

“The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest”

Alexander Greer Hartwiger
Framingham State University

Teju Cole’s acclaimed 2011 novel, *Open City*, eschews a well-developed plot in favor of contemplative walks through the streets of post 9/11 New York by narrator Julius, a Nigerian immigrant in his final year as a resident in psychiatry at Columbia University Medical School. Like any well-trained psychiatrist, Julius lets others speak unfiltered, which provides readers with unmediated access to a range of viewpoints that highlight complex relationships in an era of globalization. These views are at times unsettling, like a Moroccan immigrant’s complicated view of Al Qaeda, and at other points those views are privileged, like a Philadelphia-based Belgian surgeon’s admiration for the colonial construction of the Heliopolis district of Cairo, but Julius never offers any self-reflective commentary that would assist readers in understanding the implications of these stories. This multiplicity of voices that Julius, and by extension the reader, hears does not at first appear to converge in a meaningful way. However, the patchwork of stories eventually does form a thematic center for this novel about the divergent experiences of living in a global city.

Open City provides a departure from the celebratory cosmopolitanism of the 1990s, as well as today’s rhetoric surrounding the formation of the global citizen, to offer a stark account of the varying experiences of those who find themselves without the cultural and economic capital to move seamlessly across cultures and borders. What allows Julius to harmonize these voices is both his relative position of privilege, as a well-educated psychiatrist, and his background which combines European and African identities through his German mother and Nigerian father. His role of detached interlocutor along with a complex genealogy suggests an insider/outsider dialectic, at once a part of New York’s cosmopolitan society and apart from it. In this way, Julius resembles the figure of the nineteenth-century flâneur but with an added critical lens that enables him to engage with the politics of a post- “War on Terror” world.

Toward the end of *Open City*, at a party in New York, Julius is confronted by Moji, a woman from his past in Nigeria, about a disturbing, unremembered incident. She entreats Julius to understand that “things don’t go away just because you choose to forget them” (245). This idea of the selectivity of memory in one’s narrative about oneself, and

consequently and conversely the denial of memory for others, provides the central tenor of the novel at both the personal and cultural levels. But it is not just that memory is selective; the novel argues that we, consciously or unconsciously, select the moments, events, and details that make us heroes in our own stories. Cole reinforces this message through Julius' own limitations and blind spots, complicating the readers' trust in Julius' narrative perspective. This move, one that creates an important distance between author and protagonist, mirrors and thus reinforces in form, the thematic focus of the novel. Therefore, when Julius reminds readers that "we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play the hero" (243), readers are aware of Julius' own lack of critical self-awareness and thus his complicity in his self-aggrandizing narrative. More importantly, the novel extends this realization beyond the individual and encourages readers to consider the way cultural histories about place also rely on constructed, celebratory narratives.

In this essay, I explore how *Open City* problematizes the narrative surrounding New York's rise as a global megacity and provides a space from which to read the city contrapuntally through the histories, lives, and deaths of marginalized and disenfranchised populations alongside dominant narratives. More specifically, I describe the way Cole updates the figure of the flâneur to the postcolonial flâneur in an era of globalization, in order to provide a space from which to investigate New York City's role as the metropole for global capitalism. I argue that the postcolonial flâneur is uniquely positioned to both excavate the disremembered roles marginalized and enslaved populations played in New York's transformation from colonial outpost to global city, and to observe the way the current disenfranchised generation of migrants in New York haunt the optimistic narrative emanating from the cosmopolitan class of global citizens.

"History does not end with globalization" (Abu-Lughod 43); this warning to urban geographers and anthropologists in the late 1990s by Janet Abu-Lughod elegantly rebuts Francis Fukuyama's overly triumphant and premature declaration of "The End of History." Abu-Lughod narrows her critique to emerging global cities suggesting that they are being treated as nodes, epicenters, and "command posts" in an overarching global capitalist framework (43). She argues that thinking of global cities as "de novo" ignores the individuated, long histories of development for each global city (43). By treating the global city, and by extension globalization, as a recent, disjunctive phenomenon, the historical system of global capitalism is too easily rendered ahistorical, effectively disconnecting many global cities from their lineages in imperialism and colonialism. Ironically, this rupture from the past facilitates a continuance of longstanding inequalities and simply repackages this unevenness as a consequence of contemporary globalization.

Arguably the most recognized global city— or at least the one that sits atop A.T. Kearney and the Chicago Council of Global Affairs' 2015

index of global cities—New York, proves illustrative. In order to reimagine New York outside of the existing celebratory narratives of globalization, occluded histories must be both recovered and read alongside “official” ones. This move is precisely what Cole’s *Open City* accomplishes, through a dialectical narrative perspective that shifts between the dominant and non-dominant viewpoints embodied in the figure of the postcolonial flâneur. In other words, the novel reads history back into the city through Julius’ wanderings, in which he observes and uncovers the lost histories that contributed to make New York what it is today.

Historically, Paris and London served as metropolises of their respective empires and subsequently have undergone examinations as postcolonial and multicultural cities. New York, on the other hand, has largely escaped such scrutiny because of its complicated role as a city within a settler colony, and because it was still only emerging as a global presence during the height of colonial empires. As such, immigrants entering the city were seen as a part of the melting-pot process that formed a new nation and not immigrants from former colonies. The transformation of New York into *the* global city did not take place until the latter half of the twentieth century. In fact, in *Branding New York*, Miriam Greenberg argues that New York moved from a maligned, declining industrial city on the verge of bankruptcy in the 1970s to a “free market, neoliberal model” in the following decades (39). Greenberg argues that through urban branding, which is the cultivation of an intentional narrative, New York rapidly transformed itself into the global city *par excellence*. The deliberate branding of the city has on the one hand “created jobs, globalized its influence, and increased the potential that can be made through association with the urban image,” but on the other hand there remains another New York, one that “poses profound challenges to free expression and access to public space; to the availability of living-wage jobs and affordable housing” (251). *Open City* explores these tensions to provide a counter narrative to the one that the urban branders of New York have successfully constructed. The novel asks an implicit question about whose stories form the historical narrative of the city and whose stories are lost over time.

While New York might not have been an imperial center in traditional terms, it has turned into the centerpiece of the global economy and become an economic empire in its own right. And like all empires, eventually the periphery is absorbed into the metropole through flows of goods, capital, and people. *Open City* reveals that New York has a complex identity built through both “official” narratives as well as marginalized experiences, that range from colonial and imperial history to the present influx of non-Western immigrants, but that New York’s identity, moving from national to global prominence, has also been predominantly mediated through popular cultural representations in film, television, and music. The result is that for many people in the world, New York has developed a complicated identity as simultaneously a location of

economic and cultural freedom and as the site of disenfranchisement and discrimination.

To understand Cole's project of rereading New York in *Open City*, it is useful to think of Edward Said's contrapuntal reading as a way of understanding how marginalized histories are often embedded within dominant narratives. More precisely, Said's use of contrapuntal reading provides a way to possess an "awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (51). Bringing together these histories is not simply to embrace variety, but in Geeta Chowdhry's words, "it is a plea for 'worlding' the texts, institutions and practices, for historicising them, for interrogating their sociality and materiality, for paying attention to the hierarchies and the power-knowledge nexus embedded in them" (105). Contrapuntal reading, then, is a way to expose "intertwined and overlapping histories" (Said 18), and in reading those points of intersection, the aim is "to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences" (33). Said likens the concept of contrapuntal reading to the idea of counterpoint in Western classical music in which "various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that drives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work" (51). When understood in this way, reading histories alongside one another presents a fuller, polyvocal historical picture rather than simply replacing one univocal history with another.

While Said drew from texts at the height of the British Empire and reads those texts historically in order to excavate marginalized voices, *Open City's* narrative is structured in such a way as to enact the very idea of counterpoint. Through abrupt, seemingly disjunctive shifts, the novel appears to create a fragmented narrative structure; however, when pulled together the juxtapositions provide a thematic unity. In order to bring these disparate experiences together, Cole employs the figure of the postcolonial flâneur through the protagonist, Julius. Much like a composer, Julius harmonizes the seemingly random juxtaposition of events, or in musical terms independent rhythms, into a thematic whole about movement and migration of both the cosmopolitan elite and the unhomely in an era of globalization. Therefore, when Julius's meanderings are taken not as independent episodes but part of a larger project, the harmony of the stories emerges instead of a cacophonous dissonance. The resulting effect of the novel, like Said's contrapuntal reading, is a polyphonic historicization, in this case of New York City.

Julius' meandering strolls through the streets of New York are reminiscent of the type of flânerie of Parisian high capitalism. A flâneur was characterized as a man of leisure and a connoisseur of the crowd, akin to today's conspicuous cosmopolitans, but the critical gaze that Julius offers is more of a critique than indulgence. As such, Julius' discerning

and often critical commentary frequently resembles a postcolonial critique of global capitalism rather than a celebration of globalization through the spectacle of the arcades and consumerism. I bring together these two positions, the individual connoisseur of the marketplaces and streets of the city and the keen observer of the legacies of colonial and imperial dominance, to suggest that Julius' perspective might be best understood as that of a postcolonial flâneur.

The Parisian flâneur of the mid-nineteenth century, as seen through the eyes of Walter Benjamin, makes his home in the "industrial luxury" of the arcades, whereas the postcolonial flâneur in *Open City* haunts the department stores, sidewalk kiosks, and nighttime streets of New York (36). The arcades provided a hybrid space, not quite enclosed but not entirely open either. As such, the space privileged pedestrian traffic which enabled the flâneur to feel simultaneously connected and detached from the crowd. Here the traditional French flâneur sees the world in miniature with all its variety and excess, domesticating difference into the safety of his "home." Rob Shields links this totalizing view of the Parisian flâneur to colonialism and argues that:

for the metropolitan citizen not involved in questions of colonial administration on an everyday basis, the most direct expression of empire is through the commodity. In the form of the commodity, empire is transformed into the emporium. In the emporium, the flâneur mimics the action of the explorer who not only maps but also describes, designates and claims territory. (74)

Cole's rewriting of the flâneur from a postcolonial perspective inverts the point of view of the Parisian flâneur, moving away from the totalizing colonial gaze to a more critical one that recognizes the complex flows of capital and people. Cole emphasizes this point through contrasting street level and panoramic views of New York. From this vantage point, Julius enacts the idea of counterpoint, examining the dominant narratives that have come to define New York as well as witnessing and reclaiming the occluded and buried pasts that have also been a key component in the development of the city as a hub of global capitalism.

The term "postcolonial flâneur" has been invoked by a few other scholars, but in each instance there is a different emphasis. In working through those examples, I hope to consolidate the term as a way to develop consistency around this important literary figure of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. One of the first uses of the term is by Adebayo Williams in his 1997 essay, "The Postcolonial *Flâneur* and Other Fellow Travelers: Conceits for a Narrative of Redemption." Williams only lightly touches on the figure of the flâneur, spending the bulk of his attention on an informative overview of postcolonialism in the late 1990s and a repositioning of "postcolonialism as a radicalized doctrine within the struggle against the hegemonic ideology of our time: the phenomenon variously known as late capitalism, globalism and their 'end of history' mutations" (822). Williams' brief use of the flâneur serves as a means to illustrate the problematic nature of master narratives.

Through an invocation of Benjamin, Williams observes that “to master his narrative, the *flâneur* must take into account the ‘tales’ of *fellow-flâneurs* and competitors, a conceptual and spatio-temporal impossibility which spells doom for all master-narratives and paradigmatic discourses” (821). While Williams only provides a tenuous connection between the *flâneur* and postcolonialism in his article, his insistence that postcolonialism is the “ideological nemesis” to globalization, which he describes as the colonizing metropole’s “*logical transformation of the dynamics of capitalism after the epoch of colonialism,*” suggests that the postcolonial *flâneur* is a figure who might undo the master narrative of globalization and resituate it within the context of colonial projects (836).

Liesbeth Minnaard’s use of “postcolonial *flâneur*” in her 2013 essay, “The Postcolonial Flâneur: Ramsey Nasr’s ‘Antwerpse Stadsgedichten,’” emphasizes the process of *flânerie* more than the postcolonial component. She describes the process of postcolonial *flânerie* as “a particular way of processing the, at times, overwhelming experiences of the increasingly globalized metropolis” (79). Unlike Williams, who wishes to ground postcolonialism in “concrete historical and material circumstances” (821), Minnaard takes a more conceptual view of postcolonialism. She writes that “the situation that I am focusing on in my analysis is not postcolonial in any strict sense of the term” (83). However, she argues that the use of “postcolonial” “calls the history of colonialism into memory” and that “our globalized world is still in important ways marked by this [colonial] history and by the practices and ideologies involved in the colonial project” (83). Ultimately, Minnaard argues that the postcolonial *flâneur* “aims at relation, despite difference(s),” and “rather than strolling the streets but keeping to himself, this postcolonial *flâneur* emphatically pursues moments of encounter and interaction in an urban contact-zone that has clearly been touched by the transformative effects of globalization” (90). For Minnaard then, the postcolonial *flâneur* understands the complex relationships and complicated histories shaped by colonialism in an era of globalization but she does not ground the figure in particular material or historical moments.

The final example of the use of the term postcolonial *flâneur* that I draw on comes from Simon Gikandi’s 2010 essay, “Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality.” Gikandi briefly uses the term postcolonial *flâneur* but in doing so he includes an important component: privilege. Gikandi differentiates the experience of the global elite, whom he deems postcolonial *flâneurs*, with the unhomely, those who do not have the cultural and economic capital to seamlessly cross borders and are cast adrift in an unwelcoming global public sphere. In making this distinction, Gikandi highlights the simultaneous insider/outsider status of the postcolonial *flâneur*. At once at home “strolling down the streets of ... Nairobi, Johannesburg, [and] Accra” and moving “with the ebb and flow of the crowds,” the postcolonial *flâneur* also has access to “the haunts of the leisured postcolonial class, at book launchings, galleries, and symposiums” populated by “connoisseurs of global culture” (22). Gikandi

accentuates the privilege associated with the postcolonial flâneur demonstrating the dialectical perspective this figure has as both an insider and outsider.

From these various deployments of the term, several shared concepts along with important individuated ones emerge. The insistence on the historical moment, the era of globalization, marks all of the uses of the term “postcolonial flâneur.” The implication is that in order to engage with the urban spaces of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, the flâneur must be equipped with a critical lens that allows him or her to see the complexities of the historical moment, especially as it pertains to the link between colonialism and globalization. In other words, the postcolonial perspective prevents globalization from being seen as a disjunctive phenomenon that is disconnected from imperial and colonial projects that predate the period. Additionally, the postcolonial flâneur’s perspective is differentiated from a traditional cosmopolitan perspective in that he or she is not simply observing “universality plus difference” in the urban landscape, but rather he or she provides a critique of the ways in which non-dominant populations exist as spectral inhabitants in the global city, at once occluded from view but essential to daily operations (Appiah 151). In the configuration of the postcolonial flâneur, postcolonial then comes to signify more than a historical moment and is, in Robert Young’s words, committed to “interrogating the interrelated histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice” (20). Neil Lazarus points out in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* that “the developments in the first decade of our new century ... have demonstrably rejoined the twenty-first century to a long and as yet unbroken history” (15). It is from this postcolonial theoretical position that the postcolonial flâneur is equipped to provide an unflinching look at the legacies of colonialism in twenty-first-century cityscapes. As Simon Gikandi recognizes, the postcolonial flâneur is also a figure of privilege. Recognizing the flâneur’s standing in society is necessary because it enables the simultaneity of insider/outsider status, at once being a part of the crowd and apart from it. In bringing all of these iterations of the postcolonial flâneur together, I am arguing that the postcolonial flâneur is the figure whose critical gaze provides a way to read the legacies of colonialism, oppression, and exploitation back into globalization and the economic, social, and political frameworks that shape the global city. The postcolonial flâneur is simultaneously a chronicler of history, a keen observer of the present, and an augur of the future. The contrapuntal reading that the postcolonial flâneur provides of the urban landscape leads to a polyvocal representation of a city and the voices that make up its history and its present representation. In order for that critical gaze to get established, the vantage point of the postcolonial flâneur becomes an integral part of reading the city.

Michel de Certeau argues that seeing a city from above “allows one to read it, to be a Solar eye, looking down like a god” (92). This totalizing view lures viewers into thinking that a city has a univocal voice, a coherent essence, and that the viewer has the power to capture that

perspective. Cole utilizes this viewpoint along with a contrasting street level perspective in *Open City* to advance the counterpoint structure of the novel and to undermine the certainty of totalizing narratives. Midway through the novel, Julius returns from a trip to Brussels and as his plane descends “through the last layer of clouds [...] the city in its true form suddenly appeared a thousand feet below [...] [he] experienced [...] the unsettling feeling that [...] [he] had had precisely this view of the city before” (150). Indeed, about a year earlier, Julius did see this view of the city but not from the air; rather, he observed a model of the city built in 1964 for the World’s Fair. Throughout the years, the model had periodically been updated to reflect changes in the city. When Julius viewed the model at the Queens Art Museum, he thought that it “showed, in impressive detail, with almost a million tiny buildings, and with bridges, parks, rivers, and architectural landmarks, the true form of the city” (150). This reference to the scale model built for the New York World’s Fair is not simply a benign representation of New York free of historical context. A model in a museum might seem innocuous enough, and disconnected from history and politics, but given the context of its production, it contains traces of an historical legacy of colonialism. The first World’s Fair, The Exhibition of 1851, was an opportunity for England to show off its might through the domestication, representation, and production of foreign cultures. As such, the World’s Fair became a celebration of capitalism through the exhibition of the most advanced technology, which opened a space for global trade and a space to categorize and hierarchize racial and ethnic differences. The seeds of inequity that have produced the current disparity in rights, privileges, and wealth in today’s global capitalist framework can be found in those early World’s Fairs. Additionally, there is an uncanny element to seeing the city being replicated in a model and the model being replicated in Julius’ view from the plane. This unsettledness results not only from the ability to capture New York in one gaze, or one narrative, but also from the empty shell of the city itself. This dreamlike feeling—akin to Benjamin’s description of the phantasmagoric quality of the 1940s World Fair—that Julius experiences, reminds readers of New York’s constructed, seemingly cohesive narrative. In this regard, the simulacrum of the city risks becoming the real. As a counterpoint, Cole offers a contrasting view of the city from the street level to help readers see the different narratives that contribute to New York’s history and identity.

Julius’ walks in the city become palimpsestic exercises that expose histories that have been erased and written over. This form of *flânerie* calls to mind Benjamin’s argument in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “there is no documentation of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). Therefore, the coupling of the aerial view, which offers an uncritical, unified portrait of New York and the surrounding historical narrative, and this deep historical look at the city from the street level, which uncovers and offers a counter narrative to New York’s “official” history, provides a multidimensional space and

time configuration from which to situate New York in longer historical narratives that account for the “barbarism” that built the city (256). In fact, what Julius discovers as he “reads” the city contrapuntally during his walks is that New York has been a global city, in economic terms, for quite some time. For example, in downtown New York he discovers a small plaque that commemorates an African burial site:

[I]t was here, on the outskirts of the city at the time, north of Wall Street and so outside civilization as it was then defined, that blacks were allowed to bury their dead. Then the dead returned when, in 1991, construction of a building on Broadway and Duane brought human remains to the surface. (220)

Just as New York was emerging as the global financial hub for free market capitalism in the early 1990s, the reemergence of a repressed past reminds readers of New York’s prominence within the transatlantic slave trade. This link pulls together two historical moments through the remains of an African burial site, thereby implicating the city in exploitative economic practices from the early moments of the city to the present day. As Julius walks down to Battery Park, he traces an uninterrupted economic genealogy by explaining the importance of New York as a port for the slave trade even after slavery was abolished in the United States. He explains that:

this had been a busy mercantile part of the city in the middle of the nineteenth century. Trading in slaves had become a capital offense in the United States in 1820, but New York long remained the most important port for the building, outfitting, insuring, and launching of slavers’ ships. Much of the human cargo of those vessels was going to Cuba; Africans did the work on the sugar plantations there. In profiting from slavery, the City Bank of New York was not unlike the other companies founded by merchants and bankers in the same time period—the companies that later became AT&T and Con Edison emerged from the same milieu. (163)

If New York is reputedly the top global city of the FIRE economic sector—finance, insurance, and real estate—then the novel makes a case that the capital for this current economic success was extracted from forced labor practices like slavery. But these histories are buried just like the African bodies under the city. Julius’ gaze as a postcolonial flâneur provides the perspective that enables readers to see the complex history that has given rise to this current identity New York holds as *the* global city.

As mentioned earlier, the Parisian flâneur’s gaze is one that fetishizes the exotic in the emporium, often making the Parisian flâneur complicit with the process of colonialism and commodification. This participation in and pleasure from capitalism informs the relationship the Parisian flâneur has with otherness and as a result inhibits any sort of critical gaze regarding the relationship between commodity and exploitation. Julius on the other hand, as a postcolonial flâneur, problematizes the marketplace with his gaze as he strolls through the city. Stepping back one step, readers are also aware of the larger frame Cole constructs with the novel, which

helps readers see the position of privilege that allows for Julius to make these observations, even if they are critical. In using global capitalism as a site of connection between those that are at home in the world and those who are in a state of abjection in the world, Cole provides the framework for contrapuntal reading. Cole emphasizes the differing experiences of consumerism in New York to highlight the interconnectedness of a global economic system with social stratification in a global public sphere through Julius' observations. Within a few pages, Cole brings together these two processes through the incongruities in consumerism. As Julius walks through the Upper West Side, he marvels at the newly erected buildings for the Time Warner Corporation. He examines the shops that sell "tailored shirts, designer suits, jewelry, appliances for the gourmet cook, handmade leather accessories, and imported decorative items" (8). He goes on to observe that "on the upper floors were some of the costliest restaurants in the city, advertising truffles, caviar, Kobe beef, and pricey 'tasting menus.' Above the restaurants were apartments that included the most expensive residence in the city" (8). Julius' observation helps readers see the world contained in miniature in this building, with the inhabitants able to survey the city from a godlike perspective. Anything a tenant desires, whether local or foreign, is immediately available, giving a new understanding to the cosmopolitan motto of being at home in the world. The description of the Time Warner Building is juxtaposed just a few pages later with a walk through Harlem. Here in the open air, Julius

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 of black liberation, bundles of incense, vials of perfume and essential oils, djembe drums, and little tourist tchotchkes from Africa. One table displayed enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans. (18)

This juxtaposition of the imperial indulgences located in imposing physical structures like the Time Warner Building with that of products of resistance in contingent, often illegal street-side stalls not only reveals the different spaces that constitute New York's marketplaces, but it also shows two different relationships to commodities. In the Time Warner Building, the luxury goods serve as sign value for the residents, asserting their status as global citizens and their dominance through the domestication of cultural difference, whereas the products for sale on the sidewalks of Harlem, reflecting their illicitness or impermanence, serve as means to claim lost cultural identities and affiliations through consumerism. One item in particular, the photograph of the lynchings of African-Americans, stands out in the sidewalk scene in Harlem. The presence of these photographs in a marketplace provides an ambivalent moment that not only bares the brutal history of suffering and oppression that is a part of the United States' history but also commodifies that history, potentially stripping it of its gravitas.

It is in these marketplaces that the postcolonial flâneur's gaze provides the lens from which to read the postmodern, global city. Just as the Parisian flâneur of late capitalism in nineteenth-century France linked modernity with the colonial metropole cityscape, the postcolonial flâneur of the twenty-first century links the fragmentation of postmodernity with globalization. This contrapuntal reading of the city situates the metanarratives that have come to be absorbed in the cultural memory of a city alongside the local stories and histories that have often been omitted in order to highlight the incongruity of experience. In *Open City*, Cole exposes the fictionalized story about globalization as based on free market capitalism and offers a corrective to that history through Julius' observations about both the formal and informal economies that built and now support New York as a global city.

Cole also uses another consumer browsing experience as an entry point into an examination of New York's pre-colonial identity, which further undermines any grand narratives about the history of the city. New York's colonial origins are too often glossed over by global capitalist boosters, suggesting that the city has existed in its current form since time immemorial. As Julius wanders through a major retail bookshop, he comes across a biography of Cornelius Van Tienhoven, titled *The Monster of New Amsterdam*, written by one of Julius' patients who is Native American. Julius recounts her struggle to reconcile her personal identity with a public narrative that has buried her story. This dynamic highlights the tension between the grand narrative about the city and the local, lived histories that remain but are repressed. In one of their sessions, Julius' patient confides that "it's difficult to live in a country that has erased your past" and she goes on to add that "there are almost no Native Americans in New York City" (27). By highlighting the personal story, a story which Julius' patient reminds us is "not in the past, it's still with us today" (27), readers are forced to negotiate the fabled origins of the city with the grim reality of its formation, taking into account both public and private histories. The perspective of the postcolonial flâneur is able to bring together the tensions between a figure like Van Tienhoven with a Native American in contemporary New York who must deal with the continuing legacies of settler colonialism. Throughout the novel, Cole continually uses these types of counterpoints to destabilize perspectives in order to re-see New York and its history in an era of globalization. In addition to the founding of New York and the damaging consequences it has had and continues to have on native populations, Cole also explores the politics of movement and migration as linked to New York's role as a global city and the formation of the global citizen.

Open City challenges readers to distinguish between those who have the cultural and economic capital to be at home in the world and those who, in Homi Bhabha's terms, are unhomely. From the outset of the first chapter, birds, migratory birds in particular, play a pivotal role in establishing a form of natural migration that when compared to human movement reveals the artificially constructed elements that stand in the

way of unfettered movement. At the beginning of the novel, Julius' gaze is drawn to the sky, "hoping to see the miracle of natural immigration" (4). The use of the term "natural" here is telling because it emphasizes movement and migration as something intrinsic to the world, not something that is unnatural, and therefore in need of monitoring and policing.

Just after this observation about "natural immigration," Cole initiates the first of many counterpoints regarding movement in the novel through Julius' observation that while waiting for "squadrons of geese, I would sometimes listen to the radio" (4). Julius goes on to mention that he particularly enjoyed listening to internet radio as he was able to pick up stations from "Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands" (4). As he listened to these foreign stations, Julius admits that he "couldn't understand the announcers" but that "much of the music was familiar" (4). By turning the conversation to the mobility of art, specifically classical music as a way to tap into a universality that is beyond verbal language, Cole draws readers' attention to the imaginative and literal ways we see movement in the world. In combining the relatively free movement of migratory birds as well as the relatively "free" nature of the internet with the ostensible universality of classical music, the novel establishes an idealized form of movement and oneness with the world.

While the novel constructs this romanticized idea of connectedness, Julius' inability to connect with others in meaningful ways at the same time undermines those claims. In "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," Peter Vermeulen looks specifically at the question of cosmopolitanism in the novel and makes a similar argument, suggesting that *Open City* "interrogates rather than celebrates such a literary cosmopolitanism" and that "even if the novel is thoroughly occupied with the question of how aesthetic form can contribute to the furthering of cosmopolitan understanding, it ends up as a catalogue of failed attempts to forge intercultural connections by artistic means" (42). This discrepancy between an idealized cosmopolitan ethos that Julius embodies in his deep connection with art along with the unhindered migration of birds to symbolize a shared experience in the world, and the challenge of actually existing cosmopolitanism, which is illustrated in the inability to connect in meaningful ways to others, emphasizes the dissonance between an idealized cosmopolitanism and the actually existing dynamics that hinder that kind of interconnectedness in a global city like New York.

To further illustrate the tension that is created between the lofty cosmopolitan ideals of being a citizen of the world with the tensions that come through bounded communities, Cole provides another telling counterpoint. During one of his aimless walks, Julius is caught in a sudden downpour and seeks shelter in the American Folk Art Museum. Once inside the museum, Julius comes across a special exhibit of the nineteenth-century painter, John Brewster. As he wanders through the exhibit, he gives readers insight into the Folk Art tradition and Brewster's deafness,

and he confesses that “I lost all track of time before these images, fell deep into their world, as if time between them and me had somehow vanished” (39-40). Vermeulen suggests that in this scene “Julius learns that this experience of temporal and aural suspension is not grounded in an aesthetic achievement,” but rather it is due to Brewster’s deafness (49). This moment attempts to express the universality of the human condition through a oneness that Julius finds across time, space, and culture. In an idealized form of cosmopolitanism art, even folk art that is typically local in nature, provides insight that suggests the possibility of a shared human experience. However, that illusion of oneness is challenged by the material realities that govern a person’s being in the world. To highlight this discrepancy, Cole brings Julius’ lofty, detached contemplation back into a world marked by bounded communities and affiliations. Stepping out of the museum and into a cab, Julius is caught in a dream-like state where, as his “folded umbrella pooled its water on the mat,” he “thought of Brewster’s portrait of the deaf teenager Sarah Prince at the pianoforte, an instrument that neither artist nor sitter would have heard: the quietest piano in the world. [He] [...] imagined her running her hand along the keys but refusing to press down on them” (40). His quiet repose is shattered when he is confronted with a question from the cab driver. Snapping out of the tranquility of his thoughts, Julius asks the cab driver, “so, how are you doing my brother?” (40). The small talk is not taken generously and the cab driver responds, “not good, not good at all, you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this?” (40). The cab driver’s insinuation is that because he and Julius are both African, there should be an understanding, a bond between them, a shared worldview. Julius, however, confesses that he “was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on [him]” (40). This contrast between the deep connection with the art and the resistance toward claims of affiliation suggests a problematic configuration of cosmopolitanism in which intellectually one can be a citizen of the world, but the practical matter of finding points of contact with others becomes a challenge.

Open City does not simply pose the question about abjection in a globalized world, but it also offers telling moments that underscore the historical continuity of displacement, suggesting that the dislocation is not simply a recent phenomenon but one connected to longer historical processes like colonialism. By tracing the historical antecedents to the problems of modern-day movement and migration throughout the world, Cole draws readers’ attention to the grim reality that economic forces, from modern colonization to globalization, have shaped the stratification of experiences of movement in the world that cannot be overcome by the rhetoric of global citizens and cosmopolitans. For example, as Julius passes a federal building early one morning, he sees a line of immigrants waiting with “nervous anticipation” for the “interrogations ahead” (218). He comes across Bangladeshis as well as “an unusual number of interracial couples. One pair, I guessed, was African-American and

Vietnamese. The security officers were, their uniforms revealed, also from Wackenhut, the same private firm contracted to control immigrants in the detention facility in Queens” (218). Julius’ observation about the interracial couple can be read as a thinly veiled comment on the legacies of U.S. oppression, from slavery to the Vietnam War. Furthermore, Julius’ observation about the immigration process also reveals the contrast between the celebratory narratives of immigration connected with European arrivals with the sobering, police-like experience for non-European arrivals. This point is reinforced not only with the recognition of the shared responsibilities of the Wackenhut security force in an immigration detention center but also through Julius’ reflection that “as each expectant family reached the front of the line, they were instructed to remove jewelry, shoes, belt, coins, and keys, so that the official fear of terrorism played along [...] to the private fear of being found wanting by an immigration officer once they got upstairs” (218). The coupling of immigration with terrorism continues the disenfranchisement of immigrants from the Global South. Cole does not leave this moment without an historical counterpoint, utilizing a separate but complementary story that historicizes contemporary questions of migration within longer historical contexts.

In this instance, Cole incorporates a memorial for an African burial ground as the complementary voice to achieve a polyphonic expression. As Julius observes the immigration line, he is informed by the security force that he cannot stand there. As he moves away from the building, he notices a small object set in a “patch of grass” (220). He walks over to the object and discovers that it is “a memorial for the site of an African burial ground” (220). The burial plot was used in the “seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” to bury “some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves” (220). Julius reflects that “what I was steeped in, on that warm morning, was the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York” (221). In situating Julius’ discovery immediately after his observation about the policing of recent immigrants, Cole links the legacies of forced migration across time and space with the current policy on immigration in the U.S. As such, the genealogy of forced movement in the world to support different yet similar economic structures is made explicit. In situating the legacy of slavery in modern immigration policy, Cole challenges readers to confront other, less glamorized, forms of movement and being in the world. The European and American narratives of discovery and settlement of the world are haunted by these spectral populations who make that narrative feasible.

In one of the more troubling passages in the novel, Cole unsettles readers’ confidence in narrative itself by putting into question Julius’ reliability and credibility. This meta-commentary on narrative provides a reminder about the selectivity of memory or the very limitations of memory itself. In other words, Cole destabilizes the suggestion that there is a perfect perspective from which to narrate history. In making this move, readers have to recognize the importance of polyvocal narratives of

the past. Cole warns us about how memory is inscribed differently on those who have the power to narrate their own stories than it is on those who are subject to having their lives narrated, or worse, not recognized at all. To emphasize this point, Cole undermines Julius' normally composed narrative by including a troubling moment from Julius' past. After a late-night party which a childhood friend, Moji, attends, readers are confronted with the possibility that Julius sexually assaulted Moji when they were fourteen and fifteen respectively. Moji tells Julius that he had forced [...] [himself] on her" (244). She explains that since that time in 1989, Julius "had acted like [...] [he] knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when [...] [they] met again, and had never tried to acknowledge what [he] had done. This torturous deception had continued until the present" (244).

Through the use of personal power dynamics between Julius and Moji, Cole emphasizes the larger cultural power dynamics at the heart of memory. For Moji, to be denied the reality of the event not only absolves Julius of his crime, but it also denies her a chance to heal and recover. Moji is haunted on a daily basis by that past event, and she explains to Julius that "the luxury of denial had not been possible for her. Indeed, I had been ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar, and she had thought of me, either fleetingly or in extended agonies, for almost every day of her adult life" (244). This discovery disturbs readers and utilizes a very personal experience to emphasize the inherent power dynamics in memory. Additionally, this scene calls into question the accuracy, or at least the selectiveness, of Julius' narrative and helps readers recognize the importance of perspective. This self-reflexive moment in the text again moves away from the traditional gaze of the flâneur to one that can be self-critical. In this move, Cole reminds readers that there is not any perfect or best perspective; instead, he is opening a conversation about the necessity of multiple perspectives, multiple narratives, and multiple histories. Julius' narrative about New York is not invalidated by this discovery, but readers are made aware of the limitations of Julius' memory and perspective. As such, Julius' perspective offers critique and corrective but is not attempting to simplify the complexity of perspective by substituting one view for another. Through his use of counterpoint, Cole is asking readers to negotiate seemingly incommensurable pasts as part of the same story. Cole's utilization of sexual violence through rape is quite powerful and carries a strong correlation with the depiction of the process of colonization on both the bodies and the lands that were victimized.

As the novel concludes, *Open City* again highlights the tension between official and unofficial histories as Julius peers out at the Statue of Liberty. Obviously, the Statue of Liberty holds enormous symbolic value for immigrants entering New York. In 1903, a plaque of Emma Lazarus' "New Colossus" was mounted at the bottom of the statue. The poem offers a "world-wide welcome" from the "Mother of Exiles" and purports to provide a home for "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning

to breathe free.” Yet, Julius contrasts this romanticized history of migration with another, more unsettling type of migration. In the last two pages of the novel Cole returns to the bird metaphor that opened the novel and he describes that Lady Liberty’s flame, while a guiding light for ships, was a disorienting light for migrating birds. Julius explains that “the birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city, somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame” (258). The catastrophic effect of the flame on the birds’ orientation suggests, in Julius’ mind, that “something more troubling was at work” (259). What Julius’ postcolonial history of New York helps readers see is the ambivalent role of New York City as at once a symbol of the promise of prosperity and the symbol of uneven accessibility to it. In *Empire*, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt explain this paradox as a symptom of empire, describing how imperial capital “attack[s] the movements of the multitude with a tireless determination” and at the same time it “must be careful not to restrict the productivity of the multitude too much because Empire too depends on this power” (399). This push and pull of illegitimacy and necessity comes to represent the space of the unhomey global migrant. Their histories—like the histories of Native Americans whose homeland was seized and of Africans who suffered the Middle Passage—in New York’s formation, are omitted in the grand narrative of globalization. This move is further emphasized in the history of a global city like New York.

In *Open City*, Julius’ postcolonial flâneur’s perspective enables readers to hear New York’s polyvocal voice, situating buried stories next to those of Wall Street business people. The lives that Julius chronicles are lives lived in global spaces that come to represent “signs of a dislocated locality,” in Simon Gikandi’s words, which highlight divergent experiences within globalization (23). These unhomey populations, removed or distanced from their homes through forced migration, as refugees or exiles, are further displaced as their backgrounds are buried beneath celebratory narratives of cosmopolitan elites.

I would like to return to Moji’s comment that opened the essay: “things don’t go away just because you choose to forget them” (245). Those “things” that Moji refers to are not only the events in Julius’ life that he would like to forget, but they are also the lives of marginalized populations. Repressed pasts have a way of resurfacing and haunting the personal and cultural narratives we construct. The specter of the unhomey will continue to haunt globalization and global cities like New York until there is a willingness to situate these processes and cities in longer and deeper historical narratives that account for the oppression and subjugation of the peoples that paved the way for our current economic, cultural, and political climates. Ultimately, Cole’s use of the palimpsestic walks of a postcolonial flâneur and the stylistic framework of counterpoint provide a contrapuntal reading of New York that enables readers to recuperate the forgotten stories that were instrumental in New York’s emergence as a global city.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Janet. "Global City Formation in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles: An Historical Perspective." *Global Cities Reader*. Eds. Roger Keil and Neil Brenner. New York: Routledge, 2006. 42-48.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Rpt ed. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Belknap P, 2002.
- Chowdhry, Geeta. "Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading: Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. 36.1 (2007): 101-116.
- Cole, Teju. *Open City*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. New York: U of California P, 1988.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Reissued ed. New York: Free P, 1996.
- Gikandi, Simon. "Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality." *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. Eds. Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru, and Sarah Lawson Welch. New York: Routledge, 2010. 22-35.
- Greenberg, Miriam. *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Lazarus, Emma. "The New Colossus." *Academy of American Poets*. Web. 12 June 2015.
- Minnaard, Liesbeth. "The Postcolonial Flâneur: Ramsey Nasr's 'Antwerpse Stadsgedichten.'" *Dutch Crossing* 37.1 (2013): 79-92.
- Negri, Antonio and Michael Hardt. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001.
- Said, Edward. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Shields, Rob. "Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on Flânerie." *The Flâneur*. Ed. Keith Tester. New York: Routledge, 1994. 61-80.
- Vermeulen, Peter. "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.1 (2013): 40-57.
- Williams, Adebayo. "The Postcolonial Flâneur: and Other Fellow-Travelers: Conceits for a Narrative of Redemption." *Third World Quarterly* 18.5 (1997): 821-841.
- Young, Robert. "Postcolonial Remains." *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 19-41.