedom and a constrained unfreedom that characterizes not just Ethiopian literature but *all* the texts considered in this dissertation regardless of their nationality, periodization, or language. Rather than being an island or hilltop of exceptionality, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* and Ethiopia are in the midst of, interconnected and interrelated with a regional literary archive that spans all the geographies of the Horn—highlands, plains, and lowlands. As the following chapters will show, this regional archive is distinguished by a shared relationship to the novel as a literary genre that carries forward and keeps alive what has been lost in the long twentieth century in the Horn of Africa while also bearing witness to, grieving, and anticipating the losses of the present and future.

Staging the preponderance of genealogical and nationalist reading methods in African literary studies, this chapter and its analysis of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* deconstructs and dismantles them. Similarly, it registers the hegemony—the hilltop perspective—of exceptionalist discourse about Ethiopia in the region and more broadly and has worked to unsettle it. The chapters that follow bracket nationalist readings and turn toward a regional framework comprising a multiplicity of non-hilltop perspectives. This multi-national, multi-lingual, and multi-temporal chorus of voices offers many more situated perspectives on the theory of the novel and the work

of literary narratives in bearing witness to rupture, change, and loss, while steadily detaching the novel from (purely) anthropocentric terms of analysis. Reconsidering Ethiopia's place in the Horn and the contours of the Horn's literary traditions and cultures, this polyvocal archive recasts not only Ethiopia but also the Horn of Africa more generally from an island of insular isolation to one of interconnection and interdependence, relationality and exchange between humans, nonhumans, and their environments. Together this collection of diverse, situated, and intertextual perspectives—the perspectives of all the geographies of the Horn, not just its crests or mountain-tops—unsettles the region's stereotypes as singular, plagued by disaster, and lacking narrative autonomy, and invites readers into an apprehension of its literature on its own terms.

Chapter 2
Blood flowers and citrus:
**Productive melancholy in Sulaiman Addonia's *Silence is My Mother Tongue*,
Gebreyesus Hailu's *The Conscript*, and Igiaba Scego's *Adua***

In the opening scene of Eritrean writer Sulaiman Addonia's novel *Silence is My Mother Tongue* (2018), a makeshift theater made from a square cut in a white bedsheet frames a refugee camp, a compound with a lime tree and sugarcane leaves in the foreground. The theater, situated atop a hill, is called Cinema Silenzioso and provides an important space for community gathering and storytelling. As the "light of the stars and the moon cascade" over them, camp inhabitants sit behind the cut-out sheet and share their experiences of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict that displaced them, their memories and catalogues of losses, as well as more recent stories and gossip (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 12). While its porous borders integrate it with the natural world, the theater contrasts with the bounded containment of the camp, itself the direct descendant and international solution to the dissolution of the Eritrean nation-state.¹

¹ The idea of the refugee or humanitarian camp's provenance in nation-state decline has a long scholarly tradition traceable to Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben. Arendt's points of departure are the interwar and Holocaust periods in Europe, but her analysis of the refugee as a political category initiated by the inappropriateness and imposition of the nation-state as a form of government is taken up by scholars of postcolonial and conflict areas around the world. After all the Holocaust is not a singular event but simply one emergence of what Walter Benjamin called modernity's global "storm of progress" and its various manifestations including imperial conquest, colonization, fascism, slavery, and apartheid. For Benjamin emergency and disaster are not one-off, geographically-contained events but rather constitute the atmosphere and air we breathe; "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin 257). Agamben adds that the camp (meaning the concentration camp), the "permanent spatial institution" for modernity's biopolitical paradigm, is not an "anomaly" of the past but rather exposes the "hidden matrix...of the political space in which we still live today" (Agamben 175, 178). I follow Agamben insofar as the refugee camp indexes the ongoing coloniality of the present, but my reading of the camp in *Silence* aligns with contemporary

By beginning the novel with the open-air theater, *Silence* suggests the square frame as a figure for the novel itself, a literary form able to hold and contain other forms—orality, drama, and memory—within a single narrative structure. Yet for every image of the novel’s protagonist Saba glimpsed distantly through the frame, “under her lime tree, a book in hand,” there is an instance of Saba exceeding the frame, “stretch[ing] her arm through the gap in the screen” with desire, for a smoke, or to flee (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 13, 14). *Silence* occupies itself with narrating events and perspectives that exist beyond the edges of the theater’s frame—secret relationships, past memories, seasonal migration, and seasonal change—making it clear that, in the Horn of Africa region in which *Silence* is set, the novel as a genre is constituted just as much by what it is understood to hold or contain as by what exceeds, passes through, or has been made silent within it.

The image of Saba reading—in the open air, under a citrus tree—defamiliarizes the book and the act of reading from the colonial education context in which the novel was often introduced to African readers. While Saba acquires her reading material, Chekhov’s *The Lady with the Dog*, from a British camp official, the book itself is not an English language “classic” but a work made available to her through translation. Paradoxically the text within the text highlights questions of ecology, environment, and human relationships with nature and animals in the study of the novel, acknowledging the genre’s colonial trace while foregrounding

scholars who note the limitations of biopolitical discourse and bare life in accounting for multi-layered relations of power, ambivalence, and agency in camps. For more, see Abourahme, Abushama, and Oliver.

trajectories beyond colonial inheritance, including intertextuality and translation. Set in rural Sudan, just over the border from Ethiopia and Eritrea, with protagonists of Eritrean-Ethiopian descent—“half from an occupied country and the other half from the occupying”—and written by an Eritrean writer in English, the novelist’s fourth language after Tigrinya (his mother tongue), Amharic, and Arabic, *Silence* embodies the porous and flexing regionality effaced by conventional interpretative categories (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 43).

In this chapter I read *Silence* (2018) alongside ንዝተዓሰከረ ንዓሓደ መንእሰይ ዘርእኒ ሓደ፡ ዛንታ, or *The Conscript*, an early novel written in Tigrinya by Gebreyesus Hailu in 1927 and published in 1950, and *Adua*, an Italian-language novel written in 2015 by Igiaba Scego.² The chapter is divided into two parts: the first half demonstrates how the first two novels set up framing devices only to dissolve and dismantle them through narratives of swirling and recursive circular movement. Moving back and forth between *The Conscript* and *Silence*, I trace the agential and animate movement of the natural world such as mountains, flowers, plants, and animals to show how literary modes of holding and return contribute to a nongenealogical yet still productive regional novel tradition. In the second half of the chapter I turn to *Adua*, a text that explodes frames and categories through its swirling, recursive, perspectival, and unsettling polyvocality and multiple settings and temporalities. Picking up and returning to many of the same natural objects and relations, *Adua* is a melancholic

² My discussions of ንዝተዓሰከረ ንዓሓደ መንእሰይ ዘርእኒ ሓደ፡ ዛንታ and *Adua* rely on English language translations by Ghirmai Negash (2013) and Jamie Richards (2017) respectively. Because I cite the English translations rather than the original language text (as with *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*), I refer to each text by its translated title.

and stormy novel that encodes imperial fracturing while being an autonomous, undisciplined, opaque, and locally emplaced form of storytelling on its own terms.

Land of the sea: Eritrea in context

The novels considered here represent a complex linguistic entanglement. The oldest, *The Conscript*, is written in Tigrinya, a Semitic language that like Amharic developed from the ancient liturgical language Ge'ez and uses its script. Tigrinya is the most widely spoken language in present-day Eritrea, followed by Arabic; just across the border in northwest Ethiopia, Tigrinya is the chief language of the Tigray province and is also spoken on a limited scale throughout the rest of Ethiopia (Ghirmai, *A History*, 50). In his comprehensive study of Tigrinya literature, Ghirmai Negash, the translator of *The Conscript*, writes that the Tigrinya literary archive is composed of “a rich collection of oral and written texts;” rather than “two separately self-contained, closed systems,” oral and written literary productions are “two mutually influencing and complementing sub-systems of one literary field” (Ghirmai, *A History*, 3).

Joining a rich corpus of religious poetry, prayers, songs, hymns, and qəne, the earliest written Tigrinya texts dealt with “themes of travel and religion;” the first Tigrinya to appear in book form was Dabtara Matewos’ translation of the four gospels in the 1830s (Ghirmai, *A History*, 68). By the end of the century, missionary presses produced the bulk of writing in Tigrinya as a result of printing presses founded first in Massawa in 1863, later in Keren (1879), and finally in Asmara (1895) (Pankhurst 249).

Italian imperial presence began in the Tigrinya-speaking regions, known by its inhabitants as Medri Bahri (“land of the sea”), as early as 1869 with the purchase of the Bay of Assab. In 1885, when the scramble for Africa was at its most intense, the Italians expanded their territory from Assab to Massawa. In the 1889 Treaty of Wuchale (about which more below), Mənilək II of Abyssinia traded Medri Bahri to Italy in exchange for cash, arms, and ammunition to support his own territorial expansion, and the Italian colony known as Eritrea reached its full form. From 1890 to 1941 Eritrea was administered by the Italians who instituted language and education programs (of which *The Conscript*’s author Gebreyesus Hailu was part) and race and miscegenation laws that regarded African subjects as in a state of nature in need of civilization. The Italian colonial administration also transformed the landscape through railroads, plantations, and Mediterranean-style architecture.³

Following Italy’s defeat in World War II, in 1941 Eritrea was administered first by the British Military Administration, then by a civilian British administration. From the outset the British colonial relationship to Eritrea was based “on a denial” of Eritrea as a sovereign political entity and people; a report from the foreign office even suggested the “possibility of making Eritrea, into a Jewish colony affiliated, if desired, to the National Home of Palestine” (Gaim 251). This suggestion, along with plans to partition Eritrea into a section ceded to Ethiopia (a British ally) and another to Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, were scuttled by Eritrean activism for a single independent

³ For more examples of Italian attempts to civilize African subjects and environments, see Nadifa Mohamed’s novel *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) discussed in chapter 4.

territory. In 1952 the former colony was federated to Ethiopia, an arrangement that quickly deteriorated through the “creeping imposition of Ethiopian direct rule” (qtd. Ghirmai, *A History*, 6). Under Ethiopian emperor Haylä Səlasse’s watch, Eritrean newspapers were shuttered, political parties banned, courts abolished, and flags lowered. Tigrinya and Arabic languages were systematically discouraged through a “subtle, colonial logic” asserting Amharic as the official language of Eritrea “as it was in the rest of the Empire” (Ghirmai, *A History*, 9).

From the 1960s until mid-1991, the Eritrean people fought an “independence war” against the Ethiopian state (Ghirmai, *A History*, 6). The longest war of its kind in Africa against the continent’s largest standing army backed at various times by the United States and the Soviet Union, the struggle against Ethiopian colonialism created one of the world’s largest groups of refugees—over one million out of a country of four million (UNICEF). Many, including Suliaman Addonia’s family, fled to Sudan, the trajectory represented in *Silence*. The war concluded with Eritrean secession and independence in 1993 but this was hardly the end of Eritrean troubles. Leader of the liberation army Isayas Afwerki is head of the nation’s single political party and has governed the country without elections for thirty years. In 1998-2000 Eritrea and Ethiopia clashed over the exact location of the border, leading to an internationally-administered buffered zone. In 2018 Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed broke the “no peace, no war” stalemate, began talks with Isayas, and reopened the border, gaining him the gratitude of families reunited after years of separation and the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet at the time of writing Ethiopia’s northern

Tigray region has been, since November 2020, the site of violent conflict between both the Ethiopian and Eritrean national armies and the Tigray People's Liberation Front resulting vast human rights abuses, famine conditions, and the displacement of over two million people.⁴

Blood flowers: Anticipatory melancholy in *The Conscript*

Separated by close to a century and written in different languages, *The Conscript* and *Silence* share a thematic interest in travel and compelled migration but also more precisely enact literary practices of movement through internal and external geographies themselves on the move. For instance, like *Silence*, *The Conscript* also begins with a device that functions as a frame and draws attention to the ways the narrative will exceed and expand beyond it. The opening preface by the author locates the novel's inspiration in "my impressions when, at the age of eighteen, I travelled by sea to Italy to seek an education" (Gebreyesus xxix). Gebreyesus connects his voyage to that of his "fellow country-men, the *ascari* recruits, who were [also] travelling overseas at that time," by which he means soldiers from the Horn of Africa who were conscripted by Italy between 1910 and 1930 to fight against anti-colonial African forces in Libya (Gebreyesus xxix). In the preface Gebreyesus also notes that the novel was written in 1927 but "could not be published until now [1950] for want of

⁴ A ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2022 but atrocities are ongoing. For more see de Waal, Human Rights Watch, Lucy, Lucy and Nabih, and Walsh.

means,”⁵ deliberately creating both a sense of spatial and temporal distance *and* imagined connection with the experience narrated in the novel (Gebreyesus xxix).

Gebreyesus Hailu was born in 1906 in the southern region of Eritrea. He learned to read and write in religious schools at a young age and in 1924 travelled to the Ethiopian College in the Vatican in Rome (the voyage that inspires the novel), earning his licenza ginnasiale (1927), advanced degrees in philosophy and theology, and a doctorate in theology (1937) by writing a dissertation in Latin. Returning to the Horn of Africa, Gebreyesus was an influential figure in cultural and intellectual life in Eritrea and Ethiopia during and after the Italian colonial period and held leadership roles in the Catholic church and the Ethiopian government. While *The Conscript* is his only novel, he also wrote a 16,000-line poetic tragedy entitled *Emperor Tewodros's Suicide* whose “vivid, ironic contrast” to the novel he notes in the preface; while the poem valorizes a hero, “one who sacrifices himself for his country,” the novel portrays the conflicted position of soldiers who die “fighting another man’s war, in foreign lands” (Gebreyesus xxx).

The departure and return of the conscripted soldiers who give the novel their name is signaled by the highland mountain ranges that span the modern Ethiopian-Eritrean border, the text’s significant literary geography. The highlands first appear as the novel’s protagonist Tuquabo narrates his departure:

⁵ Ghirmai notes that in addition to financial considerations, the book was unable to be published because of its stridently anti-imperial politics: “the content and language of the book make it unmistakably clear that there was no way it could be formally printed and distributed under Italian rule in the 1930s even if financial sponsors had been available” (Ghirmai, “Native Intellectuals,” 82).

From the deck of the ship he looked back towards his land...at nighttime on a ship it doesn't look like the ship is sailing, it feels like *the land is moving away*. Tuquabo felt emotionally stirred up when he saw his native land *moving away*...its green land and beautiful hills...looked like huge walls covered with mist. The water behind the ship was foaming and splashing, and seemed like a streaming river that was following them. (Gebreyesus 15, my emphasis)

Importantly it is the mountains and other natural elements—the hills, mist, water, even “dolphins swimming in the sea and around the ship”—that move away in this scene rather than the conscripts, granting the natural world animacy and agency (Gebreyesus 17). The novel also links movement through physical matter to the “movement of emotions and of sound” (Chrisman xxvi). The landscape has clear emotional significance to Tuquabo and he is filled with sorrow to leave it, or more precisely to feel *it* “moving away” from him.

Mountain-generated affect connects Tuquabo to his fellow conscripts who “together, were thinking about their country at the same time” (Gebreyesus 16). The next morning they are glad to still observe the African continent off the ship's bow, “a vast piece of land that linked with and formed part of their country” (Gebreyesus 16). The “synchronized conjuring of, and attachment to, a shared space beyond knowable locality” bears some resemblance to Benedict Anderson's theorization of imagined national community, but rather than unknown humans, it is known land that provides the foundation for community and identity (Chrisman xxiii).

The shared physical landscape causes the conscripts to recall specific instances of human connection that exceed those typically associated with the nation. “Those with parents and siblings and those with wives and children were absorbed in

their memories. Those who did not leave behind families thought of their friends or people who were close to them” (Gebreyesus 16). Recalling the environmental and human relationships he is leaving behind, Tuquabo expresses inner conflict by recalling a song from Tigrinya oral tradition:

Go ahead,
Leave your family and country behind
For someone else’s expense
That you don’t want. (Gebreyesus 15)

The poem voices Tuquabo’s nascent anti-colonial consciousness which expands throughout the novel while also registering the voluntary nature of his conscription: he and his fellow recruits volunteered to fight in the Italian army. In the decades after Adwa, the Italian colonies were reduced to thin strips along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coasts; by invading Libya, Italy aimed to resurrect the contours of ancient Rome with the help of ascaris from the Eritrean colony. The conscripts were similarly influenced by Adwa, their elders’ boastful reminiscences about their battle years and active combat-strong bodies pressuring the younger generation to “go to Libya to fight as a hero and gain fame” (Gebreyesus 7). The novel critiques the relationship between masculinity and militarism, showing how the association of fighting with male sexual and athletic vigor (“He is a woman who refuses to go to Libya”) and the memory of victory *over* the Italians ironically motivates a new generation of fighters to fight *for* Italy against other colonized Africans (Gebreyesus 7). Recalling Adwa, the novel infuses the highland imaginary with melancholy affect: feeling the mountains “moving away” from them foreshadows the larger losses of conscription to come.

The anticipatory loss Tuquabo and his compatriots feel—loss even while the mountains are still visible—travels outside of time and place, informing the novel’s anti-imperial, anti-war politics, and crystallizing in its conclusion. When the conscripts return to their homeland two years later, it is the collective rather than the individual protagonist who regards the landscape:

They were now in the land they had badly missed. They saw the great mountain chains, which were the topic of their daily conversations and night dreams, and they couldn’t resist their tears. The landscape was part of their hearts and souls. It was impossible to forget the land. (Gebreyesus 52)

Just as the mountains moved away from them on their departure, now the memory of the land extends out and draws them back, initiating a homecoming tinged with the grief of being away and the loss of their fallen comrades. Only once Tuquabo returns home does he apprehend another loss: the disorientation of those he left behind. His mother has died of grief and his father spends his days with his heart “in a different world... forgetful; [not knowing] where he was” (Gebreyesus 52). To mourn his loss, Tuquabo turns to another Tigrinya song form, a dirge that connects his personal conscription experience to larger losses of his community while foregrounding the role of Italian empire in both. His sorrow-steeped poetry embedded in the novel returns to and extends the melancholy of the initial mountain farewell, as he declares, “Farewell to arms / I am done with Italy and its tribulations / That robbed me off [sic] my land and parents” (Gebreyesus 57).

Like *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, *The Conscript* begins in media res. Its short narrative begins with Tuquabo’s farewell to his parents, then flashes back to significant moments from his birth and childhood that open up additional aspects of the novel’s

literary geographies and environmental sensibility. Shortly after his birth, Tuquabo's mother dreams she is wandering in a "wonderful wilderness" and comes upon "six flowers, called hawohawo (haemantus), waving with the wind" (Gebreyesus 4). Her admiration of their beauty turns to horror as she watches "a sickle plucking them away" until only one remains (Gebreyesus 4). A voice interprets the vision as a symbol of her children: "Five have died. I am sparing you the last one" (Gebreyesus 4). Upon waking, Tuquabo's mother is filled with gratitude and names her son Tuquabo Medhaniye Alem, meaning "God's gift."

The flower in the dream, haemantus or *Haemanthus multiflorus*, a variety of amaryllis, is native to the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia (Nordal 157-158). The plant is composed of a bulb with underground rhizomatic stems, long leafy stems above ground, and globe-shaped clusters made up of 10 to 200 individual small flowers (Nordal 157-158). The flowers range in color from pink to scarlet, creating a brilliant reddish-pink that likely inspired the Latin name (haem, meaning blood) as well as colloquial names like bloodflower and blood lily.

Considered in the context of the dream, the hawohawo flower functions as a symbol of anticipatory death, a borrowing of future losses. Even before Tuquabo enlists, his parents already acknowledge, even anticipate, his future death. This is clear when they accompany him to the train station. Steeped in "deep sorrow," they speak to him in the past tense: "You were our light and joy. We feel orphaned" (Gebreyesus 8). Carrying the past memory of their five children's deaths and borrowing Tuquabo's death from the future, they considered themselves "orphaned"

by the loss of their children. The bystanders at the train station berate Tuquabo for what they believe is his rejection of family ties; internalizing their curses Tuquabo wants to “bury himself under the ground” (Gebreyesus 8-9). When they return home without him it is “like returning home after the funeral of a loved one” (Gebreyesus 9). In this way Tuquabo and his compatriots are ghostly presences walking the pages of the novel, alive but assumed to be dead, lost before they are gone.

Tuquabo’s parents’ anticipatory grief sets the melancholy tone of the novel, reinforced again when he feels the highlands moving away and mourns their loss before they are gone. Since his primary affective relationship is with his parents, the inversion of parent and child signaled by the waving haemantus flowers emphasizes the novel’s unsettlement of linearly genealogical modes including, in Laura Chrisman’s terms, the view of “the nation through the ideological lens of heterosexual reproduction” (Chrisman xxiii). Almost always placing Tuquabo within larger communal contexts of his family or peer group and eliding romantic and reproductive relationships, the novel subverts the conventional narrative structure that would privilege a single human protagonist as the analogue for the nation. Moreover, it is difficult to read Tuquabo and the conscripts’ affinity with the mountain landscape as nationalist since it is always on the move, resisting the fixity of borders and the containment of categories.

Garden oases: non-reproductive holdings in *Silence is my mother tongue*

Non-reproductive family relationships are also prominent in *Silence*. There, the primary relationship is between the siblings Saba and Hagos who flee the Eritrean independence war and are resettled with their mother in a refugee camp in Sudan.⁶ The novel's events echo portions of its writer's own life: Sulaiman Addonia was born in Omhajer, Eritrea in 1974 to an Eritrean mother and Ethiopian father. Following his father's death the family fled the Eritrean independence war to a refugee camp in Sudan. Sulaiman and his brother were raised by his grandparents in Sudan and later Saudi Arabia, the setting of his first novel *The Consequences of Love* (2008). In 1990 he obtained asylum in England, where he is now a naturalized citizen. His second novel *Silence is my mother tongue* (2018) was recognized by numerous prizes including the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction and the Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Fiction.

Silence takes its name from one of its two sibling protagonists, Hagos, who is born mute. Hagos' silence thematizes the trauma of sexual violence he and Saba experienced as children, as well as the idea of silence as a "mother tongue," an absent presence that indexes the loss of what Sulaiman calls "the language of home" (Sulaiman, "The Wound of Multilingualism"). While Tigrinya is the writer's native tongue, he learned Amharic, Arabic, and English in refugee camps and regards

⁶ Some broader definitions of the Horn of Africa region, including that in *The Road Less Travelled*, include Sudan and novels written by Sudanese authors constitute a rich complementary supplement to the archive considered here (Ahmed and Tadesse 13). See for instance *Season of Migration to the North* [موسم الهجرة إلى الشمال / الطيب صالح] by al-Tayyib Salih (1969), *Cities without Palms* [مدن بلا نخيل - رواية] by Tarek Eltayeb (1992), *In the Hour of Signs* by Jamal Mahjoub (1996), *The Drowning* [الغرق] by Hammour Ziada (2019), *River Spirit* by Leila Aboulela (2023), and *Ghost Season* by Fatin Abbas (2023).

Amharic, the language associated with his father, as “a language of grief, of violence, of loss, of unattained longing” which he abandoned quickly, preferring silence instead (Sulaiman, “The Wound of Multilingualism”).

Alongside Hagos’ silence, the silent theater foregrounds the novel as a form where traces, memories, and absent presences can be held within a literary structure. The novel begins with a scene in the outdoor theater where Saba is put on trial for allegedly sexually abusing her brother. Following this opening frame, *Silence* consists of short, loosely arranged flashbacks and the narration of past events that together deconstruct the allegations and foreground the siblings’ joint efforts to navigate globalized and local forms of containment that seek to fix them in place. On the first morning after her arrival in the camp, Saba registers her disorientation by recalling the garden she left behind:

Back home, her room had opened onto the garden of a stone-floored courtyard with terracotta pots full of herbs. She had inherited that room from her grandmother...[who] found a way to communicate her desire for her neighbor by planting flowers against the wall separating them. (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 39)

Like the theater, the garden’s enclosed nature draws attention to what passes through—people, the sight and scent of flowers, and unspoken yet real expressions of desire. The garden also sketches matrilineal lines of relationality and inheritance, since Saba inherits the space from her grandmother, and forms of silent yet sensorially and organically rich communication, practices that Hagos will develop throughout the novel.

In contrast to the garden that was, the camp is constructed as an artificial built environment pitting against the wild natural world surrounding it. In its desire to

control the movement of its inhabitants and the natural world, the camp betrays its descendancy from the colonial project's "attempts to civilize" African subjects and landscapes which initially appearing terrifying and ungovernable (Barnett and Weiss 9). On the night of the refugees' arrival, "darkness [enveloped] the landscape" (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 37). Wandering through the bush in all directions to find water, the refugees are frightened by the "hissing of snakes" and the fear of "what else is out there...Scorpions. Antelope. Crocodiles. Elephants. Lions" (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 35). A woman is almost washed away by the river's strong current and rescued by Hagos, who is almost "swallowed" by the rushing, ravenous water (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 37).

Contrary to the proliferation of natural life in the bush, the built environment of the camp is dry, desolate, and empty of plants and animals. There are "no cockerels to announce the arrival of dawn...no scent of roasted coffee beans in the air. Air untouched by berbere mixed with ghee, by aftershave, by perfumes" (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 42). The place has been constructed by outsiders, then abandoned: Saba stumbles over "unused thatch...wood, twigs, ropes [and] abandoned litter," evidence that "the builders of the camp must have left in a hurry" and with little care for what they left behind (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 42). The camp's spatial, temporal, and material isolation are emphasized by the same two words in three languages: "Refugee Camp... in Tigrinya, Arabic and English" (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 49).

Feeling that "there is nothing in this place," much less a garden, Saba attempts to make her own by planting "a handful of seeds from an orange" given to her by the

driver who took them to the camp (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 55, 45). With a female friend she plants the seeds “close to the wall of her [mother’s] hut.”

I will help you, [the friend says,] this hole is not deep enough. We also need to surround the hole with sticks and logs so that people don’t walk over the seeds. We have to look after this... This will be a beautiful orange tree.
(Sulaiman, *Silence*, 45-46)

On one hand the planting of seeds is symbolic of Saba’s new diasporic identity. Jill Casid notes that the scattering or sowing of seed is an image of diaspora and a method of staking possession: “to plant was to make colonies” (Casid xvii, 120). Planted near the wall of Saba’s hut and subject to close confines and constant surveillance, the orange seeds sprout, then wither and die. The failed seeds symbolize the foolishness implicit in the idea of the nation-state and the humanitarian industrial complex that communities can “naturally” make themselves new permanent homes after displacement. Moreover, the orange seeds and their failure to grow also reflect the refugee community’s surveillance of Saba’s body and its reproductive capacity.

Contrary to the strict dichotomies between the camp and the bush, Saba and Hagos unsettle the rigid binary thinking of those who would like to categorize them as Ethiopian or Eritrean, Christian or Muslim, male or female. Hagos, whose name means “joy” in Tigrinya, delights in perfumes and beautiful clothes and centers his life around the home, cooking, cleaning, [buying Saba’s] clothes and shoes, [taking] care of her hair” (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 53). Saba, whose name refers to Sheba, rarely spends time on her appearance and takes on the roles associated with male children, attending school, queuing for rations, and working jobs. Neither sibling fully abandons the signifiers of either gender; rather their traits, habits, and desires

complement and complete one another: “They were a match, he and she the other of the other” (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 53).⁷

The siblings’ fluid embodiment and resistance to “fixed” identities threatens the camp midwife, the elder responsible for social reproduction. The midwife preoccupies herself with Saba’s reproductive potential, violently inspecting her for signs of insemination or “deflowering” and even going so far as to burn her inner thighs with hot pepper. Beside the midwife’s views, the novel makes space for alternative expressions of sexuality and sexual desire by those without social clout: sex workers, grandmothers, Hagos. As bees buzz around “the yellow flowers of the hibiscus tree” transplanted from the bush, a grandmother instructs Saba and her peers about “love and its fruits that ripen in the bodies of lovers,” describing the early days of her marriage when she made her husband lick her toes, then other parts of her body, for days before having penetrative sex (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 177-178). “[I]t is not a hole you make love to...With every new lover, we turn virgin again,” she says, moving away from a zero-sum understanding of virginity and reproductive sex in favor of practices of mutual knowing, romantic intimacy, and erotic desire (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 179). Learning from the grandmother’s reclamation of the fertility metaphor by seeing female bodies as landscapes of their own pleasure, Saba “liberates” and reclaims her body through her own orgasm, “plant[ing] pleasure on her assaulted

⁷ Reflecting on African sexual and gender expression in the present, Ifi Amadiume observes that contemporary binaries, hierarchies, and power relations often obscure a multiplicity of cultural meanings attached to gender, sex, and material bodies. Rigid gender ideologies and the linking of gender and sexual expression were often introduced, reinforced, or exploited by (colonial or neocolonial) outsiders. For more African perspectives on gender, see Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie and B Camminga.

body with her fingers” (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 160). Elsewhere the novel imagines Saba’s pleasure as rivers and streams, “the White Nile and its waters,” and Saba shares moments of intimacy with other girls while sheltering from a pounding rainstorm (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 179-180). Impervious to seed, Saba’s plantings and waterings enact intimacy and desire in excess of insemination, making of her body a nonreproductive yet proliferating garden.

As Saba’s relationship to the landscape of her body changes, so too are the boundaries between the camp and the bush made porous and traversable. Nomads and their herds make camp in the bush, bringing the sounds and smells of animals and the smell and taste of their meat. Saba and her friends harvest “wild spinach leaves” for food and various camp inhabitants transplant trees and other plants into their compounds (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 67). As artificial geographic distinctions are transgressed, the displaced community of humans reestablishes relation with the human, nonhuman, and plant life of a new place. The gradual integration and coming-to-terms with the new environment does not create a new home but rather a kind of temporary homeliness; Saba explains to the herders that for the refugees the camp is “a temporary place, our oasis until we leave” (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 154).

Envisioning the camp as an oasis—an unwalled desert garden irrigated by freshwater streams and populated by native trees and plants, often used as stopovers on long desert journeys—*Silence* reframes a space of displacement as temporarily habitable, a momentary structure of shelter and rest before passing on. Contrary to prelapsarian and futuristic paradise gardens that exist outside of time, in the deep past

or the distant future, Saba and Hagos's oasis is within time and history, including the specific histories that necessitate its creation and prevent it from becoming a permanent home. In its temporary holding the oasis garden is akin to the novel's role in a literary ecology, a structure in which objects pass in and out and within which it is possible to find—again or for the first time—something lost.

The oasis garden materializes most fully in the compound of an older merchant Eyob, where Saba and Hagos move in the second half of the novel. Wagging camp tongues force a marriage between Saba and Eyob, though the primary romantic relationship is between Eyob and Hagos. Leaving their mother's compound and living together with Eyob in a space walled on three sides and a courtyard full of transplanted trees and flowers, both siblings find a respite from multiple scales of displacement. There, they are able to express familial and romantic intimacy:

Saba lay next to Eyob. She emulated her brother and placed an arm on her husband's chest. This was her time to be loved....Eyob was the oasis in which both she and her brother took refuge from their long journey. (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 200)

While they are not able to recover or restore what has been lost as the result of war, displacement, and intimate personal abuse, Saba and Hagos' oasis refuge suggests the possibility of continuing to live after loss even as that loss remains a trace in Hagos' silence and Saba's scars.

The novel's productive and communal melancholia is particularly evident in the environmental aspects of the oasis. Not only does the oasis signify a constellation of romantic, non-reproductive relations between people, it also takes material, environmental form in Hagos' flower garden, which he creates by "harvest[ing]

[flowers] from the wild and replant[ing] [them] by the door of his hut” (Sulaiman, *Silence*, 192). Contrary to the orange seeds that do not take, the flowers Hagos transplants are examples of successful non-seed cultivation. While the act of transplantation carries the echo of displacement and the forced detour of refugees, Hagos’s transplantation occurs outside the metaphors of settlement—seeds, fixed identity, and land as productive space. Hagos’s transplanted garden produces nothing but a holding space for temporary beauty, a place where what has been lost (Hagos’s voice) is animated in other organically alive ways. The oasis garden is also a return, not to the mythical garden of origin or the garden of heavenly reward, but to the point of inherited entanglement. Like his grandmother’s courtyard garden, Hagos’s flowers interrupt the genealogical teleology of reproduction and generate a recursively circular temporality and pattern of relation with his sibling and his lover.

The oasis garden is spatially adjacent to the silent theater with which the novel and this chapter began, and the view of Saba sitting under the lime tree with a book is, chronologically speaking, the novel’s last scene. In the garden and the theater the novel presents two outdoor spaces—structured yet open, delineated yet permeable—for encountering and writing narratives of what has been lost individually and communally but which can still be animated and remembered in different ways. Adjacent and porous to one another, the cinema and the garden are not two different visions of the novel but rather an image of how novels within the same literary ecology can relate to one another. Novels, even those at as great a temporal distance as *Silence* and *The Conscript*, can be read alongside and inform one another in cross-

pollinating relation rather than a linear genealogy. This kind of reading unpacks different representational and narratological priorities from the ground of the texts, including the animate melancholy of flowers, multiply signifying literary geographies, and the novel as a recursively grieving form.

Being barren: the novel as recursive melancholy

While Saba and Hagos make an organic yet nonreproductive oasis of the desert “nothing place,” the desert in Gebreyesus’ novel motivates conscripts to return home with an anticolonial consciousness that does not reproduce the logics of war or nation. Tuquabo and his fellow conscripts spend two years in “the roasting sands of the Libyan Desert,” weathering abuse from Italian officers who treat them like animals and fighting against North African Arabs seeking independence from Italian colonial rule (Gebreyesus 20). As the conscripted soldiers prepare to board a train, military police beat stampeding crowds “with a whip (yes, with a whip like a donkey)” and the train carriages are described in bestial terms: “the black trucks...roared like starving lions, hungry to swallow the *Habesha* people in their beastly bellies” (Gebreyesus 12). Once they enter combat, the conscripts are referred to by their Italian officers as “children” and as “dog[s] whose eyes, while one is eating, are raised and lowered following the movement of one’s hand;” when the Italians abandon them in the desert the narrator explains “for the Italian the *Habesha* was like a weak donkey, which you couldn’t kill for meat or hide and therefore would leave behind to die in the field” (Gebreyesus 45-47).

In the closing pages the conscripts and their loved ones are consistently described in animal terms, as when they create a stampede at a well and when the survivors are welcomed home by a crowd “like growling sheep or goats” (Gebreyesus 54). This fragmentation of “noise, chaos, tears, and calling out” contrasts with the relatively peaceful and symbiotic coexistence evoked by early images of animals in the novel, the playful dolphins and the camels Tuquabo rides with his father as a child (Gebreyesus 54). Anticipating the insight later expressed by Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon that the colony is a “bestiary” in which the colonizer treats “[the colonized] *as an animal*” and “transform[s] *himself* into an animal” in the process, *The Conscript* uses animals to underscore the violent disruption caused by Italian imperialism and conscription (Fanon 42; Césaire 41). This fracturing causes not only “the loss of human collectivity, [meaning] Eritrean national and local community,” but also a fundamental change in the relationships between humans, animals, and the natural world (Chrisman xx).

The violent atmosphere of coloniality also conditions inter-African relations and forms of racialization in the novel. At Port Sudan “where the British were in power,” the conscripts regards the Sudanese as “black people...[who] could never be superior to us” while the Sudanese call the ascari “slaves...going to Tribuli for money” (Gebreyesus 16). The novel frames the ascari’s anti-blackness in the context of their subaltern status within competing regimes of imperial control; this does not excuse them, especially since forms of anti-blackness precede colonial encounter, so much as demonstrate the novel’s view of racialization as an imperial tool for further

division.⁸ Similarly regarding the Libyan fighters, the narrator first comments that “the Arabs were notorious for bad behavior...untrustworthy, treacherous,” “held grudges,” and “had the reputation of being merciless killers,” before clarifying that these were “the stereotype[s] passed along by the Italians...what the white people said about them” (Gebreyesus 32).⁹ Acknowledging that some ascaris have internalized this view, the novel comments that “no one can believe” such stereotypes when they witness “how [the Libyans] loved their freedom” and “how they were arming themselves to fight [against] an alien army coming to attack them” (Gebreyesus 33, 35).

Tuquabo’s experience in the desert makes him increasingly aware of the irony that he left his own colonized country to help the Italians acquire additional African territories. Comparing the “vast area of empty land...[with no] single tree, no grass” to their own “fertile land” radicalizes the conscripts about “how foolish it was to fight a stranger’s war” (Gebreyesus 37). Thus even in the context of European imperialism’s racial gridding of African topographies, a practice also evident in *Adua*, the conscripts’ situated relationship to landscape helps form their anti-imperial politics. The novel’s posture of self-critique is a good example of Mwangi’s assertion

⁸ Mahmoud Mamdani notes that forms of anti-blackness precede European colonialism in Africa but are exacerbated and transformed by them. Moreover European colonialism developed a two-tiered system of ethnicity and race for classifying natives and non-natives. Natives were indigenous and in need of civilization while races were non-native and governed by civil law. From this point of view, not all nonnatives were colonizers: Indians, Arabs, and “Coloureds” were colonized but still racially superior to indigenous native Africans. Mamdani argues these distinctions remained and were heightened in postcolonial African governments and societies. For more see Mamdani, “Beyond Settler and Native” and *Citizen and Subject*.

⁹ The novel also notes that Arabs are considered to be “red in color” (ቀይሕ in Tigrinya), but that the Libyan sun “has darkened their skin slightly” (Gebreyesus 32).

that African novels may be far less interested in “writing back” to the West or their colonizers than in “writing back to themselves and other local texts,” staging “internal heteroglossia” that simultaneously asserts African agency and holds that agency to account (Mwangi 1-2). While Kwame Anthony Appiah writes that “colonial education...produced a generation immersed in the literature of the colonizers” and regards African writers educated in these traditions as “perpetually under suspicion,” the novel’s politics hardly bear out a reading of colonial complicity (Appiah 155, 156). Rather the novel enacts both “a scathing criticism of Italian colonialism in Eritrea” and holds the recruits responsible for their choice to “maintain or consolidate the same colonial system by which they themselves were oppressed” (Ghirmai, “Native Intellectuals,” 82).

In this way *The Conscript*’s relationship to the novel as a genre foregrounds African agency, including the autonomy to choose its own form and critique its own memory. *The Conscript* enacts “bricolage” and a “self-conscious” literary form, the tools of self-critique Mwangi identifies, through its communally-centered narrative and the incorporation of poetic material from multiple literary traditions (Mwangi 4). We have already noted Tuquabo’s recollection of an oral Tigrinya poem aboard ship. Rendered in textual form in the novel, the poetic fragment links the novel’s melancholic affect to the highland imaginary. A second poem opens the chapter narrating the conscripts’ experience in the “hot, dry wilderness” of Libya, this one by the famous Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi:

He who fights on a foreign soil another man’s war
...cannot say, “Oh! My beloved country!

Here is the life you gave me, I come back to you”
Dies twice, reduced to eternal wretchedness. (Gebreyesus 23)

Ironically it is the Italian poem rather than the Tigrinya one whose stance is more anti-war, and Chrisman notes that the novel uses “Italian aesthetic culture against itself, to critique Italian imperial militarism” and African conscription (Chrisman xxvii). Expressing the deep loss exile can bring, Leopardi’s poem anticipates the conscripts’ melancholic homecoming and reinforces the sense that the conscripts are twice dead, ghosts walking the text.

The Conscript’s inclusion of the Tigrinya and Italian poems stages a conversation about language and form that is resolved in the long poem that concludes the novel. That poetic dirge written in Tigrinya takes the form of a melkes, a poem “exclusively performed to mourn a dead person, during a funeral...[and] almost always accompanied by wailing, weeping, or sobbing” (Ghirmai, *A History*, 99). Tuquabo’s melkes synthesizes the imaginaries and ideologies of the first two poems. The lament is unique in that it expands the range of what is mourned to include not only the loss of Tuquabo’s mother, but also the loss conscription brought to the Eritrean community, “those I upset, my people and beloved ones,” and the larger global destruction of imperialism “[t]hat robbed me of my land and my parents” (Gebreyesus 56). Moreover the poem’s catalogue of multi-scalar loss lays the ground for Tuquabo’s “farewell to arms” and his desire, foreshadowed in his departure on the train, to be cursed: “To be denied of an eye, tooth, and hand / And be barren” (Gebreyesus 56). Tuquabo desires to take on the embodied cost of conscription and imperialism and, in an inversion of his parents’ “orphaning,” to

become barren, unable to reproduce another generation of fighters or the violence of “arms...conscript and Italian medals” (Gebreyesus 56).

Tuquabo’s desire not to reproduce reflects the novel’s resistance to a nationalist reading, since, barren, he will not produce the citizens of the state. It also inflects *The Conscript*’s relationship to the novel form. Postcolonial studies has noted the relationship between the metaphor of “seeding,” the colonial project, and the novel; to plant seeds is not only to “produce colonies,” but also to “generate imperial subjects to sustain them” (Casid xiv). As Firdous Azim has it, the creation of “the colonial terrain” and its subjects was facilitated by “the *dissemination* of the novel as literature;” through the novel the colonies are “seeded” with subjects in their image (Azim 15, my emphasis). Like *Silence*, *The Conscript* consciously engages the environmental metaphor of seed. The flower dream, critique of masculinity, deprivileging of romantic relationships, inversion of parent-child relations, and final plea for barrenness all raise, then reject the genealogically reproductive logic of the seed metaphor. Like *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*, *The Conscript* rejects being read as the “first seed” in a genealogical linguistic or national literary tradition, but rather positions itself in beside, sibling, symbiotic relation with multiple literary traditions in Tigrinya, Italian, and poetic and prose forms.

Circular and melancholic, the melkes poem at the end of the novel shatters the European convention of teleological narratives and the linear “production” of national literary forms (Ghirmai, “Translator’s Note,” x). According to Ghirmai, the narrative proceeds by a “traditional recursive technique of telling, which, subsequently,

enables” a circular structure that “echoes (or flows from) the poetic language” and patterns of repetition and synthesis (Ghirmai, “Translator’s Note,” x). *Not* a return to origins, the poem is a circular arriving-again to a place, time, and language irrevocably changed by their encounter with imperialism and conscription. The concluding poem signals the synthetic circularity of the larger novel, which has been motivated from its opening preface by the desire to hold the collective memory of conscription, the ascari who are dead twice over. Little more than a footnote within the larger history of Italian imperialism and Eritrean national history, the Libyan episode and its traces are held in the poems, in the highlands and the blood flowers in the wilderness, and in the melancholic alive-ness of the novel itself.

Eye of the storm: *Adua* in context

Both *Silence* and *The Conscript* set up novelistic frames that are exceeded and rendered porous by recursive movement, the proliferation of natural materials, and a melancholic relationship to loss—in other words, the novel as storm form. In *Adua* by Igiaba Scego, the final text considered in this chapter, the storm’s circling, disorienting, opaque, and undisciplined qualities work to shatter conventions of singular perspective and fixed spaces and times. While *Silence* and *The Conscript* mimic the storm in their recursively circular form, the melancholic turn-in or internalization of loss, *Adua* embodies the unmappable, overwhelming chaos and exploding centrifugal force of the storm, the melancholic detonation and outward introjection of loss to an atmospheric disturbance the size of the whole world.

Scego was born in Rome in 1974 to parents of Somali origin. I leave a full discussion of Somali language politics to chapter four and focus here on the role of Italy and Italian, the language in which Scego writes, in the Horn of Africa. While Italy claimed parts of the southern Somali territories at the Berlin conference, the defeat at Adwa and the rise of fascism contributed new energy to the establishment of a second Roman empire in the Horn. By 1927 Italy claimed territory from the northeastern cape to south of Mogadishu, and in 1936, the region was integrated into Mussolini's Italian East Africa, where subjects endured forced labor, racial segregation, and settlerism until 1941. From 1941 to 1950 the region was administered by the British; from 1950 to 1960 the United Nations granted trusteeship to an Italian administration staffed by many former Fascists. In 1960 the southern Somali territories were integrated with British Somaliland to form the Somali Republic, but Italy's influence remained. The official languages of the Republic were English, Italian, and Arabic, and when Scego's parents were forced to flee the country following the 1969 coup d'état by Mohammed Siad Barre,¹⁰ Italy was their obvious choice: they were fluent in Italian and it was the language their Somali passports were written in (Scego, "Not One Less").

¹⁰ Barre and his Supreme Revolutionary Council overthrew the Republic in 1969 and renamed the country the Somali Democratic Republic. The SRC decreed Somali the official language of political and administrative discourse, thereby marking the beginning of the restoration of Somali cultural and linguistic rights suppressed by colonialism. As part of the Somalization of society, the government sponsored vast literacy campaigns in which the first novel in the Somali language, *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl* by Faarax M.J. Cawl (1974), was popularized. I discuss *Aqoondarro* in more detail in chapter 4.

A journalist, activist, and fiction writer raised in Italy, Scego has been recognized since her first novel *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* (2003) as an “important voice” addressing the afterlives of Italian colonialism and the complexities of African-Italian identities (Conrad 90). She received the 2003 Eks & Tra Prize for her short story “Salsicce” and the 2011 Premio Mondello for her memoir *La mia casa è dove sono*; several of her novels have been translated into English, including *Oltre Babilonia* (2008, *Beyond Babylon*), *Adua* (2015, *Adua*), and *La linea del colore* (2020, *The Color Line*). Multi-generic and multi-formal, Scego’s work attends to “the existential condition of being in transit between places, between subjectivities, and between cultural interpellations” in Italy and the Horn of Africa through a mix of history, narrative, autobiography, and photography (Ali 159).

As we have already seen in the introduction, *Adua* is a storm-dense novel: there are literal experiences of extreme weather, conversational asides about the weather, and metaphorical references to the storms of Ethiopian and European empire. Moreover, *Adua* also formally resembles a storm, as it is composed of a swirl of narrative voices in different times and spaces. Sections titled “Zoppe” are narrated in the third-person and depict the Horn of Africa in the 1930s. Working as a translator conscripted by Italian colonialists in the Horn of Africa, Zoppe witnesses the Italian re-invasion of Ethiopia, an offensive partially intended to assuage the Italian defeat at Adwa four decades before (Finaldi 15). Throughout the novel the freighted weight of this historical battle blows on the wind and accumulates multiple forms of narrative and political significance including as the novel’s title and the name of Zoppe’s

daughter. Sections titled “Adua” are narrated from her first-person perspective in two postcolonial times: 1970s Somalia and 21st century Italy. Adua is born in newly independent Somalia and as a child dreams of becoming a movie star like Marilyn Monroe, her romantic images of Italy shaped by the films she watches as a child. At seventeen she moves to Rome but after decades in Italy has only one title to her name, a humiliating erotic movie that exploits Italian stereotypes of Black female sexuality. Late in life, she marries a young Somali refugee who comes to Italy via Lampedusa fleeing the Somali civil war. She calls him “Titanic” in reference to the precarious boat on which he arrives and treats him with much of the same aloof disdain with which her father treated her; however they part on good terms in the novel’s epilogue, where he gifts her money and a camera to make her own film.

Inserted between the “Zoppe” and “Adua” sections are short sections entitled “Talking To,” in which Zoppe’s first-person voice speaks to his daughter. Like the chapters dedicated to “Adua,” the “Talking To” sections span from Adua’s childhood to adulthood, and their oral quality suggests the novel’s relationship to oral literary traditions that precede and exceed the colonial era.¹¹ While the organization of these sections maintains a predictable pattern, the overall effect is a polyvocality that explodes narrative singularity and a swirling overlap of geographies and times. By attending to what blows in and out of *Adua*, what and how it knows, its materialities

¹¹ The Somali literary tradition has a long history of oral and written literary forms that developed alongside and in relation to one another, contrary to assumptions of an evolution or progression from oral to written literary forms (Moolla, “When Orature Becomes Literature”). The trace of orality within *Adua*’s written text suggests not only the long literary histories of which the novel is a part but also that orality is one of the genres swept into its form.

and memories, the novel emerges as a multivocal, multigeneric structure for bearing witness to loss across overlapping, layered temporalities and interrelated, seeping geographies—the novel as storm form.

The central storm of the novel is the downpour of rain that coincides with the Italians and Zoppe's arrival in Addis Ababa. Zoppe and his Italian employers arrive to find the city dripping wet, its mornings wreathed in fog and its streets thick with “an endless expanse of mud” (Scego, *Adua*, 87). For Zoppe, the weather recalls memories of past storms in the rain-soaked city:

[In Addis] the sky seemed like it was about to crush the residents with its destructive fury. Nature was not kind in Addis Ababa and even the air was hostile....the cold breath of the highlands hit him square in the face...But as his father, Haji Safar, always said, that city [also]...had a heart that cradled the dreams of babes on stormy nights. (Scego, *Adua*, 88)

The hostile-tender nature of the storm captures the concentric circles and telescoping nature of time and space that characterize the novel. Seeing through the eye of the storm, as Zoppe does, we are both in the immediate present of 1935 and in overlapping circles of previous and future storms: those witnessed by his father (whose name references the Haj and the Islamic month of high winds), those always swirling around the city as the seat of Ethiopian empire, those that traffic the legacies, memories, and motivations of Adwa, those symbolizing the coming storm of the Italian imperial occupation in Ethiopia, and those foreshadowing its dusty clouds of war. From the eye of the Italian imperial storm, Zoppe follows its path backward to where it first makes African landfall in Massawa in Eritrea, the so-called “founding colony” and “outpost of empire” (Scego, *Adua*, 158). There, where Zoppe and the

Italians had stopped on their way to Addis, the Italians meet with “Ethiopian dignitaries” in a small dark room and agree, through Zoppe as intermediary, to give “arms, men, refreshment, provisions” in exchange for Ethiopia support in the upcoming war (Scego, *Adua*, 160, 162).

Zoppe’s role as translator perhaps makes him a stand-in for Scego’s own grandfather, who worked as an interpreter for “one of the most loathsome Fascist officials, Rodolfo Graziani, who had hundreds of innocent Ethiopian civilians gassed and slaughtered” (Scego, “Not One Less”). Certainly Zoppe encodes at the level of plot the imperial contamination of the novel genre, even as *Adua*’s form will go on shatter such narrative norms of empire as the individual subject allegorical of the nation and the teleological progress narrative. Yet as an intermediary between Italian and Amharic languages and between Italian and Ethiopian subjects, Zoppe subtly unsettles the colonizer/colonized binary and the trope of the translator-traitor with its origins in the Italian phrase “traduttore, traditore.” In colonial and postcolonial situations, “the figure of the translator is often considered “a traitor—in particular, a traitor to one’s native culture” (Chow 570).¹² Conversely as a Somali, Zoppe

¹² By far the most significant example of translation betrayal in the Horn of Africa is the 1889 Treaty of Wuchale signed by Mənilək II and the Italian imperial government. The treaty granted Italy significant territories from the Red Sea to the Mereb River (effectively modern-day Eritrea) in exchange for an \$800,000 loan, half in the form of arms and ammunition, to bolster Mənilək’s ongoing territorial expansion (Vestal 24; Paulos and Getachew 17-18). The treaty’s Italian and Amharic versions were meant to be identical but contained a significant difference: the Italian version required Mənilək to contact foreign governments only through Italy, while the Amharic version noted Mənilək “may [do so], if he desires to” (Paulos 46). The translator of the treaty, Grazmach Yosef Negussie, spoke only Amharic and French and therefore could not translate the (allegedly original) Amharic version into Italian. Paulos Milkias speculates that the Italians had “already drafted [the treaty] in Rome and made Grazmach Yosef Negussie pretend that he translated it;” this seems plausible given that the Grazmach was in Italian pay despite working for the Ethiopian imperial palace (Paulos 46). Regardless, when Mənilək learned of the discrepancies in translation and that his country had unexpectedly become a

facilitates both Ethiopian Amharic-speakers' betrayal of their people and indexes the status of the Somali people as doubly subject to empire (Chow 570).

In addition to its real and metaphorical valences, the storm is also an epistemological index of various ways of constructing Horn of Africa space. Both Zoppe and his Italian employer Count Anselmi use the rainstorm to articulate their respective cartographies. As it sweeps down from the highlands, across the plateau of the city, and, in Zoppe's mind, to the coastal lowlands of his childhood, the storm also gathers up and sutures together the interrelated geographies of the Horn, each freighted with their own histories and relations. Zoppe imbues each of the Horn's three significant geographies with social meaning: "the cold breath of the highlands" and its "destructive fury" suggests the sweeping expansion of the Ethiopian settler state to the plains around Addis, signified by "a proud Oromo standing tall," and to the lower-lying Somali territories, Zoppe's own homeland (Scego, *Adua*, 88, 86). The storm casts Zoppe's role in Massawa and his work as a translator as go-between between two entities with a colonizing relationship to the Somali territories, Italy and Ethiopia.

Zoppe's storm thinking also maps the intricacies of geographic relation in the Somali territories, the relationship between the interior hinterland and the coast with its connections to the Arab and Indian Ocean worlds, and his entanglement within them. Zoppe is from Magalo, a port city on the Somali coast with "schools, offices, a

protectorate, he was insulted, abrogated the treaty (while keeping the weapons), and rallied his people against foreign invaders (Paulos 47). After a series of clashes, the conflict (known as the first Italo-Ethiopian War) culminated in the 1896 Battle of Adwa, where the Italians were defeated by a 100,000-strong coalition African army.

nice big city hall, several mosques, a Catholic church, a library, a branch of the central university, a bookstore, a pasta factory, two markets...[and] a sea that took your breath away” (Scego, *Adua*, 53). In Magalo, historical and material traces of Arabic-Islamic and Indian Ocean influence (the “Moorish tower” erected by “our forefather Torobow” and later turned into a lighthouse) are overlaid with more recent traces of European presence—“the blade of an axe...[and] a bundle of rods symbolizing Fascist power” attached to the lighthouse—as well as African complicity (Scego, *Adua*, 65-66). Adua notes that the town’s movie theatre is run by “one of those Somalis who made money during colonialism by sending bodies to the front during Italy’s war against Ethiopia. [After independence, he] got even richer” (Scego, *Adua*, 63).

The novel demonstrates how geographies map regional racial and ethnic signifiers when Zoppe, who has arranged for his children to be raised by their mother’s family after her death, returns to “drag” Adua and her sister “from the bush to the city by the sea” (Scego, *Adua*, 52). This geographic displacement is marked by the second significant storm in the novel. Adua narrates,

A big storm was beating down on our camp when the man with the red beard [Zoppe] entered our tukul. That’s how things began with my father...The rain that day was violent...[But] we truly were happy about the cruel rain that was pounding over our heads. Wallahi! So happy. That rain was a true manna from the heavens...rust-colored basins filling up with water that would quench our thirst in the coming days. (Scego, *Adua*, 36-37)

Adua’s excitement for the rain conveys pastoral communities’ precarious dependence on the weather to sustain life, as well as the catastrophe that awaits should rain fail—drought. This particular “torrential rainfall” not only illustrates climate realities but

also symbolizes a spatial, relational, and ontological rupture (Scego, *Adua*, 36). Zoppe's arrival initiates Adua's move from the pastoral hinterland full of "my goats...my camels...that golden land that had become part of my bones" to be "civilized" by an Arabic housekeeper in Magalo (Scego, *Adua*, 54).¹³ Zoppe regards the movement between geographies as civilizationally and racially transformative: "They're savages," he comments to the housekeeper and replaces the "dirty, filthy name...[his daughter] had as a nomad" with Adua, the Italian spelling of the Abyssinian location of "the first African victory against imperialism" (Scego, *Adua*, 41). This renaming relocates—remaps—Adua from the "savage" Africanity of the interior plains to an identity associated with coastal cosmopolitanism and, evoking the trace of the 1896 battle, highland independence. But Adua's experience of the "big storm," which signifies the rupture of an intimate and embodied relationship to place, also marks her entry into a number of overlapping racial cartographies and the fragmented temporality of inherited trauma (Scego, *Adua*, 36).

Storms of empire: mapping race and place in the Horn of Africa

Alongside Zoppe, the Italian count Anselmi also uses the storm in Addis Ababa as an occasion for spatial thinking and shows how the colonial imagination mapped race onto space within and after the colonial period. The Count and his French hotelier complain that "Addis Ababa is so cold in the morning," the weather of the foothill

¹³ For more on the relationship between Somalis on the coast and in the hinterland, see Farah, "Of Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism."

city contradicting the stereotypical representation of African landscapes and climates produced both by the Count's experience in Eritrea and by colonial writing (Scego, *Adua*, 87). In the novel, newspaper writers armed with "telescopes [and] first aid kits" and wearing "tan safari jackets" write sensational stories featuring "primitive scenes" and descriptions of Africans as "caveman-like, they still eat with their hands" (Scego, *Adua*, 90-91). The reduction of land and people to the status of objects initially appears to facilitate the two Europeans' quick divvying up of African lands, recalling the lines drawn on the map at the Berlin Conference. Says the Frenchman, "We have Tunisia and [you'll] get Ethiopia... a fair deal" (Scego, *Adua*, 87). But Anselmi refuses to confirm this allocation and instead "shift[s] the conversation to meteorological matters," not wanting to "reveal himself" or his nation's desire for a new Roman empire that includes Tunisia and the entire southern Mediterranean (notwithstanding French Algeria) (Scego, *Adua*, 87).

Sydney Conrad, in his reading of the novel, notes that in the minds of Italians the invasion of Ethiopia represented "a collective cause" that would "unite" Italy's various linguistic differences, customs, and ethnic groups into "one national identity," while S.A. Smythe points out that Italy's Fascist project was not just national but imperial, rooted in a desire for "aggressive territorial expansion and 'reclamation' of former lands...the Fourth Shore" of ancient Rome (Conrad 92; Smythe 5). Thus what appears to be a conversational aside about the weather actually works to obscure the full scope of Italian imperial intention from competing European interests. This is further confirmed by Anselmi's closet "obsession" with the British Empire, "the

greatest...on earth,” and his conviction that “Italy deserves one just like it [since] after all, [we] gave the world Augustus” (Scego, *Adua*, 77-78).

The Count’s meteorological aside also indexes a complex geographic and racial gridding produced by scientific positivism. Angelica Pesarini describes how “Italian colonialism and Fascism materialised the body of the racialised ‘Other’ through discourse practice able to produce hierarchical classifications of inequality” (Pesarini). Colonial administrators in Italian East Africa considered miscegenation a serious threat to Italian blood and racial purity and assigned various levels of civilization to different skin tones; as Anselmi and his colleague map it out, the Arabs are “cheap” and “efficient,” the Abyssinians “lazy,” and dark-skinned “Negroes” like Zoppe “outlandish,” outside the parameters of civilizational space and time (Scego, *Adua*, 86-88). Zoppe is referred to as “darkie bastard,” “black face,” and via racial slurs, especially when he is chased and brutally beaten in Rome (Scego, *Adua*, 7, 43). His daughter Adua is later subject to an array of racialized and sexualized language in Italy including “sharmutta” and “Faccetta Nera,” a reference to a Fascist marching song in which a Italian Blackshirt singing to an Ethiopian girl (“little black face”) justifies conquest as a means to save her from slavery and bring her to Rome (Scego, *Adua*, 22).

Anselmi’s typology recalls *The Conscript*’s racializations and Fanon’s observation that from the colonial point of view Africans were not only people without history but “radically located outside of time” (Mbembe, “Decolonizing Knowledge”). The perception of African belatedness, in concert with the production

of African environments as either prelapsarian and virginal or, in Ethiopia's case, plagued by backward practices such as slavery, served to justify colonialism as a means to "civilize" Africans and African environments by drawing them into global modernity. Ironically the novel uses a natural force (the storm) to *de-naturalize* the presence of European forms of racialization in the Horn of Africa and, by showing how they are carried in and produced by European actors, bring them into history. That Adua encounters racial slurs in Italy in the postcolonial period highlights the persistence of colonial ideologies and tropes outside their originating temporality.

While Zoppe rejects dehumanizing racial stereotypes on a conscious level, he internalizes them subconsciously. The longer he works between two imperial languages (Italian and Amharic) as a translator, he notices his mouth and tongue becoming "dry," "stiff" and "lifeless" (Scego, *Adua*, 104). In a series of visions that telescope between the past and the future, Zoppe sees a man with "big ears like an elephant's" and skin "a little yellow" and covered with "a thick layer of pink dust" (Scego, *Adua*, 122-123). The man draws a cartoon of an elephant targeted by a man with a javelin. Eventually assembling the fragments of visions together Zoppe recognizes himself as the elephant-like man. On the one hand Zoppe's elephant analog is an example of the colonial imaginary at work, especially Fanon's assessment that the space-time of colonialism "turns [the African] into an animal" and the colony into a "bestiary" (Fanon 41). Conversely Zoppe's vision puts him at a spatial distance from himself and helps him recognize the impact of colonial labor that has naturalized his body to a stereotypical African landscape of "twigs and hot

sand...the lunar solitude of the African periphery,” causing him to lose himself in the process: “[his] tongue had dried up from translating...he lost the sense of the words. It was as if his thoughts were floating away from him in a storm cloud” (Scego, *Adua*, 95, 122). Here the elephant and the psychological storm function metaphorically as stand-ins for the epistemological distancing and erasure that occur under colonialism. They also have a methodological function, allowing Zoppe to “float away” and assemble an image of himself at a distance and outside linear time to apprehend his loss.

Adua’s sections carry, drag forward, and echo Zoppe’s experiences in a different time, thereby focalizing the storm as process and system. Thinking with the storm emphasizes what Kamau Brathwaite, in the Caribbean context, calls the “*history of catastrophe*,” the slow violence of destruction and disaster that seeps beyond singular events and exceeds colonial periodization (Brathwaite).¹⁴ Similarly Mbembe considers the temporality of the African postcolony as a varying, multi-stranded, and entangled phenomenon that foregrounds relations between histories of violence, destruction, and loss. Recognition of the intermingling between pasts, presents, and futures not only draws attention to the connections between structures and legacies of violence but also makes visible forms of persistence and resistance across them (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*). Somali scholar Farah Bakaari has

¹⁴ Writing of a similar *longue durée* of crisis in the Caribbean, Brathwaite insists that “the nature of our catastrophe, the effects we feel, have ancient, subterranean but identifiable sources; that our condition: frustration, exploitation, underdevelopment...stems from the original empire on which we impinge” (Brathwaite).

something similar in mind in her theorization of “ruinous time,” a contingent, precarious temporal position of seeking to recover from “the ongoing effects of a prior (colonial) destruction” and contend with the ongoing coloniality of the present without conceding the “liberatory potentiality” of an anticolonial future (Bakaari 21, 22).

In his reading of “transgenerational trauma” in *Adua*, Conrad argues that Zoppe exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by the “exploitative, violent, and dehumanizing nature” of colonial experience; this trauma is “passed down” to his daughter and evidenced by “shared psychologies” (Conrad 93). For instance, after the first geographic dislocation initiated by her father, Adua later convinces herself, as Zoppe had before her, that attempting to appear less “African” and relocating to the colonial metropole will result in European-recognized subjectivity. Travelling to Italy under a coercive and deceitful arrangement, she experiences new iterations of her father’s brutal exploitation including personal sexual violence. Later she perpetuates similar hierarchies with her much-younger husband, infantilizing him and enacting physical and verbal abuse. While Conrad’s PTSD interpretation risks applying a western episteme to pathologizing effect, reading the novel on its own terms makes visible a legacy or inheritance of Italian colonialism that continues in the postcolonial period, or, in storm terms, a ruinous catastrophe that exceeds conventional temporal distinctions and manifests simultaneously in the past, present, and future.

Citrons in a lunar landscape: *Adua*'s productive melancholy

Initially the novel's temporality of inheritance appears to produce nothing but more loss. Through the animating movement of the storm, *Adua* constellates multiple time periods, sweeping back and forth through time, gathering, accumulating, and dragging forward past losses that inflect continued disasters in the present, such as Adua's relationship with Titanic. Zoppe refuses to talk about or remember the past, yet because his and Adua's timelines are narrated in parallel, the connections between his past and her present are legible to the reader. The narrative moves one step forward, two steps back, as Adua identifies gaps in her knowledge which Zoppe's sections address, avoid, or obfuscate, primarily through analeptic visions figured as the "strange dream haze" or "fog" which "distort" narrative time and space (Scego, *Adua*, 8-9; Conrad 97). The confused fogginess of Zoppe's visions suggest he is far from being a native informant or a conscious traitor but rather is subject to overlapping imperial storms and the burden of moving between their linguistic registers. His meteorologically obscured vision reflects an internal fragmentation and the attempt to protect his subjectivity from transparent legibility, what Édouard Glissant refers to as opacity and Sam Durrant as ironic translation (Glissant, *Poetics*; Durrant, "Critical Spirits," 59).

Zoppe's visions are themselves storm-like. In a significant one, Zoppe is in a barren landscape, a border zone reminiscent of the Somali Haud "where animals are taken out to pasture" and it was "easy...to fight with the nearby Ethiopians (Scego, *Adua*, 42). Waking, he recalls only "the smell of sulfur," a premonition of the

poisonous mustard gas Italy will drop over Ethiopia in the coming war (Scego, *Adua*, 42).¹⁵ The poisonous gas constitutes a third, man-made storm in the novel, one that contaminates the air with lethal poison and is corrosive to whatever it lands on; it penetrates “under the skin,” producing “blistering, internal lesions” and death (Sbacchi, “Poison Gas,” 47). The poison gas storm is also, as the phenomenon of “blow back” suggests, contingent on environmental factors such as “natural settling, terrain, and weather conditions;” in this way it is an example of situated yet unpredictable and undisciplined extreme weather (Sbacchi, “Poison Gas,” 47).¹⁶

Zoppe is reminded of the dream later when he meets up with an Ethiopian friend Dagmawi; together they go to a “flat and empty...lunar landscape” with a basket of citrons—a large citrus fruit with a thick rind (Scego, *Adua*, 106). According to Dagmawi,

Citrons didn’t break. They weren’t weak like the fragile papayas or soft mangos. Citrons were warriors, their cores made of metal and their pulp was as if covered in armor. It was a strange alchemy that kept citrons alive....Citrons were more resistant than lemons, harder than grapefruits. Ideal for target practice....Shooting at them will be like shooting right at the temple of the Italian enemy. (Scego, *Adua*, 101)

Dagmawi turns citron practice into a “habit,” obsessively tossing the citruses far into the distance and shooting at them; the “fruit had become the center of his

¹⁵ The use of poison gases such as sulfur mustard is an international war crime according to the 1899 Hague Declaration Concerning Asphyxiating Gases and the 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare. The Italians’ use of sulfur mustard gas in the second Ethio-Italo war is documented by Ethiopian historians but largely dismissed in the Italian historical record. See Gashaw, Grip and Hart, Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, and Sbacchi, “Poison Gas.”

¹⁶ Kim Coleman also notes that the use of poison gas as a weapon was dependent on favorable weather conditions and wind direction. In “blow back,” wind acted as a sort of autonomous agent causing gasses to travel in the opposite direction as intended, usually back toward the release location.

existence...[his] future as a warrior” (Scego, *Adua*, 102). Like the oranges in *Silence*, the citrons have an aspirational future-oriented charge, seeding victorious actions. But they are also melancholic, a natural object interchangeable with both Dagwami’s internal visions of future glory and the perpetrators of a loss so large it becomes the size of his whole world. Watching his friend shoot the citrons in the dry landscape, Zoppe feels “a treacherous wind” carry the trace of the sulfur dream and recalls his vision of everything, including Dagmawi’s family, “set on fire” by the gas (Scego, *Adua*, 105). While the storm in the hinterland represents a past loss for Adua and the storm in Addis a present one for Zoppe, the treacherous sulfur wind anticipates a catastrophic chemical storm of the future—not only Zoppe’s future, but that of all the humans and nonhumans affected by the storm’s lethal, corrosive wake.

A second significant vision involves the figure of a baboon. Like the elephant, the baboon and the citrons are examples of the novel’s complex and proliferating use of beings and objects from the natural world to suggest relationships of kinship, solidarity, and interchangeability between a range of beings subject to history. Animals register both an awareness of the colonial bestiary and of familial, affective relations that move, swirl, and telescope through time and space in ways that exceed, explode, and circumvent colonial imaginaries. For instance, the baboon allows Zoppe to communicate with his dead father. Their meetings are unfixed to “a date, time or place,” but the baboon appears when Zoppe needs a confessor and source of comfort (Scego, *Adua*, 140). “[D]oubled over like a wounded zebra,” he grieves,

“I sold myself like a Christian Judas for a pile of silver....How will I be able to look at my friend Dagmawi in the eyes? It would be better if I’d never been

born and my father's seed had dried up...I can see things before other men, but I wasn't granted the power to change the future." (Scego, *Adua*, 148)

In this distraught confession, Zoppe expresses the complicity of the translator go-between, the anticipatory melancholy that apprehends the loss of his friend before it occurs, and the desire—recognizable from *The Conscript*—for barrenness and a lack of seed, to have never been born or else to never reproduce. Moreover through Zoppe the novel portrays the power dynamics between languages under conditions of overlapping European and Ethiopian empire and the physical, psychological, and epistemological sacrifices exacted from those who move between them. Highlighting the costs of moving within empire's racial-spatial grid, the novel offers an honest yet sympathetic portrait of translators that complicates the association between translation and cultural betrayal.

Despite Zoppe's desire not to replicate and reseed, the movement of natural objects and beings through the text on the storm traces the reproduction of multiple overlapping imperial violences across space and time. Without attempting to undo fragmentation or restore what has been lost, either to Zoppe or Adua, the novel points to the possibility of a melancholic mode to give a structure to and bear witness to loss. Adua addresses her sections to "my little elephant," referring to a small figurine carved from marble, a material and metaphorical intermediary for Zoppe who, despite his "big ears," "was never very good at listening" (Scego, *Adua*, 20, 3). Conversely, addressing the "little marble elephant holding up the smallest obelisk in the world" Adua says, "You and your big ears are the only ones left to listen to my voice...It's only you, little elephant, who remembers me" (Scego, *Adua*, 3, 24). As a narrative

device, the elephant situates Adua's sections as addressed to her father, reflecting and inverting the "Talking-to" sections and giving Adua a structure within which to ascertain her inheritances and speak back to her father.

Within the swirling polyphony of the novel Adua does not fully leave the past behind but finds a method to address its damage and live in its afterlives. Her melancholic mode is epitomized in the novel's closing scene when she lets go of her father's turban, "the sign of my slavery and my old shame," and her departing Titanic husband gives her a camcorder so "you can tell your story however you think and you feel" (Scego, *Adua*, 170-171). Referencing a known historical disaster, Titanic's name evokes an anticipatory catastrophe that in the novel notably does not come to pass. Rather Titanic diverts the repetition of traumatic histories and opens up new narrative possibilities for Adua within the ruins of social and environmental disaster. Adua moves on from the subjugating control of the past, but not from the memory of past losses altogether. First through "talking to" the elephant and then through film, Adua enacts a recursive and self-determined reengagement with the forms and content of the past, telling a new story over which she has narrative control.

Like its titular protagonist, the novel also adopts a melancholic mode. It does not move on from the past but constantly returns to and narrates the losses caused by European and Ethiopian empire. Its constantly-moving narrative is constellated by distinct points of view, locations, and times that insistently and incrementally destabilize the systems that seek to capture, contain, and map African landscapes and lives. In its swirling and unpredictable nature, the novel is itself a storm that stretches,

fragments, obfuscates, and shatters narrative singularity and linearity, exploding and fragmenting totalizing narratives in order to assemble multivocal, multispatial, multitemporal, and multigeneric alternatives. In this way the storm not only animates key points in the novel's plot but also epitomizes its form. Mobile, unpredictable, blustery, and undisciplined, the novel as storm highlights the genre's relationship to empire (the novel as a genre blown in) but does not foreground it. Rather the storm form turns attention to how the novel functions as an undisciplined, opaque, and locally emplaced form of melancholic storytelling on its own terms.

Conclusion

This chapter, in its looping movement between *Silence is my mother tongue*, *The Conscript*, and *Adua*, has enacted the storm as interpretative method to tease out the threads of connection between texts separated by close to a century, written in three different languages, and featuring distinct settings and identities. In so doing this ground-up approach demonstrates how these texts refuse to reproduce the allegorical subjects and narratives legible within national allegory and genealogical readings of African literature, and it foregrounds their contributions to the intertextual heteroglossia of a regional literary ecology. In addition to the literal presence of storms, this chapter has drawn attention to multiple ways texts engage with storms, including as literary metaphors for European and Ethiopian colonialism (as in *Adua* and *Silence*); as formal features that inform a text's nonlinearity, recursive returns, and polyvocality (*The Conscript*, *Adua*); and as ecological index of the elements,

including poetry (*The Conscript*), flowers and fruits (*The Conscript*, *Silence*, *Adua*), and animals (*The Conscript*, *Silence*, *Adua*), that blow into literary texts dealing with grief and loss and animate them with productive melancholy.

Attending to the work and *movement* of ecological and natural material in each text—not only storms, but blood flowers, citrus, and animals—makes it clear that the novels considered here are each melancholic. Mimicking the movement of the storm in their recursive circular forms, *Silence* and *The Conscript* enact a melancholic internalization of and self-reflection on loss. Meanwhile in its swirling polyvocality and multiple temporal and spatial coordinates, *Adua*'s storm form enacts the melancholic detonation and introjection of loss in a disorienting and obscuring storm that centrifuges past, present, and future losses till they swirl all around, the weather of the whole world.

All three bear witness to and grieve forms of loss, whether the ecological losses of displacement, borders, and exile; the communal epistemic, ontological, and relational losses of Italian and Ethiopian imperialism, the conscription of African soldiers, and the Eritrean independence war; or the more personal losses of language, home, and sexual autonomy. Each novel holds on to what has been lost without seeking to restore, repair, or move on from it. Rather the novels move loss forward, and anticipate future losses, by means of intertextuality, shared histories, language, and ecopoetics, establishing melancholy as the conditions in which literature is produced in the present. What it brought into the novel and how is hardly uniform or

predetermined, however; the next chapter considers the novel as memory structure, its means of memory, and whether it is possible to remember without romanticization.

Chapter 3
Təzəta hauling possessions:
Highland romance and embodied memory in Maaza Mengiste’s *The Shadow King* and Gabriella Ghermandi’s *Regina de fiori e di perle*

In 1896, a coalition African army in the highlands of the Horn of Africa defeated their would-be Italian colonizers in the Battle of Adwa, named for the mountain town around which the fighting took place. We saw in the previous chapter how Adwa occupies a “central place in...[the] collective memory” of the entire Horn, its resonances, relations, and significations “overflow[ing]” their specific coordinates (Maimire 45). As a character in Maaza Mengiste’s novel *The Shadow King* (2019) puts it, anticipating the reinvasion of Ethiopia in 1935,

the Italians will declare their first victory at Adua... They will try to rewrite the memory of that day forty years ago, in 1896, when they were brought to their knees then forced to prostrate themselves before proud Ethiopian warriors. This is all for Adua, for that place that is more than a place. They have come to rewrite history, to alter memory, to resurrect their dead and refashion them as heroes. (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 89)

“A place that is more than a place,” Adwa has produced an outsized ideological and metaphorical significance for its geographical location: the highland dāga. The poet Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin refers to Adwa as the “roof of Africa” that rises above the “ominous clouds” of European colonialism,” while western historians narrativize Adwa as the triumph of “a “Christian kingdom of mountain fastness,” the victory of a “black emperor of a *big and empty land lost in the high mountains*, encircled by a confusion of deserts, jungles, and undrawn frontiers, [who] sounded reveille for a sleeping world” (Tsegaye 9; qtd. Teshale 417; Dugan and Lafore 3, my emphasis).

For Tewodros Gebre, Adwa crystallizes the “trinity of Ethiopian romance” constituted by nature, religion, and history; in the grand narrative tradition of Ethiopian historiography, Adwa is the crux of the continuity thesis, the fulcrum that facilitates the seamless transition from empire to state (Tewodros 70; Dagmawi et al.). In the wake of Adwa, the endorsed traditions of Ethiopian and Euro-American historiography produced a romance of the highlands. The romance naturalizes, or makes natural, “the most meaningful negation” of European hegemony as, in the Ethiopian version, the inevitable consequence of a great leader (Mənilək II) and Christian Amhara/Tigray civilization, or, in the Euro-American one, of rugged, impenetrable geography (Vestal 32). Both romantic narratives inevitably contain a vast number of omissions, including the assemblage of fighters “from almost every region and ethnic group” who worked together to expel their would-be colonizers and the strategic role of Taytu, Mənilək’s wife (Vestal 28).¹

Meanwhile on the African continent, in the diaspora, in the rest of the colonized world, Adwa created another kind of romance, a radically powerful beacon of resistance, dignity, and “hope and pride” for all who sought independence from oppression (Teshale 426). The sole African country never to be colonized, Ethiopia continues to stand for “an exemplary blackness” in Global South and Black diasporic imaginaries, “the space of African redemption” and homecoming envisioned by Black

¹ Such elisions also include Mənilək’s choice not to extend his victory and take back the Italian colony of Eritrea and his ongoing territorial expansion. By winning the battle of Adwa allowed Mənilək to preserve the territories of the ancient Abyssinian state and, capitalizing on battle allegiances, extended it to the south, west, and east. Perhaps a necessary defense against European encroachment, Mənilək’s expansion is viewed by some as a settler colonial enterprise or “internal oppression” (Clapham; Maimire 61).

nationalist movements (Marcus Garvey and Kwame Nkrumah), Pan-Africanism (W.E.B. Du Bois and George Padmore), and Rastafarianism (Adom, “Roundtable”; Ayele).

This chapter investigates how the highland romance produced and trafficked in the years following Adwa, especially during the 1935-1941 Fascist occupation and the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia, through a reading of Maaza’s *The Shadow King* (2019) and Gabriella Ghermandi’s *Regina de fiori e di perle* (2007). Both novels are written by authors born in Addis Ababa but currently living outside Ethiopia; in this way their novels apprehend and participate in the global movement of the highland romance. Maaza left Ethiopia with her family in 1978 at the age of four, fleeing the socialist revolution begun by student protestors and co-opted by the military into the Derg regime. She spent her childhood in Nigeria, Kenya, and the United States, where she now lives and works as a novelist, essayist, and photographer. Reimagining key moments in Ethiopian history through fiction, she is the author of two English-language novels, *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* (2010) and *The Shadow King* (2019), which was shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize.

Gabriella Ghermandi was born in Addis Ababa in 1965 to an Ethiopian mother and Italian father and in 1979 moved to Italy where she lives in her father’s home city of Bologna. A fiction writer, playwright, and performer, Ghermandi is perhaps best known for her performance work that adapts narratives from Ethiopia’s oral and musical traditions and pairs music with retellings of historical events. In 1999 she was recognized with the Elks&Tra Literary Prize and in 2003 was among the founding

members of the online magazine *El Ghibli*, the first Italian periodical with an editorial board of foreign authors writing in Italian. *Regina de fiori e di perle* (*Queen of Flowers and Pearls*) published in 2007, is her first novel.²

The Shadow King and *Queen* are melancholic in their thematization of loss as the conditions that bring novels into being. *The Shadow King* is a female-centered epic of Mussolini's re-invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the second Ethio-Italian War. Maaza writes in the novel's afterword that the novel intends to tell "the story of those Ethiopian women...who even today have remained no more than errant lines in faded documents" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 425). Inspired by the author's grandmother and archival photographs of female Ethiopian fighters, some of which appear in the novel, *The Shadow King* follows a range of female characters—soldiers, companions, cooks, and nurses—who fight alongside men to stall the Italians' advance through the highland mountains. These women are led by Aster, an elite woman spurred to action on the anniversary of her child's death, and Hirut, a peasant girl who has lost her biological family and whose meditations on old Italian colonial photos in 1974 bookends the novel. In addition to Aster and Hirut, *The Shadow King* also follows Fifi, companion to an Italian colonel and a spy; a female cook who serves both Aster and Fifi; and an unnamed "chorus" of female voices that move across landscapes and through time.

² All quotations are from Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto's English translation of the novel titled *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* (2015). From here on I refer to the novel by its translated title.

Similarly *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* is a polyphonic, choral work that gathers many stories of Ethiopian resistance—the “flowers” and “pearls” of the title—against the Italian Fascist occupation as they are offered to and gathered by the female protagonist Mahlet, the designated story-collector who comes of age during the socialist Derg regime. A curious and clever child, Mahlet is entrusted by Yacob, one of her family’s elders, to carry the stories across the sea to Italy as a gesture of remembrance and atonement: “gather as many stories as you can,” Yacob instructs. “You will cross the sea that Paul and Peter have crossed and will bring our stories to the land of the Italians. You will be the voice of our history that does not want to be forgotten” (Ghermandi 6). Yacob tells young Mahlet his story as an arbegna (resistance fighter), but it is only after his death, when she is wracked with grief from his loss, that Mahlet begins to act out her promise. Sitting in the garden courtyard of a church, Mahlet collects a series of oral narratives from all strata of Ethiopian society—farmers, shop owners, and slaves, commanders and female warriors—each narrated in the voice of its own story-teller. Presenting Mahlet as a “queen” who gathers metaphorical flowers and pearls, the novel itself gathers many stories left out of both Italian and dominant Ethiopian historiographies into one narrative structure.

The Shadow King and *Queen* present themselves as “writing back” novels that seek to address omissions and erasures in official histories. Both Maaza, who resided in Italy while writing much of *The Shadow King*, and Ghermandi, who lives there, are aware that before the last two decades, Italian state institutions barely acknowledged the Italian colonial presence in Africa beginning in 1869 and lasting through the

Fascist enterprise in 1941. In Paolo Jedlowski's words, "public memory [of the colonial past] in Italy has long been absent: as if this past were irrelevant" (Jedlowski). As a consequence of this "purposeful obfuscation," Italy long avoided exposure to "intense debate around colonial responsibility and blame" that has occurred in England and France, though this is no longer avoidable in the context of the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean (Sansalvadore 18). In this way *The Shadow King* and *Queen*, alongside texts by other writers such as Igiaba Scego and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, are part of a public conversation about the history of Italian and African interaction, imperial legacies, and the contested presence of Africans in contemporary Italian society.³

The novels' "writing back" mode constitutes the outward turn of melancholia, while the experiences of loss that initiate their respective plots reflect melancholia's turning-in and internalization of loss. Whether locating the loss in the future (the dead child in *The Shadow King*) or the past (the dead elder in *Queen*), both novels drag personal losses from different temporalities into the present, then expand and explode them to communal and ecological scales. *The Shadow King* and *Queen* foreground conversations internal to Ethiopian society about what has been lost to the coloniality of the long twentieth century and highlight the role of female figures who bear witness to, grieve, and narrativize loss. Both place female figures in mountain landscapes or within the symbols associated with the highland romance (nature,

³ For examples of this set at least partially in Italy, see Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's *Madre Piccola* (2007) and *Il Comandante del Fiume* (2014).

religion, history), staging the representational relationships between women, land, and literature.

In this chapter, I show how the highlands are not only a real and metaphorical landscape and a literary geography, but also function as a mnemonic topography that connects memory held in the body and in the land “*by virtue of the fact of the body’s own topography*” (Connerton 85). Said differently the highlands, the female body, and the novel are all related structures able to hold and move forward experiences of loss that are otherwise erased from dominant histories. As a character in *The Shadow King* reflects, “it is the land that carries our suffering when we die...nothing but earth is strong enough to withstand the burden of memory” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 298). The novels considered here show how memory is held in the land and in female bodies and do the work of giving memory an additional textualized form.

Adwa today, Adwa yesterday: Təzəta and the highland romance

The novel as a “practice of memory” is familiar ground in postcolonial literature (Cooppan, “World Literature,” 223). In Cooppan’s terms, the postcolonial novel is simultaneously shaped by the “entanglement” of the spaces and times it chronicles and “ghosted” by older generic forms and stylistic modes it incorporates including, as we have already seen in the works considered here, orality, poetry, travelogue, history, and allegory (Cooppan, *Worlds Within*, 39). Moreover, within the revisionist history projects both *The Shadow King* and *Queen* take on, the novel is a way to memorialize

accounts and experiences of the past that exist outside of or have been willfully eliminated from official narratives.

In its ability to give memory—often regarded as abstract and intangible—a physical tactile form, the novel recalls other technologies that put memory *in* things: the monument, the memorial, the archive, and the museum. Yet memory is hardly the proprietary material of its owners or its objects; memory flows across places, times, generations, histories, bodies, objects, and languages, sometimes settling or accumulating into knots of “nodal density” or connecting within, between, or across other forms (Cooppan, “Connective Tissue,” 301). Regarding the novel from this networked or ecological point of view recasts it as just one of the forms through which memory moves with variable velocity, directionality, loops, dissipations, stickiness and flow depending on the forms of history and power it encounters. As a form for memory the novel does not memorialize something static or dead but rather is animated by forces alive and on the move.

The Amharic term *təzəta* (ጥደታ) complements an understanding of the novel as a form whose relationship to memory exceeds spatial, temporal, and linguistic boundaries. *Təzəta* refers to memory, its melancholic affect, and the sonic, choral forms that memory takes. More specifically, *təzəta* is 1) a mode or genre of secular Ethiopian music composed and performed by *azmaris*, 2) the act of memory itself, and 3) a synthesis of 1 and 2, a signature ballad used for the expression of loss, especially lost love (Dagmawi 630). Much of the criticism theorizing *təzəta* emphasizes its spatially transformative effects. For instance, the writer Abraham

Verghese uses the experience of hearing *təzəta* in one of his novels to “[take] the narrator right back to Ethiopia...[It is] a song that can transport us back to a different part of our life” (qtd. Timkehet 35). Similarly Maaza writes that “when I’ve missed Ethiopia...I instinctively begin to hum ‘Tizita,’” (Maaza, “A New Tizita,” 853), while Dagmawi Woubshet applies *təzəta* to “connect poetic practices across boundaries,” pairing the figure of the *təzəta* singer, the *azmari*, with a reading of James Baldwin (Dagmawi 629).

Traditionally a lovelorn singer composes a *təzəta* to grieve both the departed lover and the unrelieved, still-present memory of the lover’s departure. In polysemic Amharic, the possessive *ትዝታዬ* can refer to both the absent lover (my *təzəta*) and the singer’s melancholy memory (my *təzəta*). For instance, “*ትዝታዬ አንተው ነህ፣ ትዝታም የለብኝ / እመጣለሁ እያለክ እየቀረሁብኝ*” [My *təzəta* is you, I don’t have *təzəta* / You say you’re coming, yet you never do]” (Dagmawi 630, Dagmawi’s translation). By giving memory a structure, *təzəta* encodes the reality that the dead or lost cannot be brought back to life; the impossibility of restoration or return creates the conditions for the lyric. In this way *təzəta* has a melancholic relationship to time; as a famous *təzəta* song has it,

*ትናትናን ጥሶ ዛሬን ተንተርሶ
 ከነገም ተውሶ አምናንም አድሶ
 ይመጣል ትዝታ ጓዙን አግብሶብሶ።*

Outdoing yesterday, shouldering on today,
 Borrowing from tomorrow, renewing yesteryears,
 Comes *təzəta* hauling possessions (Dagmawi 629, Dagmawi’s translation)

Təzəta “hauls” the past into the present and “borrows” and anticipates the losses of the future, creating a sense of compounding and overwhelming losses in the present. Moreover the performance of a təzəta song is a deeply embodied, emotional, and evocative experience “known for strongly moving listener’s feelings” (Timkehet 31). In beautifying loss in song, the singer communicates and shares that loss with the listener and “keeps alive the apprehension of loss” not only within the performer, but within a whole corporate group of listeners (Dagmawi 630). Exceeding distinctions between a linear past, present, and future and between singer and listeners, təzəta’s overlapping and swirling movement sediments “world-historical conflict” (Elleni 36). For Elleni Centime Zeleke, who proposes təzəta as an alternative to positivist empiricism and exceptionalist histories, this sedimentation occurs in the mnemonic “forcefield of the body” of the singer and listeners and can be passed down through generations (Elleni 36).

Elleni develops təzəta as a method to approach the afterlives of the student movement and political revolution in Ethiopia in 1974, the historical present of both *The Shadow King* and *Queen*. Following the end of the Italian occupation in 1941, Haylä Səlasse returned to power. With first British and then American backing he instituted a series of modernization reforms intended to transform Ethiopia into a modern state, including vast investments in secondary and university education. In 1955 a revised constitution provided for universal suffrage, though there were no political parties beyond the emperor’s, and established Amharic as the only official language of education. By the late 1960s, these efforts could not keep pace with

Ethiopians' own desire for social change and especially the end of the feudal governance structure of emperor, landowners, and tenants. Tensions grew with a failed coup attempt by the imperial bodyguard, growing Marxist-Leninist student activism, a severe famine covered up by the emperor, and the annexation of Eritrea.

In 1974, a strike by taxi drivers protesting OPEC-inspired oil price hikes escalated into demonstrations by almost every organized social group in Addis Ababa with the students in the vanguard. *The Shadow King*, which begins and ends in 1974, briefly represents this fervor; as Hirut waits to meet Ettore in a train station, she watches young soldiers with new weapons and new uniforms yell revolutionary slogans: "Land to the tiller!" and "Down with the emperor!" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 6). In September 1974 the emperor was deposed, driven out of the imperial palace in the back of a Volkswagen beetle. A reformist regime lasted two months before it was removed by the Provisional Military Administrative Council, generally referred to as the Derg (ዲርግ) and led by Mengistu Hailemariam. The Derg ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987 as a military-style junta. Private lands were nationalized and a series of "land to the tiller" farming and education programs set up. Student and other political organizations seeking a return to the ideals of ethno-nationalism and peasant-based socialism initiated a series of civil wars, while the Derg carried out mass killings of thousands of its ideological and political rivals, a purge known as the Red Terror. This tense and dangerous environment is the present of *Queen*; Mahlet grows up with surveillance, curfews, and anticipation for when "the rebels would overthrow the dictatorship" (Ghermandi 104).

Surmounting many internal disagreements, in 1991 a coalition of rebel groups led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) marched from northern Ethiopia to Addis Ababa. Bolstered by the withdrawal of Soviet support following the end of the cold war, the coalition liberated the country. In 1994 following the secession of Eritrea, a new constitution reorganized Ethiopia into linguistically-defined states within a federal system. In the twenty-first century, the Ethiopian federal government continues to engage in conflicts with its neighboring states (Eritrea and Somalia) and within its own borders (Tigray).

In both *The Shadow King* and *Queen*, the temporality of the revolution or the Derg is significant because it allows each novel to stage the question of whether to relate to the recently-ended Ethiopian imperial period as a lost object, a past golden-era destroyed by the violences of the present, or not. Təzəta is a helpful framework for discerning a text's relationship to the past losses, since it takes loss as its originating condition and resists "the possibility of restoration or return" but is not immune from romanticizing potential either (Dagmawi 630). Elleni seeks to move away from romanticized narratives that desire to "vindicate the present through a return to a golden moment in the past" by emphasizing how təzəta builds up and sediments loss, a transtemporal accumulation beyond the control of any single person grieving (Elleni 26). Similarly Dagmawi uses təzəta to draw connections between a number of ideas of Ethiopia that exceed "apotheosis, restoration, and return" (Dagmawi 629).

Conversely Maaza, author of *The Shadow King*, writes in an essay of “a wondrous freedom” granted by t̄əz̄əta’s “ability to travel years and kilometers, to transcend boundaries.”

It is as if “tizita” is a song made for all those who stand in one place and look back towards another. And what we see and how we render it is completely up to us. It signifies the power of art and literature to adapt to its time, to mold itself out of one moment and insert itself into another, changing each as it goes along. (Mengiste, “A New Tizita,” 854)

Maaza’s formulation references Walter Benjamin’s angel of history as the figure for the creative composition. The angel stands in the present with his face “turned toward the past” and regards the conventional structures of memory shattered into fragments, breaks, and undisciplined chaos (Benjamin 257). The shattering is the result of the storm of progress which, despite any actions of the angel, “keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet”—a more-than-human, environmental sedimentation that characterizes the experience of beings subject to history (Benjamin 257). Yet Maaza envisions an angel-composer unphased by the fracturing, swirling, and sedimentation of the storm and suggests that “what we see and how we render it is completely up to us.” A master over history, Maaza’s angel-composer moves smoothly and without impediment through the past, picking and choosing what to bring forward. Michael Girma Kebede distinguishes this “romantic” rendition of t̄əz̄əta from Elleni’s “tragic” one; romantic t̄əz̄ətas demonstrate a mastery over history rather than being subject to it, and they often carry “hierarchizing violence of nationalist mythmaking” in their wake (Michael 25).

Discussing contemporary *təzətas* of the Battle of Adwa, Michael cites singer Ijegayehu Shibabaw (Gigi)’s song as an example of Adwa’s continued reimagination as “a living and breathing,” “anthropomorphized and gendered” memory (Michael 44). Gigi’s lyric represents Adwa as continually alive and on the move, resonate in localized settings as well as the global “black radical imaginary” (Michael 44). Gigi sings,

አድዋ ዛሬ ናት አድዋ ትናንት፥
 መቼ ተነሱና የወዳደቁት፥
 ምስጋና ለእነሱ ለአድዋ ጀግኖች፥
 ልዛሬ ነፃነት ላበቁኝ ወገኖች፥
 የጥቁር ድል አምባ፥ አድዋ፥
 አፍሪካ፥ አምዬ ኢትዮጵያ፥
 ተናገሪ የድል ታሪክሽን አውራ።

Adwa is today, Adwa is yesterday,
 They haven’t risen, those who fell,
 Gratitude for them, for the heroes of Adwa,
 For today’s freedom, for which my comrades prepared me,
 Adwa, the peak of black victory,
 Africa’s Mother Ethiopia,
 Speak, tell of your triumphant history. (qtd. Michael 44; my translation)

In its present grief for losses far in the past (“borrowing yesteryears”) and its invitation to tell the stories and memories of the fallen that haven’t yet been shared, Gigi’s song can be seen as a call taken up by both *The Shadow King* and *Queen* whose choral forms focalize the losses that come in Adwa’s wake. Moreover Gigi’s reference to “Mother Ethiopia” draws attention to the way both novels will center female perspectives and bodies as sources of memory. The motif of Mother Ethiopia is an ancient one and most often presents *habäša* (Christian Amharic/Tigrinya-speaking) culture as the true representative of Ethiopia national identity. According to

Marzagora, Mother Ethiopia is the preferred metaphor for writers, scholars, and artists who compare habäša culture to “a mother, welcoming in its protective arms all the small children living with her” to promote the grand narrative of Ethiopian nationhood (Marzagora 92).

Perhaps the most evocative example of Mother Ethiopia is Afäwärk Täklä’s 1963 painting of the same name, which depicts a Christian habäša woman holding a baby, the contours of her body forming the silhouette of a map of Ethiopia. In a process of “metaphorical transubstantiation,” Ethiopia’s mountains, valley, lakes, and other landscapes literally cloak the body of the nation (Marzagora 92). The image of the mother and child recalls Mary and Jesus, signaling the nation’s association with Christianity while also representing its reproductive capacity, its present and future forms. In another painting exhibited in St. George’s cathedral museum, Mother Ethiopia holds a child and sits above a map of Ethiopia whose borders have mysteriously expanded to incorporate present-day Eritrea and Somalia (Marzagora 92).

While the endorsed meaning of Mother Ethiopia reproduces the grand narrative’s continuity from Abyssinian empire to Christian nation encompassing the entire Horn of Africa, Gigi’s song ties Mother Ethiopia to Adwa, the melancholically reproductive signifier that is more than a place and moves in ungoverned ways through time and language. As we will see, both *The Shadow King* and *Queen* also evoke both the nature, religion, and history elements of the highland romance and the Mother Ethiopia trope in their female characters. Yet rather than mothers, the novels

reconfigure women as producers of melancholic memory whose embodiment brings forward nostalgic imperial avatars in *The Shadow King* and a multiplicity of oral stories in *Queen*.

This chapter first discusses *The Shadow King* and its reappropriation of the tools of Italian empire to critique dominant historiographies and representations of African landscapes and women. Then it takes a detour into *Queen*, highlighting its representation of highland landscapes as mnemonic topographies that facilitate memory's movement. It traces how the novel's use of elements associated with the highland romance (land, plants, trees, and the spiritual geography of a church garden) move the memory of loss forward to create a tragic narrative *təzəta* of swirling and sedimentation without romanticization. Finally, the chapter returns to *The Shadow King* to show how in picking and choosing what to bring forward, the novel functions as a romantic *təzəta* populated by nostalgic avatars of a past imperial golden age.

An archive of the dead: Reappropriating photography in *The Shadow King*

The Shadow King's narrative focalizes a group of female characters who navigate a series of overlapping oppressions during the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The novel begins with Hirut as an old woman, rifling through Italian colonial photographs in a train station in 1974, before flashing back forty years to her arrival as an orphan in the household of an elite couple, Kidane and Aster. Within the feudal system still structuring Ethiopian society in the early twentieth century, Kidane's landlord status gives him authority to call up his tenants, organize them into a resistance force, and

march them into the Simien mountains to fight the invading Italian imperialists. Aster meanwhile gathers the tenants' wives and her household workers to accompany them, though her decision is in direct rebellion to her husband's wishes. In the "official" scene of Kidane's troop mobilization, he gives "the same speech" his father gave before he "marched to fight in Adua" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 59, 61).

The story goes that on the day the great Kidane mobilized his men, a lone figure rose up from her bed to heed his call to fight. They say the sight of those men gathered around her beloved husband pulled Aster back from her untended sorrows and carried her [to] her husband's side. (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 61-62)

Contrary to this official "they say" version, the novel portrays Aster as motivated by her own interests including the memory and "untended sorrows" of her young son's death and a newspaper photo of Maria Uva, an Italian woman standing near Port Said waving to the Italian ships full of sailors bound for conquest. Seeing the photo Aster is galvanized to "make herself anew and meet this proclamation with one of her own" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 62).

From their camp in the mountain peaks and valleys southwest of Adwa, Kidane and Aster's forces have regular encounters with an Italian regiment led by Colonel Carlo Fucelli. Most of the novel focalizes young Hirut, who must withstand both Aster and Kidane's forms of class and gender domination in addition to the danger represented by the Italians. But the novel also includes sections devoted to Colonel Fucelli; an Italian-Jewish photographer named Ettore Navarra; and Fifi, Fucelli's lover and an Ethiopian spy; as well as sections titled "interludes" narrated by Haylä Səlasse; "choruses" narrated by an unnamed lyric choir who comments on and

mourns various points of action; and “photos,” narrative descriptions of Navarra’s black and white photos. When Haylä Səlasse flees Ethiopia for England, Kidane and Aster stage “appearances” of the emperor in the mountains around the Italian and Ethiopian camps, using an uncanny resemblance between the emperor and a peasant musician. Hirut performs as the shadow emperor’s bodyguard. Late in the novel, Aster and Hirut are captured and imprisoned in the Italian camp where they endure many abuses, including being photographed by Navarra against their will. Navarra hides the photos, which are later dug up by Hirut and returned to him at the train station in 1974, the concluding scene of the novel.

The Shadow King concerns itself with identifying what has been lost to memory and developing means of marking and grieving that loss. These losses it identifies include the victory at Adwa (which the Italians will try to “rewrite” in 1935), the role of women in resistance wars, and the romance of Ethiopian empire. The novel’s method for relating to loss crystallizes in its portrayal of Aster and Kidane’s relationship to their dead son. The loss, which occurs before the narrative time of the novel, haunts their marriage. After a year of grief Aster uses it to motivate her military activity while Kidane internalizes it. He sees the ghostly trace of his son everywhere including in Hirut, who arrives on the anniversary of the death, and in Minim, the peasant musician who poses as the emperor, or shadow king. Regarding Minim in imperial dress, Kidane perceives

the outline of his deceased son’s face hovering just beyond his vision... He wants to reach out and tell him: My son, my Tesfaye, I didn’t know this was possible. I didn’t know we could tread that narrow passage between the living and the dead[,] make a man appear where there was once no more than empty

space....I thought all this time that I had lost you, that it was impossible to *remake you in the form of another*. (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 239, my emphasis)

Kidane's thoughts reflect the novel's logic that the dead are an empty space that cannot be brought back to life, but that the novel can hold the memory of the lost and re-animate or remake their memory "in the form of another." Tsefaye is gone, but Minim and Hirut can be made to appear and carry his trace and his memory. This imaginative transferal and reanimation, a characteristically melancholic structure, is *The Shadow King's* narrative project. It excavates African subjects from the "empty space[s]" of official Italian and Ethiopian histories and remakes them in the form of the novel, where it repeats their reenacts their loss and grieves them again.

The primary way the novel enacts transferal and reanimation is through its engagement with photography. Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera calls photography "a dire instrument," part of "the colonial paraphernalia" that arrived in Africa "together with the gun and the bible" (qtd. Cole). Following Vera, Teju Cole writes that "when we speak of 'shooting' with a camera, we are acknowledging the kinship of photography and violence" (Cole). Photography was a central tool of the machine of Italian colonial and Fascist propaganda. Alongside marching songs like "Faccetta Nera," colonial photographers produced a proliferation of "images...of nude black female bodies" representing African women as simultaneously "primitive-and-sexually available" and "menacing-and-dangerous" (Ponzanesi 165; Clò 28). In Italy photographs of African women were circulated to incite "virile and adventurous

Italian soldiers into the unknown, uncharted and virgin soil of Africa” (Ponzanesi 173).

The Shadow King thematizes the connection between shooting a camera and a gun in Ettore Navarra, the Italian-Jewish photographer who is part of the invading Italian regiment. Responding to a fellow soldier about whether he photographed a moment of torture, Ettore “laughs and raises his camera and...says, I’m going to shoot you now” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 206). The jokes are Ettore’s attempt to assuage his alienation and the group’s attempt to drown out the memory of violence. For the Italian colonel Fucelli, photographs represent an opportunity to surveil and control the “land, body and subject” of his opponent which are otherwise “too hard to catch” (Garuba 87; Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 260). Flipping through a stack of photos, Fucelli explains that a photo is “the only way to hold [an African subject] still:”

They’re types, all of them. Easily categorized...A typical Tigray, he says. You see the nose, the eyes? ...Look at this one here, he says, pulling another picture from the same pile of papers. A far, quite distinct by the hairstyle. He takes another out of the pile. This one, he continues, shaking it in front of Ettore, this one’s magnificent, isn’t it? (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 260)

Fucelli epitomizes the imperial use of photography as a tool of fixing, categorization, and control. Moreover, the interaction between the commander and his photographer demonstrates the ways the novel lingers in and layers moments of violence, refusing Ettore and the reader the comfort of looking away. *The Shadow King* enacts what Ariella Azoulay calls the “event of photography,” a series of encounters between the camera, the person standing behind its lens, the person facing the lens, and those

viewing the photograph (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 220). Rather than reflecting the relations in front of the camera, photography enacts a series of relations and encounters between participants and creates a community among those who view the photograph, the “citizenry of photography” (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 70). In this scene, Fucelli and Ettore constitute a spectator relation inflected by military hierarchy and Fucelli’s coercive knowledge of Ettore’s Jewish heritage, but the novel also loops the reader into spectatorship through its uncomfortable scenes, descriptions of photographs, and inclusion of photos.

Both the Italians regard photography as an tool, Fucelli to “record everything [so that they’ll] remember what we did to build this empire” and Ettore, increasingly radicalized by Fascist discrimination against both Jews and Africans, to archive “the obscenities” and “the dead” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 261, 291, 356). The novel obsessively describes how photographs are staged and composed, especially the impressive view framed by two boulders within the Italian camp:

The V that opens reveals the undulating mountain ranges, the horizon disappearing in stark clouds. The top of the V expands until the space between those great, hulking stones lets the sky pour in. Just above it all, two birds soar majestically through the wind....There is a magnetic quality to the edge, a suctioning force coming from the gorge below...the landscape has no end, it stretches far beyond what [Ettore] can see, one sharp peak giving way to another. (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 267)

This view of the highlands through Ettore’s viewfinder with Fucelli as “a tiny figure dwarfed by an imposing landscape” reproduces the European fantasy of the sublime and the representation, privileged by Romantic aesthetics, of “an autonomous subject with a privileged view casting his eye over transparent space” (Maaza, *The Shadow*

King, 267; Garuba 87). The sublime view is also the backdrop for the murder of captured Ethiopian fighters who are either hung or pushed to their deaths. Ettore photographs the deaths on Fucelli's orders and in an attempt to grant the victims visibility, a trace within the colonial record. But it is "impossible to get a steady shot...The prisoners tip over the edge...and all Ettore can photograph are awkward figures buckling into empty space" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 293-294). The falling bodies exceed the photographic frame, "a blur of tender features: the shaking head moving faster than shutter speed," creating "ghastly shapes...dark marks against the sky" like birds (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 293, 294). The blurred images confound not only Italian imperial attempts to capture and contain African subjectivity, but also Ettore's attempts to provide a conciliatory humanization.

Drawing attention to what "cannot be captured" by photography, the novel adds its own additional forms of representation, imagining the sounds of victims' names in their final free fall. This textual reimagination and expansion beyond what is depicted in the photo—"Zerihun, Zerihun, Zerihun, and the ricochet of his voice is the earth's mournful lament"—enacts a form of double exposure, the photographic technique of superimposing or layering two or more images into a single frame (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 293). The body in the photo is a double of the body that falls, while the blurriness of the image suggests multiple bodies instead of just one, a multiplicity that refracts again in the name's ricocheting echo. By describing the photos and what exceeds them and including several photos in the text, *The Shadow King* makes the reader a spectator and seems to adopt Azoulay's view that

participating in this practice is a fundamentally positive and emancipatory experience (Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 159). Reconstructing what is visible (describing photographs) and layering additional thick imaginative description, *The Shadow King* sees its project as reclaiming the subjects of colonial photography and giving their imagined histories, embodiments, and deaths a doubly exposed, ghostly embodiment which exists outside of and exceeds visual capture.

This project crystallizes on the last page of the novel, a short section that describes in lyrical detail a photo of Aster and Hirut taken by Ettore:

Look at the two of them: those women pressed against the barbed-wire fence while one clutches it in her hands as if it were knotted silk...What is seen cannot explain what exists: Hirut and Aster pressed against the barbed-wire fence...seeking comfort in the warmth of the afternoon sun[.] What does the eye know of [Hirut's] only request: Let me kill the photographer myself. (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 291)

The description breaks open the fixity of the photograph, cataloging all the things that exist but are erased by the photographic gaze: the movement of sunlight, the women's internal thoughts, Hirut's desire for revenge. In contrast to the manipulation of light in photography, *The Shadow King* develops a kaleidoscopic, undisciplined, and sometimes spiritual poetics of light that it uses to shatter fixed geographies and forms. For instance, "flashes of sunlight" symbolize the emperor's presence and a "drop of sun zigzags through the valley to skid along the grass...[alighting], graceful and quick, onto the tops of trees and disappears into a cloudless sky," while "[s]unlight blazes" on a group of African ascari who will later defect, shattering the appearance at Italian hegemony (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 237, 152, 89).

The Shadow King's sunlight poetics draw attention to a relationship with the natural world that exists outside the—in the novel's view—largely male impulse to master the landscape through the means of maps, weapons, and photography. Not only the Italians but also Kidane consult written maps, those tools of surveillance that produce “spaces to capture, subjects to control” (Garuba 87). Kidane explains to Hirut that maps are “useless pieces of paper to start a war” and that it is better to “[m]emorize the land for yourself,” but it is the unnamed female cook who puts this most directly into action, gathering plants and roots to create medicines for soothing wounds and eliminating the pregnancies caused by the war's sexual violence (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 30). Aster too articulates a symbiotic if somewhat abstract relationship to land, comforting the women she leads that the “land will protect us...Every stone will come to our service, every river will flow in our direction” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 94). Aster's comment draws attention to ways African geographies exceed the tools which attempt to contain and capture them and suggests an alternate understanding of the land not as a static backdrop but an animate environment with agency. Not only does the land move in ways not capable of being pinned down on maps, but its animacy is also—in Aster's understanding—politically charged, its movement coming to the aid of its defenders.

Women like Taytu: Challenging male historiographies in *The Shadow King*

Highlighting the presence of women within resistance movements contests official Ethiopian history, especially the focus on male military leaders that defines the grand

narrative. Marzagora notes that in Ethiopian literary representations, there is a tendency to represent female characters through the simplified tropes of virtue and vice and Serawit adds that there is “no meaningful way” in which women are regarded other than as mothers of men (Serawit, “Q&A”). In the context of Adwa, Paulos Milkias notes that while many “articles and books have been written concerning the achievement of Emiye Mənilək and his Rases, Dejzachs and Fitawraries [political leaders, military generals and commanders]...Adwa and all other Ethiopian victories were won by thousands of nameless freedom fighters,” including countless women (Paulos 80). Michael notes that Adwa’s official historiography is “hagiographic [and] Mənilək-centric,” emphasizing the supposedly exceptional and great deeds by one “Great Man” while obscuring the contributions of many others, including “language groups [outside] the Amhara and Tigre” and Taytu, Mənilək’s wife (Michael 41). Taytu was Oromo and a woman, two identities historically “nondominant in official Ethiopian historiography” (Michael 41). Taytu maintained a strategic distrust and healthy skepticism about European intentions and boosted African fighters’ morale by appearing on the battlefield as a “Warrior Queen,” but she is little more than a footnote in most historical accounts (Paulos 80; Vestal 28).

The Shadow King challenges the erasure and simplification of women within historical and literary representations by portraying a range of female characters, all of whom occupy distinct social statuses and are differently impacted by the invasion. Aster is an elite woman married to a land-owning male; initially both Hirut and the

cook serve in her house, sharing “a room that is less than a room,” though Hirut is the child of one of Kidane’s childhood friends while the cook came “by force” as a wedding present to Aster (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 12, 17). Despite this the cook and Aster have much in common; because of her skin which is “darker than most” and her mouth which “turns up like a ripe flower, full and lush,” Aster is perceived by her own household to be “part slave” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 113). The novel’s representation of Ethiopian colorism recalls Taytu, who allegedly composed her inner circle of “women with darker complexions, the better to show off her light coffee skin” (Jonas 22).⁴ Shortly after her marriage as a child-bride, Aster attempts to escape with the cook. Unsuccessful, they must both return to their gendered subordination within Kidane’s house though their experiences, differently inflected by class, cause the relationship to sour by the time Hirut arrives.

While Aster may be “a legend molded by her own devices,” dependent household members like Hirut and the cook have little choice about whether to leave home and fight in the mountains (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 62). Hirut especially is at the mercy of both Aster and Kidane, who steals the gun inherited from her father and, when the gun misfires and kills one of his soldiers, rapes Hirut in retaliation, not once but several times. Despite having also suffered sexual violence from Kidane, Aster

⁴ The international celebration of Adwa and of Taytu often elides the colorism that is a key part of Ethiopian society. As Adom points out, Ethiopia stands for an “exemplary blackness—the sole African country that was never colonized” within the global black diaspora, while much Ethiopian studies scholarship and many within Ethiopia harbor a perception of Ethiopia’s “exceptional non-blackness” in which black is coded to an association with slavery and with colonization (Adom). Michael notes that “it is common to hear Amharic-speaking Ethiopians describe non-Arab and non-white Africans simply as ‘Africans’ or ‘blacks,’ exempting themselves from either category” (Michael 27).

does not intervene to save Hirut. Later Aster and Hirut are both captured, but what could be an equalizing experience solidifies their class differences. Aster keeps Hirut at a distance even when the young girl, motivated by the “unspoken rules for those who were born to carry rich histories and noble blood,” saves her from humiliation (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 315). The novel’s refusal to move on from or resolve the class-based hierarchies of Ethiopian society is part of *The Shadow King*’s melancholy. Even as it highlights the forgotten role of women in conflict, the novel maintains the persistence of other forms of inequality and oppression as a necessary part of its response.

This melancholy is epitomized in the figure of the shadow king and Hirut his bodyguard, as well as in the novel’s “chorus” sections voiced by a group of unnamed women. Like the novel’s use of photography, the choruses appropriate the Roman/Italian tragic drama form in which a group of actors comments upon the main action of a play using song, dance, and lyric. Using the first person “we” and “us,” *The Shadow King*’s chorus first emerges as a collective voice from Ettore’s box of photos but later rises out of and moves across the highland landscape, “multitudes [rushing] like wind...blinding light across a shadowed land” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 311). The chorus comments on and mourns various events, especially those related to violence against women such as Aster’s wedding night, Hirut’s rape, and Fifi’s precarity. The chorus sections fill in additional information and perspective not supplied by the main narrative, often slowing down or rewinding time. About Aster’s wedding night the chorus intones,

Go back. Open the bedroom door and send young Aster down the stairs. Place the groom on his feet and draw him away from the bed. Wipe the sheet clean of the bride's blood. Shake it straight and flatten its wrinkles. Slide off that necklace and return it to the girl as she races to her mother. Fix what has been broken in her, mend it shut again. (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 181)

The chorus cannot undo or change the past, but its ability to slow down time makes visible Aster's experience of sexual violence which travels with her into the present and future and impacts her relations with Hirut and the cook. The chorus also provides retrospective companionship and solidarity in moments of total isolation; like a storm it connects Aster's experience of violence across space and time to that of other women. Its invitations to "Wait, sisters, wait and listen," and "Sing, daughters, of one woman and one thousand" cannot stop the largely teleological masculine discourse of war but bear witness to and create comfort within it (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 123, 311).

In addition to the chorus, *The Shadow King* reappropriates other symbols used by the Fascists to establish continuity between ancient Rome and their present imperial ambition. Echoing the rhetoric of Mussolini, Fucelli compares the contemporary conflict to "a battle worthy of the Roman Empire, worthy of the great Trojan conflict" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 301). He frames himself as Achilles and the Ethiopians as represented by Memnon, the king of Aethiopia who fought with the Trojans. Fucelli explains that "we are fighting the army of Memnon, but we are the brave sons of Italy, offspring of those who fell in Adua nearly forty years ago. Didn't the sons of Troy rise from the ashes to build the glorious empire of Rome?" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 385). The novel directly rebuts this narrative of Italian

civilizational superiority. In the words of Fucelli's Ethiopian mistress Fifi, "You can find Ethiope in the earliest books. We are older than this Roman culture you're so proud of" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 331). Adopting empire's terms, Fifi proposes an alternate temporality—"We existed before you, when you were all just peasants, not even a people"—but does not question the underlying structure of civilizational hierarchy (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 331).

The Shadow King also appropriates and domesticates Greek and Roman mythology to its memory project. It describes an Ethiopian captive as "a Grecian statue from an ancient time" and references the story of Daedalus and Icarus as a metaphor for the captured soldiers "[hurled] into the sun" with "no wings" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 200, 269). Through the myth, interpreted as Daedalus' attempt to "push [his son] into his truest form," the novel apotheosizes the casualties of Italian cruelty, cutting short the myth's tragic ending and concluding on the triumphant ascent when "a body remembers its eternal grace and moves against invisible currents. When it rises out of its beaten shell and [gazes] furious and proud" (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 318, 204). Similarly Haylä Səlasse's "interludes" make heavy use of the Italian opera *Aida*, which tells the story of an Ethiopian princess who must choose between love for her captor and love of her country, and of the Roman figure Simonides, famously the inventor of the memory palace. Simonides believed that "[m]emory is the gift of the divine...vast and labyrinthine," and that memory can be stored if one creates a building in the mind and stores details in every room (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 142). According to the novel Simonides "reconstructed a collapsed

building from memory...[and] found a way to resurrect the dead...called them to life by calling them by name” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 143). Eventually Simonides abandons Haylä Səlasse, who “holds dominion over [only] shade and fog,” but *The Shadow King* itself enacts Simonides’ idea that giving memory a form, whether palace or text, allows for a kind of resurrection so that “[n]othing is ever gone” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 320, 142).

Though it is most obvious in the chorus sections, the entirety of *The Shadow King* embodies the melancholic *təzəta* form. Grieving for what has been lost under the Fascist occupation—not only as a result of its violence but also through official Italian and Ethiopian historiographies—the novel seeks to bring forward the embodied memories of women by means of appropriating various Italian and Ethiopian imperial tools. These tools include not only the novel, but also photography, Roman chorus and mythology, and feudal class hierarchies in Ethiopia. Through the use of fictional stand-ins the novel resurrects scenes of loss, then bears witness to and grieves them, often in effusively melancholic descriptive language. The novel uses this melancholic mode to reimagine a romantic topography of the highlands through the richly textured experiences of characters occupying a range of social positions, as well as a poetics of light that evokes the ways African subjects divert, exceed, and obfuscate attempts at capture. We will return to what *The Shadow King*’s mnemonic topography produces, but first turn attention to *Queen*, another choral novel of memory.

Flowers and pearls: collecting embodied memory in *Queen*

Like Simonides and *The Shadow King*, *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* believes in the ability of a physical form to structure memory. *Queen* begins with an explicit memory premise: Mahlet, a young girl coming of age in Ethiopia in the last days of the Derg regime in the late twentieth century, grows up among her extended family in a large house in Debre Zeit. She stands out as an attentive and skillful listener, always attune to the stories of the family elders. Her favorite Abba Yacob tells her the story of his experience as an arbegna, a resistance fighter during the five-year Italian occupation, when she is a child and she promises to later write it down and “take it to Italy, so that the Italians won’t be allowed to forget” (Ghermandi 58). This anticipatory, future-oriented promise provides the frame for the novel, which follows Mahlet’s growth from childhood to early adulthood and collects many other stories, each of which are set off with a heading and narrated in the voice and style of the individual speaker.

The narrative thematizes the significant role Orthodox Christianity plays in Ethiopian society when Mahlet makes her promise to Abba Yacob “in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary” (Ghermandi 58). Mahlet begins a personal spiritual journey only after Yacob has died. Overcome by grief and an “inner turmoil [of] pain and confusion,” she follows his dying wish that she “go to the Church of St. George in Addis Ababa [to] pray for him” (Ghermandi 127). Sitting in the garden that surrounds the church, she is filled with melancholic grief, a “deep longing for what no longer existed” that keeps alive the object of her loss (Ghermandi 132, 175).

The novel's central conflict is Mahlet's forgetting of her promise to Yacob and her journey to remember it; in this, the novel's structure is, like *The Conscript*, a circular return with difference rather than a linear coming of age tale. Mahlet's process of re-memory is initiated by Yacob's death and helped along by a song that reenacts her childhood eavesdropping, sung to her by an azmari musician, and a "notebook with a rough, aquamarine cover" in which she had written down Yacob's stories as a child (Ghermandi 263). The role of the song and notebook in sparking memory recall the reminder of *təzəta* that memory requires a form to be shared.

In addition to the song and the notebook, *Queen* represents several other mnemonic devices, including the land and the human body. Abba Yacob tells his story to Mahlet over multiple sittings, many of which occur as the two of them work in the family's vegetable garden, pulling weeds and harvesting (Ghermandi 60). Yacob's story is similarly full of natural mnemonic devices. He recounts a battle between the resistance fighters and the Italians in which the arbegna commander chose the location—Menagesha Forest to the west of Addis Ababa—because he had spent his childhood there. He "knew every hole, every nook, every cranny," and his knowledge and memory of the landscape would protect his troops and provide advantages during battle (Ghermandi 12). Yacob tells the story in the present tense; as he recalls the plant life around the hideout, the "half-dried grass, aloe plants with their red flowers, and the occasional thorny bush," he reflects that the landscape was "just like the vegetation of another place...the high plains in the Tigray region, of the northern plateaus" where he had fought his first battles against the Italians at the beginning of

the war (Ghermandi 23). The sight of the plants, including bright red flowers reminiscent of the blood flowers in *The Conscript*, causes Yacob to slip backward in time and through space. Though he resists, his mind “want[s] to drag me back to that place...on that first day” (Ghermandi 23). The reader shares Yacob’s sensation of being whisked or dragged from the Menagesha Forest into a memory of “another place in another time,” the northern highlands along the Tekeze River (Ghermandi 23). A significant topographic feature, Tekeze River was first mentioned in an inscription by the Axumite King Ezana as the site of a victorious battle. The *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* claims that Mənilək I, Solomon and Sheba’s son, returned to Ethiopia down the river; some believe he left the Ark of the Covenant, taken from his father in Israel at the river’s source. In February-March 1936, the Italian Royal Air Force dropped bombs and mustard gas on Ethiopian soldiers along the Tekeze River.

In the context of Yacob’s story, the mountainous forested and riverine landscapes of both Menagesha and Tigray are not backdrops to the action but mnemonic topographies, landscapes imprinted on his memory and structures in which the memories of battles are stored. The landscapes, their flowers, and rivers hold the physical embodied traces of bloodshed and cause the slippage between different moments of violence, a kind of space-time travel through memory. Mahlet’s family home in Addis Ababa functions similarly; rather than blood the peaceful outdoor courtyard holds “the placentas of those born in that house,” which are all buried under a large old tree (Ghermandi 102). The presence of “our ancestors” under the earth creates “something magical” about the house for Mahlet, as if the past were always

present “reminding me of our old roots” (Ghermandi 210).⁵ Mahlet returns to this house after her education in Italy; there she is visited by Abba Yacob in dreams and finally recalls the memories of the past.

Through the mountainous flora, the river, and the old tree, the novel suggests that the presence of embodied material in the ground (blood, placentas) creates mnemonic topographies that hold and bring forward memory. So too with the garden. While the courtyard garden at the cathedral in Addis Ababa is different from the vegetable garden in Debre Zeit, its similar topography provides a space for Mahlet to grieve her loss and to bring forward the memories of the past—first others’ and then her own—into the present. Sitting in the courtyard, Mahlet is approached by complete strangers who insist on telling her their memories, long carried in their bodies, of the occupation period and expect her to write them down. The collected memories encompass the experiences of women, peasants, slaves, and Italian resisters, as well as the sacrifices of people from all parts of Ethiopian society. The novel notably recasts the perspectives of those who occupy positions of power to focalize subalterns. For instance, the story of Farisa Alula, a well-known commander in the second Ethio-Italo war, is told by one of his female slaves named Dinke. The novel records her narration of a mountain encounter reminiscent of scenes in *The Shadow King*:

...the column of Italians enters the gorge. It was midday; the sun was blazing down mercilessly. There was a column of men in the bed of the river and two

⁵ Somali-British writer Nadifa Mohamed’s novel *The Orchard of Lost Souls* (2013) represents a similar mnemonic strategy in which a mother buries the children she has lost in childbirth under fruit trees in her garden. She never picks the fruit from the trees that grow from them, considering it a kind of cannibalism. I discuss Mohamed’s first novel *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) in chapter four.

lines of Ascari on the banks, above the gorges. Ah. So dumb! Just imagine, they never realized that there was a strange bird singing in the bushes on their left...The tweeting was coming from another of Farisa's slaves...What useless warriors those talian were! [sic]...My Farisa gave the signal. Our troops, hidden behind the bushes, jumped out on the column. (Ghermandi 172-173)

Recording the speaker Dinke's story word-for-word, including its cadences, idioms, and asides, the novel transmits the texture of an oral tale in a written text. All the more significantly, this story of Italian incompetence and African strategy comes from a doubly subaltern point of view: female and enslaved. Contrary to *The Shadow King, Queen* includes the name of the enslaved character and her spoken testimony in its text. Doing so indicates the novel's value for embodied memory as an important form of historical knowledge but without pre-empting the ideological weightiness that accompanies the treatment of the oral and written in African literature. The two narrative modes sit side-by-side in the text, linked to one another through Mahlet.

Mahlet's role as story-gatherer and eventually writer is hardly romantic nor romanticized. At first she experiences "a strange, curious urge" when people approach her with stories, but this soon develops into a "turmoil, a strange pressure [of something trying] to claim a space" (Ghermandi 151, 211).

...the stories I had heard over those five days were beginning to run together, overlapping and blending like water on the crest of a wave. They were tossing me here and there, depriving me of my equilibrium. My mind, saturated with images, continuously spewed forth new ones, disjointed ones that faded, then blended again and suddenly resurfaced. Sharply defined and tangible. "Woi gud!" I exclaimed under my breath. "I'm going crazy." (Ghermandi 250)

The novel suggests that listening to the stories causes them to permeate Mahlet, taking up physical space inside her, "pil[ing] up in my head" (Ghermandi 254).

Mahlet's sensory experience of memory recalls May Joseph's insight that memory is

nonlinear and often housed in the “unstable and pulsing place” of the senses, where it saturates her vision, hearing, and touch (Joseph 62-63). The memories do not “*seem* to constitute [her own] memories,” as in Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory,⁶ but are instead “mnemonic traces” and “shards of exchange” which together create “intuitive ripples” of knowing and “intimate material and affective connection[s]” that Mahlet registers in her body (Hirsch 107, emphasis in original; Joseph 62-63).

In addition to the memories of others, Mahlet houses memory “buried deep somewhere” in her (Ghermandi 253). Abba Chereka, a hermit who teaches her psalms, calls the forgotten memory of her promise to Yacob a “knot...holding you back” (Ghermandi 258, 177). Chereka also reveals to Mahlet that her name has a second hidden meaning:

“If you remove the ‘h’ and shift the accent slightly, Malet means ‘the significance,’ while Ma’let stands for ‘that time.’ Therefore, their combined meaning is ‘the significance of that time.’ It is a name tied to the Annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary [prophesying the birth of Christ].” (Ghermandi 134)

The name’s double meaning is an example of *sämmønna wärk* within the *qəne* (ቅኔ) genre of poetry originating in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Mahlet’s multiple meanings convey an anticipatory temporality, a borrowing from the future, reflective of her elder’s prediction that ““One day you’ll be the voice [cantora] that will tell our

⁶ Hirsch develops postmemory to describe the relationship of a second generation to “powerful, often traumatic events” that happened before they were born (Hirsch 103). Nevertheless these memories were so powerful they were “transmitted...[and] seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 103). Hirsch identifies photography as the primary medium for transmitting the transgenerational trauma of the Holocaust, an insight that bears on *The Shadow King*’s treatment of photography, yet the ability of postmemory to surface “intimate material and affective connection[s]” is relevant to both novels (Hirsch 116).

stories” (Ghermandi 2). Like the Virgin Mary, Mahlet receives a role she did not necessarily ask for and must weather a period of significant and agonized waiting before it comes to fruition (literally, when it is birthed).

The physical presence of memory inside Mahlet’s body elicits intense psychic and affective responses over which she has little control. In addition to Mary, Mahlet also resembles Benjamin’s angel of history, buffeted and blown about by the storm of memory swirling around and sedimenting in her body as “many stories, too many stories” “drench” her “in agitation [like] a soaked mop...pulled out of the water” (Ghermandi 253, 255). The similarity between Mahlet and the angel of history crystallizes in a series of dreams. Mahlet sees Yacob in a long corridor pointing toward a “pile of stuff;” in the third dream “a strange wind” picks up the “knickknacks,” making them “[fly] around in the air” (Ghermandi 214, 254).

The dreams evoke the storm of progress that “keeps piling up” the wreckage and debris of empire and takes material form in the stories flying around Mahlet’s waking mind and body. Mahlet is completely frustrated by the dreams since they do not reveal what she’s forgotten, and her experience emphasizes the fact that looking back toward the past is not always, as Maaza would have it in her discussion of *təzəta* and the angel, completely voluntary, nor that “what we see and how we render it” is “completely up to us.” Rather Mahlet’s body is at the mercy of the stormy swirl and sedimentation of the past, at least until she is able to recall her promise and begin transmitting the oral stories into textual form.

With the help of a song sung by an azmari singer, she finally recalls her promise and embraces the role of story-gatherer given to her in anticipatory fashion as a child. The novel comes full circle, its last chapter re-enacting its first, and readers realize they have been reading the book Mahlet promised Yacob to write all along. The novel's circular structure provides a form where the stories of others are gathered like the flowers and pearls of the novel's title into a polyvocal choral work of collective memory. While the reader may find the forgotten memory somewhat obvious and Mahlet's journey to make the connection over-extended, the novel's dramatic staging communicates the effort, emotion, and imperfection involved with memory and its recall, even more so when memory travels between generations and involves the knowledge and experience of violence.

Moreover the drama of Mahlet's forgetting, while somewhat overwrought, makes the important point that forgetting is not a singularly Italian or European trait. *Queen* addresses Italian imperial forgetting, as well as the long debate about whether or not to write in the language of one's colonizer, by thematizing language choice as part of the novel's plot: it is necessary for Mahlet to write in Italian in order to fulfil her promise and to give memory a form that can be shared. Yet long before Mahlet can "cross the sea [like] Paul and Peter" and take Ethiopian stories to the Italians, she must first remember and record her own story. In this way the novel's memory project includes not only a turn out, "writing back" to Italian imperialism, but a turn in to an internal conversation among Ethiopians about the dangers of forgetting, the different

forms in which memory is stored, and how it is transferred or shared between generations.

While on the surface the imagery, metaphors, and content of Mahlet's relationship to memory might seem to reproduce the tripartite Ethiopian romance of nature, religion, and history and reify Ethiopian nationalism, the novel resists reproducing a romanticized version of the memories themselves or of Mahlet's experience listening to and receiving them. The way Mahlet gathers memories in the church garden reflects the opening poetic epigraph in which the speaker develops flowers and pearls as metaphors for memory: "I *gather* flowers and pearls. / Flowers of all kinds: large, small, invisible, anonymous. / [...] flowers and pearls from the enchanted garden of my land" (Ghermandi v, my emphasis). But the metaphor also makes it clear that Mahlet does not give birth, in the fashion of Mother Ethiopia, to the stories or flowers. *Queen*, like *The Conscript* and *Silence*, disaggregates the metaphors of biological reproduction, female protagonists, and the novel genre. Rather Mahlet is only a collector, one who like the angel bears witness as the disparate, organic, situated, "large, small, invisible, anonymous" stories that are dragged forward and swirl all around and even inside her (Ghermandi 206).

Mother Ethiopia: reproducing empire in *The Shadow King*

Queen's conclusion is composed of several recursive returns. Not only does the reader realize they are reading the book Mahlet promised Yacob she would write, but the novel also reveals that Chereka the hermit is a famous resistance fighter who laid

down his arms and became a monk after liberation. By withholding this information so late in the plot, *Regina* resists turning Chereka into a glorified or mythologized hero. Rather his trajectory recalls Tuquabo in *The Conscript*, as both opt not to do more violence nor to sexually reproduce. Instead Chereka spends his time among flowers, both the real flowers of the churchyard garden and the metaphorical flowers that represent the stories and memories of the Italian occupation and are gathered together in the novel.

While Chereka disavows some forms of reproduction, he is integral to the cultivation and gathering of flowers and to *Queen*, itself a kind of garden which anticipates, then produces, and reproduces itself as a form for memory. In circular, reproductive fashion the novel borrows from the future and hauls material traces of the past to create, like *təzəta*, a form for memory in the present. Animated by a melancholy and “deep longing for what no longer existed” that constantly circles back and recreates on itself, *Queen* demonstrates how the novel can give a form to the affect and emotion of grieving what is lost without mythologizing or romanticizing either the lost object or grief itself.

In contrast, *The Shadow King* operationalizes much of the same material associated with the highland romance to produce imperial nostalgia. Like *Queen*, the titular figure in *The Shadow King* is the crux of the novel’s memory project. The shadow king is a body double, an avatar created by transforming a camp singer and musician named Minim into a substitute for Haylä Səlasse. Even before his transformation, Minim is a melancholic figure: born after the death of his brother his

name means “nothing” in Amharic, and his songs, played on the masinqo and the krar, are so delicate they sound “like an aching whisper” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 228).⁷ Hirut is the first to notice the resemblance between the singer and a newspaper photo of the absent emperor, who has abandoned his fighters and fled to England. After a demoralizing battle, Aster and Kidane transform Minim into the image of the emperor to rally the troops, and he becomes a stand-in obscuring not only Haylä Səlasse’s but also Kidane’s deficiencies as a leader. Both Minim and Hirut, who is conscripted to play his female guard, are coerced into the performance by the known threat of Kidane’s sexual violence, making it clear that the production of the shadow king is not a request but an order to gender and class subalterns.

In their roles as shadow king and guard, Minim and Hirut bring together and repurpose many if not all of the tools of spatial and temporal control the novel has critiqued: Italian maps and photography, imperial mythologies, and Ethiopia’s class and gender hierarchies. By elevating a peasant musician and a young servant girl to occupy the highest positions of highland Christian society, the novel appears to shatter the class and gender divisions whose persistence its chorus treats with melancholy resignation. Through this crack in official history, the embodied memory of Hirut’s experience constitutes another of the novel’s efforts to open up space for a proliferation of erased or silenced narratives of African presence and resistance. Indeed, the image of Minim dressed in uniform, black cape, and polished shoes,

⁷ The masinqo is a single-stringed bowed lute played with a bow; the krar is a lute with five or six strings which may be played with a bow or by strumming or plucking. Both the masinqo and the krar are commonly used by azmari singers to accompany their songs.

riding a white horse named Adua, and shielded by a red umbrella creates an evocative image of African resistance.

Moreover, the shadow king is a ghostly and mysterious presence who appears and disappears at will, confounding European attempts at spatial control. Together with his double the real emperor, he is incapable of being pinned down on a map or with a photograph: the “faint image...reflect[ing] in the glint of a lens to ricochet against fog and hill” sits alongside, and is doubly exposed with, that of “the man who was just photographed in England, in Brighton” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 302, 329). If photography has developed one understanding of landscape and light in the novel, the shadow king indexes the resistance poetics of light. His presence is signaled by “flashes of sunlight and wisps of fog as proof of divine assistance;” the chorus sings of “multitudes who rushed like wind to free a country [with] their blinding light;” and the ascari catch glimpse of “a human form...sheltered by trees and fog [raising a] gesture both imperial and merciful...the heaven-sent beams of light” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 237, 311, 390).

Yet while the light poetics constitute the novel’s representation of an environmental consciousness that informs African resistance—the land, light, and wisps of fog coordinated with the army and its shadow king to “free the country”—they also show how the figure of the emperor and his female guard, the “new image of Mother Ethiopia,” crystallize the highland romance of nature, religion, and history (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 302). The novel’s means of breaking open dominant historiographies by bringing forward the past paradoxically reproduces imperial

iconography with Hirut as symbolic mother and Minim as emperor. While *The Shadow King* unflinchingly represents the violences of Italian imperialism and of Ethiopian imperial feudalism (forced labor, slavery, sexism, colorism, and classism), its only way to break their hold is through recourse to the mythic figures of the emperor and his guard.

Seeking to address Italian efforts to “rewrite history [and] alter memory,” the novel uses the tools of Abyssinian empire to rewrite and alter Ethiopia’s history and memory, constructing an allusion of imperial continuity through the Haylä Səlasse stand-in. Subaltern ascendancy is not only an allusion, since after the war Hirut and Minim lead a simple life in “a place too small for maps,” but one achieved by coercion, conscription, and erasure (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 5). The unspecified ghostly doubles of empire, Minim and Hirut are “made nothing,” merely the bodies over which the golden-light tinge of imperial symbology is laid. This is clear when Kidane looks at Minim and, sees not only “the outline of his deceased son’s face” but also the ghosts of Minim’s brother long dead and Haylä Səlasse “in the form of another” (Maaza, *The Shadow King*, 239).

The Shadow King enacts the novel as narrative *təzəta*, a literary form that hauls the bodily, psychic, and affective memory of the past into the present and remakes it in the form of inconsolable, constantly echoing and doubling grief for the lost imperial romance. For all its work breaking open the hegemony of Italian history and highlighting the reservoirs of bodily memory and affect, in the end *The Shadow King* reproduces Ethiopia’s imperial figures as the means to combat both outside

invaders and internal erasures. While *Queen* finds ways to both invoke and disavow romantic and reproductive tropes and to reframe regional perspectives of power from subordinate points of view, *The Shadow King* drags forward the biologically reproductive metaphors of the highland romance and reinscribes regionally subaltern states, all cast in the triumphal glow of a lost imperial golden age.

Two forms of narrative *təzəta*, both *The Shadow King* and *Queen* demonstrate the novel's function as a structure for melancholic memory. Losses of the past initiate choral narratives that turn both outward to address official imperial histories and inward to the role of embodied memory in Ethiopian society. While the subjectivities and materialities of memory are very similar across texts—a range of female voices and the natural, religious, and historical elements associated with the highland romance—how they move within the circular structure of each novel differs. *The Shadow King* exhibits, in its writer's words, “a wondrous freedom” in its posture of standing in one place and picking and choosing what is brought forward, a posture of anthropocentric and imperial mastery in which things are “completely up to us.” Conversely *Queen*'s swirling psychic and embodied storm of memory, orality, bits of flowers, and bulbs of pearls communicates the impossibility of bringing the past forward wholesale. Rather humans, literary forms, and the natural world are all subject to the fragmentation of history's storms, their gathering, piling up, sedimentation, and spew. The next and final chapter turns to three novels that embody this organic ecology of fragmentation as it relates to the Somali territories and their human and environmental histories.

Chapter 4
A sandy grave:
**Climate coloniality in Faarax M.J. Cawl's *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl*,
Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*, and Abdourahman A. Waberi's *Passage
des larmes***

Reading two epic oral poems, one grieving the death of a lost lover in a desolate desert, the other of a band of comrades on a frozen seacoast, the Somali-American writer Sofia Samatar reflects that to “stand in the ruins” is to feel the borders of space, time, and language dissolve (Samatar). The past “cuts into the present” and the future, already filled with anticipatory loss, seeps back into the present too (Samatar). The poets, who have internalized the loss and find the outside world permeated by it, are inconsolable, shot through with grief that is kept alive by the constant movement of their poems, a movement that mimics their landscapes of swirling sand or driving snow. Rooted in the natural world, these are poems of “extreme weather” from some of the world’s most delicate places: regions like the Horn of Africa where life has always been difficult for humans, animals, and plants, and where increased heat and lack of rainfall may soon render it impossible (Samatar).

With her gaze toward the past where fragments of verse, cloud, snow, dust, and text constellate and seek literary expression that can bear witness to the climate coloniality of the present and future, what Farah Bakaari calls “ruinous time,” Samatar is not reading Somali poetry nor the Horn of Africa novel, but she very well could be (Bakaari 12). Her melancholic storm-swept posture that refuses consolation recalls not only the angel of history but also Cawrala Barre, the heroine of the first

novel written in the Somali language, *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl* (*Ignorance is the enemy of love*) by Faarax Maxamed Jaamac Cawl (1974).¹ In one of the novel's most poignant scenes, Cawrala sits where the land meets the sea, in the “burnt” or “burned scrubland” of the coastline—called guban in Somali—and composes a poem (Jama 536). Grieving the death of her lover Calimaax or “Cali the Seafarer,” a Dervish resistance fighter who she believes has been slain in a battle against British colonialists, she composes an elegy:

I have lost everything in life, I have lost Cali!
I sit this evening in a deserted place
...
It is better now for me to enter a sandy grave than thus to remain in being.
(Faarax 44, 45)

The poem, only part of which is excerpted here, is attributed to the historical Cawrala and was passed down for decades in oral tradition before being incorporated into the novel.² Reflecting her individual loss of a loved one, the poem also anticipates a larger communal loss that will occur as a result of the British victory: the partition of the Somali territories. The world in which Somali pastoralists and their animals moved freely through different landscapes—the mountain escarpments, high interior plateaus, forest and grass plains, and arid coastlines—at different times of year, following the rains and the astrological and meteorological predictions of their soothsayers and poets, was changing in the early twentieth century, even ending.

¹ My discussion of *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl* relies on the 1982 English language translation by Bogumił Witalis Andrzejewski. When referring to the novel in its historical context, I use the title *Aqoondarro*. When conducting textual analysis, I refer to the text hereafter by its translated title *Ignorance is the enemy of love*.

² Cawrala's elegy, composed in the *buraambur* genre specific to female Somali poets, is one of two poems in the novel historically attributed to her.

“Like a world out of a poem”: Elegiac texts in context

While Faarax’s novel *Ignorance* is set in the first decades of the twentieth century, by the time of the novel’s composition in 1974 the Somali territories had weathered close to a century of overlapping colonial regimes and their social and ecological afterlives. In the period from 1910 to 1950 alone, there were sixteen recorded droughts, an increasing rate of extreme weather tied to the ways colonial borders curtailed existing land management practices and initiated “soil erosion on a large scale” (Jama 541). Thus Cawrala’s location on the scorched sand of the beach symbolizes not only her internal desolation, but also the larger processes of desertification in the form of territorialization and environmental change that will turn her homeland into a literal “sandy grave.” Cawrala’s poem grieves personal, communal, and ecological loss and more—“even the world itself,” making it an example of what Jahan Ramazani calls world elegy, a poetic mode that brings the personal and collective scales of traditional elegy together with ecological thinking (Ramazani 8).

While this project has traced a range of real, metaphorical, aesthetic, formal, indexical, and discursive storms—many of them rainy—through the Horn of Africa’s literary archive, this final chapter turns to storms of drought, rainfall’s inverse and the increasing environmental reality for much of the region. Expanding Ramazani’s notion of a text that grieves not only personal but also communal and planetary loss from the poem to the novel, I read three novels from the larger Somali literary tradition—*Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl (Ignorance is the enemy of love)* (1974)

by Faarax M.J. Cawl, *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) by Nadifa Mohamed, and *Passage des larmes* (2009) by Abdourahman A. Waberi—that critique, ironize, and disrupt processes of desertification and give a structure to melancholic grief which, in refusing to assuage loss with comfort or distraction, insists on its constant retelling.

This chapter draws attention to not only the literal representation of drought in literary texts but also the ways these novels bear witness to the ideological, epistemological, and environmental drought-ings. These drought-ings produce the Horn and the Somali territories in particular as desert landscapes, nothing spaces off the edge of the map where only disaster and conflict grow, therefore making them ripe for further exploitation. By highlighting representations of “dry,” “burned,” and “lifeless” desert-like landscapes, I show how each novel reclaims so-called “deserted places” as important literary geographies for grieving a constellation of personal, communal, and ecological losses that extend from the colonial period to the present and future.

From the perspective of these novels, drought, deserted places, and even sandy graves do not necessarily signify the absence of life or literature but instead are the very grounds from which they come forth. In Ali Jimale Ahmed’s words,

...*suugaan*, the Somali word for literature, [also] means the sap or fluid of certain plants like the *geesariyood*. These plants are evergreen, and are associated with life and the sustaining of life under precarious situations or conditions. When all else is gone as a result of drought, for example, the sap from this plant will sustain a modicum of existence, of life. (Ali Jimale, “Introduction,” 12)

Suugaan epitomizes the productive and animate melancholy we have traced through this project. Rather than relating to literature and the novel as ways to monumentalize

and preserve what has been lost (the conventional association of melancholia with the dead), the insight of suugaan positions the novel as a genre animated and irrigated by an organic and fluid sap which can take the form of orality, intertextuality, memory, plants, and animals. Not only does organic material move through the novel, but the novel itself is also part of a larger ecology that witnesses and grieves world-ending from within the ruins.

Ramazani and other Western literary ecocritics such as Ursula Heise, Timothy Morton, and Timothy Clark insist that ecological literature has the capacity to respond to “the totality of planetary transformation” while also noting the pitfalls of elegiac forms (Ramazani 13). One danger is that elegiac or grieving texts tend to represent nature as other, in Morton’s words as “something ‘over there,’ the ultimate lost object” (Morton 252). Relatedly elegiac literary forms, especially in the pastoral mode, can instrumentalize the natural environment as a balm or solace to the human species actively destroying it. Third, grieving texts can harbor what Timothy Clark calls an “idealising nostalgia,” a longing for a pure and unchanging nature regardless of incontrovertible climate shifts (Clark 36). Elegiac forms can also be overly preoccupied with the future in a way that “distracts attention” from what is happening now (Wenzel 41). Finally, and most importantly for this project, grieving texts display a tendency to “work through mourning” as a penitential and restorative process to arrive at the (imagined) other side of grief, rather than staying with the trouble of ongoing and compounding grief, a “Hamlet-like lingering in melancholy” that makes loss “stick” (Morton 255-256).

As we have seen throughout this project, moving on is neither preferable nor possible in the Horn of Africa context of accumulating human and environmental transformations, disasters, world-endings, and losses. While the Horn of Africa crystallizes such world-endings, they occur around the globe. The novels considered in this chapter are elegiac in that they not only grieve the loss of sensory epistemologies and lifeways tied to the natural world, but also and in distinction from the texts problematized by western critics above, continue to be irrigated by what has been lost. In other words, they neither otherize, instrumentalize, or romanticize what is lost, but create forms to continue to live with it in the present and future. Thick with organic matter like plants, bushes, and fog, the novels discussed in this chapter approach the “desertification” of the Somali territories as a process rather than an event whose temporality extends from its historical context to its continuous melancholic textual retellings. Neither romanticizing, erasing, nor redeeming what has been or is in the process of being lost, *Ignorance*, *Black Mamba Boy*, and *Passage des larmes* constantly rework, remake, and reinfuse it in literary texts that critique the structures and systems that cause their grief.

Sensory epistemologies: the Somali territories in context

Stereotyped as some of the most inhuman, even hellish, places on earth and indeed some of the hottest and driest, the low-lying topographies of the Horn of Africa are home to a number of pastoral communities. The largest of these are the Somali whose vast territories stretch from present-day Djibouti and Somaliland in the north to

Somalia, southeastern Ethiopia, and northern Kenya.³ While the Somali territories are often represented as a dry and barren wasteland and have increasingly become so throughout the twentieth century, they are comprised of a diverse geography of mountain escarpments (golis), high interior plateaus (ogoo), mixed forest and grass plains (haud), and arid coastlines (guban). For “more than two millennia,” Somali pastoralists and their herds (camels and sheep in the north, cattle in the south) practiced a productive pattern of movement between grazing land and watering places in different ecological zones (Jama 535). Seasonal movement created a “naturally adjusted” balance mutually beneficial to plants, animals, and humans and that preserved the soil from overuse, overgrazing, and deforestation (Jama 536). Meanwhile elders whom Muuse Ismaaciil Galaal calls “weather lorists” used cosmology and inherited knowledge to help their communities avoid the most difficult and dangerous situations of extreme weather (Muuse 6). For instance, in a year of predicted drought, the lorist would lead his people to the Haud, grazing lands now falling in the political boundaries of Ethiopia. In the Haud, the metaphysical ““grazing nourishment”” nuro, “a life-giving, intangible substance” sensed only by animals, could “counterbalance the evilness of the year” (Muuse 10-11, 14). Only appearing in certain places at certain times, nuro is an irrigating flow of organic matter akin to suugaan which, while unmappable, is part of an entangled ecology that can be followed sensorally within Somali epistemologies.

³ In addition to the Somali are the Nara and Kunama of western Eritrea, the Rashaida and Afar on the Red Sea coast, the Boran Oromo of the Kenya-Ethiopia frontier, and the Anywaa, Nuer, Beni Shangul, and Gumuz along the borders between Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sudan.

The qualities of these ecologically diverse geographies are regularly described in Somali verse and were well-known far beyond the Horn of Africa. For example, Xaaji Aadan ‘Afqallooc’s poem in *Ignorance* recounts the beauty of “a ravine pass, water and black mountains; /...a hundred valleys where berries grow” and where trees and plants “smell so sweet that you will think someone has sprinkled rosewater around” (Faarax 1-2). The ancient Egyptians recognized the plains, forests, and mountains of the Somali territories as the land of “sweet-smelling substances,” naming it “the land of Punt, [or] the Land of Frankincense and Gum,” and spices, aromatics, and other goods from the Somali territories circulated throughout the Arab and Indian Ocean worlds (Faarax 1). Even European imperialists, travelling in the Somali territories in the nineteenth century, commented on the diversity of its animal life and considered it a “Mecca” for sportsmen; in 1899 the British consul-general of Somaliland made a list of the wild animals, skins, and horns that hunters exported from the region including “lion, leopard, cheetah, zebra, wild ass, oryx, kudu, hartebeest, waterbuck, hyenas, foxes, smaller mammals, large kudu, gazelle and other deer, rhinoceros, and elephants” (qtd. Jama 536).

Imperial desire to extend mastery over landscapes and people fractured the geography of the lowlands in the colonial period. Within the highly competitive nature of colonial relations in the Horn of Africa, the Somali territories were divvied among five different colonial jurisdictions: the French and British colonies along the Gulf of Aden, the Italian colony facing the Indian Ocean, a substantial portion of British Kenya, and a large central zone (the Haud and Ogaden) occupied by Ethiopia.

Jama Mohamed writes that the imposition of colonial boundaries “broke” the movement patterns of pastoralists, causing the overuse of some pasture lands and the neglect of others, and “ecological degradation...set in rapidly” (Jama 537). Even those who were not pastoralists were “alienat[ed]” from the land and subject to the conflict and raiding between resistance fighters led by Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan on the one hand and European pacification forces such as the Somaliland Camel Corps on the other (Jama 538). In Jama’s words, the violence of the period created “a world as if out of a poem,” an epic scale of world-ending destruction (Jama 539).

By 1943, British Colonel F.R.W. Jameson observed that the “park-like” environment of the late nineteenth century was now “a barren, dusty, wind-swept waste” (qtd. Jama 538). Somaliland geographies had become “desolate, ugly, and dispiriting,” replete with “stumps of dead trees on a dusty plain-the grave yard monuments of a once wooded area,” while once “excellent grazing country” had been transformed into a bleak landscape with sparse vegetation (qtd. Jama 545). Moreover, the ability of weather lorists to use their situated and sensorial knowledge to navigate and manage the land was significantly curtailed, resembling similar trends in the movement of Africans throughout the continent and causing the “disturbance [of] indigenous knowledge” (Ahmed Ibrahim 7). These effects of climate coloniality persist into the present, manifesting as soil erosion, decreased species and biodiversity, the loss of environmental epistemologies, food insecurity, and famine (Ahmed Ibrahim 4, 7).

Postcolonial scholars have critiqued the ways colonial discourse produced African spaces as empty and desolate and thereby available for exploitation. The Horn of Africa makes clear that in addition to imperial imaginaries that present African landscapes such as the Somali territories as homogenously desert-like, imperial practices by *both* foreign and regional actors are directly responsible for real and present desertification. Not only did European imperialists conceive of the lowlands as vast hunting parks for their exploitation, but the Amharic ecological imaginary also categorizes the Somali territories within the *ḵola* and *berha* zones, the desert-like lowland areas of low rainfall and extreme heat. As Samia Henni writes, the ideas that deserts are empty and absent of life “legitimize [their continued] transformation, manipulation, toxification, and destruction” (Henni 11).

Conversely the novels in this chapter employ situated sensory environmental knowledge to critique, ironize, and disrupt the colonial, neocolonial, and regional iterations of desert spatialization. They also present alternate spatio-temporal mappings, entangled maps of living with environment that grieve the multiple scales of human and more-than-human loss. The chapter begins with a discussion of *Ignorance*, which represents a world in which the sensory epistemologies of weather lorists, poets, and others are readily evoked and used, including to save Calimaax’s life when he is stranded in a “deserted place.” Then it turns to *Black Mamba Boy*, which traces its protagonist’s movement through vast spaces and times as he bears witness to how Horn of Africa landscapes and people become increasingly naturalized: drought-ed and fixed in place. It concludes with *Passage des larmes*’s

portrayal of twenty-first century neo-imperialism in the Horn of Africa as signified by the US joint base in Djibouti and its unironic continuation of social and environmental disasters.

Palimpsest on a sandy grave: old and new literary forms in *Ignorance*

Published in 1974, *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl (Ignorance is the enemy of love, 1982)* is the first “full-scale” novel written in Latin Somali orthography. Its status as a first, like much else within the book’s plot, was largely a matter of timing. The Somali language was first given written form in the thirteenth century, when Sheikh Yusuf bin Ahmed al-Kowneyn, known locally as Aw-Barkhadle, travelled from Arabia to the Horn of Africa and devised a Somali nomenclature for the Arabic vowels, adapting the Arabic alphabet and diacritics to express Somali sounds (Ali Abdullahi). Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan (1865-1921), the famous resistance leader and poet, wrote poems in Arabic and used Arabic script to write poetry in Somali. In 1938 a book was published in Somali using standard Arabic scripts; the same year the British attempted to introduce Somali written in Latin script in a primary school in their northern colony, building on an earlier missionary effort, a *Practical Grammar of the Somali Language*, in Latin script in 1897. While the Latin script failed to gain purchase in British Somaliland, the Italians were more successful and formed a permanent language committee meeting in 1955 to discuss the issue.

The mid-century period desire for the (re)unification of the Somali territories into one republic, a vision symbolized by the sky-blue flag with its five-sided white

star, also motivated a call for a single language script used by all Somali people. Osman Yusuf Kenadid, an early figure in the Somali Youth League, developed a “truly indigenous script” called Cismaaniya or Far Soomaali (“Somali writing”) to inscribe the Somali language. Following the unification of the former British and Italian colonies into the Somali Republic, Cusmaaniya was adopted for use in 1961 but the debate continued. Arguments were made for the Arabic language and Arabic script, with which many Somalis were familiar due to Quranic school, and for Latin.

In 1969 Mohamed Siyad Barre, commander of the nation’s new army, and his Supreme Revolutionary Council orchestrated a coup, overthrew the government, and renamed the country the Somali Democratic Republic. In addition to intimidating and killings its enemies and suspending the constitution, the SRC also embarked on a vast modernization campaign following the Soviet model and the Somalization of society after many years of colonial rule. Consequently the language orthography question returned yet again and more committees and studies were formed. In the midst of celebrations for the third anniversary of the coup in 1972, a helicopter “flew low and dropped multicolored leaflets” (Ali Abdullahi 348). The writing was in neither Arabic, Italian, nor English, but Somali written in Latin script, finally deciding the language question “from the heavens” (Ali Abdullahi 348).

Among other transformations, Somalization involved jettisoning the education systems and languages of colonialism; all students involved in the mass literary campaigns were taught in and learned to read Somali. This is the context within which *Aqoondarro* emerged (Andrzejewski, “Introduction,” xvi). According to the

novel's English language translator B.W. Andrzejewski, it was preceded in print by only "two much shorter [prose works] printed in booklet form" (Andrzejewski, "Introduction," xvi). Like many Somali writers before and after him, Faarax Maxamed Jaamac Cawl was not a professional writer. Born in 1937, he was educated at Hargeysa Trade School, then at the Chelsea College of Aeronautical and Automobile Engineering in London (1959-62). On his return to the Horn of Africa he first worked as a technical instructor, then joined the Somali Police Force in 1964, and the National Transport Agency in 1979.

The topics of Faarax's fiction, including two additional novels *Garbaduubkii gumeysiga* (*The shackles of colonialism*, 1978) and *Dhibbanaha aan dhalan* (*The unborn victim*, 1989), reflect his own conditions within the newly modernizing socialist independence government. On one level *Aqoondarro* is a vehicle for messages about the benefits of literacy and the negative effects of practices such as underage marriage, bridewealth payments, and superstitions around eating fish. It expressed the ideals of "many Somali men and women of the young generation" who supported the pro-Somali reforms introduced by the government (Andrzejewski, "Introduction," xvii). Despite its didacticism, it was also literarily sophisticated, "aesthetically satisfying," and firmly based in the culture of its readers, adapting stories and incorporating poems from oral tradition (Andrzejewski, "Introduction," xvi).

Aqoondarro's plot fictionalizes a true story. Its hero Cali Maxamed Xasan and heroine Cawrala Barre were real people who lived in the early twentieth century, and

the details of their lives were recorded in oral tradition. The novel uses this already-circulating material as the framework on which to hang its “fabric of invented detail and dialogue” (Andrzejewski, “Introduction,” xii). The novel transforms Cawrala and Calimaax’s romance from oral poetry to written prose that mourns multiple scales of personal, communal, and environmental loss, bringing together poems about beautiful landscapes, astrological and astronomical knowledge, and beliefs around food and clan. Together this assemblage creates an archive of sensory knowledge and experience of the natural world in the Somali territories, what I call sensory epistemologies.⁴

The novel opens when Calimaax and Cawrala meet aboard a dhow traveling across the Red Sea, from Aden to a northern Somali port. Cali is a Dervish secret agent returning from a mission surveilling British forces in Aden; Cawrala is a single woman returning home after a visit to Aden where she learned to read and write. Charmed by Cali’s performance of the customary exchanges of wisdom and poetry aboard ship, Cawrala falls in love with him. Then the dhow sails into a terrible storm

⁴ The sensory epistemologies I describe here are of particular interest to the fields of new animism, animist materialism, and sensory anthropology. Drawing on Irving Hallowell’s work with the Ojibwe people in the 1960s, Graham Harvey coined the term “new animism” in 2005 to refer to “ways of living that assume the world is a community of living persons, all deserving respect, and therefore to ways of inculcating good relations between persons of different species” (Harvey 5). As the field has developed, thinkers like Tim Ingold make clear that animacy, “the transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds...continually and reciprocally bring each other into existence,” is not a human projection on the nonhuman world but an interaction that reciprocally generates or inter-animates life (Ingold 68). In the field of sensory anthropology, the work of Constance Classen and Yolanda Van Ede theorize the role of the senses (and the ways they are perceived, gendered, experienced, and combined) as simultaneous shapers and bearers of knowledge. My argument here combines the two fields, observing that the senses are the source of important knowledge and perception of an animate natural world.

and sinks. Cast amid the waves, Cawrala cries for help and is saved by Calimaax, who swims several hours to shore with her in his arms. By the end of this harrowing rescue, he is in love too. Arriving in Somaliland, Calimaax rejoins the Dervish forces and is quickly married to another young woman as reward for his espionage. Shortly thereafter he receives a love-letter from Cawrala and, unable to read or write, asks his new in-laws to read it for him. This embarrassing and painful incident explains the title of the book, since illiteracy gets in the way of Calimaax and Cawrala's love; it also motivates him to acquire literacy for himself. But before he can reply to Cawrala, Cali takes part in a raid against the British forces to expel the colonial occupation, is badly wounded, and left for dead in the wilderness. When this news reaches Cawrala she grieves on the guban, but a prophetic voice suggests that Calimaax may still be alive. Uncertain about Calimaax's fate, Cawrala is betrothed by her family to an older man she despises and becomes deathly sick, narrowly avoiding marriage. Meanwhile Calimaax sends a letter proposing to Cawrala but it arrives too late and she dies of heartbreak. Calimaax reunites with Cawrala at her grave, where he hangs her original letter and grieves her death by composing several poems. Full of despair, he predicts his own death; this occurs two years later, bringing the tragic novel to a close.

Framing the oral material of the poems and plot within a larger narrative of anti-imperialism and Somali social development, the novel relates to sensory epistemologies with intimacy and without romanticization or erasure. Rather the poems are organic material that coexist within the same literary ecology as the novel, informing and enlivening it. The novel's treatment of orality draws attention to the

co-presence of oral and written forms in Somali literature, challenging the oral-written dichotomy that characterizes histories of African literary production. Disrupting the literary politics of time which subdivide oral and written forms and consign the latter to the premodern past, *Ignorance* instead puts forward a non-linear, palimpsestic, and ecological temporality that affirms the continuation of Somali sensory epistemologies in the present, even as the larger narrative of which they are a part centers around loss.

Ignorance opens with a geographic description that challenges ideas of the Somali territories as desert-like and foregrounds the novel's ecological relation to orature. First, the narrative describes the geography of Cawrala's nomadic childhood, the town of Xiis on the shores of the Gulf of Aden, in prose:

As a young girl she stayed in the town only during the *jiilaal*, the dry season of the year, and most of her days she spent in the interior of the country, where her father tended his herds....[Xiis] lies at the foot of the Cal mountains, which form part of the Golis range....Surad mountain, standing above Xiis, is 2,800 metres high - the highest peak in Somalia...The amount of rain which falls on Surad mountain is one of the highest in all the Somali territories, and on its slopes and on others nearby grow many trees of thousands of different kinds, among them box, mastic, juniper, myrobalan, ironwood and dragon trees. The importance and the beauty of Surad and the nearby Cal mountains are beyond description. (Faarax 1-2)

Andrzejewski considers this opening "didactic" and "dry" in its enumeration of mountain ranges, but its account of lush biodiversity intentionally positions the novel in a highly localized and situated environmental context (Andrzejewski, "Introduction," xix). It also sets up novel's relationship to oral poetry, its signature formal quality. According to the narrator, the beauty of Xiis and its surrounding mountains are "beyond description," only capable of being accurately evoked in

poetry. Next the text cites a gabay describing the geography of the Cal mountains of Xaaji Aadan 'Afqallooc' as an example:

It is a place with a ravine pass, water and black mountains;
Of its rocks, some are marble and some are other stones;
It has a hundred valleys where berries grow.
...
When you climb the topmost peak of Surad
Whatever moves across the sea appears to you as if in a mirror,
...
The morning rain falls there even in the midst of the dry *jiilaal* season,
A cloud lowering its feet, and the highest tree-tops reaching upwards for a
mile
Clash with each other like sea-waves and sailing ships.
...
The scent of musk spreads from the thick herbage and the springing grass.
There are birds there each singing in its own way and each taking up a
different tune;
Each varies in its colour, and their number is as many as a million;
...
When the sky-lark calls out of you from far away,
You argue with yourself, for you cannot bear to go to any other place. (Faarax
2-3)

This poem Faarax has transcribed from the Somali oral tradition is an example of a sensory epistemology of the land developed and passed down through verse: the mountains' textures, the sea like a mirror, the aroma of herbal musks, the overlapping melody of birdsong are sensory coordinates of place.

The poem also stages the introduction of the novel's heroine Cawrala. Directly following the poem, the novel introduces Cawrala with a "dark brown [complexion] shading into red," an average height, and "soft hair, flowing like a mane" (Faarax 3). Her eyes, clear with black pupils, sparkled with "a radiance that was the wonder of wonders, and her wide eyebrows met above her long-bridged nose" (Faarax 3). When she laughed, lips "the colour of ash" parted to reveal "pearl-white teeth" (Faarax 3).

Cawrala's qualities, the classical signifiers of Somali beauty, echo the landscape: the color of her skin evoking the red soil of the Haud, her hair flowing like a river, her eyes and teeth glinting with the radiance of waves or a stony cliff.

The sequence of prose-poetry-prose subverts the presentation of the poem as an example of orality that can be romanticized, erased, or moved on from. Rather, framing the poem within prose grants it additional meaning and significance as a way to teach Somalis about their own newly unified country, to demonstrate the territories' historical interconnectedness, and to present this vibrancy as the context out of which Cawrala and her story emerge. While the description, like that of Tobbya in *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, does naturalize Cawrala to her environment, it differs both from colonial modes of naturalization that empty or exoticize the landscape and from the pessimistic mode of naturalization practiced by another early Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah. Nuruddin's first novel *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), written in English and published just four years before *Aqoondarro*, also features a female protagonist who emerges out of the Somali landscape. Raised in a nomadic pastoral community, "Ebla was nature, nature had become personified in her. The trees, the earth, the noise" (Nuruddin 16). Often referred to as the Somali bildungsroman, the novel narrates Ebla's "escape" from pastoralism and its oral sensory epistemologies toward a modern individuated life in the capital city of Mogadishu.

While both Nuruddin and Faarax's novels acknowledge the aspects of traditional Somali culture that unequally and negatively affect women, their overall relationship to Somali ontologies and epistemes displays significant differences.

Nuruddin's novel desires to leave what it portrays as the "traditional" world behind while Faarax's text has a relatively positive relationship to Somalis' imbrication with the natural world; rather than something be left behind, the natural world is integral to the modernization envisioned by Faarax. Even while anticipating alienation from the natural world in the colonial period, *Ignorance* finds ways to make sensory epistemologies of nature central to its plot (as the world responsible for its protagonist's beauty), its aesthetic language, and its form, since poetry describes things prose cannot.

The significance granted to topography in the novel's opening scene disrupts the generalized landscapes of imperial imaginaries. Rather it foregrounds localized toponyms characterized by entangled, blurred, and interwoven relations with the natural world and draws attention to geographies like the guban as more than literary background. As we have seen, Cawrala learns of Calimaax's supposed death and grieves him in the deserted place of the seaside guban. Her poem is answered by another which counsels her,

Cawrala, a hero does not die;
He does not perish, while freedom is his quest
And while he pursues colonizers and infidels.
...
The full moon has not become dim, nor suddenly set,
But has descended into a valley that is rust-red in colour
Do not give in till the spring brings its nourishing rain! (Faarax 47)

The voice singing to her is a cirsan-ka-yeer, a spirit bringing good news. It is actually the same Dervish messenger who delivered news of Calimaax's death several hours before. Now that the moon and stars have come out, the messenger, knowledgeable

about “star-lore and astral influences,” has read the sky and realized the error of his message, which he seeks to correct (Faarax 63). Since Cawrala’s elegy on the beach grieves not only personal, but also anticipatory communal and environmental loss, the novel imbues the Dervish’s situated astral knowledge with the power to reinterpret and defer world-ending tragedy. Even as Cawrala’s grief in the guban is a testimony to her present and future ruination, the *cirsan-ka-yeer* momentarily diverts tragedy and swirls time, enacting what Bakaari calls the time of “qabyo,” a temporally ambiguous zone denoting both the “poetics of ruination” and the desire not to give up the “ideals of the anticolonial struggle” (Bakaari 23).

Indeed Calimaax, the symbol of anticolonial resistance, is still alive, and his use of sensory epistemologies helps him survive in what is otherwise a desolate wilderness. Left for dead, Calimaax finds himself in the Cal Madow mountains surrounded not unlike Wahid, by wild animals—“striped and spotted hyenas, aardwolves, leopards and other beasts of prey”—who threaten him with their shrieking and growling for two days and nights (Faarax 50). Calimaax wonders “who will bring Cawrala to me, to this deserted place where I sit?” but his awareness that he is in a deserted place has as much to do with the environment as with his sense that his misfortunes are related to Cawrala’s letter and his own poor timing (Andrzejewski, “Poetic Inserts,” 98).

Calimaax’s situation worsens until he is overcome by “hunger, thirst, desolation and helplessness, as well as extreme heat” (Faarax 51). When he is almost at the end of his strength a raincloud appears in the sky: “Calimaax lay under the

raindrops as they fell, and when they ceased he crawled to where there was now a rivulet of water” (Faarax 51). The sudden weather change saves Calimaax’s life and also transforms the land, filling the dry riverbeds, “one of the most persistent topographical features of the country,” with floodwaters (Jama 535). The rain grants Calimaax the strength to recall the traditional wisdom and practical skills for surviving in the wilderness he learned from being “brought up among camel-herders and horse-pasturers” (Faarax 52). Recalling a proverb, he makes a fire and traps and roasts an animal, thereby deferring the novel’s ruination yet again.

Many interpretations of *Ignorance*’s tragedy adopt the message of its title, that it is Calimaax’s illiteracy or ignorance that prevents a happy ending with Cawrala. Calimaax himself expresses this view after the awkward scene with his in-laws, reflecting that “[i]t is now clear to me that not being able to read and write is a matter of great ignorance, in which stupidity and disgrace are combined” (Faarax 35-36). Produced in the context of mass literacy campaigns in the Somali language meant to encourage reading as a modernizing social practice, *Ignorance* notably departs from many other postcolonial novels of its generation in that the coming of literacy and writing does not make things fall apart. Rather the novel’s attention to “the evils of illiteracy and ignorance” had “topical relevance” and helped explain its popularity among readers (Andrzejewski, “Introduction,” xvi).

While ignorance may be a useful shorthand for tragedy, the conditions that produce ignorance—or more precisely the time disparity between Calimaax and Cawrala’s acquisition of literacy—highlight the role of imperialism in the novel’s

tragic ending. While Cawrala learns to read and write in Aden, Calimaax is occupied with reconnaissance on the British fort. After the embarrassment of the letter, the lovers' reunion is delayed due to yet another anti-imperial battle intended to expel British settlements in Somaliland. By the time Calimaax recovers from his almost-death and writes a letter, it is too late to be reunited with Cawrala. Contrary to the colonial outlook that, in Achille Mbembe's words, perceives Africans as "radically located *outside of time*, or whose time was radically out of joint," Calimaax's literacy "delay" and his inability to reunite with Cawrala before her death are the direct result of imperial occupation and violence (Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge").

Situating itself more complexly in time than imperial temporalities allow, the novel's tragedy is not the imposition or lack of literacy, but rather the way imperial power actively forecloses forms of freedom figured as personal expression and romantic happiness.

Moreover, the novel represents the possibility of a utopic future symbolized by Cawrala as a modern literate woman embedded in Somali sensory epistemologies and poetry in which Somalis determine their own education, relationships, and politics. The foreclosure of this self-determined Somali future is a world-ending that Cawrala, Calimaax, and the novel all bear witness to and grieve. *Ignorance's* conclusion focalizes Calimaax's acts of mourning after Cawrala's death: he visits her sandy grave and writes a poem overlaying her love letter, creating a textual palimpsest of poetry and prose.

The novel emphasizes Calimaax's desolation; even after he has "finished his prayers and lamentations, and [has] hung the letter over Cawrala's grave, [he] felt no relief, and roamed around the place where she was resting" (Faarax 86). His wayward roaming is compared to that of a melancholic poet who, unable or refusing to accept the loss of a horse he had loved very much, retraced her tracks, "examining with care the plants on which she had grazed and the places where she had rested at night...[unable] to accept her loss with patience and resignation" (Faarax 86). Calimaax's melancholy communicates that there is no comfort or redemption for her loss, or more precisely, that the only comfort is a wandering inability to give up what has been lost. Within two years Calimaax's melancholia and "his old wounds"—the physical and relational traces of his resistance to British imperialism—lead to his death (Faarax 88).

With its protagonists dead the novel is the last griever, its form a textual palimpsest weaving oral and written texts by multiple authors and fluttering on Cawrala's grave. Remaining in the desolate place and claiming it as the site of melancholic grief, the novel narrates multiple levels of real and metaphorical desertification caused by imperialism in the Somali territories. Refusing to participate in the distancing, romanticization, erasure, or redemption of what has been lost, *Ignorance*, like the melancholic poet, retraces its steps through situated landscapes and plants, rebuffing comfort or distraction and insisting on the constant retelling of tragedy. The appeal of melancholy has as much to do with its affect as with the "theoretical potential" it carries (Chow 573). The novel's melancholy allows it to hold

both past and future worlds, symbolized by Cawrala and Calimaax, and their irrevocable loss, thereby holding multiple ruins and ideals together in one form.

Green and alive: orality and history in *Black Mamba Boy*

Ignorance's closing image of wandering melancholy in a desolate landscape presents the novel as a narrative of early imperial contact that anticipates the losses to come. The colonial and postcolonial periods are the focus of the two remaining novels in this chapter: Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) and Abdourahman Ali Waberi's *Passage des larmes* (2009). Written in English and French respectively, these twenty-first century novels reflect the imposition of colonial language politics in the Somali territories and continue to access the organic material of Somali orature and sensory knowledge to irrigate the novel form.

Born in 1981 in Somaliland, Nadifa Mohamed is a Somali-British writer. In 1986 she moved with her family to London temporarily and remained there when civil war broke out in Somalia. Mohamed attended the University of Oxford, studying history and politics. Her writing, which includes short stories, essays, and memoir in addition to fiction, is characterized by historical realism and the project of excavating Somali stories from the erasures of imperial history. She is the author of three novels, her debut *Black Mamba Boy* (2010), *The Orchard of Lost Souls* (2013), and *The Fortune Men* (2021), which was shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize.

Mohamed's debut *Black Mamba Boy* is based on the story of her father Jama's life in the Horn of Africa in the early decades of the twentieth century (1935-1947).

The novel was initially conceived as an oral history project, a collection of Mohamed's father's memories that he told her verbally. The British edition includes a prologue that presents Jama's adult child Nadifa as the implied author. She writes, "I am telling you this story so that I can turn my father's blood and bones, and whatever magic his mother sewed under his skin, into history...I am my father's griot" (Mohamed 1).⁵ Understanding that African subjects, subjectivities, and epistemologies are typically relegated to the outside of official historical discourse, *Black Mamba Boy* desires to "[re-insert] Africa into world history" and to shape "an alternative narrative of history that not only encompasses [Mohamed's] father's personal journey...but also embraces the wide collective memory of the Somali people" (Steiner 184; Matzke 208). Like *The Shadow King* and *Queen of Flowers and Pearls*, the novel's project is a revisionist critique of western historiography of the Horn of Africa. The novel also critiques forms of real and metaphorical desertification that produce modern African states and subjects through "the violent materiality of borders" (Foster 153).

Black Mamba Boy begins with epigraphs from Sayyid Maxamed and Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore that position it as a tale of cross-overs between continents, and each chapter is titled with a location and a date that roughly corresponds to Jama's journey. The novel's spatial and temporal range is expansive and Jama's journey winding and itinerant, confounding colonial methods of containing space and time. Beginning in his birthplace of Hargeisa, Somaliland, Jama travels as a young

⁵ The American version of the novel does not contain this prologue.

boy with his mother across the Red Sea to Aden to find work. As a child he plays in the port and the dusty streets of the town while his mother works; in the evenings she tells him stories of his poet father, the stars, and how he was named for a “huge mamba” snake that curled around her naked pregnant belly (Mohamed 10-11). When Jama’s mother falls sick and dies, he vows to use her minor savings to find his father in Sudan. Jama returns to his mother’s family in Hargeisa, moves on to Djibouti, then Eritrea motivated by the desire to find his father. Wherever Jama goes he finds help and shelter within the vast network of Somali communities thanks to his abtiris, a memorized genealogy of paternal kinship. On his travels he also witnesses the increasing presence of Europeans and the ways “his land has been carved up among France, Italy, Britain, and Abyssinia,” creating borders that increasingly curtail his movement and that of his fellow Africans (Mohamed 77). The fulcrum of the novel is Jama’s anticipated reunion with his father but this is foreclosed in an Italian camp of conscripted askari soldiers where he discovers his father has been murdered by Italian troops.

Following this loss, the second half of the novel expands from a tightly focused adventure story to an historical account of the impacts of colonial occupation and war in the Horn of Africa. Jama comes of age experiencing acts of terrible violence including the murder of a disabled childhood friend, and his movement is increasingly limited by colonial technologies of space including borders and identity documents. He marries an Eritrean woman and establishes a successful farm which is then destroyed by drought. Like many of his countrymen forced to seek new forms of

work, he leaves the Horn and is employed by the British Shipping Federation where he learns to read and write and encounters the struggles of Jewish Holocaust survivors-turned-refugees seeking entry into British-partitioned Palestine. After stopovers in Haifa, Marseilles, and Wales, the novel concludes with Jama aboard a ship on the cusp of returning to Eritrea, but the novel withholds the typical postcolonial plot of exile and homecoming.

The first half of *Black Mamba Boy* demonstrates its relationship to the organic material of orature, Mohamed's father's oral history, in several ways. The early stages of Jama's journey resemble an epic adventure where events are strung together episodically with little connective tissue supplied by the narrative. In the space of one paragraph, Jama moves from an embrace with his adoptive grandmother to leaving her home forever, the whole town "disappear[ing] as if it were just a mirage" (Mohamed 70). According to Ali Jimale, the journey motif in Somali literature is characterized by a protagonist who moves through space from the known to the unknown and back again (Ali Jimale, *Daybreak*, 50). Protagonists are not socially alienated in this type of journey, as in Lukács' transcendently homeless hero, but rather pass out of their community to expand personal and corporate social horizons.

Jama's return to his birthplace in Hargeisa is less a homecoming than an occasion for the novel to demonstrate his sensory epistemology of place. He recognizes Hargeisa by "a sharp sweetness he breathed in, something invigorating, intoxicating" (Mohamed 48). The smell activates forms of knowing stored in memory and passed through inheritance: "This was his country, this was the same air his father

and grandfathers had breathed, the same landscape that they had known” (Mohamed 48). Yet what Jama identifies as his most important and valued memory—his father’s face—is “lost to him, hidden behind stubborn clouds” (Mohamed 5). His father’s absence is at least in part the result of “conscripted migration” under imperial conditions (Foster). The novel uses weather clouds as a metaphor for imperial control that blows in from elsewhere to eliminate relationality and obscure Jama’s ability to access the full range of sensory knowledge and memory.

Jama’s journey allows *Black Mamba Boy* to spotlight a variety of different imperially-impacted spaces throughout the Horn. The novel develops thick layers of spatial description, representing urban and rural spaces traversed by migrants, traders, locals, and strangers, and describing the layering of older regional networks and newer infrastructures. A Somali comments that “[T]he Abyssinians stole our land in Ogaden, handed over to them by the stinking English,” referencing the 1889 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty. “If [the Abyssinians] can take our ancestral land then let the Ferengis [meaning the Italians] take theirs” (Mohamed 33). In French-occupied Djibouti city, “Yemenis, Afars, Somalis, Indians, French colonials, all felt that this town belonged to them” (Mohamed 81). The French remake the town, adding checkpoints and creating “a home away from home...a provincial French town picked up and dropped into the hottest place on earth” (Mohamed 81). Assab was “a ragbag of wanderers: Abyssinians looking for work, Yemeni fisherman following the shoals of the Red Sea, nomadic Afars with their teeth filed to points, Somalis on their way to somewhere else” (Mohamed 104). In Italian-occupied Asmara,

new houses sparkled, the paint on them barely dry. Large Italian villas were painted in mouthwatering reds, corals, pinks, yellows...all the shops were run by Europeans, the town seemed to belong to the fat-bellied men with upturned moustaches sitting outside the shops...The only Africans he could see were street cleaners. (Mohamed 109)

The geography of segregation between colonizer and colonized reaches its peak in Asmara, where Italian colonial officials experimented with apartheid-like racial categories and prohibitions that naturalized people to place, confining Africans to the “reservation” part of town. Leaving Asmara, Jama takes a train, one of the most prominent symbols of European modernity, and experiences the colonial desertification of African landscapes: the “green and calm” of the Italian colonial capital disappear, replaced with “massive Italian-owned plantations, the land dominated by wheat” (Mohamed 115). In addition to representing a multiplicity of Horn of Africa landscapes and entrepôts, *Black Mamba Boy*’s episodic tour develops a comparative critique of European spatial regimes and their social and environmental desolation.

The novel’s two most formative moments take place in desert spatialities. The first, the news of Jama’s father’s death, takes place in Omhajer, a “frontier town” in the Eritrean interior (Mohamed 124). The Italians call Omhajer “the Wild West of Eritrea,” a reference to dusty dryness but also its resistance to being conquered, since in that dusty place “the borders of Abyssinia, British Sudan, and Eritrea” are easily swept away (Mohamed 124). Like *Ignorance*, *Black Mamba Boy* links the desolation of the landscape to the desolation of a personal loss. But it also emphasizes Jama’s distance from the forms of grief that constitute Cawrala’s experience. While Cawrala

composes an oral poem, Jama has only a deeply embodied silence. He bends over his dead father's suitcase, "taking the shape of the boulders placed above nomad's graves," his body itself the monument upon which loss, lament, remembrance, are written (Mohamed 127). While the *cirsan-ka-yeer* reads the stars and revises his message, Jama has no such auspicious spirit. The moon hides from him, the "planets [around which] Jama's life orbited had spun away," leaving him "float[ing] in starless obscurity" (Mohamed 128). Jama's mother had taught him about Somalis' knowledge of astrology and astronomy and practices of astral wayfinding passed through poetry—" "[there's] another world above us, each of those stars has a power and meaning in our lives" " (Mohamed 43). But after the death of both of his parents Jama is without relational connections to the sensory epistemology of the stars and they lose whatever meaning they might have had. Unable to discern their meaning, he sees "only a sea of solitude, an expanse of nothingness impossible to navigate on his own" (Mohamed 44).

Following Jama's father's death, the second half of the novel expands from an account of his personal losses to bearing witness to the larger communal losses of the Somali community under imperial rule. The second formative desert scene takes place in Keren, in Italian Eritrea, "a Muslim town of whitewashed buildings, camel merchants, and silversmiths...nestled like a medieval fort in the bosom of a severe mountain range" (Mohamed 165). On a routine supply run, Jama's friend Shidane is violently beaten, raped, and killed by Italian soldiers (Mohamed 176-177). Returning to the scene of Shidane's death, his friends encounter "a valley, desolate, gravelly and

full of craters [as if] they were standing on the face of the moon,” a desolation that recalls not only Cawrala’s guban but also the dusty lunar landscape of *Adua* (Mohamed 181).

The landscape has been literally and metaphorically eroded by violence and is devoid of life, save for “a huge sprawling shrub, its grasping leaves violently green and alive” that springs miraculously from Shidane’s burial place (Mohamed 181). A leafy tombstone, the bush seems “to grow in front of [Jama’s] eyes, and it [shines] independently in the fading light,” irrigated by Shidane’s body (Mohamed 181). While the novel does not specify the mysterious bush’s variety, it recalls the Somali concepts of nuro, the “life-giving intangible substance” in times of drought, and suugaan, the word for both evergreen sap and literature.

Adrift in a real, metaphorical, and existential desert, a droughted world caused by the storms of overlapping imperialisms, Jama has little recourse to poetry or other aspects of Somali sensory epistemology. Instead his grief takes the form of a plant with its violently green leaves. Shidane’s body is not only part of the embodied debris of empire, but also a force of organic regenerative life that persists despite desertification and death. Instead of representing Shidane’s death as the violent erasure of a powerless victim to which there is no meaningful response, *Black Mamba Boy* registers the deep trauma of Shidane’s death as a drought-causing desolation and shows how his death animates a new ecological and literary form—suugaan. Irrigated by the story of Shidane’s death, the novel reworks its organic material into a textual

form that unflinchingly narrates the causes and conditions of his death and real and metaphorical desertification.

Following this childhood drought-ing, Jama experiences another ecological and agricultural droughts as an adult. The first years of his marriage are characterized by abundance: “The earth was pregnant with so much produce” that Jama grew complacent in his sudden green thumb, thinking “all he needed to do was throw a few seeds in the earth and he would be richly rewarded” (Mohamed 199, 201). The effervescence of vegetables, grains, and farm animals comes to a sudden end with an attack of locusts whose devastation is all-encompassing: they “ate the crops, the roofs of tukuls, ate through baskets to get at hidden grains and pulses, ate the food out of children’s mouths” (Mohamed 201). Coinciding with the increasing frequency of droughts that Jama Mohamed links to imperial borders, the locusts’ disregard for human-derived borders paradoxically works with the imposed fragmentation of the land to facilitate “a backward miracle, something made into nothing,” in other words ecological ruination (Mohamed 202).

The droughted and desertified world of locusts and drought pushes Jama into the imperial system of conscripted labor. *Black Mamba Boy* uses this part of Jama’s life to highlight the two-pronged strategy for controlling African spaces and subjects, presenting the land itself as contained, “countries caged behind bars,” and showing how Jama’s abtiris, his identity written in flesh and memory, is illegible in the context of imperial biometrics (Mohamed 225). Instead he needs a “paper saying who he was and where he belonged” (Mohamed 215). Granted a passport that fixes him as a

colonial subject by recording his name, date and place of birth, eye and hair color, complexion, and nationality, he is ushered into the biopolitical structures of European modernity where subjecthood is contingent on labor. As a sailor Jama witnesses additional imperial violences that emphasize the power and artifice of the nation-state as an imperial strategy of spatial and social control, including refugees from “Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka” in cages aboard ships and the “caging” of land through the British mandate on Palestine (Mohamed 247).

Throughout *Black Mamba Boy*, Jama’s meandering pattern of travel and narration confounds imperial mappings, creating alternate cartographies that not unlike nuro are irrigated by traces of sensory epistemology and find ways to survive the increasing desertification of the Somali territories. In the closing chapter, the novel thematizes this spatially and temporally elusive mode in the form of a tattoo Jama has inked on his arm, a “beautiful black snake” (Mohamed 283). The tattoo is a reference to Jama’s origin story narrated by his mother. It also represents his lived experience, a “totem etched into his skin as a mark of where he had been and what he had survived” (Mohamed 283). Enacting a permeable interchangeability with what he has lost, the tattoo is an animate and moving image “pulsat[ing] under his fingertips” that marks the constant recollection of loss and keeps what was lost alive in a different form (Mohamed 283).

Even though Jama is distanced from some forms of sensory epistemology, the novel still looks to the oral story of his mother and the oral story he will one day tell his daughter symbolized in the snake tattoo, plus the added component of Shidane’s

suugaan, as the organic materials that irrigate its plot and its critique of desertification. If *Ignorance* concludes by returning to and reclaiming the deserted place, unsettling linear temporality through the anticipation and embodiment of imperial debris in Cawrala and Cali's graves, *Black Mamba Boy* concludes by refusing the spatial narrative of return. In a posture of productive melancholy, Jama's snake eats its own tail, the old form irrigating the new. Both conclusions are underpinned by images of an organic and melancholic palimpsest: the letter on the grave, the swirling snake tattoo. In the last novel discussed in this chapter, Waberi's *Passage des larmes*, this palimpsest is formalized, structuring an assemblage of voices and intertexts that investigate contemporary coloniality and desertification in the Somali territories and especially the former French colony Djibouti.

Navigating in a fog: history and memory in *Passage des larmes*

Present-day Djibouti, a land of sharp volcanic rock and hot rock, is bordered by Eritrea to the north, Ethiopia to the west and south, and Somalia and Somaliland to the southeast. Located on the west side of the Bab-el-Mandeb (Gate of Tears) strait connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and on the shipping routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, it has long been a geography of strategic importance. Beginning in 1862 the French purchased land from Afar sultans, including the port of Obock, and developed a steamship coaling station to rival British-occupied Aden. The colonial borders were solidified in 1896 and the French

treated the colony primarily as a trading entrepot, developing the port and building a train that ran from the coast all the way to Addis Ababa by 1916.

Djibouti and the Horn of Africa feature prominently in the French travel writing tradition, including in Michel Leiris' famous journey through Djibouti in *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934) and in the writing of Arthur Rimbaud. In 1884, the French novelist and travel writer Pierre Loti described Djibouti as "one of the hottest spots on earth...[as if] we were too close to a fierce fire" (Loti 171). The "pocket-sized country," as Waberi calls it, endured close to a century of French occupation under the names le Côte française des Somalis and le Territoire français des Afars et Issas before its independence in 1977, one of the last on the continent (qtd. Garane, "Introduction," xi).

But the French colonial presence in Djibouti has persistent afterlives, especially in the twenty-first century international security regime. A garrison originally built for the French Foreign Legion is today the site of Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent United States military base on the African continent and the hub of U.S. drone, surveillance, and aerial operations across the continent and the Persian Gulf. In addition to Lemonnier, Djibouti also hosts a variety of other foreign military bases with interests in the Suez Canal and the Red Sea-Indian Ocean passage.

Born in 1965 in then Côte française des Somalis (French Somali Coast) now Djibouti, Abdourahman Ali Waberi (Cabdiraxmaan Waaberi) is an essayist, poet, academic, and fiction writer. After primary and secondary school conducted in French, in 1985 Waberi went to France to study English literature and wrote a thesis

on the works of Nuruddin Farah; later he moved to the United States, where he is a professor at George Washington University. While Somali is his mother tongue, Waberi has written his seven novels, four short story collections, and three poetry collections in French. He is often placed in the “New Generation” of francophone African writers who emerged after 1990 and was one of ten African writers invited to participate in a literary memorialization project of the Rwandan genocide in French. Regardless of his diasporic and transcontinental identity, Waberi’s writing consistently centers Djibouti as setting and subject matter, using humor and satire (as in *Aux Etats Unis d’Afrique* [*The United States of Africa*, 2006]), playful intertextuality (*Passages des larmes* [*Passage of tears*, 2009]), and formal fragmentation (*Rifts, routes, routes* [2001]) to unsettle Djibouti’s construction as a space of extreme weather, literary inspiration, and strategic importance in global imaginaries.

Waberi’s fourth novel *Passage des larmes* (*Passage of tears*, 2009) focuses on the international representation of the Somali territories as a space of insecurity, extremism, and terrorism through the narrative of twin brothers Djibril and Djamal.⁶ Coming of age in the era of Djiboutian independence, both brothers leave the country as young men seeking education. Their trajectories trace a prominent geopolitical and ideological fault line in the late twentieth century: Djib goes west seeking higher education degrees in Europe and Canada, while Djamal goes east travelling the

⁶ For other novels that problematize the association between the Somali territories and political insecurity, see Nuruddin Farah’s *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* (*Sweet and Sour Milk* [1979], *Sardines* [1981], *Close Sesame* [1983]), *Blood in the Sun* (*Maps* [1986], *Gifts* [1993], *Secrets* [1998]), and *Past Imperfect* (*Links* [2003], *Knots* [2007], *Crossbones* [2011]) trilogies.

religious circuit of the twelve Islamic cities. The brothers' simultaneous return to their homeland initiates the novel, which is structured in alternating chapters that excerpt their personal writing.

Djib is employed by an independent Canadian intelligence company contracted by uranium speculators. Like Euro-American agents of coloniality before him, he surveys the landscape and assesses the ecological and political climate for the possibility of resource extraction, writing daily reports in "small dark blue moleskine notebooks numbered one to ten" ["carnets de moleskine bleu nuit de petit format, numérotés de 1 à 10"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 16).⁷ "I'm paid to scrutinize this country right side up and upside down," Djib writes, "to record everything...Each entry will be weighed and measured, photographed from every angle" ["Je suis payé pour scruter ce pays à l'endroit comme à l'envers...Pour tout consigner...Chaque saisie sera pesée et soupesée. Photographiée sur toutes les coutures"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 14).

Djamal is imprisoned in an island prison off the Djiboutian coast with an Islamic elder and mystic; they receive updates on religious and jihadist matters and participate in the planning of an upcoming attack. Employed as a scribe, Djamal records his master's sermons and sayings on "old bits of paper blown into our cell by the wind" ["vieux bouts de papier emmenés par le vent jusque dans notre cellule"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 81). "We are watching your every move," Djamal writes, "so close we can feel the muscles in your neck contracting, your jugular vein... Every move we make, every step we take...nothing exists outside His [Allah's] will" ["Nous

⁷ Page numbers refer to the French edition. All translations from French are my own.

surveillons tes faits et gestes...si près de toi au point de sentir les muscles de ton cou se contracter, tes veines jugulaires...Chacun de nos gestes, chaque pas que l'on fait...rien n'existe hors de Sa volonté”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 26).

Both tasked with the close observation and narration of the present, the brothers veer into personal confession through their writing. Increasingly drawn into the past, they recall their grandfather’s stories of the precolonial and colonial periods, their relationships with their mother, and the circumstances of their ruptured relationship. As the novel progresses Djib is consumed by memories of his childhood friend, a Lebanese Jew, while Djamal detects a palimpsest within the scraps of paper he writes on, a biography of the Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin titled “Le livre de Ben” (“the Book of Ben”). Under the guise of the brothers’ respective written genres, the report and the hagiography, a crime fiction narrative emerges. The novel concludes abruptly with Djib’s death and an impersonal surveillance report detailing his demise at the hands of an Islamic martyr.⁸

Initially the brothers conform to their adopted epistemes and writing cultures. Djib’s sections, labeled with the date, time, weather, and journal, clearly mimic the genre of the European colonial travelogue and are perhaps even an Afrocentric “rewriting” of Leiris’s representation of Djibouti in *L’Afrique fantôme* (Cazenave and Célérier 133-134).⁹ Djamal’s sections are organized using the letters of the Arabic

⁸ For a reading of the novel’s detective plot, see Cazenave and Célérier. This reading is supported by the novel’s playful use of intertexts, including the fact Djib reads Edgar Allen Poe’s famous detective story “The Purloined Letter” on the plane ride to Djibouti.

⁹ Leiris was an aspiring surrealist poet who, disillusioned with the Paris art scene, accompanied the first French state-sponsored anthropological expedition to sub-Saharan Africa. He kept the official records of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti as well as a compulsive and constantly mutating

alphabet and often begin with prayerful invocations to Allah. The reader is meant to understand that Djib's obsession with documenting "the truth, facts, dates" is a product of his education in the Global North, while the conventions of Djamal's writing reflect his religious training and evangelist desire to "[carry] the word of Allah still further" ["la vérité. Les faits, les dates;" "apporter la parole d'Allah plus lion encore"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 87, 120). Somewhat controversially, the novel presents both western rationality and Islam as ideologies blown into the Horn that obscure the brothers' ability to access or recall indigenous epistemologies and how they relate to the natural world.

Overarching the narrative fragmented between the brothers' writing, *Passage* itself displays an environmental consciousness. This ecological sensibility is epitomized in the novel's title and its two sections named for geographic landmarks: "Les îlots du diable" (The Devil's Isles), two islands in a lake formed from a volcanic crater, and "Bab el-Mandeb ou la Porte des Larmes" (Bab el-Mandeb, or the Gate of Tears), the Bab el-Mandeb strait. Both geographies are highly volatile and transformative, a product either the eruption of the volcano or the severed connection between the Horn and the Arabian Peninsula caused by tectonic plates. Both geographies are also known for their association with human losses and the grief and loss that comes with traversing dangerous watery channels.

travel diary that documented daily events alongside his own impressions, anxieties, delusions, and desires. For more, see Brent Hayes Edwards introduction to the English translation of *Phantom Africa* (2017).

According to Djib and Djamal's grandfather Assod, the novel's source of sensory epistemology, those lost to the shifting, buckling earth are not really gone. They remain connected to the "sand and wind, the wedding of earth and water and the songs and dances of the volcano.... They will always be in this world" ["du sable et du vent, les épousailles de la terre et de l'eau, les chants et les danses volcaniques... Il sera toujours de ce monde" (Waberi, *Passage*, 60-61). Similarly, Assod himself "roamed the earth, the skies, and even the seas" after his death ["parcouru les terres, les airs et même les mers"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 46). As Djib's memory returns he recalls Assod's reflections that,

...for our ancestors...the idea of possessing land, of claiming it for one's own, of cutting it up, of dividing it out or planting a flag on it was foreign to their way of life. It's not about owning the land but honoring it, of living on it with decency, and singing to it as we go about our daily tasks: leading the cattle to graze, milking the camels, welcoming the traveler on the road, tapping for palm wine when there is some. Cultivating one's little patch of millet if we happen to live in the generous hills of the Haud, he specified for us since we had never heard of that land; observing how the streams are flowing, caring for the beehives and the sacred woods of our ancestors.

[...pour nos ancêtres...l'idée de posséder une terre, de s'en déclarer le propriétaire, de la découper, la partager ou d'y planter un drapeau était étrangère à leurs moeurs. Il ne s'agit pas de posséder la terre mais de l'honorer, de l'habiter convenablement, de la chanter en s'adonnant aux tâches quotidiennes: faire paître les bêtes, traire les chamelles, accueillir le voyageur sur les routes, tirer le vin de palme tant qu'il en a. Cultiver son petit lopin de mil si l'on se trouve dans les collines généreuses du Hawd, précisait-il pour nous autres qui n'avois jamais entendu parler de ce terroir, surveiller le cours des ruisseaux, entretenir les ruches d'abeilles et le bois sacré des ancêtres.] (Waberi, *Passage*, 61)

Assod articulates a sensory epistemology grounded in an ecology of reciprocal, dissolving, and symbiotic relation between humans and the natural world. The rhythms of life he describes recall pastoral movement between different geographies

including the Haud that were common in Calimaax and Cawrala's time. The novel contrasts this way of being, which it understands to exist only in memory and in the novel, with European and religious modes of land possession and with Ethiopian settlerism in the Somali territories. *Passage* suggests that these methods of desertification have alienated younger generations like Djib and Djamal from the land, its ecologies and sensory epistemes.

As Djib allows himself to remember the memories he repressed upon his departure, his alienation from the landscapes of his childhood begins to dissolve. Memories with a childhood friend David at Siesta Beach are especially frequent. Sitting in his hotel room facing the sea, Djib remembers running with David from the mosque in town, across the railroad tracks, and into the sea: "We'd swim a little, then come out of the water as one" ["Nous nagions un peu. Puis, nous sortions de l'eau comme un seul homme"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 87). Djamal may be Djib's biological twin, but Djib and David are twins of fortune like "those two islands in the middle of the waves" ["les deux îlots au milieu des flots"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 91).

Djib complains that the "fog of the past has covered up the landscape of my childhood," but through the act of writing in the space of the guban he draws connections between the linked forms of desertification that impact David's life and his own alienation from Djibouti ["brume du passé a recouvert les paysages de mon enfance"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 219). Rather cynically he reflects that memory functions according to his grandfather's story of a snake who appearing to be dead "eats dirt to regain its strength and come alive again" ["mange de la terre pour reprendre des

forces et revivre de plus belle”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 96-97). In the same way when memory appears to be lost, “it recovers all its energy” [“retrouver toute sa vitalité”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 96-97).

Building on this ecological and melancholic understanding of memory, Djib recognizes “les îlots du diable” as a recurring geography in his life. The islands appear in his grandfather’s stories of working on the colonial penal colony that interned Holocaust resisters and reoccur in his childhood memories with David, the descendant of Yemeni Jews expelled from the Arabian peninsula. David’s ancestors were relocated to the new Israeli state and later returned to Djibouti. In their childhood, David tossed messages-in-a-bottle toward the last remaining prisoners on the island. Finally, the islands reemerge in the present as the site of the high security prison holding Djamal. Like Jama’s, Grandpa Assod’s snake of situated melancholic memory keeps reanimating itself, reinscribing and irrigating the grief of new losses with the old.

While Djib is haunted by seaside memories, his brother finds his writing infiltrated by the figure of Walter Benjamin. A biography composed by a former Devil’s Isle prisoner reappears on the scraps of paper Djamal discovers in his cell. “Le livre de Ben” is a fragmentary presence in the novel, riddling Djamal’s chapters with gaps and holes in which the biography breaks through. The biographer, who briefly shares a Paris apartment with Benjamin, recalls him tacking up an image of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* and another time paging through a notebook of fragments, “a mosaic of notes...The repetitions and obsessions of a great melancholic” [“une

mosaïque de notes... Des répétitions aussi comme vos obsessions de grand mélancolique”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 109, 124). Initially annoyed at the disturbance, “that damned palimpsest,” Djamel later admits that “the story of Walter Benjamin has found its way into my life, *irrigating it* with its underground charm” [“ce satané palimpseste;” “l’histoire de Walter Benjamin... se soit immiscée dans ma vie, irriguant son charme souterrain”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 156, 240, my emphasis).

Calling himself “the limping angel,” the biographer locates himself and Djamel in Benjamin’s literary lineage since “all [they] need is a pen and a piece of paper to find [ourselves] in [his] wake again” [“l’ange boiteux;” “Il me suffit d’un stylo et d’une feuille de papier pour me retrouver dans votre sillage”] (Waberi 109). Meanwhile Djib is also an admirer of Benjamin and *Angelus Novus* is his favorite painting. This connection exemplifies the novel’s playful intertextuality, especially since the angel is also Djib’s namesake (his full name Djibril is the Arabic form of the name Gabriel, God’s archangel).

The Benjaminian intertext and its invocation of the angel of history not only expand the organic material the novel takes up, but also contribute to its complication of imperial geographies and temporalities. When Benjamin wrote his famous analysis of Paul Klee’s painting and the angel of history in the spring of 1940, he seemed preternaturally aware of the Holocaust to come. Like the angel, his gaze was turned toward the storm of European imperialism and its human ideal based on the exclusion of racialized others, Africans and Jews. Benjamin saw the past as chaotically fragmented, an unpredictable and undisciplined explosion of unmoored ideologies,

texts, and material objects that, unmoored from time and place, blew into the present and future. Similarly *Passage* uses Benjamin's angel to frame world-ending systems like imperialism and the Holocaust not as singular events within linear teleological time, but as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage...[a] pile of debris" (Benjamin 257-258). This all-encompassing weather touches every part of human and non-human life; in Benjamin's terms it is the "storm...we call progress" (Benjamin 257-258). Evoking it here, the novel extends the storm's temporal, spatial, and linguistic reach from the anonymous biographer in the past to Djib and Djamal and the fractured relations of their present.

Djib and Djamal's relationship personalizes the storm-carried debris of history. After Djamal acknowledges his enmity with his brother is the result of abandonment—"You left without saying a word...[leaving your family] sorely in need, without regret or remorse"—he commits suicide ["Tu es parti sans un mot pour personne...[en laissant ta famille] qui plus est dans le besoin, sans regret ni remords"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 211, 212). Meanwhile an Islamic operative in his network carries out a hit on Djib, whose body is discovered in a trash dump, the literal debris heap of history.

Despite the brothers' emergent ability to access their memories through writing, the novel withholds reconciliation and refuses a restorative story arc. Djib and Djamal's deaths are the result not only of their personal brotherly rupture, but also how this rupture is exacerbated by epistemic and community loss and instrumentalized in globalized neo-imperial security conflicts. The brothers' fates

render them, like Shidane in *Black Mamba Boy*, part of the embodied debris of history. Like *Ignorance*, only the novel is left to melancholically bear witness to and grieve the protagonists' loss.

Passage's melancholic structure draws on Benjamin's own desire to "discover new ways of dealing with the past" through the collection of fragments (Arendt 38). Believing that the past could not be reconstructed or made whole again after its shattering, Benjamin instead collected quotations, snippets of poetry, and cuttings from newspapers in journals, "little notebooks with black covers" not unlike Djib's moleskins (Arendt 47). He "tore fragments out of their context" and rearranged them so that "they illustrated one another" in a fragmented archive of loss (Arendt 47). Inspired by this method, Waberi's novel also draws together a number of literary fragments in different languages, traditions, and genres to constellate a polyvocal account of world-ending (Arendt 38). This fragmented archive includes the writing by Djib and Djamal and by Benjamin's biographer, snippets of prayers, the security brief on Djib's death, and a Fascist pamphlet on the "wound" of Adwa ["blessure"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 147).

The novel's assemblage also includes a handful of desiccated organic objects Djamal finds among his scraps of paper: "an insect leg, a rose petal, salt crystals, and two white hairs set into the vellum's greasy texture" ["une patte d'insecte, un pétale de rose, des cristaux de sel et deux cheveux blancs encastrés dans le texture grasse du vélin"] (Waberi, *Passage*, 241). The organic material from which the text is made is dry and brittle, reflecting the multiple systems of desertification that we have seen

fragment the Somali territories, their sensory epistemologies and literary forms. Still *Passage* affirms that this dry organic material is part of the swirl of material that irrigates the novel and animates its melancholy. Not only does organic material move through the novel, the novel is itself a form of organic material within a larger ecological system. A palimpsest of inconsolable grief and constant retelling, *Passage* positions itself as a stitched assemblage of journals and scraps of paper, a buckling and holey construction foregrounding the materiality of its own production within the storm of global histories.

Navigating in the fog: a return to the storm

We conclude as we began with a storm. *Passage* uses fog, a life-giving weather formation in the Horn of Africa and a dispersed diaphanous version of Benjamin's storm of progress, to thematize the alienation of the postcolonial generation from the Somali territories and their sensory epistemologies. Fog is a naturally occurring form of weather on the Somali coast that, like nuro, can obscure imperial apprehensions of space and irrigate forms of vegetal and human life. According to testimonies of community members, low-lying landscapes used to receive moisture "in the form of mist, as maritime air is forced up over the area" (Ahmed Ibrahim 3).

Because of the mist, the grass used to hold the mist settling on it, nourishing the shoots and then seep[ing] into the ground.... We used to call it *Hayeys*, because of its incessant downpour. It dampened the soil and rejuvenated the vegetation at a time our livestock were in a dire need for it. (Ahmed Ibrahim 3).

Yet recent years have witnessed a “decrease of mist,” higher temperatures, and less rainfall, by some estimates a 50 percent decrease in precipitation levels in the last 60 years (Ahmed Ibrahim 4). As one report in Somaliland summarized: “climate change stole our mist” (Ahmed Ibrahim 1). A formally melancholic substance, fog filters and weaves through the gaps in narrative. Djib and Djamal feel they are “navigating in the fog,” distanced and disconnected from the world of their grandfather [“navigue dans le brouillard”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 59). The novel also connects the brothers’ metaphorical and epistemological fog—the storm inside—to actual decreases in fog due to ongoing climate coloniality, the occupations of the past and the continued practices in the present—the storm outside.

Early in *Passage*, Djib describes a “diabolical” system of seventy-foot canvases suspended along the coast that collect “the tiny particles floating in the air” and harvest them for water use [“diabolique;” “les minuscules particules qui flottent en suspension dans l’air”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 16). Djib, himself employed by western resource speculators, notes without irony that the fog sails are “gifts from the American military” for “a land without water” [“dons des forces américaines;” “une terre sans eau”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 16, 15). The fog catchers are an index of the ongoing catastrophe of desertification, the continued occupation of a landscape that it irrevocably alters. The American forces at Camp Lemmonier are stationed on the site of the former French colonial garrison. Their “gift” acknowledges the decrease of fog under conditions of ongoing climate coloniality and, without directly accepting their

role in desertification, offers yet another spatial technology that is laid over Somali geographies.

The novel's melancholy fog turns inward with the interiorization of Djib, Djamal, and Benjamin's epistemic and relational losses and outward to index climate loss, the scope of which encompasses the whole world. *Passage* lays bare not only the colonialism of the past and its real and metaphorical desertifications but also, in Sultana's words, the "ongoing coloniality that governs and structures our lives," the afterlives of colonialism that manifest as military occupation and climate change in the present (Sultana 3). Yet even as literal fog decreases, *Passage* retains fog as a narrative device that highlights the novel's textual fragmentation without repairing it, thereby making possible the continued telling of loss and anticipation of future losses to come.

Like *Ignorance* and *Black Mamba Boy*, *Passage* uses the language of desolate deserts and sandy graves to portray real and metaphorical desertification. Standing in ruins that continue to pile up around them, the novels considered here confound imperial cartographies and temporalities, collapsing the borders between times, spaces, and languages. In so doing they account for and bear witness to ever widening and expanding scales of loss from the personal to the communal to the planetary. Rooted in the material world, they are, like the rest of the novels we have considered in this project and like Sofia Samatar's elegiac poems, texts of "extreme weather."

As expressions of *suugaan*, *Ignorance*, *Black Mamba Boy*, and *Passage* affirm that from the very conditions of desertification, conditions that invite despair and

melancholia, literature continues to emerge. What Horn of Africa novels grieve becomes part of the irrigating life force of new narratives, underpinning their melancholic critique so that “when all is gone,” the ecology that infuses and supports insistent inconsolable retellings still remains. Invitations to communal and planetary nonhuman-centered grieving, Horn of Africa novels grieve what is lost, condemn its ruin, and yet still enact an attachment to it, an ecological relationship maintained through and in spite of loss to irretrievable yet still alive things. Inconsolable in their grief, they move through our increasingly-desertified world like the poet in the desert without comfort and distraction, irrigated by the thread of suugaan nourishment, evergreen and alive.

Coda

Standing in the Ruins

In *Passage des larmes*, Djib describes how the Angel of History “must look:” his face turned toward the past, “his eyes wide-open, his mouth agape” [“doit ressembler,” “ses yeux sont écarquillés, sa bouche ouvert”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 75). The storm from paradise picks up “ruins upon ruins” and hurls them at his feet and it catches in his wings “so violently that the angel can no longer close them” [“ruines sur ruines,” “si violemment que l’ange ne peut plus le refermer”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 75).

Waberi’s rendition of the angel epitomizes the posture of the literary archive traced in this project. Contrary to the relatively recent and reactionary turn toward Anthropocene scholarship in the Global North, Horn of Africa literary traditions have long been aware of the compounding accumulation of personal, communal, and environmental disasters that constitute not a “chain of events” but the “single and incomparable catastrophe” of the imperial-colonial system [“chaîne d’événements,” “une seule et unique catastrophe”] (Waberi, *Passage*, 75). Indeed Horn of Africa literary texts bear witness in intimate, fleshly, organic detail to how the overlapping violences of the past continue on in social and environmental relations in the present, even as their logics of fungibility and extraction create further world-endings now and in the future.

In *The Road Less Travelled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn of Africa*, Ali Jimale Ahmed writes that literary perspectives have been the “road less taken” in the study of the Horn (Ali Jimale 15). Academic scholarship often presents

the Horn as geopolitically, socially, and ecologically exceptional, in but not of Africa. Rarely has it been taken on its own terms nor approached from the situated perspectives of its story-telling traditions. This project travels these less-trod roads, bringing together texts otherwise fragmented by imposed spatial, temporal, linguistic, and generic categories. It recasts them as a regional literary ecology compelled to bear witness to compounding disasters and boldly identify their perpetrators and causes. Rather than exceptionalizing the Horn, this project offers its deep and diverse literary archive as one well-practiced in critical and creatively productive grief.

The project also offers a critical method for reading that shows how imperial-colonial and environmental conditions may be apprehended together. Like the parable of the many blind men feeling their way around the leathery skin of a great horned elephant, it is possible to read this archive as fragmented into incoherence, texts side by side but oblivious to one another. Conversely, I have proceeded like Zoppe, who in perceiving stereotypes of dryness, desolation, and animality that naturalize him to his environment, searches for and finds situated epistememes which recognize and make meaning from an overlapping, varied, and context-specific reality that is more than the sum of its parts.

In similar fashion this project has de-naturalized what has been made natural about the Horn of Africa and generated a ground-up scholarly approach. As Zoppe thematizes, this project also relies on translation—texts as translations of meaning, others' literary translations as well as my own. As a critical posture, translation's provisional, storm-like approach makes it possible to trace how the Horn represents

itself and its knowledge, stories, images, and languages, while always being open to further revisions and intricacies.

In our globalized present, eruptions of the “single and incomparable catastrophe” are hardly confined to particular geographies, temporalities, or languages. Empire is the atmospheric condition—the weather—not only of the Horn of Africa but the entire world. At the time of writing, state-sponsored violence, genocide, displacement, and resource extraction are actively in progress, empowered, weaponized, and enacted by empire’s contemporary Euro-American iterations or its proxies. Presently this is evident in Tigray, Ethiopia, in the Sudan, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Gaza, and in Ukraine. Concurrently and consequently, climate change, environmental degradation, and species loss are so exponential that each generation following our own will inherit a further impoverished natural world (Kahn and Weiss).

Rather than facilitating escapism or forgetting, the Horn of Africa’s literary archive compels us to look straight ahead into the storm. These novels will not save us, only invite us to see that humans and nonhumans have long been companions and witnesses to the ends of the world brought about by fungibility and extraction. Literature is an expression and a record of what it means to stand in the world’s ruins and somehow still be alive—remembering, inconsolable, and wide-awake. There is no better company than this for the storms we face ahead.

Appendix 1
***Tobya* by Afework Gebreyesus,**
translated from Amharic by Kelsey McFaul

Preface

Included in the 2011 (E.C.) reprint edition

It is observed that people all over the world use their literary heritage to speed up and advocate for educational progress. Translating literary heritages from their original languages to other languages is shown to be useful and yield tangible results on many continents.

Collecting, reproducing, and making use of literary heritage is nothing new in our present time. We ourselves will utilize ancient books by collecting them and selecting those that are useful based on their narration, description, opinions, and values, then reproduce and put them into circulation. Based on this, we have selected *Tobya* from the old texts and polished and prepared it.

Tobya's preparation process:

- a. In an effort to make the text readable, the author has updated some words in the book that today may appear obscure but without losing their feeling.
- b. The book has redundant words in its description and limitations in its sentences which have been polished while maintaining the flow of ideas and without losing the original foundation.
- c. The book's alphabet, phrases, sentences, and arrangement were harmonized, but the corrections were minimal so as not to endanger the old style.
- d. Even though *Tobya* was written in vernacular lay language, it also has some descriptions of a scholarly nature and some ancient words. So that students in the provinces and woredas can easily read it without a teacher's help, a glossary has been prepared with phrases and sentences

for easy reference. These explanations are briefly annotated. The glossary is available at the end of the book [in the Amharic version].

Ləbb Wälläd Tarik, or A Novel

*The one who does good lends, the one who does evil suffers.
When a generous person gives they are lending, not giving.*

At the beginning of the Christian era, when the authority of the Old Testament diminished and the preaching of the Gospel emerged, arämäne people enjoyed the upper hand over the Christians. Emboldened by their superior numbers and strength, the non-Christian arämäne crossed the border into the Christian lands and attacked the people, plundering, burning, and destroying.

Many Christians were killed, taken captive, sold as slaves, or else made to do hard labor in the homes of their captors. Few though they were, the Christians fought strongly so at the very least their religion was safeguarded and they defended the borders of their land. Sometimes the victory went to the Christians, other times to the arämäne. However neither group wanted to reconcile and make peace with the other. Month after month and year after year they fought without ceasing, each searching for ways to struggle against, slaughter, and annihilate the other.

One day as usual the arämäne sent their army out to fight with orders to plunder the land of Christians down to the skin, kill the people, castrate them, capture prisoners, and sell the spoils. When the Christian king was told the news, he immediately declared the country under siege, quickly mobilized and organized his

soldiers into four divisions led by dājazmačs, and sent them out with the command: “Go and fight!”

The army rushed into battle and fought bravely to prevent the arāmāne from crossing the border. But their foes’ force was ten times their size and the Christians were defeated. Three of the four generals were killed and one was taken prisoner. On both sides the people massacred each other in hand-to-hand combat, cutting each other’s throats. The majority perished, but a few survivors were made to surrender and taken captive. Not a single person was able to retreat and escape back home. After the victory the non-believers’ army plundered the Christian land and took the cattle and prisoners back home.

News of the battle traveled throughout the land and everyone mourned the death and capture of their relatives, crying until their faces sagged in sorrow and pulling out their hair. Hearing of his army’s defeat, the death of his three generals, the fourth’s capture, and the plunder of his country, the Christian negus became sick with grief and shock. He died before his time a few days later. All at once the Christian land lost its king, and the land returned to wilderness.

The dājazmač who survived the battle was taken back to the arāmāne land and sold. The seller, not recognizing the prominence of their captive, sold him as if he were an ordinary person. The man who bought the poor general however was very pleased with his stature, height, strong build. “I’ve got a very capable slave!” he said to himself, happy with his purchase.

He put the general to work doing the most difficult jobs: cutting grass, splitting firewood, loading and carrying tents and their pegs, and more. The ex-general struggled with the manual labor and found he couldn't do any of it well. His hands felt like they'd been peeled like onions after cutting the wild grasses. Used to holding delicate glass bottles in his army days, his fingers developed sores from daily work with the axe.

Still the new slave—formerly the *dājazmač*—tried his best in everything, hoping to prevent his master's anger and avoid whippings on his tender body while whimpering, "Yes sir, whatever you say." However the skin on his hands completely peeled away with blisters. After carrying many things, his naked shoulders peeled and were worthless.

Thinking the new slave was deliberately avoiding work, the general's master was furious and considered beating him for his lack of motivation. The newly arrived slave, showing him his damaged shoulders and hands, said, "I've tried my best to do what you want, but there's no work I can do well. Do what you want to me."

Observing what manual labor had done to the slave's body and his inability to do the work, the *arāmāne* master asked himself suspiciously, "Is this man from a well-to-do family?" He questioned the seller, "The slave you sold me—what was he wearing when you captured him?"

The seller replied, "He had a lot of jewelry. When I stripped it and sold it, it brought me a lot of gold."

Overjoyed to hear this news, the master concluded that the *dājazmač*—meaning the new slave—was a member of the nobility. Since he was useless for hard work, he decided to make money from him instead. One day the master called to the slave. “I found you in the dust and bought you for a lot of money from the man who captured you,” he said. “I can do anything I like with you now, but I pity you. Send to your relatives at home and ask them to send a ransom of a large number of gold *wāḳets*. When I receive it, I will let you go.”

But the ex-general knew that the Christians’ land had been plundered, the king dead, all the cattle stolen, and the oxen driven away by the enemy. Even if this hadn’t been the case, he had lived with magnanimity on his own land, decorating and rewarding the valiant, giving alms to the poor, feeding the hungry, clothing those in need, and never thinking of hoarding money. Knowing this, the *dājazmač* said to his master: “I am poor and have nothing to pay. But do with me as you like.”

At home all the *dājazmač*’s personal servants who fought with him had died in action, the king was dead, and there was not one supporter, not one hope he could count on. He had only his wife and his two similarly-aged children, a boy and a girl, both of whom were sixteen years old. They dressed very similarly and were the perfect image of one another since the boy did not yet have a beard. The general’s wife and children were told he had died in the war. However he had actually been captured and later sold into slavery and his master had said, “Bring me a lot of gold and I will let you go.”

When the family heard this, they were relieved he was not dead. But their sorrow increased when they thought of his sufferings and hardships as an arāmāne slave and their inability to raise the ransom to free him, and they wept at their misfortunes. The king was dead, the country devastated, and they were poor themselves—where could they possibly find the money? What could they give to save him? All they could do was cry and worry.

The boy Wahəd said, “Let me go and become a slave in my father’s place so he can return to his country.”

But his mother was afraid those same non-believers would take them both and prevent the general from leaving. In the end the mother, along with the siblings Wahəd and Tobbya, thought it over and made a decision: Her son Wahəd would hire out his labor and save his earnings. Her daughter Tobbya would collect firewood, draw water, and prepare the family’s meals. They decided to dismiss their male servant and the maid since they had no money to pay or feed them. In fact it was an illusion to think they could save enough money by hiring out Wahəd’s labor and spinning thread. But what else could they do? This was all they had, and there was nothing else to do.

After their decision, the mother began to spinning as fast as she could and Wahəd looked for a master to work for. Tobbya went out to collect firewood, singing as she worked. Tobbya gathered their food which only amounted to leaves. She gathered roots, grains, and clover, even the bare earth. She collected roots and leaves every day, then cooked and served them to the family. They came together and ate,

the children pondering thoughts of their father and the mother her husband. The next day each one returned to their respective work.

One day the boy Wahad was out searching for a job and arrived at a big city. Seeing a merchant who had set up shop and camped at the outskirts, he went to inquire of him first. He asked the camp's guard about the identity of the merchant, what he sold, and where he was headed. The guard replied, "This camp belongs to a big merchant. He deals in incense, ivory, and coffee. Now he is headed to Egypt."

"Thanks be to God," Wahad replied. He paused then asked, "Do you know if this merchant needs any porters?"

The guard replied quickly, "Oh let me tell you! A disease broke out in the camp and most of the servants are laid up. As a result the merchant has been delayed and he's anxious. He can't depart and is so desperate he's said 'I'll pay double for capable men!' As you can see, the caravan here is enormous."

Wahad was filled with joy and, being in a hurry, ran to the merchant's tent without saying goodbye to the guard. Arriving at a large tent he judged to be the merchant's, he spoke to the person outside: "Here I am, wanting to be a porter! Please tell the master."

The chief of staff, observing the young man's dress and speech, didn't believe he was really offering himself as a porter. But he knew his master was desperate for men to carry the cargo. Besides that, he felt compelled by duty to go in and tell his master, "A strong and able fellow is volunteering be a porter."

The words “healthy and strong fellow” angered the merchant. "Well, a healthy man has come, is that it? As if I needed the opposite! You know that I have plenty of sick men in my house already," he said, standing up swiftly and pausing in front of the chief of staff before rushing outside to the young man.

“Ewrä!” the chief of staff replied. “What I mean is a fine-looking young man, not suitable for hard work,” but the merchant didn’t stop to listen and continued out of the tent. Swallowing his reservations, the chief of staff followed his master silently.

When the merchant reached the door of the tent, he looked around and saw no one but the young boy named Wahəd. Then he turned to the guard and asked, “Where is the person who came to load?”

Before the guard could answer Wahəd bowed his head and said, “It is me, my master. If you will allow it I have come to follow you, offer my services, and be your servant. Please agree.”

The master however looked Wahəd over from head to toe and muttered incredulously, “How!? Since when are porters like this! This is *just* the kind of porter I need. What a joke!”

Seeing that the merchant despised and would not accept him Wahəd added, “As they say, the thin obedient ox is much better than the fat lazy one. Please don’t judge me by my young appearance. I won’t have a problem with the cargo.”

When the rich merchant heard these words from the childlike Wahəd, his spirit immediately took a liking to him. "But why on earth would a nice young man like you want to go out and work for a caravan? Your language is refined, your

clothes are elegant, and you have the manners and spirit of nobility. How then could the love of money make you choose this kind of job?" he asked him.

Wahəd did not interrupt but let him finish speaking. Then he replied, "Oh my master, it is not for love of money. If you knew my story and had heard the fall from wealth to destitution that I and my family have experienced, you would not judge me so harshly."

The merchant took back his words. "Excuse me. Come and tell me your whole story. A man only looks at the surface and judges, he cannot know what is inside. Maybe I made an error without knowing. Please tell me your story and correct me." And the same rich man added, "Let's load my mule and we'll go out and talk about everything."

Wahəd immediately saddled his mule for him and they went out together. When they were a little distance from the tent, the merchant said, "Alright, tell me what's upset you."

Wahəd threw his left arm over the back of the mule behind the master and followed along next to him by foot. He said to him, "It's true that I come from noble people. I am the son of a dājazmač and I used to live with dignity and nobility. But as you know, when the arämäne came to destroy our country our king mobilized his forces under his four generals and sent them out with spears, saying 'Fight!' My father was one of those four. When the non-believers and Christians fought, God prevented his followers from getting the victory which went to the arämäne instead. Many of the fighters died and others were captured alive and sold into slavery.

“Three of the generals died in the battle. My father however was captured and sold as a slave. Recently though we heard that the arāmāne who bought him, seeing his manner and build, suspected he must be a noble person and demanded, ‘Bring me a large amount of gold and I will let you go.’ Hearing this news my mother, sister, and I were overcome with deep sadness. We don't have any gold and knew we couldn't provide the money to set our father free. And in the old days, my father only knew how to give and donate money; he didn't know how to save it. Where could we get so much money? Were the king alive he would pay it, but as you know he died of shock after his defeat. The land is devastated, the people killed, the cattle driven away, and the harvests burnt. Where could the money come from!?”

“At a loss for what else to do, my sister gathers leaves for our food. My mother earns some money by spinning, and I have been seeking work as a servant with a lord like you. We're hoping that together over time we'll save enough to win the freedom of my father. That's why I'm here now. I would have liked to take my father's place and become a slave so he could return to his country. My father took special care and attention to raise me himself; now it would be my pleasure to become a slave and repay him. But my mother stopped me, saying, ‘I cry for your father's suffering. If you also go and remain as a slave with your father, it will only add to our suffering more.’ And she pled with a priest, who also forbade me to go under threat of divine punishment. Now let me tell you, my lord,” he concluded, “this is what brings me here to be a servant. Please don't judge me.”

The rich merchant listened to Wahəd's story with great sadness and sympathy. When he finished he said, "I have some business in my tent, so I will go back there. You go back to your home. May God help you!" All merchants carry some money with them on their travels. On this occasion the merchant tossed all the money he carried into a bag and gave it to the young man. Before they parted the same rich man asked Wahəd, "What is your father's name, and the name of the arämäne who bought him? Where does he live?"

Wahəd was filled with joy thanks to the bag of gold. Happily he held the merchant's hand, his lips trembling and his head shaking. He told him his father's name and location, including specific place markers. They separated and each went their own way. However in Wahəd's happiness for his sudden and unexpected good luck, he didn't ask for the generous man's name and address in return nor did he say thank you or "God bless you." He just blew on home.

Ashamed and not wanting to appear greedy by counting what he received in front of the generous man, Wahəd waited until after they parted, then hid himself behind a bush, quickly poured the bag of gold onto his šäma, and counted it, finding 40 gold wäķets.

At this his happiness doubled and he ran home and entered the house, presenting the gold to his mother and his sister and telling them what had happened. Hearing the story and moved by the thought of the merchant's kindness and the enslaved person's release, mother and sister began sobbing with tears of happiness and sadness. Clearly the rich merchant had told Wahəd "Load my mule for me and

follow me” to discern whether he was worthy of support and so that he would not be humiliated by accepting money without doing a service.

But the gold given to them was still not enough to pay the arämäne’s ransom and release their father. As a result the mother, Tobbya, and Wahød returned endlessly to thoughts of how to make up the difference. They each spent their days working and night after night they gathered for their dinner of plants.

One evening Tobbya prepared and cooked the leaves, then scooped the food from the pan into rounded bowls. The three of them gathered and ate as usual while admiring the merchant’s generosity. “When will the day come when we can save as much money? When are we going to send the ransom? When will he be freed?” They said all this with longing, interrupting their meal every now and then to talk. “When are we going to see each other again? The time has not yet come.”

Just at that moment the door opened gently. Out of nowhere someone entered very slowly and stood in front of them. All three were startled and looked up.

It was the man they wished for, the one who had been sold, their father! They couldn’t believe it was real and thought they were day-dreaming. The general, when he saw his wife and children together and at the same time, was overcome with longing and love. He stood motionless and could not speak from choking back his tears. Shaking and dazed with shock, the family also could not get up or talk for some time.

Minutes passed and the dream stopped; taking deep breaths, they began to realize he really was their father, the one they missed so much and desired to see. All

at the same time his wife and children got up and ran to him, crying. One hung on his neck, another on his waist, and the third about his knees. Anyone who saw them then, even an enemy or a non-relative, would have felt sad and full of pity.

The father's words too were interrupted with tears. Taking each of them in his arms in turn, he began, "How are you? How are you doing?" Then turning his face on all three and wiping his tears with his handkerchief, he asked, "Where did you get the gold to free me from slavery? I never knew how to save that much money myself. Where did you get it from?"

But they did not know how to answer this mystery. They knew very well that as of yet they'd sent no money to free him and were still trying their best to save what they could to raise the required amount. They could only stare at each other.

Seeing no one answer him his father turned to Wahād and asked, "Wahād, my son? Where did you get it from?"

But what could Wahād answer? He was sure he hadn't sent anything! But a few minutes later, with his father still looking into his eyes and waiting, Wahād remembered the words of the generous person who had given him the gold wāḳets earlier.

"I know the man who sent the money to let you go!" he said, "Father, I'm not him." Then he told him the story of that generous merchant who gave him money and asked him his father's name and the name and country of the arāmāne who had bought him.

The father was very surprised to hear all this. He thanked Christ above and blessed the good man below who had liberated him.

Then the old general said to Wahəd, “My son, this good merchant who didn’t know me and whom I don’t know, who is no relation to me, paid the arämäne so much money to release me from slavery. Moreover he gave me a good horse and sufficient supplies for my journey home so I wouldn’t be hungry. In this way he allowed me to return to my land, my river-source, my home, my children, and my wife. He made my happiness possible and my world complete! I must go and meet my unknown benefactor. Of course I cannot repay him for what he’s done. But assuming he has not departed on business I will go to where he is, say ‘God bless you,’ and thank him for his kindness. Please, take me there!” he entreated.

But Wahəd did not know the name or whereabouts of that wealthy merchant, only his face. He hadn’t asked such things at the time and now he was concerned.

“If I want to find that person, that kind generous person who brought back my father and dried my, my mother, and my sister’s tears, what direction should I go? What should I do to find him?”

Finally he made up his mind. “I will not rest until I find the merchant and tell him about my father's safety and his reunion with us. I will not rest until I thank him for the joy he had given and the world he returned to us. I will go around the world looking for him for as long as I live, but I will not stay at home.”

Having decided, Wahad gathered his travelling supplies for a long journey in a sack, tied them together, and grabbed his walking stick. The next day he said goodbye to his relatives with many tears and set out to search.

Wahad left the house and travelled quickly, heading toward the large city where he'd found the rich merchant camped. When he arrived at the outskirts but before entering, he regarded the field where the merchant's tents had been pitched. Looking at the location and thinking of that kind person he was shaken. He began to cry and, with tears running down his face, sat down where he had been standing.

After he'd finished, he got up and began walking again but with his neck always turned toward where the camp used to be and unbothered by his feet kicking up gravel and rocks. Still with his face turned toward the camp, he eventually entered the city gates. But what could he do in the city?

His thoughts swirled and crashed around each other. Disoriented and looking like a fool, he stopped in the middle of a crossroads, floating without knowing where he was going. He was a young boy from a noble family who had always had a comfortable life; he'd seen suffering only a few times. Now he started to feel hungry and thirsty. He was overcome with despair, and his eyes became heavy with tears. Despite it all Wahad had no regrets about the decision he'd made. It was not an empty promise: he was determined to search for this good man even until the end of his life if necessary. Nothing could divert his mind from his commitment.

Overcome by hunger and thirst, he looked for and sat down near a small stream. He carefully ate a little of his food, bowed down and drank deeply at the stream's source, said "Thank you, Lord," and rose to continue his search.

Then Wahad went to every square, market, street, place of worship, house, door, alleyway, and church to find the merchant. He searched all these places but was not able to find him. All his effort was in vain. Wahad gave up hope. He had spent eighteen days searching the town. During that whole time he wandered around searching during the day and spending the night on church porches so he wouldn't be eaten by hyenas.

Eventually realizing that the rich merchant wasn't in that city he asked himself, "Where should I go to find him?" He thought and thought and decided to continue his search by visiting all the markets of the various merchant caravans. This was his final decision.

The next day Wahad took his own advice, left the city, and started walking along one of the roads searching for caravan shops. He walked and walked and every time he came to a hill he would climb it and look around to see if there were any shops or caravans. Whenever he met passersby he asked if they had seen a shop or a merchant on their way. If someone said to him, "A merchant passed here, from this neighborhood," Wahad immediately ran in that direction, caught up with the merchant, and searched for that generous man among the group. He didn't know the merchant's name and would only recognize him by his face so he could not ask the other merchants, "Where is so-and-so? Where is he now?" In this way Wahad went

from one shop to another, running now in one direction, now in another, wherever he heard shops could be found, and he slept wherever he found himself at nightfall.

One day as he was traveling, he came to the wilderness where there was no village. In the middle of an uninhabited and empty wilderness area, he saw a large merchant camp in the distance. He recognized it by its shop, the arrangement and size of which resembled the camp where he had met that rich man. Momentarily he was filled with happiness. Hoping to reach the camp, he took off at a run.

The wild land was dominated by rivers. Wahəd ran and ran but the distance between him and the camp remained the same. The more he strained to arrive there, the more the camp seemed to pull back from him. As much as he ran, he made no progress on the road. The hour grew late and the sun went down, and before Wahəd could reach the shop it was nightfall. As the sun set, it was difficult to see.

When darkness fell nothing was visible. Gone were the songs of the daytime birds and in their place were the various noises of water creatures, grasshoppers, and wild animals. On either side of the boy wolves and foxes began to howl in the darkness. Hyenas, tigers, and lions made loud noises all around. Still Wahəd, trembling with fear, walked alone through the middle of the wilderness.

In the evening, the noise of birds had been good company. Later on now, the sounds of beasts surrounded him on the right and left and he was worried. There was no house to stay in; where could he rest and sleep? If he stayed out in the field, the beasts would finish him off. What should he do?

Wahəd decided to continue his journey. He would defend himself against the wild animals rather than lying down to rest and getting eaten. “Whatever happens, I can’t sleep here,” he said to himself. “I need to reach the shop I saw.”

Meanwhile it got darker and darker. It became densely dark, he lost his way, and his spirit grew deeply frightened. Left and right, front and back, everything appeared to him in the shape of hyenas, tigers, and lions.

“The hyena will sneak up on me and tear out my belly!” he thought. “The tiger will strangle me, and the lion will break my bones into pieces! Oh poor me! If I escape one I won’t escape another.” All he could do was pant in fear. What could be done? Wahəd couldn’t escape this fate.

In the midst of all this a young moon shone faintly. Wahəd continued on despite all the fear racing nonstop through his mind in the direction of the camp he had seen. Once he looked through the darkness into the bush and glimpsed a four-legged creature he thought was a lion. The sight filled him with such fear it felt as if his soul separated from his body. His knees shaking, he stared at the creature imagining that the lion created by his fear was waiting and thinking about jumping out to attack him.

Then Wahəd, thinking up a trick, decided to act like he was in a large group of people. He used fifteen different voices—once a high voice, another a lower voice, then a thin voice, then again a deep voice going through puberty—shouting like a herd of people: “Circle it, don’t let it escape! Don’t be afraid, keep going!”

Continuing to shout, he mixed all the voices together. In reality Wahad was alone. He was without friends except for his shadow which blended in with the darkness and confused him. Even though he'd given the bush the name "lion," it wasn't alive.

When it refused to move, Wahad changed his course to avoid it. Still whenever he looked back it seemed to him the lion his fear had conjured in the bush was following him. Poor Wahad, he could not move his legs shook so badly in terror. He thought to climb a tree to escape but unfortunately there wasn't a stick to tend a fire in that wilderness let alone a large tree. After all these thoughts Wahad was deeply worried. His fear overwhelmed him more and more. Every black thing he saw seemed like a wild animal. Going up and down among small hills he kept changing direction.

Suddenly a small cave appeared on his left side, and his shaking increased even more. Panicked, his face and body were covered in a thin layer of spreading sweat. "I escaped from one lion and here a second one has arrived! Surely I won't escape this time," Wahad said, worry rising.

Standing tall and raising his voice as before he started shouting, "Surround it! Don't let it escape!" He shouted over and over again until his throat, already sore with thirst, began to crack. However much he looked at it the object didn't run away from him. Stretching himself he shouted with even more energy but the object remained at a standstill looking down at him. Later his voice became thin and his throat almost closed. He found it difficult to shout in any of the fifteen different voices.

Believing it was the same false lion looking down on him with disdain, Wahād became suspicious. "Of course, it must just be an inanimate black object," he started to say. Then he knelt to scrutinize it with certainty and said: "Will it move now?" and again, "Will it move a little bit?" And as he watched, it did seem to move a little. He focused on it without closing his eyes. Suddenly, it seemed to start walking toward him. His eyes teared up from staring.

When Wahād realized he was wasting time he let the tears flow and as they did it seemed like the beast's steps hurried toward him again. Wahād glared at the beast, then knelt down and threw pebbles and stones out in front of him. As trying times bring support, the only witness to all that had happened to Wahād was a small concealed quail. Saying, "I've been hidden, now I am revealed," she shook the leaves with her wings, made a sudden noise, and flew away.

At first Wahād thought that the beast had come out and was going to choke him. He stopped breathing and lay motionless as if he were dead. Time passed and he thought to himself, "Has my soul survived, or am I dead?"

To find out if the beast had bitten him and to reassure himself, he listened carefully but didn't hear anything. He had closed his eyes because he was afraid of being bitten by a beast; opening them now he saw that far from a wild animal, there was not even a rabbit in sight.

Then Wahād took a deep breath, steadied himself, and stood up. Looking around, the beast he thought was there didn't move or peak, just looked at him. A

thought dawned on Wahəd: “Did any beast come? Or was the beast ever alive? I saw it. But did it bite me and then leave?”

As he spoke he checked his body and felt that he hadn’t been touched. “What was it? I was so fragile and overwhelmed by my fear that I couldn’t stand. I’m so glad no one saw me in this state. How can a man collapse from his own fear?” he said all this to himself, surprised by what had happened. Then he resumed his journey.

A little stronger now, Wahəd hoped to reach the camp before dawn. But it was very late, past midnight, and the six stars Wahəd had perceived as his friends had completely disappeared. The darkness was very strong. He lost the road only to find it again. As he walked the camp’s fires started to appear, encouraging him and filling him with happiness.

Walking downhill he came to a river. As he descended lower into the valley the camp’s fires disappeared behind the horizon. There was no moon, the morning star had not yet appeared, and no light could expel the worsening darkness. On top of that shadows on the left and right banks of the river made it impossible to see. The darkness so strong you couldn’t see if your own eyes had been poked out.

Wahəd descended downhill but he lost his way. What could he do? He had made up his mind to reach the merchant camp and wanted to do so at any cost. He went downhill in the dense and impenetrable darkness, sometimes crawling, sometimes going on his hands and feet, sometimes dragging himself, turning his face in the direction he’d come from and at the same time sending his legs in the direction he wanted to go, crawling through the grass, plants, and thorny əshə bushes covering

the ground like a farmer who as forgotten a sickle, and sliding on his chest until finally, he arrived at the flowing river.

Wahəd had no way of knowing whether the unknown river’s water was clean or cloudy. Yet desperate to quench his thirst he bent over and drank from the river as if it were high-quality tej or filtered țäla. With his mouth he sifted out the green sludge that covered its surface, spitting out the slimy parts. When he’d drunk his fill and was no longer thirsty he said, “Thank you, Lord,” then sat down on the rock by the river and looked at the crossing.

At first it seemed like the river was too deep for him. He couldn’t sense whether the water was shallow or deep. He didn’t know how to swim and was too scared to enter the water. Wahəd had heard it said that a river that flowed gently and without falls was usually deep. “What shall I do?” he said to himself.

Then a mule appeared, very thirsty like himself. She came from the direction of the camp having escaped by pulling up the stake to which she was hobbled.

“Is this some kind of wild animal?” Wahəd asked himself, panicking. But looking at her nose and lips as she shook them in the water he calmed down. The mule completely immersed herself in the river, sending water flowing in his direction. Thanks to the mule, Wahəd then realized that the water was shallow and he estimated the depth.

“If the mule finishes drinking and feels full, she’ll escape me. I must catch her before then,” he said and used his long stick to make his way through the water in her direction, measuring the water as he went.

At that moment the mule threw water at him, raised her head, and shook her ears and for the second time wondered to herself, "Have I had enough or do I need more?" In the same instant Wahəd approached and grabbed her quickly, saying, "You, you!"

She was kind. He first touched her with his hand thinking that she might kick him but the mule sensed that he was tired and begging her, "Let me rest." Saddened, she kept quiet and let herself be caught.

Confirming that she was tame, Wahəd pulled her up to a massive rock and climbed on her back. Then he turned her in the direction she had come. Addressing her directly he said, "Take me to your stable," and put himself in her care.

As if she understood Wahəd's meaning the mule took the path toward the merchant's camp, walking without shaking him. Every so often though when she saw grass, the mule stopped, grazed a little, and at her own convenience resumed the return journey to her friends. Wahəd however didn't say, "Go, you!" He just clung tightly to her mane to keep from falling. Otherwise he let her go at her own pace, feeling it would be ungrateful to speed her along with his feet when of her own free will she had allowed him to catch and ride her. "A guest has no authority in his host's home!" he thought to himself.

The mule took her time rejoining her fellow animals and, just as they were about to reach the camp, the guards out looking for the mule heard her footsteps and came running. When Wahəd saw this he was afraid of being caught riding a mule that belonged to others, so he got off and planned to hide. But when the guards

surrounded the mule and tried to catch her with leather ropes, they also found and caught Wahəd who looked like he was about to steal her away.

Wahəd, his feet exhausted, was unable to escape and didn't know what to do. Finding him next to the mule the guards thought he had untied her and taken her from the camp. "You thief! Let's see if your father comes to save you!" they shouted, beating him with heavy walking sticks, insulting him, and making him feel miserable.

"Please listen to me," Wahəd said. "I'm not a thief!"

He shouted weakly but it was all in vain as they shouted back, "You thief, you liar! We caught you stealing from us, and you say 'I'm not a thief!'" Then they took them into the camp.

Some of the men tied up the mule in the stable and others tied Wahəd's hands and legs very tightly and left him lying face down on the ground. What can a young boy left upside down do? He couldn't breathe. His breaths became shorter and shorter, shallower and shallower. Anyone who saw him then would have cried on his behalf. He was lying like a goat to be slaughtered, upside down with his hands and feet tied with ropes. Meanwhile the mules wandered around him as he lay, with only one of their legs tied to a pole and plenty of food.

"If only I could have my feet tied like you and breathe all my breath like you!" Wahəd said with envy. But he was about to explode from lack of air. He rolled his eyes bright like the morning star from left to right, wondering who might save him. Who might intercede and loosen the rope even a little? It was all in vain. His suffering and pain were like that of the martyrs, those whose deaths we read about in

books. All the stocky heavysset merchants struck him with their elbows and fists and kicked him. Wahəd passed the night in such conditions until morning dawned.

In the morning all the merchants who had been sleeping got up, heard the story of Wahəd's capture, and came to see the thief who was surrounded by animals. They saw that his knees, chest, and back were bruised and sore, his clothes torn, and his gabi stained with blood. All this was the result of his journey through the thorns and thistles in the darkness but to his captors it meant that he was a thief. They thought he'd been found stealing in the same way in some other place and they had beat him there and let him go.

Wahəd was tired and unable to breathe; he could not open his eyes. Not only couldn't he get up to travel with them, he was barely alive.

At that time a few of the merchants said, "Shall we deliver him to the governor or tie him to the mule and take him with us?"

While they argued, their peers stomped on Wahəd with their feet and said, "What's your name? Where do you come from?" They questioned him, but he was too exhausted to respond. As they tossed and rolled him back and forth, he became like a corpse.

Then the majority said, "Let's release him and leave him alone. If he's dead we'll be blamed and run up a steep debt because of our actions."

By then it was getting late and they started to gather the animals. Quickly they packed up the camp and, since it was too late to hand Wahəd over to the governor,

untied him and left him lying there alone. They rode away from the campsite. Only he and the grass flattened by the animals were left.

Making matters worse, poor Wahød had nothing to eat or drink and no relative or supporter to come to his aid. The whole night he'd been alone in the frost and the cold and now these were replaced by the sun burning his chest and forehead. He had no energy nor capacity to get up and move into the shade. Wahød was numb with exhaustion from being on the road day and night, kicked, punched, driven, goaded and pushed by the guards, and then tied up. What's more, it had been two days since he'd eaten. How could he possibly move after all that? He just lay there in silence, the sun beating down on him, miserable with thirst, and thinking he was about to die.

But if Christ says it's not your day to die, you won't. An old woman approached the deserted camp to pick up the left-behind cattle dung for fuel and from a distance she saw the body lying there. At first she thought it was something forgotten by the merchants. Getting closer she saw it resembled a human body. She leaned forward on her toes to look closely, afraid to get too near what looked like a corpse. Still she didn't turn back; she hated to leave without finding out the truth. Then even though she was afraid she held her breath and cautiously approached the body again.

No matter how hard she stared she didn't see him move so she suspected he was a corpse. Afraid it was a dead body, she covered her nose and mouth with a cloth and approached, saying, "What kind of person are you? What happened to you?"

There was no answer but she kept on looking at him. Suddenly she moved closer, wanting to know if it was someone she knew who was dead. Then she saw Wahad's eyes narrowly open and, as if they were speaking to her, say, "Don't be afraid! My soul is not yet gone. Come closer and see my body. Help me if you can."

She looked at him and seeing that he moved a little slowly asked, "What happened to you, my brother?" Noticing he did not answer, she beat her chest and cried.

Then that kind woman ran back to her house and returned with milk in one hand and water in the other. She put down the jug of milk and with her hand raised his neck and held it close to her chest. She said, "Let's wet your throat, my child," and poured the water onto his lips.

Wahad felt the cool water on his mouth but he had no strength to help himself drink. At the sight of his wet yet chapped lips she made him drink from the jug of milk. After gulping the milk a few times, he opened his eyes and started breathing.

As soon as that kind woman saw he had returned to life she put her inquist, the basket she used for collecting dung, upside down under his head as a pillow. Then she went a little distance, climbed a hill, and called to her husband who was busy plowing the land nearby, saying "Come here and help me with a job."

Her husband stopped his tilling and ran to her. Before he could ask "What's the matter?" she said, "Please, let's help each other and take this brave young man to our house and care for him until he recovers."

These kind people took him to their home and installed him carefully in their bed. They slept on the floor and cared for him like a selfless mother and father until he completely recovered.

Wahād, weighing the kindness of this couple and the cruelty of the caravan guards, said to himself, “This world is full of both bad and good people.” To them he said, “May God reward you for what you have done for me. I have nothing to give you in return except thanks. I regained my strength because of your kindness. Now, let me go.”

They packed him what he needed for his journey and showed him the road. When they had finished packing they said, “Don't forget your past suffering. The men of this world are evil. Be careful from now on and don't travel alone. We had only one child: Islamic merchants found our son alone on the road, kidnapped him, and sold him. Here we are, we have lost our only son. There's no one to support us, no one to help us in our old age, and no one to inherit from us. Be careful that you, still a young child, do not fall into similar circumstances in the hands of men and be sold.”

They advised him and returned home. When Wahād said goodbye to them he noted both their names, the name of their son who had been sold, and the name of their land; then he started to travel.

Wahād traveled very far on foot, but he did not know whether he was in the lowlands, the highlands, or where he was headed. He traveled along the road, asking only for news of the merchant caravans. Whenever he heard “They passed in that direction,” he would walk that way.

In the course of his journey but without knowing it he crossed the Christian border and entered the land of the arāmāne, still without finding the rich merchant he sought. When he first saw those people their language, clothes, and habits were all unfamiliar to him. Wahəd began to worry, but how could he turn back now?

The traveler went wherever his feet took him and even when he knew where he had come from the land began to spin around his head, disorienting him. Where the sun came up and where it went down were all one to him. As he worried about these things, darkness fell suddenly on the earth.

“Instead of getting eaten alive by wild beasts,” he said to himself, “I’ll let these people do what they like to me.”

With this in mind he went to one of the houses nearest the roadside and begged, “Please let me spend the night with you.”

The owners of the house noticed he looked quite unique and surrounded him, gazing at him and laughing. They didn’t understand what Wahəd said but surmising from his gestures that he was asking to spend the night in one of their home they happily welcomed him. Like a family member returning from a faraway campaign, they supported his hands left and right and took him to their homes. They prepared food, fed him, and gave him water to keep him healthy and fatten him up so he would fetch a good price.

Thinking that they were honoring and entertaining him with kindness as God’s guest, Wahəd began to bless them. But when he finished eating, they surrounded him. Seeing his injured body and the wounds he had received at the merchant’s camp and

from travelling in the dark, they touched him to see if he was healed. They worried, “His wounds may or may not bring down the price,” as they prepared for the market the following day.

Wahəd with his good heart didn't know any of this. Observing them press the wounds to see if they were healed and looking and talking to each other, he thought they were sympathizing with him and said, “Now I am saved, I'm no longer hurt.”

They didn't listen to or understand what he said; they just prepared for tomorrow's market, asking themselves, “How much should we sell him for?” Then they let him sleep, watching him all night so he wouldn't sneak away and escape.

Quite early at dawn they woke him from a sweet sleep, made gänfo porridge, and fed him. When he ate and was satisfied, they anointed his body all over with animal marrow. Wahəd was a child of nobility, only accustomed to being anointed with butter sweetened with sandalwood and other perfumes. He had no experience with ointments of animal fat or those for softening old leather rope. “Don't put that on me!” he said with disgust.

Even without knowing his language, they realized from his looks and gestures that he resented the marrow and didn't like it. Yet they knew that when they displayed him to potential buyers, his stomach full of porridge and his body smeared with marrow, he would fetch them a lot of money so they continued with the smelly ointment regardless of what he said. Realizing they wouldn't stop, Wahəd gave up and kept silent. Also he thought they were doing him a kindness by trying to heal his wounds. “Oh wonderful, wonderful! What a country this is where God's guest is

loved,” he said and blessed the land. How surprising to be so unknowable to one another!

The same morning, the people came to him blinking their eyes and said, “Get up and follow us,” and so they all went out together. Wahəd, thinking they wanted to go on a picnic walk, agreed and followed them readily, walking in their midst.

After a while they came to a large village surrounded by a protective ditch like a fortress. It was further encircled by a large stone wall topped by the thorny branches of acacias and other kinds of trees so that it was impossible to jump over. In the middle were several tall buildings and two government halls.

The compound had only two gates: one was narrow, the other wide enough to pass through on horseback. At the compound’s main gate was a man was black as the devil. His chest was several arm-lengths wide and he was as tall as a pillar, his eyes colored red as if with ənsosla or balsam, and his nose flattened as if with a roller. His arms, thick as an elephant’s hooves, were decorated with copper and tin bracelets. Around his naked belly he wore a large belt with a short sword sharpened in four directions. This man stood at the gate with a rope tightened in his right hand, ready to prevent any people who were not permitted from entering. Seeing all this Wahəd thought, “This must be where the local governor lives.”

The men who brought him had sent a message ahead to the owner of the house and were given permission to enter. With his hosts on either side Wahəd passed through the gate and saw many who had been brought to be sold like him coming

from every side and similarly encircled by their sellers. These people wept and wailed.

Observing this his body flooded with suspicion and he realized all the kindness he'd been shown was a ruse. Still he waited patiently to see how things would turn out. Even if he knew what was happening, what could he do alone amongst all the unbelievers? He was an arämäne captive and didn't even know their language. Like a sheep being prepared for the Easter slaughter, he could only helplessly observe his surroundings.

That large compound, impressive fortress, sharp acacia thorns, and strong fortifications—all were part of a big slave trader's house and worked to guarantee that the captured slaves were tightly fenced day and night and had no possibility of escape. The chief slave trader came out of his hall and stood in the middle of the compound. Then he walked all around inquiring about the price.

Eventually he came to Wahəd. Like a traditional massage healer trying to understand the injuries of his patient, he inspected his arms and legs like one would wiggle the teeth of a young boy. When he finished negotiating the price with the men who'd brought Wahəd and had counted out and handed over the money and the men had received it, Wahəd realized he had witnessed his own sale into slavery. Those kind good people who cared so well for God's guest returned home, carrying their gold and silver at Wahəd's expense.

Wahəd stayed with his new master who, it turns out, was not a bad person. On the contrary he liked Wahəd's appearance, manners, and personality and said he

wouldn't make a profit off him nor make him work. Rather he would allow him to grow up in his house with his own children.

Even under these conditions Wahad thought, "How can God approve of me staying in these nonbelievers' house? How can He deny me the chance to meet that good merchant and be reunited with my family?"

Yet over time Wahad discovered many enslaved Christians in the same house serving the same master. He knew their language and began approaching them. Careful not to be observed, he asked them their names and the time and place they had been sold. Among those slaves Wahad happened by accident upon the son of the people who'd found him beaten up and abandoned and who had taken him in and rescued him. They told him their son's name when he stayed with them. Wahad recognized him immediately when the boy told Wahad his name, his homeland, and the way he was sold.

Thrilled, Wahad told the boy that he had recovered because of his mother and father's care in his house and that they continued to weep day and night over losing him. The two became close friends, almost one being. Their secrets and hopes united and they started living in the hope that one day they would return to their respective homes.

Meanwhile a year had passed since Wahad left home. His mother, father, and sister didn't know where he'd gone and assumed he had "disappeared." All this time they wept over their loss.

Finally Wahəd's father thought, "My child has gone missing. How can I just sit here silently in my warm house? I must go and look for him at all costs."

He saddled the horse given to him by the kind merchant when he freed him from slavery and set out to search for Wahəd. But there was no one to accompany him. Half his servants had fallen in front of him in the war and the other half had been captured and sold like him. When he returned home, the king was dead, the cattle plundered, the land barren, and because of all this he himself had become poor.

When his daughter Tobbya saw him preparing to go alone without a companion, she feared that he would lose his way just like her brother Wahəd had done. Beginning to cry she implored him, "Father, you're used to living a noble life. How can you go on such a long journey without a companion? Who will cut the grass and feed it to your horse? Who will gather water and give it to you at the right time? Now, please don't leave me behind; let me follow you on this journey. If nothing else I can make conversation and take the horse and lead him to graze. No matter what happens, don't leave me behind!" she said to him, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Seeing her extreme anxiety and uneasiness he was saddened and wept like her. "My daughter, your plan will be unsuccessful. You're still a young girl and fragile. Just imagine if you're exposed to extreme sun and cold, or get exhausted by the hunger and thirst of the road—how will you be able to travel the country with me? It's final, you're not coming," he said, forbidding her.

But Tobbya begged him, crying and saying, "No, I won't stay behind."

Her father firmly refused. “Far from you helping me you will tire me, slow me down, and delay my goal of finding your brother Wahad. You’re still a young girl, Tobbya,” he added. “You’ve been raised in comfort and nobility with tej to drink for every meal and the wine bottle always nearby. When there’s no wine and no water and your feet used to soft carpets must handle the thorns of the road, how will you weather the hunger and thirst and the sun’s pressing heat and still return home? No, you must stay here with your mother.” Saying this, he got up to kiss her goodbye.

She wrapped her arms around him crying and saying, “My father, don’t worry about me. People can adapt to poverty as well as to nobility. I’m still young and can adjust to new conditions. Moreover, ordinary people who come into nobility may not know how to manage, but a child of nobility even if they lose their privilege won’t be crippled by poverty and hardship. They’ll get used to it quickly if need be. I’m sure to adapt quickly so take me with you. Besides if I stay here I’ll worry about my good father and brother. It’ll be much better if I wander around the country with you dealing with whatever comes my way.”

Then her father said, “As you do not understand, let me explain it to you. What are you thinking? How can we leave your mother alone? What will people think if we do?”

When he finished, the mother replied. “Let people say what they want. Don't think about me, I can easily find an elderly widow to manage things for me. I’m only worried that the girl will tire and won’t be able to keep up with you. But if she thinks

it's possible, don't worry about me." And turning to her daughter, she asked, "Really now my child, do you trust your strength?"

"Yes, mother," Tobbya said quickly. "If you don't mind being left alone and permit me to go, I'm sure I'll make it. Just convince my father to give me permission."

Her father began to answer, "Whether or not—" But Tobbya interrupted his thoughts.

"Just one more thing, Father," she said, wanting to add more but then hesitating out of fear.

Her father could tell she was being shy. "Tell me what's on your mind, my daughter," he said.

Tobbya gathered herself and added, "My father, two are better than one. Even the lion, man's enemy, respects two people and does not attack when he sees them together. An enemy will be afraid if the two are male, but no one is afraid of a woman. So when I accompany you I will leave my women's clothes behind. It will be better to dress as, as a..." She hesitated to finish her thought and bowed her head to the ground.

Her father understood her. "When you say as, as—do you mean you want to dress as a man when you travel with me?" he asked.

Hesitant and overwhelmed, Tobbya covered her face with both hands and said in a thin voice, "I think it's better, my father."

Her father realized she was determined to go and said, “Fine! If you want to so badly, what can I do to stop you? Get ready. Let's prepare and leave right away.”

Happy, Tobbya immediately cut her hair, long and thick as silk, into a male style and put on a complete set of male clothes. She reassured her mother and they said goodbye and departed.

The father and child supported and encouraged each other, sleeping, traveling, and sleeping again, until they reached the city Wahəd had told them would be his first destination. But when they got there, who could they ask for help? They went around the square and market looking for Wahəd, but it was useless; he was like a pipedream to them.

Later they said, “Wahəd was looking for that kind rich merchant. Let us sit at the gate where all merchants pass by from the places he has traveled to. We'll look at every merchant going back and forth. Eventually we'll see Wahəd or that merchant coming back from Egypt with him.”

With this hope they inquired about the way to the big gate but the road took them to an unexpected place. First it took them through the wäyna däga, then the low ƙola, then to a land they didn't know.

“How will we get out of here?” they said, trying to leave.

Just as they said this they reached a very fertile däga area. Their hearts pulsed with happiness as they gazed across the beautiful highland landscape. It was harvest time. Grain was heaped up on one side; on another, the harvest was in process; and further away the piles were sorted. Elsewhere piles of seeds sat ready for planting.

Some fields had just been planted and others had young crops. It was a beautiful sight, enough to make someone full without eating a bite of food.

Seeing all this, Tobbya grew stronger again. Her father was happy to see his daughter in such good spirits. Tobbya had left her women's clothes at home and wore a man's pants and shirt, a šäma, and a piece of sheepskin elaborately embroidered and edged as is done in the Arabian Sea. In this costume she left the house looking like a refined young man. Her father commended her, teasing, "Not only your clothes but also your strength make it clear you're a man." And indeed Tobbya was very strong and never complained of tiredness.

They emerged from the ʔola's edge and ascended to the heights of the dāga. At the threshold, they first sat on the hill and felt a refreshing breeze move quickly across their faces, cooling them so they could admire the growth of the crops, the cultivation, and the beauty of the land. As they contemplated and exclaimed over the landscape, the sun set and they decided to go into the village to find a place to stay.

"Let us go into the village to rest and pass the night. We'll look for the main gate where all the merchants traveling to Sinar, Egypt, and the sea gather, then we'll inquire among them which road to follow. The next day we'll get up early and follow that road in search of Wahəd." Thinking thus, they paused their plans and entered the village nearby.

Approaching one of the houses they appealed, "Please let us sleep here and keep our horse in the stable."

A woman who had been crying hurriedly came out of her house to meet them, wiping away her tears. She rushed up to them instantly, asking, “Where did you come from? What's the news?” She was the homeowner.

“We came from that way and haven't heard any news,” said Tobbya’s father, pointing to where they had come from.

Crying, the woman answered, “Please come in and rest. The horse will spend the night eating with the others and you will spend the night as if we were equals. So long as we have possession of our own house, God's guest can spend the night here. But who knows about tomorrow or the day after that? We may not even have the house, since the arāmāne invading our land will either burn it or come and inhabit it like they built it themselves. Oh my house! Oh my property! My beloved and generous home. Here I enjoyed feeding myself, drinking, and all the joys life can offer...” and saying this last, she completely lost herself in tears and sobbed bitterly.

In the midst of her tears she stopped herself, realizing that the guests didn't know what she was crying about and had not asked her out of respect and fear. “Don't be afraid,” she said to herself, wiping away her tears with a cloth. “What will these guests say to me?”

Then she spoke to them, her voice full of regret. “Don't be afraid! That's not the real problem. Sit down and we'll talk about it after you eat. It's only good to talk about positive things in a rush, not the negative—don't you agree?” Reassuring and comforting them, she went back to work.

Tobbya was frightened by all this. She tried to persuade her father to get away, saying “Let’s leave this house and go.”

At some distance from them they saw a man deeply consumed with his thoughts. He was so lost in contemplation he seemed to have forgotten everything around him. Sitting on a stool with his head between his knees, he dug at the earth with a stick in his hand, causing the dust to rise.

At first he didn’t notice or speak to the guests. But later he let out a deep breath, raised his head, and, seeing there were guests in the house, immediately got up and approached them saying, “My brothers, don't be offended that I kept silent and did not greet you. My thoughts had made my heart heavy and worried.” Then he asked, “Where do you intend to go? Where did you come from?”

And when they told him their point of departure and their destination, he said, “Now that the arämäne are coming, how can you keep pushing toward them rather than fleeing back the way you came? Isn’t that like jumping into a deep inferno with your eyes wide open?”

The father and child were shocked. “What?! What’s going on? We don’t know anything about it. Please sir, tell us everything,” they said, begging him.

“Well if you don't know the story, here we go,” he said. “About a year and a half ago, the people of our country fought and were defeated by the arämäne. The country became barren and our king died of sorrow. Alas our country lost our king, our leader. We lost our head, and when a leader is lost, his soldiers are like bees directionless without their queen. They do not stay united without a leader. Hearing

this news, the arämäne king mobilized his forces and sent men mounted on camels to invade our country, convert all the Christians in his religion, and eliminate all those who refuse to convert. Here now he's marching toward our land. And not only marching but the rumor is he will arrive the day after tomorrow. What's more, knowing there is no one fighting to defend it he doesn't want to destroy the country. Rather he's said, 'No one escapes me. I hold the whole land in my hand.' Others say, 'The king moves into our land as casually as if he's entering his own house.'" This is what their host told them.

Tobbya and her father's faces darkened with shock and they were speechless. Realizing that his daughter Tobbya had come with him only to fall into the hands of the arämäne, the father choked back tears and couldn't speak. He wanted to tell their hosts he had survived the war, had been captured, sold, and returned to his own country, but his tears kept him from speaking.

The wife came and invited her husband to bring the guests in for dinner. They got up and entered together. There was an abundance of food, including ənjəra arranged on one side and a great variety of wäts—beef, fish, chicken—and yogurt all arranged together. Waiters stood in a line, a lantern was placed in every corner, and everything was prepared and waiting for them as if for a marriage feast.

The household was large. All were busy at their work: the person in charge of ʔäla, the one tending the meat, the cook, the hand-washer, and the lantern-keeper. Tobbya and her father were surprised to see this largesse. They couldn't believe the woman who had come out of her house crying to receive them and the man who had

told them the terrible news headed this fine household. They were also surprised at the number and activities of the dinner servers. Initially the house had been silent as everyone focused on their own job, but during mealtime they came from all directions to serve the feast together.

In that village, people and their homes appeared ordinary from the outside, and only by entering could the wealth and nobility be seen. Accordingly the guests had seen nothing out of the ordinary about this house from the outside but going inside everything appeared changed and cause for confusion. However the hosts only wanted to charm their guests, to make them feel comfortable and at ease from what they offered to how they offered it, as the saying goes. Not only was the meal excellent, but their manners, outgoing exuberance, and gestures of hospitality were even greater, and Tobbya and her father relaxed and ate and drank their fill.

Still—how could they possibly sleep that evening! Thinking of the coming arāmāne invasion they asked each other, “What shall we do? Where shall we flee?” No matter how tired they were from traveling all day, they could not sleep and spent the whole night thinking.

Rising at dawn they saddled their horse. Their hosts packed them provisions for the day—a basket of ənjəra and nut-sized dried bread and a horn filled with tej—and gave it to them. They accepted with gratitude, blessed their hosts, and set off on their way.

But where should they run back to? Reaching the main road, they asked themselves, “Where should we go? Shall we go back to the ƙola and hide there?”

Standing there undecided, the country became blanketed with smoke on the right and left and to the front and back. The enemy had arrived and begun killing men with swords; capturing women and children; burning houses and harvest piles; driving away the horses, cattle, and mules; pillaging to feed their own army; trampling the rest of the harvest under foot; burning churches; destroying the forest; cutting the vegetables; and using the branches to make temporary shelters.

When Tobbya's father saw this fate he grabbed and held his child Tobbya close to his chest. "My dear child!" he said. "You came for my sake and fell into my misery, and now you are about to fall into the enemy's hands! Where can I take you? When I was captured and sold in the last war, Almighty God saved me and miraculously brought me back. What's more, my master bought me and let me go in exchange for money. A person who saw your appearance, my beloved, a woman like you whose beauty is unmatched in this world, how would he let you go? Even if you gave him tons of gold, silver, diamonds, and jewels, he would not let you go."

The father's anxiety was two-fold: In the first place Tobbya, though a woman, was dressed in a man's clothes and he had heard that the enemy would spare no men from their slaughter. It is said that the men will be slaughtered and thrown away as soon as they arrived. He was afraid Tobbya would be killed when they saw her clothes and believed she was a man. In the second place, if the enemy discovered she was a girl, it was well known that she would pass over into their country and be lost to him forever. One problem seemed worse than the other in his view and he began to cry.

Tobbya understood the weight of the situation. Nevertheless she tried to calm her father down, liquifying with tears, crying and comforting him.

“Father, God did a miracle in the past, freeing you from slavery and making us happy. God does not start something He will not finish. Now He will save us with His grace and mercy; He will keep us free from evil things. Don’t be fragile—be strong! Do you think Christ works miracles only once? He doesn’t get tired, doesn’t give up, doesn’t forget, doesn’t get old, and doesn’t shrink or expand. He is always the same, remains faithful, and doesn’t hate after He loves. Now again, gather your strength! Let’s leave our worries to Him,” she said, reassuring him.

At the same time they hadn’t yet chosen what direction to run. Before they made a decision the enemy approach was visible from the smoke which came as the arãmãne burned houses and land on their march into the country. Seeing the smoke the villagers where they had spent the night became scared and began running away. Everyone ran—the able-bodied and the old, women carrying those who couldn’t run on their backs, young children ordered to run fast and out in front, women carrying infants on their breasts and children at their sides, strong old men carrying weak children who couldn’t run on their shoulders—across the lowlands, the fields, the caves, and the forest to escape the coming conflict.

Seeing this Tobbya and her father said, “Let’s get out of this place instead of waiting till we’re captured by the enemy! We’ll try to blend in with everyone else.” They readjusted the horse’s saddle and mounted, her father in front and Tobbya behind.

Riding along, they spurred the horse on quickly until they arrived at a wide field. Then they dismounted, let go of the horse's reins, and loosened the bit, and they all rested. After that they began to ride again, looking behind them once and a while.

The horse sweated and felt energetic again. It seemed to sense its masters' concern and rush as well as the closeness of the enemy. It didn't think of itself but worried only for them. They said, "Let's ride you," and even when they wanted to give the horse some rest and loosen the bridle, it pushed back and continued on with energy.

As they looked around nothing was as they expected. Riding and riding, they weren't sure where they were going and there was no place in that country to hide. There wasn't a single leaf on that empty low-lying kola to cover their heads, let alone a thorny bush.

In the middle of the vast field stood one hill, alone like a pillar. There were no trees or leaves on top of the hill, only a pile of sharp black rocks. Neither people nor grass nor leaves had found a home there. There was only a small hut, old and dirty, its building materials falling about everywhere and its roof white with bird droppings. The place was the eternal residence of crows, their sanctuary.

Seeing the hill Tobbya said to her father, "Father! They say that this army is riding on animals, not marching by foot. Those on animals ride across fields and plunder neighborhoods but they will not go where there is no cattle, grain, gold, silver, or people only to plunder crow droppings. It'll be best to go there and pass the time until this havoc has finished."

Her father replied, “You’re right, my child, God bless you. That’s a very good idea, let’s ride there,” and away they galloped.

Reaching the foot of the hill they didn’t know what to do with the horse. They weren’t concerned about losing money; rather the horse was such a good and understanding companion and had worked hard, sweating, to deliver them there. Parting with it troubled them and they felt bad about abandoning it to the hyenas. But what could they do? It would be foolish for them to suffer and die for its sake, so they took off the horse’s bridle and released it, saying “Go wherever you want, you’re not ours anymore! May God give you a good master!”

Then the father and child started to climb, but there was no path on the ascent. It looked like no one had ever stepped on it. They took a random shortcut and made their way to the top, tired and exhausted almost to death. Then they rested, wiping their dripping sweat with the hem of their clothes, and started looking around.

From the tip-top of the hill they could see a long way in all four directions and started to view the approaching enemy invading, plundering, and beheading. Father and child prayed, “Oh! Oh! Deliver us!” They held their hands to their foreheads to protect their eyes from the sun and looked around in every direction; every so often they stood up to look as far their eyes could see. They did this till they got tired.

As they surveyed their surroundings the enemy got closer and closer. The army approached and the horse they left at the bottom of the mountain munched on the grass and looked around for people. It had no idea its masters had abandoned it; it thought they would come and ride again.

Saddened and worried, Tobbya said, “If the enemy sees the horse, will they discover our hiding place?”

As she thought this, the army’s advance guard reached the place where the horse was. Surrounded by the fitawrari’s force, the horse disappeared from view. The father and the child’s hearts panicked and their chests thumped in fear. They didn’t sit but laid down so they wouldn’t be seen, sticking their necks out like turtles. Of course they were incredibly frightened. Even if there were a full-grown elephant with a white tusk on the top of the hill who wanted to be seen, it would look like a fly from the perspective of a person on the field looking up. Indeed, everything would look like a fly from that point of view. But Tobbya and her father were afraid they would be heard, and they covered their mouths with a cloth when they coughed.

The former dājazmač, the veteran hero Tobbya’s father was not afraid for himself but for his child Tobbya. As they say, the one who stays with the women is also woman-like. But knowing he wouldn’t be able to do as he wished, he kept his battle zeal to himself. There wasn’t a single person in the whole land able to stand up and defend it against an invading force as strong as a tree trunk.

The invaders looted whatever their eyes could see, whatever their cattle were able to carry, and whatever gold and silver they could snatch. They seized the crops and the houses and burned them down, giving them to an ungrateful fire, and then passed on.

“What generosity!” Tobbya said. “This is how to be generous! The gift of the cruel arāmāne: While humanity, the children of Adam, goes hungry, crops are fed to

the fire. Food is taken from hungry people and fed to a fire that isn't hungry. The poor are driven out into the frost while houses, halls, and lively living rooms are given to a fire that doesn't feel cold. This is exceptionally embellished generosity.” She was saddened.

Tobbya and her father saw and noticed all this from their hillcrest location. They saw the invaders arrive at the hill like a flood of water. Reaching it they split in two and passed by on each side. The enemy flowed by the hill and immediately came back and rejoined on the other side, going on robbing, plundering, killing, and capturing.

However the hill was like a large island sitting by itself and no one looked up at it. The huge army spent the day moving past the sides of the hill until near the end of the day the number of people passing dwindled.

At that time Tobbya commented to her father, “Well, I think the army has finished passing by. If God conceals us and saves us from this danger, once we've spent the night let's get up when the rooster crows and go down the slope back toward where the army came from. An army marches forward, it won't go back to the land it plundered, right, father?”

Just as she finished speaking, something black and resembling clouds in the month of heavy rains began to appear at the far end of the field. Father and child wondered what was happening, then saw a cloud of dust blown by a revolving, circling wind. Raised by the horses' hooves, the dust moved before the advancing

force, and as they approached they became more visible. Now the mass distinguished itself into two huge parties.

Seeing this, the father and child were once again saddened and shocked and their hopes were dashed. They began to pray and plead with God once more, but the force continued getting closer. The drums and horns of the approaching army were audible, mixing with the wind. The army came near and all its ornaments—horse and mule harnesses, men's ornaments, gold helmets, gold turbans, medals, trophies, lion's manes, cattle skins, shoes, embellished nickel shields—were visible, mixing with the sun and shining brightly and painfully in the eyes.

Then between the two advancing enemy parties, a small group of people started to separate themselves at a little distance. Servants riding to the left and right of the invading king hoisted a canopy of silk with golden toy-like objects dangling from the edges. The king himself was seated on a mule almost crushed by the weight of the gold and precious stones of his uniform. He talked with a few of his lieutenants as he rode.

Meanwhile the sun was about to set, so the army which was marching in a calm flow suddenly came to a stop as if it had been warned. The drum, which had been beating out one rhythm to match the march of the troops, changed and beat the signal to camp.

Next a tent whiter than snow was pitched in a higher place. Then everyone else followed suit and began pitching their tents. In their midst was a colorful tent of silk and gold, bigger than a hall but smaller than a hill. The tent had small hanging

embellishments made of gold around its edges and its dome was also made of gold. Topping that was a gold and silver embellishment playing in the wind and a banner with a huge image of a half-man, half-beast with an arrow. Tobbya and her father knew this was the king's tent and also that the symbol on the flag was the object of the arāmāne's worship. Once this tent was visible in the empty field, many tents suddenly followed suit and the field was soon flooded with tents. Men, horses, mules, and cattle all trampled on it and it was so crowded that if someone threw a lemon there was nowhere for it to fall. The army appeared not to be that of a single country or government but rather a collection of men and creatures gathered from the four corners of the earth as if on Judgment Day. It was so large it seemed impossible it would fall in battle, let alone the annihilation of Christ's return. And even if the army were destroyed, there was not land enough to bury them all.

Tobbya and her father observed all this as it happened and said, "God, only You can keep us safe from what we see and deliver us." While they prayed no one below thought of where they were, let alone of going up there. As the saying goes, when death is delayed it feels like it will never come. The father and child didn't see anyone climbing the hill so they were momentarily filled with hope. They thought, we'll spend the night well here and leave early in the morning.

It was kingly custom while camp was being made to leave the tents and choose a high place to survey the encampment before entering it. The king would spy on the presence or absence of the enemy around them, see the country nearby to them and, using field binoculars, scout the far lands they would travel through the next day.

As the encampment was unfolding therefore, the king and a few noble attendants rode out separately on horseback and reached the foot of the hill where Tobbya hid with her father. Reaching it he dismounted, handed off his binoculars, and began to climb with the idea of observing the surroundings.

What could the father and child do when they saw this? Where could they run to? They were simply paralyzed, stunned. Tobbya's tears stopped as if she were a strongly scolded child. Both believed they would soon die. Tobbya's father approached and said to her, "My child, we will soon be separated, so may God who created you treat you according to His mercy. You fell into this suffering for my sake," he said, kissing her forehead, cheeks, and head. But not wanting the enemy to see his tears, he dried his eyes and waited for what was to come.

Ahead of his lieutenants, the king finished his climb and emerged on the crest. Far ahead of the others, the king saw Tobbya and her father. "What kind of people stand between a mountain and black rock, where nothing exists?" he wondered. "What are they doing all alone?" So saying, he went straight toward them.

His companions, preferring not to stay behind with their fellow soldiers, were keen to spill blood and eager to kill. When they saw the father and child standing there their eyes blazed red as berbere. They drew their thin curved swords and hurried toward them to tear them apart.

Immediately the king said, "Don't touch them!"

He saved them then said, "I saw them first. You saw that I left them alone, so why would you come at them? What's more, these people don't have shields to

defend themselves, let alone weapons to fight with. People who are armed, who say ‘we will kill,’ and ‘I shouldn’t die’—these are enemies worthy of being killed. But if you kill an unarmed person instead of capturing him, it won’t count as a victory. I have just led us out but even I, unless I find an enemy who challenges me head-on, will capture but not kill him and I will not count it as a victory. Now these kaffirs are my captives so leave them be! Perhaps those claiming to be heroes just want to impress everyone and will kill anyone who is unarmed! Going forward we’ll come up with a protocol.” He finished his speech.

As all this happened, the father and child stood silently awaiting death. They didn’t know what those people were arguing about, whether for mercy or total devastation. Tobbya hid behind her father’s back, stared at the ground, and trembled. But her father watched still possessing his heroism of the past. Nevertheless Tobbya’s tremors shook his body, his heart was pounding, and he drew back his hand to comfort her.

The king was saddened when he observed Tobbya's trembling for there is no creature without a little sympathy even if he’s of the arämäne race. Then he came very close and said to them, “What did you come up to this hill alone to do, you kaffirs?”

“We ran away here hoping that God would save us from this army’s devastation,” the father replied.

With the king was a jester and hearing the father’s reply he said to the king and his lieutenants, “Because the kaffirs say their God lives in heaven, they must

climb the hill so they can come closer to the sky! That way their God will quickly hear their pleas and save them from us.” Then he turned his face to the captives. “Now why doesn't your God come and save you from us?” he said, beginning to sneer and mock them.

This jester was kept around to make people laugh yet not only the king's court but also hungry hyenas were disgusted by his appearance. Indeed his calves and neck resembled those of a šəmālay vulture. His cheeks seemed like they'd been hammered from both sides and collapsed into one another. When he laughed his appearance changed and made even a čəlada monkey look nice. He had no grace and no calm. Lacking a clear countenance and with an ugly and restless face, he was a good-for-nothing creature. His soul moved and talked so it must have existed but it remained unrecognized, like a corpse left outside the caves in Lalibela and not taken in.

Tobbya's father heard this scrawny man's sneering. His mockery of Christianity drove him to anger. “Neither the nearness of the mountains nor the vastness of the fields, neither the depths of the ocean nor the heights of the air, neither bottomless generosity nor extreme strength, neither the coldest snow, the blackest darkness, nor a colossal rising tide can limit the ability of the Christian God you're mocking to bring curses and grace,” he said. “Everything is the same to Him. With one word, everything can be built or stopped, destroyed or erased. With Him there is no beginning and no end. Judgment Day will come. All are the same before Him. The strong and the weak, the brave and the cowardly, the poor and the rich, the ruler and the subject—all are equal. All are insignificant and nothing is big or small before

Him. In this world, both believers and unbelievers live equally. They are born, grow old, and die. But in the next world everyone will receive a blessing or a curse according to his behavior and religion. From now until we die, my child and I will trust our God with all our hearts. Even if we die, even if you kill us, we know it's because of our sins, not because Christ failed to hear and save us.”

It was also occasionally customary among the king's servants to keep a dwarf to support the jester, and therefore in the midst of the king's lieutenants was an extremely small creature so diminutive only his voice made him visible. He had a nose more prominent than his height, ears larger than his palms, a chin more exposed to obstacles than his forehead, and buttocks that dragged on the ground before his heels and were poked by spiky plants so it was hard to tell if he was sitting or standing. He followed after the king.

This dwarf heard Tobbya's father say: “Before Christ everyone is equal, right, and insignificant.” Then he replied, “What will become of me if everyone is insignificant? If that's the case, will I cease to exist? Or will I be the same as this ugly jester? According to this kaffir, I am either equal to those of this race or I'm nothing at all.”

Not only the others watching but even Tobbya laughed at this even though she still trembled in fear. Then the king interrupted everyone's laughter and, guided by the Holy Spirit, said, “Allah created the whole world with His knowledge, and He makes all His creations according to their own religion. Allah hears all the prayers in different languages, and He justifies and condemns each person according to their

conduct. Yet a follower of one religion doesn't think another person's religion has any benefit. Don't mock human religions! Only Allah knows which one is true. Allah is the only one to judge everything and after all, who knows that the kaffirs' religion isn't superior?"

Finishing his speech the king lapsed into deep thought. All his companions were very surprised by this unexpected talk. And after all this Tobbya and her father were still ignorant of who had spoken to them. They did not suspect he was a king or even a low-ranking officer. Of everyone there the speaker was the youngest. While the rest were outfitted in military uniform, his clothes were ordinary. Nevertheless when good words came out of his mouth they became hopeful in their hearts, saying, "We wish the king was kind like this young man! We'd prefer that he take us captive." The father and his child assumed the king was resting in his tent pitched down below. They didn't dream he would come to their hiding place, stand in front of them, and talk to them. But as it happened, the same young man really was the king.

Meanwhile the sun began to set. Looking in all four directions the king said, "Night is falling without us seeing the country. Bring me the field binoculars." When he saw how the army camp was arranged according to his orders, he was happy and smiled.

Indeed the camp was very colorful. The inhabited field was endless and immeasurable. Apart from the tall hill, there was no hill or valley terrain and no gravel to disturb or confuse the feet. The encampment was like a calm sea completely abandoned by the wind. It looked as if the ends of the sky and the earth had kissed

each other on the horizon with loving lips that met like a mäsob basket and its muday lid—a union impossible to separate like a vow to never break free. Yet the sun’s beauty judges the sky and earth and seems to give them their boundaries, instructing the sky not to trespass below and the earth not to encroach above and each to stay in their territory based on their own color.

The entire army had camped their tents on that field. From afar it was impossible to know the camp’s starting or finishing point or how far it went on the right and left sides. A person standing in the middle of the encampment would be unable, even with a pair of British binoculars, to see its full extent. This included the fitawrari’s advance force, the defense force to the rear, and the forces on the right and left flanks. As twilight wore on, the entire field of tents began to resemble the December star, unobstructed by clouds.

At that time the king said, “It’s late. Let’s go to our camp,” and got up. But before he began his journey he turned to Tobbya and her father and said, “You kaffirs, don’t be afraid but follow us without fear. If you want to live with us, we will keep you comfortable. But if you want to return to your country, you can stay with us now and when peace returns to the land we will set you free. But if we let you go now, our soldiers who are keen to kill and capture may, without knowing your situation, find you and destroy you on the road,” he said, advising them.

Hearing these words Tobbya’s father was joyful and said in his heart, “Well, I think my child is going to survive.” When this advice was offered, he suspected that the speaker was the highest-ranking of the people there. He thought he was a chief but

didn't suspect he was the king. Rather he suspected he might be the son of some noble person or perhaps the king's lieutenant.

Whatever the case he said to the king, "My lord, until now my child and I were trembling in fear—you saw it. My trembling isn't because I'm afraid of dying myself; man is always created for suffering and death. But my fear and shaking are for this fragile child of mine. However now you've promised us not to fear and that nothing will happen to us. So we'll know that our salvation is certain if it resembles your kindness," he said, appealing to him.

Hearing this the king signaled to his companions not to speak of his kingship. "Alright," he said, "I will intercede before the king and save you." Then he went on his way.

Arriving at his tent but before entering, the king called the commander before him and said, "Have these kaffirs remain here. Give them a tent and install them there so they aren't hungry and thirsty." Then he entered.

The commander set them up to pass the night very comfortably. Father and child were puzzled by all this. For them it seemed implausible that he was the king since he was so young; at most he was twenty years old. Moreover the way he dressed was quite casual. But his charisma was very commanding, his speech warm and sweet, his manners well-measured and authoritative, and his appearance shining and handsome. Even if he was a non-believer and still a boy who hadn't yet grown a beard, his presence was graceful and awe-inspiring. It was only his clean and colorful clothes that failed to indicate he was the leader of that whole army.

Indeed it's a shame when kings decorate themselves in the customary way unless there's a big feast or a major dignitary visiting. Their true decoration is to honor the bravery of their heroes; build and adorn their houses, horses, and mules; develop their lands; provide good judgments; and grant pardons to wrongdoers. They don't distinguish between rich and poor, and they're not prideful. They know that if they're covered in gold, silver, emeralds, pearls, and jewels, these are not the true essence of their adornment and will not bring them additional honor.

In the palace only those like the azmari singer, the dwarf, the prostitute, or ordinary peasants would be given such jewelry which they accept as a symbol of bravery. Even without any ornaments kings and nobles will be known by their charisma. After all even a donkey or pony dressed in gold and silk is less decorated than a naked yet clever person. The lion with his small claws and majestic air is more beautiful than the flaky-skinned elephant with his long tusks. Therefore Tobbya and her father knew by the young man's speech, manner, and charisma that he was the king even though he lacked adornment. Thinking deeply they were completely amazed the king had spoken to them—this must be Christ's work. They spent the whole night marveling at it.

The next day before the king started his journey, he came out of his tent and saw Tobbya standing with her father in the distance. Approaching them he said, "Don't be afraid! You have nothing to worry about. I spoke to the king!"

Father and child were very happy and bowed to him. They pretended not to know the king was himself. Immediately he turned around and ordered a good horse

for the father and child, saying they should ride behind him in comfort and leisure so the soldiers wouldn't harass them.

And the journey began. The father and the child traveled comfortably in the entourage following the king. Certain they had been saved, their hopes grew day by day. But reflecting on thoughts of Wahəd which they had left off in the past, they were fearful. “Where has he gone? What has happened to him?” they started to say to themselves.

At noon the army began to make camp. As usual the king's tent was pitched in the center and after it was up the rest of the tents instantly sprung in place around it. The invaders began coming from left and right with those they had captured. They sang their victory songs—Ho, ho!—and had fabric soaked in enemy blood tied around their horses' necks.

The king sat on a golden throne at the top of the square surrounded by his high officials. On his left and right stood enslaved šanqəla swordsmen each carrying a sword the size of an elephant's neck. But before this special set-up appeared, the invaders stood with their shields ornamented in silver and gold, their battle trophies, and bands on their right arms denoting those they had killed along with lion, leopard, and rhinoceros symbols. Next to these, a five-thousand-member well-built select guard, capable of bringing down an elephant, lined up and stood to the left and right.

No one uttered a sound. Even the king waited silently for the warriors to arrive with their spoils. In the midst of all this—those brave, decorated, and silent warriors, a smooth soft specialty hemp-woven carpet that lit the eyes and well-built

black slaves with faces clear and shining as sunflower oil standing right and left with very sharp swords—was the young and boyish king who resembled Saint Michael, only a little browner, sitting with confidence and comfort on a high golden throne. Sensing all this glory and the silence, Tobbya and her father could not think nothing but the Last Judgment. Once everything was in order the warriors were called upon and passed by in their formation, receiving recognition with a smile.

But seeing these surroundings and all this joy, compounded with men's deaths, the land's destruction, the attack on the Christians, and the arämäne's prosperity, Tobbya hung her neck in thought. She sobbed and hid at her father's side, hoping she wouldn't be noticed.

The king recognized her grief from afar. Thinking one person's suffering is another's happiness, he immediately left the procession of warriors without announcing anything and went into his tent.

The king's tents were five in number. His father and mother had died when he was still a child so his uncle raised him as father and mother. His uncle had one child and the king, having neither sister nor brother, loved this cousin dearly, like a sister. He called her my sister and likewise she called him her brother, äyawa. Their age was exactly the same. Because of their love they traveled together for every battle; they didn't split up. Therefore one of the nicest tents was hers, the fourth was the uncle's, and the fifth tent was for the reception of high-ranking dignitaries.

These five tents were separated by a fence of šäma fabrics and did not face one another door to door. Within the šäma fence, Tobbya and her father had a small

well-maintained tent set up for them so they would not be disturbed by anyone who might mock them as kaffirs or traitors. Located close by were the treasury, storage room, *tej bet*, *wät bet*, *ənjəra bet*, and the prep kitchen. Between the prep kitchen and the king's tents, a large *gəmja*-cloth fence was set up. It was visible from a distance and its light caused dancing flames to reflect in the eyes. Outside this fence stood five thousand guards, those who were the most tall-chested and broad-shouldered, recruited and decorated with silver and gold weapons. Beyond them was a thousand-member calvary guard. The camp started after that.

In the early evening there was not a soul to be found near the *gəmja* fence. It was so quiet and peaceful a place that birds appeared to come and land there, then fly off again. The guard forbade people from speaking loudly or making any noise, but a decorative tassel on the king's tent didn't heed this warning or listen to the king's word. It moved here and there with every breath of wind in the evening and all through the night.

That night it happened that the king was giving a royal court banquet. Beforehand while the preparations were still underway, he exited his tent for a stroll and to get a breath of fresh air. *Tobbya* sat at the door of her tent with her forehead on her father's knees, filled with sadness and looking at the ground. As he walked around, the king saw her. He had observed her crying earlier in the day when the procession passed and, thinking she was crying about that again, he approached to calm her down.

When the father and child saw it was the king, they were startled and got up, but the king came closer. “Would you like me to present you to the king?” he asked them. “Would you like to be in his presence?”

A gentleman knows how to manage situations like this. Accordingly Tobbya’s father answered quickly, “We don't want to see the face of any king but you, my lord.”

Then the king understood that they knew him.

“If that’s the case and you don’t prefer anyone else, I won’t abandon you. Trust me,” he said and went on to the banquet. His kingship was finally revealed to the father and child, but Tobbya’s womanhood had not yet been revealed to the king.

The next day an order was given for the men and animals to rest owing to their fatigue from the invasion. The king himself spent the next day thinking about what he was going to do. Among his thoughts one stood out: the day before when Tobbya had wept over the people’s slaughter and the land’s destruction as displayed during the procession. Because of this, he decided a proclamation should be made so men’s lives wouldn’t be lost in vain and the country destroyed for nothing.

The procedure for the proclamation was as follows. Beforehand the herald emerged, stood on a high rock, and shouted like this three times: “Listen! Listen! Or let God overtake you with deafness, you enemies of the king, our lord, and our country.”

The words of the declaration:

“Oh Christians! As you know we have been quarrelling, fighting, and annihilating each other, whether over religious differences or border

conflicts, since ancient times, beginning with our forefathers and continuing in the present. All this war has come from the kings on both sides, not from the people. If the kings of both lands knew each other heart to heart, the land would not be destroyed in vain, the poor would not suffer, the borders would be respected, and the religions live in harmony. I myself have inherited vengeance from my forefathers. Because of this I have come all the way here, destroyed the land, wronged the poor, and annihilated people. All this has happened and I see that now you have no one to care for you and no king to defend you. As a result I've begun to feel grief for what I've done up until today. Now again I say this is enough. Those of you out in the wilderness, who have killed or sliced others' Achilles heels, I grant you amnesty. Come back. You won't be charged or responsible for what you've done or for the sins you committed in the past. Let the merchant go to their merchandise! The plougher to the plow, the digger to the digging, and the priest to the church to serve. Let everyone remain in their respective religions. Don't insult each other's faiths or ridicule them. The ups and downs we've had in the past are enough. I am not a Christian, but I will respect everyone according to their religion and insure this respect for all. Be brave. Be as you were before and go about your habits, activities, and way of life. Oh, you poor people! Be brave. I didn't come against you but for you. Starting today and from now on, I will honor the elders like my father and the young people like my brothers. I will live and serve justice fully, treating all my people as citizens. You also, starting today, recognize me as our king. Return, all you who fled. Come back and retake your land and your place. You poor people! I robbed you. To compensate for plundering and seizing your wealth I will not take taxes or tithes for two years so that your country may carry on. In addition all the royals related to the king, the rases, dājazmačs, and anyone decorated for their service, come back to your country. I bless you for returning to your duties and service to your land and region and for continuing your management work. But after this proclamation, if you don't resume the duties associated with your title or if you incite violence, wreak havoc to the country, and fight the government, if you consider or attempt to do this, be aware that your inheritance, title, and power will be uprooted and taken away from you. Those who come back and try to poison people's minds to act differently by spreading ill wishes will be charged with your enemy as the witness. You soldiers and peasants, live with respect for each other. Soldiers, don't abuse the poor. While you serve me with a sword and shield, the peasantry serve me by tilling the earth with the plow. All your services are equal. Let all of you serve the country and the king in your own way."

The king concluded. When everyone heard this proclamation they said together, “Let it be done!” and clapped their hands. After the decree, the arāmāne ceased robbing the country and killing the people. Their movement halted that day and construction began on a large capital city at the camp’s location.

Whether willingly or forcefully staying together in the same camp, the king saw Tobbya and her father in the mornings and evenings. Over time his spirit was drawn to hers. Now that the offensive was over, she was no longer exposed to the hot sun during the day nor the cold at night. Her cheeks, which had been covered in tears, became beautiful and her body, damaged by hunger and thirst, started to recover. Although she kept her distance so her femininity would remain unknown, the king began to love her and attempted to bring her closer instead.

Seeing how the king approached her every day, Tobbya’s father was worried that the female identity of his child would be discovered. He advised her, “Be brave! Walk and talk like a man so your identity isn’t revealed.” Her clothes were completely masculine and no one suspected her femininity.

Not just the king, but also everyone else who saw her began to like her. After all, Tobbya was very beautiful, stunning even, with all-consuming charm and beauty that disoriented all who saw her. Her eyes appeared so silvery they rivaled the morning star. On top of that her eyelashes appeared as thick and luscious as the harvest of autumn grass. Her nose was straight and her lips were like a morning rose beginning to bloom. Her hair cut like a man’s was like the spread of sprouting grain in Säne month or teff flowing left and right in the wind like a sheaf of silk on a piece

of new land. Her face, which had been battered and darkened by the sun and cold, began to regain its original color.

Together with her snow-white teeth all these qualities signaled her femininity even from a distance and started to expose her. No one could claim that she was short, tall, fat, or thin—it was pointless to search her ideal appearance for shortcomings. Like the elegant neck of a tej bottle her straight neck bent and lengthened as if she was tired. Her slender, seemingly boneless fingers were as straight as the threads of handcrafted fabric. Her waist was as fluidly flexible as a queen bee or the thin leather of a horse’s reins. Her calves and heels were well-built and equally portioned. The power of her gaze and the cautious sensitive way she opened her mouth to reveal her teeth and lips weakened the strong and slayed the idle. On a day when God Almighty was happy, He created her and gave her a soul with extreme care and creativity, and this is how she appeared. All in all Tobbya looked nothing like an ordinary creature. Beyond her flesh and bone, in terms of her beauty and personality Tobbya appeared to be closely related to the cherubim who served God. And as they say, a person with beauty is adored by the angels.

Seeing all God’s blessings in Tobbya, the king was not alone in his affection. He liked her very much and wished to make her a court attendant and mentor her. Even as he thought all this, he didn’t suspect Tobbya was a woman. He liked her only with a pure heart. What’s more, the king and Tobbya were almost the same age. Tobbya was about eighteen years old and the king about twenty. Their similar youthful ages contributed to the love and affection developing between them.

The king wondered, "Should I or shouldn't I?" but eventually he summoned the father and the child.

"What are we being called for?" they worried, thinking up thousands of reasons why they'd been summoned until the very moment they arrived before him.

Above all, Tobbya forgot to imagine she was a man and found it difficult to appear and walk like one as her father advised. Everything about her gave away her femininity. More than anything else they were afraid and asked themselves, "Will her femininity be known from now on?" This was their worry.

But the king did not suspect this, and as soon as they arrived, he sent everyone away and turned his eyes to Tobbya. "You boy, wouldn't you be happy to come live with me?" he asked, "if I made you one of my attendants, you grew up with me, and I appointed and rewarded you?"

Regardless of whether Tobbya was intimidated or afraid, she let her father answer for her. While the king still looked at her waiting for her answer, her father began to speak. The king turned to him and listened. At the same time, Tobbya turned her face and began blinking and shaking her head so her father would not agree. "Say no!" she communicated to him.

Her father said, "O king, it is a great honor to stay with a king like you and be one of your attendants. It is a privilege to be raised up to a position of honor by you. My son and I thank you for thinking of such a title for my son. May your kingdom expand and your good conscience remain with you! But my child Tobbya is a homebody and doesn't know how to live in a palace. Please forgive me, but I must

say no. And what's more my lord, on the day you found us hiding on the hill you promised that if we wanted to stay we could and when the land became peaceful again we could go back. So I beg you to be true to your word and let us go. The country has most likely been peaceful since your proclamation," he pled with the king.

Yet the king felt sorry and sorrowful that his request hadn't had the desired impact. Right away he said, "My words stand firm. If you want to go I will gladly send you away, but I will also beg you to tell me one thing. Why do you dislike living with me? Or is it because of your religion? If that's the case you know very well I have made a proclamation that everyone should live according to their own faith. Or do you have something else to fear? Don't be afraid," he said to them. "Tell me what's in your heart."

When Tobbya's father heard such kind words from this young king, his heart opened and he considered revealing all his secrets to him. Next he said, "O king! Only my wife remains at home. It's been a long time since this child and I left our house. My other son left a year ago to search for the whereabouts of a person who did us a great favor. We asked for word of him, but there's been no sign of him or his whereabouts. We lost him. Then, out of options we went here and there looking for him. While we were searching we heard, 'Your army has arrived and is destroying the country.' First we thought to run back to where we came from. Then we realized we had no time and thought it would be better to climb the hill where the horses and your

men would not reach us. But we had no idea what would happen and you the king found us. This is how we ended up here.”

In conclusion he started to reveal Tobbya’s femininity, saying, “This gi—” But as he began Tobbya struck her mouth with her hand, warning him not to talk. Changing course he said, “This world is harsh on unlucky people. It has been a year since we started crying over my son’s disappearance. Consequently, this son of mine has been separated from his mother since his beloved brother was lost and he’s still in mourning. It’s impossible for him not to think he would be selfishly happy staying in this palace,” he said.

Tobbya had heard that once these gentiles saw a woman they would not let her go and she was afraid the king would keep her forever. This motivated her refusal to reveal her womanhood or to talk about it. What’s more, she didn’t see the need to tell all their secrets. As they say, if you spill everything in your stomach you remain empty.

When the king heard of Tobbya’s brother’s disappearance he asked, “When did he leave? What direction did he go? How many years has it been since he vanished?”

The father said, “It’s been a year since he left. He intended to go to the camp on the border between Egypt and Sinar where merchants pass by. He’s the same age as Tobbya, and both of them are between seventeen and eighteen years old.”

The king followed up, asking, “If that’s the case, they’re twins?”

“Yes, it’s like you say. They’re two of the same kind. It was sometimes difficult for us as parents, let alone outsiders, to distinguish them from each other. When they were still children we found it difficult to tell them apart by their appearance so we called them by their names or a wink. When they were both in front of us we could not differentiate them,” he narrated.

Listening sadly the king said, “If he has been lost for a year, clearly my army has not found him. If my men had caught him I would have discovered him immediately. But my army has only been in the area for a few days. I’m afraid of what will happen if he encounters slave traders and is sold into slavery.”

He lapsed into contemplation, then continued his speech, “If he’s out in the world walking around somewhere, I’ll find him for you. I’ll do everything I can and most likely I’ll find him. Cheer up!” he said with satisfaction. “But all this will take lots of time, so stay with me in the meantime. Tobbya can remain here at the court and be installed with my other attendants. And you, the father, do not separate yourself from the other nobles and high-ranking court officials. Make sure to attend the banquets held before me.”

What could the father and child say in response? If they said no it was tantamount to accepting the disappearance of the lost son. Realizing that if they quarreled with the king they themselves would suffer, they were puzzled how to respond. While they were still contemplating these things, the king got up: “I advise you to think it over carefully and tell me your answer,” he said and went up to a high place.

Then Tobbya's father said, "My child! I would like to stay with the king to find your brother but I fear that doing so might reveal your womanhood. If we don't act as the king says it's very worrying for us, not to mention for finding your brother. After all, isn't he king of the arämäne?"

Tobbya replied, "My father! How can I accomplish walking and talking like a man? Plus the longer this goes on, the worse it'll be when it's discovered. As they say, when you reach for something stored above your head you lose what you hold tucked under your arm. I'm afraid we might become a laughingstock in our eagerness to find Wahəd. But what can I do? If my brother is to be found, let's do it. I will accept and act as one of the king's attendants. May the Lord's mother Mary hide my secret," she said.

And the father replied, "Well then if you are determined, be careful with your speech so you will not be recognized. And let the way you walk, talk, and all your other actions be like a man's," he said, advising her.

When the king returned from the hilltop, he asked them, "Have you consulted amongst yourselves? What have you decided?"

"Alright," they replied. "We will do as the king says."

Seeing their confidence in him, the king was overjoyed. He gave them some property to live on and ordered a large tent set up within the šäma cloth fence as the royal quarters. He gave them horses and mules, servants to command, slaves, porters, kitchen workers, and gold and silver to give away as gifts, immediately filling their new dwelling to the brim. After this he elevated Tobbya among the other men as he

said he would and brought her into his council. He rewarded her father as a high-ranking official and placed him among the nobility.

The next day the king made the following proclamation: “Anyone who has bought a male slave in the last year, come and bring them to me because I have lost someone. Start your journey to me on the same day you hear this announcement. If you bring the person I’m looking for, I’ll immediately reward you with ten times the price you bought him for and let you go.”

He released the proclamation all over the country, in all the public squares and in every council and every station. The territory to be ruled was so vast that no one brought a single slave for five or six months after the announcement. All this time, Tobbya and her father remained living with the king. As time went by, the king regarded Tobbya with a fondness as for something precious and his affection for her increased. Among all his attendants he brought no one closer than her.

Moreover Tobbya’s looks and behavior combined with her beauty and manner of speech to enthrall everyone’s hearts. Even the king’s uncle and guardian and his child the king’s cousin saw her, loved her dearly, and brought her close to them. Indeed the king’s cousin routinely gazed at Tobbya wherever she went. Tobbya was all she talked about. The king soon discovered that his cousin was in love with Tobbya. At one point he asked her, “Would you like it if your future husband was as handsome as Tobbya?” teasing her to test the seriousness of her love.

Because they had been raised together and she loved him as her brother, she told him her secret. She did not want her father to know because he would be angry with her for saying she loved a kaffir, but she had fallen in love with Tobbya.

Then she paused and said, “From the time I was born until today I’ve never seen anyone like your new attendant Tobbya,” she began to tell him. “In your palace or in any other place there’s no one who is so handsome, delivers everything one could ask for, has no bad character traits, is excellent, and never sins. He’s well-built with attractive eyes. I wish he wasn’t a kaffir!”

The king replied, “You’re right, my sister. There’s no one like him in our own country.”

Day and night, in her dreams and in real life, the cousin thought of nothing but Tobbya. It was the only thing she talked about with the king, daring to hope that one day he would marry her to Tobbya. What innocence! After all Tobbya was also a woman—she just wasn’t dressed like one.

Even though he was aware of the strength of his cousin’s love, the king was concerned. On the one hand he worried that his uncle would not allow his child to marry a Christian and on the other that Tobbya would not agree to marry an arämäne. Apart from this, he was happy with the idea of Tobbya and his cousin’s marriage.

But Tobbya did not know any of this. Her regular routine was to spend all day at court with the king and at night to go home to her father. Filled with anxiety, he asked himself, “How is it going with my child? Has our secret been discovered?” and

when she returned, he continued, “My child, how was your day? Is everything alright?”

Tobbya replied, “By the grace of God nothing has happened to me yet, and the king and his cousin look upon me with love.”

When she went back in the morning as usual, her father sent her off, saying, “May the Christian God protect you.”

They remained in this fashion for a long time without anything going amiss. As the days went by, the king’s cousin and Tobbya spent time together, became more familiar, and started conversing. But as they say, it’s a burden to keep secret something that shouldn’t be revealed. For her part Tobbya was happy when her king’s cousin spoke to her and began conversing with her eagerly, more so than with the king and other men since, being female, she was afraid and didn’t speak readily unless she had to.

This relationship surprised the king and the people. The king’s cousin in particular said to herself, “My love is not in vain.” She was happy and her hopes grew.

Gradually the other court attendants became jealous and envious of Tobbya and her service’s rising popularity with the king and his cousin. Every attendant in the court made the same complaint: “How can a kaffir come and have more fame than us!” From then on, morning and night, the muttering and complaining increased. The inevitable was coming: they came up with a plan to complain to the king’s uncle,

creating an excessive and extravagant story to throw Tobbya into misery and exclude her from the court.

As mentioned, there was a dwarf in the palace whose neck had collapsed close to his waist and whose buttocks dragged on the ground. He conspired together with the attendants in the following way. After lunch the king had a habit of taking an afternoon nap. While he was dozing the dwarf would tell Tobbya, "The king's cousin is calling you!" Tobbya would agree to go and, when she entered the tent where the king's cousin was, the dwarf would go to the uncle and say, "A traitor called Tobbya has entered the girl's tent and we don't know what he's up to!" With this strategy they conspired to catch Tobbya red-handed.

One day the plan was put in action. The dwarf observed that the king was sleeping and hurried to Tobbya, saying, "The king's cousin is telling you to come quickly." Tobbya acquiesced and went out right away. After all, she didn't suspect anything out of the ordinary.

However as soon as she entered the tent where she'd been called, the king's uncle heard the news and showed up to catch Tobbya red-handed. The attendants immediately spread the news to everyone: the new court attendant Tobbya, who had been clever in the past, had found the king's cousin and raped her where she was. When things were quiet he had seen the opportunity and brought danger upon her.

The king heard the story immediately but he didn't feel it was the truth. Still his uncle, blazing with anger, came to him and said, "If this kaffir is not punished, I will kill myself."

The king replied, “How could such a calm person, too shy to answer when questioned, dare do such a thing?”

For his part his uncle said, “I reached out and caught him with my own hands! He must be punished.”

Then the king said, “If this is the case I’ll ask Tobbya for the facts and I’ll confront both him and his father to get the truth. As for punishment, since I gave them my word the day I found them that nothing bad would happen to them I can’t punish them.”

Straightaway he brought Tobbya from where she was detained and asked her, “What is going on?! Why did you go to my sister’s tent out of nowhere like that?”

Knowing that she was a woman even if she had not acted as one in the past or the present, Tobbya was most concerned that her hidden femininity not be revealed. She began to tremble head to toe and her face transformed with fear. But her countenance did not show any signs of falsehood and guilt—only innocence and sincerity. Still she was lost about what answer to give. If she said, “I went because I was called,” it was tantamount to exposing the uncle’s daughter.

Seeing her completely silent, the king said: “Why are you quiet? You're not going to tell me, are you? You’re timid. How could you do such a thing to my cousin when I believed you were a well-mannered, disciplined, and composed young person and was intending even higher roles for you?”

As he spoke her father arrived and said, “O king! My child would not do such a lowly thing, so don’t listen to everyone’s talk. Trust me.”

The uncle was angered at this and said, “I say I found them red-headed and here he is trying to calm me down?!”

While all this was happening Tobbya was bowed down and looking at the ground. Then she looked up and said, “O king! Since the beginning I was fearful and didn’t know the intricacies of the palace. But you selected me, the poor undeserving one, and allowed me to appear before you, coming and going from your high court. Now if you think it’s true that I’ve done wrong, punish me. But my behavior, good or bad, has been the same all the time you’ve known me. If you believe me let me go, if not punish me. Just don’t detest my father for my sins and keep your word to search for my brother and deliver him to my father. My brother must not remain lost because of my sin.”

The king said, “If this is the case, why won’t you tell me why you entered my sister’s tent?” He pressed her but she kept quiet so as not to expose anyone. The king was troubled. He struggled to understand—whatever came out of Tobbya’s mouth was true and not a single word was false. On the other hand, Tobbya held everything tight so he couldn’t say it hadn’t happened.

Time passed and Tobbya's father, seeing that things were getting complicated, became worried. He gave up hope. In these circumstances he was afraid the lost child would not be found and knew Tobbya would be punished for something she didn't do. His two children would be lost to him forever. He would be unable to save even one, and he himself would be driven away in grief and shame like a dog chased out of a church.

Then he decided to share the secret with the king. But to do so he said, “Please, let everyone leave.”

When he was certain that everyone had gone out he said, “O king! Today isn’t the first time a person will be put to death for something they didn’t start. And no matter how wise or merciful you are, you’re still a fleshly human being unable to discern truth and falsehood in the hearts of others. Of course you’ll believe what people tell you. I want to explain everything to you, but first give me your word that the secret will remain among us.”

The king agreed and gave him a promise. After that, Tobbya's father revealed all their secrets from beginning to end with no omissions, including Tobbya's womanhood.

Hearing all this the king was very sad and astonished. From beginning to end Tobbya’s story saddened him. He was surprised that she had gone all over the land looking for her brother disguised as a man and, even when the attendants plotted to punish her out of jealousy, hadn’t given up the façade to expose them. Saddened about all this, on the other hand the king was happy about Tobbya's womanhood. In the past he had loved her charisma without knowing about her femininity. But now that same affection turned into true love and his hopes transformed. Instantly his heart was overwhelmed with love for her and he began to feel it in his chest. Love entered him from all directions like a thin cold and he began to soar with love.

But the king was careful not to let the father and child know. He would have liked to punish those jealous attendants, but he had agreed to keep Tobbya and her

father's secret so it wasn't possible. Thinking about it some more later, the king decided to pretend he believed the allegations and would proceed with punishment. He ordered Tobbya to change out of her attendant uniform, dismissed her from service, and sent her to go and live faraway with her father in a tent like they used to. He told the father and child this idea secretly in advance and gave them lots of gold, property, and a large tent. "Go and stay in a distant place," he said, showing them the site and counseling them that Tobbya not leave the tent and let no one see her, while her father should only go out to the public square once a day. Then he sent them away to live on their own.

Even at a distance their new site directly faced the king's tent. In this way he could hope to view Tobbya with his binoculars at any time. In other words he sent them to a convenient place where she wouldn't be out of his sight.

The king's uncle and all the attendants rejoiced at what they thought was Tobbya's punishment—no longer wearing the court's formal dress and being sent away. But when the king's cousin heard Tobbya had been banished from the court, she was shocked. She could not eat or drink and instead cried day and night. The king was troubled and worried because she was like his sister, but he could not tell her about Tobbya's womanhood since he had promised not to reveal the secret.

Many days passed after Tobbya left the court. The mastermind was happy with what he had accomplished, joyful and laughing internally as he sat in the court. The king on the other hand smiled and pretended as he attended the proceedings while keeping the truth to himself.

In contrast Tobbya wasn't bothered at all. She didn't hold a grudge against anyone, not one! Wishfully she wondered, "Once that proclamation has reached every country, how long until my brother Wahad returns to me?" She hoped her brother would be found and they would all return happily to her mother.

To make her happy the king sent an internal message to all the country's regional deputies: "I implore you," he wrote again, "to the best of your ability, hurry up and quickly send every slave sold in the past year." Soon this was heard all over the land, and people began to appear holding their slaves. When the king announced the proclamation, he had promised to give the owner of the slave he was looking for ten times the amount of gold used for the purchase and immediately award him. This caused everyone to bring their slaves before the king, each begging to go first.

At this time the king was pleased. He sent for Tobbya's father in private and advised him that with Tobbya he should look at every slave that passed by from a concealed place. After that he ordered all the assembled slaves to cross by in front of Tobbya's tent, walking slowly. The next day, slaves marched by the tent one by one from dawn until dusk. Tobbya and her father sat at the mouth of the tent and watched until their eyes were full, but Wahad was not to be found among all who passed by. Toward evening, Tobbya and her father began to give up hope. Night fell; it was announced the remaining slaves would begin passing by again tomorrow morning. Watching them through his field glasses the king wondered, "Have they found him yet?" But observing Tobbya he realized they hadn't found him and was dismayed.

Tobbya and her father spent the whole night worried. Like the day before, in the morning they sat at the door of their tent and started watching again. They spent the whole day without finding anything. Night came again and the remaining slaves were called for the next day. The father and child's grief had doubled. "Wahəd is dead, otherwise we would have found him by now!" they began to say.

On the third day up until noon they found nothing and abandoned hope. They were too tired to look at each slave who walked past, only every now and then looking up to see who was passing. But around midday Tobbya saw a young man from afar walking pensively alongside an Islamic merchant with a shaved face and a wineskin hanging from his shoulder. His stature and movements looked like those of her brother but his appearance had been blackened by the sun and the wind. As she debated with herself whether it was him or not Wahəd came closer, wiping his sweat with a white nātāla fabric.

When she realized it was her brother Tobbya forgot to inform her father. She just stretched out her hands to Wahəd and fell down flat on her face. The father, not understanding what had happened, ran over and bent down to pick her up, saying, "What happened to my child?"

Then Wahəd recognized his father and threw the wineskin off his shoulder. "My father! What brought you here?" he said and embraced him.

Before he could pick up Tobbya from where she had fallen, the father realized it was the lost boy and fell to the ground as well. All three of them were shocked, filled with longing and happiness, and completely silent. All this made them

speechless and they appeared like mute people. In all this excitement Wahød didn't notice Tobbya at all. When he saw her with her hair cut like a man and wrapped in a sheepskin, he thought she was someone else. But later when they came back to themselves, they began to cry and inquire about each other.

Because he was spying on them with his field glasses, the king knew the lost person had been found. Immediately he ordered that the discovered boy and the man who brought him come to him. Seeing Wahød, the king was overjoyed. Tobbya and her brother were perfect copies of each other, but he appeared like a degraded weathered version of her. Indeed when they saw Wahød, everyone who knew Tobbya as an attendant thought she had received the king's mercy and been recalled to the palace. There were very few differences between Tobbya and Wahød, only in their gaze, their way of speaking, and their liveliness. No matter how much Tobbya tried to hide it, everything revealed her femininity.

The king didn't explain to the people but he was filled with joy and said to himself, "Well, I've found a husband for my sister. She will never identify him as anyone other than Tobbya and will be happy the Tobbya she loved has come back to her," he said, strategizing.

Right away the king brought the merchant who traveled with Wahød gold and silver, gave him the reward, and sent him away. But to Wahød he said, "Come live with me. I will raise you up and care for you in comfort."

Wahød, on the other hand, was worried and said, "O king, I've lost a merchant who did me a great favor, and I left my house thinking I would not rest until I found

him. Lo and behold, when I was looking for him I found many hardships and then I was sold as a slave. If you had not taken me out now, I would have been lost like the others. Now that you've brought me this freedom, I will keep looking for that kind man until I die. I cannot stay here in your majesty's house being self-serving, comfortable, and happy. Please don't feel sorry for me but excuse me. I may lose the honor of serving you, but you will find plenty of others," he told him.

The king observed, listened to, and appreciated his sincerity. "If that's the case, don't worry. I will find the friend you're looking for just as I found you. Only agree to my offer and stay with me here," he said.

Wahad replied, "O king, if you do this for me I will live happily. Even if you treat me as a permanent slave, I will take it with happiness and gladly serve you. Nothing will trouble me."

As the king promised Wahad, that very same day he sent out a proclamation: "All you merchants! All you who were plundered during the war, let me restore your wealth to you. And those who didn't lose anything, I shall give a letter so you won't be harmed wherever you go. Come to my palace as soon as you hear this," it said and went out throughout the land.

The next day Wahad was rewarded with the official dress of a court attendant and took over Tobbya's former place. The king brought him very close and all the attendants became jealous and began coming together to conspire against him. Concerned that something similar to Tobbya's debacle might happen again, the king advised Wahad with an order not to accept any requests but those from him and never

to leave his presence. From then on Wahād took care to spend the days with the king and the nights with his father and sister.

Meanwhile, following the scandal with Tobbya the king's uncle ordered his daughter not to leave her tent. He forbade her from entering the king's court as he and the other attendants did. So she didn't know of Wahād's entry to the court. But the king, who knew that she was crying and miserable over Tobbya's departure, one day secretly spoke to his cousin. "Courage, my sister!" he told her. "Don't be sad that Tobbya is gone. if you love him I'll make him come back."

Hearing this she was filled with joy and longing for Tobbya and she started to quietly shed her tears. She continued: "My lord, my brother, if you do this for me, I will give up my royalty and my status. I will pay you back by being a cook or carrying water or ṭāla. The truth is that when I'm by your side there's nothing I lack and nothing I am troubled by. You have raised me above everything but all this royalty and these titles—there's no happiness in the world if what you wish for doesn't come true. Everything is worthless and fragile. It's better to be poor than to have shaky nobility. Still if you truly want me to be happy, my lord, help me be married to Tobbya. Make me his wife since I'm deeply in love. I won't bother you with anything. I'll renounce my royalty and all else and I'll serve you like a maid." She wept as she concluded.

But before the king could reply her father the king's uncle arrived suddenly and the king left them alone. She was left in suspense without knowing what his answer would be.

The king kept it to himself, but for his part his heart was pierced with love for Tobbya. He was absent-minded when he spoke. He even began forgetting what he intended to say. Trying to speak he would start and stop, and he repeated himself over and over again. At night as soon as the banquet was finished he dismissed the people and after saying farewell stood alone outside his tent, leaning on its frame and looking at Tobbya's tent until midnight, when sleep overcame him and he went inside. The next day he would do the same. Even though he knew that Tobbya couldn't see him, he hoped to see where she was.

What else could he do—she was his first love. Excepting Tobbya, he had neither loved nor thought about a woman. Before he met her he scoffed, “What is this thing called love?” He was still a virgin after all.

But ever since he loved her and wished to make her his wife, his desire for Tobbya had turned into a dream for him. Walking slowly in the dark, he would have liked to ask her, “How are you this evening? How did you pass the night?” But he knew of her strength, her shyness, and her faith and he was afraid. When her brother Wahad came in early in the morning he asked, “How is Tobbya?” This question was his only hope.

Meanwhile all the merchants in the country began to gather due to the proclamation. No merchant failed to attend: the ones who'd been robbed of their money and cattle, and others who hadn't been but were worried about the future and came to receive letters. All arrived and gathered together.

The king was pleased at this turnout and he ordered the merchants to cross and Wahad to watch and look for the one he sought. He agreed and went out to the open gate, looking at every merchant who passed through. But he didn't find him the first afternoon.

The next day like the previous one, he looked at the gate. Late in the morning he saw the benevolent merchant walking—saddened, consumed in thought, thin from hunger, and carrying his holey clothing over his shoulder. His wealth had been plundered.

Wahad caught his breath and jumped, kissing the merchant's face and knees, then hugging his neck and kissing him again. At the same time he began asking him, "How are you, my savior? How are you, my generous master?" No matter how sad and miserable the merchant was, Wahad would not forget the good deed he had done nor would he despise him. But when he saw Wahad well-decorated and blossoming, he forgot where he knew him from and was troubled. Later when Wahad told him everything he was embarrassed, humbled, and shocked since he didn't want his past gift to be known to the world.

As soon as the king learned of this merchant's presence he summoned him immediately. According to the merchant's verbal description—"I lost this many cattle, this much gold and this much silver"—he appointed him a *nāgadrās*, a chief commercial officer, in a region with twice the wealth of what he had lost. Then he let him go. Sometimes it happens that a person's good or bad deeds are rewarded not only in the other world but receive compensation in this world as well.

After he had finished all this the king called Wahad and his father into his private presence. To the father he said, “When you were in tears because your beloved child was missing, I found him for you and made you happy. I dried your tears.” And then to Wahad he said, “When you sought that good person, even to the point of being sold yourself, I made a proclamation, found him, brought you joy, and freed you from slavery. Now it is both of your turns to return the good deeds done to you.”

Hearing this, they were both worried. “O king!” they said. “It’s true that you have done a vast number of good deeds deserving reward. But what can we, poor people like us, do except thank and praise you and pray to God to prolong your life? You fulfilled our wishes because there’s nothing in this world you can’t accomplish or that gives you trouble. You know we can never repay you for your good deeds. Moreover, is there anything in the world difficult or impossible for you to accomplish? What could we possibly do for you?” They answered him respectfully.

The king paid attention and listened to everything. Then he said, “It’s true, everything is possible for me. I am king and my kingdom is enormous. Even though I’m still young and have no mother, father, or supporter, my God has fulfilled everything and given me success. There’s only one thing I lack for eternal happiness. Said differently, this thing isn’t available from anyone but you. Not only the king and the rich can extend offers of help, after all. If a king doesn’t have support among the poor, he can’t rule the country and the people in peace—the government wouldn’t be

a government and a marriage wouldn't be a marriage. I'm not asking for something that's impossible for you, so please say yes."

Troubled, they said, "Tell us the request. For the king there's nothing we won't do if we can."

Then the king said to them, "Since you say so. A chicken living comfortably at home with his hen is better off than a fox living rough among sheep and goats. As for me, I have everything I could ask for, but I lack eternal happiness. If you sympathize with me and wish me to be happy, you Tobbya's father—bestow Tobbya upon me as my wife. I love her very much, and my life and my death will be with her. And you Wahad—in return I will give you the hand of my cousin who I love in marriage. Once you marry her you have my word that I won't appoint anyone to a higher rank than you." With this he finished.

Her father, knowing Tobbya was very strong in matters of faith, was anxious and afraid. After a while he said, "Give me time to consult about this and I will let you know." Then they parted. Wahad also remained silent and wondered what would happen with his sister.

When she heard the news Tobbya was shocked. It astonished her. Indeed since her childhood she had never considered a life of honor and nobility, so she didn't agree to his proposal right away. She just thought about it.

Refusing would be ungrateful to the king who had saved her brother from slavery. On the other hand she worried her refusal would endanger her father and brother. But saying yes and marrying a person who was not baptized and did not

know Christianity would be akin to changing religions and moving away from Christ. It would mean that rather than the comforts and pleasures of the world to come, she diminished their glory and preferred the temporary ones of this world. So she decided to say no. Still, she was troubled and begged Christ to save her brother and father from suffering.

Then she wrote to the king:

“Oh king! I have heard that you begged my father to give you my hand. I was very surprised to learn about this. Now my lord, a great king and lord like you who holds the world in his hands and tramples it under his feet, to whom everyone bows, whose beginnings are almost perfect and whose future is yet to come, how can such a young king lower himself to wish for a poor girl like me as a wife? Were it to happen, this would be a great honor and massive social advancement for me. But please disregard me since I’m not worthy of you. I’m not a good fit for you. Besides, marrying a king who does not know Christ and is not baptized would betray Christ. It would mean I despise my eternal life and glory by trading them for the temporary status and happiness of this transitory world. Therefore I will stretch out my hand to God but I will not give myself to someone who isn’t baptized and doesn’t know Christ. In fact I’ve taken an oath that I won’t do this so don’t be saddened by my reply. Because you have done a great service, made us happy, and freed my brother from slavery, no man will be able to repay you—only God. Even if you don’t know him, Christ knows you and will certainly reward you for your good deeds,” she said, and at the end, “Your majesty, you promised more than once that you would send us back to our home in safety. I humbly beseech you to fulfill your promise and make it possible for us to return home together to our land,” she wrote.

Entrusting the paper to Wahød, she implored him to deliver it in private.

When the king realized his proposal was unsuccessful, he was disappointed but decided not to coerce her since he knew forced love would not make a good marriage. A king shouldn’t rely on his own strength to do whatever he wants. On one hand he had promised to release them and a king’s word was unbreakable. On the

other he loved her so much that letting her go was tantamount to death. When he thought of her leaving, he began to shake up and down and lost his mind with love. His bones shuddered and he sweat. When he thought of Tobbya, his kingdom, crown, honor guard, and army were all meaningless. Nothing in the world mattered—he wanted nothing more than to be Tobbya’s husband. His heart trembled whenever he thought of her. At the idea of losing her, he felt deep sadness, had a terrible stomachache, and his head throbbed in pain.

What could he do? Saying he was sick he went to bed to avoid everyone. He made sure no one visited him except Wahəd and began thinking quietly but thinking got him nowhere. Tobbya had sworn she wouldn’t marry anyone who wasn’t a Christian—end of story. All that was left to him was to become a Christian.

His thoughts stopped there and he said, “Wahəd, go tell your sister: Take heart and be happy! I’ve decided to become a Christian like you and to marry you. Find me a priest who will baptize me in secret.” And he sent Wahəd to her.

For her part Tobbya was overjoyed, not because this meant she would be queen but because through her a great arämäne king would become a Christian. She said, “If this is the case, it will be beautiful!” and she gave thanks to God.

From that day onward the king began preparing for a grand banquet some months in the future. He didn’t announce the reasons, just ordered tej prepared, țäla brewed, cattle gathered, and everything else be made ready. Moreover every night a respected teacher from the monastery came in secret and began teaching him about religion and the details of our Lord's descent, birth, and death. Planning to marry his

cousin to Wahad who resembled Tobbya, he told her, “You must be a Christian to marry your beloved Tobbya. I myself am becoming a Christian to marry a Christian girl.” In this way he convinced her to study with him, and the king and his cousin learned the faith of Christ.

Meanwhile the king made secret arrangements to have the sign of the cross carved on all his weapons. In place of the banners with the half-man half-beast there appeared a new flag and image bearing the cross, green floating underwater plants, a sword, and a crown of thorns. The name of an idol had been written on every drum, horn, and shield; he had it removed and wrote Christ’s over it instead.

When the wedding preparations were complete, at midnight the night before the union he and his cousin were baptized by the monastery teacher. Right before dawn, the king planted a new cross banner on the tent and threw the old one in the fire.

As dawn broke and the birds started chirping, a herald came out onto the square to make a proclamation, beating a drum and with cross banners on the left and right sides, waving in the wind. People hadn’t yet risen from bed but when they heard the sound of the drummer—Dz dz! Dz dz!—they knew it was the herald. They woke up and hurried to hear the announcement, rubbing their eyes with their hands, single-handedly pulling on clothes from the ground, scrambling and coming to the square from left and right to avoid missing the proclamation. Suddenly, all the people gathered in the square like a pile of leaves and grass and began to mill about.

The king watched everyone from a distance. Once a large group had accumulated he sent his chief herald along with an escort to the square. The herald was in courtly dress with a gold cape, gold shoes, gold hat, gold belt, silk robes, and green trousers. He had a gold-plated staff in one hand and carried the words of the proclamation in the other. He arrived in the square. When he passed behind the drummer and stopped, the drummer began to speed up his beat to signal the time had come for the proclamation. People in the square began to shove and tremble to hear the announcement. So as not to miss the words, they jumped up and down on top of one another and perked up their ears.

At the same time, a proclaimer came out from a large platform and chanted three times as usual: “Listen! Listen! May the king’s enemies be rendered deaf!” As soon as he finished, the chief herald began to read the proclamation and his words were repeated by the proclaimer. The proclamation began:

“My army! My country! There is only one God. He created the world, the earth, the people, the animals—all the creatures of this world. There was no creator before Him. There will be none after Him. The same God existed before the world began and will endure for all eternity. When we believe in the Trinity, we say God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We believe in the unity and trinity of one God. This same God created Adam and Eve and commanded them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the world. At that time not only Adam and Eve but also the wild beasts, animals, and birds recognized and praised their God. After many centuries humanity filled the world. As a result human languages multiplied and distinguished themselves. As the number of languages grew religion and worship changed alongside them. Humanity forgot the true God and made idols for themselves. Then God the Father said to His only son, ‘Go,’ and sent Him to earth. This same child came down from the heavens, was born of the Virgin Mary, became human, taught, was crucified, and died. But His students and disciples continued going around teaching His message as He had taught them. Whatever country they went to, people heard their

words, light dawned in them, they believed, knew the words of Jesus Christ, became Christians, and were baptized. To this day those who did not listen to the disciples' words worship idols, jinn, demons, trees, and mountains. I also lived in ignorance and worshiped idols passed down to me from my forefathers. But now Christ has changed my heart, brought me out of ignorance, and made me know the true creator. The true religion is to be on the side of Christ. It is my religion—know it! If you love me, be baptized like me. But if you don't like me, you can keep your own way. If you'd like to be a Christian, move to the right. If you'd like to live like you used to, go left. Each of you set up camp in that place.”

With this he finished. After the proclamation, the left side was deserted. All went to be baptized and were recognized as Christians. Everything happened as one could have predicted and then became calm again.

The king was relieved. “Shall I be left alone?” he had wondered worriedly. As soon as he saw that his word was accepted, he added an additional decree: “Let the Christians rule, not be ruled.” Because of this law every Christian in the land who had been sold as a slave was emancipated.

All were saved because of a single merchant. All believed on account of one woman. Ethiopia stood tall because of one king's word.

The wedding pavilion was set up, the tables spread out, wäts prepared, and tej made ready. Äräqe was prepared and many heads of cattle were slaughtered. The glasses and bottles were cleaned and made ready. Everything was put in order. The king had already prepared and sent his wife's jewelry. A tent of fine gold cloth embroidered with gold was set up for the event, fenced all around with red and yellow Damascus-made cloth curtains. Tobbya entered and the tent of her poverty was taken

away. The whole area was surrounded by ordinary and uniformed guards. Ladies in waiting were selected, beautifully outfitted, came forward, and accompanied her.

A thousand šanqəla swordsmen armed with swords sheathed in their hands and wearing red cloaks came and joined the queen's bodyguard and formed part of her followers. Before the people's eyes, Tobbya's camp began to dance and spread like fire. Compared to the king's main camp, hers bloomed like Mäskäräm flowers.

Next the king made Wahəd his ras bitwädäd, a title of greatest honor, and crowned him with a gold crown. The camp was separated and re-organized. To increase Wahəd's followers and strengthen the army, the king ordered that all the high-ranking officials of the Christian country move over and camp on the ras bitwädäd's side. After the proclamation was given, Wahəd's infantry increased.

The king and Wahəd prepared to marry on the same day. The king's cousin, unaware of Tobbya and Wahəd's situation, still thought she was going to marry Tobbya. To judge her reaction before the wedding, the king took Wahəd and showed him to his cousin. Seeing him in his court dress and wearing the gold crown of the ras bitwädäd, she never doubted it was anyone but Tobbya. Because she longed so deeply for her love, the moment she saw him she started sobbing with joy and merely wondered aloud how tall he'd gotten in the few days since they'd seen one another.

Hearing this the king said, "He's called Wahəd. The name Wahəd means that the arämäne and the Amhara have become one. For this reason his name has changed and I made his old name my wife's name."

“Alright,” she said. “It’s a good name and it has a good meaning,” and she accepted it happily.

The wedding took place. Their unions created happiness that extended to their children and grandchildren. The kingdom endured and the religion grew deep and capable roots.

Afterward Wahød remembered the son of the kind people who rescued and cared for him when the group of merchants had beaten and abandoned him and who had been sold into slavery. He found him, brought him in, and appointed him as his deputy out of gratitude for his mother and father’s good deeds.

Then the king married Tobbya and composed the following lines for her.

“From where has such a flower sprung!
She must be a saint sent from above.
Created with pure character, she made people marvel in pain at her
perfection.
She won the hearts and souls not only of men but also women.
She achieved all this, yet she did not look down on others.
Leaving her sadøla, a clean-shaven patch surrounded by hair, she
shaved off everything else.
She removed her written talisman and put on animal pelts,
left her carpets and walked on thorns,
got down from her throne and climbed a hill.
She who was not meant to die, let alone be humiliated,
was accused by a dwarf even as the whole world bowed to her.
She was cast out of the royal court thanks to a covetous trick.
She disguised herself as a man for her brother’s sake.
Although she did this, it didn’t last forever.
She united the kingdoms of two countries.
She was unafraid of war and lined up on the battlefield.
This heroine was the first to capture the king.
She made not only those who loved her but also her husband proud.
At the end of it all, Tobbya earned a crown.

Like grain in the dry season
that sprouts with the small rains,

the way you were created
makes everyone lose their minds.

Hold off, don't interrupt!
Let everyone go to pieces.
All the people and the army will worship you.
Within your body and personality
I found a character
who destroys the hearts
God created.
However much I learn of the gospel
or understand religion,
I refuse to believe
someone like you could exist.”

Then Tobbya faced her husband the king and replied with this poem:

“Why all this criticism
For what she's said,
What she's done without worrying about value or milk,
And for marrying a king as fine as honey?

The one who made thousands of Amhara flee,
who invaded the ras and dājazmačs,
overthrew the king,
was unafraid of cannons let alone arrows and swords,
whose news caused people to shiver even at a distance,
who broke the oxen in the monasteries, and
whom hyenas or chains could not restrain—
beyond belief, he was bound by a marker of Christianity!

Even another habäša king
supplied by a cannon-maker in Jerusalem and
waging war for a thousand years could not subdue him.
Only now is he disoriented and frightened,
immature, untested in battle, and inexperienced in kingship.
All those foot-soldiers
all those warriors
all those armies
all those regiments—disarmed by a priest!”

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