

Self-Representation in the Contact Zone: An Autoethnographic Reading of *The Conscript*

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Abstract

Considered the first post-colonial Eritrean novel, *The Conscript* by Gebreyesus Hailu was originally written in Tigrinya in 1927 and published in the same language two decades later. The novel follows Tuquabo, a young soldier recruited by the Italian colonial army to fight Arab nationalist forces in Libya. The emergence of post-colonial African literature was shaped by what Mary Louise Pratt has conceptualized as contact zones. I develop Pratt's notion of the 'contact zone' as the site not only of cultural clashing but also of undoing harmful beliefs and false narratives. This article posits an autoethnographic reading of *The Conscript* because of its status as the first book formally published in Tigrinya, the ironic response to Italian colonialism in Eastern Africa, and the incorporation of multiple oral story-telling methods.

Keywords

Autoethnography, self-representation, contact zone, Italian colonialism, orality, *The Conscript*

Résumé

Considéré comme le premier roman érythréen postcolonial, *The Conscript* par Gebreyesus Hailu a été écrit d'abord en Triginia en 1927 et publié dans la même langue deux décennies plus tard. Le roman suit Tuquabo, un jeune soldat recruté par l'armée coloniale italienne pour combattre les forces nationalistes arabes en Libye. L'émergence de la littérature africaine postcoloniale a été façonnée par les zones de contact, notion élaborée par Mary Louis Pratt. Je développe la notion de Pratt de la « zone de contact » non seulement comme le site d'affrontements culturels, mais aussi un espace où défaire les croyances nuisibles et les faux récits. Cet article postule une lecture autoethnographique de *The Conscript* en raison de son statut de premier livre officiellement publié en Tigrinya, de la réponse ironique au colonialisme italien en Afrique de l'Est et de son incorporation de multiples méthodes de narration orale.

Mots-clés

Autoéthnographie, représentation de soi, zone de contact, colonialisme italien, oralité, *The Conscript*

Foreign discourse has long dominated the perception and imagination of post-colonial African countries. The imperial partition of the continent by major European powers, also referred to as the Scramble for Africa, invented territorial boundaries based on colonial politics with no regard for the pre-existing diverse cultural and societal organization of African regions (Gikandi 381). Eritrea, a northeastern African country on the Red Sea, developed from this history through Italian colonization and shares its post-colonial borders with Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti (Appendix A). Simon Gikandi has suggested a stronger level of African agency in cultural encounters than previously indicated by earlier critics; this is witnessed by turning to the cultural production of arts such as literature.

Highly regarded as one of the first postcolonial novels, *The Conscript* by Gebreyesus Hailu provides an ironic reflection on Libya's anti-colonial war (1922-1932) through the eyes of an *ascari*, the lowest ranking officer in the Italian colonial military hierarchy. The story follows Tuquabo, a conscripted soldier recruited by the Italian colonial army to fight the nationalist Libyan forces resisting Italy's colonial presence in Libya. The short novel is divided into three main parts of a journey, beginning with a brief narration of Tuquabo's childhood and insight into Eritrean cultural values and attitudes at the time, followed by the conscript's departure for war, and finally their arrival in the Libyan desert, where those who survive spend two years fighting under Italian commandment. *The Conscript* is rife with examples of Italy's conquest and power, and their effects, but also full of questions of identity, community, and home. Originally written in Tigrinya in 1927 yet published in 1950, this work is considered the first Eritrean novel. It was later translated into English, adding to its global visibility within the literary realm as a revelatory piece of world literature.

The emergence of post-colonial modern African literature was shaped by what Mary Louise Pratt coined ‘contact zones’, defined as social spaces of interaction between cultures to “meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (34). Consequently, the colonial experience has been a central and enduring theme of African literature since the 20th century (Gikandi 379). Pratt also put forward the notion of the ‘autoethnographic’ text, which describes one’s self or one’s group in “ways that engage with representations others have made of them,” typically in response to ethnographic texts by European metropolitan subjects commenting on their conquered Others (35). I will explore the following questions: How and where are contact zones represented in this novel? In its depiction of asymmetrical power relations, in what manner does *The Conscript* negotiate the binary colonizer-colonized relations in its style, narrative, and plot? Drawing on Pratt’s theoretical concepts and Nir Arielli’s historical account of the role of colonial recruits, I argue that Hailu’s work can be read as an autoethnography related to Eritrean self-representation for three reasons: 1. it is a response to Italian colonization; 2. it was originally published in Tigrinya, an Ethiopic language; and 3. it adopts a narrative style incorporating orality in multiple ways. Beginning with a brief historical background, followed by an analysis of the text as autoethnographic, I aim to develop the contact zone as the site of not only cultural clashing but also of undoing harmful beliefs and false narratives.

A brief historical background is necessary seeing as the novel begins *in medias res* and little exposition is provided in terms of Italy’s colonization of Eritrea. The Scramble for Africa is a term designating the conquest which took place between 1881 and 1914, increasing Western European control over African regions tenfold (Press 206). This invasion, occupation, and rapid partition of African territory by European powers followed the Berlin Conference of 1884, which

formalized external control over the lands. During this period, control over customs, taxes, criminal jurisdiction, and military rights in African regions was claimed by European imperial nations (205). In its ambition to become a great power, Italy's colonial expansion took partial possession of the region now known as Eritrea in 1870 and 1882, forming Italian Somaliland in 1889; Asmara was declared the capital of the newly established colony of Eritrea, replacing Massawa (Appendix B). At this time, the regions under Italian imperial rule were Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia.⁶ The events in *The Conscript* occur in Tripolitania, during the Italian government and its armed forces' "lengthy, difficult, and bloody attempts to subdue the colonies" during the second colonial war in Libya (Arielli 47). In 1922, Italy launched a "military re-conquest of the colony", marking the end of a somewhat peaceful co-existence between Italians and Arabs in Libya (49). The novel begins here, the year the *Habesha* conscripts leave for Tripoli.⁷

Borrowing from the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, I posit an autoethnographic reading of Hailu's work. Autoethnography emerged from postmodern philosophy as a method of questioning traditional science and research and offering a way of "giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding" (Wall 39). Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook trace the definitions, epistemologies, forms, and critics of autoethnography to better understand its interdisciplinary application. Epistemologically, autoethnography means writing about a nation or group of people and the self; the term has been commonly adopted in qualitative anthropology and sociology (Doloriert & Sambrook 83). In anthropology, it is used to capture indigenous people's accounts of their own cultures (84).

⁶ Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were later united to form a nation renamed Libya (Arielli 47). The names Tripoli and Tripolitania are used interchangeably in the novel.

⁷ *Habesha* is a self-designating term used by the people of highland Ethiopia and Eritrea, who see themselves as possessing a distinct identity (Belcher 19). The *Habesha* "have been Christians for millennia and not because of European missionaries" (19).

Although Sarah Wall uses autoethnography and personal narrative in the sociological field, I apply her definition in tandem with Pratt's understanding of autoethnography as a *response* to ethnography, specifically in the Italian colonial context.

The Conscript is a poignant, multi-faceted, and early response to Italian colonialism in Eritrea in which colonizing tropes and binary beliefs are simultaneously exposed and dismantled. Binary language and understandings of the world are foundational underpinnings of the colonial project of conquest and domination. European imperialist powers adopted an essentialized, ethnocentric worldview which centred their cultural existence at the expense of the 'savage' or 'uncivilized' Other. This binary relation became further reinforced through the essentialization and dehumanization of colonial subjects.

As a ruling imperial power, the Italians had a sense of national, racial, and class superiority over their colonial subjects and used the attribution of animal behaviour as a devastating justification for the *Habesha*'s subjugation. The departure of the *ascari* from Asmara is the narrative's first instance of dehumanization and collective suffering of Eritreans at the hands of the Italians. The colonized subjects are reduced to animal status as "the military police would intervene and beat them with a whip (yes, with a whip like a donkey)" (Hailu 12). The interjection of the narrator's voice employing repetition further confirms and emphasizes the Italians' cruelty in their position of authority. During the journey to Libya, the Italians' hierarchical position is both literally and metaphorically reinforced by their seating on the upper deck of the ship. They consistently dehumanize the Eritreans, whipping or shooting them for their disobedience, and segregating them in an area of the ship with no protection from the elements in "a place where you put animals" (Hailu 14). Segregation as a practice, according to Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, constitutes the very essence of colonialism (258). The dehumanization of

the Eritreans at large provides a critical framework for understanding how the colonizers exerted control based on racism to uphold their dominance.

Rooted in racism, the dominance-subjection relation between the Italians and Eritreans represents both an ideological and an active manifestation of domination over somebody who is considered an inferior being. Fear and punishment tactics are used to control the *ascari*, including but not limited to physical punitive measures, namely flogging and the withholding of crucial survival supplies such as food, water, and shelter. At war in the Libyan Desert, the asymmetrical power relations between the Italians and the *Habesha* worsen through their shift into a master-slave dynamic. The submission of the Eritrean Other to the colonizer's will is most apparent in the following exclamation on the narrator's part: "they tell you to do nothing, even if you are slaughtered, until they give their order!" (Hailu 39) This comment speaks to the cruel nature of the colonial war as well as the infantilization of conscripted soldiers in Italian colonial discourse.

Language and identity are inextricably linked as shared languages facilitate communication while providing a sense of belonging through understanding. Languages also play a crucial role in the representation of communities and the power relations between them (Dirar 265). According to Ghirmai Negash, *The Conscript's* translator, "written African literature evolved out of the colonization of Africa by Europe"; hence, the African literary canon has primarily consisted of anticolonial and postcolonial texts predominantly written in the languages of former colonizers (74). *The Conscript*, however, was first published in Tigrinya, an important literary language of the Horn of Africa, spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Autoethnography has also been defined as the entry of marginalized groups into "dominant circuits of print culture" (Pratt 35). The novel's publication nearly thirty years late is

relevant to its consideration as an autoethnographic text because, due to its content and language, in the 1930s, there was no way to formally print and distribute such a novel under Italian rule (Negash 82). The colonial policy held a deliberate aim to suppress local linguistic identities, “with a particular hostility toward the Tigrinya language” (Dirar 265). Being the first novel written in this language, *The Conscript* represents an autonomous and alternative perspective, simultaneously creating self-representation while condemning injustice and the erasure of cultural identity. It must be noted that the *Habesha* have an ancient written culture and have exercised self-representation for over two thousand years in written texts in their own language, *Ge’az* (Belcher 19). The *Habesha* “have been producing bound manuscripts ... since at least the sixth century” and wrote many original books of poetry, theology, history, and biography (ibid).

In *The Conscript*, contact zones are designated spaces of social interaction between different cultural or ethnic groups within the overarching structure of asymmetrical power relations, dehumanization, paternalism, and white superiority. Multiple cultural, racial, and religious encounters occur in the novel, involving the Italians, *Habesha*, Somalians, and Libyans. Conflict is an overarching theme of the story, primarily between imperial powers and anti-colonials, but clashes also occur within the Italian army itself because it plucked soldiers from various African countries. The dynamics between the *Habesha* and Sudanese demonstrate how, fueled by a “divide and conquer” logic, the Italians exacerbated intragroup tensions in pursuit of colonial expansion. The first encounter between the Ethiopians and the Sudanese on the ship involves tension and racism. The Sudanese refer to the Ethiopians as “slaves” going to Tripoli for the money, whereas the Ethiopians call the Sudanese “black people” who could never be superior to them (16). Both groups harshly judge each other according to assumptions that are rooted in prejudiced racial beliefs.

Due to the harmful slurs and racist myths perpetuated by colonial forces, the Arabs had a reputation of indolence and were perceived as merciless killers who could not be trusted to keep their word. Dirar speaks to the Italians' "construction of the colonial subject" through which the *ascari* were expected to act as "agents of Italianisation" within Eritrean society (268). The *ascari* subsequently adopted stereotypical views perpetuated by the Italians painting the Arabs as a notoriously lazy, treacherous, and untrustworthy group (Hailu 32). After conveying this information, the narrator clarifies, "this is what the white people said about them" (ibid). The Italians weaponized these racist stereotypes for the dual purpose of protecting their white superiority and constructing the Arabs as the enemy, ensuring that the conscripts follow their orders. Hailu reveals the strategies adopted by the Italians to exploit and exacerbate existing prejudice and racial tensions between different East African regions to their advantage.

Beyond simply displaying the exploitation that resulted from asymmetrical power relations between the Italian colonizers and Eritrean colonial subjects, Hailu takes his critique further by dismantling racial and cultural stereotypes. In the following excerpt, he ironically co-opts the colonial language of representation of the *Habesha* as animals.

It was exactly like watching a dog whose eyes, while one is eating, are raised and lowered following the movement of one's hand. They were, after all, like dogs, if you compared them with the Italians. In fact, dogs fared better; they at least ate their masters' leftovers. (46)

Through simile likening the *Habesha* to dogs, Hailu ironically incorporates the colonizers' language and their representation of his people to unpack the severity and extent of the *Habesha's* mistreatment. This narration actively conveys the cruelty of the Italians in their

purposeful reduction of the *Habesha* to animal status, forcing them to suffer through inhumane conditions such as slavery, starvation, and extreme thirst over an extended period of time.

Dirar argues for an analysis of the colonial power structure from a more complex standpoint, viewing colonialism as a “plurality of actions and actors ... motivated by broad shared logic” but not always cohesive in their institutional and operational activities (257). He quotes Alexander Naty on the shortcomings of solely emphasizing the exploitative relations between the colonized and colonizer, its limitation being the ignorance of complex interactions of societies with the colonial powers (ibid). This is in agreement with Gikandi’s comment about African agency in cultural encounters. Dirar highlights the combination of institutional mechanisms and Italian colonial policy, and their interaction with local identities which must be put into conversation with *The Conscript*. Hailu’s novel speaks to the hybridity arising from the contact zone. The colonial influence over language becomes apparent when the *Habesha* adopt the word “marching” into their Tigrinya vocabulary “as a testimony to their exhausting experience” (Hailu 27). This is the manifestation of contact zones as spaces where differing cultures imprint on one another but, in this case, only the colonized is imprinted upon.

As opposed to this book’s titular implications, the *ascari* were not technically conscripted soldiers because their participation in the war was ‘voluntary’. This label is inextricably linked with agency; however, rather than digress toward a discussion of volition, the focus here remains the representation of socio-cultural processes factoring into the *ascari*’s military participation in *The Conscript*. In a historical investigation into the military contribution of colonial troops, Arielli emphasizes the Italians’ heavy reliance on Eritrean recruits for financial and political reasons during the counter-insurgency in Libya (48). Positioned at the bottom of the colonial military hierarchy, the *ascari* posed significantly less of a monetary burden than Italian soldiers

(53). As well, loss aversion was a major political consideration for the Italians, as they would receive less backlash in Italy over the deaths of colonized subjects as opposed to Italian soldiers (ibid). These factors were key in Italy's pursuit of expansionist policy in Libya using recruits from the Eritrean colony.

Aside from the imposition of Italian colonial rule, a number of cultural values influenced the participation of *ascari* in the war. Principles of moral courage and masculinity incited many young Eritrean men to voluntarily join the imperial force's army, blinding them to the fact that they were being used without any benefit to their own country. In his youth, Tuquabo witnesses the first wave of war in Tripoli and internalizes thoughts and beliefs rooted in male cultural pride and bravery. These Eritrean social values are passed down generations and repeated in songs. One lyric in particular vocalized by the youth, "He is a woman who refuses to go to Libya," effeminizes men who do not desire to partake in the Libyan war (Hailu 7). Gradually, "all the songs and information were stamped on [Tuquabo's] heart" (ibid). It is through a generational process of learning and socialization within his village that he comes to understand gender roles and equate masculinity with strength and bravery as did his father and the fathers before him – but Tuquabo becomes used for the benefit of the colonizer.

The *Habesha* chiefs, held in high esteem in Tuquabo's community, equally play a role in this conditioning because they boastfully express their desire for war and Tuquabo "developed an interest in weaponry and the military" as a result (Hailu 5). Though his parents are extremely disheartened by his decision to go to war, they exhibit great pride in Tuquabo's knowledge of weaponry throughout his childhood (5). Influenced by community leaders, his father, and the perception of masculinity within the community at large, the idea of fighting grows on Tuquabo

and he resolves to “fight as a hero and gain fame” (7). Eritrean participation in the colonial war is further explored through the different reactions in the local community.

Contrary to the *Habesha* warriors, the family members of the *ascari* and townspeople alike vocalize their disagreement by questioning the soldiers and shaming their decision to fight (8). Struggling to understand why he wishes to fight for foreigners, Tuquabo’s parents experience a great deal of sadness and distress once their son is “in the hands of the heartless Italians” (ibid). At his departure, his mother’s collapse prompts other Eritreans at the train station to curse Tuquabo, labelling him a “cruel son” for leaving his parents to join the fight (8). Regardless of differing opinions vis-à-vis the war, the East African colony was not in a position to provide all the necessary manpower (Arielli 55). *The Conscript* speaks to this issue in its mention of the Eritrean people saying that “not even one young man can be found; all have gone to Tripoli,” reminding the reader of the devastating effects of this colonial war on the local communities (Hailu 26). Hailu’s inclusion of this cultural context reveals the complex web of colonial policy, local socio-cultural beliefs, and motivations resulting in the *ascari*’s military participation in the colonial war and its effects on the people of Eritrea.

Though *The Conscript* is narrated omnisciently, fluctuating between the third and occasionally first-person narration, the majority of the story occurs through Tuquabo’s perspective. This decenters the Italians, instead focalizing on the *Habesha* soldiers’ collective experience, engaging in reflection from a lesser-heard marginalized perspective. Personal narratives can provide a “new vantage point” at the intersection of the personal and societal (Wall 39). Considering autoethnography as “more of a philosophy than a well-defined method,” its textual appearance and configuration may vary (Wall 39). Tuquabo’s story deals with issues of personal importance “within an explicitly acknowledged social context” and of evaluating

one's actions, two central autoethnographic elements (Wall 39). Tuquabo's character is consistently on the move; beginning in his youth, his cattle-owning family afforded him occasional travel opportunities with his father (Hailu 6). However, he never ventured a great distance until the war because the passage to Libya is his first experience seaside. The majority of the narrative is structured as a journey, from leaving the train station to setting sail on the Red Sea, to marching across the desert daily.

The transitory nature of his existence in this narrative can be read as progress and development, ultimately leading to Tuquabo's awakening. Initially, Tuquabo proudly and voluntarily leaves home to fight for the Italians. Approaching the novel's culmination, the *ascari* experience a major contact zone at war in Libya where the Italian military, composed of subgroups, encounters the Arab Libyan nationalists in battle. The contact zone is emphasized in the description of the three different fighting styles according to three cultural backgrounds. Unaccustomed to the Italian military techniques of lying low, the *Habesha* prefer to face their enemy standing tall but are obligated to follow the commandments issued by their Italian superiors (Hailu 39). Meanwhile, fighting for their country on their lands, the Arabs sing war songs expressing the insurgent sentiment to "liberate [their] land or ... be buried there" (37).

Tuquabo gradually experiences an awakening of consciousness and comes to understand the reality of his predicament precisely when he says, "we let our country be taken, and we are now instruments to occupy someone else's country" (Hailu 42). Tuquabo's reflection on the Arabs' protection of their "barren" land as nomads prompts his awakening to the *ascari*'s predicament when he recognizes his tragic use as an Eritrean mercenary 'owned' by the Italians (43). Upon realizing the ironic contradiction of fighting to maintain a colonial system oppressing him and his people, Tuquabo unlearns the essentialist beliefs imposed on him and becomes

entirely disillusioned with the war. This awakening enables him to evaluate his role as a tool for oppression, ultimately leading to a deep sense of regret, shame, and unworthiness reflective of the critical and reflexive nature of autoethnography (Doloriert & Sambrook). A patchwork of feelings, experiences, and emotions is woven into this pluralist, autoethnographic approach to literature, calling the Eritrean soldiers to rethink their situation and, above all, its implications.

Language plays a crucial role in the (re)production of society and identity; orality is *sui generis*, in other words, self-constitutive and unique (Gunner 1). The narrative blends oral storytelling and written methods, affirming Liz Gunner's argument that orality has not disappeared, but rather has adapted itself in many forms as a "vehicle" for expressing the fears and hopes of new generations of Africans (12). Defined as the language and performativity of the body in both public and private spheres, orality facilitates the self-regulation of societies, organizes the past and present, and creates spaces of philosophical reflections (Gunner 1). It is the age-old practice of holding and transmitting cultural knowledge and social values across generations through poetry, song, and dance. In reciting the names of his male ancestors with his father, Tuquabo participates in the oral transmission or exchange of culturally significant, local, intergenerational knowledge. This is just one example of the multitude of ways in which *The Conscript* works with orality.

In the desert, the *ascari* soldiers are addressed by a mysterious vocal interjection that prompts a reflection on their predicament. Upon the *Habesha*'s arrival in the Libyan desert, an anonymous internal voice manifests itself in the minds of the soldiers, simultaneously and directly addressing them all. Hailu interjects dramatic irony into the narrative, foreshadowing the conscript's brutal betrayal by the Italians: "Beware, Habesha; the Arabs are not your enemies. Will you be able to recognize your true enemy?" (Hailu 21). Whether this voice is the narrator,

or a God, or something else entirely is unclear but its purpose is to inform them that the Arabs are watching. This foreshadows the *ascari*'s dreadful treatment by the Italian commanders who later abandon their colonial troops, most of whom will die of thirst. More importantly, it exemplifies the insertion of the composer's voice and evokes a collective consciousness shared by the *Habesha*, transcendent of the boundary between the self and society.

Autoethnography can also entail the "incorporation of elements of one's own life experience" (Reed-Danahay 6). At multiple points in the story, there is an abrupt transition from third-person to first-person narration to recount historical information and personal anecdotes relevant to the narrative's events. To emphasize and relate to the reader to what degree the desert conditions made the *Habesha* suffer, the narrator interjects: "I recall one day myself running unawares into one of those hot ash craters. My legs sank up to my knees; I was full of burn wounds" (Hailu 24). Moving beyond the individual life experiences of Tuquabo and the narrator, and following indigenous oral tradition, Hailu juxtaposes the biographical and the collective (Negash 75). This leads to the linkages between orality, song, and memory, which are equally prominent themes in the text.

Orality and music coexist, and the narrative's most poignant scenes are almost always marked by singing. Song is often a testament to the memories of lived experiences, both individual and shared. At the departure from Asmara, women "sang together a melancholy song" when they bid the soldiers' farewell (Hailu 12). Likewise, seeing their native land moving away from the ship, absorbed in their memories, "all of [the *Habesha*], together, were thinking about their country at the same time" (16). As they bid their homeland farewell, catching one last glimpse of the familiar landscape, Tuquabo is reminded of a traditional song which prompts him to feel regretful and forlorn. Finally, the train station scene is paralleled in the end as the women

sing to welcome the surviving *Habesha* home two years after their departure. The reader is reminded by the narrator that, despite the emotional poignancy of this story in particular, it is “not extraordinary” and happened “each time conscripts arrived in the train station” (Hailu 55). This advises the reader that despite the focalization on Tuquabo, he is one of thousands conscripted soldiers among many waves of troops sent off to fight against Libya’s anti-colonial war which spanned a decade. In this case, the focus on Tuquabo as an individual acts as a refraction of a collective representation (Belcher 8).

Beginning and ending at the Asmara train station, the novel’s circularity builds on poetic rhetoric and pays homage to oral storytelling. In the same way it began, chaos reigns at the train station awaiting the *Habesha*’s return, and once again the local crowd is likened to animals, such as sheep looking for their lambs (Hailu 54). Only this time, the Eritreans are the agents of authority. Not only do they speak Italian phrases, but the smug guards carrying whips and pistols have adopted the colonizer’s propensity for violence. This internalization of violence is yet another consequence of the contact zone. Their “order” was to whip any *Habesha* who came too close but never any foreigners (53). This moment paints a striking portrait of the devastating violence of the colonial era and its lasting ramifications. In protest of this development, people sing “God save us from your wrath, the *Habesha* clerk has turned against his own” (Hailu 53). Singing and, in other instances, its absence mark the story’s crucial, most emotional moments.

The stark contrast of the *absence* of song is just as remarkable. For instance, the utter silence upon the *Habesha*’s arrival in the Libyan Desert is conveyed when “not even one song or meaningful word was heard in the entire group” (Hailu 23). It is in this hot and dry environment that the *ascari* have their voices taken away, poetry and song being a central part of their culture. Nevertheless, Hailu’s prose still feels poetic, packed with vivid imagery and symbolic language

to describe the natural environment as reflective of the narrative's events. He compares the depressing desert scene to the expanse of the sea, emphasizing the land's barrenness and hostility through the lack of greenery and animal life, symbolic, perhaps, of the effects of colonization (Hailu 24). Praise poetry is a West African tradition of oral poetry that looks at the personal and collective histories while deeply engaging with imagery of the natural world (Gunner 3).⁸ Poetry and song are a "license for those without formal power to comment and criticize" (Gunner 7). Consisting of a narrative shaped by orality, *The Conscript* becomes a site of questioning and contesting power by exerting pressure on pre-existing social conditions and asymmetrical power relations. As a radical political approach, autoethnography entails the concept of "resistant memory" which holds minority histories and ensures the maintenance of a community (Gunner 6), as seen in this powerful narrative.

The novel ends with a dirge—a lament composed by Tuquabo to pay respect to his deceased mother. In this case, memories and experiences are presented in a circular manner because the story begins and ends with the protagonist's relationship with his parents. In the beginning, Tuquabo's background is framed by his mother Tek'a's memory of the day he was born. Tek'a dreams of six flowers, representing each of her children, being plucked away one by one by a sickle representing the hand of death (Hailu 4). She names her son after Medhaniya Alem who, in her dream, saves her baby boy from illness (ibid). In the end, she is the one who passes away before her son's return from Libya, ravaged by grief and despair. Songs and laments allow moments to live on in the collective memory and have a "dual role of catharsis and revitalization" in educating generations about the past (Gunner 10). *Melqes* poems are part of a Tigrinya genre performed by oral poets to mourn the dead (Negash 85). In his composition,

⁸ This tradition is rooted in West African poetry, therefore, not of the same regional origin as the *Habesha*. My aim here is not to lump together cultural practices from different African regions, but simply to use the term to compare general techniques of oral practices to *The Conscript*.

Tuquabo expresses extreme regret and shame toward his decision to fight the colonizers' battle. "I am done with Italy and its tribulations / That robbed me of my land and parents" (Hailu 57). Not only does this pay respect to his mother, but also denounces the imperialist war by ending the novel with Tuquabo's tremendous suffering as a direct result of Italian colonialism in Eritrea.

The evocative, emotional narration in *The Conscript* transcends the binary colonizer-colonized social relations, reaching a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of Libya's anticolonial war. The multiple instances of cultural encounters with various Others develop the contact zone as a central concept throughout the text. These contact zones are spaces of oppression and chaos, but also of questioning and dismantling of essentialist beliefs. Although Hailu offers a scathing account of Italian colonial practice, resilience prevails as a dominant theme embodied mainly through the protagonist. Focalized through an Eritrean soldier, *The Conscript* dismantles Italian essentialist beliefs about the local populations of Eritrea and Libya, adopting and merging oral tradition with 'modern' narrative forms to rewrite a shared and complex history. Hailu's writing is self-reflexive in its approach and he does not limit himself to criticizing the Italians. He combines oral traditions of poetry and song with a 'modern' form to produce self-representations offering an alternative perspective and nuanced understanding of the mechanisms and the manifold ramifications of colonialism.

The importance of analyzing *The Conscript* as an autoethnographic text lies in the legitimation of different forms of knowledge production and distribution. In its narration and form, lines are blurred between the objective and the subjective, creating space for cultural production outside the well-established Western methods and pushing for the combined revival, renewal, and evolution of genres to reread, rewrite, and revise historical events. Increasing the visibility of texts like *The Conscript* is crucial; however, this may raise important questions

regarding translation as a practice and its capacity to preserve and transmit the original meaning and voices of autoethnographic work. Regardless, its translation into English and additional languages is a gift bestowed upon readers worldwide.

APPENDIX A



Present-day map of the African continent, emphasizing in yellow the modern-day place names for the pertinent locations in *The Conscript* (mapchart.net).

APPENDIX B



Map of Eastern Africa, as partitioned by the imperial powers c. 1914 (Encyclopedia Britannica).

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