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Misreading the Air: Narrative Ambivalence and the Burden of Representation in Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*

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Abstract: This article argues that Ethiopian-American writer Dinaw Mengestu's novel *How to Read the Air* (2010) generates a narrative and cultural conundrum. It contests mainstream, trauma-riddled depictions of immigrant life while simultaneously conforming to the reductive cultural tropes it criticizes. I approach the notion of the stereotypical "singular" immigrant story, wherein the individual's struggles stand for those of the diasporic community, by drawing on Kobena Mercer's and Stuart Hall's notion of "the burden of representation" as well as Cathy Park Hong's "literature of minor feelings." Situated within an ongoing critical conversation about Mengestu's relationship to diasporic identity and popular migrant stories, this article foregrounds *How to Read the Air*'s narrative dissonance and departs from the current scholarly discourse, which tends to either interpret Jonas' individual experience as reflective of collective diasporic experience or overemphasize the novel's revisionist self-consciousness. Through close textual analysis, I show that *How to Read the Air* both masterfully employs irony and falls victim to it. The novel might not ultimately rise above tropes, but its ambivalence blends opposed positions, sentiments, and tones, and in doing so creates a pluralist revisionist narrative that assimilates stereotypes creatively.

Keywords: burden of representation, revisionism, singular immigrant story, irony, trope

I. Introduction

When Jonas Woldemariam, the narrator and Ethiopian-American protagonist of Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air* (2010), delivers news of his father's recent demise to his private school students, their reactions meet his expectations: "[H]uge tides of sympathy were mounting for my dead father and me. . . . I had brought directly to their door a tragedy that finally outstripped anything . . . [they] could have personally hoped to experience" (244). Thanks to Jonas' embellishment of his father's backstory, his tear-jerking immigrant narrative, momentously capped with Yosef Woldemariam's death, rivets his presumably white and wealthy student audience. Leaving uncertain "how much" of what he relates to his students is "true" (245), Jonas turns Yosef's absconding to the West from a singular (and, so far as we can tell, real) and private lifetime event into a hugely successful tragic narrative whose universally familiar features allow it to self-propagate.[1] Jonas' storytelling takes the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy: convinced of his students' disgruntlement if he pursues the class syllabus instead of narrating his father's adventure on any given day, Jonas takes "pride" (228) in perpetuating the well-worn cultural image of the immigrant as victim. And yet Jonas also categorically refuses to participate in a "Save Africa Now campaign" organized by the students, dismissing their myopic preconceptions about Africa by joking, "My family's Irish. . . . I'd feel like a fraud if I joined" (99). In one moment Jonas is more than willing to indulge a Western audience's appetite for the Other's trauma, while the next he openly mocks postcolonial stereotypes. On the one hand, he resigns himself to his students' simplistic understandings as much as he potentially indulges a masochistic drive; on the other, he exercises enough effort (and self-respect) to unapologetically scoff at Western postcolonial clichés. These attitudes continually give way to each other throughout *How to Read the Air*, propelling the story forward while simultaneously destabilizing it. Narrative ambivalence permeates the novel; Mengestu's attraction to cultural clichés ultimately aids, rather than thwarts, his endeavor to rewrite the postcolonial immigrant story by creatively integrating its limitations into a revisionist narrative.

II. Readings, Misreadings, and Representation

How to Read the Air is narrated by Jonas, an introspective and somewhat emotionally numb second-generation Ethiopian immigrant in the United States. Jonas' non-linear narrative provides flashbacks of his failed marriage to Angela, a lawyer and fellow Ethiopian-American; his equally troubled work as an English teacher; and memories of his parents' time in Africa and America that reflect their tumultuous relationship. A talented storyteller, Jonas is an unreliable narrator par excellence; central to the novel's power is the fact that readers are left puzzling over the degree to which Jonas' tracing of his parents' story is fabricated. Even more provoking is the novel's contradictory attitude toward conventions of immigrant narratives, as existing scholarship evinces.

Much of the criticism on *How to Read the Air* treats Jonas' penchant for rehashing immigrant tropes as if he is doing so unironically, construing this tendency as integral to the novel's purported status as representative of a collective experience.[2] Critics who do acknowledge the novel's resistance to reductive cultural depictions of the African immigrant do not account for its simultaneous conformity to them.[3] It is often an either/or case in which Mengestu's own potential ambivalence and his conscious effort to shed light on an irresolvable cultural conundrum go underappreciated. Grant Hamilton, for example, contends that the novel "stages diasporic experience as aporia," as a sort of life that, paradoxically, is at once impossible to live and necessary (154–55). He employs essentialist language to characterize Jonas, whose life, he writes, captures "the seminal dissonance that confronts the diasporic subject" (154). Hamilton suggests that Jonas' situation points to a "fundamental existential and ontological structure" where life must be lived even as the uncertainty governing past, present, and future makes it unlivable (154); any attitude of Jonas' antagonizes a different one—his need to lay claim to an adoptive land conflicts with his perception of his current life as discontinuous with a former one (157)—and the unresolvable tension produced is a "necessary act of the immigrant" (155). Although sensitive to the intergenerational trauma that is to an extent responsible for Jonas' occasionally conflicted emotions, Hamilton's reading doesn't grapple with

how that it is precisely this ascription of private drama to collective pain that the novel contests, even if ambivalently. Similarly, despite recognizing that Mengestu does "indeed make something new out of the familiar immigrant narrative" (117), Aliki Varvogli identifies Jonas' striving "for a sense of home and belonging" and his frustrated juggling of a dual identity as an American and "African story-teller" (119) as the narrative's motivating forces.[4] She does not acknowledge the extent to which these themes, as well as her own interpretation of them, might be clichés. Likewise, although Grace Musila stresses Mengestu's intent to challenge "the global literary marketplace's appetite for portraits of black suffering" ("The Afterlives of Slavery" 112), her argument is compromised by her formulaic reading of Yosef's escape from Sudan as evoking the experience of "enslaved Africans on slave ships" (114). She both perpetuates the habit of interpreting a singular incident as an index for collective experience that she claims Mengestu rebuts and declines to dwell on why the novel might fall victim to what it criticizes. More recently, Michelle Rabe has perceptively argued for the multiplicity of readings that *How to Read the Air* offers that undercut "the harmful singularization of African fiction," whether that fiction relies on well-worn tropes of immigrant suffering or follows a newer—and equally homogenizing—tendency to replace trauma narratives with stories of socioeconomic belonging and success (768–69, 774). Nonetheless, Rabe's emphasis on the novel's self-consciousness overlooks its paradoxical commitment to the very tropes it disavows. The current scholarly landscape, then, is in need of attention to the novel's narrative dissonance, the cultural and, simultaneously, narrative roadblocks that frustrate Mengestu's revisionist agenda, as well as why such a noncommittal attitude might be essential to *How to Read the Air*'s achievement.

Notwithstanding their different arguments, existing scholarship on Mengestu's novel gestures invariably, albeit never explicitly, to "the burden of representation." Developed by Kobena Mercer and Stuart Hall, the concept critiques the idea that work by Black artists and cultural workers ought to represent cultural experiences shared collectively by the Black community. Critics that read the novel as narrating a singular life to give voice to a non-singular mode of being ironically

replicate Jonas' own internalization of the pressure to account for the non-Western immigrant's experience; they misread the air in the same way that Jonas often does. Analyzing the novel through the conceptual lens of the burden of representation, I depart from existing criticism to argue that *How to Read the Air* stages—or inadvertently reveals—narrative ambivalence about its own representational mode. It turns its meta-commentary on storytelling into a narrative device through which to explore Jonas' invention of revisionist stories that parody postcolonial tropes bred by the West's fetishistic "cult of suffering" (Mbembe 630). And yet it is simultaneously through this meta-commentary-turned-narrative device that the novel perpetuates the tropes that it sets out to contest and falls victim to its own irony. While several of the novel's passages gesture at the possibility of an alternative immigrant narrative that steers clear of stereotypes and eschews underestimating the real challenges immigrants face, other (and often the same) instances replicate tropes. The novel thus both anticipates and tests the ground for the "literature of minor feelings" envisioned recently by Cathy Park Hong, whereby the unpleasant emotions generated by immigrant life are spotlighted without framing migrant stories chiefly as stories of trauma. *How to Read the Air* demonstrates a conceptual challenge that might be inescapable: the process of ridding oneself of a mentality that relies on standard cultural fare co-exists with, and cannot exclude, subscribing to and reproducing cultural clichés. I conclude by showing that the novel's irresolution, even the inadvertent irony to which it succumbs, allow it to rise above the discontents that result from efforts to represent the immigrant experience while half-heeding representation's dictates.

III. Individual Lives and Collective Experience: Art and the Burden of Representation

Ushering the concept into intellectual life in 1990, Mercer defines the burden of representation as "the overwhelming pressure to try and tell the story all at once" (62). Black artists' susceptibility to the pressure to account for a collective experience often stems from having been continuously represented as devalued objects and impeded from representing themselves as subjects (62). In wholesale resistance to this perennial

exclusion, many Black artists have produced work that not only depicts people of color as fully individuated subjects but (often exclusively) narrates an individual life to tell the story of an entire community. Mercer's vocabulary to describe this representational mode, in which the individual always partakes of the collective, is shrewdly legal: "The notion of a given set of ethical 'obligations' immediately sets up a moral problematic that presupposes a contractual model of subjectivity" whereby Black artists feel bound by "their 'accountability' to the community" (65). Subjectivity risks forfeiting its singularity as individuality melts into a largely constructed experiential condition purporting to be simultaneously individual and universal. Black art is deemed authentically "black" (and "worth talking about" [67]) insofar as it clings to the preordained formula of telling a community's "true" story; attempts to meet the obligation for an individual life to be representative limits these artists' ability to experiment formally and thematically.[5] Ironically, "representative" art replicates the essentialist mentality that the anti-racist discourse to which it subscribes strives to eliminate (68).

As my application of Mercer's argument to Mengestu's novel demonstrates, the burden of representing the experience of the African diaspora under the rubric of consolidating diasporic identity risks eliding the singularity of an individual identity through undue, if implicit, insistence on a particular ethically charged framework of victim and savior. More often than not, narratives depicting the specificity of experience as a collective condition among non-Western immigrants appeal to a Western audience's compassion for the Other's (often sensationalized) suffering; this narrative tendency comes at the expense of modes of representation that depict individual life as singular and multifaceted rather than reflective of collective trauma.

Expanding on Mercer's argument, Hall adopts a broader view of the critical trajectory that has provided legitimate grounds for contesting certain kinds of Black art. Originally, Black artists' concerted struggle to access "the rights of representation" (Hall 442) centered identity on a common axis in order to foreground and resist the experience of discrimination shared by Black people (441). This effort to produce "a 'positive' black imagery" in cultural production has led to a "new

phase" in Black cultural politics (442) whereby novel forms of art level anti-racist critique against a representational mode that homogenizes Black identity and experience (442–46). Stressing a particular lynchpin of this new critical chapter, Hall calls attention to this kind of Black art's frequent and troubling propensity to overlook ethnic specificity by constructing a "singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities" (441). For Hall, "Black" is a constructed category that blurs ethnically particular histories, languages, and cultures (446) in the same way that Western-bred identitarian tags—i.e., the so-called immigrant or diasporic subject—critiqued by Mengestu do. Not only does treating experience as monolithic omit ethnicity's role in individual immigrant identity, but it also fetishizes it. The fetishization to which minoritized groups have been subjected historically when represented in popular culture remains nothing less than a valid risk in reverse once a postcolonial mindset substitutes "positive" for demeaning modes of representation. Just as racism and willful ignorance once injected cultural production with negative stereotypes, an appetite for what Steven Thomas critiques as "'authentic' stories of individual success against a backdrop of traumatic Africa" (10) breeds new cultural and narrative clichés—tropes that might not be debasing but are limiting tropes nonetheless.[6]

This fetishistic exaggeration of trauma in narratives about immigrants of color has come under trenchant critique by recent theories of minoritized representation. A famous example is Afropolitanism. With beginnings in Achille Mbembe's eponymous essay from 2007 and Taiye Selasi's popular article "Bye-Bye, Babar" (2005), the Afropolitan ideology endorses an image of twenty-first-century Africans as cosmopolitan, well-educated, beautiful, and successful rather than victimized by social and political marginalization. A well-known instance of Afropolitanism's sway over contemporary culture is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work; Adichie targets, in a famous TED talk, the "single story" that shows "a people as one thing, as only one thing" (9:22), although the degree to which her work is reflective of this critique is debatable. Despite its salutary efforts to de-emphasize dominant cultural narratives,

Afropolitanism whitewashes the discrimination and disenfranchisement that continuously affects diasporic subjects.[7] It might hew to the newly glorified rubrics of transnationalism and pluralism, but, in a by now familiar gesture, Afropolitanism congeals diasporic identity under new categories, revising rather than evading the essentialist logic that underpins cultural representations both disputed by and, ironically, reproduced by the type of Black art critiqued by Mercer and Hall.

A recent attempt to break out of this loop of critique and replication of a particular representational logic is Hong's essay collection and memoir *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020), which engages intimately, if never explicitly—and from an Asian rather than African perspective—with the issues of representation foregrounded by Mercer, Hall, and the Afropolitans. Although Hong recognizes the "ethnic literary project" as a "humanist" one aimed at portraying people of color as complex human beings, she decries its fetishistic logic: the "'single story' on immigrant life" comprises a set of marketable, "tired ethnic narratives" that have "made our lives palatable to a white audience" (47) by catering to the formula, "I don't think, therefore I am—I *hurt*, therefore I am. Therefore my books are graded on a pain scale" (49; emphasis in original). A single character's trajectory becomes a symbol of a greater whole—an ethnic community, country, or continent. Conflict, poverty, and "historic tragedy" become the frameworks for unfolding storylines that test individual characters and lead to "revelation[s] of self-affirmation" (49). Hong's alternative to the homogenizing tropes on which the standard immigrant narrative thrives is a literature of "minor feelings": narratives that abstain from sensationalized indulgence in trauma that portray "racial everyday experience" and its range of "negative, dysphoric, and untelegenic" emotions via realism (55). A literature of minor feelings leans toward the painful side of racialized existence but resists feeding excessively on such "rigid and rudimentary" points of narrative conflict as "not belonging" and "the sense of in-betweeness" (196). It seeks to refrain from entering a vicious cycle whereby maligned identity tags are replaced with new tags that perpetuate a tired process of (what I think of as) cultural reification: individual moments and often individual storylines constitute concrete

manifestations of an ethnic community's "condition," which might be real or might be an abstraction that is construed as universally valid.

Hong's proposed literary mode bears witness to racial experience as marked by negative emotions while also acknowledging that such emotions, although real, become a construct when they are supposed to epitomize minoritized experiences; conscious of this slippage, the literature of minor feelings seeks to transcend irony. Likewise, although *How to Read the Air* does not discredit narratives of unbelonging, it asks us to acknowledge that representations of immigrant existence as traumatic are largely conditioned by the cultural mainstream. The novel avoids pandering to the convention of "self-affirmation" (49) that Hong targets; it concludes with Jonas being as emotionally numb as ever. However, while it takes care not to underrepresent the reality of immigrant suffering, *How to Read the Air* repeatedly succumbs to the temptation of making private trauma representative of collective identity. It both gestures toward a literature of minor feelings and shies away from it in service of plot structures that promote a reductive mode of representation, thereby seemingly impeding the project of social justice that underlies so much postcolonial fiction. Ultimately, however, Mengestu's tonal blending, which is intertwined with the novel's contradictory sentiments about immigrant representation, suggests an alternative to the formulaic immigrant narrative that even Hong's literature of minor feelings falls short of articulating, a point I return to below.

IV. "That's (not) the same thing my father said": Critiquing the Politics of Representation

The novel's meta-commentary on storytelling reflects Angela's and Jonas' awareness of the process through which immigrant identity is constructed; moreover, this meta-commentary constitutes both a heuristic through which they negotiate the effect of stereotyping on how they are perceived and a narrative tool with which Mengestu mocks cultural tropes. In a deft exposition of how stock assumptions coalesce to enshrine a monolithic narrative, Angela darkly humors her former law school classmates at a reunion by pitching different versions of her father's disappearance. She spends the evening joining in conversations

with the catchphrase, "That's the same thing my father said just before he left us" (Mengestu 49). Each time, she offers a different reason for his abandonment of the family (he went off to Mexico; he went to get some cigarettes). The majority of Angela's former classmates are likely white,[8] and, raised with privilege, they almost cartoonishly subscribe to a neoliberal, consumerist lifestyle that revolves around "trips[,] . . . resorts[,] . . . [and] great restaurants" (48). This characterization identifies them as cookie-cutter consumers of mainstream culture and suggests that Angela's conduct around them is strategic. Her tactic approximates what Thomas, writing about Ethiopian-American writer Nafkote Tamirat's work and thinking of Sigmund Freud, describes as Tamirat's "narrative uncanniness" in her novel *The Parking Lot Attendant*: by making an unreal political dystopia the framework of her narrative, he suggests, Tamirat defamiliarizes immigrant stories (5). Angela's behavior at the party is driven by a similar agenda: "If I told you the whole story," she tells Jonas after the event, "you could say that it's true, but you don't know the story. . . . I don't have a father and everyone thinks they know the whole story because they saw something like it on television. . . . Well, that's not true. It's not the same story" (Mengestu 49). Mengestu parodies a Western audience's preconceptions about immigrants while remaining sensitive to both the precarity of being an African immigrant and the need to avoid bypassing the reality of immigrant suffering. Yet it is ironic that he castigates the logic of extrapolating a greater truth from individual experience[9] by furnishing a single narrative incident—Angela's demeanor at the party—as a means of alluding to a broader concern regarding the ethics of representing immigrant experience. Angela's darkly facetious attitude serves as a springboard for a more far-reaching critique.

In having Angela resort to a similar disruptive strategy on another occasion, Mengestu continues his ironic technique whereby a particular character is made to stand for an idea in order to lambast a convenient, yet wrongheaded, means of approaching minoritized experience. At a Christmas party thrown by her law firm, Angela introduces Jonas to her co-workers. She initially says that he comes from Sierra Leone and is "still traumatized by the war, which is why he doesn't speak much" (103). She

later changes the story and describes him as Japanese, even though "[h]e doesn't look it" (103). Angela mocks postcolonial tropes by targeting two frameworks—war and trauma—through which African immigrant identity has frequently been defined. In the first instance, she spotlights what is likely the typical assumption that anyone hailing from Sierra Leone must have experienced conflict and been profoundly scarred by it. In the second instance, Angela's attitude harkens back to an exchange between Jonas and his high school students, in which the former answers the students' question about where he is from with the response "Illinois," provoking them to ask, "where are you *really* from?" (76; emphasis in original). The white students' understanding of "origin" hinges on a simplistic conflation of physical appearance with geographic and cultural origins (again, a facile logic of interpreting individual circumstance as per cultural stereotypes) and implies that only white people can be real Americans. Angela undermines these assumptions by suggesting that Jonas might come from Japan just as plausibly as an African country like Sierra Leone, since his Blackness does not tie him intrinsically to an African homeland. His own Blackness, in other words, does not necessarily append him to a place associated, historically, with many Black people.

Mengestu's meta-commentary becomes a particularly sophisticated device in Jonas' hands. A crucial instance of the novel's ironic twist on narratives that conflate individual with collective experience is Jonas' recollection, evoked by his parents' visit to Fort Laconte, of his childhood habit of building miniature forts out of stones and twigs. Although he assiduously built hundreds of forts, none of them "were especially sturdy," for he was "never a craftsman" (119). Unable to create a "proper foundation," he had to repeatedly demolish and re-erect his "irregular" and "fragile" forts, constructing, over the course of seven years, "as many versions of home as [he] could find" (119). He followed a general blueprint found in "how-to books," but never failed to enrich each fort with "one distinct variation that was of [his] own making" (119). Although the novel might not create an explicit link between representation and fort-building, I read Jonas' flashback as symbolic of a storyteller's capacity to refashion a narrative about their identity endlessly, spinning ever

new stories about a standard—even trite—theme such as the quest for a "proper foundation" and belonging; in their variability and unpredictability, the new versions redeem the clichés on which they depend. It is once again characteristic of Mengestu's brilliant irony that it is nearly impossible for readers to resist the temptation of teasing a general maxim (creative twists on well-worn stories add novelty and character) out of a particular incident (the craftsman-like young Jonas built several different forts). By inviting readers to parse fort-building as a metaphor that makes Jonas' particular habit meaningful beyond itself, the novel asks us to rethink how we read and create narratives about individual lives.

In lieu of resisting the cult of suffering's fetishistic allure by banishing stories of hardship from the space of immigrant narrative altogether—a propensity to which Afropolitanism is susceptible and owes its contentious reception—Mengestu insists on the importance of highlighting the pervasive legacies of colonialism and racial marginalization but liberates his representational mode from the standard tropes with which immigrant narratives have been saturated. The disappearance of Angela's father is unique, and the young Jonas' tendency to express his need for steady emotional crutches through play is the particular experience of an Ethiopian-American child growing up in late twentieth-century Illinois. Jonas' experience might arguably be tied, to an extent, to his position as the child of African immigrants, but it is not representative of an immigrant of color's fundamental "dissonance" (Hamilton 154) or "the bigger story" of "*the* child of Ethiopian immigrants looking for his place in the world" (Varvogli 125; emphasis added). The young Jonas may have followed prescribed guidelines on how to erect his forts, but his eventual creations always expanded beyond the original blueprint: "I built each . . . as far as possible out of anyone's general line of vision" (Mengestu 120). Each new fort comes into being out of the ruins of a previous one and forever ceases when the same materials crumble yet again; analogously, a scripted immigrant narrative is untrue because each story is unique in space and time, even as the effects of racialization pervade several such stories.

In the case of both Jonas' childhood memory and Angela's attitude toward her family history, the novel urges a revisionist take on the

immigrant narrative that anticipates Hong's literature of minor feelings. This literary mode, we recall, strikes a balance between giving voice to the negative and disturbing emotions that haunt immigrants and abstaining from formulaic narrative frameworks. Angela's father did disappear, and she is embittered by this fact even as she has come, through her fortitude, to treat it with aplomb and humor; Jonas did experience emotional instability as a child. The pain, in one form or another, of ethnically related individuals sharing generational memories and legacies need not be elided, but can, refreshingly, exist alongside moments of humor and individual creativity that invest a narrative with its own personality and artistic originality.

V. "A man like that": Allured by Trope

Hong's alternative to the single story of suffering is not entirely divested of this narrative's banal trappings. The state of dysphoria on which the literature of minor feelings centers is itself standard fare in immigrant narratives, and Hong does not clarify how it can be framed anew to avoid catering to the Western appetite for trauma. It is thanks to eschewing a reliance on "racial trauma as a dramatic stage for individual growth" that the literature of minor feelings is presumably original; instead, it exposes a capitalist system founded on exclusionary politics that "keeps the individual in place" (Hong 56). Although exposing this system is no doubt crucial, Hong's alternative narrative, which emphasizes oppression rather than success against all odds, is by no means new, nor does it present a multi-faceted picture of immigrant lives. It is hard to see how a story of minor feelings resists lending itself to the reductive evaluative model that thrives on "a pain scale" that Hong (sensibly) censures.

Likewise, notwithstanding its pointed resistance to fitting immigrant narratives into a generic mold, Mengestu's meta-commentary in *How to Read the Air* enacts an archetypal logic whereby readers are invited to discern a larger whole from a single incident. This is nowhere more evident than in Jonas' fort-building flashback. Each new fort the young Jonas erects might carry a different genesis story, but they all share a common purpose and end-point:

> I built each, regardless of how poorly it may have been constructed, as far as possible out of anyone's general line of vision. I put the birdhouse in the closet and kept a small circle of rocks near the head of my bed. There were no back- or front-yard forts for me. I didn't build protective cocoons to fight from or to defend. I built mine to hide in because I always knew an attack would come, and that . . . the most my forts could do was soften the blows when they came. (Mengestu 120)

Jonas establishes the singularity of his activity by coloring his description with peculiar details (unaccountably, he chooses not to include the birdhouse he has built with the rest of his creations) and drilling first-person pronouns into it. Unease, however—if not quite tension—is generated subtly as the negatives ("There were no," "I didn't") disavowing Jonas' conformity to a "general line of vision" meet pronouns that collectively evoke totality ("each," "as far as possible," "I always knew," "most of my forts"). Universality is reinforced through the mildly deadpan species of indicative mood characteristic of Jonas' narrative.[10] Jonas' habit of fort-building seems warranted, universal, and nearly inescapable. Why that is so becomes clear as soon as he lets us in on the "attacks" and "blows" his miniature structures need to weather. The formulaic conflict between the individual and the world, which implies the familiar trauma of having to face a painful existence with frail defenses, looms large over any idiosyncrasy Jonas injects into his stories. The earnest, matter-of-fact tone Jonas uses to describe his past emotional state, so vividly recollected as if it never ceased to be, should no doubt trigger an empathetic and pitying readerly response; it appeals to the liberal humanitarian sentimentality that the white-savior-complex narrative trope depends on.

Such ambivalence is also at work when it comes to Jonas' experience as an editor of personal statements at the immigration center. Categorizing the statements as those of "the persecuted and [the] not so persecuted" (22), he offers a clinical description of the work he performs with Angela: "[W]e began to divide up our clients between the west side and east side. We split Africans first. . . . When we were finished

we moved on to South Asia, which we cut in half. . . . Central America was later carved up" (19). In using such coldly anatomical language, Mengestu exposes the arbitrary criteria that factors into the construction of identitarian categories. Jonas' claim that he "took an entire family from Turkmenistan because their last name almost rhymed with" his own (19) suggests, further an element of arbitrariness: rhyme points to poetry, but its logic of affinity extends here, to storytelling's possible role in schematic grouping. Jonas is aware that his and Angela's division of statements is as coincidental as a pair of rhymed words. Jonas' tone, in this instance, could be understatement, but his emotional detachment from these statements results in a tonal neutrality that makes it hard to surmise whether Jonas is being unselfconsciously (rather than deliberately) detached.

Jonas' attitude is increasingly nebulous as the narrative progresses. Mengestu capitalizes on his role as narrator to call readers' attention to the clichés that pepper immigrant statements. Jonas reads the statements and is reminded of his students' perception of Africa earlier in the narrative: "I read through them quickly, but in each case I could have stopped after the first couple of paragraphs. The rest was familiar. . . . We were straining to break our hearts. My students had all but admitted as much when they said they wanted to save Africa and that millions were dying. Without such a grand scale it was impossible to be moved" (130). Prefiguring Hong's exasperation over the "pain scale" by which narratives by minoritized authors are evaluated, Jonas takes care to note that his private school students, whom he regales with dramatic immigrant tales, are fascinated by the "only images they ha[ve]" of Africa: stock images of poverty, hunger, and deprivation (98). As Musila observes, Jonas might parody "his students'—and, by extension, readers'—masternarratives about asylum seekers" ("The Afterlives of Slavery" 118), but his use of irony, albeit artful, blurs the lines between detached mockery and earnestness. An example of this blurring is Jonas' tone as he and Angela are dividing immigrant statements based on geographic location, as if that is a decisive factor of shared experience among individuals; Jonas' emotionally detached narrative tone makes it hard to determine whether he believes in the validity of his division method or is being self-consciously

ironic about it and thus critical of it. It complicates readings and even invite misreadings of his attitude; the line between self-consciousness and passive resignation (or internalized acceptance) disappears. Jonas exercises his flair for storytelling outside of the classroom and develops a hobby of assigning every immigrant he encounters an imaginary background: "To the Pakistani man who sold me my first plate of . . . lamb curry I gave a slightly distinguished military career thwarted by nepotism, rumors of homosexuality. . . . To the Haitians on the other side of Prospect Park I threw in a mix of political persecution . . . and several large-scale natural disasters" (Mengestu 203). Mengestu unabashedly marshals an arsenal of clichés that populate the Western cultural imaginary—many of which he expects his readers to have internalized—that fashion non-Western countries as dens of oppression, hardship, and festering corruption. "Whatever real histories any of the people I encountered had," Jonas acknowledges, "were forfeited and had been long before I came along, subsumed under a vastly grander narrative that had them grateful just to be here" (204). He resigns himself to the single story, treating it as an alluringly foregone conclusion.

Even apart from Jonas' aptitude for narrative and the conflicted tendencies embedded in the stories he spins, his apathy regarding his life itself conforms to a master narrative about immigrants. Although well-educated and charismatic, Jonas is no careerist; nor does he pursue his professional aspirations, such as his dream to complete a PhD. Introducing himself as a teacher to Angela's law firm colleagues may fill him with pride, but it is with a significant dose of irony that he relates the following: "We began to think of ourselves as a black power couple in a city full of aspirants, the kind who would someday vacation for an entire month in the summer and whose children would attend elite private schools like the academy with the tuition paid full in advance" (56). Jonas' statement highlights Mengestu's, as much as Jonas', characteristically understated dismissal of the lifestyle values fostered by a corporate capitalist society. Musila argues that Jonas' resistance to "the homo *oeconomicus* code of being human" valorized by aspirants to the American dream enables Mengestu to subvert the narrative conventions of migrant literature ("The Afterlives of Slavery" 122). This might be so,

but it is hard to see how the character's indifference to a work ethic vital to the culture in which he was brought up does not cater to the ethnic literary project's taste for pain and the immigrant's debilitating sense of estrangement. As a narrative element, Jonas' passivity toward his career would not raise the questions it does if it was not a manifestation of his general numbness. Angela confronts him about his apathy and observes that it was not until the day she sensed his wish to hit her that she stopped being "nearly convinced that [he] had never cared about [her]" (Mengestu 256). She adds that she "wouldn't have been able to stand [his] indifference anymore" (256). Angela's view of herself and Jonas as "two damaged little kids trying to heal each other's wounds and failing miserably at it" (254) comes to define Jonas' personality so thoroughly that it is nearly impossible for readers to disassociate his apathy from the sense of emotionally stasis that we often expect in immigrant stories.[11]

Yosef Woldemariam's fraught escape from Ethiopia through a war-torn Sudan, Jonas' most meticulously traced (and embellished) story for his students, gives Jonas' susceptibility to tropes of trauma free rein. Jonas is clear about his intent: "I needed a history more complete than the strangled bits that he [Yosef] had owned and passed on to me—the short brutal tale of having been trapped as a stowaway on a ship. . . . It made for such a tragic and bitter man" (170). Jonas seeks to preserve the story's traumatic core while reducing Yosef's life to a series of reproducible clichés that center his identity around the tag "refugee." Despite this, he wishes to see his father as more than a refugee. In practice, however, the tale he spins revolves entirely around a harrowing yet conventional framework of someone being smuggled from conflict-riven Africa to the promised land of America and falls short of painting a more complete picture of Yosef. The only human relationship enjoyed by Yosef, according to Jonas' narrative, is with his abettor in smuggling, Abrahim. All we learn about Abrahim is that he is a "tall, nearly hairless dark-skinned man" who reminds Yosef of "the prophet" after whom he is named (41) and whose allusion to the Biblical Abraham evokes notions of sacrifice and suffering. Abrahim functions as a plot device that facilitates Yosef's successful escape and helps illuminate the tale's universal resonance and appeal. Jonas' story aims to humanize Yosef, but the

temptation to allegorize, to represent, hinders his effort to move away from tropes and results in a portrait of affliction that lacks the nuance that would paint a more well-rounded picture.

Jonas' discussions of his father omit individual traits and make constant reference to abstract types. Observing his deceased parent's packed belongings, he muses: "We all had fathers[,] . . . and speaking of dead fathers, here was what was left of mine, sitting just a few feet away in a cardboard box—the only true and proper resting place for a man like that" (150). Yosef is "a man like that": indefiniteness (yet another "man") is coupled with an indexical nod to specificity (a "man like that," like something) that is never fully realized, as if to convey the character's indeterminately and broadly representative status: he is a man but also an abstraction. As a non-Western immigrant everyman of sorts, Yosef is prone to violence against his family and self-sabotage. He leaves behind an ambivalent legacy that is captured by the "few remaining objects" left in boxes (149). Echoing, once again, the "talking points" of non-belonging and in-betweenness identified by Hong as hackneyed pillars of the minoritized narrative, the boxes are a symbol of transitoriness and liminality that reduces Yosef's life to an unattained quest to assimilate.[12]

Jonas' recourse to stock cultural frameworks when attempting to come to terms with his father is evident elsewhere. In an early, (half-) fabricated flashback, Mariam gets into "the 1971 red Monte Carlo her husband had scraped and saved to buy" as the two of them prepare to embark on their second honeymoon (8). The sleek car, the anticipated vacation, the husband awaiting his pregnant wife—it all amounts to a faux tableau vivant of vintage Western comfort that is only a perverted idyllic image since we soon learn that Mariam is secretly pregnant, Yosef is thinking tensely that his spouse "would surely destroy him" (45), and the honeymoon is a nightmare that almost kills them. Jonas is well aware that the "old black-and-white picture" that his father seeks to live up to is "a lie" (45) long exposed by generations of immigrants for whom the American dream's shimmering promises have proven chimeras. Both the image of the cardboard boxes and that of illusory marital bliss are poignant memories that also reduce Yosef's life and legacy to

painful events shot through with perennial feelings of dispossession and unrealized aspirations.

VI. "There is nowhere to go but back": On Stereotype and Style

In light of the moments in *How to Read the Air* that turn Jonas, his family, and their circumstances into a portrait of generational hardship that is all too familiar, what might Mengestu's novel accomplish? Instances such as those discussed above are too schematic to be ingenuous; they are deliberate enough to elicit our bewilderment. Mengestu, I suggest, is determined to include such ambiguous moments with his revisionist immigrant narrative not so much to expose their shortcomings as to highlight his own receptiveness to them and, by so doing, achieve control over his narrative. This might seem counterintuitive, but I hope to demonstrate how it might be so by commenting on Jonas' flashback of his parents' second honeymoon.

Jonas' mother Mariam shows a keen interest in immigrant trauma stories on her visit to the fictitious colonial Fort Laconte. Sensing that "something tragic had happened here," she takes pleasure (indeed, she "indulge[s] herself" [139]) in envisioning the lives of the fort's former inhabitants, conjuring up images of "plague, famine, and then finally a tornado" (139). It is hard for her to sever the setting from associations that tell familiar stories, even if they never befell the particular site:

> She tried to imagine a tornado descending down on this place. . . . She tried again with a famine and did better. The images came quickly but in the end fell short. The inhabitants of Fort Laconte, as she knew well enough, had all been European, and there was no stretch of her imagination that could allow her to conceive of hungry white face. . . . She was certain that even four hundred years ago the world would have conspired to prevent such a sight, and so she shaded in the faces, broadened out the lips and noses, and came up with a picture more suitable for a slow, hunger-pained death. (140–41)

The fort's "inhabitants" were not, in fact, European but Tamora Indians who were captured, imprisoned, and often horrendously tortured by

French colonial settlers until the fort's fall in the battle of 1687 (133); without knowledge of any of this, Mariam speculates on the edifice's history based on its French name. Only the worst possible catastrophe is conceivable and only that which is closest to home: a creeping famine will do better than an instant tornado because, as far as Mariam is concerned, it climbs up the scale of tragedy to befit minoritized people into which the European faces effortlessly morph. The site is a powerful memorial whose imaginary history is as culturally meaningful as its actual one, since the narrative unfolding in Mariam's mind is no personal speculation but instead a Western cultural and ideological by-product. In this moment, Mariam's mind is not entirely private; it is a cultural collective. This interpenetration between private imagination and collective memory provoked by the fort turns its own space-bound and temporally complete historical record of the Other's tragedy. In this moment, a particular edifice is turned into a collective symbol.

As well, it is the most inaccessibly private of histories—the violence Mariam suffers at her husband's hands—that transmutes into shared trauma, and vice versa. We recall that, in the novel, fort-building is an activity that simultaneously affirms and cancels the privacy of individual experience. Jonas' frail childhood forts resemble the actual Fort Laconte, at least in his eyes: the fort appears to be "a small pile of building blocks, the kind a child would use to arrange towers and squares in the middle of a playpen" (120). As in the case of Jonas' flashback, it is impossible not to read the fort's "history" in tandem with Mariam's secret dread—or, rather, misread it, in this case, by making an unwarranted connection between a private history and collective trauma. As soon as specters of famished Black faces surface in her mind, Mariam feels "a sudden uptick of emotion" (140) that is like an eerie omen of Yosef's approach shortly after (141). And then, all (impossible) stoicism subsides and the young pregnant wife flees from her husband into the dark forest (142–43). The chapter's dramatic climax, Mariam's domestic distress, is a fitting match for Fort Laconte's ghastly colonial past.

Mengestu's tone at the end of the chapter under discussion is sardonic. In what might be an unprecedented moment of self-revelation, Jonas explains that he intends to have Mariam flee into the forest upon

becoming aware of her husband's approach in order to achieve "a stronger narrative" (142). Here Mengestu keys us into what constitutes a "strong" narrative strictly by popular—and postcolonial—standards. The narrator "can let her [Mariam] dash past bushes[,] . . . can give her scrapes on her arms, let a little blood trickle down her legs" (142); rather than being a flourish of narratorial power, the modal auxiliaries carry a political charge that exposes the power structure (and violence) rehashed by so much cultural representation these days. An accruing flurry of violent detail, a seemingly inexhaustible series of mishaps, Jonas' breathless account of his mother's nightmarish forest expedition begins with a dash and ends with a race:

> I can let her dash past bushes and branches. . . . She loses a shoe in the brook, bends down to pick it up, and drenches the bottom of her dress in the water. . . . She stubs her bare toe on a stone, holds back her cry. . . . As she runs she grows more confident in her footing. . . . She is an athlete, an Ethiopian runner, capable of heroic feats of endurance and strength, and soon the world will know her name. . . . [She is] a gazelle in disguise. An army of men couldn't catch her. Their bullets, arrows, and rocks, along with their violent, angry words—all would sail harmlessly by or fall uselessly to the ground in her dust.
>
> And how long could she keep this up—this twenty-eight-year-old soon to be mother of one, dressed in a comfortable but ill-suited-for-marathon-running dress and flat-soled canvas shoes that easily slip off? The obvious answer is, not long at all, five, or let me be generous because this is my mother and it's hard not to be, and say ten minutes at most. . . . There is nowhere to go then but back, which is precisely where she and I are headed now, but God, what a beautiful run we might have had. (142–43)

I have quoted the passage at length because it is a stylistic tour de force that sustains an exuberant comicality that calms into subtle pathos. More importantly, tonal plurality—created through a heavy dose of humor—enables Jonas to invert the thrust of his earlier narration of his

fort-building habit and pokes fun at readers as much as himself. A fleeing pregnant wife makes for a doleful scene, but Jonas' comparisons of her to a stellar if ill-dressed runner and a gazelle nimbly dodging bullets strike a jocular note. "Literary and cultural post-colonial criticism has been marked by a curious reluctance—a restraint verging on the pious—towards the functions of laughter" (8), Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein note in their introduction to *Cheeky Fictions*; forms of humor in post-colonial narratives might reflect "a struggle for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release" (9). Jonas' attitude in the passage may, for some, border on the insensitive, but it is a pointed assertion of agency by virtue of replicating a cliché. The novel does not downplay the fact that Jonas' flashbacks culminate in the harrowing story of a woman being driven to cause a car crash so as to rid herself and her unborn child of her violent husband, himself an immigrant of color whose struggles for survival and cultural assimilation have exacerbated his mental health issues, diminished his capacity for self-control, and irreparably damaged his interpersonal relationships. It is hard to remain oblivious to the ring of tender sadness, weariness, and regret that sound in the passage's concluding sentence: "There is nowhere to go then but back, which is precisely where she and I are headed now, but God, what a beautiful run we might have had" (Mengestu 143). Whether Mariam darted into the forest in terror or not, Jonas insists that there is no reason to believe she remained still any more than there are grounds for swearing she must have fled. What is a cultural and narrative cliché is also, in this case, an earnest narrative possibility—but, equally, it is not, since the passage does not take itself too seriously.

The account of Mariam's flight balances tonal and temperamental variations to effect ideological plurality. The immigrant couple's backstory is marked by trauma. By infusing part of the story with comic irony, Jonas and Mengestu demonstrate that they can spin an immigrant narrative of suffering and, concurrently, gently giving in to their susceptibility to trauma's allure; they can issue a critique while fulfilling a masochistic urge to testify to historic and continuing disenfranchisement, which itself courts cultural and political naiveté by assimilating

heterogeneous identities into a reifying account of inescapable misfortune. Through the plurality they attain, both Jonas and Mengestu assert control over their narrative and thereby distinguish it from other novels featuring immigrants. Readers are teased for putting trust too eagerly in the tragic dimensions of the immigrant couple's backstory and the thrill this story might elicit from us. Equally, we are invited to interrogate our reading of other low- or high-note moments of pathos strewn throughout *How to Read the Air*, including the young Jonas' lonesome yet compulsive fort-building, Yosef's agonizing escape from Africa, the adult Jonas' numb contemplation of the fractured legacy bequeathed by his broken father, and the onset of dread that grips an abused wife as she envisions the bloody record carved into the physical site before her eyes. To what degree might these narrative episodes be self-aware, even self-mocking, in spite of their earnest pathos? Is it possible that Hong's compelling concept of minor feelings omits the idea of variable mood? She articulates her years-long admiration of African-American stand-up comedian Richard Pryor, who exposed "private black humor to /a white audience" in order to confront them with Black oppression all the more shockingly; in doing so, he toed the line between "enabling and destabilizing stereotypes" (53), much like Mengestu. Hong writes that in Pryor she saw someone "channel what [she] call[s] minor feelings" (55), implying that the variegated sentiments entailed by the comedian's style are vital to escaping a racist mindset, even as they depend on problematic representation as much as they combat it. What Hong hints at, Mengestu experiments with more. His command over contrasting tonal shades is nowhere near as masterful, his technique nowhere near as noticeable, as it is at the moment of Mariam's flight into the woods; still, this instance is a cue that repurposes the narrative ambivalence that pervades *How to Read the Air,* making it the motor of Mengestu's narrative power vis-à-vis representation and its discontents. The specific episode captures Mengestu's peculiar revisionist strategy, which uses stereotype instead of banning it: "There is nowhere to go but back," back to what is familiar, hackneyed—but with a stylish, albeit politically charged, twist.

VII. Conclusion: Lies, Narrative, and Culture

"You think you can lie," Angela points out to Jonas suddenly, "but really you can't. . . . You're terrible at it" (253). Imbued with an ounce of meta-narrative humor that hinges on readers' awareness of Jonas' penchant for fabrication, Angela's remark calls attention to the bafflement his story elicits from him and readers alike. The embellished tales of suffering that he spins at the immigration center and as impromptu storyteller to his students constitute a dual act of misreading, a parodic distortion of purportedly collective immigrant experience and a fascination with common tropes used to represent them. Mengestu's meta-commentary exploits irony to mock popular narratives' proclivity to generalize individual experience and makes that tendency a vehicle for its own critique; equally, it falls victim, time and again, to the irony it directs at readers and popular depictions of minoritized subjects. Jonas lies and is, in a sense, lied to by the tales he has digested and repeats. The novel's achievement lies (pun intended) in challenging what Mercer calls the "communifying effect" of representation (72) by pursuing not a single-minded revisionist agenda but an ambivalent and often (deliberately) self-undermining one that integrates those elements it criticizes rather than entirely ridding itself of them. Contemplating the possibility (and being itself indicative) of the fact that a critic of one's culture cannot help but also be its product, *How to Read the Air* is a thoroughly conflicted cultural creation. Through his command of plural sensibilities and tone, and by coupling self-deprecation with self-awareness and critique, Mengestu exercises narrative freedom by both affirming the sway of collective identity constructs and mocking them. His is a stylistically and ideologically plural revisionist immigrant narrative.

Notes

1 "Slightly distorted" versions of the story that exaggerate its tragic dimensions spread rapidly like wildfire among students (Mengestu 244).

2 See Hamilton 153–67; Varvogli 117–37. Hamilton reads the novel as exemplifying "diasporic experience," marked by feelings of non-belonging and dissonance; meanwhile, Varvogli interprets the novel as telling "*the* bigger story of *the* child of Ethiopian immigrants looking for his place in the world" (125; emphasis added). Both critics approach the immigrant experience as monolithic.

3 See Musila's "The Afterlives of Slavery" 110–30 and Rabe 768–89. Both Musila and Rabe focus on how Mengestu's novel resists cultural tropes about immigrants but overlook how it simultaneously reproduces them. In particular, Musila discusses how Jonas deliberately parodies narratives about asylum seekers in order to mock his white students' culturally received ideas about immigrants; additionally, Jonas resists the terms of American hospitality toward migrants contingent on embracing a neoliberal capitalist ethos. Rabe argues that *How to Read the Air* recycles some of the essentializing tropes of African migrant fiction only to subvert them and to thereby open up a space of dialectical reading (as an example, contrary to common depictions, Jonas' immigrant parents have been professionally successful rather than having had precarious jobs and thereby motivated their son to aim for better things; if anything, Jonas is an underachiever). Both scholars support a revisionist reading of the novel that is genuinely insightful but overlooks the text's ambivalence.

4 Using similarly essentialist terms, Masterson argues that Jonas' identity as a second-generation Ethiopian situates him in a line of "quintessentially American storytellers" (14).

5 The Black art discussed by Mercer speaks both of and to a putatively unified Black community (67). As I argue, *How to Read the Air* confronts predominantly white audiences with their preconceived notions about immigrants of color.

6 Thomas attributes white audiences' appetite for "authentic" stories from the "global publishing industry" (10). Similarly, Folarin holds the preponderance of white staffers at major American publishing houses accountable for a widespread cultural failure to recognize "multiple forms of black greatness."

7 Bady summarizes the charge against Afropolitanism: rather than a productive political platform, it is "a displacement characteristic of our neoliberal age," a "fashion accessory" insofar as the "Afropolitan declines to be Afro-pessimistic" because "she has the privilege of declaring victory from the dance floor in London, the art exhibition in Rome, or the runway in New York" (199).

8 Mengestu repeatedly situates Jonas and Angela in white-dominated environments. Jonas informs readers that he and Angela "were the only black people who worked at the [immigration] center" (17); at the restaurant that they visit after their wedding, Angela tells Jonas that "'we're the only black people here'" (73); they go on a weekend excursion in Long Island and visit a village where they are "'the only two black people'" (252). In this way, Mengestu draws attention to the two characters' status as Black storytellers addressing a white audience.

9 Such an interpretive logic might go as follows: "Angela's father's disappearance is no surprise; after all, she comes from a family of non-Western immigrants."

10 The disproportionate ratio between the indicative and subjunctive mood in Jonas' narrative is striking: his proclivity for a declarative, factual style of storytelling screens rather than exhibits his personality. Kierkegaard's notebook observations

on moods are helpful: "The indicative thinks something as actual . . . The subjunctive thinks something as thinkable"; "the subjunctive . . . enters as a glimpse of the individuality of the person" (230).

11 In a somewhat similar vein, Thomas refers to Mengestu's typically "solitary" Ethiopians (6), taking issue with Ethiopian-American novels' tendency to focus, one-sidedly, on characters' "solitude and alienation" rather than paying tribute to immigrants' vibrant and complex engagement with their own diasporic communities in the US (19).

12 In an essay that discusses Mengestu's and Selasi's treatment of "human failure," Musila also interprets the boxes in figurative terms: she writes that they capture the "paradox of globalisation in their promise of escape to the American dream, but also the reality of entrapment" ("Unoka's, Okonkwo's and Ezeulu's Grandsons" 99). Mengestu's refusal to let go of the unoriginal figure of the immigrant eager to assimilate is also evident in his debut novel, *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, whose protagonist presents a "classic version" of that character type (Cesare 120).

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