

A note from the Notes

by Muna Mussie

“Hundreds of people descend from buses and cars, whole families make their way toward the congress hall, they hug tightly, manifesting an intense joy, so much enthusiasm and so many smiles. Exchanging greetings: How are you?.. It’s been so long. Where are you coming from? Tell me of those who came with you, and the situation of the struggle? (this is the one most frequently heard). It’s normal to see tears well up in eyes, spontaneously and naturally, struck with emotion. As the sun moving higher shines more intensely, so grows the smile on each person’s face.”¹

Testimonies of the struggle of the Eritreans exiled in Europe is a book that narrates an event, singular and extraordinary to me, and for the history of Eritrea, where I was born and the city of Bologna, where I grew up. From 1974 until 1991 in Bologna, during the month of August, there was the Congress-Festival by the E.F.L.E. (Eritrea For Liberation in Europe). Here hundreds, thousands of Eritreans from all over the world (USA, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Northern Europe) gathered for twenty years in support of the struggle for the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

Le Caserme Rosse (the Red Barracks), the site that hosted the Festival – located in a large public park in Corticalla, in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Bologna – goes down in history for having been a concentration and sorting camp of the Nazis, active from 8 September 1943 to 12 October 1944. I remember attending some of these festivals during the eighties, when I was still a little girl; what remains of that experience and that fascinates me still, is the festivity of the event: a tenacious political resistance that passed especially through commonality, the music, the dances.

¹ ‘Congress of Bologna An Eritrean City For One Week’, *Saghm*, Fronte Popolare di Liberazione Eritreo (F.P.L.E.), 1987. Taken from *Bologna Testimony of the struggle of Eritreans exiled in Europe Lest we forget*, Agostino Tabaco and Nicoletta Poidimani (eds.), Punto Rosso Edizioni, 2001, p. 171.

The park of the Caserme Rosse, between musical bands, tents refreshment, bar and an expanse of tents for the guests of the festival, was transformed, for a week, into a micro Citadel animated by black bodies: children of the armed struggle but drugged with peace, freedom and independence. A city within a city, an impromptu polis, a mirage in the hallucinogenic summer heat. There was something unreal and fairied about it for me; a bit like when, as a child, I enjoyed building, to create dens/habitations, precarious structures, architectures arranged with nothing: a sheet, two chairs and I found myself under a roof, in a house (at home). From under this roof I could make everything happen, I was immersed in the magic of a desired and desiring autonomy, made out of imagination and concrete feelings, resistant to everything and everyone.

This concept of home is the subject elaborated in residence at the Archive in Milan. During the armed struggle for Independence, in addition to the Liberation Front that fought – in the front line – in Eritrea, there were several organisations, associations, unions and movements of Eritreans emigrated around the world. The conflict with Ethiopia highlighted the need of the Eritrean people to define, or rather to question, different singularities and specific concerns. I am amazed that such a small country, with such a small population, would generate so many associations, in the name of a single struggle; but at the same time, it is understandable to me, to the extent that, with its many refugees, displaced throughout the world, it was as if Eritrea had expanded, magnified. I imagine that it is thanks to the numerous operative cells scattered over the various territories, that it had been possible to carry out with rigour, a project of such an articulated resistance.

A.D.E.E. Eritrean Women's Association in Europe
A.E.S. Association of Eritrean students
A.L.E.E. Eritrean Workers' Association in Europe
A.S.E.E. Eritrean Student Association in Europe
E.F.L.E. Eritreans for liberation in Europe
E.F.L.N.A. Eritrean for liberation in North America
E.R.A. Association for Aid to Eritrea
F.L.E. Eritrean Liberation Front
F.L.E.-C.c. Eritrean Liberation Front - Central Command
F.P.L.E. Eritrean Popular Liberation Front
G.U.E.S. General Union of Eritrean Students
M.L.E. Eritrea Liberation Movement
N.U.E.S. National Union of Eritrean Students
P.F.D.J. Popular Front for Democracy and Justice
R.I.C.E. Centre for Research and Information of Eritrea
U.N.D.E.E. National Union of Eritrean Women in Europe
U.N.G.S.E. National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students
U.N.L.E.E. National Union of Eritrean Workers in Europe
U.N.S.E.E. National Union of Eritrean Students in Europe

All these forms of associations metaphorically represent houses within which one is recognized and self-sustained. Houses – Citadels – Fortresses. Fortress understood as a form of great will and also of shelter and protection from the physical and ideological attacks of an enemy. In this regard, I recognized in the *Netsela*: a shoulder cover, head cover, typical of the Eritrean tradition, cotton fabric and made by hand, the synthesis of home, camp, tent, association. The *Netsela* is typically worn by Eritrean women and has versatile uses: shields from the sun, from cold, from wind, encloses the body of the child with its mother, is flaunted during the festivities, during the dances and ceremonies that require it, or is simply used to feel collected in oneself, as inside a secret hiding place, a molt, a portable home.

On this fabric, I wanted to embroider the various acronyms of associations, born during the war of independence, the same ones that allowed to gather under a roof – intangible as delicate as gauze but symbolically impenetrable as a fort – the bodies, the voices, the thoughts, the words, the dances, the hair, the beauty, the sounds, the families, the friends, the dreams, the birthdays, the tears, the clashes, the games, the fear, the melancholy, the hope, and all that a house can contain.

Bologna St. 173 is the name of a street that is located in Asmara that the new Eritrean government – proclaimed by Isaias Afewerki in 1991, at the end of the war of independence – wanted to dedicate to the city of Bologna to remember the fundamental role it had had for Eritreans during the long years of struggle. *Bologna St. 173* is a house that molds itself and takes shape according to the bodies that inhabit it.

PF DJ: A phantasmagoric body covered with Netsela from the waist up, prepares popcorn. The sound and the matter shooting out from it glides in the space, and drags with it the billowing-trailing-body. A prechosen point will be the base from which the arm of liberty emerges, the body abandons the molt and escapes into the uncovered open. There are small rites that accompany the life of all peoples. That of popcorn in Eritrea is a rite that finds space inside parties, birthdays, weddings, dances; but rather than something to be eaten, the popcorn here is thrown, made to fly in the air as if it were carnivalesque-confetti-snow and then flung to the ground, scattered as to mark an area of joy where thrift gives way to the sign of abundance and of the ephemeral. By design, popcorn is the result of small explosive reactions that translate into something particularly spongy and soft, both to touch and to view. The sound generated by this reaction, recalls that of shooting: fireworks or firearms. On this sonorous ambiguity plays the action of *PF DJ*: where the struggle for independence advances between gunfire and bombardment; at dusk – during the week of the Bologna Congresses – music and dance take over, revealing the more tender, recreational, crackling and playful phase of the struggle.