Introduction

In and Out of Ethiopia: Migrations, Diasporas and Contemporary Ethiopia

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For many years, scholars of history, anthropology, sociology and political science have been pleading for the bridging of the boundary between Ethiopian studies and African studies (James 1986, Shelemay and Kaplan 2006: 192). The putative “exceptionality” of Ethiopia in Africa is evidenced by both Africanist productions that leave little room for case studies from Ethiopia, and from Ethiopianist scholarly traditions mainly anchored in Europe (United Kingdom, Italy, France, Germany), and more recently in the USA, that do not engage deeply in the themes and concerns of Africanist scholarship. The “integration of work on Ethiopia into the mainstream of African historiography” (Crummey 1990: 119) is underscored as a major challenge. As a matter of fact, the interpenetration of themes, methods and research questions represent a perennial concern, which 15 years ago was far from achieved (Bahru 2000: 17). If progress has been made since then, the overall objective of bridging Ethiopia and Africa remains unfulfilled. Such an objective calls for comparative studies, as well as for the conceptualisation of research themes that would encourage scholars to encompass Ethiopian historiography as well as other fields of knowledge. This would contribute both to a disentanglement of Ethiopia from itself, and to a scholarly dialogue between Ethiopia and Africa.

This challenge applies as well to the field of research on the African Diaspora. It has already been noted that Ethiopians abroad “have received little attention from scholars of migrations, diaspora studies, or even the African diaspora” (Shelemay and Kaplan 2006: 192) and in turn, Ethiopianists do not engage systematically terms and concepts emerging from an ever-growing body of knowledge on diaspora, postcolonial literature, and cultural studies. This disconnect actually underscores an acute need as the field of modern Ethiopian studies (19th and 20th centuries) remains in search of narratives that could reframe the “battlefield” represented by the scholarly discourses on ethnicity and subjectiv-
ity, and by the instrumentalisation of memory and history (Triulzi 2002). The scarcity of studies on the Ethiopian diaspora could be understood as a result of the very place actually given to Ethiopia in studies of the African diaspora, in particular in the Americas. Ethiopia, and by extension Ethiopianism, came to represent simultaneously a biblical land, a royal lineage, and a metonymy for people with black skin (Shepperson 1968, Drake 1991). As such, it structured black political thought and social practices in the Americas as early as the 17th century. Early visionaries like freemason Prince Hall (c. 1735–1807); intellectuals like Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963); activists like Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), and others contributed to give “Ethiopia” a political and religious significance. In addition, “Ethiopian” Churches about everywhere in the Americas aimed at empowering “Ethiopians” and were structured by a discourse on the “redemption of Ethiopia” (Drake 1991, Scott 2004, Price 2003). With the Italian-Ethiopian war (1935–1941), Ethiopia became a cause to defend as widespread international contestation grew, in particular in black communities (Scott 1993, Harris 1994). Furthermore, Ethiopia has often been regarded as a paradigmatic “homeland” for descendants of enslaved Africans, along with Liberia, Sierra Leone and Haiti. For example in Robin Cohen’s work, Ethiopia is mentioned as representing the most significant notion of an imagined African homeland, not as a physical point of departure or arrival (Cohen 1997: 36–39). William Safran offers only a mythical value to return to the homeland: it would serve “to solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity when religion can no longer do so” (Safran 1991: 91). However, physical “returns” from the Caribbean (and the Caribbean migratory space) to Ethiopia, starting in the late 19th century until today, are now documented, adding an attribute to the myth of return: it can actually survive to the reality of settlement in Africa (Bonacci 2015). Even if the centrality of Ethiopia in the imagination of the African diaspora remains a dominant paradigm, a very tangible Ethiopia can be incorporated into discussions of the African diaspora. The Rastafari movement is exemplary in this respect, while in Jamaica, in the Caribbean and in the Western metropolises, Rastafari were major proponents of a sacralised and idealised Ethiopia. Since the 1960s, Rastafari are also the main actors of a “return” to Ethiopia, thus forcing us to weave closely together knowledge on Ethiopia and on the African diaspora (Bonacci 2015).

Nonetheless, a new strand of literature on the Ethiopian diaspora is emerging, as exemplified by the 2006 special issue of Diaspora (Shelemay and Kaplan 2006). At the centre of enquiry is a search for working definitions of creativity in the expressive cultures of the Ethiopian diaspora, as a way to produce knowledge about Ethiopian life in the diaspora. All papers focus somehow on creativity and innovation (Levine 2006, McCann 2006), with particular atten-