

RE/CREATING HISTORY THROUGH THE  
PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY IN *HOW*  
*TO READ THE AIR*

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To two amazing individuals who encourage me every day, whose continued support offers a pillar in the midst of difficulties, and who have taught me not only to value hard work and determination but also to appreciate and embrace my culture and my history.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: A REASON TO SPEAK

When I first began working on my thesis, many of my peers would ask me what I was planning on writing about. I can honestly say my response to that question was never the same; and even after I had begun to conceive of a more concrete concept of what I was trying to accomplish, I evaded the question as much as possible. Lacking a clear concept for a thesis might have dissuaded a different person, but I understood from the very beginning that for me, writing a thesis was never about what I was going to say. For me, writing a thesis was about what I would discover.

My approach to this thesis has led me to question the role that we as literary critics play in literary studies. Many times, we speak from a privileged position, what we like to call a place of objectivity, because we are seemingly detached from the object of our study. This kind of detachment gives us the authority to discuss a subject without the influence of biases that might skew our initial responses. But even if we hope to achieve this kind of academic distance from our subject, the reality is that many people choose to write on subjects which hold personal significance for them. Whether intentional or not, many scholars and students alike will inevitably approach a text with a host of experiences and personal values in the wake of each word they write.

There is, I believe, an element of subjectivity in scholarship. While scholarship does not traditionally engage in the kind of subjective writing that borders on creative writing, a scholar nonetheless engages in some way with the text she studies. For me, Dinaw Mengestu's novel, *How to Read the Air*, elicited an empathetic response: I saw

myself reflected in the protagonist as he pieced together his family's history, recreating an event he viewed as fundamental to his family's experience. As a child of immigrants—like the protagonist of the novel—I could understand why someone would feel the need to seek out a past, even a traumatic past, and make something come alive from its dying embers. Reviving the past has been my own experience, one which I continue to play out just by writing this thesis. Even as I attempted to uphold the values of academic objectivity, I discovered I could not separate my own experiences from how I understood the text. Unwillingly, every word I wrote arose from the emotional turmoil I experienced in my own life; in every piece of scholarship I read, I hoped to uncover something of myself from within its content. Unintentionally, I began to work on my thesis as if I were writing to discover my own life laid out in the pages before me.

While my own experiences influenced the direction I used to analyze *How to Read the Air*, it could not escape my attention that Dinaw Mengestu seems to do the very same thing by writing this novel. He even extends this role to his protagonist, Jonas Woldemariam, who, as the narrator and interpreter of events in the novel, explores his family's past as a way of coming to terms with his own present. Although Mengestu conflates real experiences with fictional events, circumstances, and details, he gives Jonas a voice of authority that allows him to determine how one should interpret the events in his family members' lives, specifically his parents' lives. Jonas even states, "I didn't know it at the time but two completely different versions of history were being offered to me in preparation for my inevitable role as both advocate and judge over what happened [in his family's past]" (115). One could hardly call Jonas a scholar; nonetheless, he assumes a role in which he uncovers meaning behind events through narration. I would



like to suggest that events and circumstances that displace families, such as those that plague Jonas and his parents, often lead to the need to comprehend the past through a narrative reconstruction of a history embedded in the body of the storyteller. This thesis will further develop how and why Jonas reimagines past events and occurrences and the meaning he eventually discovers through this act.

Published in 2010, *How to Read the Air* tells the story of a small Ethiopian family and the challenges the family must face in their relationships with one another, challenges all the more complicated by the heavy air of displacement that follows them throughout their day-to-day existence. Told from the perspective of Jonas Woldemariam, an American-born child of Ethiopian immigrant parents, *How to Read the Air* follows three primary plotlines interwoven throughout the telling of these stories. Later, I analyze the novel from the moment of its narration rather than as a chronological rendition of events which moves the reader forward through time. Rather than consider the novel a chronicle of events occurring over a specific period of time, one must think of Jonas' narrative as an articulation that takes place in a moment of suspension. I revisit these ideas in chapter four of this thesis, but for now one must consider the various and oftentimes contradictory elements represented through the novel's separate plotlines and how these elements shape Jonas' conception of himself and of his history.

The first of the plotlines follows Jonas' parents, Yosef and Mariam, on a roadtrip from their home in Peoria, Illinois to somewhere on the road to Nashville, Tennessee as they embark on their first vacation together since Mariam's arrival from Ethiopia six months prior. This roadtrip, stained by abuse and memories of a traumatic past, ends when Mariam grabs and suddenly turns the steering wheel, plummeting the car into a

ditch, in a desperate attempt to escape her abusive husband. Jonas allots particular significance to this trip, perhaps because it marks the moment when his parents' marriage must inevitably fail. The dynamic between Jonas' parents after this roadtrip marks Jonas and his memories of his childhood and leaves him with a brokenness that follows him throughout his life.

The second plotline follows Jonas, from the beginning of his relationship and then marriage to Angela, to the eventual demise of their marriage. This part of the novel also follows Jonas through different jobs that both aid and impede his relationship with Angela: first, Jonas works as a legal assistant in a New York refugee resettlement center that aids refugees seeking asylum in the United States, and later Angela helps him find a job as an English teacher in a private academy. Jonas' relationship with Angela begins to deteriorate after he loses his job at the resettlement center and lies about it. However, during his tenure as an English teacher, he begins to explore the history of how his father began his journey to the United States, often inventing details he does not know about his father's past. This experience becomes a formative part of Jonas' path to self-discovery and recovery from his family's painful pasts.

The third plotline takes place in the novel's present and presumably acts as the place from which Jonas narrates the novel. In this plotline, Jonas rents a car and reenacts his parents' trip to Nashville after quitting his job at the academy and separating from Angela. His journey begins with a visit to his mother in order to hear her version of what occurred during his parents' roadtrip and eventually takes him on the road to places such as Fort Laconte until he reaches the place where his father and mother had their "accident." The experience of reliving his parents' journey allows Jonas to explore the

history of his family and his conceptions of the past through a physical, or bodily, reconstruction of the past.

The first two plotlines of the novel reveal the deep instability which displacement has had on the lives of the characters; these plotlines culminate in the third plotline, the journey Jonas takes as he attempts to piece together the scattered remnants of his family's lives. Through his journey and his narration of these scattered pieces, Jonas discovers a desire to speak and, more importantly, a desire to persist in the face of the destabilizing effects of his family's history and the displacement this causes. Ultimately, Jonas' unification of these three plotlines allows him to rearticulate history in a way that addresses the disparities between what Jonas has experienced and what remains unsaid in his family.

Mengestu's preoccupation with history, as is evident in his novel, seems to stem from his personal life and his parents' reluctance to discuss the traumatic events they experienced in Ethiopia. At a discussion at the Lewiston Public Library, for instance, Mengestu told the students in attendance that his family did not speak about their lives in Ethiopia "because of the violence that surrounded it" (qtd. in Cullen). When he was a young child, his family fled a war-torn Ethiopia, leaving behind family, memories of a lost brother and uncle, and the grief they endured due to the war. Just a young boy at the time of their escape, Mengestu "has almost no memory of his life in Ethiopia" ("Dinaw Mengestu"). At home in Peoria, Illinois, "The family's conversation avoided all but the vaguest mention of their heritage" (Cullen). There was no family history that he knew of or remembered. The absence of a vocalized past ultimately drove Mengestu's desire for it. In an interview, for example, Mengestu claims, "We had no memories in our house. ...

We were never allowed to, we never spent time talking about it, and yet you're very aware that it haunts everything. It's that absence that creates the concern for it. Nothing can be passed on" (qtd. in Rohter). Not knowing led Mengestu to learn all he could about Ethiopia, and he eventually was able to piece together an account of what must have occurred and to imagine what his family must have lived through.

Mengestu's concern for history and for the memories that construct it, even imagined memories, characterizes his writing and forms one of the central preoccupations of his novels. Mengestu acknowledges this tendency when he states, "We are historical creatures – we have memories, we have narrative – all these things that give weight and meaning to our present lives, and so for me, and definitely for the characters in my novels, an understanding and reckoning with history is vital not only to moving forward with our lives, but also with coming to terms with it" (qtd. in Hazelwood 61). Mengestu claims that one must understand history in order to progress with life, which in and of itself is not an original claim. In fact, the idea that one must revisit the past in order to move forward in life characterizes many novels in addition to Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*. The themes and tropes which Mengestu explores are not unique to his novel; nonetheless, his novel can offer an interpretation on how history gets transformed and reinterpreted to suit present purposes. One could apply an analysis of this novel to novels exploring similar themes and tropes, particularly those that deal with the effects displacement has on subsequent generations. This thesis, however, will focus only on *How to Read the Air* in order to provide a more extensive analysis of how displacement (and trauma) impacts subsequent generations and their conceptions of the past.

Aliki Varvogli, who conducts a study on the tropes of travel and dislocation in

contemporary American literature, reminds readers that *all* the novels she discusses in her study (which includes *How to Read the Air*) “attempt to negotiate a space where identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century can not only be understood but actively constructed and reconfigured” (xvii). As one such novel, *How to Read the Air*—which examines the effects that forced relocation from Ethiopia has on Jonas’ parents’ lives and consequently his life—directs most of its efforts toward recreating history. It even goes so far as to have Jonas reenact his parents’ “honeymoon” by renting a car and following the same route and stops his parents made. Varvogli’s study, which stresses the role physical spaces occupy in narratives of dislocation, reminds readers that Jonas’ understanding of the past and, consequently, of himself coincides with his movement through physical spaces in New York and other places (126-28). However, Varvogli’s emphasis on space misses the way Jonas’ experience of time—past, present, and future— influences his comprehension of history and of the present. Though the novel does act as a space in which renegotiation takes place, the emphasis on history and on recreating the past reveals that the novel (or better yet, the narrative contained within the novel) exists in and through time. Consequently, the novel asks that one reconsider the parameters of time as well as space.

As Homi Bhabha writes, “in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (2). *How to Read the Air*, which takes place in a moment of transition, between the end of Jonas’ marriage and the beginning of something new, moves literally and metaphorically through spaces and time. Varvogli’s analysis, with its attention to space, fails to examine the implications of

time in the novel and how time acts as the introspective space where Jonas can reevaluate the events of his and his parents' lives. Unfortunately, the scope of work currently available on Mengestu's novel, not including Varvogli's book, is limited to book reviews which do not provide adequate space to further explore such a concept. As a result, up to today, literary scholars have yet to examine the full extent of the role time plays in *How to Read the Air*. Nonetheless, as Bhabha's quotation reveals, it is those transitional spaces, where time and space collide, where the new emerges. In the novel, Fort Laconte provides one of the strongest examples of such a concept since its very stones contain the traces of its past and tell of the history the fort endured. Here at the fort, both space and time meet to tell a story that only the observer can understand. By allowing time and space to interact in such a way, Mengestu creates a space more emblematic of real experiences and of how an understanding of these experiences can change according to perceptions of space and time. As a result, he explores new avenues of expression in order to accommodate an experience that can be both physical and contemplative, real yet transitive.

One could say that fragmentation acts as the primary mode of expression in *How to Read the Air*. After all, Jonas' narrative often interrupts itself in order to introduce another thought or reflect on a past event. Take, for example, the beginning of the novel as Mariam and Yosef get ready to leave for their roadtrip. Before Mariam ever enters the car, the narrative refers back to a time when Mariam learns the expression, "Men can be strange. Wives are different," from one of the ladies at her Baptist church (3-4). Much of the novel progresses through flashbacks, thus never truly settling on one memory or another or one time or another. These continuous interruptions and jumps in time reflect

the displacement in the characters' lives and parallels the literal and metaphorical movement between spaces that takes place in the novel.

In the same way that Jonas' parents must cross national and state boundaries, Jonas must navigate the boundaries between his life and his parents' lives and between what he knows and what he imagines. According to Bhabha, the nature of a boundary as a place where ideas meet leads to the emergence of fragmented and displaced narratives that transform differences into understanding and identity (1-27). In other words, fragmentation becomes a way to create meaning. In *How to Read the Air*, time, as well as cultural and historical differences, contribute to Jonas and his family's sense of fragmentation. As a result, meaning in the novel gets construed through the negotiation of temporal boundaries.

Mengestu writes his novel so that time itself fragments into pieces of the past and present that continuously interact with each other. One can find evidence of this fragmentation in the temporal displacement—the sense of existing in and between multiple time constructions—of Jonas and his family. For example, Jonas, as narrator, literally and figuratively journeys back through time in order to come to terms with his painful separation from Angela and also with the instances of his father's abuse that he witnessed and experienced as a child. In addition, passages which describe remnants of the past reveal that the past still very much exists in the present. In one such passage, Jonas states, "What was once here [at Fort Laconte] has either slowly eroded with time or since been picked off piece by piece by bored kids or scavengers of American history, who have carted away what little remains" (132). In this passage, the use of the phrase, "have carted away what little remains," gives the impression that scavengers are still

removing their finds from the fort. Additionally, the phrase, “was once here,” reminds readers that what exists at the fort is heavy with traces of the original, like a ghost of itself. This fragmentary conception of time as bits and pieces scattered throughout the present influences the structure of the novel and ultimately provides a way of understanding the underlying message Mengestu conveys.

Although Mengestu does not write *How to Read the Air* using a chronological timeline, each individual subplot seems to progress forward, thus giving the novel’s overall structure the appearance of a cohesive movement forward in time. However, as stated above, time in the novel is fragmentary, nonlinear, and evocative of a past that continues to persist in the present. Most notably, memories frequently interrupt the narrative and break up the forward progression of time. Additionally, Jonas bases much of his narration on his memories and the memories of his family. He begins the novel recalling the beginning of his parents’ trip to Nashville, a recollection that is loosely constructed from his mother’s memories. He intersperses this story with glimpses into the lesser known pasts of his parents prior to their arrival in the United States. He then introduces and expounds on his own more recent narrative concerning the evolution and eventual demise of his marriage with Angela. In addition, he recalls his childhood, his perceptions of his parents as a child, and he discusses his present roadtrip to Nashville. Because memory by its very nature is fragmentary due to a person’s inability to recall all the details of an event, much of *How to Read the Air*, which is founded on memories, emulates this same characteristic.

Craig Blatz and Michael Ross offer one way of better understanding this phenomenon of illusive cohesion despite a very fragmented foundation in the novel. They



write, “People are often unable to capture their original experiences because they cannot remember details. People sometimes recall only a few aspects of an episode; they may use their current knowledge and preferences to fill in gaps and resolve ambiguities in their memories” (226). In other words, only a portion of the memory remains faithful to the actual event; the remainder of the recollection often represents an attempt, generally derived from personal experiences and knowledge, at providing a complete account of what occurred. The underlying fragmentation in *How to Read the Air* partially results from Jonas’ incomplete memories; however, the novel’s apparent unity is a byproduct of Jonas’ attempt to present a complete narrative by filling in the missing gaps with his own knowledge and understanding.

Memory and displacement thus prevent Jonas from identifying a complete account of what happened in his family’s history. He at times even admits that his memories are incomplete, such as when he states, “I said before that I couldn’t remember what happened to my mother the night before she took me to school, and perhaps that is true” (*How to Read* 92). Jonas’ inability to access the whole history leading up to his parents’ eventual separation, even the parts involving him, may offer one possibility as to why he feels the need to narrativize and recreate his parents’ pasts. When he recounts his parents’ experiences, he adds details, makes assumptions, and invents portions where his knowledge is insufficient—much like Dinaw Mengestu admits to doing (Cullen)—in order to fill the missing gaps and holes in his family history. A more complete story could provide answers as to why his parents acted in the ways they did and how these actions impacted his life and his marriage. Nonetheless, Jonas’ admission of his inventions and his lack of knowledge and the fragmentation that shapes the way the novel

progresses all suggest otherwise. One finds, instead, that an honest and accurate depiction of everything that occurred from the time Jonas' father was arrested in Ethiopia to Jonas' decision to make the same "honeymoon" trip his parents made years before matters very little by the end of the novel. Jonas himself seems to adhere to this principle since he consciously makes the decision to include his imaginings in his narration of his parents' story even after pursuing the "true" story from his mother. The difference between "completion" and completion, between a narrative that consciously merges truth and fiction and a narrative that pursues a perfect understanding of every possible element available, ultimately provides the motivation that drives the narration of the novel forward.

Although initially Jonas' narration seems motivated by a desire to represent and understand his own and his parents' experiences more fully from Yosef's time in Sudan to the end of their marriage, by the end of the novel, he has allowed the fragmentary nature of these experiences to permeate and define the narrative. Hayden White, who explores the notion of narrativity through historiography, states that "Narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give *real* events the *form* of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult" (8). The novel's fragmentation, its overt preoccupation with time, and an illusory unity in narration all reflect the difficulty of narrativizing *real* events and more significantly, reflect the *desire* to allow real experiences to shape the narration. The desire not to represent what happened faithfully, but to convey the real experience of living through traumatic events and having those events shape one's memories or the way one relates to the surrounding environment ultimately motivates Jonas' narration. By doing so, Jonas can create

meaning, or truth, from the meaningless remnants of his family's past which previously lay buried beneath years of repression. It is at this point that Jonas can finally accept his past and move forward.

According to Bhabha in his analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psychic survival" (26). Born in a country away from his ancestors and the history of his family, Jonas lacks any visible or immediate connection to the past and turns to narration and to the "displacements of memory" to cope with the psychological effects displacement has had on him. However, Jonas goes one step further and does not simply use "the displacements of memory and the indirections of art" to survive; he actually recreates history, first by actually reliving his parents roadtrip and later through his narration and his imagination. This approach differs slightly from what Bhabha claims Morrison does in *Beloved* since it goes beyond merely "engrav[ing] the event in the deepest resources of our amnesia, of our unconsciousness" and makes history immediate and accessible (26). This accessibility to the past provides the means for Jonas to move beyond its restraints and allows him to directly confront that which before was unavailable to him. In addition, this accessibility reinforces the idea that the past never truly disappears but remains active and alive within the present. This idea becomes the central message of the novel and the reason why Jonas finally concludes at the end of the novel that "we do persist" and do not disappear (*How to Read* 305). If the past and the experiences of the past continue to persist, then Jonas, Angela, his mother, and even his recently deceased father will also continue to persist. By allowing the novel to develop in

this way, Mengestu offers a moment of visibility to the Woldemariam family's experiences (aided by Jonas' imaginings) and to what some literary critics might say cannot be captured and so must remain elusive.

Ultimately, Mengestu leaves readers asking what is real? What is fictional? Jonas admits his lack of knowledge of his parents' experiences, yet he presents a narrative that appears cohesive and even chronological. Nonetheless, when one breaks down the structure of the novel, memories are notably entangled with Jonas' imagination and his inventions, and time does not differentiate between the past and the present. For a novel which demonstrates an overt preoccupation with history, one would think that at least within the context of the novel, there would exist a concrete and decisive representation of history. But as scholars such as White have posited, one cannot *truly* (or accurately) represent events from the past. Mengestu seems to be aware of this and instead presents a narrative that seeks to capture, as *truthfully* as possible, the ways present generations interpret and derive meaning from the elusive past. *How to Read the Air* reveals that when present structures of meaning eclipse a person's ability to comprehend past events, that person must create a different mode of expression in order to draw meaning from the past. Mengestu does so by combining space with time, the known with the unknown, and the real with the imaginary. Ultimately, he creates a space where Jonas can redefine the present and develop an understanding of the past.

To further expand on the concepts discussed within this introduction, the four subsequent chapters provide a closer examination of the following concepts respectively: chapter two, trauma as a deterrent to accessing the past; chapter three, the fear of disappearing (as a central concern in *How to Read the Air*); chapter four, *How to Read*

*the Air* as a form of discourse which reexamines perceptions of the past, and finally chapter five, an examination of *How to Read the Air* as a text that speaks through the physical space of the body.

The second chapter looks at how Jonas' parents fail to articulate important aspects of their own history due to the traumatic events in their past, events they willfully attempt to leave in the past. This chapter examines the way these events ultimately influence the structure of the novel and Jonas' perceptions of the past. This chapter seeks to suggest that traces of trauma and the past continue to exist even in the present.

The third chapter further analyzes this novel by discussing the novel's use of the fear that the past and the people in the past will cease to exist, or disappear, once they are forgotten. It examines how the novel exhibits an obligation to remember due to the possibility that one might forget. In addition, it examines how history and cultural stereotypes contribute to the fear of disappearance and introduces the concept of identity as something at stake if one cannot acknowledge the past.

The fourth chapter will introduce the concept of viewing *How to Read the Air* as a discursive text which aims to rearticulate aspects of history as personal, subjective experiences which speak to the few versus the many. It will suggest that the novel's use of imagination, history, and memory bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing, creating new narratives that satisfy the needs of the present and help account for the discrepancies between histories of differing groups and individuals.

The fifth and final chapter will conclude this thesis with the concept of bodily discourses. Through the concept of speaking through the space of the body, I demonstrate that Mengestu uses physical, bodily experiences in *How to Read the Air* to help Jonas

rearticulate the past.

Through an examination of the subjects listed above, this thesis aims to contribute to current discourses on memory in ethnic and immigrant literature. As the next chapter demonstrates, one cannot think of memory (or the lack of memory) in these novels without first understanding how trauma plays a role in shaping these memories.

## CHAPTER II

### IMPLICATING MEMORY: TRAUMA IN *HOW TO READ THE AIR*

Many reviewers and writers recognize how Mengestu's *How to Read the Air* attempts to take a past mired in tragedy and transform it into something more compelling and relatable. Reviewer Miguel Syjuco notes that the "inexorable failure [of Jonas's marriage] and news of Yosef's lonely death lead Jonas to re-examine, and rewrite, his own history" (18L). Another reviewer, Rachel Hazelwood, claims "Ultimately the resounding message is that although we need to acknowledge our personal histories, we also have to be careful not to get lost in our own stories and should always strive to move on with our lives" (61). Christopher Potter of *The Sunday Times* writes, "To this end, the author has created a narrator who is forced to start from scratch" (41). Even skeptic Randy Boyagoda notes that *How to Read the Air* "features connect-the-dot ideas about the challenges of 'identity' and 'the past' in a complicated world." As these reviewers observe, Mengestu's novel explores the strained relationship between the past and the present and how this can lead one to redefine the meaning complicit in those memories he carries with him. And although most reviewers to some extent acknowledge the role Jonas as narrator plays in taking these stories and reshaping them, they vary in how they interpret the main message of Mengestu's novel.

Most critics are divided on how to receive *How to Read the Air* and generally view it as either a success and a testament to Mengestu's strength as a writer or as a failure (at least compared to his first novel) without the stability to maintain its premise. Hazelwood, who sides more with the former, claims that "In the end, Jonas reaches an

understanding of his parents that finally frees him from his past while simultaneously rooting him in it” (61). Syjuco, though initially circumspect, also concedes to the success of the novel and writes, “In the end, however, Mengestu distinguishes this book by adeptly using Yosef’s story to deepen the narrative, and by creating Jonas’s redemption through the character’s act of story-retelling” (18L). Reviewers who find Mengestu’s novel a success tend to find meaning in Jonas’ storytelling and view it as revelatory and redemptive in this way, but not all critics agree on this point. For instance, Boyagoda views Jonas’ fabrication as something that “is supposed to tell us something important and meaningful about him, or maybe about his family relationships, or perhaps about immigrant life in America, or even about America itself. Ideally, it would be revelatory about all of these at once. The plain truth? It isn’t.” Anthony Cummins, a writer for the *Daily Telegraph*, also views *How to Read the Air* as lacking and writes, “Mengestu sets himself the tricky task of persuading us that Jonas can judge what Yosef and Mariam thought and felt while he was still in his mother's womb. I don't think it quite comes off” (25). Like Boyagoda, Cummins does not find Jonas’ fictionalizing of the past convincing; instead, he considers this one of the weakest aspects of the novel.

Whether they view it as a success or as a failure, few critics agree on *why* Jonas feels compelled to revisit his parents’ experiences and retell them with so little regard for factual accuracy. As the previous excerpts demonstrate, some reviewers see this pursuit of his parents’ past lives as something that gives Jonas closure while others view it as an attempt to evaluate the past. Regardless, most reviewers focus on this retrospective element of the novel as something Mengestu intends to be meaningful and demonstrative. Their commentary on this subject shows that one cannot and must not overlook the



significance of Jonas' imagination when narrativizing his parents' lives in *How to Read the Air*.

Another reviewer, Ron Charles of the *Washington Post*, thinks of *How to Read the Air* as “a tragic and affecting paradox, a demonstration of the limits of fiction, the inability of stories to heal or preserve.” Given that a number of reviewers consider Jonas' storytelling as an exercise in healing, it comes as a surprise that Charles would so definitively limit the capacity for Jonas or his parents to recover from their injuries. But his commentary offers some insight into the novel and the way it continuously returns to paradox to create meaning. The stories cannot erase or even replace the past, yet one cannot escape the sense that this is exactly what Jonas attempts to do: he seems determined to create a history in which his parents' actions can be explained. The tensions between fiction and truth, tragedy and healing, forgetting and remembrance ultimately characterize the novel and motivate its plot. In many ways, reviewers have fallen short in their narrative examination of these elements. Alike Varvogli, who by far conducts the most extensive analysis of *How to Read the Air*, chooses to limit her discussion of the novel to the topic of immigration and the immigrant experience. Although this decision conforms to the subject of her book—travel and dislocation—it represents such a small part of *How to Read the Air* and fails to elucidate the complexities at work in the novel. The following thesis represents an attempt at deepening an analysis of the novel in a way no other writer has done up to now.

In his review on *How to Read the Air*, Cummins writes, “It might have been wiser to let Jonas narrate these passages [involving Mariam and Yosef's trip] in the present tense, rather than the cast-iron past, so as to establish a more suitably speculative tone”

(25). Cummins criticizes Mengestu's use of the past tense presumably because using the past tense positions Jonas as someone who can authoritatively speak for his parents. Cummins demonstrates a concern for authenticity in representations of the past and implies that the novel would be greatly improved by an admission of this lack of authenticity by placing it in the present. However, Mengestu does not seem interested in accurately portraying the novel's past. He clearly establishes Jonas' ignorance of events concerning his parents: on more than one occasion, Jonas admits that he does not truly know what happened on his parents' roadtrip or during his father's transition from Ethiopia to the United States. Nonetheless, this lack of knowledge reveals something deeper taking place in the novel. As Jonas tellingly states as his marriage with Angela begins to fall apart, "despite what we may have said we were finding that we were still perhaps only a few degrees away from what came before" (*How to Read* 155). Even without complete knowledge of the past, Jonas, Angela, and his parents are always close enough to feel it.

The past that shapes Mengestu's novel is undeniably a traumatic one. Yosef escapes torture in prison only to confine himself to a small box on a ship for what could be days or weeks. Once reunited with Mariam, he beats her uncontrollably, something Jonas witnesses and experiences throughout his childhood. Even Angela hints at a traumatic childhood at various points throughout the novel, though she never explicitly states what happened to her. One cannot read the novel without escaping the trauma and the pain that marks it. As this chapter will demonstrate, Mengestu's use of trauma in *How to Read the Air* forms the foundation for an examination of how history and untold history never truly disappear from the present. By doing so, he portrays the way real

experiences shape understanding of the present and the past.

How trauma becomes incorporated into the memories Jonas references throughout *How to Read the Air* poses a significant question for those wishing to understand the novel. Undoubtedly, trauma acts as a formative base and boundary in the novel, simultaneously creating a foundation for future experiences and building walls which contain and define those experiences. The trauma of the novel appears most obviously through the image of Yosef for whom the phantasm of boxes both haunt him and motivate his actions. Jonas' claim that his "father had been dreaming of boxes since coming to America ... which despite his best efforts had continued to haunt him" (39) reveals the severity of the trauma acting on Yosef's life. As Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart demonstrate, "fragments of these unintegrated [traumatic] experiences may later manifest [as] recollections or behavioral reenactments" (160). For Yosef, these reenactments take the shape of dreams of boxes that haunt him throughout his life. In the novel, he moves from dreaming of to actually accumulating boxes, repetitively playing out the events that forced him to hide in a box to escape from the Sudan. Although his is not the only trauma evident in the novel, his experiences nonetheless demonstrate that the inescapable reality of trauma does inevitably extend from the recesses of the past into the actuality of the present. In fact, the indistinction between the past and present apparent in traumatic experience influences how Mengestu structures his novel.

Besides interweaving the separate plotlines, Mengestu structures his novel in two opposing, that is, dialectical ways. First, he develops the novel's narrative through Jonas' use of memory and imagination, imitating the temporal disjunction of memory in the nonlinear movement of the novel. By using memories and imagination as a structural

element, Mengestu allows Jonas to interpret the subtle reflexes of his parents and to create a history emblematic of who he understood them to be. Second, he incorporates physical memories into Jonas' present. In other words, Jonas notices the way objects contain remnants of the past, such as when he visits Fort Laconte. At the fort Jonas states, "Looking at the remains of the fort—its size and scope, its proximity to the forest and to the spring that runs alongside it—I don't think anyone who came here did so expecting or wanting to fight" (*How to Read* 135). Although most of the fort has disappeared with time, what remains still offers evidence to the original intentions of the fort. These traces of the past in physical objects parallel what becomes one of the primary themes of the novel: Jonas himself is imprinted with the traumatic experiences of his parents.

Structuring the novel in this way allows Mengestu to create an atmosphere in which time is cumulative and the present the sum of everything that has come before it. In doing so, he allows trauma to permeate Jonas' present and creates a situation in which Jonas not only must come to terms with the tragedies that precede him, but he must also translate those experiences in a way that allows him to draw meaning from them.

The way the novel communicates trauma is one of the most critical aspects to developing an analysis of trauma in *How to Read the Air*. Rather than hearing the experiences Jonas' parents undergo from their perspectives, the novel translates the stories of their traumas through Jonas' retelling. This means readers are at least twice removed from the initial traumatic event, which impacts how readers interpret and understand the novel. More significantly, Jonas himself does not have access to the complete account of what transpired between his parents during their roadtrip as well as on their respective journeys to the United States. Nonetheless, based on Jonas'

interactions with his parents before and after they separate, one can assume that their experiences were traumatic enough to impact how Jonas perceived them in his lifetime. According to Bessel van der Kolk and Alexander McFarlane, “The shame that accompanies such personal violations as rape, torture, and abuse is so painful that it is frequently dissociated; victims may be unaware of its presence, and yet it comes to dominate their interactions with the environment” (497). Van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart later define dissociation as the inability of the mind to integrate the memory of the traumatic experience and results in memories that “cannot be easily translated into the symbolic language necessary for linguistic retrieval” (173). Unable to integrate the memories of trauma into their conscious experience, victims of trauma nonetheless act out the injury in their interactions with the surrounding environment. While van der Kolk and van der Hart provide examples of people who reenact the experience of the trauma by unknowingly acting out the motions of the initial trauma, we can also see similar actions from Mariam and more overtly from Yosef. Jonas witnesses these reenactments, which are visible in Yosef’s continued and seemingly uncontrollable aggression, in his obsession with boxes, and in Mariam’s constant need to move from place to place (reminiscent of her plots to escape during her marriage). As a witness, Jonas further construes their experiences according to the little knowledge he does possess of their pasts and their histories and to his own present needs and desires.

But as Boyagoda notes, “we’re not to trust it [Jonas’ story about his father]: Jonas disavows most of the tale following its telling because, as we learn in other contexts, he’s a compulsive liar who’s blithe about the consequences of his serial deceptions.” Though Boyagoda dismisses much of what Jonas states for his tendency to lie, Jonas reveals that

his elaborations complete a forgotten history in a way he otherwise could not. As Jonas states, “I needed a history more complete than the strangled bits that he had owned and passed on to me ... and so I continued with my father’s story, knowing I could make up the missing details as I went” (*How to Read* 170). Despite the fact that Jonas largely fabricates his narrative, actual events also inform the story. In addition, Jonas’ familiarity with his parents allows him to at least partly understand how they might have acted and reacted in moments he did not witness firsthand. Even if one were to examine Mariam and Yosef solely through the actions Jonas *did* witness, the evidence would suggest that they indeed did suffer from trauma.

Mariam and Yosef exhibit many of the traits Van der Kolk and McFarlane describe as characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder patients. They describe, among others, traits such as the inability to integrate trauma into reality, the repetition of the trauma, as noted previously, and the lack or avoidance of emotional stimuli. In addition, Van der Kolk and McFarlane write, “What distinguishes people who develop PTSD from people who are merely temporarily stressed is that they start organizing their lives around the trauma” (489). In other words, in people who suffer from trauma, trauma acts as the centralizing experience of their lives rather than a brief deviation from their normal routines. They later state, “The memory of trauma is not integrated and accepted as a part of one’s personal past; instead it comes to exist independently of previous schemata [memories, values, and beliefs]” (491). The mind, then, refuses to accept the trauma and thus dissociates the traumatic experience.

The unshakeable reality of the traumatic event, contrasted with the inability of the mind to accept it, forms one of the central paradoxes of trauma. Mariam offers us an

image of this kind of paradox when she drops off Jonas for his first day of school.

Although, as Jonas tells us, she exhibits a bruise from a fight with her husband which Jonas no longer remembers, she carefully dresses herself that morning “with all the pomp and circumstance that other women bring to more significant affairs” (*How to Read* 90). However, her mood changes when they arrive at the school and she sees the other moms, “women as young as or younger than she was, but without the bruises or uncertainty of language she carried” (91). The contrast between Mariam’s attitudes before arriving at the school and after she arrives and sees the other American mothers reveals a discrepancy in how she perceives her abuse. Initially, she goes about her day as if it never happened, yet her encounter with the other moms forces her to confront the reality of her abuse and leads her to tell Jonas, “If someone asks you what’s wrong, you say nothing. Say this, Nothing is wrong” (91). Mariam’s continued silence on the subject of her abuse becomes a theme in the novel, and though she does eventually talk to Jonas about the car accident on the road to Nashville, she still expresses reluctance at revisiting those memories.

Van der Kolk and McFarlane write that “many people with PTSD not only actively avoid emotional arousal, but experience a progressive decline and withdrawal, in which *any* stimulations (whether it is potentially pleasurable or aversive) provokes further detachment. To feel nothing seems to be better than feeling irritable and upset” (495). Mengestu himself admits that “there is a distance and coldness” to Mariam, which is evocative not of a *lack* of emotion, but of an unwillingness to experience emotion (qtd. in Hazelwood 61). It is possible that one of two events left Mariam traumatized: either the abuse from her husband or the contrast between her life in Ethiopia and her life in the

United States. Thus, Mariam inadvertently evades mention of either of these experiences until Jonas asks her after his father's death about the roadtrip. Mariam continuously avoids "emotional arousal," something that later leads Jonas to assume that "It was better, she [Mariam] believed, not to translate emotions into actions, to let them lie dormant, because once they were expressed, there was no drawing them back" (*How to Read* 89). In addition, she organizes her life around her abuse by planning escapes throughout Jonas' childhood, escapes which translate into her inability to remain in one location for an extended period of time during Jonas' adulthood. The evidence provided in the novel suggests Mariam may indeed suffer from trauma. Little doubt exists, however, to the fact of Yosef's trauma.

Mengestu makes it clear that he wants readers to think of Yosef as traumatized. He has Jonas describe Yosef's dreams of boxes during which Yosef gives "the boxes the consideration they deserved, granting them the full and proper place in his life" (39). And while one could question the veracity of the dreams, they appear more tangibly throughout his later life in sketches or reconfigured in the corner of his room. His continued and even forced exposure to what forms such a central part of his experience leaving the Sudan points toward what van der Kolk and McFarlane write about: "The core issue [in recovering from a traumatic event] is the inability to integrate the reality of particular experiences, and the resulting repetitive replaying of the trauma in images, behaviors, feelings, physiological states, and interpersonal relationships" (491). In fact, when Jonas receives his father's belongings after his death, he finds hundreds of sketches of boats with "dozens of sketches of three-dimensional boxes floating around them, as if my father were trying to find a way of fitting those boxes inside the boats themselves"



(*How to Read* 151). From what Jonas states, readers learn that Yosef left the Sudan inside one of the boxes aboard what most likely was a cargo ship. Although one could question the validity of this information, Jonas reveals that his father did talk about these experiences though not to the extent that Jonas himself does. Instead, Yosef shared only “the short brutal tale of having been trapped as a stowaway on a ship” (170).

Nonetheless, one can see that those experiences as a stowaway never truly disappear from his memory, especially when he begins to obsessively accumulate boxes and sketches of ships. Van der Kolk and McFarlane reiterate this compulsive behavior and state, “One set of behaviors that is not mentioned in the diagnostic criteria for PTSD is the compulsive exposure of some traumatized individuals to situations reminiscent of the trauma (493). As van der Kolk notices in his most recent book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, this obsessive behavior generally translates into individuals exposing themselves to dangerous situations similar to the danger they initially encountered (31-33); however, in Yosef one can see this behavior as a consistent exposure to boxes and ships which, after receiving his father’s belongings, Jonas concludes Yosef must have witnessed at the piers (151).

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk describes his encounters with Vietnam war veterans suffering from traumas they endured during the war. He mentions the need to keep security guards nearby to help during veteran outbursts and discusses a rage so uncontrollable that one veteran had to leave home to keep from hurting his family. He again notices the same reaction from women escaping a violent childhood: “They also alternated between occasional bouts of explosive rage and long periods of being emotionally shut down” (20). As van der Kolk witnesses in his trauma patients, periods

of violence alternating with emotional numbness characterize many trauma victims. In “The Intrusive Past,” van der Kolk and van der Hart elaborate on reasons why a traumatized individual might react in such a way. They write, “Janet described the fact that traumatized people lose track of current exigencies, and respond instead, as if faced with a past threat: (they have) ‘lost the mental synthesis that constitutes reflective will and belief; [they] simply transform into automatic wills and beliefs the impulses which are momentarily the strongest’” (174). They further clarify this [behavior] and state that Janet concluded that these types of outbursts were necessary in order to help retrieve the traumatic memory since they create a similar state to the one during which the event initially occurred. Yosef displays a similar pattern of behavior and exhibits a rage that leads him to abuse his wife but which also seems involuntary.

Aside from Yosef’s abuse toward his wife, *How to Read the Air* provides very little evidence of Yosef’s involuntary rage that is not filtered through Jonas’ perception. Jonas at one point claims that Yosef did not want to fight<sup>1</sup>, yet somehow he finds himself slapping his wife when she takes too long to return to the car. Nonetheless, Jonas’ proclamation that “My father was never an exceptionally cruel man, despite so much of what he said and did in his life,” gives the impression of a mild-mannered man when he is not arguing with or hitting his wife (195). Yosef’s behavior indicates that he suffers from trauma. However, the novel does not clarify whether Yosef’s trauma stems from his time as cargo on a ship or from his time as a prisoner in Ethiopia. The evidence points more directly to Yosef’s time aboard the ship during his escape from the Sudan, although both events may have had a similar impact on him. Regardless of what event traumatized

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<sup>1</sup> “The fights grew out of their own organic, independent force, obliged only to their own rules and standards. ... He could no more keep the fights from erupting than he could make the trees vanish by an act of will or, say he had the authority, one of mercy” (*How to Read the Air* 65).

him, the reality of Yosef's trauma influences how and why Jonas narrativizes his parents' and his own experiences.

In "The Seduction of History: Trauma, Re-Memory, and the Ethics of the Real," Joseph Flanagan claims that "History *itself* is inherently traumatic" (388). Although Flanagan uses the notion of historical trauma to develop an understanding in which individual trauma extends itself to a more collective traumatic event, he draws attention to the relevance of history in trauma. In fact, Flanagan's observation that the memory of trauma can unconsciously transfer from one individual to another does offer insight as to why someone like Jonas might identify with those unexperienced traumatic events. However, for the purposes of the moment, Flanagan's discussion of trauma as nonrepresentational history holds the most weight. Concerning history he writes, "Conceiving of History as traumatic is thus an attempt not to do away with the referential truth-claims of traditional historiography but, in fact, to move those claims away from suspect figurative and narrative conventions to a more stable and reliable source: the 'Real' of the nonrepresentational" (389). Those who claim history is traumatic, and therefore nonrepresentational, negate the accessibility of history through symbolization. However, as Flanagan explains, thinking of history in this way allows one to consider history less from potentially fictive representations of narrative and more from the more reliable perspective of the Real. Unlike narrative, the Real offers a more dependable way of considering history because it prevents the biases of language from shaping the ways in which history is conceived. Flanagan later states, "traumatic memory is more faithful than normal memory because it does not distort that experience through representation" (390). Because trauma inherently defies representation, traumas do not reshape memories

of an event but instead reenact the event for the individual *as it happened*.

The idea that traumatic memory offers a more faithful version of the past because it defies representation poses a problem for an analysis of *How to Read the Air*. First, it implies that Jonas' account of his parents' experiences is largely constructed from the little knowledge he possesses of his parents and from information that he imagines. Second, this concept of traumatic memory calls into question the reliability of even the information Jonas has acquired from his meeting with his mother prior to his roadtrip. If Mariam and Yosef both suffer from trauma, then their narratives are never complete or fully expressible through language. Van der Kolk and McFarlane write, "Because people with PTSD have a fundamental impairment in the capacity to integrate traumatic experiences with other everyday life events, their traumatic memories are often not coherent stories" (492). Nonetheless, Jonas' retelling of his parents' earlier roadtrip is largely dependent on Mariam's account of what happened. So it comes as no wonder that Jonas at times admits the limitations of his narrative, such as when he states, "What happened between my parents late on a September afternoon thirty years earlier is, I have to admit, largely a matter of wild and perhaps even errant speculation" (134-35).

Jonas' inability to really know what transpired between his parents speaks to the difficulty in realizing traumatic experiences. His continued reliance on memories, which even he admits are limiting, further complicate his ability to accurately represent the past. As noted in the previous chapter, memories can be ambiguous and fragmentary; thus, Jonas' use of memory coupled with his parents' traumatic inhibitions call into question how *real* his narrative actually is. While these problems do limit Jonas' capacity to represent his and his parents' experiences, they also play a role in determining how the

narrative will take shape. They instead prepare a slate for speaking about the unspeakable.

Hayden White mirrors some of Flanagan's words when he writes, "But *real* events should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be; they can perfectly well serve as the *referents* of a discourse, can be spoken about, but they should not pose as the *tellers* of a narrative" (8). According to White, real events, such as the fictional traumatic experiences that inform Mengestu's novel, cannot narrativize. Although narratives can be written *about* them, the actuality of the experience remains independent of narrative. This means that real events cannot be expressed in their original form. They can *inform*, but they cannot be told. The idea that real events can inform a narrative does offer some credence to Jonas' story: it suggests that in spite of the difficulties facing his narrative, the experiences which define the novel do come from actual occurrences.<sup>2</sup>

Cathy Caruth repeats White's premise when she writes, "a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (18). This notion seems problematic since it implies that traumatic history is accessible only through its inaccessibility. In other words, to understand trauma, one must first accept that it cannot be accurately reproduced except through traumatic memory and that its memory cannot be spoken. To speak of it would damage the memory of it and transform it into something unrecognizable.<sup>3</sup> However, as I demonstrate later, it is this transformation that proves

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<sup>2</sup> One can actually extend this argument outside the context of the novel and examine *How to Read the Air* as a novel informed by the real occurrences in Ethiopia and the Sudan during the civil unrest of the 70s and by the actual trauma experienced within Mengestu's own family. For the sake of this argument, however, one must think of Yosef and Mariam's experiences as actual events that take place within the fictive world of the novel.

<sup>3</sup> Wulf Kansteiner and Harold Weilnbock provide a more in depth analysis of the problems trauma theory poses in its representation of trauma in their essay "Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma (or

valuable and, ultimately, offers something closer to truth in *How to Read the Air*.

As I discussed previously, though speculation does inform much of Jonas' narrative, some of the narrative information comes from observable and concrete facts. For example, though Jonas may not know the exact circumstances of his father's journey to the United States, he does notice stacks of boxes in his father's apartment. Furthermore, some of the details that play key roles in his narrative come from the few things his father or mother did admit to being true instances of their past lives. Much of Mariam's conversation with Jonas when he comes to visit her after his separation with Angela informs his representation of his parents' roadtrip (along with his stops at the same sites his parents visited), and Jonas reveals that though he does not know much about the mysterious Abraham,<sup>4</sup> his father did frequently refer to him as a real part of his life. These fragments of knowledge by themselves cannot substantiate claims of what actually occurred in Yosef and Mariam's past; thus, the interpreter—Jonas—inevitably must draw connections between the concrete, the speculative, and the imaginary in order to surmise what may have happened. Jonas first begins to do so when he tells his class the story of his father, using knowledge of his father's behavior to conjure a past that could have caused those behaviors. He even admits, "And while I had always dismissed such statements [that Yosef made] as those of a paranoid man ... I realized now they must have had their origin somewhere, and here at last with my students I was starting to discover them" (*How to Read* 212). Though Jonas' additions to the stories he shares and

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How I Learned to Love the Suffering of Others without the Help of Psychotherapy." They write, "In fact, creating distance between oneself and moments of extreme human suffering might be the whole point of the exercise [trauma theory] because the bystander apparently wants to mentally eliminate the empirical experience of trauma by way of ontological speculation" (237).

<sup>4</sup> Abraham appears throughout the novel as a part of Yosef's recollections of the past and as one of the few aspects of his past which he does share with Jonas and Mariam. Jonas indicates that Abraham aided his father's escape from the Sudan in exchange for a promise to marry Abraham's daughter, which Yosef never fulfilled, and later exaggerates when he imparts this story to his students.

his own admission to altering versions of past events make him unreliable as a narrator, one should not wholly dismiss his narrative. His narrative offers an interpretation, though considerably speculative, still informed by actual events that took place in the lives of Jonas and his family. More significantly, he offers a base from which to analyze the behaviors and attitudes of his parents and, possibly, offers reasons where they previously did not exist. Jonas' narrative, in other words, allows him to achieve an understanding otherwise impossible.

Caruth presents an analysis of how trauma can lend some understanding of how Jonas' narrative discloses previously unknown information despite his lack of actual knowledge regarding his parents' pasts. Caruth, who turns to Freud to better develop an analysis of trauma, states,

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (3)

Caruth implies that in literature one can find traces of the known and the unknown in trauma and provides a context from which one can examine the relationship between knowledge and the unassimilated implicit within traumatic experiences. Furthermore, because trauma "is always the story of a wound that . . . addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable" (4), a narrative such as Jonas' can proffer some kind of truth from the fragments of a traumatic past.

Janet's example of the young woman, Iréne, discussed in van der Kolk and van

der Hart's "The Intrusive Past," offers another version of what Caruth suggests. Janet depicts a woman, Irene, who cannot remember the death of her mother, yet she acts out the final moments of her mother's life several times a week before falling asleep. Her inability to remember yet her compulsion to reengage in the same actions as the night her mother died compound the moment of not knowing with a knowing beyond her immediate reach and therefore accessible to her body alone. Trauma theorists such as Caruth and van der Kolk most often consider trauma from the perspective of the individual who has experienced trauma, but Jonas' narration of his parents' pasts reveals a similar relationship to what Janet and Caruth illustrate between knowing and not knowing. In fact, Jonas himself acts out the events of what he considers the defining moment of his parents' marriage by undergoing the same roadtrip they took in 1976, much like Irène acts out her mother's death.

While Jonas' compulsion to repeat his parents' actions could imply that he has inherited his parents' trauma, an attribute characteristic of cultural memories, his compulsion also points to the memory retrieved through action. Jonas cannot "remember" these events, therefore, he must recreate the events in order to "know" them. The example of Irène, who does eventually come to remember her mother's death through hypnosis and therapy, reveals how inadvertent actions can account for the "forgotten" past. The fact of trauma in the lives of Mengestu's characters must be addressed with some reservation, especially since, as Hazelwood states, "Jonas' reliability as a narrator is questionable" (60). Nonetheless, Jonas' narrative does what Irène's repetition of her mother's death and Freud's turn to literature do: it provides a context from which the unknown can become known. At this point one must begin to think of Jonas' narration



not just as a reimagining of past events but as a complex perusal of a repressed history that reexamines the unknown in order to push the boundaries of the known.

While visiting Fort Laconte, Jonas recalls a moment when his mother tries to guess at who previously owned their couch: “‘I think someone very fat used to own this couch. . . . Only a very fat person could make it soft like that.’ And she was right, the middle cushion was softer and did sag more” (*How to Read* 138). Once again, one can see Mengestu’s use of physical memory at work in the novel. In this case, the family couch bears the marks of previous use. Although Jonas’ mother can only guess at who the previous owner might have been, she uses the evidence present—the soft places on the couch—to surmise who that owner could have been. David Middleton and Steven D. Brown offer another way of thinking about Marian’s consideration of the couch. They write, “‘However, the durations of living made available in hesitation are not purely subjective experience. The point is that they intersect with the durations of others and it is in that intersection that further imaginary elaboration is possible” (246). Marian’s couch represents the intersection of two different durations, or experiences of time. She, in her present, views the couch as something that once belonged to someone else in their past. These two moments meet with each other and allow Marian to imagine who the owner could have been. More significantly, Jonas’ memory of Marian inspecting the couch intersects with Jonas’ present and his visit to Fort Laconte. It enables him to imagine the kind of behaviors his mother exhibited while examining the remnants of the fort thirty years prior. The novel makes frequent use of objects and memories as a stimulant to Jonas’ imagination. This allows Jonas to expand the narrative past what he knows and delve into the world of what he does not know. Furthermore, as Middleton and Brown

state, “The power of non-figurative monuments [memorial sites] is that they create such zones of indeterminacy [or reflection]” (246). In other words, objects that motivate reflection power imagination simply because they leave their histories open to interpretation.

Sites of memory offer one such example of objects and/or spaces whose primary purpose is to stimulate remembrance. Pierre Nora’s conception of sites of memory can be described as “mnemotechnical devices, but also extremely ideological, full of nationalism, and far from being neutral or free of value judgments” (Boer 21). In many ways, they ask that people observe a specific remembrance and adhere to specific principles. However, these sites of memory appear throughout *How to Read the Air* and offer one way to examine how memory and imagination intersect in the face of trauma. Nora writes, “There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” (7). Nora claims that in France, at least, a turn to historicizing the past has led to an absence of memory on a national scale and has created the need for sites of memory (7-8). Sites of memory in the United States (and those present in *How to Read the Air*) similarly exist in instances where forgetting threatens memories of certain events. Memories, then, often get situated into historical landmarks, sites, archives, etc. and become sites of memory in an attempt to preserve real experiences diluted by time and distance.

Some examples of sites of memory in the United States referenced in *How to Read the Air* include Fort Laconte and the empty place in the New York skyline where the World Trade Center twin towers once stood. These places, as sites of memories, also have their roots in traumatic events which in some way or another impacted how history

played out. As Mengestu's novel hauntingly reveals, the destiny of the memory of traumatic events is to be forgotten or at least removed to some place at the back of one's consciousness. For instance, Jonas informs readers, "There is almost nothing out there about Fort Laconte. In the large green and white textbooks assigned to my students there wasn't even a single mention of Jean-Patrice, much less his fort and the role it played in the founding of America" (*How to Read* 117). Fort Laconte has the unfortunate destiny of even losing its place in American history, its preservation possible only through the efforts of those who Jonas names "the Guardians of America's Forgotten History" (117).

In a sense, a site of memory exists precisely because it can be forgotten. This concept holds all the more true for sites of memory meant to commemorate traumatic events: because, as determined previously, the memories of trauma cannot be shared, they risk being forgotten unless someone chooses to preserve them. Nora writes, "Contrary to historical objects, however, *lieux de mémoire* have no referent in reality; or rather they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs. . . . In this sense, the *lieu de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of possible significations" (23-24). Sites of memory, then, cannot replace real experiences; they only offer a symbol, a kind of representation, of those experiences. However, for this reason, they allow for endless possibilities of imagination and endless ways of configuring and reconfiguring past events. One can see this at work in *How to Read the Air* when Jonas reutilizes Fort Laconte as a site where not just a national tragedy occurred, but as site where his parents learned a little more about their natures and their relationship.<sup>5</sup> In this way, memories

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<sup>5</sup> In *How to Read the Air*, Jonas visits Fort Laconte, one of the stops his parents made on their roadtrip to Nashville. While there, Jonas discusses the history of the Fort and the men destined to die there

change, their significance changes, and over time, they become new again.

*How to Read the Air* concerns itself extensively with the notion of forgetting. Mengestu contrasts Mariam who expresses a desire to forget, or at least to repress, painful memories with a later version of Jonas who actively seeks out the past. In many ways, Mengestu essentializes remembering. But doing so means recalling trauma and the pain that so often accompanies trauma; such an act risks reproducing the traumatic sentiment. Flanagan, aware of this possibility, attempts to develop an understanding for how traumatic history causes the individual to empathize with that history and how this interaction between the individual and the collective can impact the ethical subject. He ultimately concludes that trauma seduces those who wish to participate in history and endangers the constitution of those who identify with it. In other words, the ethical subject (one who empathizes with a differentiated object) has “to die to [herself] ... to be born in/as the other” (402). This action, according to Flanagan, presents an ethical dilemma since it implies that the reenactment of trauma “becomes the very history of ... [a] community” and continually reproduces the traumatic subject (401).

This same principle can be seen in Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experiences* when she states, “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, ... history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). Such a concept implies that one must choose either to forget or to become the traumatic subject once again. James Pennebaker and Amy Gonzales offer a slightly different interpretation in their essay. They claim, “With enough time, historical memories are reinterpreted and changed to match the needs

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but also reimagines his parents there taking note of the same stones and walls he sees. He suggests that as Yosef walks around the Fort, Mariam enters a forest near the Fort and temporarily considers leaving Yosef. However, when Yosef calls for her, she decides she would not make it very far and returns to him (138-143).

of a culture ... With time, the memories can often evolve into something mythlike, with positive outcomes emphasized and the costs forgotten” (186). Such an evolution would mean that the trauma of an event eventually gets forgotten though the event itself would remain present in historical dialogues. Whether one chooses to abide by Pennebaker and Gonzales’ version or Caruth’s version of how traumatic histories get remembered, the fact remains that in both interpretations one is *expected* to remember. The ethical subject is not just one who chooses to empathize, but one who has a *responsibility* to remember whether collectively or self-imposed.

One could call Jonas an ethical subject. He evokes a past imbued with trauma out of a necessity to remember. In one passage Jonas tellingly states, “And yet it’s only after I’ve fully recalled the sights and sounds of my own students twenty years later spilling into the arched-stone gates at the start of each morning, and the ensuing panic that their voices ... always aroused in me, that I’ll remember this is not September at all but May, [and] that I’ve lost the one career I’ve had” (*How to Read* 117). Here Jonas reveals that his current crisis will not allow him to forget and that something about it will always force him back to that grim reality that sent him exploring his past in the first place. In a weird paradox, one discovers that for Jonas, remembering the past means forgetting the present and remembering the present means forgetting the past. No matter where he turns, Jonas is faced with the task of remembering in exchange for forgetting. This characteristic could instate Jonas as the reborn traumatic subject since each time he chooses to remember, some other memory must die; however, unlike someone suffering from trauma, Jonas speaks the past. He places it into circulation so one may examine and reexamine it. Middleton and Brown, however, think of remembering and forgetting

differently than Flanagan and Caruth. They write, “Remembering is therefore a discontinuous process holding back the burden of the past. In the same way, forgetting is not the frailties of memory but the return of experience to imaginative re-elaboration” (249). In other words, remembering and forgetting are simply a process of revisiting, reimagining, and moving forward. Even as an ethical subject, even as someone who must remember, Jonas still can reinvent the past in new terms.

Some people might view a transformation of past events as a distortion. In a way, choosing to speak of, and thus change the memory of, trauma can betray the power of the experience. Speaking of trauma can diminish the moral implication of it, the fact that certain events can induce such intense reactions. But the fear that those experiences will disappear over time is without merit. Although people change, although even the memory changes, traumatic experiences remain ingrained within the following generations. As Craig Blatz and Micahel Ross note, this can prove disastrous. In *Memory in Mind and Culture* they write, “The downside to memorializing historical injustices committed against one’s group is that such recollections can fuel bad feelings and intergroup hostility. Groups may fail to settle present conflicts because earlier grievances remain unresolved. The conflicting sides cannot put the past behind them as they attempt to deal with the present and the future” (230). Or, as in the case of Jonas, one could adopt the attitudes and behaviors of the traumatized individual if exposed to that person for a significant period of time. But there exists an alternative too. Following generations could grow to accept the past and learn from it. *How to Read the Air* offers both versions and ends with the possibility that the future can be different. But Mengestu leaves imprints throughout the novel, suggestions of a past that left its mark and that continues to persist

because of that mark. One can see this in Fort Laconte, in Mariam's couch, and in Jonas himself. Ultimately, *How to Read the Air* implies that though the memory may change, though the story may transform, the past never disappears.

In the following chapter, I address the issue of disappearance. I discuss how the fear of forgetting can lead to the fear that individuals, memories, and experiences may disappear. In addition, I look at how history and cultural stereotypes, exemplified through sites of memory, can also contribute to a fear of disappearance. The following chapter aims to explore how and why the theme of disappearance appears in *How to Read the Air* and becomes the primary concern of the novel.

**CHAPTER III**  
**FORGETTING, HISTORY, AND DISAPPEARANCE**  
**IN *HOW TO READ THE AIR***

Contemporary society has a predilection to thinking of life in terms of the present. We term this present as “moving on” or “living in the present moment” and attempt to separate our thens from our nows often in order to leave the pain of the past stuck in some corner at the back of our memories. Even Stuart Hall notes that “Postmodernism attempts to close off the past by saying that history is finished, therefore you needn’t go back for it” (“On Postmodernism” 137). Maybe not everyone feels compelled to adhere to such a complete rejection of history; nonetheless, in the desire to move forward, society often attempts to separate the past from the present moment. Paradoxically, moving forward often means revisiting the past, accepting it, and leaving the previous chapter behind. For example, those who take on the twelve-step program to put an end to their destructive addictions at some point are asked to examine and make amends for their past errors. What happens, though, once a person moves on? Do past memories become a sacrilege to the present or an emblem of the progress one has made? Whatever the case, the past occupies an ambivalent space, a space which both confounds and entices us. The past remains perpetually at odds with the present, defying our ability to conceive of it in terms representative of our experiences.

It is no wonder then that, as Hall claims, Postmodernists prefer to think of history as finished: by doing so, they avoid confronting the tension between the present and the past. No matter how one goes about leaving the past in the past, the alternative—dwelling



on the past—can connote an emotional or mental disconnect. Trauma victims experience this kind of persistent past, so persistent that the memory remains intact and resistant to changes in interpretation or remembrance. The fact that PTSD creates a nightmarish reality for those who suffer from it reveals just how uneasy of a relationship some people have with the past. Joseph Flanagan’s claim that history *is* traumatic is all the more formidable from this perspective (388). His claim implies that people maintain a perpetually strained relationship with the past, one all the more complicated by both the desire to memorialize and the desire to forget. Nonetheless, *How to Read the Air* explores notions of remembering and forgetting, not only by moving between different temporalities but also by cementing an imaginative and reflective present. Through this temporal shift, the novel unveils the borders that exist between worlds, between the past and the present, and the way these borders continually penetrate each other’s spaces. Maybe, just maybe, it is these colliding spaces, the way the present defies the need to forget by enveloping the past, that leads to the tense relationship between then and now present in the novel. One must forget, yet one must remember.

History would have us believe that the past exists only in the past. Contemporary representations of it are just that: representations. Nonetheless, people seek it, they dwell on it, or they define themselves by it. It is what one could call an anxiety of the past, a need for our bodies and our minds to return to the past despite our instinct to move forward. *How to Read the Air* is not free from these constraints. Some of the characters suffer from trauma; Jonas navigates the history of his family; memory marks every page of the novel. In an interview, Mengestu even states, “We are historical creatures – we have memories, we have narrative – all these things that [sic] give weight and meaning to

our present lives, and so for me, and definitely for the characters in my novels, an understanding and reckoning with history is vital not only to moving forward with our lives, but also with coming to terms with it” (qtd. in Hazelwood 61). But *How to Read the Air* does more than just try to capture an account of the past or more than just follow a group of characters as they struggle with the consequences of their pasts. It entirely rejects the notion that the present must remain separate from the past and offers a version of history that continues to live on, that fails to disappear. At the core of the novel, in fact, exists the fear that the fragments of the past and the people implicated in that past will fade away into a forgotten place if one does not remember. Mengestu, however, moves past simple remembrance and takes his novel to a realm where the past continues to persist in the present in spite of the characters’ motives to remember or to forget.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, while persistence forms the resounding message of the novel, fears that the past will eventually disappear, and with it the people in one’s past, drive the novel forward. Jonas exhibits an obligation to remember, perhaps because through memory he can manipulate the story into one of redemption rather than loss. Nonetheless, Jonas’ reliance on memory—and eventually on history—holds wider cultural implications about the way trauma and displacement can damage a person’s history and subsequently his identity. *How to Read the Air* reveals that in the struggle to remember exists the struggle to persist in history, in memory, and through time. Only through this persistence can one stake a claim on history and come to discover the substance of existing.

In “Seven Types of Forgetting,” Paul Connerton writes,

All these usages [of forgetting] have one feature in common: they imply

an obligation on my part to remember something and my failure to discharge that obligation. This implication has cast its shadow over the context of intellectual debate on memory in the shape of the view, commonly held if not universal, that remembering and commemoration is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily failure [sic]. (59)

He goes on to develop seven different ways through which people forget; however, as Connerton notes, in most cases society views forgetting as a form of transgression. In other words, many societies strongly discourage forgetting past figures and events, especially those figures and events viewed as the building blocks of a culture. This is especially true of collective memories which “have a remarkable capacity to create a sense of unity or ‘oneness’ among people who would not otherwise see a meaningful sense of kinship” (Lambert et al. 194-95). Within communities that celebrate shared remembrance, individuals are expected to preserve memories that form part of the collective history of that community. This kind of obligatory remembrance—not necessarily limited to collective remembrance, though highly characteristic of it—forms a part of the discourse of the ethics of memory. In the previous chapter, I began a brief discussion about the ethics of memory,<sup>6</sup> a phrase used by critics to discuss the social responsibility of remembering.

Just to recapitulate, in *How to Read the Air*, Jonas acts as the ethical subject (but not necessarily the reborn traumatic subject) who demonstrates a *responsibility* to

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<sup>6</sup> My own familiarity with the ethics of memory came through Flanagan and Caruth who both use a working concept of the phrase in their writing. However, the principles dictating the ethics of memory originated with Freud and Lacan. Since the 2002 publication of Avishai Margalit’s book, *Ethics of Memory*, as a simple database inquiry will reveal, more writers have begun to use the phrase in their research than before. This may not necessarily correlate to the publication of Margalit’s book; however, interest in the ethics of memory has grown tremendously since its publication.

remember. Aside from the fact that most, if not all, of his narrative is based on memory, Jonas also often alludes to the act of remembering, such as when after receiving his father's belongings he states, "I stood for twenty or thirty minutes, long enough to finally get the courage to ask my father, now that he was dead and I was here trying to remember him, if he was finally happy" (155). In this particular instance, Jonas, who up to now has attempted to forget or at least numb himself from the past, must confront the memory of his father after learning of his death. In fact, the novel's overt preoccupation with remembrance implies that the alternative, forgetting, could prove irremediable: near the end of the novel, Jonas' wife, Angela, admits, "If we're not together, ... then I wonder what's left. I'm afraid to someday find that there's no one who knows me anymore. I could disappear and who would care[?]" (304). In other words, Angela admits the fear that she could be forgotten and that in this forgetting she might disappear, even cease to exist—at least metaphysically. However, before moving on to the issue of disappearance in *How to Read the Air*, I would like to broaden an analysis of the ethics of memory.

Identifying a theory for the ethics of memory, even with the amount of research available on the subject, can prove difficult. Even Avishai Margalit, writer of the book *Ethics of Memory*, goes so far as to suggest that remembering can be just as transgressive as forgetting. He writes, "Still, memory breathes revenge as often as it breathes reconciliation, and the hope of reaching catharsis through liberated memories might turn out to be an illusion" (5). Several scholars, in fact, warn against collective remembrances tied to traumatic experiences, which can stimulate hostility and resentment against other groups. Yet even in the midst of these possibilities, people continue to memorialize such events. In *How to Read the Air*, for instance, Angela and Jonas attend a work party on a

boat that passes the site where the Twin Towers stood prior to September 11. As they pass this site, the clients onboard, including a couple, try to place the location of the twin towers unsuccessfully, causing Jonas' boss, Bill, to come over and correct them. Jonas then claims, "The couple focused their sights onto where he was pointing, and I could see them trying to recreate from their television memories an image of the towers" (28). This image of the towers offers a telling experience: on the one hand, the towers have literally disappeared from the horizon. On the other hand, observers attempt to locate its ghost and to remember the image as they witnessed it through television. This short passage has several implications; however, one should note the effort to remember on the part of the witnesses despite the lack of physical evidence. In this instance, memory preserves the site in question though time has caused a change in circumstance for the site.

Today, there instead stands a memorial with two pits of fountains where the towers once stood, emphasizing the emptiness of the space, the lack which begs that we remember what stood there before. The memorial boasts many visitors who come to find the names of people they once knew etched on the sides of the fountain or to reimagine that historic day and where they were when they first learned news of the event. As a site of remembrance, it prevents those who visit from forgetting the lives that were lost and the events that changed the future of the nation. However, as *How to Read the Air* reveals, there is a tension in this remembrance. Jonas states,

A year or maybe two years earlier Bill would have stuck around longer and recounted to them his own personal experience of that day. ... For a few years we had all tried to stake our own personal claim on what happened that day [of September 11<sup>th</sup>]. That time had clearly passed, and

the best he or any of us could do was to try on occasion to set the record straight. (28)

Bill's reaction reveals a reluctance to place himself in the past similar to that of a former POW and war veteran at the prospect of photographing a vacationing Japanese family described in Middleton and Brown's essay. Middleton and Brown view the veteran's reluctance as a hesitation which they describe in the following terms: "For Bergson, life must be characterized by the 'uncertainty' found in this small example of being made to wait: 'time is this very hesitation or it is nothing.' Properly speaking, then, our own particular duration is not really singular—it is always conjoined with others" (246). For Bill, his duration, that of a time past, joins with the duration of the clients on the boat, that of a present concern to locate. Here, a call to remember interferes with the natural reaction of forgetting and causes a suspension, a hesitation, in time. Middleton and Brown maintain that this kind of intersection allows for "further imaginary elaboration," yet for Bill, one witnesses a moment in which elaboration has stopped (246). Instead, these intersecting durations force memory upon him, perhaps even a memory he wishes to leave behind. A theory of the ethics of memory should begin here with the acknowledgement that memory is not always willfully imposed; the inevitable reality of memory is that the obligation to remember occurs when we are called to participate in each other's lives.

The call to remember is not always wanton. In the example of Bill locating the towers, the clients never directly ask him to do so; yet when he sees that they are unable to identify the proper location, he feels the need to intercede and correct them. The towers themselves are emblematic of a historical event which has become a part of the

nation's collective memory, yet Bill still reveals a reluctance to revisit these memories. Memory, therefore, cannot be thought of independently from forgetting. This holds all the more true for collective memories which require reinterpretation in order to best fit the purposes of the community. In fact, Margalit claims, "An ethics of memory is as much an ethics of forgetting as it is an ethics of memory" (17). Although, as Connerton suggests, forgetting can be thought of as a degradation to memory, it can also be viewed as a necessity for remembrance.

As sociologist Elena Esposito notes, "In order to remember it is necessary first of all to be able to forget—to forget the countless singular and irrelevant aspects of objects and events, but also the excess of accumulated memories, in order to free mnemonic capacity, and to permit the construction of new memories" (181). From this perspective, the capacity to create new memories requires the ability to forget memories or aspects of a memory no longer relevant, such as Bill's location at the time of the attack on the towers. James Pennebaker and Amy Gonzales extend this interpretation to memories which get restructured before entering a collective consciousness. They write, "Events such as these [that become a part of the collective] undergo rethinking, reinterpreting, and even forgetting to become a part of the permanent fabric of collective memory" (171). Individual *and* collective memories require a process of remembrance and forgetting that transforms them to suit the purposes of the moment. *How to Read the Air* presents such a process as witnessed in Bill's recognition of the towers and also in Jonas' eventual forgiveness of his parents for their treatment of him in his childhood. As Margalit writes, "The decision to forgive makes one stop brooding on the past wrong, stop telling it to other people, with the end result of forgetting it or forgetting that it once mattered to you

greatly” (193). Jonas’ ability to move forward is tied not only to remembering his parents but also to forgetting that their wrongs once hurt him.

Middleton and Brown view forgetting as fundamental to the experience of memory and consider it a significant part of realizing different ways of thinking about the past. They write, “Experience matters then not so much in terms of what happened in the past but in terms of how futures are built back into the past in ways that make for the possibility of becoming different—actualizing alternative trajectories of living” (249). Like with prescriptive forgetting, they suggest that by inserting futures into one’s memories of the past, one can reformulate the past. In one example, they analyze an interview with a former WWII POW who finds redemption by taking a family photograph for a Japanese family. In this example, the veteran presents two accounts, one in which he chooses not to offer to take a photo for a Japanese family and later regrets this decision, and one in which he later does so without hesitation. Although Middleton and Brown focus on the intersecting durations of these two accounts, one can see that the veteran has forgotten the pain associated with his internment in Japan by the second incident, something possible due to the interjection of a different future, a *what if* in the first incident. Here, forgetting offers a redemptive experience that allows the war veteran to move past the initial trauma he experienced as a POW, much like it does for Jonas.

Similar to Middleton and Brown, Paul Connerton views forgetting as necessary, at times, to social welfare. In his essay, he describes the social functions that forgetting can fulfill, functions that generally incorporate a recasting of memory so as not to include certain less desirable or significant memories. One of these, prescriptive forgetting, directly corresponds to the development of nationhood and “is precipitated by an act of



state ... believed to be in the interests of all parties to the previous dispute [such as a civil conflict]” (61). In prescriptive forgetting, states choose to forget past conflicts in order to move forward in peace and unity. Of the types of forgetting Connerton discusses, one of the more insidious is repressive erasure, or “the condemnation of memory” in which the state criminalizes the remembrance of certain public figures or events (60). Though forgetting may not necessarily always involve coercive strategies, these examples reveal how political aims can subvert memories deemed inappropriate for its goals. More innocuous means of forgetting can have similar consequences in which a community or individual uplifts one memory over another in order to promote a specific understanding of the past. For example, as Connerton states, “forgetting ... [can be] part of an active process of creating a new and shared identity in a new setting” (63). Identity formation often incorporates new and some existing memories and thus may render certain less desirable memories negligible.

In *How to Read the Air*, one can see these processes at work in the lives of the characters. For example, after Yosef dies, Jonas receives a box full of his father’s belongings which includes sketches of ships and boxes and “a small bundle of photographs of him [Yosef] in front of various monuments taken all over the world” (151-52). Although it may not seem like much, the box contains memories, both preserved and forgotten. In the photos exist the memories Yosef chooses to remember, which significantly, take place at monuments or national sites of memory. The photos symbolize not only a fondness for a specific past, but a desire for a national, or possibly even international, identity free of his ethnic origins. In the same way, while heading to Nashville with Marian, Yosef decides to stop at Fort Laconte so that he may familiarize

himself with a piece of American history that could give him ownership to an American identity. One could imagine him taking a similar attitude to his stops at the famous European monuments in his photos, places he must have felt he had to know to begin to create a new identity for himself (85-87). Conversely, the sketches of ships and boats tell of ghosts, of phantasms, simply by the nature of their black and white, hard graphite lines that fade away with time. The sketches represent what Yosef wishes to forget. Jonas even notes that the drawings “have the air of having been drawn from a distance, both physical and emotional” (151). These drawings represent the past Yosef attempts to leave behind in order to bring in a new present, one full of the promises of change (although ultimately his *inability* to forget prevents the fulfillment of such hopes) and a new identity in a new country. And though, like with Middleton and Brown’s war veteran, this kind of forgetting can offer redemption, it can just as easily sacrifice an entire history for the promise of a different one. Here, between memory and history, one can witness a struggle to remember, to forget, and to ascertain ownership over the past.

History, official history, does not always leave room for memory. Pierre Nora goes so far as to claim that “History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (9). Although this concept may seem a bit far-fetched, it does not necessarily imply that historians put forth a calculated effort to suppress history but that memory in its biases and subjectivities is not always deemed worthy of a much more objective and (presumably) nondiscriminatory history. Nora uses this idea of a “suspicious history” to advance his argument that sites of memory develop to make room for memory in places where objective history prevails as the medium for thinking about the past. However, his comment reveals the tendency of historians and

other academics to think of history as separate from memory. He is not wrong to say that history is suspicious of memory, but memory is likewise suspicious of history. As Margalit notes, “In the disenchanted world of critical history, there is no backward causality. We cannot affect the past; we cannot undo the past, resurrect the past, or revivify the past. Only descriptions of the past can be altered, improved, or animated” (66). Memory, on the other hand, revives and transforms the past. It stands in direct opposition to the historical impetus, the challenge to produce the most authenticated version of the past possible in which every detail must be represented exactly as it happened, free of the transmutations of bias.

People do not want to think of a cold and disconnected history as representative of their experiences or of their memories. Yet even though historians have begun to acknowledge memory as a discipline, many still would rather not allow the subjectivities of memory to influence critical representations of the past. In a novel such as *How to Read the Air*, where memory and history become notably entangled, such delineations disappear. One cannot think of memory in this novel without considering history, and one cannot consider history without examining memory. But even between these two exist tensions which underline the plot of the novel. Memories change. Memories are products of the present. History, at the very least, attempts to stay true to the past. History represents a desire to place the past within its proper contexts and to reserve a place for the past in the past. These considerations cannot be overlooked in an analysis of this novel.

Although Mengestu focuses his novel more on the fictional pasts of Jonas and his family, actual historical events do inform the plot of the novel. Specifically, revolution in

Ethiopia, beginning in the 70s, and civil war in the Sudan form the foundation for the events that motivate the plot of the novel. As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Mengestu's family's history serves as a basis for writing this novel. In addition to Mengestu having grown up in Peoria, Illinois, Mengestu's family had fled Ethiopia after his uncle died in Derg<sup>7</sup> custody ("Dinaw Mengestu"). The Ethiopian revolution had a direct impact on Mengestu's family and does influence the plot of *How to Read the Air*. More significantly, the conflict between Eritrea<sup>8</sup> and Ethiopia may have impacted Norwegian hip hop artist, Yosef Wolde-Mariam's, relationship with his own father. Not only does Wolde-Mariam share a name with Mengestu's main antagonist, he also forgave his own Eritrean father (details about the conflict between father and son remain ambiguous) only after his death in 2006, much like Jonas does with his own father (Ekker). The striking resemblance between the two suggests that Mengestu borrowed inspiration from the artist's difficult past with his own father. Although one cannot say for sure what Wolde-Mariam or his father experienced, around the time that Yosef leaves Ethiopia in *How to Read the Air*, Eritrea struggled with Ethiopia for independence. These historical events involving Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Sudan all take place during Yosef's imprisonment and departure from Africa.

As readers learn, Yosef spent time in "a prison cell just outside of Addis ... for attending a political rally banned by the government" (*How to Read* 41; 170). Jonas even provides the dates for the years Yosef spent either in prison or attempting to escape the Sudan, stating, "The last four years of his life he spent thinking about the years between 1974 and 1976 and what he had gone through to get here" (148). In 1974, Ethiopia

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<sup>7</sup> The Derg, a rebel group in Ethiopia, would eventually overthrow Emperor Haile Selassie and take over rule of Ethiopia (Tareke 40-42)

<sup>8</sup> Eritrea borders Ethiopia and was considered part of Ethiopia during part of the twentieth century

suffered from famine, social injustices based on class, and a heated political climate that would eventually lead to the revolution of 1974 and the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie. Under the rule of Emperor Selassie, modernization had swept across the country; however, Selassie's policies failed to change agrarian society and left the peasantry to live in relative negligence (Tareke 19-20). In addition, a small emerging working class without contracts and only a weak union to represent them, had little protection from unfair and cruel labor practices (23). The poor conditions for the peasant and the working classes in Ethiopia led to a radical student movement calling for reform and embracing Marxist ideologies (24, 28). *How to Read the Air* suggests that Yosef participated in this student movement since he attended "a rally of high school and college students ... with a picture of Lenin raised high over his head" (67). Of course, by protesting, these students faced "the banning of their organization, repeated temporary closure of the university, expulsion, imprisonment and torture in the country's fetid cells, and even death" yet they continued to march forward (27).

At the same time that civil unrest brewed in Ethiopia, Ethiopia's neighbor, Eritrea, had united under the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)<sup>9</sup> in order to demand independence from Ethiopia. Although internal dissent and other similar yet opposing groups threatened the existence of the EPLF, eventually they would successfully defeat Ethiopia and gain their independence in 1993 (Tareke 65-66, 327). These events influenced the climate in Ethiopia in the 1970s, leaving the country in political turmoil and constant warfare.

The Sudan, during the 70s, like much of the world, also suffered from political

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<sup>9</sup> The EPLF did not officially take its name until 1977. However, by 1973, they had already begun to organize and work toward the goal of achieving independence, formed from the merging of three other groups (Tareke 63).

unrest. In the Sudan, war raged between the southern and the northern parts of the country because each side of the country held different values and beliefs. After gaining independence from the British government in 1955, the majority of legislation fell to the Khartoum led north, disenfranchising the people of the south. Rebel groups who opposed Khartoum, known as the Anya Nya, formed in the south and gained strength and support with each year that passed. In 1972, the two groups met in Addis Ababa and, under the direction of Selassie, negotiated a cease fire that granted the Southern Sudan regional autonomy (“Sudan: First Civil War”). Until 1983, when civil war erupted again, the people of the Sudan lived in relative peace. However, the Sudan that Yosef walks into is marked by the recent wars and political tensions which later result in President Jafaar Nimerei’s institution of Sharia law (Zapata). In addition, thousands of refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea had crossed over into the Sudan where they faced a life as “third-class” citizens (Tareke 63, 133). Refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea must have been met with discrimination by the Sudanese who must have resented the influx of refugees into the country as well as EPLF fighters who would take recruits from among the refugees (72). This, along with the turmoil in Ethiopia, influences Yosef’s experience in these countries, which in turn influences his behavior in the United States.

While I cannot excuse Yosef’s violence against his family, knowing the history of Ethiopia and the Sudan does provide some context for Yosef’s trauma and why Yosef would dissociate himself from the past. Having suffered torture and, most likely, prejudice in Ethiopia and the Sudan, Yosef would have wanted to forget these memories in the United States where he arrives free from the civil strife that stains his past. Nonetheless, Mengestu does not actually mention the history of these countries outside of

instances involving Yosef from which audiences can only guess at the actual politics taking place. Yet for someone whose parents did not speak much about the past, Jonas is not ignorant of what took place in Ethiopia and constructs such a believable version of what his father experienced that, at the very least, it reflects the actual political climate of the time. Mengestu himself admits that as a child “he became obsessed with learning everything he could about Ethiopia, its political troubles, and the international community of political and economic refugees who had emerged from it” (“Dinaw Mengestu”). One can assume that he intends for his protagonist, Jonas, to have sought the same knowledge, especially since Jonas makes a similar effort to find out what happened between his parents on their roadtrip to Nashville by first speaking with his mother about it and then actually making the same journey his parents did. Knowing at least some of what happened abroad and during his parents’ roadtrip allows Jonas to have a base from which to allow his memories and his imagination to reproduce the past in its new skin.

Gebru Tareke admits that “what was obtained [as resources of study] was occasionally incomplete or inconsistent, as state documents usually are. . . . There are instances of misrepresentation, distortion, and outright fabrication” (xv). Even a more thorough version of Ethiopia’s revolutionary history, then, contends with bias and missing information. As Craig Blatz and Michael Ross suggest, popular “histories reflect a bias to report the past in a way that confirms current preferences, goals, and beliefs” (224). It comes as no surprise, then, that the documenters of Ethiopian history would skew the events in their favor, making a more objective rendition of the past difficult to achieve. One must wonder if this factors in part into Mengestu’s decision to deemphasize the political events that actually occurred in Ethiopia and in the Sudan in his novel. While

Mengestu has the option to make his novel a historical novel, especially since it centers so heavily on events that occurred due to the revolution in Ethiopia, he instead focuses primarily on *creating*, or recreating, history, and a fictional history at that. When even a more objective history is still subject to the biases of memory, it may fail to properly represent groups or individuals who exist on the margins of those histories—who, despite having experienced those same events, get excluded from historical accounts. As such, had Mengestu decided to write a historical novel, he might have fallen prey to committing the same kind of stereotyping Jonas initially does at the resettlement center: he might have perpetuated a story based on a common interpretation of history.

The study of history often centers on acceptable modes of translating the past into a narrative that is accurate and analytical. In other words, history asks how one *represents* the past. Hayden White considers narrativization a form of historical representation in which events are not only presented in a chronological and coherent manner but moralized as well, or given meaning where meaning did not previously exist. But through this form of representation, he notes a kind of subjectivity at work. He writes,

It is the fact that they [historical accounts] *can* be recorded otherwise, in an order of narrative, that makes them at once questionable as to their authenticity and susceptible to being considered tokens of reality. ...  
Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. (23)

By presiding over history and deciding what constitutes the real or what meaning one must obtain from a set of events, historians legitimize specific versions of history. As



White notes, only when a historical account can be questioned does the historian feel the need to step in and correct the account. Tareke offers a compelling image of such a task since he takes fragmentary and biased depictions of the Ethiopian revolution in order to surmise what “actually” took place. However, such judgments are not without their problems. White concludes, “The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries” (27). White thus views narrative historical representations as subjective because they prioritize order where order may not exist. More overtly, the fact that one version of history could be deemed more legitimate than another reveals the biases of historians who prefer a neatly compressed version of the past to the chaotic residue that usually follows great historical events.

At the heart of Mengestu’s novel exists the problem White’s essay illustrates. To put it a bit differently, White’s essay emphasizes the fact that standards, primarily relegated according to the values and beliefs of a society, exist as to what constitutes history and what does not. That which does not conform to those standards gets excluded from, at the very least, academic history. More significantly, these standards invalidate the authenticity of historical accounts which offer dissident versions of history—those accounts subject to a historian’s judgment in her search for the “real.” Jay Newman thinks of authenticity in the following way: “Cultural products ... are human creations, and we usually regard them as inauthentic or authentic in relation to a judgment we form about the human agents who have created or promoted them” (6). As a cultural product, history’s authenticity depends on a recognition of the validity of the voice which issues that history. History, then, implicates the person who produces that history. Although

Newman contends that the question of authenticity is not an existentialist one—a question of authenticity does not negate an entity’s existence—in history, that which does not conform to the accepted version does not receive the same recognition. This means that individuals or groups whose histories are not recognized lose their voice and their ability to define themselves according to their perceptions. As individuals, they virtually disappear. *How to Read the Air* deals thoroughly with both the disappearance of history and the disappearance of individuals to cultural stereotypes. Though the connection to stereotyping initially seems muddled at best, the novel implies that history offers a lifeline to those who have fallen in the fray for recognition.

Reviewer Ron Charles notes that *How to Read the Air* “contradicts our most cherished clichés of immigrant progress.” In other words, Mengestu does not tell a recognizable story of what people have come to expect about immigrant families in the United States; rather, he writes a tale that does not mire itself in “clichés” and stereotypes or, at the very least, attempts to do so. In an interview with NPR, Mengestu even admits that “It’s very easy to sort of consider it [the immigrant narrative] as one simple story that we’ve all heard and we’ve all grown very familiar to ... and oftentimes it can be enough to sum up the entire narrative in people’s minds without knowing any of the details or facts” (“‘Heaven Bears’ Author”).

In Mengestu’s novel, then, one can see the influence of mainstream perceptions on immigrants at work, most overtly during Jonas’ tenure with the refugee resettlement center. Even Jonas is subject to this kind of stereotyping since, as he states, his hire depends on the fact that he “could be Jonas, or Jon, or J, and of course when Bill needed, Mr. Woldemariam, who despite distance and birth, remained at heart an African” (*How to*

*Read* 21). Jonas' boss depends wholly on the fact that others can recognize Jonas' foreignness in his features despite the fact that, as Bill admits over the phone, Jonas is "completely American" (21). In a sense, those who see Jonas but do not hear him assign him a history appropriately foreign, appropriately other, and appropriately conformist to expectations of what foreign means. In other words, they designate him as an African immigrant without knowing the actual origins of his family or the circumstances that brought his family to the United States. In this way, Jonas' personal history gets negated.

The problem with such stereotyping, however, is that it threatens the individuality of the person or the group. Gülriz Büken notices a similar occurrence among American Indians and writes "The 'stereotypes of the Indian' that are disseminated through popular culture, as James Nottage notes, help ... 'to erase the individual and cultural identities of the Indian'" (47). For the American Indian, an image of a feathered chief with a tomahawk in hand perpetuates ignorance of the various cultures that exist among Native Americans. In addition, this image normalizes the idea of the warring Indian, though, historically, this may not always have been the case. Consequently, those whose histories get reallocated into an image or a myth face cultural and historical erasure. In *How to Read the Air*, this kind of possibility is made evident through characters such as Jonas and Angela stereotyping the lives of the foreigners who arrive at Jonas' workplace seeking counsel from the lawyers there. At one point Jonas even claims, "I quickly discovered that what could not be researched could just as easily be invented based on common assumptions that most of us shared when it came to the poor in distant, foreign countries" (24). So Jonas himself participates in stereotyping the refugees who come into the office. He even goes so far as to attempt to place the face to the story, basing what

they might have gone through on how they look.

Notably, the refugees that come in and out of the office lack any individualizing characteristics. During the resettlement center's boat party around Manhattan which clients can attend, Angela describes the refugees in the following way: "The Pakistanis are sitting at a table by themselves barely talking to one another because none of them really like each other. They all just happen to speak the same language and don't trust the Liberians, especially the boys, who have probably snuck a bottle of alcohol out from behind the bar even though they're too young to drink" (28). In this description, she does not even bother to identify the refugees by name, but groups and characterizes them according to nationality. Even here, they lack history, personality, anything that might define them as something other than a refugee. Later in the novel, when Jonas comes back to volunteer for Bill during the summer, Bill finally admits, "I didn't even need you to make up their stories. They were good enough on their own. They were perfect. Absolutely perfect" (129). Bill, at this point, has recognized the error in his method and the way he helped create a stylized refugee, much like the mythic Indian. For the first time in the novel, one sees Bill acknowledge the history of these refugees. Without history, or least one that is unique to their circumstances, the refugees cannot exist as individuals but only as the faceless mass Angela identifies on the short cruise around Manhattan.

According to Bhabha, "The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in psychic

and social relations” (107). Although he does not say as much, Bhabha implies that where differences are denied (as a result of the stereotype), the differentiated subject also is denied. Furthermore, in the preceding passage, he suggests that the stereotype represents “the subject’s desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division” (107). In this way, the stereotype assigns origins or identities which exist precisely because of the threat of difference. That which falls under the stereotype becomes the sign of the stereotype or (in Bhabha’s words) “a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’ that threatens to split the soul and the whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego” if it does not conform to a neatly packaged stereotype (107).

Jonas, as an American and a foreigner, is a differentiated subject—he is not identifiable by cultural stereotypes. His first encounter with the dean of the academy where he begins to work demonstrates this perception of Jonas. During the interview, the dean asks Jonas where his accent is from, to which he responds, “Peoria” (which is the city in Illinois where Jonas was born and where Mengestu grew up). Confused, the dean attempts to hide his ignorance and discontinues his pursuit of the subject (*How to Read* 54-55). A similar situation takes place on the first day Jonas teaches his English class when one of the students asks where Jonas is from. When Jonas answers that he comes from Illinois, another student attempts to clarify the question and states, “No. I think she means where are you really from?” (76). Both of these scenarios reveal how when Jonas does not immediately accept a foreign identification it leads to confusion. Those asking Jonas of his origin resist the possibility that he might not fit their preconceptions of him. While Jonas is by no means the only character in *How to Read the Air* who experiences such stereotyping, his case nonetheless confirms the perceived threat of disappearance.

Because others attempt to generalize Jonas' identity, Jonas, as an individual, stands at risk of disappearing behind the curtain of stereotypes thrust upon him.

It comes as no surprise, then, that for Jonas, his life exists somewhere on the periphery of mainstream culture. When surrounded by others, for instance, he “disappear[s] into a corner of... [his] own making” (29) and frequently makes up stories about his life when he does interact with others. In fact, Jonas claims, “Without ever thinking about it, I had become one of those men who increasingly spent more and more of their nights alone, neither distraught nor depressed, just simply estranged from the great social machinations with which others were occupied” (17). Maybe Jonas is a misfit of his own making, but, as his words reveal, he is a misfit nonetheless. Jonas stands between two cultures, in the place of the beyond,<sup>10</sup> as Bhabha would call it (1-2). As a result, his identity is not fixed. I mention above that memory, forgetting, and remembering, play a role in identity formation. Maybe, then, *How to Read the Air* explores the dynamics between memory and history because the thing at stake is not just the memory of a person or of his past, but his identity, his “authentic” self. Jonas risks losing his connections to the people around him and consequently his perception of himself when memories are forgotten, histories neglected, and identities assigned.

Although the novel focuses primarily on Jonas and his family, it echoes a problem present among minority groups in the United States: cultural identities are threatened when the narrative of the few gets merged with the narrative of the many. Rachel Hazelwood picks up on this thematic component of the novel and claims,

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<sup>10</sup> “The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past. ... these ‘in between’ spaces [the beyond] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (*The Location of Culture* 1-2).

Towards the end of the novel, we find out that Mariam and Yosef never talked to each other about their past lives in Ethiopia. This unwillingness or inability to share past experience . . . brings into question the importance of remembering our heritage, to feel rooted in our own personal and social histories, in order to move forward with our lives. This issue of remembering is one that is vital to Mengestu's storytelling. (61)

As Hazelwood notes, Marian and Yosef have not discussed past events, at least with each other. They have allowed themselves, essentially, to negate the past. As a result, Jonas is disconnected from his family's history. Like the missing skyline of the twin towers, the Woldemariam family's past is just a ghost of a figure, unidentifiable by those who did not experience it for themselves. Jonas offers a sample of what many individuals caught between two different cultures, between one vision of themselves and another vision, experience. Nonetheless, I would be remiss to limit *How to Read the Air* to a representation of a cultural group or tradition. In fact, Jonas does not exemplify the characteristics that one would normally identify as "ethnic." As his boss, Bill, states, Jonas is wholly American. While the struggles Jonas experiences are pertinent to minority groups in the United States, the novel represents an attempt to identify a subjective, personal, experiential history and create a space for that history to exist. If Jonas can allow himself to remember and to remember in such a way that allows for the transfiguration of the past, then he, the people close to him, and the past will not disappear entirely.

However, I began this chapter with the understanding that the call to remember can be inadvertent and unintentional, and that it is our participation in each other's lives

that causes us to remember. Angela's fear that no one will remember her reflects this understanding since she believes that after Jonas leaves her she will no longer be a part of anyone's life. But *How to Read the Air* shows that the past leaves its mark on the present, a mark that over time may morph into something different, but that will nonetheless continue to exist, much like the stones at Fort Laconte. In this way, Angela's fear is unfounded: she cannot erase the influence she has already had in Jonas' life. One then cannot change the fact that people and the past, despite their fears, do not disappear. However, when the past collides with the present, new interpretations and new histories emerge.

In the following chapter, I look at how these new histories come into existence through an analysis of *How to Read the Air* and how Jonas uses discursive practices to articulate a new history and identity for himself and his family. For as Bhabha's discussion of the "beyond" demonstrates, "The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices. ... It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which [sic] *something begins its presencing*" (6-7). Boundaries, in other words, act as a mediation between dissonant cultures, different temporalities, and establish places for what cannot be articulated through static, unchanging channels. If the prevalent historical discourse, as described by White, allows room for only one mode of representation, then it is to its "epistemological limits" we must look to find the place where marginalized histories emerge.



**CHAPTER IV**  
**BRIDGING THE DIVIDE:**  
**DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN *HOW TO READ THE AIR***

In *How to Read the Air*, when Mariam returns to the car prior to heading out for Nashville and after having made Yosef wait for her, Jonas states of his father,

As soon as my father said the last two words, he felt the abrupt and dramatic shift in the air that precedes any violent confrontation. Something vibrated, buzzed. If there was a way to narrate it, he would have described it as the tiniest particles that make up the air we breathe becoming slowly charged and electrified with a palpable life all their own. The world around us is alive, he would have said, with our emotions and thoughts, and the space between any two people contains them all. (66)

The title of the novel, *How to Read the Air*, courses through this passage. Here, Yosef senses the shift in the breeze before a fight between him and Mariam erupts. This same recognition saves Yosef twice before, once from his knife flinging father and once from a bullet, presumably targeted at him for his socialist ideas (67). Yosef essentially reads the air and perceives the signs present in the space between himself and the other person that tell him of the moment to come—uncontrollable, unstoppable, and inevitable. One must ask, then, does the novel represent Jonas' attempt to do the same thing?

The space between, the place where Yosef feels the change in the air, resembles David Middleton and Steve D. Brown's understanding of hesitation. Middleton and Brown describe an illustration by French philosopher, Henri Bergson, of waiting for

sugar to dissolve in a glass of water. In this illustration, the amount of time spent waiting and the impatience one feels during that time cause the sense that a particular instance in time moves at a different pace from the normal flow of time (245). They write, “For the time this takes [the sugar to dissolve], our own duration is hooked into that of the sugar and water mix. . . . Bergson’s point is that the impatience we feel is an emerging and irreducible property of the hooking together of durations” (245). This meeting of durations—the temporal property of an event—causes a hesitation or the experience of a longer lapse in time than the actual amount of time that passes. Yosef’s experience of a bullet heading toward him during a protest happens at the intersection of two durations: that of a soldier aiming to shoot and that of Yosef realizing the soldier is aiming at him. This hesitation allows him to observe, recognize, and react—just in time—to miss the bullet. (I can imagine this scene in a movie, slowed down so the audience can observe the soldier pulling the trigger and Yosef’s facial expression as he realizes he is just moments away from potential death).

But Yosef’s experiences offer just a brief example of what hesitation looks like in *How to Read the Air*. In fact, I contend that Jonas’ narration of recent and past events in his and his parents’ lives *is* a hesitation. But rather than exploring the intersection of two isolated durations, the novel explores the intersection of Jonas’ past and present and everything they encompass. However, the past the novel identifies is not the kind of cold and distant past resigned to our history books but represents the traces of the past still acting in the present—the sag in a couch cushion, the remaining stones of a fort, and the memories that consume Jonas. At face value, one might think of the novel as a narrative about a group of people and the occurrences in their lives over an extended period of

time. And while it is true that through Jonas readers learn of a set of events that take place over thirty years or so, Jonas narrates the novel during a period between meeting with his mother after his separation from Angela and his final stop on his roadtrip at the place where his mother steered his parents' car into a ditch years earlier, a period of possibly a week or so. The duration of this period seems much longer because Jonas' narration constitutes a hesitation, a meeting of his present with his past, during which he observes, recognizes, and reacts. His actions are those of a restless person, someone who can neither stay still nor move forward just yet. So for a moment, Jonas must pause and learn to read the air.

*How to Read the Air*, as the title implies, embodies a discursive space where Jonas negotiates the past and the present, the known and the unknown. The traces of the past evident throughout the novel form the spaces where Jonas learns to recognize the signs of the past and the events that occurred in these spaces. He learns to read the stories these traces tell and to see what was once invisible: the confinement of his father first in prison and then to a box; his mother's first tentative steps into an open field and her reason for returning; or the decision to build a home rather than a fort and the lives that were lost for it. For Jonas, these spaces exist because here the remnants of the past intersect with the present, creating an in-between space where Jonas can interpret information available to him (and, eventually, where he can add on to that information). Jonas even tellingly mentions, when he refers to his mother's many escape attempts from home, "Life, for my mother and me, was lived in the spaces between attempted departures" (83). Not only does Jonas' past consist of spaces in-between, he himself exists in spaces between locations, cultures, and temporalities. As someone whose life exists between spaces,

Jonas must articulate a new identity and a new history representative of him and his experiences.

After Jonas loses his first job as a legal assistant, he states,

Even beyond that I had begun to sense that my place in the world was rapidly shrinking, that this was not an age for idle drifters or starry-eyed dreamers who spoke wonderfully but did little.... If I didn't latch on to something soon, I'd find myself thrown overboard, completely adrift, bobbing out to sea with nothing, not so much as a life vest of companionship to hold on to. (54)

This passage resonates with Bhabha's description of Isabel Archer's (a character in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*) transition from one home to another. As Bhabha writes, "The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer...taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'. And it is at this point that the world first shrinks for Isabel and then expands enormously" (13). Like Isabel, Jonas finds his world shrinking as he faces the "unhomely moment" or "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha 13).

Of this estrangement, Bhabha states, "In that displacement [when a person transitions from one culture or space to another], the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (13). Although Jonas does not *relocate* from one space to another in the way Isabel Archer does, as a child of Ethiopian immigrants in the United States, he stands at the border of two different

cultures. These cultures force upon him “a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting,” a vision evidenced by Jonas’ divided identity as American and foreigner. To put it differently, a deep displacement pervades this novel precisely because Jonas stands at the borders of two different worlds.

As a child of Ethiopian immigrants, Jonas must navigate the boundaries between himself as a foreigner and as an American. This characteristic of the novel causes some reviewers to identify *How to Read the Air* as an immigrant novel. One review states, “Mengestu stunningly illuminates the immigrant experience across two generations” (“How to Read the Air”). Another reviewer writes in reference to Mengestu’s novel, “The canon of literature describing immigrants’ experiences has helped shape what we think their stories should sound like” (Yabroff). Even Mengestu himself states, “what I’m interested in doing is adding to the complexity ... of the immigrant narrative that’s now becoming part of the African American and African immigrant tradition in American literature” (“MacArthur Fellows”). Undoubtedly, migranhood characterizes the novel. Most significantly, though, immigrant narratives, such as *How to Read the Air*, deal more aptly with the negotiation of boundaries than other traditional immigration narratives because they provide characters who regularly experience what it is like to navigate two different cultures in two directions.

In Mengestu’s novel, Jonas acts as the primary character negotiating these different, multiple, identities. Angela even tells Jonas at one point that he “lacked a clear sense of identity” (*How to Read* 100). Because Jonas must straddle different cultures, he does not possess an identity easily discernable by others. In fact, one could say that until he makes the decision to retrace his parents’ earlier roadtrip, Jonas himself does not even

understand who he is. Jonas even admits when seeking protection from the attention of his abusive father, “I thought of my obscurity as being essential to my survival” (101). However, in a wider context, this statement reveals that Jonas does not even have a clear vision of himself, perhaps because being someone unequivocally would have meant exposing himself to the dangers of the world around him.

The boundaries between cultures are by no means the only boundaries in *How to Read the Air*. In addition to cultural boundaries, the novel also explores the boundaries between different temporalities, locations, and narratives. Underlying each boundary is a set of tensions that determine the ways those boundaries will be understood. Arguably, the most significant of these tensions is the one between the past and the present since arriving in a new country comes with the expectation of a new future and a past that remains elsewhere. Additionally, Jonas’ ability to move forward after his separation and divorce from Angela requires that he come to some understanding about how the past has impacted his present. The problem, however, with such tensions is that they, at times, elude our ability to ascribe meaning to them. In the case of memory and history, the tensions between the two sometimes lead to the tendency of scholars to keep the two terms categorically separate, despite their dependency on each other. As Pierre Nora observes of late twentieth century France, “the entire discipline of history has entered its historiographical age, consummating its dissociation from memory” (10). Postmodernism rejects the notion of meaning, such as Baudrillard who, according to Stuart Hall, claims “things *are* just what is seen on the surface” (Grossberg, “On Postmodernism” 136).

Hall rejects the postmodernist impulse to deny the presence of meaning (135). When asked how he would respond to postmodernism’s abandonment of matters of

representation and meaning, Hall answers, “I don’t think it is possible to conceptualize language without meaning” (135). Hall instead offers a theory of articulation which “*can* make a unity of two different elements” and still do justice to the forces of representation in play (141). Hall offers a way to consider opposing elements and the way these elements work together. And although he is primarily concerned with hegemonic relations and the rhetoric of subversion, his theory of articulation offers a way of thinking about the contradictory elements present in *How to Read the Air*.

Using articulation to describe conditions under which hegemonic relations can be understood, Hall states that “a theory of articulation [the negotiation of contradictory elements] is ... a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse” (141). For example, articulations might join the ideological with the social, thus creating a space in which the articulated subject could be understood in various ways. But in *How to Read the Air*, Mengestu does not refrain from exploring the dynamics among the different opposing elements. Arguably, because he explores notions of identity and history, Mengestu uses articulations in order to deepen an understanding of the forces at work in the novel. In fact, Mengestu’s use of these contradictory characteristics of the novel follows Grossberg’s definition of articulation, or “the complex set of historical practices by which we struggle to produce identity or structural unity out of, on top of, complexity, difference, contradiction” (“History, Politics” 154). Jonas’ navigation of the past as a way of understanding his family and himself satisfy these requirements and enables one to analyze the novel through the theory of articulation.

One of the most overt instances of articulation requires I revisit a passage quoted

earlier in this thesis. As Jonas begins his trip to Nashville along Interstate 155, a highway he claims to have visited with both his mother and father on separate occasions, he states, “I didn’t know it at the time but two completely different versions of history were being offered to me in preparation for my inevitable role as both advocate and judge over what happened to my parents during this trip” (*How to Read* 115). Here Jonas admits that he will have to take differing accounts and make a judgement about what happened based on the information presented to him by his parents. In other words, he will have to unify the accounts. Jonas does do this. Throughout the novel he represents both of his parents’ perspectives at various instances, explaining his narrative according to how he believes they must have felt. Despite Jonas’ childhood and relative estrangement from his parents, he manages to convey a complexity of emotions that he must only have understood through the steps he takes to retake the journey his parents took before his birth and to allow himself to remember his parents and his experiences with them.

Another kind of articulation, that between the known and the unknown, allows Jonas to merge the information available to him with speculations in order to surmise what may have happened. Take, for instance, Jonas’ familiarity with his mother’s unwillingness to show her emotions. When Jonas visits her after his separation from Angela, he claims, “These were events [of her trip to Nashville with Yosef] she hadn’t thought of in years, and most likely she would try as hard as she could never to do so again” (298). In this case, Jonas unifies what he knows about his mom with what she does not say in order to deduce that she will resign herself to forgetting once again. Although not in this specific example, the articulation of the known and the unknown allows Jonas to create a history for his family, one largely based on his subjective



imagination.

According to White, “The subjectivity of the discourse is given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an ‘ego’ who can be defined ‘only as the person who maintains the discourse’” (7). If one were to abide by White’s position, then Jonas’ role in the novel as narrator makes the novel, *How to Read the Air*, a discourse maintained by Jonas (due to its subjectivity). In thinking of *How to Read the Air* in this way, I do not mean to impose a reductive way of thinking about discourse or to broaden the application of discourse to potentially any novel or narrative. However, one should not overlook the fact that only through a series of articulations can Jonas arrive at an understanding of himself, his family, and their past. In fact, Aliko Varvogli views certain aspects of the novel as revelatory of discourse. She writes, “The act of storytelling is crucial in this novel, and it emphasizes not only the discursive nature of identities, personal and cultural alike, but also the central place that storytelling occupies in American ideologies” (123). From her stance, then, narration in *How to Read the Air* points to the discursive nature of the text as a means to gaining an identity. When Jonas reaches the point in his life where his “stories, all of them, were over,” it represents a point of transition in his life where he can finally begin to understand his past, his present, his family, and himself for what they are (*How to Read* 291). It marks the beginning not just of his roadtrip (and the end of his life with Angela), but also the beginning of a new understanding of himself. While Jonas’ previous stories, his lies about his father and his lies to Angela, may have just been a means of escaping from confronting himself or his past, his narration now represents a discursive act in which Jonas will attempt to articulate a new understanding of the circumstances that have led him to this point.

One cannot analyze *How to Read the Air* without taking note of the amount of memory present throughout the novel. More significantly, the novel takes memories of past events and *adds* to them. But Jonas' elaborations on memory are nothing out of the ordinary. As discussed in the previous chapters, memories frequently undergo transformations according to the needs and desires of the present. Familiar with this aspect of memory, Jay Winter writes, "If 'history' has difficulty withstanding the challenges of 'memory,' the opposite case can be just as problematic. Witnesses forget, or reconstruct their narratives as a kind of collage, or merge what they saw with what they read" (255). Here, Winter takes the notion that the biases of memory can complicate historical narratives and reverses it, suggesting that people also recreate their memories according to the historical accounts they have encountered.

While the majority of Mengestu's novel deals with Jonas' alterations to narratives about the past, there are instances in which one can see the influence history has on Jonas. Most notably, at Fort Laconte he engages in a historical discourse in which he attempts to identify the events that led to the massacre of the troops stationed there (*How to Read* 136). Jonas admits earlier in the novel that he has researched the fort, which later allows him to make an informed judgment on the events that took place there (117). But as Jonas circles the fort, inspecting the remaining stones, the signposts, the fence he presumes was not there in 1977 when his parents stop at the fort, he allows memories to sift through his mind. In fact, Jonas compares the fort to his parents, stating, "I don't think it would be wrong to say I can see clearer the causes and effects of a battle more than three hundred years old, along with the lives that fought and died in it, than I can understand my parents, who for their part always remained strangers to me" (135). By

making this comparison, Jonas allows the history of the fort and his familiarity with it to impact his conceptions of his parents. For Jonas, standing before the fort makes his lack of knowledge about his parents all the more real.

In addition to shaping Jonas' memories, history also shapes his imagination. This is evident first in his reshaping the narratives of the migrants that seek assistance from the resettlement center and later when he tells his students the largely imagined story of how his father was imprisoned in Ethiopia and escaped from the Sudan. However, history *and* memory affect how Jonas constructs these new and imagined narratives. In both cases Jonas relies not just on some familiarity with history, but on his memories of whatever other refugee accounts he has read during his job as a legal assistant or the few things his father did tell him. One must assume in these cases that Jonas has some familiarity with the history of the events surrounding the revolution of Ethiopia and of warfare abroad since he does not overtly state as much. As I suggested in the previous chapter, some of what he states aligns with the actual events that took place, such as his father's participation in a communist protest (67). In addition, many of the assumptions he makes about his clients probably are derived from some familiarity with the nature of warfare in politically turbulent nations; otherwise, he could probably not make those assumptions. In other words, a person must know some history in order to be able to draw conclusions about the past.

The interesting aspect of Jonas' use of history and memory to help him recreate narratives about the past is that the two are often considered conceptually different from each other. As Avishai Margalit notes,

History, critical history, differs from shared memory in its reluctance to

rely on closed memories, that is, in its commitment to looking for alternative lines that connect a past event to its present historical descriptions. In doing history, one makes an ontological commitment to securing the event which the memory is about; not so in the case of a traditional shared memory. (60-61)

Critical history differs from shared memories, according to Margalit, because the two have different means of achieving a similar end. Nonetheless, when one considers how the two offer different ways of thinking about the past, one can then begin to think of *How to Read the Air* as an articulation of memory and history, or of difference—generally understood as opposing elements and traits. When these articulations take place, new narratives develop that can encompass an understanding of both.

According to Bhabha, “

Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction – that takes you ‘beyond’ yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present. (4).

More simply, he aims to suggest that social differences result when a minority group becomes incorporated within a collective body. Here, the boundaries between the different groups meet, leading to the renegotiation of identities but also forcing the groups to realize the existence of their differences. At this point, differences become tokens of a struggle for political agency.

The illustration above, of Jonas comparing his recognition of his parents to that of

the fort, in many ways exemplifies Bhabha's understanding of how differences get acknowledged. When Jonas' memory of his parents meets with his experience of Fort Laconte, Jonas comes to the realization that he barely knew his parents. In fact, as Bhabha states, when the two different events meet (in Jonas' constructed imagination) the differences between them stand starkly against each other. In this case, the knowledge that Jonas can fairly easily deduce what took place at the fort all those years ago contrasts greatly with the understanding that, despite his time with his parents, he still has very little understanding of who they are. This realization is probably why Jonas allows so many of his interjections to shape the narrative of his parents' roadtrip. The tensions that Bhabha claims appear at the meeting of boundaries cause the friction that pushes Jonas to attempt to create (or recreate) a narrative about his family. Because he suddenly becomes aware of the discrepancies between his knowledge about the fort and that of his parents, he now feels motivated to act. Put another way, Jonas' realization of difference allows him to begin the process of articulation during which he combines memory with history (and fiction) and the unknown with the known, in order to reach an understanding of his family.

In many ways, thinking of *How to Read the Air* as a potentially political text limits its ability to motivate different interpretations of the text. In fact, Grossberg warns against the dangers of reducing articulations of identity to models of oppression and resistance. He writes, "models of oppression are not only inappropriate to contemporary relations of power, they are also incapable of creating alliances [between different groups]; they cannot tell us how to interpellate various fractions of the population[,] in different relations to power[,] into the struggle for change" ("Identity and Cultural

Studies” 88). As Grossberg further explains, cultural studies’ models of oppression make it difficult to theorize around an environment of change where culture and identity are in constant renegotiation.<sup>11</sup> Thinking of Mengestu’s novel as a political text rather than as a discursive one could encourage similar sentiments of an oppressed group struggling against the oppressor; however, Mengestu explores this concept only within the parameters of a highly individualistic account of the past and the present. In other words, though Jonas does describe instances in which people other him, he does not express interest in participating within a specific cultural group but only in developing his own sense of the past, independent of any specific political goals. For example, when students ask Jonas to participate in their campaign to save Africa, Jonas states, “My family’s Irish ... I’d feel like a fraud if I joined” (*How to Read* 99). In this instance, Jonas goes so far as to deny his heritage, partly because he feels as if the campaign already is rife with assumptions, but also because he does not want to be identified according to his heritage.

Not only does Mengestu have Jonas participate in the kind of stereotyping that could be viewed as a form of oppression against ethnic minorities while he works for the resettlement center, he also makes Jonas a character who does not conform to any expectations of his status. For example, in addition to refusing to disclose his ethnic heritage to anyone who asks, Jonas spends one night at a party with Angela finding places to interject the phrase, “That’s the same thing my father said just before he left us” (49). Both he and Angela, in this instance, use common assumptions about their backgrounds to confuse the other people at the party about the veracity of their statement.

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<sup>11</sup> Grossberg argues for a politics of singularity in which a sense of belonging to a group of people of diverse identities rather than a common identity determines the emergence of a community. By arguing from this stance, Grossberg attempts to define a theory which can account for the multiplicities of experience within a group and which has the flexibility to transform according to the environment.

As Angela says to Jonas later on, “If I was white, everyone would think I was joking. ... Instead everyone thinks it’s true [because she is Black]” (49). While the statement develops from Angela’s actual experience of her father leaving her family, their use of it as a joke reveals an unwillingness to accept other people’s perceptions of them. Angela even claims, “I say I don’t have a father and everyone thinks they know the whole story. ... Change the dates and the names but it’s the same. Well that’s not true. It’s not the same story” (49). By emphasizing the way the characters’ experiences do not fit into a generic representation of a particular kind of experience, such as growing up without a father, Mengestu essentially erases any identification to a specific cultural group. If their experiences cannot be represented by a common narrative, then their identities cannot be either.

In an interview for the MacArthur Foundation, Mengestu states, “I’m driven by the belief that people are fundamentally the same and that I can write the story of an Ethiopian immigrant in Washington D.C. and that someone in Kansas can find themselves reflected in that narrative, that an immigrant narrative is no different from a human narrative” (“MacArthur Fellows”). Mengestu, then, demonstrates an interest in creating novels that have universal appeal to their audiences. This interest could explain why Jonas and even Angela do not engage in behaviors that could situate them with one group or another (though it does not stop Mengestu from including instances of racial and gender stereotyping throughout *How to Read the Air*).

So, when analyzing *How to Read the Air*, one must avoid a potentially reductive political interpretation, one of oppression and retaliation, of the novel. The new narratives that emerge in the process of articulation do not emerge through group sympathies.

Rather, these narratives emerge because of the contradictions that exist in the individual and in his environment and because of his need to reconcile tensions between these contradictions. For example, *How to Read the Air* merges truth with fiction, the past with the present, the foreign with Native, and wounds with healing, among others. By allowing opposing concepts to unite, the new narratives that develop offer a sense of wholeness to those who have lived their lives along lines of social and personal fragmentation. In this way, *How to Read the Air* offers a story which can appeal to anyone, not just one ethnic group or culture.

I would like, for a moment, to contradict myself. I want to avoid the drawbacks of thinking of *How to Read the Air* from a purely political standpoint, especially since Mengestu does not portray his characters as *against* any particular group. While there do exist instances of stereotyping throughout the novel, they seem less indicative of any form of institutionalized oppression than they do of people's ignorance of differences. Thinking of the novel politically could cause one to overlook the novel's emphasis of the discrepancies between narratives of the individual and of the differences present just from person to person. That said, there are certain political elements identifiable within the novel. For example, when Jonas and Angela visit the beach near the end of their marriage, Angela says, "We're probably the only two black people to come here in winter" (252). Jonas then responds to Angela, "Maybe that's why everyone left" (252). Jonas' humor points to much larger issues of racial discrimination and, to some degree, gentrification. These political elements add a complexity to the novel that serves to deepen the experience of being a person who exists between cultures and identities in the United States. Most importantly, though, the political aspects of Mengestu's novel



remind readers that Jonas and his family must contend with multiple perceptions of who they are in order to arrive at an understanding of themselves.

Jonas is, undoubtedly, a representative of a generation that faces disparate identities, a multiplicity of stories and histories that they bring with them to their understanding of the present. Such a generation asks, then, how does one identify? Mengestu offers a solution. Through Jonas, he reveals the merits of creating, or recreating, the past in order to redefine the present. By rearticulating narratives about the past, Jonas offers a way to come to terms with the difficult aspects of life. More significantly, he creates a narrative which provides a space for him, Angela, and his family in a world that has not learned how to incorporate the narratives of those who are situated between spaces and identities. Though Jonas' narrative is largely constructed, he presents a vision of an experience, of being a creature of the beyond. Through the fictitious and the real, through memory and imagination, Mengestu places a vision of plurality into the universe that can offer audiences a way of reading a world where change is inevitable.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I will examine how Mengestu creates a discourse of the body through *How to Read the Air* and how sometimes, one must learn to speak through body before learning to speak with words.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: SPEAKING THROUGH THE BODY

The foundations of United States history, rooted in the migration of European peasants, criminals, and enterprisers as well as a massive displacement of Native Americans, complicate conceptions of American culture and history. In other words, displacement and dislocation defines the very essence of what we characteristically call “American.” Even Nora recognizes this facet of historical culture in the United States and writes, “In the United States, for example, a country of plural memories and diverse traditions, historiography is more pragmatic. Different interpretations of the Revolution and the Civil War do not threaten the American tradition because in some sense, no such thing exists—or if it does, it is not primarily a historical construction” (10). Culture in the United States nods to a vast array of experiences and traditions and as a result shapes identity through its very plurality, even negating the need to rely on history to connect a person to the nation. Nora, however, fails to recognize how much the “American tradition,” or lack thereof, threatens conceptions of historical identity, especially since, as demonstrated in *How to Read the Air*, stereotypical groupings of experience replace the personal and the private in history.

Dina Gavrilos considers contemporary concerns of immigration by examining the history of immigration in the United States. She notes that

In the USA, a popular celebratory narrative of America as the land of

immigrants quickly embracing “American” culture, language and political values often dominates. An alternative US history is characterized by various ethnic, racial and native groups’ struggle for national belonging alongside attempts to sustain cultural pluralism in the United States. (95)

The difficulty in determining one’s culture in a country that both struggles for and discourages cultural pluralism shapes what we understand as the immigrant narrative. As immigration continues to influence the historical, political, and social consciousness of the United States, questions of belonging and identity will continue to surface in the American narrative. Inadvertently, writers like Dinaw Mengestu turn to the past and to history to address those questions that have become embedded in the very fabric of our collective consciousness.

More and more scholars have turned to their studies in fields ranging from sociology to literature to further explore the social ramifications of migration, diaspora, and travel in culture. One such scholar, Timothy Raphael, writes about his experiences creating and administering a course “designed to explore the implication of the campus’ diversity through an investigation of the impact of immigration on cultural identity, representation, reproduction, and transformation” in “Something to Declare: Performing Oral History” (13). For his course, he asks that students interview for and perform oral histories from family members, friends, or neighbors who have come to the United States from another country. He states, “The course serves as an example of how oral history and performance can function as a means of teaching testimony, and how twenty-three hyphenated Americans, capable of conversing in seventeen languages, discovered they had something to declare” (13). Although developed to help students begin to construct

an understanding of cultural identity through performance and through oral history, the results of Raphael's experiment demonstrate what can happen when students begin to grow more aware of their personal and cultural histories.

Initially, Raphael reports, the students fail to interrogate the histories that will become a part of their performance and instead identify a common immigrant narrative without differentiating much between one experience or another. Like Jonas does when he rewrites the stories of the immigrants seeking asylum, some of the students focus "on the most dramatic or exotic elements of what they heard and ... [ignore] the less spectacular details that might provide a far more nuanced understanding" (17). However, as the course progresses and students are exposed to the limitations of their prior conceptions, the performances also become more exploratory, more personal, and more emblematic of a range of migratory experiences. In a very telling passage, Raphael writes,

As opposed to depicting the objective structures that shape the immigrant experience, *Something to Declare* [sic] [ the title of the final performance] documented the range of improvisatory performances these particular immigrants enacted in response to those structures. In conducting oral histories and performing them, the students gained experiential knowledge of Marx's dictum that "Men [sic] make their own history, but do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Through performing the stories of their families, friends, and neighbors, these students became active participants

in the transmission and transformation of cultural memory. (26)

Raphael's course, initially intended to engage students in the creation and perpetuation of a dialogue about immigrant experiences, ends with much more than he expected. By the end of the course, students have not only discovered the breadth of experiences that define immigrant communities but have also participated in the translation of those experiences and the recreation of cultural memories.

The students' experiences in *Something to Declare* mirror much of what Jonas goes through as he too navigates the implications of immigrant history in his life. Like Raphael's students, he mistakenly believes that one immigrant experience speaks for another and fails to recognize the assumptions he falls prey to. In fact, he does not disagree with his former boss, Bill, when he states of the refugees' narratives, "When you think about it, it's all really the same story. All we're doing is just changing around the names of the countries" (*How to Read* 24-25). However, as he explores the past through a combination of imagination, speculation, and shared knowledge, he discovers that one story cannot encompass another. Both Jonas and the students must learn to navigate the various representations of the past presented to them

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed notions of silence and voice in *How to Read the Air*. However, I would like to conclude with a somewhat radical conception: *How to Read the Air* uses what I will call discourses of the body in order to rearticulate narratives of the past and narratives of identity. In Raphael's experiment, he notices that "Through exposure to Smith's work, students were sensitized to a central issue in documenting oral histories...: the fact that the voice on the tape and the words transcribed on the page are emitted from a body that also has a tale to tell" (18). The notion that the

body can actually speak, that it too has a tale to tell, forms the central premise of discourses of the body. We as a culture often think of our voice as coming from an ability to communicate through words. As a result, it is easy to say that a group or an individual is silenced because they are prevented from using their words. However, the body speaks too and sometimes, as *How to Read the Air* reveals, it tells us more than words ever could.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk bases his study of trauma on the idea that the body and the mind are intrinsically connected, and that during trauma these connections are disturbed. As he writes, “We now know that trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive” (3). In other words, victims of trauma suffer physical impairment to the part of the brain that manages bodily sensations. Van der Kolk later describes a series of films taken of WWI veterans acting out strange behaviors. He writes,

we can observe their [the veterans] bizarre physical postures, strange verbal utterances, terrified facial expressions, and tics—the physical, embodied expression of trauma: “a memory that is inscribed simultaneously in the mind, as interior images and words, and on the body.” (184)

Though trauma may leave its victims without the memory of the experience or the desire to speak of the memory, the experience nonetheless writes itself on their bodies. Van der Kolk promotes a body inclusive approach to healing from trauma, but he also reveals just how much the body will speak when one’s lips are unwilling or unable to do so.

In *How to Read the Air*, Mengestu frequently uses the bodies of his characters to

relay some understanding Jonas may not immediately realize. The instances and ways in which he uses the body varies from a bruise on Marian's cheek to Jonas squeezing Angela's wrist in a moment of anger. The body speaks, but it speaks reluctantly. For example, on some of Jonas' last visits to his father, Jonas notices some of the signs visible on his father's body of his frontal lobe dementia. For instance, when Jonas speaks to his father in Amharic rather than English, Yosef's "body did not rise to attention ... but instead sank down even further into the one plastic chair he kept in his room" (148). But even though in the last years of his life Yosef begins to show the signs of his dementia, Jonas notes that "The appearance my father had created had formed a veneer of survival and graceful aging. He was half out of his mind, and probably had been for decades and no one knew it" (149). Jonas assumes that this "veneer of graceful aging" stems from a sense of pride and suggests that his father went to great lengths to maintain the illusion. Yosef attempts to hide his dementia from some last remnant of pride; however, as Jonas' last interactions with his father reveal, Yosef's body does eventually say what he will not allow himself to say.

To think about the body as a form of discourse, as an articulating agent, one must consider how the body articulates in the first place. In Fort Laconte, the physical ruins of the fort still hold traces of the past, enough for Jonas to state, with some degree of conviction, "If Laconte had had more time, I'm sure he would have eventually gotten around to securing the fort better" (136). In fact, Jonas can draw conclusions about the fort because what remains provides sufficient evidence of what came before. Jonas, at one point, contemplates the fort much like an anthropologist uncovering broken pottery shards might study those pieces. He states, "Looking at the remains of the fort—its size

and scope, its proximity to the forest and to the spring that runs alongside it—I don't think anyone who came here did so expecting or wanting to fight" (135). He studies the fort and discovers enough information to fuel his conclusions. But the fort is not the only thing in the novel that carries evidence of the past in it. In fact, it primarily serves as a metaphor of how the physical *can* retain traces of the past. The actual bodies of the characters carry similar traces on them. The marks of the past on the body and on other physical objects stand starkly against the present. Like a scar, one cannot help but notice these remnants. In a sense, then, these markings allow for articulations because they occur at intersections with the present.

Jonas' decision to take the same roadtrip his parents took in 1977 provides the paramount example of discourses of the body in *How to Read the Air*. While yes, Jonas' parents do exhibit their trauma through their actions, as discussed in previous chapters, the fact that they attempt to evade the issues prevalent in their lives suggests that participating in discourses was the least thing on their minds. Jonas, however, rents a car and begins a trip with the sole purpose of learning what happened between his parents when his mother was just three months pregnant with him. Jonas takes his body through a specific experience, allowing himself to visit the same places his parents visited around the same times they visited. He even, at various points throughout the novel, makes note of when a detail is different from what his parents would have witnessed, such as a barbed wire around an estate in the field where Marian fled to after crashing the car (278). At Fort Laconte, he tries to walk across the same places his parents did and imagine it as they might have seen it. Had Jonas simply wanted to know what happened, he could have stopped at asking his mother. However, he follows his visit to her with his



own version of the roadtrip, allowing his body to experience the same bodily sensations his parents did. Maybe by doing so, Jonas hopes to realize connections to his parents, stronger than just memories or just imagination. Maybe he hopes to discover everything he ever needed to know in his very being. Whatever the case may be, it is notable that Jonas begins to tell his story only after he begins his journey. Jonas, then, can only speak after he has allowed his body to act. Before Jonas can speak, his body must speak first.

I would like to end this thesis with the idea that began it: fragmentation. Jonas lives a fragmented existence. This fragmentation acts on his very body. His body cannot settle into one space. Even with Angela, Jonas lives a temporary existence. As he states when he first moves in with Angela, “Despite us having both lived in New York for years, neither of us had formed any deep, lasting attachments to particular quarters of the city. There were no streets that we were especially fond of, restaurants that we loved, or bars where we had once spent many hours sitting alone” (31). Even in New York he cannot find a space for himself, eventually enabling him to leave Angela and the city behind him. In Angela we see a similar fragmentation shifted to her body, especially when she begins to cheat on Jonas. In this act, she seeks to remedy her internal strife with a brief external pleasure. Her body, then, is at odds with itself. Fragmentation pervades the novel, in Jonas, in Angela, and in his parents. In the end, the novel reveals that the body carries the past, all its struggles and joys, with it. The body, then, is the living memory. It is a site of memory where memory burns into the site without any loyalty to one representation or another, without attempting to dispel the fragmentation the body holds. But as Nora tellingly states, “The quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (13). The body, then, is a discursive space that embodies one’s desire not just for memory

but for a history, a connection to this world and to the people in it, a means of identifying the self and the place the self occupies.

Finally, Stuart Hall offers a different way of thinking about the fragmentation that permeates bodies which stand between cultures. According to David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, “In these essays [by Stuart Hall], the autobiographical experience of the migrant – the experience of dis-location, dis-placement and hybridity – is treated as structurally central to the ‘condition of postmodernity’” (14). Hall explains this “condition of postmodernity” through his own experiences as a migrant. He states,

My own sense of identity has always depended on the fact of being a migrant ... (now) I find myself centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered: what I’ve thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be *the* representative modern experience ... welcome to migranhood!” (Qtd. in 15)

For Hall and for many others, fragmentation acts as the central component not only of their identity but of how they come to understand the world around them. This is all the more true for those who have either migrated or whose families have migrated and who locate displacement as the source of their identity. Mengestu is no exception to this condition and demonstrates this in *How to Read the Air* by creating a novel that incorporates fragmentation into its structure. He ultimately unveils the way a generation, whose experiences continue to be compounded by dislocation and by a relative sense of brokenness, takes this fragmentation and turns it into something that allows them to process how it has shaped them into who they are. In other words, paradoxically, the

fragmentation that disrupts how a person views herself transforms itself into a source of empowerment and a source of identification.

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