The Autologic Archive: Appraisal, Institutional Motives, and Essentializing Identity in Refugee and Asylum Application Narratives, In and Out of Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article merges the postmodern critical thinking that scrutinizes bias and power in the formation of archival collections with the refugee and asylee resettlement process in the United States. It proposes that the theoretical accumulation of narratives recorded on applications for refugee and asylum status can be conceived of as a theoretical archive, physically boundless and spread across countries of origin, temporary host countries, and countries of resettlement. A postmodern-archivist lens helps to interrogate the implications of what Mireille Rosello calls the "problematic gap" separating what happened to a person and the narrative that is bureaucratically established during the application process; this article explores this "gap" by engaging fieldwork and scholarship from lawyers, field researchers, and humanitarians who critique how application narratives are recorded, processed, and preserved. It then turns to fiction from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, and Imbolo Mbue that inhabits this "problematic gap," reading a character in each text as personification of the processes of appraisal, institutional motives, and essentialization of identity. These texts make visible ways in which the application narrative archive operates through what the author calls an "autologic function" that prioritizes familiar forms of narratives while determining who is eligible for refugee

KEY WORDS

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status. In turn, the article proposes that these fictional illustrations of autologic processes might inform archival projects focused on inclusion of marginalized communities.

The personal stories of resettling refugees and asylum seekers in the United States draw increasing public attention, as artists, activists, and scholars create oral histories, narratival photodocumentary exhibits, short films, memoirs, and cowritten collaborations that make visible individual experiences.[1] However, as some people's experiences become more visible, those of others are obscured: people whose applications for resettlement are denied do not tell their stories during benefit dinners and visits to high school classrooms because they are not here to tell them. While the narratives on asylum applications purport to be descriptive and factual, a variety of elements distort them, resulting in what Mireille Rosello calls a "problematic gap" between a person's story and how it is documented;[2] this problematic gap, Agnes Woolley shows, potentially affects refugees' and asylum seekers' access to their United Nations (UN) mandated human rights.[3] I argue that conceiving of the theoretical accumulation of application narratives as an archive makes visible its biases, distortions, and prioritizations that postmodern archivists explore in any archive.[4] Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace advocate that archival scholars and practitioners deliberately "[seek] to engage and alter structures of social injustice" via what they call an "archival-social justice nexus" that uses "the past to inform and change the present through concrete action."[5] Proposing that the accumulation of refugee and asylee application narratives forms an archive allows for these social justice concerns to engage with the bureaucratic asylum-seeking process.

Using fiction by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, and Imbolo Mbue in which protagonists impact or are impacted by the "problematic gap" between what happened to applicants and what is documented in their paperwork, I read a character in each text as an embodiment of an archival process or concern: an immigration official in Adichie's short story "The American Embassy"[6] as personification of the appraisal process, as conceived by Terry Cook as "doing nothing less than determining what the future will know about its past";[7] Dinaw Mengestu's protagonist in *How to Read the Air*[8] as embodiment of how an institution might act on documents for its own motives, in Ciaran Trace's understanding that "record production is inherently self-interested";[9] and an immigration lawyer in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*[10] as exemplary of one of Elisabeth Kaplan's archivists who are "major players in the business of identity politics" because they "appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built."[11] Reading literature through a postmodern archivist lens follows a lineage of scholars engaging methods from other

disciplines with archival theories, including prior engagements with literature,[12] speech-act theory,[13] media studies,[14] ethnography,[15] and ethnomethodology.[16] These texts make visible ways in which the application narrative archive operates through what I call an "autologic function," using the word "autologic" in terms of "having or representing the property it denotes."[17] By prioritizing familiar forms of narratives, the application process may deny safety to applicants whose narratives' structure, emphasis, details, and events are not like the others. In turn, these fictional illustrations of autologic processes can inform archival projects focused on inclusion of marginalized communities.

Applying for Refugee and Asylee Status: It's a Long Story

At the time of writing, there are nearly thirty million refugees and asylum-seekers around the globe;[18] though nearly 5 percent of these millions are "most vulnerable" according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and thus in need of resettlement, less than 1 percent of refugees are resettled.[19] Resettlement in the United States consists of more than twenty distinct processing steps, possibly including assessments; iris scans; security checks; screenings from agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department, and the Department of Homeland Security; multiple interviews; and fingerprints: this process is based on "recurrent vetting" against terrorist databases so that refugees are "subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States."[20] As I will show, this application and selection process is not only competitive with serious stakes but is also full of cracks through which what happened to a person might fall, be forced, or become distorted.

Though not used ubiquitously for asylum-seeking situations in the United States, the I-589 form, also known as the "Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal," demonstrates one of many possibilities for the bureaucratic requirements an applicant might face. A twelve-page document, the I-589 is available to people who are already in the United States for protection and wish to remain. The first five pages, Part A, ask for data on all family members (place of birth, previous addresses and schools, etc.); Part B is labeled "Information About Your Application" followed by four pages of questions that require both checking "yes" or "no" and explaining in a blank square.[21] The applicant is instructed to

> provide a detailed and specific account of the basis of your claim to asylum or other protection. To the best of your ability, provide specific dates, places, and descriptions about each event or action described. You must attach documents evidencing the general conditions in the country from which you are seeking asylum or other protection and the specific facts on which you are

> relying to support your claim. If this documentation is unavailable or you are not providing this documentation with your application, explain why in your responses to the following questions.[22]

The instructions on this application use the words "account," "descriptions," and "responses," rather than "narrative" or "story." Walter Benjamin proposes that "story" differs from "information" in that the latter is "understandable in itself" because it arrives "already being shot through with explanation"; stories, on the other hand, must be "free from explanation" so that it is left up to the reader to "interpret things the way [s/he] understands them."[23] But what happens when the "account" is based on trauma and horror? How can traumatic and inhumane situations—events that are often described from the outside, ironically, as unspeakable, unimaginable, or impossible—be made "understandable in [themselves]" in a descriptive "account"?

Contrary to the language expected by the I-589, Mireille Rosello argues that a refugee, by definition, does not give accounts, descriptions, or information as the application demands: a refugee provides narratives and stories. A refugee "is a fine narratologist," Rosello writes, otherwise she "will not have been allowed to become a refugee."[24] In an essay on what she calls "refugee aesthetics," Rosello explains that a refugee is "performatively created by the encounter between an individual who tells a story and a listener who must be convinced to grant asylum." Rosello notes that although applicants have not been "trained" for this kind of storytelling, they are "expected to perform in a way that would be greatly improved if they had access to such training."[25] Furthermore, the listeners (and/or readers) of asylum stories, though trained in the procedures of their job, are just as likely to be un- "trained" in this genre. The space between the novice storyteller and listener has the potential to create what Rosello calls a "problematic gap" between the rights of asylum seekers and the "emotional reactions that accounts of such persecutions are likely to trigger." Put another way, what happened to a person seeking resettlement becomes "caught within a frame of reference" that is built by both the applicant and the listener's prior experiences with story.[26] If applicants tell their stories chronologically, are they more or less likely to engage listeners' or readers' attention? Will narratives with metaphors; vibrant details; and a clear beginning, middle and end enthrall their readers/listeners or make them impatient? Rosello's notion of "refugee aesthetics" suggests that, as in other genres, both author and audience may be as unaware of rhetorical devices as they are affected by them.

Woolley positions a similar analysis of refugee narratives into a legal framework. The process of seeking asylum requires asylum seekers to "conform to a particular narrative" that demonstrates "well-founded" persecution based on "verifiable evidence" according to terms defined by the United Nations in 1951.[27] While the process allegedly relies on evidence corroborating

an applicant's story, Woolley notes that "in practice . . . the process relies heavily on the self-presentation of the individual claimant; their ability to convince an officer or judge."[28] This produces "an idealized version of refugeehood" with extraordinary stakes: an applicant's "civic incorporation."[29] Employees may not know how to interpret a story that is low in "evidence" or does not sound like stories they have already heard about refugee experiences: the decision between an application's acceptance or denial is "one of narrative interpretation."[30] Woolley's emphasis of the 1951 mandate asks important questions: How have the meanings of "persecution," "verifiable," and "evidence" changed over the decades? How are these terms acted upon by an individual's interpretation of these terms, and how is an applicant supposed to know what those interpretations might be?

Woolley also considered the materiality of the stories recorded for asylum and resettlement applications. She observes that the nature of "consigning to text the original oral narrative provided by the claimant" is problematic, as the structure of questions arranges the way an applicant tells her narrative.[31] Furthermore, when a version of an applicant's story is recorded, bureaucratic replicability transports this altered narrative via "a series of documents" moving from office to office, reader to reader, "[allowing] the story to be co-opted in ways that deprive the claimant of control over its narrative permutations and fixes their story into a particular version of the truth."[32] The consequences from this loss of control are serious, as Woolley points out: not only do applicants "cede narrative agency over their stories to institutional procedures," but particular versions of their narratives have been fixed and acted upon, "[eliciting] a negatively idealized version of events . . . , paradoxically undoing its claims to empirical discovery."[33] This traveling, altered narrative is then fed into the process demanding "a clear line between fact and fiction," the supposed "authenticity" of which determines the applicants' fate.[34]

Fieldwork by human rights journalist Caroline Moorehead and Amy Shuman and a team of legal scholars corroborates Rosello and Woolley's concerns. In 2005, Moorehead compiled observations on policies and practices of countries inviting refugees for resettlement and observed a trend of asylum seekers "embellishing their pasts, the better to merit acceptance . . . so anxious are they to convince their listeners, and so aware that what they say may be misunderstood or manipulated."[35] Similarly, in 2014, Shuman and co-authors compiled observations while working with political asylum applicants and emphasize the "fallacy of the assumed neutral position of immigration officials," suggesting a variety of consequential misunderstandings in cross-cultural interviewing of refugees.[36] The possibility exists, for example, that immigration officials understand a refugee's traumatic experience as "traditional and cultural" rather than as persecution.[37] Shuman's team observes that women's

stories are particularly vulnerable to gender expectations in cross-cultural and cross-gender interviews. An immigration official may follow different definitions for rape or sexual violence, so that what is put on the document becomes diminished (consider that many people around the world do not believe that a man can rape his wife). Shuman et al. add that women may not be "considered on their own merit" and can only state their case as "deriving from persecution of their male relatives."[38]

These concerns can be nuanced and immediate, depending on cultural norms of both storyteller and listener: Should a woman look a man in the eye? Can she speak without being asked a question directly? If she speaks with confidence, is she subject to suspicion? Does the fact that she does or does not have children alter the way a person hears her story? The possibility for misunderstandings over cross-cultural and cross-gendered exchanges on paper is equally complicated. Though a listener/reader may be considering the story without the speaker's/writer's presence, biases remain. These questions and the "problematic gaps" they create saturate the bureaucratic resettlement process, with its nearly twenty stages of interviews and less than 1 percent acceptance rate. The concerns raised by these fieldworkers likely sound familiar to scholars and practitioners of the archive/s: for example, the stages of bureaucracy previously discussed serve as an example of Randall Jimerson's summary of the postmodernist stance that though documents in archives might not change, "our understanding and interpretation of them do constantly shift and refocus."[39] In this case, these documents that might not change endure one of the world's most formidable bureaucratic processes, each step of which is subject to "interpretation . . . and refocus."

The Refugee and Asylee Application Narrative Archive: In Theory

This article considers the cumulative effect of the dynamics that produce "problematic gaps" in refugee and asylee application narratives. These narratives, themselves stretched across multiple-choice questions and squeezed into word-limited boxes, are part of application packages that are dispersed across countries of origins, temporary host countries, and countries of resettlement. While these documents do physically exist, they are only accessible to study as an archive theoretically, much in the sense that Terry Cook defines *archive*, singular, as a "metaphor symbol, as representative of identity, or as the recorded memory production of some person or group or culture."[40] The application narrative archive is, theoretically, a "metaphor symbol" for the layers of power and processes applicants endure.

This theoretical archive is supported by other models, including Ricardo Punzalan's "archival diaspora" and Rodrigo Lazo's "migrant archives." Punzalan's "archival diaspora" describes a particular oeuvre of photographs that is dispersed over time and place and, he emphasizes, across "various actors, who at various times, were considered to be the rightful creators, owners, and donors of the photographs."[41] Taking care when comparing dispersed photographs to the application narrative archive, as application material for asylum or refugee status is not created, owned, or donated in the way that photographs might be, my inquiries merge with Punzalan's in that the mounds of paperwork that correspond to some individual refugees, not all, might be similarly "diasporic." The "actors" in this case are the many immigration officials, UN staff, and employees working in relevant offices across the globe determining who is eligible, who is not, and what happens to an application in either case.[42]

Despite the important distinction between "immigrant" and "refugee," Lazo's concept of "migrant archives" also informs my conceptions of the theoretical application narrative archive. Migrant archives, Lazo explains, "call for a journey, either for the researcher or the text," evoking the "potential of not being safe, which contrasts with the archive as a 'storage vault,' which historically has been one of the constituting elements of an archive."[43] Likewise, when people seek refugee or asylee status bureaucratically, their documents could be at risk, whether in locations under physical threat, without capacity to preserve records, or under political or bureaucratic mandate.[44] While Lazo's "migrant archives" are not synonymous with the archive I describe (for example, migrant archives move in and out of repositories of rare documents and other libraries, something which is unlikely with resettlement application material), the notion of instability fits;[45] furthermore, migrant archives require new approaches and considerations, as they "might not be readily apparent within the existing discourse of academic or political inquiry," and "[sometimes] the routes of migrant archives will lead to new understandings of who and what is excluded from the archive."[46] Unable to physically follow or collect application narratives, I use fiction to make visible these "new understandings of who and what is excluded from the archive." This analysis of fiction suggests an autologic process that determines who is eligible to resettle as a refugee as it defines who a refugee "is."

The "problematic gap" in individual application narratives and the many factors contributing to its shape both create and is formed by an autologic function that applicants and processing employees energize. As employees, interviewers, and decision-makers read the applications of previous applicants who have been invited to resettle, a dominant narrative forms that makes nonconforming narratives illegible/ineligible. I position this autologic process as an example of Derrida's "violence of the archive" via consignation, as described by

Wisam Mansour as the bringing together of signs to create an "illusion of being whole";[47] the autologic process gives the perception that refugees are the people who resettle as our neighbors while keeping silent the more than 99 percent of people who are not selected yet may still fit the UN definition as requiring protection with a "'well-founded' narrative of persecution based on verifiable evidence."[48] Duff et al.'s argument that archives "both produce and reproduce justice and injustice"[49] engages with such an autological function: applicants who are not eligible for a particular reason may increase the likelihood of denial for future applicants for that particular reason alone.

An archive that functions autologically might also be considered a form of dominating narrative in the social consciousness: to cite one example of many, Mai-Linh Hong shows how a National Public Radio series describing a Vietnam-era event as a white rescue narrative exerts "narrative authority" that suppresses other possibilities, even those written by Vietnamese refugees.[50] I do not argue that the bureaucratic process creates the dominating narrative; rather, an autologic application narrative archive contributes to microdominating narratives within populations of particular identities seeking refugee or asylum status. Inderpal Grewal shows how Sikh women seeking asylum in the United States in the 1990s needed to conform to a dominant narrative to have their applications considered. These women were the "product," Grewal writes, of "a variety of discourses produced transnationally."[51] Specifically, Sikh women who were sexually violated by state police had to "negotiate" whether they applied for the "gender-neutral category of political asylum" or as victims of rape. Ultimately, the narrative of rape became "hegemonic" and choosing to "depart" from it "meant risking deportation."[52] Though Grewal does not use the word "archive," the hegemonic narrative that she describes comes from the accumulation of applications that construct and maintain that hegemony. Just as Michelle Caswell reminds us that the way that archivists represent their data or describe their records is to "name the subject of their collection,"[53] the application narrative archive names which of the countless possible narratives will push an application forward.

This paperwork is for all intents and purposes inaccessible. I do not imply that narrative applications should be publicly available, or that more people need to see this archive. However, just as Trace warned that in recordkeeping institutions, "the record has become naturalized and thus invisible, an assumed backdrop rather than active agent,"[54] it bears consideration that the autologic function in bureaucratic, dispersed archives is an "active agent." I will use three fictional texts whose narratives and characters inhabit the "problematic gap" between what happens to applicants and what is documented in their paperwork. In each of these texts, I read a character as an embodiment of postmodern archivists' concerns for appraisal, institutional motives, and essentialization of

identity not to suggest that archivists are acting irresponsibly like these characters, nor to suggest that a refugee's eligibility is determined by one person alone who is at fault. These fictional characters are exaggerated metaphors for what inevitably occurs. These fictional embodiments of archival processes may allow archivists to identify autologic functions in other archives of marginalized populations who have little say in the way that documents about them are created and preserved.

Appraisal: "You Haven't Given Me Any Details"

Documents in the refugee and asylee process are, in a sense, appraised: just as major institutions preserve approximately 1 to 5 percent of material in their archives,[55] less than 1 percent of refugees worldwide are selected to begin the resettlement process.[56] Terry Cook explains appraisal as "doing nothing less than determining what the future will know about its past";[57] similarly, people who are determined eligible for asylum, and their stacks of applications, become what immigration officers know about refugees, so that future applications proceeding through the process are more likely to look like past applications deemed appropriate to proceed. The shift in understanding the role of appraisal at the beginning of this century that urged archivists to "consider the context in which records are created before looking at the records themselves" meant that ideas of neutrality or roles of "custodians" would no longer be accepted. Archivists now had "to face their responsibility as shapers of the past."[58] Similarly, employees in bureaucratic positions project their own biases onto applicants and their applications.

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's story "The American Embassy" opens with the protagonist baking under the Lagos sun, in line at the American embassy with a hundred others and a 1 percent chance to be selected for safety. Her four-year-old son, Ugonna, was murdered two days earlier by men seeking to punish her husband for his political writing; she escaped by jumping from a second-story window. Before her interview, Adichie's protagonist is given unsolicited advice on how to shape her asylum story: the doctor she sees "refused to give her any more tranquilizers because she needed to be alert for the visa interview";[59] the man near her in line advises, "if you make a mistake, don't correct yourself, because they will assume you are lying"; and at her son's funeral people recommend that she not "falter" when answering questions: "Tell them all about Ugonna, what he was like, but don't overdo it, because every day people lie to them to get asylum visas, about dead relatives that were never even born. Make Ugonna real. Cry, but don't cry too much."[60] Whatever you do, the advice seems to be, don't say how you really feel about your situation.

However, when the protagonist eventually sits face-to-face with a white, American interviewer, she decides to barely speak at all. Adichie writes, "she realized that she would die gladly at the hands of the man in the black hooded shirt . . . before she said a word about Ugonna to this interviewer, or to anybody at the American embassy. Before she hawked Ugonna for a visa to safety." In response to the protagonist's laconic narrative, the interviewer responds, "Can you go through your story again, ma'am? You haven't given me any details." Our protagonist answers, "Yes. But I buried it yesterday. My son's body." Though the protagonist realizes that "the sympathy [drains] from the visa interviewer's face" and that "[her] future rested on that face," she cannot trust this woman who "probably did not cook with palm oil, or know that palm oil when fresh was a bright, bright red and when not fresh, congealed to a lumpy orange."[61] The protagonist's silence rejects the power dynamics inherent in the application process, and Adichie does not make explicit the consequences: the story ends with the protagonist walking away from an incomplete application. The expectation for her protagonist to relate her recent trauma to a white American who is likely unfamiliar with what she may hear as a Nigerian accent let alone norms, subtleties, and expectations in Nigerian culture, exemplifies Rosello's "problematic gap" that can occur in the tension between the rights of asylum seekers and the "emotional reactions that accounts of such persecutions are likely to trigger."[62]

Woolley, scholar of the "asylum story" noted earlier, writes the only other critical reading of "The American Embassy" available. Woolley's reading emphasizes the story's engagement with what she calls the "international asylum regime system," which, she argues, practices exclusion via "the regulation of narrative."[63] The protagonist's "refusal to perform her own grief" is a way to protect her "sense of selfhood," whereas to "conform to the official's narrative expectations would be to exile herself not only from her country, but also from her own experience, which would be reshaped to fit the [UN] Convention criteria."[64] While the protagonist refuses to provide the narrative expected from her by the immigration official, she does provide the narrative expected by the reader. Woolley describes the story as structured by "two narrative frames": the story recorded on legal documentation through the perspective of the immigration official, and the literary narrative, whose reader has her own expectations. These two frames, Woolley argues, not only expose the gap between what might be documented and what happened, but offer Adichie "an alternative narrative space for the telling of the multivalent asylum story outside and beyond the restrictions of the legal context."[65] Using the two frames reminds the reader of the "problematic gap" that contributes to the way stories are told, heard, and recorded.

Again, I cannot emphasize enough that I do not point fingers at individual employees, nor do I diminish any training officers and employees may undergo to address factors leading to "problematic gaps." In her personal reflections from fieldwork on employees' "daily listening for the nuances of deceit, the little lies that will mark a claim as false," Moorehead observes that it would be "wrong to blame those who listen, hour after hour, to these tales of bloodshed and torture. There are too many cases, too much suffering, too little time."[66] The distortion and bias in application narratives are not so much the onus of individual employees, but effects of the volume of narratives that exceeds human capacity for horror and trauma. Nevertheless, reading the position of deciding whose application proceeds and whose does not as a form of appraisal highlights the role as a shaping component of the process. As Cook observes, even if the models, standards, and protocols are well created with good intentions, the "complex research-based knowledge of the archivist needed to fill these empty shells will always, by definition, be subjective and interpretive. And it will always be historical."[67] Likewise, immigration officials' previous experiences with people who look like, or not like, the person in front of them during an interview—or the application that does or does not look familiar in an office possibly in another country—inevitably shapes the way they hear, record, or process that person's story.

When appraisal archivists make biased, difficult choices when determining what to preserve and what to discard, discarded materials are acknowledged to be a gap that is inevitable but nevertheless an absence; to sufficiently understand the implications of the accumulation of altered application narratives, we must also consider the applications that do not exist. Adichie does not reveal to her readers what the immigration officer does with the incomplete application, but we presume this protagonist's application will not proceed to the next stage of the application process. Other immigration officers will not learn how to read an experience like hers that has gaps, which makes them less likely to process future applications with similar or other gaps. This protagonist's experiences are, then, lost to the application narrative archive, as are her contributions to more complex and nuanced understandings of the asylum-seeking process.

Institutional Motives: "Distorted and Warped and Worse"

The immigration official in Adichie's story has her job on the line, and it is a job that requires following procedure: if she were to process an incomplete application, it would not help the applicant but only hurt the official's professional standing. Geoffrey Yeo shows that recordkeeping is "often directed at minimising any trace of deviations from official rules and procedures, favouring the interests of record creators or showing them in the best possible light."[68]

Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air* (2010) exposes more explicit enactments of procedures that "[minimize] any trace of deviations" to meet the needs of the institutions handling the applications—without an applicant's knowledge or consent. For the first half of Mengestu's novel, the protagonist, Jonas, works at an immigration center in New York City, where he processes narratives of refugees seeking asylum. Jonas is also a child of parents who were refugees and who have never told their son the details of their story. The novel's narrative is fragmented across time and space, divided between Jonas's reconstructed knowledge of his parents' departure from Ethiopia, his experiences with his girlfriend then wife then ex-wife, his two jobs, and his quest in the present to trace the road trip from the past that his parents took before Jonas was born. Scholars working with the novel favor comparative studies with other immigrant novels,[69] and a literary lineage between Mengestu's characters and previous fictional greats including Chinua Achebe's protagonists,[70] Homer's Telemachus, and Ellison's invisible man.[71] None of these analyses prioritize Jonas's job in an immigration office learning to physically alter the stories of others, then applying these skills to create the story of his own father.

Initially, Jonas's assignment at the immigration center is not to change the application narratives, but to categorize them into two piles in terms of urgency. Jonas describes these narratives as having "a cold, almost hard pragmatism" with similar endings, in which "the consequences were always the same. . . . We, I, can't, won't, will never be able to go back."[72] He identifies these narratives as a genre with an ending he is trained to expect. Soon, however, he transitions from passive consumer of these narratives to a participant in their form. His boss directs him to alter the narratives to increase their likelihood of being accepted:

> In time I was given the job of editing out the less credible or unnecessary parts of some of the narratives, while at the same time pointing out places where some stories could be expanded upon or magnified for greater narrative effect. . . . It was easy to find the necessary details; they resurfaced all over the world in various countries, for different reasons and at different times. I quickly discovered as well 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. [My boss] put it to me this way once: "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. Sometimes the religion, but after that there's not much difference." It was his suggestion that I borrow from one story to feed another. "No one will ever know the difference," he said.[73]

This casual alteration of application narratives, encouraged by Jonas's boss and enacted by Jonas, not only changes applicants' narratives but solidifies the application narrative as a genre or form that has "necessary details" and is

void of "unnecessary parts." Jonas inserts what future document readers expect "based on common assumptions" that likely come from the very source he helps to construct. His embellishments of others' stories reify and make tangible Rosello's "problematic gap" between the layers of situations that force people to seek refugee or asylum status and the altered story that has granted them access to resettle in the United States. Regardless of eligibility, future applicants who do not know which details are un/necessary and do not have a Jonas to edit their application for optimal "narrative effect" are more likely to be overlooked.

Jonas as tailor of individual documents personifies and exaggerates less explicit institutional markings on an archive. By changing what has been recorded, Jonas's actions reflect Trace's claim that "record production is inherently self-interested."[74] Jonas's work culture renders his alteration of others' applications an expected activity: the "same story" that his boss wants him to replicate is the story that decision-makers expect to see. This makes visible what Trace argues occurs in all institutions: "the act of record creation involves the manipulation of . . . background expectancies in order to make accounts of what happened persuasive and justifiable."[75] Altering documents to fit a dominant narrative is easily "justifiable" to an organization helping to resettle refugees. When Jonas makes these marks, he thinks about the future by trying to change the past: hoping to make certain applicants eligible, he and his boss treat his alterations as quotidian as opposed to motivated.[76]

How to Read the Air calls attention not only to the effect that the alteration of narratives could have on applicants whose narratives are not shaped into the expected form; the novel also critiques the cumulative effect that these deliberate adjustments can have on both the storyteller and the listener. Soon after Jonas alters the narratives of others, he is laid off (for reasons unrelated to his alteration of narratives) and begins teaching high school English, where the process of narratival alteration is enacted upon him. Despite warnings from a colleague not to tell students about his personal life ("Once you do," she says, "you'll never be able to get them out. They're like viruses. They'll pass anything you tell them along from one year to the next but it will only get distorted and warped and worse as it goes along"),[77] Jonas tells his class the story of his father's escape from Ethiopia to the United States. Because Jonas has never heard this story, he embellishes with his own "necessary details," transferring previous job skills to his personal life. But, this time, the embellishments do not stop with Jonas; students begin to shape his version of his father's story into their own versions, filling the hallways with variations:

> In these versions the story took place in the Congo amid famine. By Thursday it was said that my father had been in multiple wars across Africa. Another claimed that he had lived through a forgotten genocide, one in which tens of thousands were killed in a single day. Some wondered whether he had also

> been in Rwanda, or in Darfur, where such things were commonly known to occur.[78]

The students enact Jonas's previous work with the written narratives of the immigration center's clients, pulling from prior understandings of refugees to shape the story of Jonas's father into something that sounds more like stories about refugees they have heard before. While Jonas functions as institutional marker on the documents of others, his own narrative, though not on paper, becomes marked by societal conceptions of "refugee."

The texts from Adichie and Mengestu suggest two of the ways that an applicant's narrative might inaccurately signify that person's story, each possibility igniting others. If Adichie's protagonist chooses not to tell her story because she protects the sacredness of the memory of her son, how many other factors might influence a person's decision over how much to tell and in what way? If Jonas explicitly copies and pastes information from one application narrative to another, how many other employees are making alterations more subtle but that nevertheless accumulate? These fictional texts remind readers that all the narratives held in the application archive might be misrecorded and institutionally altered into an autologic "same story."

Essentializing Identity: "Some Country in East Africa"

The "same story" that Jonas's previous boss tells him to replicate, and that his high school English students expect, contributes to the United States' historical and ongoing relationship with immigration that spans from acute xenophobia to activism for open borders. This multivocality exerts pressure upon the way a person applies for resettlement, asylum, or continued residence in this country; in turn, the way that people apply for these statuses affects public perception of who is invited to live in the country and why. This process engages with Elisabeth Kaplan's concerns that archivists working in identity-based collections can be essentialist because they are "rarely critical and discerning when it comes to documenting identity" as "the understanding of and respect for context . . . is frequently forgotten."[79] Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* illustrates this essentialization of the application narrative archive and suggests how other archives specifically focused on marginalized communities might perpetuate this marginalization. The immigration lawyer in Mbue's novel, Bubakar, takes on a similar role to one of Kaplan's archivists who are "major players in the business of identity politics" because they "appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built."[80]

The novel follows the Jonga family, immigrants from Cameroon, and their experience doing whatever it takes—including filing for asylum with a false

story—to remain in the United States. At the time of writing, only Florian Alix addressed this novel with significant critical attention, considering it in the context of "Afropolitanism," a genre that depicts African migrant characters "No longer as poor or out of touch with culture, but as young and mobile with open spirits and capable of adapting to new environments while preserving their African cultural customs."[81] The Jongas are not refugees or asylum seekers, they are migrants whose attempts to remain in the United States mark the application narrative archive and future refugee and asylum seekers. Jende Jonga came to the States on a temporary visa five years before the novel begins, via claims at the embassy in Cameroon that he would visit for only three months, a story corroborated by a letter from his work supervisor in Cameroon, his son's birth certificate, and other paper proof that he plans to return.[82] This evidence, however, has been contrived, as the Jongas intend to move to the United States permanently. As the impending expiration of Jende's work visa approaches, he is introduced to an immigration lawyer, Bubakar, "a fast-talking Nigerian . . . with hundreds of African clients all over the country [and] also an expert in the art of giving clients the best stories of persecution to gain asylum"; Bubakar brags that he has even "won asylum" for the daughter of a prime minister "of some country in East Africa" (yet does not say which one when asked).[83] The Jongas pursue the life they desire, but Bubakar encourages them to create a narrative that "embellishes"[84] their risks if they return to Cameroon. The Jongas' story is not withheld like Adichie's protagonist's or acted upon like Jonas's, it is enacted.

Bubakar at first appears to be what Rosello might call a "trained" storyteller, adept at presenting the right evidence that will push a form such as the I-589 up the ranks. When Jende tells Bubakar the events of the last decade of his life, including his stint in prison from when his girlfriend's father found out they were pregnant with a child who died shortly after birth, Bubakar interrupts: "Boom! That's it!"[85] He will claim persecution for Jende "based on belonging to a particular social group."[86] He explains, "We weave a story about how you're afraid of going back home because you're afraid your girlfriend's family wants to kill you so you two don't get married."[87] Bubakar says they can get started "As soon as you provide me with all the evidence."[88] Jende will need birth certificates, death certificates of the lost child, "letters. Lots of letters, from people who'll say that they've heard this man say he's going to kill you if he ever sees you again."[89] When Jende worries that he won't be able to contrive this kind of "evidence," Bubakar responds, "It's like that man Jerry Maguire says, show me the money. These people at USCIS are going to say, show me the evidence. Show me the evidence! You get me?"[90]

This visa and its impending expiration pressure Jende to "embellish" details to conform his narrative to the stories of previously accepted applications. Jende lies, speaks for others, and alters his story in ways that implicate other people:

he will need to ask others not only to lie on his behalf, but to lie about the man who was now his father-in-law, who "didn't like him . . . but . . . had never once threatened to kill him."[91] Much as field researchers Moorehead and Shuman et al. do not blame immigration officials for their subjective and potentially biased listening, *Behold the Dreamers* does not blame the Jongas; instead, the novel exposes the impossibility of the system that controls their options. This dilemma exceeds Jende's ability to choose between right and wrong. Immigration lawyers like Bubakar have set a precedent, and immigration employees are on the watch for "embellishments." Jende's cousin argues that the story won't work because Jende couldn't fear persecution from something that happened fourteen years earlier, and, by the way, it is legal in Cameroon "for a father to have a young man arrested for complicating his daughter's future."[92] Later, another immigrant lawyer warns that employees in immigration offices have "heard enough false stories of persecution and seen enough beautiful young women proclaim endless love to ninety-year-old men for the sake of green cards that they can tell a contrived story from one that resembles the truth."[93] The novel exposes a form of arms race within application narrative storytelling: as readers and listeners become more suspicious of "fallacious stories," writers, tellers, and editors become more thorough with their embellishments.

Bubakar's attempts to convince the Jongas to conform their application to the dominating narrative for applicants from Cameroon enacts Kaplan's concerns that identity-based archives are "rarely critical and discerning."[94] Bubakar's pressuring the Jongas to alter their story to fit previous narratives of asylum is an attempt to shape their identity into one that is already established and bureaucratically recognized. Grewal's example with Sikh women applying for asylum in the 1990s also makes visible this kind of essentialization, as the process created "the raped woman [as] the paradigmatic female refugee," so that "[a] woman's credibility . . . depended on her ability to convey the threat of rape or the experience of trauma of rape to the hearing officer."[95] Michele Statz and her co-authors' work on the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) also engages identity politics with bureaucratic documents. The SIJS "gives unaccompanied minors right to permanent residency due to the inviability of family reunification (i.e,. abuse, neglect, etc.),"[96] which pressures lawyers and their clients to position the applying child as "inherently dependent, vulnerable . . . [and] victim to abusive or neglectful Chinese parents."[97] Statz et al. call this process "selection" of identity, "one that emerges discursively through the questions cause lawyers do and do not ask, the responses youth offer, and attorney's subsequent 'scripting' of a legal narrative."[98] Immigration officials come to expect a particular story; applicants, if they are aware of the expectations, are pressured to conform.

Jende's embellished story proves insufficient against the skepticism of the immigration officials reading his application. Jende receives a letter from Immigration stating he is subject to removal because his work authorization has expired. Though Bubakar tells Jende not to worry, as another court date will be scheduled and there is a "backlog in the court" so they can file "one appeal after another" to "buy [him] a whole lot of time,"[99] Jende, worn down by the unknown, the waiting, the lying, tells Bubakar to petition the judge to close the deportation case so the Jongas can leave on their own. Unable to fit into the narrative that would let them stay, they are pushed back to Cameroon. As Kaplan writes, "the reification of ethnic identity does not foster tolerance or acceptance; it constructs communities and then draws hard, arbitrary lines between them, creating differences and making them fixed."[100] The Jonga family encounters these "hard, arbitrary lines" when Bubakar tries to embellish Jende's story to cross them.

When the Jongas return to Cameroon, they have not changed the "hard, arbitrary lines" marking who is eligible to stay and who is not, they have strengthened them. The (false) application for asylum that they hoped would allow them to stay in the United States remains, presumably in Bubakar's case files with carbon copies and in an unknown number of government filing cabinets or their digital equivalents. The narrative on file states that a man named Jende Jonga fears for his life in Cameroon because his wife's father threatens to kill him but that he decides to return. What does this tell readers of the document within the novel who are unaware of Bubakar's attempt at "winning" asylum? How might this story impact how decision-makers feel about the number of spots allotted, officially or otherwise, to Cameroonian asylum seekers? If immigrants from Cameroon before or after the Jongas worked with Bubakar and submitted embellished claims for asylum using exaggerated stories about fathers-in-law, immigration officials in New York might note the trend: Cameroonian fathers will kill for the honor of their daughters; Cameroonian women are likely to get pregnant before marriage; Cameroonian men are out to get daughters pregnant, and so on. The Jongas' false narrative, poorly advised and enacted out of desperation, settles in this fictional application narrative archive, a possibility that we can conceive as occurring outside of the novel, potentially strengthening discrimination against immigrants and/or future asylum seekers from Cameroon. The novel acknowledges the volume of embellished narratives complementing those from people whose lives are acutely at risk and emphasizes the possible cumulative, autological effect of one kind of asylum story affecting future applicants.

Conclusion

The fiction I explore in this article makes visible only some of the postmodern archival concerns occurring in the application narrative archive, just as they illustrate only some of the possible forms taken by Rosello's "problematic gap" between a person's experiences and the narrative recorded on an application for resettlement or asylum. In a bureaucratic process in which the stakes are high for applicants and employees, fiction allows closer scrutiny of the human possibilities for distortion in this theoretical archive. Someone is less likely to make public their own actions that are similar to those of Jonas and Bubakar, and it is just as unlikely that we be told why a person decides not to finish an interview for asylum when they need asylum; but in these fictional accounts, we are given imagined possibilities that ignite many others. Exploring these sometimes uncomfortable confessions and problematic actions through fiction allows us as readers the time and space to both critique and empathize with the characters who make these decisions, as much as it allows the time to reflect on the implications for these actions.

As I have shown through engaging this fiction with archivists' attentions to processes of appraisal, institutional motives, and essentialization of identity, the multiple stages of the refugee and asylee application process potentially prioritize familiar forms of narratives. As rigorous as it is opaque in its entirety, the process may deny safety to applicants whose narratives' structure, emphasis, details, and events are not like the others. The accumulation of documentation becomes not only a place to turn for information, it creates information, shaping both the internal process of refugee resettlement and the outward-facing understanding of what it means to be a refugee.

Archivists may be able to identify these concerns, but that does not mean they have access to the application narrative archive or any of its functions. However, considering that the application for resettlement and asylum process functions autologically might remind readers that the population in the United States that is often understood as representing "refugees" is a group selected from a much greater whole. Awareness of possible autologic functions might also inform archivists' ongoing work on creating community and ethnic archives,[101] as well as make suggestions for how archival projects can help resettling populations feel a sense of belonging in various cities across the United States[102] and/or fundamentally challenge mainstream society[103] and its marginalization of refugee populations. Making visible this autologic function inspires new ways of reading processes of any archival projects that include the narratives of marginalized populations who have little say in the way that documents about them are created and preserved.

Notes

[1] In addition to artistic and local programming are excellent scholarly explorations of refugee archives and archival materials. Though they explore communities outside of the United States, see Koen Leurs's essay for a fascinating look at how refugee youth in the Netherlands use their phones as "pocket archives"; Gillian Whitlock's exploration of an epistolarium and gift exchange, most notably embroidery, between Australian activists and people seeking asylum who are detained on coastal islands; and Alice Cati and Maria Francesca Piredda's critique of two digital archive projects in Italy that attempt to engage immigrant and refugee storytelling. Koen Leurs, "Communication Rights from the Margins: Politicising Young Refugees' Smartphone Pocket Archives," *International Communication Gazette* 79, nos. 6–7 (2017): 674–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048517727182; Gillian L. Whitlock, "Embridry," *Profession* (2011): 85–97; Alice Cati and Maria Francesca Piredda, "Among Drowned Lives: Digital Archives and Migrant Memories in the Age of Transmediality," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 3 (2017): 628–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1338037.

[2] Mireille Rosello, "Refugee Aesthetics: Agency and Storytelling, in Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* and *Fremde Haut*," *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* 12, no. 2 (2012): 5–15.

[3] Agnes Woolley, "Narrating the 'Asylum Story': Between Literary and Legal Storytelling," *Interventions* 19, no. 3 (2017): 376–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2016.1231585.

[4] These concerns manifest in strategies including reading archives not "just as a source but also as a subject"; as incapable of neutrality in their chosen presentation of records; as a product of "the heavy layers of intervention and meaning coded into the records by their creators and by archivists"; and as an "agent of change." See, respectively, Lucille Schultz, Forward in *Beyond the Archives Research as a Lived Process*, ed. Liz Rohan and Gesa Kirsch (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), vii; Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archive: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk; and Joan Schwartz and M. Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 6, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435628.

[5] Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace, "Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation," *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 317–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-012-9198-x. See for example, Whitney Douglas's essay on her collaboration with the DeVoted Women Project, in which her work recovering archival materials recording women's voting activism in Nebraska informed a touring theater piece about suffrage. Whitney Douglas, "Looking Outward: Archival Research as Community Engagement," *Community Literacy Journal* 11, no. 2 (2017): 30–42.

[6] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The American Embassy," in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

[7] Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape," *American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011): 606, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.74.2.xm04573740262424.

[8] Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air* (New York: Riverhead, 2010).

[9] Ciaran Trace, "What Is Recorded Is Never Simply 'What Happened': Record Keeping in Modern Organizational Culture," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 143, 150, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435634.

[10] Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers* (New York: Random House, 2016).

[11] Elisabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist* 63, no. 1 (2000): 126, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.63.1.h554377531233l05.

[12] Randall Jimerson reads fiction from George Orwell and Milan Kundera to "explore the implications of . . . concerns regarding recordkeeping and political power." Randall Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 140.

[13] See for example, Geoffrey Yeo, "Representing the Act: Records and Speech Act Theory," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 31, no. 2 (2010): 95–117. See also Leurs, "Communication Rights," 674–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/00379816.2010.506782.

[14] Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56.

[15] Karen F. Gracy, "Documenting Communities of Practice: Making the Case for Archival Ethnography," *Archival Science* 4, nos. 3–4 (2004):335–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-005-2599-3.

[16] Trace, "What Is Recorded," 137–59.

[17] Lexico, s.v. "Autological," Oxford Lexico UK English Dictionary, https://www.lexico.com/definition/autological.

[18] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Figures at a Glance," https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html, captured at https://perma.cc/4TUF-A3ZC. I use the UNHCR definitions for "refugee" and "asylees," which describe a refugee as "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so," and an asylum seeker as a person who applies for "the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded." UNHCR, "What Is a Refugee?," February 5, 2020, https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee. While I use the terms synonymously in this article, I acknowledge and respect the nuances and essentializing potential in these terms. For example, Leurs notes that many youth he spoke with in the Netherlands have "highly ambivalent feelings" about being called refugees: "The term is commonly interpreted within the false dichotomy of forced and economic migration, which is problematic as boundaries between volition and coercion are often blurred, rather than straightforward." Leurs, "Communication Rights," 694.

[19] UNHCR, "Resettlement in the United States," https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement-in-the-united-states.html, captured at https://perma.cc/D4MM-UZ9H.

[20] The White House, President Barack Obama, "Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States," November 20, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states, captured at https://perma.cc/72KV-6N9Y.

[21] These questions interrogate both why applicants believe they need asylum (i.e., "Why are you applying for asylum. . . ? Check the appropriate box(es) below . . . Race, Religion, Nationality, Political opinion, Membership in a particular social group, Torture Convention"), as well as political affiliations (i.e., "Have you or your family members ever belonged to or been associated with any organizations or groups in your home country, such as . . . a political party, student group, labor union, religious organization, . . . ethnic group, human rights group, or the press or media?"). A blank form is publicly available at US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal," January 22, 2020, http://www.uscis.gov/i-589.

[22] USCIS, "I-589."

[23] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 89.

[24] Rosello, "Refugee Aesthetics,"5.

[25] Rosello, "Refugee Aesthetics," 5–6. While Rosello writes of oral storytelling, I argue that the same distinction applies in written applications, some of which are recorded, reviewed, and edited by a person other than the applicant.

[26] Rosello, "Refugee Aesthetics," 6–8.

[27] Woolley, "Narrating," 376–77.

[28] Woolley, "Narrating," 380. See also Michael Lipsky's notion of "street-level bureaucracy," which explores this sometimes-private, sometimes-intimate, always unevenly powered interaction. Lipsky argues that the employees from any number of offices or agencies who "interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions" make decisions that do not always align with their mandates. Lipsky frames this dissonance between mandated policy and that which is enacted as inevitable: "Ideally, and by training, street-level bureaucrats respond to the individual needs or characteristics of the people they serve or

confront. In practice, they must deal with clients on a mass basis, since work requirements prohibit individualized service." The moment of narrative-formation on applications during asylum interviews that I examined provide an example of street-level bureaucracy with particularly high stakes. Michael Lipsky, *Street Level Democracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980), xi–xii.

[29] Woolley, "Narrating," 376.

[30] Woolley, "Narrating," 378.

[31] Woolley, "Narrating," 381. See also Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* for an insider's views of how an application's structure can twist a story. Luiselli volunteers to translate the stories of unaccompanied child migrants for intake questionnaires. She writes, "The children's stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end." Luiselli's fascinating dissection and critique of these documents exposes several of the issues I address with the application archive; however, the distortions occurring in the additional layer of "translating" between a child's story and adult expectations for narrative are significantly different from those faced by adult applicants, whose situation is my focus. Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), 7.

[32] Woolley, "Narrating," 381.

[33] Woolley, "Narrating," 382–83.

[34] Woolley, "Narrating," 380.

[35] Caroline Moorehead, *Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees* (New York: H. Holt, 2005), 43.

[36] Amy Shuman, Carol Bohmer, Rachel A. Lewis, and Nancy A. Naples, "Gender and Cultural Silences in the Political Asylum Process," *Sexualities* 17, no. 8 (2014): 941.

[37] Shuman et al., "Gender," 952.

[38] Shuman et al., "Gender," 942.

[39] Jimerson, *Archives Power,* 6.

[40] Cook, "The Archive(s)," 601.

[41] Ricardo L. Punzalan, "Archival Diasporas: A Framework for Understanding the Complexities and Challenges of Dispersed Photographic Collections," *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 340, captured at https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.77.2.729766v886w16007.

[42] Punzalan, "Archival Diasporas," 329. One of Punzalan's possible solutions for archival diasporas is virtual reunification, "the process of bringing together dispersed collections using digital and online tools [with a] . . . capacity to facilitate compromise and expediency for repositories unable or unwilling to deaccession or repatriate their pieces of larger interinstitutional collections." This would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in the case of many individuals' paper trails in the refugee or asylee process, let alone those describing experiences of an entire population with any given commonality.

[43] Rodrigo Lazo, "Migrant Archives: New Routes In and Out of American Studies," *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2009), 38.

[44] Douglas Cox's exploration of archival materials during armed conflict also overlaps with considerations of archives of refugee narratives, particularly his discussion of the debate between "cultural nationalism" and "cultural internationalism" and internationally seized documents during wartime; many refugees leave a country that is currently at war and will be for years to come. Douglas Cox, "National Archives and International Conflicts: The Society of American Archivists and War," *American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011): 454, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.74.2.42332g3h5p685w87.

[45] Lazo, "Migrant Archives," 50.

[46] Lazo, "Migrant Archives," 51.

[47] Wisam Mansour, "The Violence of the Archive," *English Language Notes* 45, no. 1 (2007): 43, https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-45.1.41.

[48] Woolley, "Narrating," 376–77.

[49] Duff et al., "Social Justice Impact of Archives," 319.

[50] Mai-Linh K. Hong, "Reframing the Archive: Vietnamese Refugee Narratives in the Post-9/11 Period," *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 41, no. 3 (2016): 18–41, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlw021.

[51] Inderpal Grewal, "Gendering Refugees: New National/Transnational Subjects," in *Transnational America Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2005), 168, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386544-005.

[52] Grewal, "Gendering Refugees," 188, 190.

[53] Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016): n.p., https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk.

[54] Trace, "What Is Recorded," 159.

[55] Cook, "The Archive(s)," 607.

[56] UNHCR, "Resettlement in the United States."

[57] Cook, "The Archive(s)," 606.

[58] Dominique Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives," *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 90–91, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.73.1.k2837h27wv1201hv.

[59] Adichie, "American Embassy," 128.

[60] Adichie, "American Embassy," 134.

[61] Adichie, "American Embassy," 139–41.

[62] Rosello, "Refugee Aesthetics," 6. The interview scene of this story also engages oral history scholarship. Postmodern archivists generally view oral histories as an important way to include "voices of marginalized or underrepresented groups in the historical record," despite, or perhaps because of, technical challenges. Jessica Wagner Webster, "'Filling the Gaps': Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011," *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 255, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-79.2.254. See also Daniels, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience," 87, 101, for a summary of how archivists and others using oral histories face limitations, including "interviewee's memory, the formulation of questions, and the technical quality of the recording distorted the information gathered" and the "motivations of the contributors, or even their truthfulness." While oral histories require participants to make oral their experiences, Adichie's asylum seeker's trauma-informed inability/decision not to speak perhaps informs oral history projects working with people who have experienced trauma.

[63] Woolley, "Narrating," 386.

[64] Woolley, "Narrating," 388.

[65] Woolley, "Narrating," 390.

[66] Moorehead, *Human Cargo,* 10.

[67] Cook, "The Archive(s)," 618–19.

[68] Yeo, "Representing," 105.

[69] Alik Varvogli, *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2011); Justine McConnell, "Generation Telemachus: Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*," in *Ancient Greek Myth in World Fiction since 1989,* ed. Justine Mconnell and Edith Hall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 225–36.

[70] Grace Musila, "Unoka's, Okonkwo's and Ezeulu's Grandsons in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*," in *Chinua Achebe's Legacy : Illuminations from Africa,* ed. James Ogude (Pretoria: Institute of South Africa, 2015), 92–105.

[71] McConnell, "Generation Telemachus: Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*," 225–36.

[72] Mengestu, *How to Read the Air*, 22.

[73] Mengestu, *How to Read the Air,* 24–25.

[74] Trace, "What Is Recorded," 143,150.

[75] Trace, "What Is Recorded," 151–52.

[76] This engages with former theories, and now critiques, of "archival innocence," in which documents "reflect a certain kind of truth compatible with the process that creates them" in that "their creators had no intent to create a historical record." This changes with the postmodern

shift toward Foucault's "questioning of the document" and the ensuing charge not to "[interpret]" a document but to "work on the document from within and develop it." Mansour, "The Violence," 41–42.

77 Mengestu, *How to Read the Air,* 74–75.

78 Mengestu, *How to Read the Air*, 244.

79 Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect," 147.

80 Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect," 126.

81 My translation. Original: "non plus celle du migrant pauvre ou du déphasé cultural, mais au contraire celle de jeunes gens mobiles, ouverts d'esprit et capables de d'adapter à un nouvel environnement tout en y conservant des codes culturels africains." Florian Alix, "L'Afropolitanisme Au féminin: Une Déterritorialisation des Lieux Communs?," *Etudes Littéraires Africaines* 44 (2017): 114.

82 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 18.

83 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 19–20.

84 Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 43.

85 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 21.

86 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 24.

87 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 24.

88 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 24.

89 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 24.

90 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 24. The mission of the US Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) is to "[administer] the nation's lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland, and honoring our values," USCIS, "About Us," http://www.uscis.gov/aboutus.

91 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 25.

92 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 21.

93 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 225.

94 Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect," 147.

95 Grewal, "Gendering Refugees," 184.

96 Michele L. Statz, Roberto G. Gonzales, Nando Sigona, and Edelina Muñoz Burciaga, "Chinese Difference and Deservingness: The Paper Lives of Young Migrants," *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 13 (2016): 1630, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216664946.

97 Statz et al., "Chinese Difference," 1643.

98 Statz et al., "Chinese Difference," 1635.

99 Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, 224.

100 Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect," 151. See also Dominique Daniel's synthesis of scholars who caution that archives designed around ethnic identity can present a "fragmentary, narrow, and static view of the so-called ethnic experience." Also, Cristine Paschild's exploration of how prioritizing identity can detract from other important energies in archives, including financial operations and archival collections themselves, raises points that are particularly relevant to resettling communities who, from all over the world, may be relocated toward one part of a city in the United States: she writes, "generalized commonalities may be highlighted over the specificities of difference, including those as influential as national context, relationships between spoken language and language of record, and impetus for emigration. Conversely, selected specificities may be raised as representative of issues for the whole, supporting misperceptions that the challenges for one community archives are the challenges for all." Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience," 95; Cristine N. Paschild, "Community Archives and the Limitations of Identity: Considering Discursive Impact on Material Needs," *American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (2012): 133, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.75.1.c181102l71x4572h.

101 For example, Robert M. Warner and Francis X. Blouin, "Documenting the Great Migrations and a Century of Ethnicity in America," *American Archivist* 39, no. 3 (1976): 319–28, https://doi.org/10.17723

/aarc.39.3.1318m268q80275w2; and Tracy B. Grimm, and Chon A. Noriega, "Documenting Regional Latino Arts and Culture: Case Studies for a Collaborative, Community-Oriented Approach," *American Archivist* 76, no. 1 (2013): 95–112, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.76.1.ph222324p1g157t7.

[102] See Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience."

[103] Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9, no. 1 (2009): 83, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2. See also Caswell et al., "To Suddenly," 62.

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