Open City, Open Text: Teju Cole, Digital Humanities, and the Limits of Epistemology

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Teju Cole writes books to be read online. Put another way, Cole's artistic practice straddles the border between digital and analog forms. By repurposing each medium's conventions, he foregrounds the epistemological assumptions that undergird them. His work affords us new insights into how the Internet and the digital humanities have changed our reading practices, as well as how writers of African origin have reconfigured their imagined communities to accommodate increasingly transnational realities. Cole's novel *Open City* offers a particularly timely perspective on the ramifications of such changes. Its plot has multiple timelines: the narrative present, in which its narrator Julius wanders through New York and makes a short trip to Brussels; Julius's life, from his childhood in Nigeria to his relocation to New York to study psychiatry; and Manhattan's history, as a Native American settlement, then as a colonial center of commerce and shipping during the slave trade, all the way up to 9/11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center.

Given Cole's background, it is hardly surprising that his novel's interweaving of multiple timelines, geographical locations, and affective terrains relies heavily on techniques associated with the digital realm. Trained in art history and photography, Cole was best known for his visual and verbal experiments on a variety of social media platforms, before *Open City* achieved international acclaim in 2012. In fact, his first published book, *Every Day is for the Thief,* began its life in January 2006 as an experimental blog. Cole explains in an email interview with Aleksandar Hemon that he wrote one post each day: "In effect, I was blogging on this weird project eight hours a day for an entire month. Months later, after I had erased the blog, a Nigerian publisher showed interest, and the project was edited and found a second life as a book." The printed version of *Every Day,* however, is much more—or less—than a book version of the blog, as it explicitly foregrounds the differences between the two media. Unlike Cole's technically sophisticated, color-saturated 2018 photo essay *Blind Spot, Every Day's* blurry grey and white photographs call

upon the reader to imagine what might have been conveyed by its images, properly backlit on a computer screen. Conversely, the book's ephemeral subject matter feels at odds with the permanence of a printed volume. Its brief chapters, with their swift, categorical judgements on issues as complex as Nigerian marketplace lynchings or the fate of the artifacts in the Lagos museum, conjure melancholy. They gesture toward an immediacy we might have experienced, had we encountered these fleeting anecdotes in real time, as occasional blog entries to be swiped through online between checking our Facebook pages and daily newsfeeds.

Cole uses similar techniques to achieve the reverse effect in "Eight Letters to a Young Writer," which he models on Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet.* The letters deliberately invoke the conventions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century epistolary genres. As Cole explains in his on-line preface, "'Eight Letters to a Young Writer' evolved as a fictional exercise addressed to an imaginary young Nigerian writer. I thought it might be interesting to take the genre of letters to a young writer and have it be written by someone who is himself a young writer" (4). However, while Hans Xaver Kappus transformed the original handwritten letters Rilke sent him into a printed text, Cole uses the formatting conventions of print, complete with numbered pages, standardized Times New Roman typeface, right and left justified margins, and extended block paragraphs, to create the illusion that we are reading an uploaded photocopy of a printed book, rather than a born-digital artifact.

In *Open City,* the blurred boundaries between digital and analog forms force readers to grapple with the epistemological limits of narrative in an age when texts often are perceived as infinitely networked and their meanings instantly recuperable. Many of the novel's stylistic effects depend on expository conventions associated with the digital rather than the print realm. This makes navigating them with the help of digital humanities (DH) tools, from hyperlinks and GIS maps to computer apps that aggregate and chart specific literary effects, extraordinarily generative. The hyperrealist precision with which Julius navigates Manhattan is a case in point. Like the driving directions function in Google Maps, Cole plots Julius's movements down to the exact corner at the edge of Central Park where he enters the subway. Using DH tools, we can overlay his path onto the images of Manhattan's past and present spatial organization he references, as Amanda Chemeche does in a Yale University Digital Humanities project, for which she superimposed contemporary maps charting Julius's movements onto historical maps of the places he observes and the past events he summons on his walks (Open the City). Such details buttress the novel's central conceit, that its narrator is reliable because we can place him with absolute precision in relation to the topographical or historical

landmarks to which he alludes. The illusion of forensic exactness leaves many first-time readers feeling betrayed when the plot calls the narrator's relationship to fact into question, even though the author inserts numerous "clues" that foreshadow the novel's denouement.

Cole also saturates *Open City* with cryptic allusions to specific writers, musical compositions, venues, and historical events. The allusions function as hyperlinks inserted into a web-based text, inviting the reader to investigate their significance to the plot by Googling them online. The novel reads especially well on a Kindle or other electronic reading device, where the reader can click away to an online source for additional information without exiting the reading screen. *Open City* is littered with allusions that the author does not fully develop. Many hew so closely to their original sources that the first hits in a Google search for a specific name or phrase often turn up information relevant to their significance in the novel. Cole seems to welcome this kind of internet sleuthing when he notes in a 2018 interview with Kunle Ajibade: "In a way, you write your book well enough that if a graduate student decides to study it, there are things that are buried inside." He also has contributed a gloss of the allusions in the novel's opening three paragraphs to *Genius*, a website that elucidates cryptic references in published works. The *Genius* glossary identifies references as arcane and disparate as "The Silence," a Julian Barnes short story about the composer Sibelius; Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World;* Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, and Talib Kweli's verse on "Respiration" from the hip hop album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Cole even provides the correct attribution for a piece by the composer Shchedrin that his narrator mentions but cannot quite place. The phrase "And so," with which the novel opens, receives its own special treatment. Cole explains its provenance thus:

> Opening lines of "Beowulf" (trans. Seamus Heaney, 1999): "So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by/ And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness./ We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns." The word translated as "so" here is Old English "hwæt!" which is sometimes translated as "attend!" or "listen!" (Cole, *Genius*)

The connection Cole makes here to Heaney's *Beowulf* translation urges readers, on the one hand, to approach his novel as they would an oral tale, even as it drags us by the other hand down through the endless rabbit holes of the world wide web. At moments like these, it is hard to divine if, in indulging his pedantic side, Cole is merely pulling the reader's leg.

Cole's digitally enabled interactive cues leave it to the computer's search engine and the reader's predilections to determine how we integrate external threads of information into our reading experience.

For instance, my first hits in a Google search for "Nadege," the name of Julius's Haitian ex-girlfriend, turned up a French Patisserie and the Wiktionary definition of a Gallicized Russian girl's name, which translates into English as "Hope." However, when I Googled "Haiti and Nadege" together, I was directed to a Haitian NGO committed to empowering victims of gender-based violence, one of the novel's central themes. Readers, then, must decide which associations to integrate into the text. And since, once we have encountered them, we subliminally associate all these pieces of information with the word "Nadege," to some degree they all infect our reading experience. The cues also act as prosthetic devices that augment the sensory experience of silent reading. Each of *Open City's* chapters prompts us to import an audiovisual sound track from the internet against which it can be read. Julius often drops the names of specific artists or composers with very little descriptive detail to contextualize them, or he surrounds the action with cryptic references to specific movies and paintings that most readers only can engage fully by Googling them. This style of allusion differs, say, from E.M. Forster's lavish description of Beethoven's fifth symphony in chapter five of *Howard's End,* where the narrator devotes extended passages to describing Beethoven's music, as well as the emotions it evokes in the novel's characters. Cole's narrator, by contrast, often inserts just the names of paintings or musical works with minimal descriptive commentary. Moreover, his references are so eclectic, that even readers who recognize some allusions would be hard-pressed to divine the idiosyncratic connections the narrator makes among them, without clicking through to external images or sound recordings.

DH applications help fill in these missing links, allowing the reader to engage at a deeper level with Cole's hyperrealist text. Elijah Koome, for instance, has used the media editing tool *Adobe Spark* to create a digital collage he calls "Death/Burial/Elegy in *Open City*," in which he aggregates the visual and sonic effects Julius associates with loss, especially the loss of his father (Koome, "Death"). In chapter nineteen, Julius mentions the composer Mahler's funeral in connection with the weather on the day of his father's burial. Later, in chapter twenty-one, he lists Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* along with Mozart's requiem, Beethoven's Ninth symphony and Schubert's last piano sonata as "fitting final statements," before pronouncing that Mahler's "equally immense ninth symphony" establishes the composer as "the genius of prolonged farewells" (250). Koome's project combines extracts from these sporadically referenced musical works with details taken from El Greco's painting "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz" and Courbet's "Burial at Ornans" that Julius inserts into the memory of his father's last rites. Reflecting on these rites eighteen years after the fact, Julius claims that the memory "had taken on the characteristics of those images, and in doing so had become faint and

unreliable. I couldn't be sure of the color of the earth, whether it really was the intense red clay I thought I remembered, or whether I had taken the form of the priest's surplice from El Greco's painting or from Courbet's" (228). Retrieved online and reassembled into an audiovisual collage, however, the paintings and musical performances evoke an intense, direct emotional response in the reader that exceeds their relationship to Julius's loss.

It is important to emphasize the qualitative distinction between what the words on the page convey and what DH reconstructions bring to our reading experience. Franco Moretti, in *Graphs, Maps, Trees,* maintains that digital extrapolation does not merely replace the work which a reader's imagination should do. Rather, it helps prepare a text for analysis:

> You reduce the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, artificial object like the maps that I have been discussing. And with a little luck, these maps will be more than the sum of their parts: they will possess "emerging" qualities, which were not visible at the lower level. (53)

In their essay on "Experiential Analogies," Anna Foka and Viktor Arvidsson take this notion further when they use the term "digital ekphrasis" to describe how DH tools augment our encounters with ancient sites and cultures. In their view, such digitally enabled renderings should be considered autonomous artifacts. Like Keats' ekphrastic poem, "Ode to a Grecian Urn," they engage the imagination independent of the objects to which they respond.

Cole's novel has inspired several artistic homages, including a full-length jazz suite, also called *Open City,* composed by Vijay Iyer. However, Julius's minimalist references to works of art and music also prompt recourse to ekphrastic synergies closer to the ones Foka and Arvidsson describe. Rather than restricting readers' freedom to shape unique imaginative responses to words on the page, digital aggregations and restagings of the text's allusions, like Koome's "Death/Burial/Elegy in *Open City*" open up new possibilities for engagement that we otherwise may fail to register. Yogesh Tulsi in his blogpost about "The Value of Digital Tools for Interpreting Hyperrealist Texts," produces effects similar to those for which Moretti argues when he uses the audio-visual DH tool *Audacity* to foreground how sounds as mundane as traffic noises can convey distinct emotional resonances. Tulsi connects three moments of silence that Cole interjects into chapter three of *Open City*: a companionable silence between the narrator and his grandmother; the hushed atmosphere of a museum that intensifies the sensory deprivation conveyed in paintings by a deaf artist; and the awkward silence between the

narrator and an African cab driver whom he refuses to converse with. In each case, the text represents silence by having Julius register background noises, or their absence. The "thrum of motorcycles" in the distance (35); the rise and fall of voices on a car radio (41); and the physical numbness that the sheer absence of aural stimuli in the museum induces, making Julius feel for a moment that he has lost the ability to speak (40). By abstracting and juxtaposing the haptic stimuli these silences unmute, and representing them visually as soundwaves, Tulsi documents "how silence is constructed as substantive rather than empty in *Open City*, and how actually listening to the silences might reframe the way we read the chapter" (Tulsi, "Soundscapes").

Open City's connection to a potentially infinite online network of allusions works in at least one other way. In chapter two, when Julius mentions stopping to exchange pleasantries with an acquaintance whom he describes as a jazz-loving tenure-track professor of Earth Sciences, he offers us this brief character sketch:

> His interests were broader than his professional specialty suggested, and this was part of the basis of our friendship: he had strong opinions about books and films, opinions that often went against mine, and he had lived for two years in Paris, where he had acquired a taste for fashionable philosophers like Badiou and Serres. In addition, he was an avid chess player, and an affectionate father of a nine-year-old girl who mostly lived with her mother on Staten Island. (23)

Novelists frequently use quick sketches like these to summarize a character's traits as they relate to the plot. In *Great Expectations*, for instance, Dickens repeatedly pairs passing references to Wemmick's post box slit of a mouth with the character's favorite phrase about "portable property" (291). The two details highlight the differences in attitudes to money, through which the plot distinguishes Wemmick from the novel's protagonist, Pip. In the case of *Open City,* our first surmise might be that the tenure-track earth scientist's interests serve as a foil to Julius's views about movies, or about family ties, or about music. However, the unnamed professor is peripheral to the plot, interacting briefly with the narrator just this once, unless we are meant to assume he is the friend with whom Julius and Moji go to the park near the end of the story. His only function seems to be to provide yet another opportunity for Julius, or his creator, to inundate readers with arcane allusions to seemingly disconnected bodies of knowledge—earth sciences, jazz, French philosophers, single parenting—which never quite seem to add up, even when we click through to the Internet to try to make sense of their significance.

Julius's perversely recondite name dropping, however, serves larger purposes. For a start, it calls attention to itself, deliberately feeding the discomfiting suspicion that the narrator's erudition will always exceed our own. The way this sense of inadequacy affects

readers calls to mind Freud's story about a youthful school teacher. Because the young man occupied a pedagogical role, Freud and his classmates considered him as remote from them, age-wise, as their fathers, and presumed he possessed vast knowledge that would always remain beyond their reach. In her essay "Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable," Shoshana Felman links Freud's schoolteacher and the Lacanian "subject presumed to know," when she points out that the figure of the teacher and the figure of the analyst both perform a type of unknowing in relation to the students or the analysand, which they paradoxically experience as infinite access to knowledge (34). But in fact, as Felman argues, the teacher/analyst, like the blind seer Tiresias in the Oedipus myth, merely mirrors back to the students/analysand what they already know. A parallel anxiety informs the relationship between Cole's reader and his know-it-all narrator, whose flaunted erudition we easily conflate with the seemingly infinite knowledge to which we imagine the Internet gives us access. That anxiety may help explain the overwhelming need to compete with the narrator, or to catch him out in an error, which one senses in early reviews of Cole's novel. Miguel Syjuco complains in his *New York Times* review, for example, that Cole's metaphors can seem "too capacious," his references, "ponderous." Yet he immediately tries to best the narrator by demonstrating, parenthetically, that he "gets" all the arcane references: "(The connection between a bust of the Vichy-supporting poet Paul Claudel and Auden's odes to Yeats and the Bruegel painting in a museum nearby may not immediately bring to mind, as it's meant to, the responsibilities of the intellectual during troubled times)" (12). Conversely, once we as readers start relying on the Internet to acquaint us with figures like the composer Shchedrin or the philosophers Badiou and Serres, about whom we suspect the narrator, too, may know very little, we begin to fantasize that we, too, can aspire to the narrator's capacious erudition, even though, like Freud's students, we may never quite believe that we can best him.

Julius's seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of knowledge does have its limits, however, and stumbling upon those limits may be even more unsettling than anxieties about his omniscience. They become apparent when the facts to which his references point do not line up with our online fact checking. Amanda Chemeche, who produced the historical maps of Manhattan mentioned earlier, picked up on one such discrepancy while following links beyond the text to the Dutch settler Cornelis van Tienhoven, "the monster of New Amsterdam," who engineered the wholesale slaughter of the Lenape Indians during New Amsterdam's early colonial period. Julius claims that van Tienhoven worked for the Dutch East India company, whereas the Wikipedia entry for this historical figure indicates that he worked for the Dutch *West* India company. The slip may be no more

than a copyeditor's oversight. Nevertheless, the conviction that Julius's knowledge, like Google's, may be both infinite and verifiable, so pervades the reader's experience that, faced with this "glitch," Chemeche reflects:

> Julius's descriptions of history provide a sense of connoisseurship, as if he is a historian. We take the worlds he reveals in Manhattan's landscape as factual. When finding this inaccuracy, there is a moment of disequilibrium. The carefully drawn skeleton of American history that we have inhabited with Julius is suddenly flimsy. It is as if I have caught him and, by extension, the author, in the act. Cole is not a historian, he is an author and this well of knowledge he draws from, is not as deep as it seems. ("Fact vs Fiction")

Chemeche's comments locate the epistemological dilemma at the heart of Cole's novel. If we conclude that either the author or his narrator has made a sloppy mistake, the novel's entire web of allusions becomes suspect. As Chemeche worries, the "well of knowledge" on which the author draws may not be as deep as his text's positioning of the narrator as the subject presumed to know may have led us to believe. Chemeche resolves this dilemma by speculating that the erroneous detail may be the author's way of accurately representing the imprecisions to which we all have recourse when we "make assumptions and build a narrative in order to place ... new information into some sort of context, like slipping a piece into a larger, grander puzzle" ("Fact vs Fiction"). Rather than reading this moment as evidence of narratological error, therefore, she prefers to read it as an example of artistic verisimilitude, a testament to the hyperrealism for which Cole strives—like an artist who includes an actual blemish on his model's skin when painting an image of the Virgin Mary.

Whichever explanation we favor, the disequilibrium the glitch occasions abruptly exposes the invisible hand behind Julius's apparently seamless narrative, throwing into relief the dilemmas *Open City's* readers confront as they try to weigh the narrator's truth claims and the novel's facticity. Does it matter to anything in the story that the Dutch East India company replaces the Dutch West India company? And if so why does it? And to whom? Nothing about the plot changes because either Cole or his narrator fail to get every last detail right. And, yet, our need to rationalize even small slips may have a bearing on how we judge Julius's larger lapses at the end of the novel, when he claims to have no memory of having sexually assaulted Moji. Moreover, the reader's recourse to the Internet to supplement or compete with the narrator's erudition implies that the Internet knows more than the narrator, since it can distinguish between the East and West India companies, or retrieve for us the name of a composer the narrator fails to identify. Even if we consider it a mere tool to verify the facts through which Cole and/or his narrator underwrite their credentials, doing so elevates the Internet to

the role of arbiter of truth. Whether the reader or the narrator's knowledge wins out, the subject presumed to know is thus rendered indistinguishable from the machine presumed to store all knowledge. That difficulty in establishing the line between what the narrator knows and what the Internet stores forces us to reconsider how we evaluate truth and facts in *Open City*.

Which brings us back to Serres and Badiou, the French philosophers Cole casually inserts into the narrator's passing reference to his friend, the earth scientist. Serres, who taught for many years at Stanford, in the heart of Silicon Valley, is a huge fan of all things digital, including Wikipedia. According to his own Wikipedia page, he is:

> ...interested in developing a philosophy of science which does not rely on a metalanguage in which a single account of science is privileged and regarded as accurate. To do this he relies on the concept of translation between accounts rather than settling on one as authoritative. For this reason, Serres has relied on the figure of Hermes (in his earlier works) and angels (in more recent studies) as messengers who translate (or map) back and forth between domains (i.e. between maps). (Wikipedia)

Serres's characterization of epistemology's multiple horizons as transitive and situational is resolutely optimistic. In a 2014 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, he dismisses anxieties about the breakdown of meaning in the digital age by insisting that the networks of previous eras merely have become outdated and thus incapable of communicating meaning in a new era. And he predicts that a new philosophical order, "a new law, completely different from that which organized our old metric space," will emerge to encompass the digital topologies of the twenty-first century. To help us imagine this process of remapping, he explains:

> Before, when you'd give me your address in London, it was a code that referred to a space on the map of London, or on the map of the British Isles. This map was drawn according to what we call metric geometry, which was used to define distances. With new technologies, distance disappears. Distance is not only shortened today, as it was with a horse or a plane, it's eliminated altogether. As a result, your new address – which is the address of your mobile phone or your computer – functions regardless of where you are and sends messages no matter where your correspondent resides. As a result of this kind of proximity we no longer live in the same space as our parents did. Our space has changed, and of course this change of space plays a decisive role in many things, particularly law. (Obrist)

Unlike the dystopian surrender to contingency associated with much post-structuralist thought, Serres embraces the possibility of coherent future epistemologies; multiple ways, however provisional, to map the order of things. And it is to an investment in such possibilities that Cole's novel initially appeals. Like Serres's cell phone user, for whom distance as a function of time has become

inconsequential, Julius's relentless name-dropping allows him to position himself within a network of historical, physical, and intellectual data points in relation to which he is constantly in motion but from which he seems always to be equidistant. As he traverses a single city block, he can move allochronically within and between disparate eras without missing a beat. Julius's ability, like the computer's algorithms, to translate fluidly across hitherto disconnected times and spaces buttresses his self-presentation as the subject presumed to know. Even when he fails to communicate with his immediate interlocutor, as happens in chapter three, when he rebuffs the taxi driver who attempts to claim him as a fellow African, or in chapter four, when he rejects the advances of the museum guard who reads him as gay, his inner narration effortlessly situates these misapprehensions in relation to the historical contingencies and cultural contexts out of which they arise. Julius's expansive epistemological horizons can even account for the violent rhetoric of his Moroccan interlocutors in Brussels. He understands, even shares, their critique of western imperialism, although he does not endorse what they themselves concede is an irrational identification with the 9/11 bombers. Instead, his vast network of knowledge enables him, like Serres's figure of Hermes, to contextualize their twenty-first century error in relation to multiple eras and epistemologies. These include late nineteenth-century international socialism, "the age of pamphlets, solidarity, world congresses, and young men attending the words of radicals," as well as mid-twentieth century pan-Africanism: "Fela Kuti in Los Angeles, the individuals who had been formed and sharpened by their encounters with American freedom and American injustice who, by seeing the worst that America could do to its marginalized peoples had had something in them awakened" (126).

Cole networks such seemingly random observations across time and space by allowing each chapter of *Open City* to orbit around a central idea, in much the same way that a search on the world wide web might bring together thousands of discrete references to a specific word, sound, or image. Chapter two, for instance, takes as its organizing principle the notion of the monstrous Other. Its sonic backdrop modulates from the chorus of women's voices on a Manhattan street protesting male violence in a "Take Back the Night" demonstration, into the grotesquely anatopic West African musical score of a movie about East Africa; to the racial taunts two white children on a subway platform hurl at the black narrator. The narrator also inserts a long list of notorious historical figures like Pol Pot, Stalin, and Hitler into his reflections on the atrocities of political monsters like Van Tienhoven and Idi Amin. To these, he adds the hatred which an Asian professor expelled from Uganda during Idi Amin's regime now harbors toward all Africans; the corralling of

Japanese American citizens during World War II; and the myth of the Yoruba God Obatala, whose drunkenness is said to be responsible for creating physical disfigurement. By suturing together such disparate sounds, images, and stories, he invites us to contemplate what constitutes monstrosity. Is it pathological cruelty? Is it the need to see a group, any group—all men, all black people, Ugandan Asians, Africans, Japanese Americans—as less than human and therefore monstrous? Perhaps, as Julius's increasingly random aggregation of disparate images implies, the true monstrosities are the grotesqueries of representation; the ones filmmakers produce, when they make sloppy, anachronistic choices in representing exotic cultures; or that gods inflict, when they get drunk and create deformed human beings; or that purveyors of tourist kitsch reinforce when they sell Chinese peasant hats to midwestern tourists; or that TV shows retail when they depict all black people as criminals. Drawing on Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, Julius suggests that when we fail to attend to context and detail we reduce people and cultures to vague abstractions, with violent consequences for actual human beings. Even Julius's carelessness with the details of his patient's story about Van Tienhoven may be a case in point, as it feels of a piece with his lax oversight of her treatment, which may have contributed to her suicide. Such lapses remind us that attitudes and algorithms that allow us mechanically to aggregate facts, without attention to their specificity, open up the imaginative lacunae in which atrocities flourish.

Cole repeats and critiques this curatorial strategy throughout *Open City*. In chapter one, the sounds, images, and anecdotes focus on isolation; in chapter three, on silence; chapter four, on sequestration, whether chosen, in a monastery, or involuntary, in a deportation holding facility; chapter six, on military discipline, chapter nineteen, on loss, and so forth. Like Hermes, the messenger god in Serres's analogy, or a Spotify playlist, Julius provides the central consciousness that connects each chapter's disparate nodes. From this vantage point, the novel initially orchestrates a coherent response to the knotty ethical issues that bombard both its characters and its readers in a complexly mediated world.

Further into the narrative, however, the chapters' centering ideas begin to inform each other, providing the reader with insights into Julius's condition that he himself cannot see. As new networks of signification develop across chapters, the reader takes on the mantle of the subject presumed to know, discerning truths that escape the narrator who, like Oedipus, cannot divine the meaning of his riddle, although he is the source of all the information the blind seer Tiresias uses to solve it. Gradually, we realize that we no longer are being guided by a narrator whose capacious knowledge allows him to connect a seemingly infinite

stream of informational nodes, or an arbiter who stands outside the meanings thus construed. Instead, the reader begins to apprehend a character whose formative experiences with isolation, monstrosity, silence, sequestration, discipline, and loss have left him deeply scarred and rendered him unable to maintain meaningful human connections. In the language of Alain Badiou, the other French philosopher whose name Julius drops, we are confronted here with varieties of meaning-making that seem to obey different rules, but which converge to underwrite a bounded form of coherence that Badiou calls "compossibility" (Riera 69).

Badiou's notion of compossibility differs from the serial remapping about which Serres fantasizes because it privileges intersections (or, perhaps, lacunae) over infinite ramification. For Badiou, the true opposition is not between the One and the multiple, but between any such pairings and the perspectives they occlude. Compossibility thus arises out of what Badiou terms the conditions or truths, in relation to which Truth with a capital T is constructed. He identifies these conditions as art, politics, science and love (Riera 69). As Srdjan Cvjeticanin summarizes: *"For Badiou, philosophy is inherently empty, that is, it has no privileged access to some realm of Truth beyond the reach of artistic, scientific, political, and amorous thought and creation. Therefore, philosophy is conditioned; it is conditioned by the conditions of truth-procedures and ontology"* (Cvjeticanin). When fissures develop in the representational conventions that secure the presumed neutrality or naturalness of these truth conditions, a new relationship to Truth, with a capital T, becomes visible. "To this process stretched between an encounter with the void, as cause, and the construction of a consistency not founded on the foreclosure of the real of being, Badiou gives the name subject" (Cvjeticanin). We need no more than the equivalent of Julius's passing acquaintance with fashionable French philosophers, by way of his friend, the assistant professor of Earth Sciences, to grasp how bounded truth conditions, like the ones Badiou's system of thought assails, infect our reading of *Open City*. Our sense of inadequacy in the face of the narrator's seemingly infinite networks of information turns out to be inconsequential. Instead, the tensions between each chapter's internal consistency and the conceptual links between the chapters open up fissures in the coherence of the narrator's world view. Julius's mastery of the conditions of knowledge associated with art, politics and science come under pressure as his incapacity to articulate the condition of love looms large.

An example of this process becomes clear if we return to Koome's representation of the art and music Julius associates with his father's death. In my earlier comments I focused on how

Koome's digital ekphrasis allows the reader to experience an overwhelming sense of grief partially untethered from Julius's loss. That emotional response is evoked by our encounter with the art and music Koome retrieves and reorders in relation to Julius's words, rather than from the way the narrator describes his own responses to grief. Except for one fleeting, albeit significant, reference to feeling "hollowed… out," which he immediately buries in an allusion to "the ghouls and Zombies in Michael Jackson's *Thriller"* (228), Julius offers the reader few explicit insights into what he felt during or after his father's burial. In fact, his reliance on references to European art and music in this context functions as a screen memory that leaves him unable to distinguish between the color of the earth he remembers from his father's actual burial and the red color in paintings by El Greco and Courbet. From the retrospective vantage point of the novel's denouement, however, Julius's reliance on external references now heightens our awareness of what his classical soundtrack and aesthetic references occlude. Like Tulsi's representation of the sounds that define the silences in chapter three, the grandeur and pathos of the paintings and musical scores Julius references only intensify our awareness of the emotional silence at his core.

As the narrative process stretches between what Badiou calls "an encounter with the void, as cause, and the construction of consistency not founded on the foreclosure of the real" (Cvjeticanin), a new subject begins to emerge. Julius, the narrating "I," whose movement between the various conditions or truths in Badiou's paradigm initially suggested mastery and coherence, is eclipsed as "the subject presumed to know." He is replaced by the reader, who can position herself now both at the organizing center and on the ethical horizon of the narrative. By degrees, Julius's narration inadvertently exposes the extent and origin of his estrangement from his emotions, until we can see what he cannot: that vast troves of information and the capacity for reason are insufficient for constructing an ethical view of the world. Despite the overwhelming display of intellectual mastery through which Julius grooms us to identify with his perspective, his own words ultimately persuade us to accept Moji's version of events over his—that he sexually assaulted her.

Once we supplant Julius as the ethical framer at the novel's sensate core, however, we become in our turn "the subject presumed to know" and must grapple with the void that inevitably threatens to engulf that subject—what Badiou has termed the foreclosure of the real. Readers who persevere to the end of Cole's novel often feel compelled to judge Julius's character; to assign meaning to Moji's rape and Julius's inability to recall his role in it. And yet, if we read closely, it becomes apparent that even after we

make links between the separate foci of each chapter in ways that Julius cannot, Cole provides us with no external corroboration for Moji's story. We base our conviction that she is telling the truth solely on our affective engagement with her, as readers situated in the twenty-first century who have been sensitized to how sexual violence against women can become routinized. Moreover, like the monks and prisoners in chapter five, we remain sequestered within the narrator's version of reality. We receive Moji's story only as it is filtered through Julius's consciousness. Based on the information available to us, we know, as does Julius, that Moji believes the event she describes took place. But by the same token we also have to accept that Julius has no recollection of any such event; that he simply does not know any more than he says. We have no external information that would allow us independently to corroborate either version of the story. Which is not the same as saying that Julius did not sexually assault Moji. As Badiou would have it, we are faced here with the distinction between truths and Truth: "Truths, in other words, are phenomena, or phenomenal procedures, which bear a fidelity to the foundations of ontology. Truth—the philosophical category—on the other hand, is the subtracted universal articulation of these singular thoughts" (Cvjeticanin). We may choose as readers to believe one version of the truth or the other, but each choice is circumscribed by the phenomenological limits of the conditions that produce it; the point where our epistemological horizon abruptly falls off into the void. We simply cannot know.

Unless, of course, we return to Serres, who would argue that the map into which we could insert these incompatible truths is yet to be drawn. As he affirms in his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, "[i]nside the space that is the Internet there exists a law that has nothing to do with the law that organizes the space we previously lived in, and as a result, there is a reciprocal ignorance and struggle between these two laws" (Serres). The Twitter hashtag #metoo offers one example of such a remapping, because it has forced many communities in the twenty-first century to entertain the possibility that just because many men actually do forget the occasions on which they assaulted women, it does not mean that these assaults did not occur. Their lack of recall simply may demonstrate how securely such actions have remained beyond the reach of phenomenology, sequestered outside the frameworks many cultures have erected to evaluate truth claims for centuries. *Open City's* refusal to offer us more than affective corroboration for Moji's version of events calls attention to the conditions of truth that constrain overarching claims about Truth, with a capital T, at any given moment.

Having debunked our assumption that Julius's self-narrative can be ratified by connecting it to the empirical data we can access online, Teju Cole's *Open City* goes further. It challenges us to consider how much of what we take as epistemologically coherent in the digital age—how much of what we think we can fact check—continues to be framed by conditions or truths unique to our specific cultural and historical moment. Many of Cole's readers probably appreciate this insight when it comes to scientific forms of knowledge. Most would agree, for instance, that the framing stories on which scientists relied for centuries to explain how infection spread were inadequate to account for the spread of the HIV virus— or of COVID-19, for that matter. We are less ready to accept such epistemological shifts when they concern political values or artistic standards and least likely to do so when they relate to love or desire. In the wake of the #metoo movement, it is difficult enough to fathom how the extent and systemic nature of sexual assault remained beyond our cultural horizons for so long. Given that hard-won realization, many readers may feel that they cannot afford to entertain the possibility that Moji's memory of events could be as unreliable as Julius's. Some voids are just too unfathomable to be left unfilled.

Open City cautions us that each new episteme eventually fissures, extruding the conditions that hasten its exhaustion. This is not an argument for endless relativism. When he invokes Badiou and Serres, Cole acknowledges that even though the bounded epistemological frameworks through which we perceive our world may shift over time, such shifts have concrete consequences for actual bodies. The astounding efficiency with which the Internet allows us to fact check every name, image, or piece of music in Cole's hyperrealist novel encourages us to equate the notion of a permanent, indivisible Truth with what we can ratify online. However, when the novel blurs the boundaries between analog and digital worlds, or between human subjects and the algorithms that organize information, it gestures beyond itself toward future ethical horizons. Like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Teju Cole's *Open City* invites us to peer over the edge of the abyss; to anticipate the moments when the truth conditions that characters or readers take to be self-evident will become illegible. Only, instead of staging this as a faceoff between Okonkwo's world and that of the district officer, Cole's readers and characters must grapple with the faceoff between competing systems of representation in a networked global community. Inhabiting transnational spaces in the era of social media, Cole belongs to a cohort of African writers that has had to negotiate a world where the assumptions Achebe's generation took for granted about what it means to be an African or what it means to write no longer hold.

His novel looks toward the future, cautioning readers against taking this new era's truth claims for granted because we think we can corroborate them via the Internet. He challenges us not to foreclose our horizons as we reexamine the conditions we bring to our engagement with Truth.

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