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Journal of Modern Literature, Volume 37, Number 1, Fall 2013, pp. 40-57
(Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism

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*While Teju Cole's 2011 novel *Open City* has been received as an exemplary cosmopolitan performance, a careful reading of the novel's engagement with memories of suffering and of its evocations of aesthetic experiences shows that it interrogates rather than affirms an aesthetic cosmopolitan program. Through its use of a flat, nearly affectless tone, it renders visible the inability of contemporary calls for aesthetic and memorial cosmopolitan practices to engage a global landscape riven by injustice and inequality. As the novel progresses, its apparent celebration of the exemplary cosmopolitan figure of the flâneur makes way for the decidedly less glamorous figure of the fugueur. By mobilizing this marginal figure from the history of psychiatry, a condition marked by unwanted restlessness and ambulatory automatism, *Open City* exposes the limited critical purchase of the imaginative mobility and intercultural curiosity celebrated by cosmopolitan defenses of literature and art.*

Keywords: Teju Cole / *flâneur* / *fugue* / aesthetics / cosmopolitanism

If the many accolades it has received are any indication, Teju Cole's 2011 novel *Open City* managed to hit a nerve in contemporary literature culture.¹ *Open City* is the first novel that Cole, a Nigerian-American writer, photographer, and historian, published outside of Africa, and it stands out for its rather grandiose literary ambitions. The novel rigorously ties itself to the perspective of Julius, a young psychiatrist with Nigerian and German roots. It combines an investment in cultural difference with a markedly melancholic tenor that is inescapably reminiscent of the work of W.G. Sebald, one of Cole's avowed influences. And if this were not enough, the novel unapologetically inhabits a high-cultural frame of reference—there are discussions of Jan Van Eyck, Paul Claudel, Diego Velázquez, Gustav Mahler, and many others. These multiple concerns are strung together by the novel's two main organizing devices: first, Julius's compulsive habit of walking the streets and traveling the public transport systems of New York and Brussels, which generates a number of intense aesthetic experiences as well as a series of

encounters with a whole catalogue of storytellers; and second, Julius's memories, which connect the narrative present and the stories of Julius's interlocutors to his and his family's Nigerian and German pasts.

The critical reception of the book has unfailingly focused on the peculiar narrative perspective that ties the novel's disparate stories and concerns together. In the eyes of many critics, Julius's wanderings and ruminations generate a perspective that is both intimate and detached, engaged as well as estranged. Even if Julius is sometimes strangely uninvolved in the stories and experiences he collects, critics underline that this distanciation yields an epistemological advantage; it produces, as James Wood writes in a widely noted review in the *New Yorker*, "a productive alienation" (n. pag.). Because Julius enjoys "a cosmopolite's detachment from his American experience" (Messud), the novel can approach multifarious realities, stories, and memories in a way that allows multiple resonances and interconnections to emerge.

Open City's successful mix of metropolitanism, aestheticism, and intercultural curiosity clearly connects it to a cosmopolitan tradition, and it is no surprise that it is customarily read as an exemplary cosmopolitan performance. From its title onwards, *Open City* seems to embody the cosmopolitan conviction that the cultivation of curiosity and attentiveness is the appropriate tool for fostering connections beyond ethnic, cultural, or national borders. In this respect also, it appears as a very timely achievement indeed: the study of literature in the last two decades has increasingly invoked "cosmopolitanism" as a label for literature's—and, by implication, literary studies'—claims to continued relevance in a globalized world. Julius's perspective, simultaneously alienated and engaged, can be recognized as an example of the signature cosmopolitan dynamic of "(re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance" (Robbins, "Actually Existing" 3). *Open City* can easily be read as a magisterial display of literature's enabling role in fostering cosmopolitan feeling and understanding.

This investment in a "productive alienation" resonates in another notion that recurs throughout the novel's reception: the criticism of the book time and again identifies Julius as an early-twenty-first-century update of the figure of the *flâneur* (Foden, Messud, Wood). Famously theorized by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, the *flâneur* has become "a key figure in the critical literature of modernity and urbanization" (Wilson 93). The nineteenth-century *flâneur* was a leisurely wanderer who was acutely attentive to the spectacle provided by the processes of commodification and urbanization that surrounded him. An aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them, the *flâneur* can be—and has been—condemned as a fatally bourgeois figure attempting to reprivatize public space (Buck-Morss). Still, he emerges from Baudelaire's and Benjamin's work as a dialectical figure "who presented himself as open to everything but who actually saved himself from the chaos of randomness through his pretensions to epistemological control" (Rabinovitz 7). In this way, the *flâneur* anticipates a cosmopolitan ethos that thrives on intercultural curiosity and the virtues of the aesthetic.

In this essay, I argue that *Open City* interrogates rather than celebrates such a literary cosmopolitanism. Even if the novel is thoroughly occupied with the question of how aesthetic form can contribute to the furthering of cosmopolitan understanding, it ends up as a catalogue of failed attempts to forge intercultural connections by artistic means. The novel strings together numerous accounts of human rights abuses and testimonies of culturally very diverse experiences, yet these fail to register in even a minimally transformative way in the narrator's fatefully dissociated mind. When read closely, we can see that Julius's posture as a cosmopolitan *flâneur* is shadowed by the contours of more sinister, and mostly forgotten, nineteenth-century figure of restless mobility: the *fugueur*.

Fugueurs emerged in urban areas in France at the end of the nineteenth century; they were "mad travelers" who unaccountably walked away from their lives and, when found, were unable to remember what had happened on these trips, let alone what had motivated them to set out on them in the first place. Ian Hacking, who has devoted a monograph to the late-nineteenth-century fugue epidemic, notes that fugues need to be understood as a parody of the mass tourism that was then emerging (48), and even as the pathological flip-side of the *flâneur* (27–28).

Open City subtly evokes this dark counterpart of the cosmopolitan *flâneur* in order to indicate the limits of the cosmopolitan imagination. The novel carefully constructs a panorama of cultural and historical difference, yet it filters it through a perspective that remains strangely unaffected by it. In the next section, I show that *Open City* responds to the prevalent critique that cosmopolitanism is unable to effect change beyond the domain of culture by highlighting how another much-criticized aspect of cosmopolitanism—its reliance on a rarified repertoire of aesthetic postures, gestures, and styles—paradoxically provides it with the tools that allow it to make the "culturalist" limitations of literary cosmopolitanism visible. While literary cosmopolitanism underlines literature's ability to create "sympathy and empathy through identification" (Fojas 21), *Open City* insistently denies its readers the illusion that imaginative transports can stand in for real global change. It forcefully reminds its readers that empathy and intercultural understanding *alone* cannot achieve the changes to which cosmopolitanism is committed, and that they can only point readers to the world outside—to a global landscape riven by injustice and inequality.

LITERATURE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE LIMITS OF THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION

In the past two decades, the terms "cosmopolitan" and "cosmopolitanism" have become a staple of defenses of literature in an age when its virtues seem more contentious than ever.² In contrast to the term "international," cosmopolitanism signifies a commitment to a community beyond rather than between nation states (Spencer 6). Compared to "multiculturalism," it underlines the values of reciprocal translatability and common norms (Robbins, "Introduction" 12–13). Unlike discourses of empire and globalization, it is increasingly rooted in a commitment

to human rights (Benhabib 16–17). “Cosmopolitanism,” in other words, is an intrinsically normative term, and its frequent mobilization in literary criticism by itself signals a desire to argue for the relevance of literature. Yet the strategic linkage of the literary and the cosmopolitan does more than that: it situates contemporary literary studies in an intellectual tradition that has always depended on the contribution of culture to supplement its mainly political, philosophical, and legal ambitions. Already in the work of Immanuel Kant—which inaugurated modern cosmopolitanism—culture in general, and the novel genre in particular, are assigned a crucial role in promoting a sense of belonging to humanity (Juengel 62, Siskind 337). In a very comparable way, the novel genre has assisted the development of human rights discourse, which also emerged in the eighteenth century. Allowing readers to identify with the suffering of people whose lives were remote from theirs, the novel served as a training ground for sensibilities that facilitated the spread of the idea of universal human rights (Hunt 35–69). The genre was a crucial aide in helping cosmopolitan attitudes and human rights gain acceptance in the larger culture (Slaughter 25). When contemporary criticism flaunts literature’s cosmopolitan credentials, then, it does not just state that literature circulates in transcultural networks—for this, notions such as “global literature” and “world literature” will do—it invokes literature’s prestigious pedigree as a vital part of an effort to promote supranational political and legal institutions beyond ethnic, cultural, and national borders.

Broadly speaking, literary cosmopolitanism has given rise to two (closely related) critiques: first, that it privileges cultural over material change, and begs the question how the former can meaningfully shape the latter; and second, that it is not merely *culturalist*, but outright *aestheticist* in its preference for a rarified set of (far from universal) styles and attitudes. The first critique holds that an excessive focus on the virtues of literature has unmoored literary cosmopolitanism from the broader ambition to effect change in the global economic, political, and legal sphere. On these accounts, self-congratulatory celebrations of literature’s power to connect readers to “the customs, culture, and beliefs of places other than their own” (D. Stanton 629)³ substitute cultural and aesthetic pseudo-solutions for worldly engagement. Conceived as goals in themselves, the intercultural encounters that literature affords can easily be dismissed as a form of higher tourism. Novels then come to serve as mere repositories of the exotic that may satisfy sophisticated metropolitan tastes, but that leave the real power divisions and inequalities that inflect the experiences of global subjects unaddressed (Huggan). Indeed, even if cosmopolitanism has increasingly engaged with a broad variety of often unprivileged transnational experiences, it has generally continued to capture these experiences in cultural terms. As I show, *Open City*’s resistance to its own aesthetic achievements can be seen as a strategy to heed this critique, and to remind readers of the insufficiency of the merely aesthetic pseudo-solutions that the novel on a superficial reading seems to invite.

Cosmopolitan discourse has recently tried to bolster its materialist claims through an increasing emphasis on the linkage to human rights issues (Levy and

Sznaider, "Human Rights" 195). Still, it is far from self-evident that artistic and literary engagements with human rights abuses have more purchase on international power relations than other cosmopolitan practices. As Andreas Huyssen has noted, literary and artistic works tend to become "vacuous exercise[s]" when they fail to link up with "the political dimensions of rights discourse" (608, 616). While they can offer a welcome corrective to the tendency of human rights discourse to slip too quickly into ahistorical abstraction, their work of offering concrete cases and of training the imagination amounts to very little if they fail to connect to real-world politics (617). Human rights discourse, far from anchoring cosmopolitanism in the realities of the international division of labor and the legacies of colonialism and anti-imperialism, may itself be complicit in the culturalism that literary cosmopolitanism is often charged with.⁴

Open City participates in this turn toward human rights issues. The panorama of cultural and historical difference that the novel develops is mainly made up of scenes of violence, abuse, and exploitation, almost always tinged by a racist component. The novel recounts the American persecution of its domestic Japanese population during the Second World War, the violent suppression of Native Americans by the Dutch settlers in the Americas, the suffering of Ugandan-Indians under Idi Amin, the lingering legacies of slavery, the situation in contemporary Iraq, as well as the suffering of Germans at the hands of the Red Army after the Second World War. Such memorial atrocity exhibitions—another element that brings the novel into the orbit of Sebald's work—resonate with recent calls to have cosmopolitan criticism attend to the legacies of the violence besetting colonial encounters.⁵ *Open City's* decision to string together numerous instances of human rights violations may seem to consolidate the alliance between cosmopolitanism and human rights; but again, the failure of these stories to register in any minimally transformative way in the narrator's life is a forceful reminder of the need to supplement the novel's aesthetic performance with a more materially effective program.

In order to make this point, *Open City* takes on a second line of critique routinely leveled at literary cosmopolitanism. This critique holds that cosmopolitanism is not merely *culturalist* (and to that extent anti-materialist), but also unabashedly *aestheticist*; it not only mistakes cultural solutions for worldly action, but it also privileges a rarified set of high-cultural gestures at the expense of a more inclusive approach. As we will see, *Open City* mobilizes the power of such gestures in order to make visible the critique of literary cosmopolitanism's culturalism. The most spirited defense of cosmopolitanism as aestheticism is Rebecca Walkowitz's *Cosmopolitan Style*. Walkowitz argues that the concept of style, understood "as attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness" (2) informs many literary and non-literary cosmopolitan practices. For Walkowitz, modernist writing conveys an awareness "that conditions of national and transnational affiliation depend on narrative patterns of attentiveness, relevance, perception, and recognition" (6). The critical potency of aesthetic styles and postures is not disqualified by their elite provenance, as "cultural strategies of posture have a significant role in even those

cosmopolitan paradigms that involve actors who are not social elites or whose position in the world is not in all ways privileged" (17). Walkowitz's argument echoes Bruce Robbins's contention that, even if cosmopolitanism is often identified with a global elite, this does not automatically render it ineffective. Rather, it shifts the issue to the aesthetic task of finding "a proper tone in which this [elitism] can be acknowledged" ("Village" 16).

For Robbins, the novel is the "place where such matters of tone are most searchingly experimented and reflected on" (16). Even if Walkowitz and Robbins fail to answer the charge that they provide merely cultural solutions to global challenges, their generous assessment of the self-critical potential of literary style intimates *Open City's* attempt to make the limits of a merely aesthetic cosmopolitanism visible by literary means. *Open City* experiments with a flat, nearly affectless tone in its depiction of Julius's dissociated mind. It does so not in order to find appropriate ways to think "about people whose lives are geographically or culturally unrelated to one's own" (Walkowitz 79), but rather in order to signal the insufficiency of such merely imaginative exercises. Throughout, the novel is occupied with the challenge of finding an adequate medium or form. The intense evocations of aesthetic experiences test several aesthetic paradigms for this role: the portrait, the symphony, the fugue, the photograph, the cathedral, and so on. From its very first pages, the book clearly privileges the contrapuntal principle of composition that is commonly associated with the musical fugue form. According to this contrapuntal principle, particular elements (stories, thoughts, memories, characters, images) are offset by very different, even contrasting elements, which allow these elements to resonate with each other, leaving the reader with a virtual web of echoes, contrasts, and connections between and across different domains. Still, the novel consistently resists the aesthetic realization of the fugue form, and the "fugue" will gradually reveal its second meaning: that of a dissociative condition the novel renders through its affectless tone. This is a clear warning for readers not to mistake aesthetic success for a cosmopolitan achievement.

FUGUE FORM AND THE MONOTONY OF NOISE

For Walkowitz, a cosmopolitanism stance is defined by two "principal characteristics": "an aversion to heroic tones of appropriation and progress, and a suspicion of epistemological privilege, views from above or from the center that assume a consistent distinction between who is seeing and what is seen" (2). Cosmopolitan connectedness requires the suspension of sovereign, self-sufficient forms of subjectivity, and aesthetic form has traditionally been seen as one way to inaugurate such a suspension. Throughout, *Open City* engages in a self-conscious struggle to decenter the single narrative perspective to which it confines itself. From its very first pages, it links figures of suspended agency with intimations of connectedness. The novel's opening pages tell of Julius's new habit of "aimless wandering"; this follows an earlier habit he "had fallen into" of "watching bird migrations from [his] apartment," during which he used to listen to "Internet stations from

Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands” and to read books (translated from “one of the European languages”), activities that often seem to seamlessly morph into sleep (1–4). All these exemplary observations of migratory life duly trigger Julius’s comparative imagination: he wonders whether the bird watching and the wandering “are connected”; he notes “the comparison” between himself, “in [his] sparse apartment, and the radio host in his or her booth”; these “disembodied voices,” in their turn, “remain connected . . . with the apparition of migrating geese”; reading aloud, he observes that he “gave voice to another’s words” (1–3). The suspension of agency activates a heightened receptivity and, it seems, initiates exemplary cosmopolitan scenarios of detachment and re-attachment.

With remarkable consistency, the novel codes these scenarios as aesthetic achievements. The walks, we read, serve as “a counterpoint to . . . busy days at the hospital” (1). While the latter are associated with tight regulation, perfection, and competence, the trope of the “counterpoint” suggests that the complement of the nightly walks helps to compose Julius’s life into a harmonious, polyphonic whole. If this were the novel’s last word about this, rather than its first page, it would readily deserve the criticism that it traffics in aesthetic pseudo-solutions that distract the reader from sociopolitical divisions. Yet the novel immediately challenges this harmonious suspension as it describes the interaction of the radio and Julius’s reading voice as a “sonic fugue” composed of a “voice mingling with the murmur” of the radio; this lends his evenings a fateful “monotony”—a word that here acquires its full acoustic sense (3–4). In a deflationary movement that sets the tone for the rest of the novel, the harmonious composition that promises cosmopolitan connectedness turns out to be indistinguishable from a mere monotone that dissolves all difference.

The walks Julius takes not only serve as a “counterpoint” to his working life, but also as an attempt to “break” with the monotony of his evenings at home. But instead of offering release, the street affects him as “an incessant loudness . . . as though someone had shattered the calm of a private chapel with the blare of a TV set” (6–7). At the beginning of the novel’s second chapter, street noise again interrupts Julius’s splendid isolation: a group of female protesters intrudes as “noises from far off, noises that were hardly audible to begin with,” words that “did not resolve into meaning” (22). Initially, this sonic blur is wishfully posited as a “counterpoint” to the voice of Julius’s soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend on the telephone from San Francisco (24). Yet far from forging relations, the passage shows the promise of distant attachment unraveling into total disconnection. The street noise inspires an excursus on jazz, which ends in Julius’s realization that he lacks “a strong emotional connection” to it. The counterpoint between the unsignifying noise and the girlfriend’s voice ends with the former’s meaninglessness overtaking the latter’s better intentions. While they had promised to make an effort to keep their relationship afloat, Julius ruefully notes that they “had said the words without meaning them” (24).

Already in *Open City*’s first two chapters,⁶ Cole launches the counterpoint as its privileged principle of composition, only to signal its failure to become a

paradigm for distant and multiple connectedness. The novel can be read as a catalogue of failed attempts to live up to the expectation of achieved polyphonic form. Instead of a cosmopolitan connectedness, the novel's main figures of transport—walking, memory, art—at best provide experiences of shared isolation. This is how the novel's intense first sequence of telescoped experiences ends:

Aboveground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified. (7)

This sentence accurately announces that the novel will to a large extent consist in the patient recording and acknowledging of the personal and inherited traumas of others. This is what Walkowitz, in relation to Sebald's work, identifies as the operation of a "Horkheimian gaze": the "insistence on comparison and distinction among various acts of international violence" (158). The distinction between the subway and aboveground in the sentence also indicates that this effort will be actualized as what we can call, again with Walkowitz, an archeological, "Benjaminian gaze": an "effort to display the acts of barbarism and exploitation that underwrite monuments of European civilization" (158). One of the novel's signature gestures consist in sudden shifts from the contemplation of a monument of civilization to the imagining of the violated life buried underneath. During a conversation about the Belgian industrialist Édouard Empain, who developed the Egyptian luxury capital of Heliopolis as well as the Paris metro, for instance, Julius's thoughts drift from those "expression[s] of optimism and progress" to "the numberless dead, in forgotten cities, necropoli, catacombs" (93–94). Walking the streets of Brussels, whose grandeur was paid for by the spoils of the Belgian exploitation of the Congo, Julius muses how these streets were constructed over streams, and how after the reconstruction "waterside houses suddenly found themselves looking out on traffic" (146). Walking through lower Manhattan, Julius offers an extensive description of the history of the long unacknowledged African Burial Ground located there; the memory evokes "the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York" (221).

The sentence above introduces a distinction between experiences "aboveground" and those "in the subway," yet it does so only to underline how immaterial the difference between them is. The former appears as the realm of untraumatized solitude, the latter as the realm where traumas are reenacted rather than acknowledged, which only intensifies the solitude that reigns aboveground. There is only a difference in intensity, not in tone, and the two variations are too close to each other to be organized in a contrapuntal relation. The novel's investment in experiences of relatedness is consistently shadowed by their imminent relapse into numbed disconnection. Juxtapositions of legacies of suffering, of the personal and the collective—as when the description of the African Burial Ground morphs into Julius's memory of the burial of his father—oscillate between their status as felicitous montage and their fate as inconsequentially contiguous bits.

In the novel's own terms, this amounts to the maddening indistinguishability of fugal harmony and mere noise. In terms of the novel's critique of literary cosmopolitanism, it means that the novel is no longer mobilized as a tool for aesthetic articulation, but as the site where this indistinguishability is registered, and where the insufficiency of a merely aesthetic cosmopolitanism is signaled.

The contiguity between the aesthetic success of a "fugue of voices" (216) and the actuality of sheer noise is reflected in the novel's texture by the absence of quotation marks. This allows the different conjured voices to dissolve into a continuous discourse in which the lack of distinction between free indirect speech, interior monologue, and reported speech robs these voices of their dialogic, agonistic, or contrapuntal potential. The decision not to use quotation marks leads to passages in which it is unclear whether we are reading the interior monologue of the narrator, his own speech, or the reported speech of one of his interlocutors.

The most notable example is a particularly demoralizing dialogue between Julius, Farouq (a North African he has met in Brussels), and the latter's friend Khalil. Khalil rehearses uninspired clichés about American foreign policy, Israel, Hamas, and so on. The conversation inevitably drifts to the topic of Al-Qaeda: "Khalil said, True, it was a terrible day, the twin towers. Terrible. What they did was very bad. But I understand why they did it. This man is an extremist, I said, you hear me Farouq?" (120). On first reading, it is unclear whether the last sentence is Julius interrupting Khalil's speech and addressing Farouq, or Khalil reporting his initial reactions on Bin Laden to Farouq at the time of the attacks. The point of the confusion—soon resolved when it becomes clear that it is indeed Julius calling Khalil an extremist—is that the difference is disconcertingly immaterial. Julius realizes they are just playing "a game" in which he "was meant to be an outraged American," and in which Khalil and Farouq pretend to think "how Americans think Arabs think" (120). Typically, the indifference and inconsequentiality of the conversation undercuts the redemptive aesthetics of the counterpoint: suddenly realizing that Farouq's face "was the very image of Robert de Niro," this comparison serves as "a meaningless visual counterpoint to whatever else was going on as we talked and drank" (121). Again, this is a far cry from the cosmopolitan mobility that *Open City* may on a superficial reading seem to deliver.

THE AESTHETICS OF THE "STILL LEGIBLE"

The novel features several meticulously crafted descriptions of Julius's aesthetic experiences. While these may seem to establish the paradigm for successful performances of the cosmopolitan imagination, it is remarkable that they never trigger cosmopolitan connections in Julius's life or mind. Visiting a record store that is about to go out of business, Julius muses that music stores should be "silent spaces," as loud music "spoiled the pleasure of thinking about other music" (16). Yet this time Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* allows him to "enter the strange hues of its world," "a stronger, surer mood," a "trance" (17). This rapture carries over to all of Julius's activities in the following days; in a quintessentially modernist

valorization of the redemptive intensities of sense-perception, “[t]here was some new intensity in even the most ordinary things . . . as if the precision of the orchestral texture had been transferred to the world of visible things” (17–18). The way, in these pages, the novel strings together an excessive mass of familiar aesthetic tropes is inevitably reminiscent of the perfunctory manner in which Khalil, in the scene discussed earlier, amasses familiar sound bites of anti-imperialist critique.

Unsurprisingly, aesthetic experience fails to generate the intercultural associations that literary cosmopolitanism claims it can provide. Julius carries this heightened experience out of the store into an aestheticized version of daily life when he notes that “[i]t simply wasn’t possible to enter the music fully, not in that public place” (17). He leaves the store, takes the train, and spends the train ride fully disconnected from “the crowds” filling that train. The chapter ends with a conversation with his next-door neighbor, in which he learns that the latter’s wife died five months before, a revelation that makes him realize that he “had noticed neither her absence nor the change . . . in his spirit” (21). Music, like the novel, offers no guarantees for cosmopolitan contact: “I had known nothing in the weeks when her husband mourned, nothing when I had nodded to him in greeting with headphones in my ears” (21).

In another self-deconstructive scene, Julius encounters the intense silence that he failed to find in the music store during a visit to the American Folk Art Museum. Contemplating the paintings of the nineteenth-century painter John Brewster, Julius is struck by the “air of hermeticism,” “the feeling of quietness,” “[t]he stillness of the people depicted” (37). The pictures are “records of a silent transaction between artist and subject,” which instigates a synaesthetic spreading of silence to Brewster’s signature “muted colors,” and further to the “quiet and calm” of the gallery (37–38). Yet Julius learns that this experience of temporal and aural suspension is not grounded in an aesthetic achievement, but in the brute fact “that John Brewster was profoundly deaf, and the same was true of many of the children he portrayed” (37). Nor does this experience carry over into a scene of humane connectedness: upon leaving the museum, Julius inadvertently insults his black cab driver by not saying hello to an “African just like [him]” (41). Again, the chapter stops here; again, the novel’s commitment to the aesthetic and its investment in cosmopolitan connectedness fail to add up to a viable cosmopolitan aesthetic.

Julius motivates the stand-off between himself and the taxi driver by noting that he “was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on [him]” (40). The visit to the Folk Art Museum spins off into a closely related scene a week later, when Julius is approached by a dark-skinned young man who remembers him from the museum, explaining that he works as a guard there (53). The man’s presumption that their skin color amounts to a significant connection makes Julius uneasy and leads him to break off the conversation. The point, here as elsewhere, is emphatically not that Julius does not *want* a sense of relatedness. When he first meets the character Farouq in Brussels—who, as if to underline the trope of global communication, runs a phone shop—he addresses him as “my brother,” only to immediately check himself when he wonders “how this aggressive familiarity

had struck [Farouq]" (102). Rather, the point is that the novel chronicles Julius's difficulty managing his distances from and attractions to the lives of others, and that the aesthetic experiences that are explicitly invoked to aid this management of affective and cognitive distance turn out to be of no help.

This chapter also ends on a note of painful disconnection. Recalling the sprawling, multicultural reality that had to make way for the World Trade Center, and tracing this conviviality back to the period before the Dutch settlement of New York, Julius notes:

Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories. Somewhere close to the water, holding tight to what he knew of life, the boy had, with a sharp clack, again gone aloft. (59)

This dense passage encrypts a reference to Julius's earlier visit to the Brewster exhibition, while it also, as we will see, announces the novel's alternative aesthetic program. The boy going aloft not only evokes the skateboarders Julius has just encountered, but also the "painting of a child holding a bird on a blue thread"—a work generally known as *Francis O. Watts with Bird*—that he contemplated in the museum (38). Julius uses the encounter of Brewster and the young Watts to elaborate on Brewster's family tree leading back to the Mayflower and on the "elite Federalist milieu" in which he grew up, as well as on the prominent public career Watts would go on to make in the nineteenth century. While these historical connections may seem to underwrite an ethic of cosmopolitan "hyperlinking," they are delivered in an insipid tone that also surfaces elsewhere in the novel and that is inevitably reminiscent of a Wikipedia page.⁷ Art's failure to inspire a sense of connectedness in Julius is palpable when, in the passage quoted above, the lifelines that the aesthetic is supposed to weave together come apart "with a sharp clack," i.e., with a sound that all by itself already discredits an aesthetic, like the one Julius attributes to Brewster, premised on silence. The curious fact that the novel's figural language makes the boy (rather than the bird) fly away when the lifeline breaks further underlines aesthetics' failure to play its role of keeping the boy (and Julius) connected to life.

Escaping from the museum guard's claim on him, Julius runs off to contemplate Ellis Island, the traditional gateway for immigrants into the US. He observes that it hardly serves as a significant node in African American memory: "it had been built too late for those early Africans . . . and it had been closed too soon to mean anything to the later Africans like [the museum guard], the cabdriver, or me" (55). He walks on to the site of the events of 9/11, and again notes how the desire for multiple associations threatens to dissolve particular stories and events into a totalizing natural history of violence: "atrociousness is nothing new, not to humans, not to animals" (58). 9/11 "was not the first erasure of the site"—earlier there was, after all, the multicultural diversity that had to make way for the buildings that 9/11 erased in its turn: "The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten" (58–59).

But how can the novel do justice to this diversity without absorbing its constituents in an indistinct blur? The effort to undo history's violent erasures and to restore lost histories of suffering has only a limited critical purchase, as the novel time and again conveys its concern that the aesthetic does not have the power to initiate significant, empathetic encounters with the diverse experiences it recounts for its readers. Instead, the passage discussed above subtly suggests a more minimal program for the novel. The figure of the city as a palimpsest where history is "written, erased, rewritten" points to a minimal practice of marking history, of preserving the past as a legible trace, rather than composing it into the raptures of aesthetic experience. A few lines below, Julius calls himself "one of the still legible crowd," which further underlines the responsibility of the novelist to testify to a history of suffering that he, unlike the victims of history, can still read and render legible and visible for future readers. By emphasizing legibility (rather than, say, composition), these figures shift attention to the readers who may yet receive the traces that the novel has rendered legible, even if it refrains from any more ambitious or more determinate designs on the reader. This compromised and self-critical commitment is part of the novel's strategy to acknowledge the limited purchase of the aesthetic in bringing about cosmopolitan change.

This more compromised position is also apparent in the novel's subtle gloss on its own title, which makes it hard to read it as a celebration of metropolitanism and cosmopolitanism. The phrase "open city" occurs when Julius notes that Brussels, in spite of the "countless wars fought on the territory" surrounding it, had not been firebombed in the Second World War. If Brussels stands today as a ('legible') monument to historical achievement and destruction, it is because the Belgian government made the (at the very least) morally debatable decision to compromise with the German occupier:

. . . there had been no firebombing of Bruges, or Ghent, or Brussels. Surrender, of course, played a role in this form of survival, as did negotiation with invading powers. Had Brussels's rulers not opted to declare it an open city and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble. . . . As it was, it had remained a vision of the medieval and baroque periods, a visa interrupted only by the architectural monstrosities erected all over town by Leopold II in the late nineteenth century. (97)

The city's compromised past makes it available—that is, legible—for future cosmopolitan uptake. In a closely related way, *Open City* itself renders stories of violence and suffering legible, even if it self-consciously refrains from composing them into an occasion for empathetic identification.

The novel subtly develops a minimal program of making things legible through language—the task, that is, of making perceptible things that would otherwise slip under the perceptual radar. In the novel's second half, Julius is increasingly occupied by bedbugs. These bedbugs are "the unseen enemy," and as such serve as a figure for the altered "terms of transnational conflicts": both in the case of bedbugs and of global security threats, "the enemies were now vague, and

the threat they posed constantly shifting” (173). The bedbugs figure a dimension of global life that cannot be substantiated as a tangible experience the cosmopolitan imagination can invite us to share. Instead, they figure a largely virtual, non-dramatic, non-evental sense of unease that only the aesthetic or literary can make apprehensible for the first time: bedbugs fight “a conflict at the margins of modern life, visible only in speech” (173). The work of rendering things visible in speech is the novel’s unheroic operation. This emphasis on visibility and legibility also explains the rather startling tagline of the novel’s first half: “Death is a perfection of the eye” (1). Read in tandem with the novel’s commitment to keep the traces of the past visible and to render the palimpsests of history resolutely legible, this line associates death, closure, and erasure with an optic that is too intent on perfecting, completing, and purifying whatever comes into its purview. *Open City* instead keeps the bits of life that it collects radically imperfect, incomplete, and therefore—as the tagline suggests—visible and undead.

THE COSMOPOLITAN *FLÂNEUR* AND THE SHADOW OF THE *FUGUEUR*

The tagline to the novel’s second half reads “I have searched myself” (147). It is tempting to marshal a passage near the end of the novel as a confirmation that Julius, through all his wanderings, has in the end finally found himself:

Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play, the hero. . . . (243)

James Wood quotes this passage at the culmination of his discussion of the book. For Wood, it testifies to a “selfish normality,” an “ordinary solipsism” that freely admits “the limits of sympathy,” while it is yet the very possibility condition “enabl[ing] liberal journeys of comprehension” (n. pag.) This reading seems to bring the novel in line with the dialectic figure of the *flâneur*, as well as with forms of cosmopolitanism that do not require a full-scale detachment so much as a dynamic of re-attachment or multiple attachment in which a confidently rooted subject never fatally loses itself.

I have been arguing that the novel does not endorse this program, and it is unsurprising that the passage is decidedly more complicated than Wood makes it out to be. The passage is part of the only sequence in which the novel abandons its signature combination of the casually chronological flow of the narrative present and the repeated excursions into Julius’s or his interlocutors’ narrated pasts—the only sequence, in other words, that radically ruptures the composure of the *flâneur* that the rest of the novel seems to sustain. Julius is attending a party in the spectacular apartment of the boyfriend of Moji, an old acquaintance from Nigeria whom Julius has accidentally run into in New York. Just before the reflection

above, Julius reports how he made his way home from the party at sunrise, leaving part of the night unaccounted for. In an unprecedented move, the novel goes on to fill in this lacuna through a flashback that, for once, ruptures rather than enriches the narrative present. The novel conveys a conversation between Julius and Moji that, after Julius's opening question, consists of a monologue by Moji, rendered as free indirect speech, without giving the reader any indication of Julius's reaction. This lack of response is all the more remarkable considering Moji accuses him of raping her at a party in Nigeria, and of acting like he "knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when [they] met again" (244).

Julius's response, when it comes, is startling in its inadequacy. Rather than speaking, he imaginatively converts the river, at which Moji had been staring during her monologue, into an aesthetic spectacle: "the river gleamed like aluminum roofing" (246). At that precise moment, Julius tells us, he thinks of the "double story" of the Roman hero Scaevola and Friedrich Nietzsche. The former, "rather than giving away his accomplices, . . . showed his fearlessness by putting his right hand in a fire and letting it burn"; the latter, when failing to convince his schoolmates of the truth of this story, had "plucked a hot coal from the grate, and held it," which led to a scar he carried with him for the rest of his life (246). For Julius, this memory seems to have dissipated the tension between Moji and him. The chapter ends abruptly with Julius saying goodbye to some other people at the party, and with the shockingly trivial message to the reader that, as he later discovers, "Nietzsche's contempt for pain had been expressed not with a coal but with several lit matchsticks" (246). The novel does not return to the rape after this, as it did not refer to it before.

On closer inspection, the "double story" that fills in for an adequate response is not entirely arbitrary: the double emphasis on scars and the withholding of speech echoes Moji's assertions that Julius "had been ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar," and that she had tried "to keep her pain hidden" until now (244–45). These tropes, together with the observation that her voice is "emotional in its total lack of inflection" and that it conveys a "flat affect" (244), qualify Moji as a typical traumatized subject, rendering Julius's inability to connect with her entirely predictable in light of his failure to respond to trauma in the rest of the novel. Julius's double story not only fails to acknowledge Moji's suffering—she repeatedly asks that he "say something"—it also implicitly declares her guilty of a failure to feel the appropriate "contempt for pain"; to add insult to injury, it rationalizes and thus excuses Julius's own failure to speak. The story, in other words, converts the spectacle of traumatic suffering into an assertion of the heroism of inexpressiveness.

This passage, which breaks with the chronological unfolding of the narrative present, leaves little doubt about something the novel's affectless tone has continuously been suggesting: Julius's compulsive walking and remembering are not simply a carefully cultivated case of *flânerie*, but testify to a more sinister condition. The scene strongly suggests a connection between Julius's incessant walking,

his dissociative condition, and a failure of memory. As I already noted, the novel's repeated invocation of the fugue form provides a cue for the condition that combines this set of phenomena: the (exceedingly rare) phenomenon of "dissociative fugue."⁸ The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* notes that this condition is characterized by "sudden, unexpected travel away from home or one's customary place of daily activities," and often goes hand in hand with "confusion about personal identity" (523). Ian Hacking, who has devoted a book to the history of this pathology, characterizes it as "impulsive uncontrolled traveling, with confused memories" (77). Julius's amnesia, his compulsive walking, and his dissociation from the stories and memories he encounters all point in the direction of this phenomenon.

The fugue epidemic that swept France between 1887 and 1909 has been relegated to the status of a footnote in psychiatric history. In spite of the popular appeal of the idea of amnesia—one of the fugue's constituent parts—it has "not evolved its own literature" (Hacking 59). *Open City's* sabotaging of its own aesthetic successes through the use of a *fugueur* narrator gives an indication as to why the fugue resists literary elaboration. It is no coincidence that the *fugueur* differs from the *flâneur* in this respect. Indeed, Hacking makes clear that the *fugueur* can be considered as a dark counterpart to the *flâneur*. While the latter was part of an emerging discourse that exalted mobility and tourism as "exceptional, admired travel, a heightened form of travel," the *fugueur's* "ambulatory automatism" served as the shadow side of this new-won mobility (52). It was associated with *vagabondage* and the unbearable boredom of modern life. And while *flâneurs* takes an acute interest in the world around them in order to enrich the self, *fugueurs'* compulsive escape from their normal lives was "less a voyage of self-discovery than an attempt to eliminate self" (30). The *DSM* notes that cases of dissociative fugue are "usually related to traumatic, stressful, or overwhelming life events" (525). Unlike the urban mobility of the *flâneur*, the unwanted restlessness of the *fugueur* is not an attitude that literary cosmopolitanism can celebrate. By showing how easily the *flâneur* devolves into a *fugueur*, and by making the reader experience that fateful proximity through the novel's affectless tone, *Open City* resists the complacency of a literary cosmopolitanism that believes that intercultural feeling and understanding can be more than a spur to worldly change. The category of the dissociative fugue is key for recognizing the novel's critique of literary cosmopolitanism.

The novel ends with a final attempt to invest the hope of human connectedness in the powers of art. Julius attends a performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, which inspires reflections on Mahler's "genius of prolonged farewells"—his mastery of "the ends of symphonies, the ends of a body of work, and the end of his own life" (250). This "obsession with last things" (252) seems to make Mahler an appropriate guide for ending a novel, as "in the glow of the final movement" (253), the spectacle of a frail old woman beginning to walk up the aisle brings on an ecstatic vision of a final reconciliation of Julius and his estranged grandmother. He notes that it was "as though I was down there with my oma, and the sweep of the music was pushing us gently forward as I escorted her out

into the darkness” (253). Yet the situation soon turns into farce: Julius takes the wrong exit and finds himself alone, locked out of Carnegie Hall “on a flimsy fire escape,” exposed to the rain and the wind (255).

The novel’s last attempt to affirm the aesthetic cosmopolitanism at which it has insistently hinted is interrupted by a random event that reveals the novel’s commitment to another, and more minimal, aesthetic program—to an aesthetic that preserves legible and visible traces rather than promote virtuous transport. Before Julius manages to climb down to an open door that allows him to return to the music hall, he is surprised to see the stars. He had not expected to see them “with the light pollution perpetually wreathing the city” (256). The danger that the stars may drown in an indifferent blur replays the aesthetic challenge that has occupied the novel throughout—the threat that having stories and memories resonate with each other will not result in a suggestive contrapuntal harmony, but rather a noisy monotone. Again, the novel refuses to celebrate intercultural feeling and understanding as valuable cosmopolitan achievements in and of themselves. Instead, it refashions itself as a humble recording device that renders the past and the present legible in order to preserve it for a cosmopolitanism that remains to be achieved in an uncertain future:

[the stars’] true nature was their persisting visual echo of something that was already in the past. In the unfathomable ages it took for light to cross such distances, the light source itself had in some cases long been extinguished, its dark remains stretched away from us at ever greater speed . . . in the dark spaces between the dead, shining stars, were stars I could not see, stars that still existed, and were giving out light that hadn’t reached me yet, stars now living and giving out light but present to me only as blank interstices. (256)

Only by faithfully recording the light as well as the darkness can the disasters of the past and the hopes of the future be transmitted. The novel’s anticlimactic ending underlines its main insight: recording the “still legible” world involves a refusal to see the stars as self-sufficient constellations of significant connectedness.

Notes

1. Apart from many nominations, the book won the 2012 PEN/Hemingway award, the 2011 New York City Book Award for Fiction, and a Rosenthal Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
2. To name only a handful of monographs that invoke the signifiers in their title, we can think of *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and The Politics of Community* (Berman), *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Schoene), *Cosmopolitan Fictions* (K. Stanton), or *Cosmopolitan Style* (Walkowitz).
3. This quotation is taken from Domna C. Stanton’s 2005 address as *PMLA* president, which is symptomatic of the “culturalism” that critics like Timothy Brennan have exposed in cosmopolitan discourse. The title of Stanton’s address refers to Kwame Appiah’s notion of a “rooted cosmopolitanism,” a cosmopolitan practice that does not surrender its own situatedness. Of course, the figure of the *flâneur* is a much more appropriate vehicle for this form of cosmopolitanism than for a cosmopolitanism that insists on universality. In the humanities, there is a notable tendency to underplay

this universal dimension, and to focus instead on the opposition between the cosmopolitan on the one hand and the “parochial” or the “chauvinistic” on the other (D. Stanton 629). This is a continuation of the traditional opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism (updated in the 1990s by Martha Nussbaum), in which the latter was invariably cast as the negative term. One effect of this near-automatic coding is a tendency to valorize all things that transcend national or ethnic boundaries as cosmopolitan by default. Compare Amanda Anderson’s more careful definition, in which the universal horizon does not disappear: “in general, cosmopolitanism endorses reflective distance from one’s cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity” (72).

4. Pheng Cheah’s *Inhuman Conditions* is an ambitious attempt to interrogate the strategic problems that human rights and cosmopolitanism share with one another. For Cheah, both are part of “a concerted attempt to give a softer, normative face to globalization by figuring it as an indispensable material condition for achieving humanity” (3).

5. See especially Spencer. A comparable investment in the nexus of the memory of violence and the dynamics of intercultural encounter is apparent in the field of memory studies, where this interface has been studied under such labels as “prosthetic” (Landsberg), “multidirectional” (Rothberg), and, most tellingly, “cosmopolitan memory” (Levy and Sznajder, “Memory Unbound”).

6. And obviously, the fact that the novel’s main movements are already formulated in its very first sections, only to be reworked throughout the novel, further connects it to the fugue form, which is precisely defined by the recurrence of its opening theme(s) throughout the composition.

7. Rita Barnard has coined the term “hyperlinking” to describe the seemingly uncontrolled and fortuitous linkages between characters and stories in a film like Alejandro Iñárritu’s *Babel* or a novel like David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten* (210). *Open City*’s descent into the tonality of a Wikipedia entry points to the danger that such a principled openness may always devolve into the accumulation of mere information.

8. I thank my student Eva Mebius for drawing my attention to the close parallels between the character of Julius and the figure of the *fugueur*.

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