

“Rape Culture’s Open Secrets: What We Talk About When We Don’t Talk About Rape in Teju Cole’s *Open City* (Warning: Contains Spoilers)”

“It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness.”

--Marlow, as an unnamed narrator records in in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

"I could, in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist or ‘Viking’”

--Julius, in Teju Cole’s *Open City*, to an unseen psychiatrist.

I.

In February 2014, when Dylan Farrow reiterated her longstanding accusation that Woody Allen had molested her as a child, the novelist Teju Cole tweeted “Believe her.”



Twitter’s 140-character limit tends to produce, or at least allow for, an allusive form of speech in which much more is implied than is ever made explicit, and judging from their responses, the thousands who read Cole’s two-word tweet understood to whom he was referring. But the open reference to “her” also broadens the rhetorical frame beyond Farrow in particular to embrace women like “her” as a category: women who make accusations of rape and who are, as a general rule, disbelieved. In this way, the tweet becomes legible as an engagement with what activists and academics have called “rape culture,” the generalized and socially compulsory doubt and distrust that confronts rape victims when they go public with their stories.¹ The tweet voices a generalizable counter-imperative: when an accusation of rape is made, *believe her*.

At the end of Teju Cole’s much-praised 2011 novel, *Open City*, an accusation of rape is abruptly made against the novel’s protagonist, Julius: at a party, he is confronted by an acquaintance from his youth in Nigeria, Moj Kasalii, who describes for “six or seven minutes...her precise memory of what happened”:

“[I]n late 1989, when she was fifteen and I was a year younger, at a party her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, I had forced myself on her...we had both been drinking beer, she was close to

¹ In theory, rape is universally despised and condemned, and rapists are, in the abstract, regarded as monsters, deviants, and/or unredeemable criminals. Yet because of the seriousness of the crime—and of the consequences, when proven—only a few, very selectively defined examples of sexual violence tend to be found to rise to the level of *real* rape. Rape victims disappear into this double standard. To be believed, an accuser must adhere perfectly to an almost impossible (and very particular) fantasy of blameless and chaste victim-hood, following a prohibitively particular script: chaste deportment, active resistance, and immediately reporting the crime, with perfect and consistent recall. In contrast, the discovery that an accused rapist is *not* a monster, a deviant, and/or unredeemable—or any other complication to the fantasy script—will tend to produce the opposite effect for the accused, a presumption of innocent credibility. Especially given the difficulty of empirically verifying the crime itself, a function both of the nature of the crime and of the social setting in which it most often occurs and is investigated, the scales are heavily weighted against accusers who may also reasonably expect to become the target—in the course of criminal defense—of programmatic character assassination.

passing out, and I had taken her to another room and forced myself on her” (244).

Julius gets up and leaves the party, apparently without a word. “Will you say something now?” she demands; “Will you say something?” (245). He says nothing. On the walk home, in the pre-dawn gloom, he mentally revisits a story that Camus told about Nietzsche telling a story about Gaius Mucius Cordus Scaevola—meditating for a moment on the ways the story has been misremembered—and after this frustrating intellectual tangent, the penultimate chapter of the novel ends. When the final chapter picks up the narrative thread, several months have passed and Julius does not revisit Moji’s accusation. The matter is dropped so absolutely that it is hard to fault readers for questioning whether we are meant to believe it is true. If one expects such a revelation to shatter the narrative, to radically transform the novel we (thought) we were reading, her accusation does not. If the reader is left unsettled, the surface of the novel remains as serenely untroubled as Julius apparently seems to be, forgotten like a bad dream when the sun rises.

Since its publication, *Open City* has been recognized as a masterpiece. Broadly acclaimed in the popular press, it received the PEN Hemingway award and has already been the subject of a remarkable amount of academic critical attention, in the short three years since it was published.² Yet with very few exceptions, Moji’s accusation has not been believed, and if we are to judge from these responses, the novel has *not* become legible as an engagement with rape culture. This is not to say that Moji has been actively disbelieved: even Julius admits that her accusation is credible, and many critics do acknowledge the gravity (and plausibility) of her charge. But as the novel has entered the canon of contemporary global fiction—already commonplace on university syllabi³—the fact that Julius is both an unrepentant rapist and a highly unreliable narrator—and that the entire novel is tightly structured by his defensive effort to repress this self-knowledge—has *not* become the primary critical fact about the novel. It has remained merely a possibility, an “allegation”; if it is a belief, it is not one which can be *believed*, a credible possibility which does not become a fact.

This is a very particular, over-determined, and symptomatic mis-reading of the novel. As when *Vanity Fair* once declared Nabokov’s *Lolita* to be “the only convincing love story of our century,” I would suggest that to read Julius as anything but a dangerously untrustworthy narrator is to be seduced *by* him, overlooking the fundamental narrative structure of the novel, and doing so precisely in service of his defensive self-consciousness and will-not-to-know. The revelation that Julius is a rapist brings an otherwise apparently plotless novel to its conclusion and provides the interpretive key by which the novel can be, retroactively, understood to have had a narrative shape all along. Structured like a language, Julius’ unconsciousness of himself is to be found in his narrative’s refusal to narrate, which though it frustrates the reader’s desire for certainty, is legible and consistent throughout (as I will show).

Along with the question of Julius’ guilt, the novel’s first critics almost uniformly declined to observe how narrative cause becomes effect. On its publication, the novel was praised either for or despite its apparent lack of plot and structure. James Wood, for example, compares Cole’s novel to the work of W. G. Sebald, arguing that “what moves the prose forward is not event or contrivance but a steady, accidental inquiry, a firm pressurelessness” (XX). Apparently lacking either plot or authorial oversight, the novel seems to write itself; it “revels in banal digression” but plot is “perfunctory”—according to Claire Messud

² In peer reviewed journals, it has already been the subject of Pieter Vermeulen’s “Flights of Memory: Teju Cole’s *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” in *Journal of Modern Literature*; Katherine Hallemeier’s “Literary Cosmopolitanisms in Teju Cole’s *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*,” in *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*; Hamish Dalley’s “The Idea of “Third Generation Nigerian Literature”: Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel” in *Research in African Literatures*, and Karen Jacobs’ “Teju Cole’s Photographic Afterimages” in *Image [&] Narrative*.

³ The novel has been taught at Middlebury College, Washington University of St. Louis, the Pacific School of Religion, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Southern Mississippi, the University of Texas, Duke University, New York University, and no doubt this is only a small fraction of the total

and Miguel Syjuco—the narrative a mere excuse for philosophical meditations. The novel is hardly a novel at all; Wood suggests that “Cole has made his novel as close to a diary as a novel can get, with room for reflection, autobiography, stasis, and repetition,” and this approach can also be generally observed: for Messud, Julius is “a new and particular guide to a familiar world: he awakens us to the city as we had not heretofore seen it; and in so doing, thrillingly follows Pound’s literary exhortation to ‘make it new’” (XX). Wood praises the “productive alienation” of the novel, “whereby Cole (or Julius) is able to see, with an outsider’s eyes, a slightly different, or somewhat transfigured, city” (XX).

These early readings of *Open City* set the terms for the book’s critical reception, framing Julius as a stand-in for his writer and reader. When Wood describes the novel as “a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism common to thousands, if not millions, of bookish types,” for example—and makes the subject of the novel “Cole (or Julius)” —there is almost no distance between reader, writer, and protagonist. In this way, the novel has come to be read to be, as novelist Hari Kunzru writes in one of the novel’s blurbs, “a melancholy, beautiful meditation on modern urban life”:

“If Baudelaire was a young African, wandering the streets of contemporary New York, this is the book he’d write...it has echoes of W. G. Sebald and Walter Benjamin and reveals Teju Cole as one of a talented new generation of global writers, at home in the world.”

It is not surprising that so many of the novel’s critics have left Moji’s accusation unresolved, ignored it, or tried to explain it away: if Julius turns out to be an unrepentant rapist, can we so blithely enjoy his “melancholy, beautiful meditation on modern urban life”? Some very prominent reviews and critical essays avoid mentioning her accusation at all, but those who acknowledge it tend to describe it in the most vague and euphemistic terms: at most, it is a disturbing *possibility*, a claim that must be qualified with a word like “alleged.”⁴ In the years since the novel’s publication, the already substantial critical archive that has accumulated around the novel in peer-reviewed academic journals has inherited this original mis-reading, canonizing a novel which looks very significantly different from the novel that Teju Cole actually wrote. To read *Lolita* without naming Humbert to be a pedophile and rapist—to put the name “love” to his violence against Delores—would be the same kind of scrupulously faithful reading of the letter of the text, against its spirit, as the readers who regard *Open City* as being “about” anything but Julius’ struggle not to know what he knows: that he is a rapist.

As her accusation fails to become a believable fact, the novel does not become legible as what it otherwise would clearly be: Julius’ narrative is built around its protagonist’s desire to un-think himself as rapist—to render this fact about himself impossible to imagine or believe, and to use “culture” as the cover story deferring this self-knowledge—but the novel written by Teju Cole has not been read as the performance (and deconstruction) of this consciousness.

Teju Cole has been quite clear in interviews that Moji’s accusation is “absolutely true”:

[Interviewer] Max Liu, 3:AM: The accusation that Moji makes against Julius: many critics have ignored it but it struck me as a huge moment that completely debunked my (perhaps complacent) understanding of the character. Is it ‘true’?”

Teju Cole: Oh, it’s absolutely true. I can’t imagine Julius’ story without it. I knew right from the

⁴ James Wood’s review in the *New Yorker*, Anthony Cummins’ review in the *TLS*, and Michiko Kakutani’s review in the *New York Times* all describe the novel as if it does not contain or reference Moji’s words. But if Julius has “likely committed a major crime,” for example, a critic like Karan Mahajan also reminds (or reassures) us that “even after rereading the text in its entirety, we cannot be sure whether the rape occurred.” Some critics even suggest this “discomfiting turn” in the narrative is a mistake on the part of an author in need of editing: Syjuco suggests “it feels unnecessary, either a misstep by a young author or an overstep by a persuasive editor” and Pankaj Mishra writes that “the accusation is so egregious, and is left so unresolved, that its appearance in the novel seems, initially, to be sloppiness on the author’s part.”

beginning the book would end like that: three vicious thwacks of the hammer, and then a soft exit to strings. I'm attracted, in art, to things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader. I was interested in that move that went from "He's one of us" to "Is he one of us?" Many people were upset that I put Julius through that. But there's no such thing as a right to remain untroubled.⁵

Cole has also, on multiple occasions, cited a blog post by Alyssa Rosenberg ("Rape and Memory in Teju Cole's 'Open City'") as one of his favorite reviews of the novel.⁶



Writing for the explicitly partisan *ThinkProgress*, “a forum that advances progressive ideas and policies,” Rosenberg clearly believes her. Her argument therefore moves swiftly from analysis to advocacy, from an impersonal objectivity to the “we” of a progressive subjectivity:

“the power of that conversation between Moji and Julius lies in its dissonance, the fact that an event that was shattering for one person was forgettable for someone else. And this is the kind of thing that can happen when we don’t treat boys and girls equally about what consent means. It’s just as important to teach boys that no genuinely means no as it is to teach girls to say no in the first place. Putting sole responsibility on women is a sick joke when men can override their lack of consent. And when we don’t teach boys what consent genuinely means, and why obtaining it is critical, this is where we get these horrendous differences in memory. I don’t think it’s unreasonable that someone would forget a one-time sexual encounter in a lifetime of them if that’s the way their lack of knowledge and empathy lead them to read an assault. And I find it all too plausible that a 14-year-old could rewrite what for a woman was a lifechanging sexual assault into a routine, and barely-remembered hookup at a party. Julius

⁵ “Palimpsest City” Teju Cole interviewed by Max Liu. www.3ammagazine.com/3am/palimpsest-city/

⁶ Washington Post and other followups.

didn't forget assaulting Moji because he's a sociopath who can easily put a rape out of his mind—he forgot assaulting Moji because he doesn't understand himself to have assaulted her in the first place. This doesn't absolve him of moral responsibility, then or now. In fact, it shows him to be more globally detached and inconsiderate than we'd previously seen. It's a revelation that forces us, and Julius, to revisit everything we've come to understand about him." (XX)

"Force" is an unfortunate choice of words; in part, because critics who are reluctant to "revisit everything we've come to understand about him" (in the same way that Julius is actually quite reluctant to re-evaluate himself) have not been forced to do so. Yet while the *New York Times's* reviewer praises Cole as being "neither radical pinko nor reckless provocateur"—a highly tendentious conflation of radical provocation with reckless communism—it is the explicitly partisan *ThinkProgress* which Cole described as "one of the few to intuit my feminist commitment in the book" (XX). This contrast is striking: while the journalistic medium most explicitly devoted to objectivity—aspiring towards what media critic Jay Rosen has called "the view from nowhere"—inaccurately portrays Cole's commitments, and does so with a strikingly partisan bias, Rosenberg's explicitly feminist reading of the novel is both the most felicitous account of the novel's animating spirit, and has—likely for this reason—been excluded from the archive of reviews which academic critics have built their own analyses upon.

To read the novel as leaving ambiguous the question of whether Julius is guilty, the perspective which Rosen has also called "'he said, she said' journalism" is a useful nowhere from which to view the novel, and is, un-coincidentally, the narrative perspective that Julius himself favors. Rosenberg articulates (and demonstrates) the fundamental point from which a corrective to the dominant reading on the novel would begin: "truth" is not hidden, inaccessible, or uncertain, but is *contingent*, a function of how the past is remembered and who remembers it. The problem which *Open City* poses to its reader, then, is not the empirical question of whether Julius "really" raped Moji, a question which the novel's frustratingly limited first-person narration does not allow us to answer with any confidence; instead, the novel poses the more unsettling proposition that since skepticism empowers impunity, an over-investment in empirical truth threatens to make us complicit in the propagation and reproduction of a culture of rape impunity. The reader is caught in a very uncomfortable position: do we "believe her" without corroborating evidence? Or do we base our judgment on our account of Julius' character, as he has represented himself to us? With whom do we sympathize, regard as "one of us"?

The New Critical impulse to avoid the "intentional fallacy" is a similar desire for a critical view from nowhere, the same reflexive reluctance to give Teju Cole's opinion of his novel any interpretive weight that finds Roland Barthes "Death of the Author" to be a liberating emancipation for the reader. Yet the fact that none of the peer-reviewed articles that I've named even mention Rosenberg's (and Cole's) interpretation of the novel is—like Syjuco's insistence that Cole is one of us, not a radical and reckless pinko and provocateur—much too underdetermined to be a coincidence. It is symptomatic.

As Moji tells Julius, "I don't really believe in coincidences...Something either happens or it doesn't, coincidence has nothing to do with it." (159). When it comes to *Open City*, the desire to read an authorless text—to read a novel which, as Barthes puts it, "is henceforth written and read so that in it, on every level, the Author absents himself"—is also to provide an alibi for Julius, to make anything but "he said, she said" analysis impossible. Even a symptomatic reading becomes untrustworthy: "once the Author is gone, the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes quite useless," as Barthes puts it, a novel like *Open City* can have no central organizing principle and cannot be said to be "about" anything in particular. In fact, Barthes' description of "the text" after the death of the author is essentially a blueprint for the dominant critical reading of *Open City*:

"The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture...the writer can only imitate a gesture which is anterior, never original. His power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them." (XX)

However, *Open City* has a political unconsciousness, and can be read symptomatically. Whether it

should be read this way is a different question; many readers have chosen not to do so. However, the reading is present in the novel, a pattern of references and associations which organize the stream of Julius' consciousness, and which can be traced and followed as predictably as a river runs toward the sea. The trail of breadcrumbs is there, whether or not we choose to acknowledge the author's role in placing it there.

In choosing *not* to acknowledge its presence, however, readers must do as Julius describes New Yorkers doing, neglecting their rivers.

Throughout the novel, the water surrounding Manhattan Island has been an explicit figure of psychological repression: calling the East River as the city's "embarrassing secret," unknown to "the millions who lived on the tiny interior [and] had scant sense about what flowed around them" (indeed, he even feminizes the river, calling it "the unloved daughter, neglected"), Julius' thoughts are inevitably drawn toward these opaque, forgotten depths, only to turn away at the last minute (54). In this early reverie, for example, Julius describes how "as thought leads to thought, standing there looking at the river, I felt an unexpected pang of my own, a sudden urgency and sorrow, but the image of the one I was thinking of flitted past quickly: here, as throughout the novel, he will peer over the edge only to pull back (56).

In the anticlimactic final scene with Moji, the river fulfills the same symbolic function. When Moji stops speaking, she stares out at the Hudson, and to his relief, she does not cry: "anyone who had come out onto the porch at that moment could not have imagined that we were doing anything other than enjoying the play of light on the river" (246). Without her words or emotions, a spectator could only imagine they were "enjoying...the play," rather than recalling a vicious rape. Like the hypothetical party-goers that might have "come out onto the porch at that moment," readers have tended not to see, in this scene, a rapist and his victim, reliving the original moment of violation.⁷

If Freud understands consciousness to be a function of unconscious repression—such that narrative is the process of resolving and mediating contradictions between fantasy and reality—Julius reads Barthes instead. Indeed, twice seen reading Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Julius even reflects, at one point, on how profoundly Freud has been debunked:

"I read Freud only for literary truths. His shortcomings had, after all, been so thoroughly exposed that, in the popular culture almost as much as in the profession of psychiatry, he was understood almost primarily through his critics: H.J. Eysenck had taken him to task for his psychotherapy, Popper for his science, Friedan for his attitude to women. The criticism, in general, was not unjust. So I read him, not as a professional seeking professional insight, but as I would read a novel or a poem."

In the remainder of this essay, I will read Teju Cole's *Open City* "primarily through his critics," both to demonstrate the symptomatic reading which critics have actively ignored—that Julius is a rapist—and to clarify the structure of this critical unconsciousness, which effectively works to preserve, fetishize, and commodify "the work of art" by doing so. This reading is *felicitous*, in the way that a performative speech-act is not reducible to its truth status, but simply works or does not. Yet to demand that a *novel* be interpreted through the question of whether something did or did not objectively happen—to read *Open City* through the question of whether or not Julius really raped Moji—is frame fiction as a constative utterance, as a set of propositions about an objective reality which can either be confirmed or denied. At best, this is a counterintuitive way to read a novel; especially since Teju Cole has insisted that both *Open City* and *Every Day is For the Thief* are novels, it would be infelicitous to describe *Open City* as anything but a *novel*, however unconventional (indeed, what is more conventionally novelistic than an 'unconventional' novel?)

⁷ As Pieter Vermeulen puts it, "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" (XX).

As a speech-act, then, *Open City* is precisely what its author has said it is: a legible engagement with the generalized and socially compulsory doubt and distrust that confronts rape victims when they go public with their stories. High literary culture, to put it as bluntly as possible, is and has been “rape culture,” a space in which the fact that Julius raped Moji cannot be believed, cannot become factual, and cannot become the basis for a reading of the novel. When Julius reflects that “I could, in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist or ‘Viking’”—the single moment in the text when he explicitly contemplates himself in these terms—this observation reflects the split between the different textual environments through which his guilt might be adjudicated, the difference between spaces of polemic commentary online—as in explicitly partisan blogs like Rosenberg’s *ThinkProgress* (or Cole’s own massively popular twitter feed), where speech-acts are explicitly *performative*—and the space of traditional literary high culture, where his novel has been praised and analyzed as an *object*, divorced from the circumstances of its production as text.

In this way, the masterpiece of intertextuality, the cosmopolitan account of globalization, and the exemplary work of literary art which *Open City* has been canonized as being is also a kind of critical fetish object. First, in a Marxist sense: by erasing the labor of its author in producing it, the novel becomes an object, only to be discussed objectively. Second, in a Freudian sense: as High Art, it substitutes for the novel which it both displaces and whose absence it marks. But to produce *Open City* as analogous to work by Baudelaire or Benjamin—neither known for their fiction—is to produce the novel as *non-fiction*. By contrast—to rely, again, on the voice of The Author—Cole suggested to me, in the performative space of Twitter’s “direct message” function, that the novel’s organizing principle might be the fact that Julius’ monologue is—or plausibly could be—the product of psychoanalytic staging, the fiction of subjectivity produced by the consciousness in flight from itself:

“Are you aware that a plausible framing device for *Open City* is a series of visits to *his* psychiatrist? It helped me think about what could be included in the narrating and what might be left out. They’d let him unfold. They’d let him circle and digress. All the pushing will come from within himself.”

Especially if we read Foucault’s “What is an Author?” as an implicit response to Barthes’ “empty affirmation that the author has disappeared,” the idea of psychoanalytic therapy is, quite literally, the “functional principle by which [Teju Cole] limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which [Teju Cole] impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of [*Open City*].” Just as Foucault argued that it was “pure romanticism...to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state,” I would suggest that both Julius and his faithful critics have an investment in the romantic notion of free literary circulation that the author of this text, frankly, does not, and which he works to place in a state of crisis and to show to be complicit in the production of impunity for sexual violence in particular and historical violence in general.

In the remainder of this essay, I will produce a reading of the novel which critics have ignored—that is, I will read the novelistic utterance they have actively ignored—a reading which proceeds from the retroactive realization that Julius has not passively forgotten that he raped Moji, but that he works to forget it, through his narrative, in ways which can be (and must be) read back into the novel. Only when read front-to-back can the novel be described as meandering, plotless, or lacking in structure; when read backwards, beginning with the climactic revelation, *Open City* turns out to be very tightly plotted and obsessively structured by Julius’ will-not-to-know, and legibly so, with a consistent and well-ordered symbolic vocabulary

One of the primary ways that critics have worked to *not* read *Open City* in this way is by the use of the adjective “Sebaldian.” W.G. Sebald is certainly one of many literary reference points in a novel composed by its hyper-literate referentiality, and as Cole has acknowledged, Sebald is both a flattering comparison and an important influence. Yet Sebald has been treated not as one (important) literary interlocutor, but as an *influence* in the most reductive and anxiously oedipal sense. As Karen Jacobs observes, “It is surely telling that so many reviewers of the novel have commented on Sebald’s extensive

presence in the text” and “the recurrence of comparison of his work with Sebald’s is telling.” I agree with her, but with the caveat that it is *symptomatically* telling: to refer to Sebald as Cole’s “primary interlocutor” and to describe “his complex debt to Sebald,” is to position Sebald as the author of Cole’s referential style, just as asserting that “Cole’s range of reference and affiliated conversation partners rival Sebald’s” is to make Sebald something other than a mere *reference*: the novel’s literary aspirations can implicitly be to rival (even displace) Sebald, but the thought is un-thought that he might be doing something fundamentally and irreducibly different.

This reading is, itself, a kind of cover story for the novel’s more fundamental concerns, valid up to a point, but particularly attractive to critics who do not wish to go beyond it. To read the novel primarily by reference to Sebald—to make Sebald such a primary reference as to implicitly exclude all other textual interlocutors—makes Sebald himself into a fetish, even a figure for the novel as fetishistic art-object.⁸ There is a certain aptness, in this sense, to Cole’s references to “the Sebald thing.”

The argument of this essay, however, is not that a “Sebaldian” reading is *wrong*. I wish to read this novel as it reflects an underlying, and very real, culture of rape denialism: the *fact* that the rape which it is structured around is illegible in the critical record critics have made of the novel is not a coincidence. But my reading—like Cole’s and Rosenberg’s—is as structured by desire as any other: my argument is that the fact or fiction distinction does not and cannot obtain, just as performative speech cannot be felicitously understood in the terms developed to analyze constative speech. To talk about what *really* happens in a novel, then, is a contradiction in terms (a contradiction which the novel itself provokes or at least allows us to consider). But to register this provocation, we must choose to be provoked: for the speech act to be successful, we must want to hear it; we must *want* to “believe her.”

For this reason, the fact that we find a distinct critical divergence between two distinct bodies of critics on the question of whether Julius is a rapist is not “just” a coincidence. “I don’t really believe in coincidences,” as Moji tells Julius; “Something either happens or it doesn’t, coincidence has nothing to do with it.” (159). The fact that the most carefully euphemistic, circumspect, and openly doubtful treatments of Moji’s accusation occur in print—by critics whose careful adherence to objective standards of evidence and proof allow for Moji’s statement to be reasonably doubted—is also something that has happened, not a coincidence: it demonstrates the structural biases of the material on which the criticism is recorded, the media through which the novel is made legible as a coherent literary object. In some places, Julius can be “taken for a rapist”; in some he cannot.

It is not a coincidence that newspaper reviews tread lightly on the novel’s climactic revelation, or that novelists—when moonlighting as critics—read Cole’s novel with particular investments in the literary, or that a culture blogger for a partisan progressive publication reads the novel through the progressive project of combating rape culture. It is not a coincidence that the novel has been read, overwhelmingly, as a “Sebaldian” project, while the extent to which the novel is “African” has been neglected. Finally, it is not a coincidence that “the internet”—an imprecise but adequate metonym for online spaces of relatively ungoverned speech—has been the site of the most explicit discussion of the novel’s engagement with rape culture, discussion which has also been the quickest to disappear. Teju Cole’s “Believe her” tweet, for example, has been consumed by the voracious presentism of the

⁸ Again, this reading is derived, in part, from Cole himself, who has consistently noted the limitations of “the Sebaldian thing.” In one interview, he replied to a question about Sebald by asserting that “Stylistically speaking, I take a lot more from poets like Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, and prose writers like VS Naipaul, JM Coetzee, Michael Ondaatje and James Salter. It’s fair to say a lot of the cadences in my sentences are inspired by Naipaul. But few critics pick that up, and somehow end up latching onto the Sebald thing instead.” In an email to me, Cole also observed that “The pity in taking the Sebald thing and sticking to it means that you then miss the Woolf, the Wong Kar Wai, the Michael Baxandall. You think you’ve found the one key, but the book has many keys. Also, the Sebald thing can obscure a key issue in the book: this is a narrative troubled from beginning to end by Julius’s origin in Africa. It is a book about historical memory, it is an African book, it is a city book, and it is a book about male privilege. Only one of those things is properly Sebaldian.”

medium—except insofar as links to it continue to circulate—and the most forthright discussions of the novel’s address to rape culture occur and have occurred online, particularly in the discussion groups, chat rooms, and comment boxes where readers feel free to “believe” rather than prove (and where a phrase like “Warning: Contains Spoilers” frees writers from injunctions to silence). While novelists writing reviews in literary periodicals like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* work to suture together an irresolvably broken narrative—and academic criticism of the novel has worked to make its omissions and ambiguities into positive aesthetic qualities—it has been left to critics like “Bix2bop” to observe that the novel is fundamentally fractured and broken by Moji’s accusation (as Bix2bop observes in a comment to Giles Foden’s review at the Guardian, Julius “would appear to have a conscience, which is why I was blindsided at the end when he’s accused of a crime for which he has no explanation”).

In this way, while print archives continue to record the *uncertainty* of Moji’s claim, and reviews have formed a kind of primary documentary foundation for the critical accounts which scholars produce—replicating that sense of doubt—it is on blogs and other more ephemeral media that the words of those who believe her have been buried and forgotten. Rosenberg’s blogpost, for example, references a discussion of the novel which is no longer available online, and her own exclusion from the secondary criticism reproduces that kind of exclusion: readers who are “blindsided” disappear from the novel’s reception history, displaced by critics like Messud and Wood, who are “awaken[ed] to the city as we had not heretofore seen it” and enabled “to see, with an outsider’s eyes, a slightly different, or somewhat transfigured, city.” (XX)

II.

Blinded by Culture

It is precisely the logic of a “rape culture” that rape becomes illegible, but there is another reason why so many readers have not “heard” Moji’s voice: in a very literal sense, the novel does not contain it. Since the entire narrative is written, without quotation marks, as a single uninterrupted monologue by Julius himself, the reader only gets Moji’s words secondhand. Her account of him is a destabilizing moment in the text, since what Julius says she says—her words, as he reproduces them—are not reconcilable with the version of himself that he would prefer. Yet her words, as we receive them, are wholly filtered through Julius’ own voice, and self-perceptions. It is therefore not surprising that Julius does not respond to her accusation: as a consciousness in denial, he can hardly hear that of which he is struggling to be unconscious.

For most of the novel, Julius seems like—or presents himself, in the first person, as being—a sensitive, humane, and literate critical mind, even “civilized” in the best sense of the word. He dwells somewhat obsessively on stories of historical and personal suffering, and comes into focus as a character by his apparent struggle to listen to and hear the voices of those whom history has violated, silenced, and forgotten. This facade, however, is more apparent than real. As an African immigrant and psychiatrist, he is symptomatically *insensitive* to immigrants and other black people who attempt to make “claims” on him—who he consistently rebuffs and ignores—and to the claims made on him by the patient (“V”) who most combines the intimate and historic traumas of violence which he might otherwise seem to be struggling to address throughout the novel. A member of the Delaware tribe herself, “V” suffers a depression “partly due to the emotional toll of [her] studies...the horrors Native Americans had had to endure at the hands of the white settlers, the horrors, in her view, that they continued to suffer, affected her on a profound personal level.” Yet when she attempts to contact him, in particular distress, he is on vacation, not only declining to hear her, but seems strangely un-moved when she subsequently commits suicide.

Some have read Julius’ very characteristic disengagement as a characteristic of Cole himself; as Akin Adesokan argues, for example, “Cole is sending signals that being African does not, should not, commit a writer to engaging with African themes.” If he is “sending signals,” however, it is in the person of a character whose characteristics he does not share. While Julius’ preferred version of himself is as the sympathetic listener, the novel shows him failing to listen sympathetically, repeatedly. While he presents himself in this way to his then-girlfriend, Nadège, when he tells her about visiting and listening to Saidu, a

Liberian refugee in a detention facility (in seven pages for which she is the primary audience, but for which the reader is also an unseen listener), he presents himself to the reader—or to his own psychiatrist, if the novel is the narrative occasion of his own visit to his therapist—as wearing a mask: “Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story,” he suggests; “I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself” (70). But Nadège has fallen out of love with him by the time he makes this reflection, the event which seems to have precipitated the narrative itself—the evening walks he takes, which form the basis of the novel’s first-person narration—and which spurs him towards self-reflection. He has also fallen out of love with himself as well: over the course of the novel, Julius repeatedly shows himself to us as something other than this person, repeatedly acknowledging (albeit without much comment) scene after scene of insensitivity and non-listening; Saidu, for example, requests that Julius return to visit him again, but he never does. Most importantly, when Moji presents him with the story of he victimized her, and demands that he says something, Julius declines to say a word: he gets up, leaves the party, and does not mention it again. In this way, Julius’ ego-ideal is shown to be the cover story repressing the truth of his id that Moji has revealed: while striving to picture himself as a listener, who passively attends and sympathizes to others, her words show him to be a rapist, who acts without listening, refusing to hear the absence of consent and using force to override resistance.

The vast majority of the novel’s critics have also “fallen in love” with the idea of Julius that he presents, I would suggest, but have preferred not to follow Nadège’s example. The dominant critical reading of the novel has been to invest in the fantasy of cosmopolitan vision which Julius seems to exemplify, to frame the novel as something more like a work of non-fiction, a collection of philosophic meditations through which Julius and Teju Cole become essentially indistinguishable. Anthony Cummins, for instance, suggests that “Julius rarely appears to be more than a vessel for aesthetic and historical commentary,” and notes that the novel flatters its readers with a “fantasy about the contemporary significance of high culture.”

Julius is, however, more like Kurtz than Sebald, and *Open City* is a kind of inversion of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a novel famously composed through its layered narrative perspective. If Chinua Achebe’s famous critique of Conrad’s racism has a limitation, it’s that Conrad places the novel’s limitations of perspective at center stage, emphasizing Kurtz’s own blindnesses; Achebe is partially right that “no alternate perspective,” at least if we take the novel’s reception history for the novel itself, but the defense of the novel would be precisely that it does what Achebe demands it do.

Open City is distinctly reminiscent of Kurtz’ “splendid monologue,” but Marlow tells the story of Kurtz’ descent into madness to a nameless narrator—and Conrad places nearly the entire novel in quotation marks to continually remind us of the frame narration—*Open City* gives only the voice, with none of the context or frame. If *Heart of Darkness* uses the presence of spectators—Marlow listening to Kurtz, a group of sailors on a boat listening to Marlow—to frame speech as performative, focusing on the labor of producing meaning in terms of the subject’s own needs, then it does so because Marlow and his fellow sailors can, cynically, regard the truth of who they are. But the absence of spectators, in *Open City*, facilitates a desire to avoid looking too closely at how the sausage is made. In strict narrative terms, there is no outside to Julius, the sole narrative voice of the novel. The novel’s lack of quotation marks effectively embeds other voices into his voice, the uninterrupted monologue of the analysand who remembers and quotes (or misremembers and misquotes) the voices of everyone else. We even hear Moji’s accusation in his voice, which actually allows us not to hear her at all; it is impossible to gain perspective on his perspective, because we are only given his perspective.

The point of connection and contrast is clearest in the first word of both Julius and Marlowe’s narration, “and”; in both cases, beginning a story with a conjunction reminds us that the voice emerges from a context. But while Marlowe’s “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” is said “suddenly,” shattering a silent, sailorly reverie, the first words of Julius’ narration (“And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall”) are also the first words of Teju Cole’s novel, without quotation marks or dialog markers. Conrad places his reader outside of Marlowe’s narration; Cole places his reader inside Julius’ head.

In this way, if *Heart of Darkness* is an allegory or deconstruction of the commodity fetish—in which the objects of bourgeois society, like Kurtz’ Intended’s piano, are connected to the violent exploitation of their production, such as the the primitive accumulation of Belgian colonialism—then *Open City* is not only presented to the reader as a commodity itself, fetishized and stripped of the social context in which it was produced, but its moments of disturbing inadequacy serve to spoil the illusion. *Heart of Darkness* quietly interpellates its readers as fellow (former) sailors; especially when first published in *Blackwoods*, the story is told to a readership much like Marlow’s own audience on board the Nelly, men who know what women must be prevented from knowing, lest it upset the basis of bourgeois society (as Marlowe relates, “They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over”).

Open City, by a very precise contrast, is “about” the feminine knowledge which men must be prevented from knowing, the knowledge that rape is the omnipresent subtext of modern social life, the fact that “culture” is rape culture, and the fact that this rape culture is the production of ignorance of itself. In this way, while *Heart of Darkness* is built to be read symptomatically—presenting the unconscious of capitalist society, structured like Kurtz’ language—*Open City* begs for a symptomatic reading that it makes impossible, suggesting only to frustrate; Marlow and his fellow followers of the sea know but cannot tell where the ivory in pianos comes from; Julius and his readers, fellow consumers of literary high culture, constantly and obsessively tell what they cannot know.

Rape Culture’s Commodity Fetish

In the epigraph to this essay, I’ve quoted the only occurrence of the word “rapist” in the novel. The word “rape” does not occur at all: Moji says that Julius “forced [himself] on her”—using precisely that wording, three times—but there are several cognates of the word scattered throughout the narrative. Julius’ fear that “I could, in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist or ‘Viking’” is a reference to a Belgian journalist “who wrote on his blog that Belgian society was fed up with ‘murdering, thieving, raping Vikings from North Africa’” (XX). In context, he is expressing his fear is that he—as a black man—would be racially profiled and singled out for violence by nationalist thugs; his fear that he be “taken for a rapist,” then, is covered over by the fact that, in Belgium, such an apprehension would be the product of bigotry, not fact.

When Julius reports that Moji three times describes how “I had forced myself on her,” “I had taken her to another room and forced myself on her,” and “You forced yourself on me eighteen years ago,” his repetition of the word “force” recalls the copy of Simone Weil’s essays which Julius briefly picks up at his friend’s house; referring to “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” his friend suggests he “take a look at it sometime”:

“She’s wonderful on the *Iliad*, he said. I think she really gets what force is about, how it motivates action and loses control of what it has motivated.”

As Weil argues, “The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad*, is force,” and clarifies that “force” is that which “turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing”; the human spirit is not only that which has been *thingified*, in the passive voice, but the thingifier as well, who has been “swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle.” Rape, in these terms, is the manner in which Julius has made Moji into a thing, and in doing so, has become a thing himself.

On some level, Julius does understand this, in the same way that he knows he does not like Coke—that his body rejects it—without quite knowing why. But when Julius observes that “I could no longer stand Coke. Not its taste, not the rapacious company that produced it, or the ubiquitous screech of its advertising,” the word “rapacious” is coincidental in the Freudian way as is his repetition of her word

“force.”⁹ In chapter ten, Julius recalls a day from his pre-adolescence, a kind of primal scene, in which a Coke bottle—that great metonym of postwar American globalization—symbolically links the desire he associates with manhood with his resentments towards his mother: he wants a Coke, and when he is a grown man, he resolves, he will drink a Coke whenever he wants, every day. His mother’s narrative of adulthood denies him the Coke, however; he knows that if he *asked* for one, she would embarrass him for his desire by naming it infantile (which “would be unbearable for a proud boy like me”) (132-3). He drinks the Coke anyway, but hides it from his mother.

In this way, he learns that to be a man is to take what you want, in defiance of female restrictions, and to deny that you did it. This event takes place before his sexual awakening; he tries to masturbate but does not know how (he recalls putting “a searching hand” into his shorts but cannot find what he wants, recalling that “I lay on my back, and fondled myself, but had no imagination, no idea what to do”) (XX). But the event also either structures his understanding of masculinity, as he grows into adulthood and sexual maturity, or retroactive allows him to decode it. When he raped Moji, he also took what he wanted, secretly and in defiance of female restrictions, and then denied it. In fact, his frustrated recourse to books and magazine pictures as he tries (and fails) to masturbate might be read as foreshadowing (or retroactively decoding) the adult Julius’ constant search for meaning in literature and art, a similar displacement of bodily frustration onto the mastery of *texts*.

However, Julius is never a suspicious reader. Here and elsewhere, he insists on avoiding what he calls the error of “over-interpretation.” “For many years, I had been tempted to overinterpret the other events of that day,” he declares, but he quickly decides that his subsequent estrangement (“what happened afterward, between my mother and myself”) “was due as much to any other day in my boyhood” (136). This becomes a pattern. Julius always steps back from the brink of true self-analysis, precisely because he does not “believe” and fears to lose his skepticism. At one point, he sharply distinguishes himself from what he calls “the overinterpreters,” and criticizes “a mood in the society that pushed people more toward snap judgments and unexamined opinions, an unscientific mood...a more general inability to assess evidence” (28). He is therefore unlikely to pick up the linguistic clue that a Freudian would quickly seize, when he casually recalls how he no longer likes Coke, or his reference to that “rapacious” company, or that whether or not he’s taken as a rapist might depend on the “place” where he is apprehended.

“Julius” is not only skeptical in general, he is specifically skeptical of women who claim to have been raped. He criticizes society’s “antiscientific mood” immediately after a “take back the night” march disturbs his composure (while he is on the phone with Nadège):

“to the old problem of mass innumeracy, it seemed to me, was being added a more general inability to assess evidence. This made brisk business for those whose specialty was in the promising of immediate solutions: politicians, or priests of the various religions. It worked particularly well for those who wished to rally people around a cause. The cause itself, whatever it was, hardly mattered. Partisanship was all.”

It is not coincidence that Julius is troubled by partisan appeals and those who would “rally people around a cause” when he hears the “Take Back the Night” rally outside his apartment; he associates the sound with “a hunting party flushing rabbits out of their holes” and closes the window to shut out the noise. It is safe to assume that Julius would not have tweeted “believe her” in response to Dylan Farrow’s accusation. Secure in his apartment, he exercises a right to remain untroubled by the voices of the mob below by closing the window; as when he responds to Moji’s accusation by silently leaving the party, he hears and then silently un-hears. I would suggest that many or most critics have also closed the window,

⁹ In Cole’s essay, “Natives on the Boat,” Cole observes that “‘Heart of Darkness’ was written when rapacious extraction of African resources by European adventure was gospel truth—as it still is” and records V. S. Naipaul complaining that Chinua Achebe “refusal to write about his decades in America was disappointing.” Without going into it here, I would suggest that *Open City* is usefully read through the matrix of concerns that this essay brings out, published as it was, on September 11th, 2012.

preferring to remain untroubled by the novel's supremely unreliable narrator.

While Julius' desire not to desire Coke is also the desire not to want to rape—on a symbolic level—his retreat into symbolic representation is a retreat from actually desiring not to rape. Throughout the novel, his desire for solitude reflects this drive to no longer be, himself, “rapacious company”; the novel is motivated, as a narrative, by Nadège breaking up with him, and by his realization that there is something about himself that he does not know, that she has fallen out of love with him for a reason he cannot quite grasp. As he recalls, immediately after the story of “the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle” is ruptured by his realization that he never listened to Saidu (whose name recalls the Arabic word “help”).

Yet his distaste for who he was remains insistently unconscious, unexamined, unacknowledged. Despite the self-congratulatory words at the start of the novel's second part—“I have searched myself”—Julius does not find what he was looking for, and remains as “winded and seething,” unsatisfied, as he did on the day of the rains and Coke bottle (xx). He calls his walks a “release,” but they do not seem to satisfy him, leaving him instead in “a state of disoriented fatigue,” from which he returns home to “lay in bed, too tired to release myself from wakefulness” (6). The novel is written from this place of frustration, circling around the object of its dissatisfaction without ever, quite, finding it. At the novel's ultimate conclusion, therefore, Julius goes beyond the pleasure principle to fantasize about death; the only narrative resolution he can find, since he will not *act*, is self-annihilation.

Death Fantasies

Julius' flickers of consciousness provoke a desire for death. In the earlier passage, after the “unexpected pang” he feels as “the image of the one I was thinking of flitted past,” he contemplates drowning: “how easy it would be, I thought, to slip gently into the water here, and go down to the depths.” In context, in this moment, Julius seems to be referencing his recent breakup, the event which was the occasion provoking the narrative itself. As it is possible to reconstruct, Julius begins taking long walks, “last fall,” right after Nadège's departure, and does so as an attempt to quiet his mind so he can sleep (“The walks met a need,” he claims; “once I discovered them as therapy, they became the normal thing, and I forgot what life had been like before I started walking.”)¹⁰ But the “dreamless sleep” which he describes as relieving his “hectic mind” is less a release than an evasion; he does not speak his trauma, but represses it, avoiding self-consciousness by the desire for unconsciousness. Death is preferable to shame.

Nadège's departure is a kind of disgrace for Julius: though it is unclear precisely why she leaves him when she does—unclear to the reader, perhaps, because Julius does not want to know—she seems to represent, to Julius, the possibility of thinking well of himself, in a very particular way.

Especially if we read her name etymologically—Nadège being the French spelling of an originally Slavic name meaning “hope”—her departure is a loss of faith in that story, the hopelessness of living up to it. Just as she is no longer in love with him, his story having been revealed as the fiction that it is, he is no longer in love with himself.

Death, too, has been present throughout the novel. As Julius reflects, early on:

“The sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange to me, and I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counter-instinctive death drive, into movable catacombs . . . all of us re-enacting unacknowledged traumas.” (7)

At the conclusion of the novel, after attending a performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony that he regards as “expressive of last things” (and which is generally understood as about death)—Julius finds himself accidentally locked out of the concert hall, on a flimsy fire escape.¹¹ As he looks down, he

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¹¹ For example, Lewis Thomas's “Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony,” opens by writing “The long passages on all the strings at the end, as close as music can come

contemplates falling: “death would be instant. The thought comforted me” (255). That he is buffeted by rain recalls the heavy rain on the day he drank Coke (as well as his flirtation with death, on the same day, when he gazes into his family’s well). But Julius has always been flirting with losing himself in the dark fluids and murky waters of literature, as when he was drawn to the Hudson river and a reverie on *Moby Dick* in chapter four or when the pounding rain that brings part one to a close is embedded in a passage ostentatiously recalling the end of James Joyce’s “The Dead” (56, 146). Here the river of dark literary forgetfulness is an allusion to Dante, or to the river Styx more broadly: as he crosses West Side Highway, he is greeted by a Charon figure, who offers to take him on his boat:

“He raised his arm in greeting. We are just about to leave, he said. I presumed he was in charge of the boat, and I explained that I wasn’t part of the party. It’s okay, he said. The boat isn’t at capacity yet. And you don’t have to pay anything; they’ve covered the costs. He smiled, and added, I can tell you’d love to hop on. Come on!”

The novel ends with the suggestion of a death-fantasy that is not, quite, confirmed within the novel’s diegetic frame. Perhaps the man in uniform is simply a friendly stranger; perhaps Julius did not jump to his death from the fire-escape. Within the terms of the novel’s narration, it is not possible to know. But it is possible to *believe* that Julius kills himself, that the novel’s closing image—of birds fatally disoriented by the sight of the “single monumental flame” of the statue of liberty, and falling to their deaths—represents Julius’ own self-destructive endpoint (258).

In any case, it is certainly the fantasy with which he concludes his self-analysis: after Julius dwells upon the idea of falling, as he looks down into the “neon inferno” of Times Square from the rain-drenched fire escape, the final page of the novel describes what the boatman takes him to see: the Statue of Liberty. The sight of the great American immigrant fantasy, however, prompts Julius to recall the detailed catalog of dead birds which Colonel Tassin carefully compiled, as hundreds were “fatally disoriented.” The final sentence of the novel is this statistic:

“On the morning of October 13th, for example, 175 wrens had been gathered in, all dead of the impact, although the night just past hadn’t been particularly windy or dark” (256)

Birds have been a consistent symbol for what Julius, an immigrant, calls “the miracle of natural immigration” in the early pages of the novel, where he recalls beginning his aimless wandering not long after “I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations” (4, 3). Migrating birds do not respect or fear borders, like the internet radio station he listens to—in French, Dutch, German—and the poly-lingual literature he reads, a paragon of cosmopolitan cultural consumption. But in the final, apparently tangential recollection of birds being confused and disoriented by the statue of liberty, his identification with falling, dying birds expresses both Julius’ death-wish and the failure of this cultural fantasy.

For Julius, the “faint green in the mist” of the Statue of Liberty is the same fatally disorienting light that Jay Gatsby’s green light represented, at the end of the Daisy’s dock (“‘If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay,’ said Gatsby. ‘You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock.’”). In America, Julius hoped he could make himself new, escape the self he had been. But the United States, the land of Coca Cola, does not provide the transcendence he had hoped. For one thing, “the crown of the statue has remained closed since late 2001,” and this closure of the city is made particularly concrete by the figure of Saidu, the imprisoned Liberian refugee who Julius visits in a DHS detention facility. For another, as Julius occasionally allows himself to acknowledge, the miracle of natural migration has always been a function of race. “Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European

to expressing silence itself, I used to hear as Mahler’s idea of leave-taking at its best. But always, I have heard this music as a solitary, private listener, thinking about death. Now I hear it differently. I cannot listen to the last movement of the Mahler Ninth without the door-smashing intrusion of a huge new thought: death everywhere, the dying of everything, the end of humanity.”

refugees,” he recalls at one point; “Blacks, ‘we blacks,’ had known rougher ports of entry” (55).

Alone with himself, Julius will occasionally allow himself this realization, the fact that Ellis Island, “the focus of so many myths...had been built too late for those early Africans – who weren’t immigrants in any case – and it had been closed too soon to mean anything to the later Africans like Kenneth, or the cab driver, or me” (54-5). These are the moments when he comes closest to death (a page later, Julius gazes into the Hudson, and muses; “How easy it would be, I thought, to slip gently into the water here, and go down to the depths”) (56). But it is Moji’s revelation that pushes him closest to the edge; in solitude, reality can be endlessly dream-worked into acceptable forms. In the presence of the other, on the other hand, his security is broken, and so he must flee.

Julius presents himself as a very passive narrator, apparently writing as aimlessly as he walks; at one point, he is attacked by a mugger But he would like to picture himself as passive throughout: the novel begins, for example, when he “found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city,” and his monologue is driven by this same sense of a motiveless drifting. The city is the current which carries him along; in this way, he does not begin to walk but *is begun* by his walks, in the passive voice. Instead of walking into New York, he observes that “New York worked its way into my life at walking pace,” and as he is taken farther and farther afield, he is occasionally “compelled” to return by subway. And as walking becomes habitual, it is a habit he falls into, just as one might fall into the Hudson River and be borne away by the current (a fantasy he indulges). In this way, the novel ceases to be Julius’ story because Julius himself disappears: the city becomes the protagonist, the motive agent for the narrative and the subject of its sentences.

The dominant reading of the novel—particularly as it has been crystallized by New York City based critics like Wood and Messud—has been to praise this disappearance as the source of the novel’s artistic vision, to frame Julius in Emersonian terms, as an invisible eyeball who sees without being seen. In this way, as Julius reads the city, and as Teju Cole’s authorial mediation disappears, it is “we,” the readers assumed by the reviews, who inherit the insights of his productively alienating labor. And as the layers of narrative mediation pass away, we passively follow him through the city, such that New York moves into *our* life, at walking pace. If he is the flâneur, then we can be as well.

Moji’s voice spoils this novel; Julius can no longer be legible as the flâneur, what Walter Benjamin described as “the ultimate hero of modernity,” if he is the villain in her story. He can hardly be Benjamin’s “figure who seeks to give voice to [modernity’s] paradoxes and illusions...to give form to, the fragmented, fleeting experiences of the modern,” if he silences her and makes her no more than a form, simply a *thing*. If it was, as Walter Benjamin put it, “the unique provision of Baudelaire’s poetry that the image of woman and the image of death intermingle in a third: that of Paris...a sunken city, and more submarine than subterranean,” then it is certainly true that *Open City* makes New York City a tomb where Moji and her accusation can be buried and repressed. But it is only Julius who seeks to be a young, African “Baudelaire,” not Teju Cole.

Teju Cole, after all, tweeted “Believe her.” Julius would not have done so. In the event, in fact, neither believes nor disbelieves, and even his admission that her story is credible is, essentially, a form of passive silencing:

“I am only too familiar with bad stories -- badly imagined, or badly told -- because I hear them frequently from patients. I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives. But what Moji had said to me that morning, before I left John’s place, and gone up on the George Washington Bridge, and walked the few miles back home, had nothing in common with such stories. She had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy” (243).

While this statement might seem to show an admirable willingness to take her statement seriously, this performance of objectivity is an evasion; he watches himself listen, expertly, but does not, in fact, hear what she has said. Instead, by converting her statement into an *object* that can be scrutinized,

investigated, and known—the object of his own expertise—he produces himself as analyst to her analysand. He is the analyst who listens without speaking, unseen and as absent as possible; she is the hysteric, whose own words testify against her. After all, when she speaks to him “in a low and even voice, emotional in its total lack of inflection,” her lack of emotion might seem to indicate a cool and objective ability to see and judge clearly. Yet by calling upon his professional expertise, he converts even her “lack of inflection” into a sign of repressed emotion, by referring to it as her “flat affect,” a clinical term indicative of depression, trauma, or more serious pathologies such as schizophrenia. Her emotion would testify against her; so does her lack of emotion. The only way not to be doubted would be not to speak at all.

Julius, therefore, does not speak. After Moji predicts that he will not acknowledge what he had done (“You’ll say nothing...I know you’ll say nothing. I’m just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed”), he responds to her demand that he “say something” both by saying nothing, and transforming her into an object to be scrutinized, the pathological subject which can testify to anything except what it knows about itself. Julius’ evasion into aesthetic reverie is, therefore, an aggressive non-response, an active inaction like his refusal to speak. Her experience remains unclaimed, as she tells him, the trauma of re-living the original violation because it has not been represented, has not become *known*:

“seeing me again, and seeing that I had lost none of my callousness, she said, had renewed and had brought back to her a distress comparable in intensity to what she had suffered in those weeks, only this time, she said, she had tried, for reasons unclear even to her, to keep her pain hidden and put a happy face on the situation” (245).

For Moji, in other words, the literal violation has been followed by a symbolic violence against her knowledge of herself: she was raped, once, but has been unable to say so, forever after, a silence which his silence, passively, makes necessary. Even before she speaks, she knows that she will not be believed. In this sense, he has already spoken, and thus does not need to speak again: as she tells him “this was so long ago, and it’s my word against yours, and you’ll say it was consensual, or that it never even happened at all. I have anticipated all your possible answers.” If the first violation was an act of violence, in other words, the second is in the passive voice; because his response is present to her before she can articulate her complaint, it preempts the very possibility of accusation. She therefore finds herself compelled to hide his crime, “to keep her pain hidden and put a happy face on the situation.” She must labor to cover his tracks, while he must do, and does, nothing.

To be “at home in the world” is a fantasy of cosmopolitanism which Julius allows readers to enjoy. What Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “ethics in a world of strangers”—in a book that Julius actually mails to a character who has challenged his worldview—is the desire for a philosophy that could mediate and mitigate the violent consequences of identitarian difference. As racism turned on its head, “cosmopolitanism” is the absence of the kind of alienating recognition through which violence becomes thinkable, when the object of violation is understood not to be “one of us” and therefore *homo sacer*. To be “a citizen of the world,” as Diogenes proclaims, is to make the world into a single imagined community, to make something like “illegal immigration” unthinkable.

If this is a faithful reading of the story that Julius tells about himself, it is a poor reading of Julius himself. For one thing, far from being passive, his intensely maintained and policed solitude reveals an active and defensive imagination, energetically engaged in narratively justifying and defusing the deeply unsettling facts about himself which the reality principle occasionally brings to his attention. His mind is no more “open” than is New York City itself: one of the most heavily-policed urban spaces in the world, the city’s apparent openness hides the authoritarian and repressive force by which order is maintained, violently when necessary. For New York City—and for America—“9/11” represented the interruption of a reality principle into the myths of globalization with which Americans had lulled themselves into contented unconsciousness, as characters like Julius’ interlocutor, Farouq, passionately argue. The fact of American global aggression produces Al-Qaeda as its consequent blowback (as Farouq puts it, “For us,

America is a version of Al-Qaeda”) (121). The Department of Homeland Security detention center where Julius meets Saidu—an African refugee who believes in the American dream, and who has been imprisoned for his naiveté—represents the defensive consequences of this well-secured fantasy state.

“Neo Africanus: In Teju Cole’s World”

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