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From Violence to Silence: Memory, History and Forgetting in Teju Cole's *Open City*
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Abstract: Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole's 2011 novel *Open City* explores urban space and immigrant experience in a narrative encounter with the monuments and memorials of New York City. The novel presents students with a fictional horizon for understanding real trauma and violence through the conflicts between memory and history in everyday life. The paradox of storytelling as a practice that is at once life-affirming and death-driven practice is a central element of Cole's novel. This essay tracks the multiple and overlapping geographical and biographical circuits traced by the novel's immigrant narrator as he observes the exploited and forgotten inhabitants of the city, past and present, and as he recounts the lapses of personal experience that constitute global history.

Keywords: African-American Culture and History, Colonialism, Memory and Trauma, Migration, Philosophy of History, Transnational Literature, Urban Spaces

Teju Cole's 2011 novel *Open City* is a provocative text through which literature instructors can initiate discussion on the traumatic memories of migration that permeate American cities and can thereby introduce students to a range of topics at the intersection of history, heritage studies, critical race studies and immigration studies. Throughout the novel, the reader encounters the difficulty of remembering—especially the incomplete expression of memory around traumatic events—entering into the larger problem of recording and remembering history, particularly from those narratives that cause discomfort and pain. A Nigerian immigrant to the United States, Cole's novel speaks elegantly to transatlantic black experiences, opening a window into the vagaries of migration seen also in the work of his contemporaries, writers like Mohsin Hamid, Aminatta Forna and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.¹

Cole's novel teaches readers how to perceive narratives of memory and history in their own everyday lives, in the places that they live, those that they might travel to and in monuments and memorials formal and informal. Cole structures the novel in such a way that it contains lessons for living, also for interpreting our own experiences through the

¹ Cole's novel finds intriguing interlocutors—and can be a source of engaging class discussions, as well as inspiring material for critical college-level writing assignments on history and intersectionality in contemporary American culture—when taught alongside Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*, and Forna's 2018 novel *Happiness*.

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stories of others, and on the landscapes we inhabit. Moreover, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, in the novel, the storyteller's greatest gift lies in the "warmth" that is created by the consuming "flame" of another's life, fate and, ultimately, death:

the novel is significant...not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about. (101)

We encounter death near the end of the novel in a passage recounting the itinerant narrator's chance happening upon the controversial archaeological site that was formerly called the "Negro Burial Ground" in Lower Manhattan.² The scene acts as a climax for the emotional tone set earlier in the novel around the Ground Zero site, and various characters and clients Julius encounters. The burial ground scene also captures the eerily disjointed sense of physical scale and historical proportion of the novel's urban spaces.

This kind of reading can make for a powerful emotional resonance, provoking an intellectual as well as an emotional response that challenges readers concepts of self and identity, providing a lens through which we can view our own experience in relation to others and the unexpected density of the urban spaces that we inhabit. *Open City* paradoxically signals a new beginning towards a concept of nation through its very transnationality. Contextualized as an American migration, it asks readers to insist upon a linking of the urgency of these kinds of movements—often made at risk of death—to the instability of belonging to a place and adopting a history. The tenuous connection between self and place in *Open City*, particularly in the ways in which such a connection forms around memory in the recollection (voluntary or involuntary) of trauma, often as a result of different kinds of migration, glimpses the operation of ideology below the surface of

² As a National Monument under the jurisdiction of the National Parks Service since 2007, the site has been renamed the African Burial Ground National Monument. For an insightful and comprehensive analysis of the historical site from a heritage studies perspective, see Epperson, Terrence W. "The Contested Commons: Archaeologies of Race, Repression, and Resistance in New York City."

consciousness in daily life. Finally, the reader faces a series of confounding absences in the novel, there are disappearances throughout the narrative that create nagging doubts as to the reliability of the narrator—a character readers may not like, but to whom they will likely accord some empathy. The revelation near the end of the text that speaks to the violence of these absences is thus jarring and simulates the larger omissions that occur in dominant cultural and historical narratives. Cole's narrative structure demonstrates these narrative vicissitudes at work in the way that memory function and how such an interplay of presence and absence shapes the cultural landscapes we inhabit.

The Legible Crowd: (Re)inscribing Violence

Open City, explores the relationship between personal memory, public spaces and the recollection of history. Julius, the novel's protagonist, sees history written *on* the city. The city can be read through identifying the kinds of people that inhabit different neighborhoods and how public space is used—for personal and public, economic and cultural purposes. Monuments and memorials, often at odds with the spaces they occupy, provide touchstones for exploring the past and connecting it to the present. This is especially important to the narrative in identifying a subjective experience troubled by larger historical narratives. However, as a transnational immigrant, the narrator of the text embodies the mobility necessary to adequately imagine the interlocking geographic spaces and geopolitical systems that produce the mixture of governmentality and cultural production that memorials and monuments represent. With a focus on the hybridity of cultural and political production, Cole's narrator exemplifies the process of the reception/perception of people and ideas through historic time and geographic space.

To create these effects, Cole's novel engages with the reader's imaginary, creating elastic narratives that exist in the present but are not held to journalistic or academic standards of veracity. Novelists do not have to prove the viability of their characters and stories, and so can suspend reality in ways that allow for a particular perspective from which to consider fraught events. In *Open City*, Teju Cole gives readers a character whose believability teeter totters throughout the novel, in a manner that produces sympathy and, likewise, disturbs in subtle ways. In toying with readers' ability to trust the narrative, Cole

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teases out memory, accentuates its unreliability and situates the personal and the historical as complicated by the systems in which they mix.

Early in the narrative, Cole introduces readers to Julius' disconnect from the external world and his detached observation of things and events occurring around him. In the first of many passages built around the presence of birds, in this case migrating geese, we enter Julius' personal narrative, "I doubted in some part of myself whether these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies and tireless little hearts, really did exist. So amazed was I by them that I couldn't trust my memory when they weren't there." (Cole 4) The birds thus give living expression to Julius' difficulty in positioning himself within the larger story of his life, in particular around his migratory experiences. Evidence builds throughout the novel that brings into question Julius' ability to account for events outside of his subjective experience, even events in which he has actively played a key role. His understanding and recollection is colored by his own notions of self, as he reshapes the past to fit into an identity that he has carefully crafted. Waiting until the final pages of the novel to reveal his rape of his childhood friend's sister, Moji, Cole gives the reader space to comfortably settle into the absence of certainties, to trust that there is harmlessness in such ambiguity.

The revelation of violence then has the power to elicit a double reaction in the reader—the shock that accompanies the knowledge that a person has the ability to commit such violence, and the discomfort that comes with not having suspected as much. There is a tension that accompanies large-scale societal violence, in that such violence demands of an intellectual response alongside the emotional one that Cole mediates through the imaginary of fiction and use of a personalized, internal narrative. The personal and the historical have a causal effect in the protagonist's internal narrative and though Julius' interactions with people and places throughout the novel Cole provides a template for readers to utilize this process of navigating the passage between inner self and the outside world. Personal histories and historical events are connected in the narrative through Julius' analysis of art and architecture, an activity inspired by his movement through urban spaces. The instability in the relationship between memory and the changeable nature of one's physical, material environment thereby calls into question the stability dominant historical narratives.

Contemplating Historic Absences in the Everyday

The mode of writing employed in *Open City* is reflected on in contemporary scholarship on transnational literature, which attempts to account for and explicate larger historical absences in order to construct critical responses arising from the personal, creative, endeavor of contemporary literature. The result is a mode of critical reading that is at once intimate to the lives of readers while also allowing for a more complete understanding of the intersections of trauma, memory and global historical events. In her essay, "Literature as a World," Pascale Casanova proposes that literature be held not solely to its political associations and concerns, but that it move beyond these borders to be able to form a more holistic criticism of itself, to:

permit us to set out on a course of criticism that would be both internal and external; in other words, a criticism that could give a unified account of, say, the evolution of political, economic and social world—including telling us how, by a very long (indeed historical) process, the link gets broken in the most autonomous regions of this space." (Casanova 72)

Giving expression to Casanova's notion of a unified criticism born out of lapses in political, economic, and social processes, Cole's novel shows the brokenness of historical concepts by depicting events as interwoven with, and inseparable from, the uneven personal experience of the narrator. Cole shapes this personal/historical narrative around Julius' daily walks, allowing the reader to become habituated to their everyday occurrence, using a contemplative tone that lulls the reader into a mood of thoughtful reflection. By embedding accounts of historic events into this contemplative narrative (events inseparable from the political, economic and social formation of a place, such as the African Burial Ground), Cole avoids directly confronting the reader. The reader is necessarily implicated in historic and political occurrences and Cole's narrative provides ample space in which the reader can contemplate that very thing. Readers are thus gradually engaged in a critical appraisal of the function of history in one's subjective experience. Just as Julius recalls the wonder with which St. Augustine regarded the ability of Saint Ambrose "to read without sounding out the

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words" (5), Cole seems to be suggesting that there may be a point in the future in which reading without a division between internal and external criticism, will seem a wondrous and slightly ridiculous relic. He thus gestures towards a move beyond even the "holistic" hybridity of internal and external practices Casanova proposes and into a mode of reading that will occur on a terrain of immanence and incorporation—that is to say, where the boundaries of body, self, text and space are dissolved.

In his essay, "The Idea of 'Third Generation Nigerian Literature': Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel," Hamish Dalley proposes a reading of *Open City* that works to "open new avenues for thinking through the relations between time, space, and narrative in literature" (19). Written on the city and in relationship to his own experience and intellect, ruptures that likewise suggest that Julius' absences and disappearances throughout the narrative are indicative of loss of memory, as revealed by Moji later in the text. Dalley discusses Cole's use of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," suggesting that Benjamin's work serves as a blueprint for the novel's construction, guiding the reader through the "'constellation of causally unconnected moments [that] disrupts the stability of the present, throwing into doubt the assumption that entities presumed lost—like the subtle erasures beneath the rubble of Ground Zero—have, indeed, been destroyed" (28). Dalley posits that Cole places Julius outside of specific locations and categories of identity, which creates ruptures through which Julius can read historical events.³ Julius's walk through Ground Zero in Manhattan is fantastical, with advertisements for tours of the various tragic and grisly events of American history plastering the sidewalks. In the narrative, the everyday crowd goes about their routines, seemingly untouched by the significance of the place. Julius steps out of the flow of bodies to take in the place and the action. He stands alone just out of touch of the hurried crowd in the twilight, enveloped in the eerie sensation evoked by observing the awareness of history rushing alongside the present—of perceiving of history as *in progress*—as a narrative which is constantly being written and re-written through our own experiences, and amended to support the dominant historical narratives in support of current ideologies.

³ In the spirit of Dalley's reading, Julius' outsider brushes with historic sites align with Walter Benjamin's historical materialist who, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (257).

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At Ground Zero, Julius reads the first entry on the memorial to members of the New York police department who died in the line of service: "PTL. James Cahill, September 29, 1854" (57). There is no explanation of who James Cahill was or how he died, but a careful reader will note the Irish name, recall the hateful attitudes of the nineteenth century towards Irish Catholic immigrants and be reminded of the similarity in attitudes to Muslims, particularly after that inauspicious day in 2001. Like James Cahill, anonymous among the mass of New Yorkers, Julius walks through the militant swarms, making all present complicit in and affected by the particular history of this place:

The commuters with me marched along, shoulders up, heads low, all in black and gray. I felt conspicuous, the only person among the crowd who stopped to look out from the overpass at the site. Everyone else went straight ahead, and nothing separated them, nothing separated us, from the people who had worked directly across the street on the day of the disaster. When we descended the stairs into Vesey Street, we were hemmed in on both sides by a chain-link fence, penned in, 'like animals' stumbling to the slaughter. (58)

Through the crowd as an entity that is simultaneously disconnected and indivisible, Benjamin's notion of history as constellation is invoked, creating a collocation of place and meaning that imbues this moment in the narrative with historical significance, all the while maintaining the mundanity of the everyday. This occurs in spite of—or perhaps because of—the discomfort that this historical disruption in Julius' narrative and Cole's prose evokes:

The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarreled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay. Generations rushed through the eye of needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. (59)

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The passage connects this moment, this location and all involved within numerous historical, geographical and cultural narratives amassed within the place name New York. It is, perhaps, easy to conceive of the city as a *natural*, and therefore, permanent figure of the landscape as one goes about one's daily business. But Cole reminds the reader that this, and indeed all locations are imbued with such multifaceted narratives. As "one of the still legible crowd," Cole asserts his power to reinscribe the narratives that form public memory and thereby exemplifies the relationship of writing to history.

The concurrence of conflicting narratives of memory and history recalls the concept of planetarity that Gayatri Spivak examines in her 2003 book, *Death of a Discipline*. The strangeness of Julius's experience aligns with what Spivak describes in this text as "alterity." Julius both belongs and does not belong to the crowd moving about the World Trade Center. As an immigrant, as a person of color, he is constituted as "other," defined as in opposition to ideas of Americanness. But when viewed in the sequence of events that Cole describes it becomes apparent that he does, indeed, belong; as one more in a series of inhabitants, hearkening from different parts of the globe, with intentions and desires that coalesce to form this present moment and location. Cole suggests that these narratives are contiguous and that any understanding of them as otherwise is an incomplete narrative, an unfinished picture. Moreover, Spivak tells us that the combination of these lines of thought and series of events must be viewed from different perspectives in order to see them in their entirety. To consider that which is *within* is always also to consider that which is *without*, the negotiation between these spaces is where lost histories might be found:

If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. And thus to think of it is already to transgress, for, in spite of our forays into what we metaphorize, differently, as outer and inner space, what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous. (Spivak 73)

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The transgression represented by alterity that Spivak describes—the imagined difference—speaks to much of what is strange in Julius's experience and, indeed, to much of what is strange about the novel as a whole.

In one of his daily walks, Julius reads poetry and strolls through maples, elms and boxwoods. He sees a swarm of bees that "reminded [him] of certain Yoruba epithets for Oldumare, the supreme deity: he who turns blood into children, who sits in the sky like a cloud of bees" (42). Readers then find him in

...a cove formed by two large rocks, I went and sat, as though led by an invisible hand, on a pile of rocks. I stretched out and laid my head against one of the rocks, placing my cheek on its damp, rough surface. I must have cut an absurd figure to someone looking on from a distance. The bees over the boxwood lifted as a single cloud and vanished into a tree. After a few minutes, my breath returned to normal and the bellowing in my ribs ceased. I got up slowly, and attempted to clean my clothes, brushing bits of grass and dirt away from my trousers and sweater, rubbing earth stains out of my palms. (42-43)

This passage is written with almost ritualistic detail—being led by an invisible hand, the sensation of the rock against his cheek, the appearance of the bees associated with a religious figure. Julius rises slowly to remove the grass and dirt from his clothes and hands—all of this suggests some sort of trance state, he breathes heavily as he emerges from this suggestion of aporia. The reader is left with no explanation, but is provided with evidence for possible lapses in time and what occurs in this lost time. This lapse is written in such a way that it almost eludes the reader's notice, forming the question as to what else we may be missing, what else about Julius that Cole may not be telling us. It also evokes the difficulty of attempting to communicate experiences that are essentially unknowable, that is, experiences that evade language and trouble oral accounts, as well as written records. Julius's self-confessed inability to trust his own recollection, as well as the marked lapses in action in the narrative, draw attention to a strangeness derived from an attempt to create a demarcation between culture and subjectivity.

Home and Comfort: Losing Your Place In Transnational Migration

Julius constantly encounters people who have been forced to migrate, often as the result of traumatic events and provides ample evidence of the difficulties in the experience of migrations. This may be seen to account for the aloof emotional distance that Julius maintains throughout the book with almost everyone he meets. During Julius's trip to Brussels—in which he makes half-hearted attempts at finding his maternal grandmother and seems to settle for the companionship of the woman that he meets on his flight from New York, who also exists in a transnational space, moving between Belgium and the United States—we meet Farouq, himself an immigrant from Morocco. Julius strikes up a surprising friendship with Farouq, who works at the Internet café that Julius frequents during his stay in Belgium. Julius avoids interacting with men that he encounters in New York on anything more than a surface level (other than his unnamed "Friend"), and his friendliness to Farouq surprises even himself, but he elides over any emotional significance that it may carry by chalking it up to practicality: "I wondered how this aggressive familiarity had struck him. I wondered, also, why I had said it. A false note, I decided. But soon after I changed my mind. I would be going into the ship for a few weeks, and it was best to make friends..." (102). It is through Farouq—himself a scholar, despite his mundane employment—that Walter Benjamin enters the text. Farouq is reading Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" at the time that the two meet. Cole uses the variety of men that he encounters to introduce his readers to different types of migrants—Pierre the bootblack, from the Caribbean and Saidu, the Liberian he visits in prison—but Farouq holds a special kind of significance, as he is able to parse some of the difficulties of modern experience and identity (and, indeed, migrant experience) with an intellectual vigor and curiosity that Julius himself can't seem to muster.

While in Belgium Julius returns to reading Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. The book mirrors Julius' search for his maternal grandmother in that it describes a photograph of Barthes' recently deceased mother from childhood that Barthes repeatedly references, but never shows, despite the inclusion of other photographs in the book. Julius's experience in Belgium circle around a notion of family and belonging, visiting the city in which he last

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knew his grandmother to live, looking for her in passers by, but ultimately avoiding contact and the potential for emotional impact that such contact carries.⁴

There are similarities between that of the novel's main protagonist and Cole himself. Both Cole and Julius leave Nigeria, Julius under somewhat secretive circumstances to attend university in the United States, and both attain citizenship and the privilege to travel freely that comes with it. Cole writes about a trip home to Nigeria in his second book, *Every Day is for the Thief*. In that book, Cole is perplexed by the change that has overcome him in his time away, unable to pin down, what exactly is so different about him, what makes him stand out as foreign in his home country:

When I start speaking Yoruba, the man I've been haggling with over some cared masks laughs nervously. 'Ah oga,' he says, 'I didn't know you knew the language, I took you for an oyinbo, or an Ibo man!' I'm irritated. What subtle tells of dress or body language have, again, given me away. This kind of thing didn't happen when I lived here, when I used to pass through this very market on my way to exam preparation lessons. (58)

Considered alongside a later scene in which Julius walks through a street market in Harlem, the passage shows the bewildering proliferation of difference that occurs when perception underlies belonging. One can infer from the above account of Cole's interaction in the market in Lagos that there is a cultural and ethnic identity that may be tied to a national identity that can signify belonging in that space. However, in Harlem, belonging seems to have more to do with one's ability to sell or purchase goods and, importantly, the color of one's skin:

⁴ Just as in his fruitless search for his grandmother Julius experiences a sense of loss, but also an irrevocable distance, Barthes contemplates grief through the photograph, as the analogical separation between internal and external, representing a passage and a crossing between two disparate states of being. Barthes discusses the elusive and personal nature of this mode of distanced interaction through the Winter Garden Photograph, writing: "These same photographs, which phenomenology would call 'ordinary' objects, were merely analogical, provoking only her identity, not her truth; but the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*" (Barthes 71).

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I saw the brisk trade of sidewalk salesmen: the Senegalese cloth merchants, the young men selling bootleg DVDs, the Nation of Islam stalls. There were self-published books, dashikis, posters on black liberation, bundles of incense, vials of perfume and essential oil, djembe drums, and little tourist tchotchkes from Africa. (18)

These goods, described as being part of one collection, signify a specific set of objects that comprise ideas surrounding Black cultural identity. But Cole tempers the seemingly harmless quality of these objects—a poster celebrating black liberation alongside incense and tchotchkes—to suggest the commodification of political identity, the removal of some of its power by making it an object rather than an ethos. To intensify this point he continues on to describe visual representations of violence, "One table displayed enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans" (18). In what ways does this photograph of death live alongside consumerist items like posters and incense? Is it meant as a historical marker, a sign of progress, or a reminder of the way that gratuitous violence continually reasserts its presence as a boundary separating Africa and African-Americans in the contemporary period?⁵

This tableaux adds to an uncanny sensibility in Julius's observations, "Around the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue, the drivers of the black livery cabs gathered, smoking cigarettes and talking, awaiting the fares they could pick up off the clock" (18). Cole's description creates a sensation of timelessness, suggesting that this scene has played itself out over generations, perhaps in this very location. The sweetness of such nostalgic visions conflicts with the stereotypes of criminality represented by "young men in hooded sweatshirts, the denizens of an informal economy, [who] passed messages and small nylon-wrapped packages to each other, enacting a choreography opaque to all but themselves" (18). These young men, too, may be viewed as part of a long line of those

⁵ In much the same way, in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Frank Wilderson differentiates between gratuitous violence and contingent violence in describing the "Black ontology" that governs the African-American experience within—or, in fact, perpetually excluded from)—U.S. civil society (19-23).

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involved in informal economies suggested criminality of their trade complicates the sensation of nostalgia, adding to it a sequence of urban rituals that stymie Julius'—and the reader's—full comprehension.

As Julius continues on his walk, he describes the familiar sensation of seeing a person on the street who one might know, but being unsure one approaches with warmness, not wanting to risk either snubbing a friend or reproaching a stranger:

An old man with an ashen face and bulbous yellow eyes, passing by, raised his head to greet me, and I (thinking for a moment that he was someone I surely knew, or once knew or had seen before, and quickly abandoning each idea in turn; and then fearing that the speed of these mental disassociations might throw me off my stride) returned his silent greeting. I turned around to see his black cowl melt into an unlit doorway. (18)

There is a common bond suggested in this interaction, created by dint of being inhabitants of the same city, in the same neighborhood, by mutual recognition and, as Cole points out in his closing sentence of the paragraph, skin color: "In the Harlem night, there were no whites" (18). But if Julius possesses a certain comfort walking the streets of Harlem, this comfort is compromised near the University, where his manner and bearing mark him as a person of privilege. Julius is attacked by three young men and beaten badly. Their use of language affects him deeply, "I had encountered those words: never hostile, never directed at me...they were intended now, to humiliate, and I shrank from them...My hand was raised against curses too, as the blows kept coming" (213). Julius' feelings of violation go far beyond the physical violence he suffers.

Before the attack, encountering the young men for the second time in his walk, he relaxes, recalling, "There had earlier been...a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male, on our being 'brothers'" (212). This situation is reversed when an African taxi driver of unidentified nationality lays claim on Julius' manners and invites his brotherhood, chastising his refusal to join in. Later, encountering the security guard from the museum he had been in before the encounter with the taxi driver, he is further annoyed with demands made on his attention by some assumed membership in a community. "I thought

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of the cab driver who had driven me home from the Folk Art Museum—hey, I'm African just like you" (Cole 53). In this narrative, Cole points out the differences in these perceived, felt and perhaps "true" brotherhoods. Julius is ultimately refused membership in the first encounter and refuses membership in the second, making it difficult to identify him as a member of any one group, but not necessarily excluding him altogether from either. Rebecca Walkowitz calls upon the scholarship of Leslie Adelson to describe the uncertain trajectories of texts written by immigrants in a way that mirrors Julius' impasse between migrant and racial identities, writing that "changes in thinking about migration require changes in thinking about belonging, community, and civic recognition. They reject two assumptions: that migrants move 'between two worlds' that are distinct and coherent, and that migrants bring with them or enter into literary systems that are unique and strictly local" (534). The fallacy that migrants, or texts, smoothly move between two worlds is further supported in Cole's own description of his experience at the market in Lagos, and it seems clear that these passages of violence and misbelonging in *Open City* represent a sustained disruption that notion.

Cole does not identify the "Africans" that he meets by nationality. Neither the cab driver nor the museum guard is given a specific nationality. We must consider this exclusion notable, especially as it resists the misleading conceptualization of "Africa" as a singular geographic space that ignores the greater ideological forces at work in the creation of putative geopolitical boundaries. James Ferguson addresses this in his book, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. "Historically, Western societies have found in 'Africa' a radical other for their own constructions of civilization, enlightenment, progress, development, modernity, and, indeed, history... 'Africa' continues to be described through a series of lacks and absences, failings and problems, plagues and catastrophes" (2). This vexed notion of Africa as a single and unified geographical entity is echoed in *Open City*, where we encounter Nigeria only through the childhood memories of Julius, which focus on events that shape his notion of selfhood. There is no evidence of Nigeria as a political, cultural entity in its own right—either as an ethnically diverse society or as a sovereign state capable of asserting international influence. Set against the detail and historical knowledge that Julius has for locations in New York, the lack of attention to similar locations in Nigeria obscures its existence in his reality and negates its importance as a place that is part of his

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personal history. This is especially interesting when contrasted with Cole's vivid and thriving description of Nigeria in *Thief*:

The air in the strange, familiar environment of this city is dense with story, and it draws me into thinking of life as stories. The narratives fly at me from all directions. Everyone who walks into the house, every stranger I engage in conversation, has a fascinating story to deliver. The details I find so alluring in Gabriel García Márquez are here, awaiting their recording angel. All I have to do is prod gently, and people open up. And that literary texture, of lives full of unpredictable narrative, is what appeals. (65)

If Cole hopes to act as "their recording angel" in *Thief*—to record lives of unpredictable narrative—then, in *Open City*, he invests in a univocal narrative, strategically placing Julius in a stream of events and connecting the individual to a larger historical narrative through subjective lived experience.

This is movingly demonstrated in the scene in which Julius encounters the memorial for the African Burial Ground. Sighting a small patch of grass with a nominal marker, Julius approaches the burial ground as a space as a that is curiously both marked and unmarked. That is to say, it is a shape that calls his attention, but only as the shape of a small and non-descript contemporary signpost of "sculpture or architecture" that conceals a vast and momentous historical reality:

There was a small security island in the middle of the side street, and just across from it, surrounded by the huge office buildings, was a patch of grass. It wouldn't have drawn my attention at all, if I hadn't seen a curious shape—sculpture or architecture, I couldn't tell right away—set into the middle of it. An inscription on the monument, for that is what it turned out to be, identified it as a memorial for the site of an African burial ground. The tiny plot was what had been set aside now to indicate the spot, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the site had been large, some six acres, as far north as present-day Duane Street, and as far south as City Hall Park. Along Chamber Street and in the park itself, human remains were

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routinely uncovered. But most of the burial ground was now under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government. (220)

The discrepancy between the "tiny plot" and the original enormous size of the burial ground—with a length of up to four or five city blocks in Cole's estimation speaking—creates a visual correlative to vast number of slaves that inhabited, or passed through, the city now called New York. "Under office buildings, shops...[and] all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government," the death of these inhabitants is the substrata and bedrock of the city's thriving capitalism—forever hidden, but forming a more stable and lasting part of the meaning of the city than the cosmopolitan citizenship of Julius or his fellow mobile urbanites. The paradox of scale evoked as Julius stumbles upon the burial site highlights the novel's use of space as a way of imagining history. The disjunct between the tiny memorial and its historical corollary suggests that the material traces of the past that are immediately sensible to an individual can, at any moment, give way to an unthinkably deep reservoir of collective experience.

Conclusion: Legacies of Violence

The last sentence of the chapter that describes Julius' viewing of African Burial Ground connects Julius to the violence of the place: "The security island near the monument was unmanned. I stepped across the cordon, and into the grassy plot. Bending down, I lifted a stone from the grass and, as I did so, a pain shot through the back of my left hand" (222). This sentence also closes the chapter that began with Julius being beaten by three young African-American men. The pain in his hand physically connects him to the legacy of violence that is the true memorial to the heritage of chattel slavery in the United States. While the size of the monument in proportion to the enormity of these consequences disturbs, stranger still is the security island looming over the monument. "Unmanned," its efficacy lies in its mere signification of surveillance, while the description also communicates the anonymity and automatism of the power that whiteness wields in the period of late capitalism. This recalls the response to Julius' attack by "...the campus police, who would put up a sign by the elevator announcing (as so often before, in all the previous instances

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when I wasn't the victim) that somebody had recently been attacked in the neighborhood, and that the suspects were male, black, and young, and of average height and weight" (214). The sign, like the security island, serves only as a sign of surveillance and authority, both grossly inadequate in marking the passing of historical events and suppresses the true—systemic—economic and political sources of danger to human life.

The random violence of the previous attack leads Julius to reveal the rape of his childhood friend's sister, Moji. Julius's refusal (or potential inability) to respond to her accusation and the seeming indifference with which Cole indirectly addresses this through Julius's internal narrative, speak not just to the suppression of this single act, but recall the suppression of another history. In describing his own family history we learn that Julius has, "surmised that my own oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it" (80). It is this rape that was the beginning of the life of his own mother, but this detail in his family ancestry is something that he only considers later in life: "It was unimaginable that this is something that she and my mother would had ever discussed, but Mother herself would have known, or guessed it." Thus, in an attempt to fill in the lost space that the omission of this event has created, Julius tries to imagine a life that he had never directly experienced, other than through his own Mother's grief. "...I tried to imagine the details of that life. It was an entire vanished world of people, experiences, sensations, desires, a world that, in some odd way, I was the unaware the continuation of" (80). In mediating on an unthinkable fate, Julius thus replicates the activity of the reader of a novel—entering into the complete and complex sensory world of the totality of a lived experience. In the passage, Julius confesses to being an "unaware continuation" of his personal, family history. He is, however, driven to connect to the wider histories that converge at Ground Zero: "I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part of these stories" (59). Ultimately, as a storyteller he unflinchingly seeks traces of his own past by collecting and connecting the stories that surround him in the city.

Much as the Negro Burial Ground is covered by the encroaching city, and as the World Trade Towers are rebuilt, so too, does Julius effectively bury his own personal history of violence by rejecting memories of the rape of his oma and his own rape of Moji. Cole leaves us with a series of observations as Julius's life moves on and away from his part in

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these memories, their personal significance being subsumed by larger historical events and Julius's silence in the perpetuation of incomplete histories. The book concludes with an anecdote of the mass death of disoriented birds attracted to the "monumental flame" of the Statue of Liberty that both returns the reader to the theme of migration and parallels the monument of the African Burial Ground. The final lines abruptly relate the inexplicable and unnatural force of attraction that the monument seems to hold over the birds:

The average...was about twenty birds per night, although the weather and the direction of the wind had a great deal more to do with the harvest. Nevertheless, the sense persisted that something more troubling was at work. On the morning of October 13th, for example, 175 had been gathered in, all dead of the impact, although the night just past hadn't been particularly windy or dark. (259)

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94 quotes from Open City: "His reverie took him out of the everyday, away from the blankets and the bag of urine." One moment, in all of history, was captured, but the moments before and after it disappeared into the onrush of time; only that selected moment itself was privileged, saved, for no other reason than its having been picked out by the camera's eye. Teju Cole, Open City. 0 likes. Like. "The details were saccharine, but they could not obscure the force and beauty of the painting." Teju Cole, Open City. 0 likes. Like. "But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?" Teju Cole, Open City. My decision in the Morning News's Tournament of Books is finally live, so I can reveal that I picked Teju Cole's Open City over Patrick deWitt's The Sisters Brothers, and I can finally discuss both books without tipping my hand about what "or how" I'd be judging. There's a fascinating discussion in comments about the key event in the book. Julius, a somewhat depressed psychiatrist who is the main character in the novel, spends much of the book reconnecting with Moji, a girl he knew when they were both growing up in Nigeria. But towards the end of the novel, Moji reveals her real motivations. Open City is a 2011 novel by Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole. The novel is primarily set in New York City, and concerns a Nigerian immigrant, Julius, who has recently broken up with his girlfriend. The novel received praise for its prose and depiction of New York. It was included on several end of year lists of the best books published in 2011. Julius, a man completing the last year of a psychiatry fellowship, explores New York City and meets a variety of people over the course of a year.