

Chapter II

Going Through The Motions – Movement, Metahistory, and the Spectacle of Suffering in Teju Cole’s *Open City*

“[L]iterature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.”

Cathy Caruth

“And above all beware, my body and my soul too, beware of crossing your arms in the sterile attitude of a spectator, because life is not a spectacle, a sea of sorrows is not a proscenium, because a man who screams is not a dancing bear.”

Aimé Césaire

1 Introduction: Moving On or Being Moved?

It is with the first paragraph of Teju Cole’s *Open City*⁴² that we not only gain a concrete sense of this peculiar novel’s set and setting, but also a crucial insight into its entire structure, mode, and tone: “And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city” (3). It is from this precise localization that the novel’s ulterior narration sets out, mapping the distances between fixed points like Morningside Park or Central Park in units measured by “walking pace” (ibid.). In the course of the narrative, spanning the “final year” of his psychiatric fellowship, New York City “work[s] itself into” the life of the first-person narrator Julius (ibid.). The sense of temporality maintained here is deictic: later we will discover that the story is set in the period from the fall of 2005 to that of 2006. The opening composition of a specific place in a somewhat fixed yet unsure time, however, will structure the way that Julius experiences the city. It marks a sense of time as something to be decoded, linked to the experience of space yet also independent of it. Throughout the novel, unhinged temporalities present themselves as a narrative force, as something imbued with an agency of its own, altering urban space and affecting the narrated “I,” as Julius finds himself “gripped by [...]

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42 Hereafter cited as *OC*.

a commotion from an earlier time” (74), feeling as if he had “stumbled into a kink in time and space” (191) or caught in the kind of temporal limbo in which “it could have been any day from the last fifteen hundred years” (165).

For all its temporal suspensions and historical excursions, *Open City* is very much concerned with the fleeting present moment, and – especially in light of both the author and the novel’s reception – also with the arguably even more elusive, contemporary moment of Afropolitanism. As such, both author and protagonist have often been read as embodiments of a new African or Black cosmopolitanism. Identifying Teju Cole as “one of a talented generation of global writers, at home in the world” (Kunzru), whose debut novel opens up, amongst others, “new vistas [...] on race, identity” (*The Economist*) allows a reading of *Open City* as the fictionalized account of a distinct experience of New York. This experience is mediated through the perspective of a highly educated, cosmopolitan man of German/Nigerian descent whose complex past and present intermingle with the city’s historical and contemporary challenges; while establishing a multilayered form of ‘being Black’ in New York City – and the world.

Yet *Open City* does not simply mark a novel phenomenology of global Blackness by providing “new vistas” on the world. Rather than merely reading Julius’s position as exemplary of a new African or diasporic identity, it is important to resist taking the novel’s realism at face value. With regards to any of its themes, and, crucially, to the way it employs race in/as history, *Open City* must be understood not simply as exemplifying a novel social formation but in its distinct novel form. Or, as Malcom Bradbury put it in a different context, it is important to remain attentive both to “the novel’s propensity toward realism, social documentation and interrelation with historical events and movements,” and to “its propensity toward form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination” (1977: 8).⁴³ Despite the ostensibly mundane action it details, *Open City* provides less documentary realism than a highly formalized rendering of time and history as subjective experience. Skillfully, it brings in dialogic relation both subaltern and hegemonic, contrapuntal and dominant readings of history, foregrounding metahistorical positionalities that are seldom actively reflected upon. By detailing how individuals, collectives, communities, and even nations, move away from and/or through past trauma, it probes how exactly a conjunctural relation with history is established, as well as the various modes of being, ethical and

⁴³ Giles Foden, also citing Bradbury in his review of *Open City*, writes that the novel “recommences a process of synthesis” between these two often contested aspects of the novel (2011: para. 6). I agree that the novel dramatizes this, and that most careful readings of the novel acknowledge it – except when it comes to notions of race and racism, which are either ignored or not afforded this kind of hermeneutic nuance.

otherwise, that each positionality may entail. *Open City* thus embodies an important aspect of the Afropolitan moment, yet one that is less interested in making history through novelty but rather investigates the subjective and affective *poesis* of history, or how history is made, and the hermeneutics of history, how history can be read.

The evidently modernist motifs in *Open City* have led critics to align Julius with the figure of the *flâneur*, whose putatively aimless wandering, erudite cosmopolitan sensibility, and “acute, sympathetic eye” invite the reader to “see interesting things in the city, and to notice them well” (Wood 2012: para. 6). The same review, by James Wood, while noting an “interesting combination of confession and reticence about Julius,” nevertheless sees the narrative motivation of *Open City* thus exhausted (para. 5). However, the narrative flow of *Open City* is clearly not aimless, yet it is also not causally driven – at least not in the common sense of action and reaction, event and idea. There are lapses, there is meandering, there is the cautious revolving around a theme that remains largely unresolved. This chapter illuminates how the formal structure of *Open City* bespeaks its narrative motivation, while being attentive to the novel’s carefully constructed ambiguity. Its thematic complexity and ostensibly motiveless protagonist and story resist a totalizing interpretation and prompt remarkably varied reader responses.⁴⁴ An important premise of the following investigation is the assumption that the diversity of readings and their respective emotional responses mirror the extent and potential of *Open City*’s protagonist Julius to move in and out of, and be moved by, the stories he records. Reading the novel through the polysemic trope of movement makes it paramount to relate its affective and chronotopic configurations to the Black Diaspora – as a political movement predicated on historical imbrications and contemporary solidarity. Hence, this chapter argues that it is precisely through the exploration of spatiotemporal movement that the novel also stages the (im)possibility of emotional transference – of being moved to feel – and establishes an ethical relation to the past.

⁴⁴ While popular reviews of the novel hail it as an “exhilarating post-melting pot” and a “hopeful, affirming book”, or laud its cosmopolitan and liberal sensibility, other, mainly scholarly, interpretations tend to focus on the novel’s more foreboding and pessimist tones. See Liu 2012; Hallemeier 2013.

2 “To Trace Out a Story”: Narrating Movement and the Movement of Narrative

With its vast array of historico-ontological and metaphorical connotations, movement can easily be identified as a master trope of the Black Diaspora, be it the forced movements and removals of colonialism and transatlantic enslavement, the northbound movements of the Underground Railroad, the Great Migration, Post-war emigration from the colonies, or the complex flows of contemporary migration. Theoretically, too, some hugely productive conceptualizations of Black or postcolonial culture have relied on notions of movement; from the ambivalent vacillation behind Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of liminality (2004: 5) to the “vertiginous movement” underlying the cultural practice Henry Louis Gates has identified as signifying’ (1988: 55). In Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, the connection is made particularly explicit when he centers his exploration on the image of “ships in motion,” calling this particular chronotope of passage the “central organising symbol” of the diaspora (2002: 4). Apprehending *Open City* through the trope of movement, it appears as if it is movement in and of itself, rather than its aim, origin, or directedness that seems to determine its overall narrative structure. The protagonist Julius, repeatedly emphasizing the aimlessness of his urban strolls, could thus be interpreted as an embodiment of the most prevalent image of the Afropolitan – sophisticated, unfettered, and monied. Yet it is rather difficult to align this complicated protagonist with the glossy surfaces of that consumerist notion of Afropolitanism, showcasing a shiny and new generation of African immigrants who move swiftly and elegantly from country to country, cultural sphere to cultural sphere, seemingly at ease and carrying no grudges, creating no friction. The leisurely movements of Julius are indeed marked by the kind of agency, nonchalance, and self-possession that are not commonly afforded to the global movements of Black bodies, who have historically been imagined as either economically trafficked, externally driven, or coerced itinerant objects. What drives the following investigation, however, is how ‘unmotivated’ and ‘free’ any form of movement – particularly Black movement – can ever be.

While *Open City* variedly explores movement, its most obvious instance is the physical movement of the narrator, which allows for the unfolding of most of the action, while also determining the narrative pace, temporality, and structure of the novel. In order to distinguish the temporalities of these levels, I operate with Gérard Genette’s narratological model of *histoire*, *récit*, and *narration*, or story, plot, and narrating, as well as duration, mood, and voice. Looking at the way that spatiotemporal configurations evoke formal conventions or constraints, I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, as developed in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

Open City's first-person narrator Julius is a young psychiatrist who roams the city like a restless *flâneur*, measuring its lengths and depths, an isolated and distant observer winding down after long days at the hospital. Apart from a trip abroad and a short visit to an immigration detention center in Queens, Julius traces out a map of Manhattan, staying true both in spirit and scope to the vastness of this "sea in the middle of the sea," the "urban island" evoked in French historian Michel de Certeau's much cited essay "Walking in the City" (2008: 91). The narrative momentum of *Open City* unfolds in a pedestrian rather than panoramic way, slow and subtle. Yet this is not to say that there is no action, no drive, no plotment – or elevated viewpoint, for that matter. The particular movement of his purportedly "aimless wandering" (3) dictates a narrative rhythm that is somewhat monotonous, a lulling pace accompanied by his distanced and sophisticated musings on predominantly Western history, art, philosophy, and psychology. This rather cool and detached surface reading is punctured by violent intrusions that seem to force themselves upon the narrator, as he strolls through, or perhaps flees from, his own past and part in history.

The novel comprises twenty-one chapters and is divided into two parts. The epigraph to the first part reads "*Death is a perfection of the eye*" (1); the second part is themed "*I have searched myself*" (147). Part one spans the beginning of Julius's evening walks until the end of his visit to Brussels, Belgium – a trip of several weeks intended to bring about a reunion with his maternal German grandmother that is marked by extensive rain, more walking, a chance sexual encounter, as well as an engagement with Europe's colonial heritage and post 9/11 islamophobia. In the chapters leading up to Julius's lonely Christmas in Brussels, we learn that he is an avid listener of classical music, an eclectic reader, and an occasional birdwatcher, that he has few friends, one of them an 89-year old Japanese-American professor of Early English Literature, and that he has recently broken up with his girlfriend, Nadège. These biographical details are woven into his autodiegetic narrative in a piecemeal fashion; everything is filtered through reflection, little is shown in action, everything is told in retrospect. The telling, however, is intimate, often casual, omitting and passing over information in a mode more akin to that of a diary or internal monologue than that of a memoir or autobiography. The overall effect, however, maintains the impression of the narrator as author. In this sense, the intradiegetic world of Julius's narrating takes on mimetic qualities. We learn that Julius is not white through the incidental observation that "[i]n the Harlem night, there were no whites" on page 18. We gather that he is African when he thinks back to his childhood memories of watching a movie about Idi Amin's atrocities, and we find out that he is Nigerian when he recalls an uncomfortable situation in the house of a medical professor, an East African Indian who had been expelled

by Idi Amin and who speaks with disdain and disgust of all Africans, “sidestep[ing] the specific” (31).

Apart from numerous passages that indulge in erudite soliloquies on urban and art history and, in their ostensibly calm and collected objectivity, resemble the style of historiography, frequent excursions into Julius’s recent and more distant past accompany his narration. Curiously, they appear to be both central and accidental to character and plot motivation. When the narrating comes to an end, a year later, it seems as though not much has ‘happened,’ at least on the surface. Julius has completed his fellowship at the clinic and taken up an opening in a private practice in Manhattan. We have reached the present tense of the narrative; he is organizing his new office (248). His final memory ventures only so far as the previous night, a visit to the opera to see one of “Mahler’s final works – *Das Lied von der Erde*” (250). Following the memory of getting locked out on the fire staircase of Carnegie Hall, gazing at the starry skies and evoking strong notions of futurity, he recounts the unexpected experience of a boat trip on the Hudson River later that night. Moving onto the Upper Bay, the boat comes close to the Statue of Liberty, triggering in Julius a train of thought on the statue’s history as a lighthouse and the fatal danger it presented to migrating birds. This passage appears to be embedded in the frame of remembering the “[l]ast night” to Julius’s present, yet, unlike countless other historical digressions, this one closes the narrating and narrative as a whole:

A large number of birds met their death in this manner. In 1888, for instance, on the morning after one particularly stormy night, more than fourteen hundred dead birds were recovered from the crown, the balcony of the torch, and the pedestal of the statue. [...] On October 1 of that year, for example, the colonel’s report indicated that fifty rails had died, as had eleven wrens, two catbirds, and one whip-poor-will. The following day, the record showed two dead wrens; the day after that, eight wrens. [...] On the morning of October 13, for example, 175 wrens had been gathered in, all dead of the impact, although the night just past hadn’t been particularly windy or dark. (258–259)

With this cumulative account of the generic names and numbers of birds that perished, disoriented by the Statue of Liberty’s gleaming light, the novel ends not merely in the intradiegetic past tense of recent memory but also in the distanced authorial mode of historiography – and a strangely inverted invocation of a bird’s eye perspective. Again, recalling de Certeau’s distinction between the panoptic overview of a city, in his case initiated by the view from the World Trade Center, and the street-level perspective of the pedestrian or *flâneur*, this particular instance of another iconic New York City building and the interesting blurring of perspectives functions as a peculiar coda to the novel. Without actually leaving the street or, in this case, sea level of the narration, without being of

ferred an untroubled, totalizing overview of Julius's account, we are still left with a somewhat elevated perspective and narrative voice that is not one or no one's and could thus be ours. This perspective also questions the kind of narrative situation invoked in *Open City*, and the ground the narrating actually attempts to cover. Modeled on the ambling movement of the pedestrian, Julius's narrating forecloses a final interpretation for himself in the same way that de Certeau asserts that the bodies of urban *Wandersmänner* "follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (2008: 93).

Yet who is the receiver or interpreter of this text and what is the motivation for it being written? In the very first chapter, Professor Saito evokes the spatial dimension of a text in a striking reversal of de Certeau's notion of the "long poem of walking" (2008: 101), alluding to it as "the environment created by the poems" (OC 14). Julius also affirms this notion, along with the unintelligibility of a textspace with regard to the body that produces it: "I told him a little about my walks, and wanted to tell him more but didn't have quite the right purchase on what it was I was trying to say about the solitary territory my mind had been crisscrossing" (12). This passage is also interesting in that it casts Julius in the role of reader or interpreter in a way that might signify an interpretative model for his own narrative. From listening to the memories of his former mentor, Julius notes, he has "learned the art of listening [...] and the ability to trace out a story from what was omitted" (9). Throughout the entire narration, Julius places subtle and not so subtle reminders that his narrative, too, is built on lapses and omissions that might be central to reading it as a whole. Only two paragraphs in, he already admits that he "couldn't trust his memory" (4), but it is finally through the rape accusation made by his childhood friend's sister, Moji, that we realize with more clarity that Julius is an unreliable narrator. In an interview with scholar Aaron Bady, Cole sheds light on Julius's particular unreliability: "I wasn't going for regular unreliability: 'I was thinking more in terms of a formalized testimony, of the kind that might happen on a psychiatrist's couch. In other words, a plausible framing device for *Open City* is a series of visits by Julius to his psychiatrist" (2015: para. 11).

If we are to take this kind of framing seriously, we will have to adapt both the aim of Julius's purportedly unmotivated meandering and the narrative situation to that of a serialized confession, resting on the pivotal axis of Moji's disclosure. Thus, while most readers might experience the revelation as happening close to the end, it is in truth the end, at least the end of Julius's intradiegetic narrating. It is the culmination of a recollected story and occurs just before we reach the present tense of the narrating instance, in the final chapter. Furthermore, the temporal intervals between the two bracketing ulterior narrations and the narrating instance render the latter not merely a subsequent, but an interpolated nar-

rative instance. Julius is telling this story as “a series of visits” and, as he cannot trust his memory, he also remembers it in a way that will influence the story. Genette describes this narrating instance as particularly complex, because “the story and the narrating can become entangled in such a way that the latter has an effect on the former” (1980: 217). In addition, Julius performs the narrating in a particularly cunning manner; he is a psychiatrist, after all. Asked by Bady if a therapist would not push him toward exploring the issues he is avoiding, Cole answers:

Not in psychoanalysis. They'd let him unfold. They'd let him circle and digress. All the pushing will come from within himself. And since the patient is also a psychiatrist, he's naturally going to brood over questions like whether he has a blind spot, or come up with a statement like “I have searched myself.” He would present with that kind of self-deceiving self-awareness. (2015: para. 15)

This temporal structure of *Open City*, organized around the disavowed rape of Moji, reveals a narrating instance that takes on crucial importance for interpreting the story as a scene of confessing or confiding and, on the part of the narratee, witnessing and constructing. Even though Julius never explicitly acknowledges his guilt, the novel's narrative structure renders his confession if not the story's ‘point’ or ‘purpose’ then at least the fundamental moment that motivates its telling. The implicit reader of *Open City*, as a psychotherapist, would, of course, be able to anticipate or trace this kind of pivotal moment through the narration's momentum and structure, as well as the following clues.

Moji enters Julius's story at the beginning of *Open City's* second part, whereas the revelation appears at the very end. In-between these brackets we gain a very restrained sense of agitation, a subtle acceleration moving toward a climactic break, not only when Julius observes that he “had the ulcerous sensation of too many things happening at once” (184), but also in the form of a denser succession of action. Following the chapter in which Julius runs into Moji, we learn that his favorite patient V. has died, quickly followed by the death of Professor Saito, spanning two chapters. After a brief, and, as we will later see, illusory moment of leisure, Julius is robbed and injured by a group of teenage boys. The next externally motivated plot point is already Moji's telephone call, inviting him to a party at her boyfriend's apartment and leading up to the scene where she will confront him.

Instances that anticipate Moji's accusation and Julius's disavowal are especially poignant in the scene of their reencounter in New York, as well as in Julius's delayed reaction to it in the following chapter. Here, Julius's attachment to a self-contained, coherent – and innocent – sense of self not only barely conceals, but actually highlights his own sense of lack and fear of disintegration.

The passage opens with a reflection on one's relation toward the past and the deceptive integrity of a coherent life story:

We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. (155)

The ensuing evocation of a singular, isolated present is contrasted with a different kind of temporality, one that questions the former's disjuncture and contingency by providing the kind of continuity that is neither simply coherent nor convenient, but in its estranged familiarity, is uncanny and repetitive, and invested in the "reiteration" of things "that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts":

But there was another, irruptive sense of things past. The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa. [...] She appeared (apparition was precisely what came into mind) to me in a grocery store in Union Square late in January. I didn't recognize her [...]. At the same moment that I confessed to having blanked out on who she was, she accused me of just that, a serious accusation, but jocularly expressed. (156)

Julius reacts politely, lightheartedly, "mask[ing] the irritation" he "suddenly" feels (156). Yet his actual response will work its way out only a few pages later, in the following chapter. Here, Julius experiences an explicit bout of amnesia. Trying to withdraw money at an ATM machine, he is unable to remember the correct four-digit code and is deeply disturbed by this "sudden mental weakness" (161). He detects an "unsuspected area of fragility" in himself that poses a threat to his sense of integrity and wholeness, rendering him "incomplete" in the same way that walking would be "suddenly lessened" by "a broken leg" (*ibid.*). After repeated, unsuccessful attempts, he gives up and eventually returns home. There, he tries to find the code amongst his documents and then, he claims, "forg[ets] all about the incident" (166). The following day, a call from his bank causes the embarrassing failure "to become fresh again, and this time more heavily, and this time without witnesses or an official record" (*ibid.*). When he repeats, only a few lines down, that he "had forgotten the incident," this creates an uncanny resonance within the paragraph and also, in its conspicuous tautology, echoes both the memory lapse of the previous day and another uncomfortable and equally inevitable return. In repetition, Julius links this incident to others like it, to the disavowed rape, Moji's "serious accusation" (156). An event that is part of his past, and that is not really forgotten, but merely "hovering [...] out of reach" (167).

We find two notions of coherence established in these passages that are both threatened by disintegration. The first is a sense of the past or history that is particularly interesting in its spatial qualification as “empty space” in which people or events “float” (155). This notion of history, echoing Walter Benjamin’s “homogenous, empty time” of progress (2003: 395), is penetrated by “another, irruptive sense” of the past, in the form of Moji’s ghostly “apparition” (156). The second illusory coherence is that of the psyche as a governable realm, of an imagined ideal ego, threatened by the irreversible blow of an uncontrollable memory lapse. By comparing this to the effect of a broken leg to a body’s movement (161), Julius is recapitulating the idea of memory, or personal history, as a text-space, traversed by an abled body, moving freely. Both the movements of walking in the city, and the “fixtures in [his] mental landscape” (19) are spatiotemporally mapped and subject to the differing models of linearity and progress or recursiveness and gridlock.

Even though the disavowed rape of his childhood friend’s sister renders the narrator of *Open City* as unreliable as any narrative of unfettered progress, this discrepancy is not part of the immediate telling and generic structuring of the novel, where he presents himself as the hero of his story, albeit mediated through reflection and self-awareness. In the passage ushering in the story’s climax, Julius reflects on this:

Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people’s stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic. (243)

Writing about the journal and the epistolary confidence as the genres that are also characterized by *Open City*’s interpolated narrative instance of “quasi-interior monologue and the account after the event,” Genette asserts:

Here, the narrator is at one and the same time still the hero and already someone else: the events of the day are already in the past, and the “point of view” may have been modified since then; the feelings of the evening or the next day are fully of the present and here focalization through the narrator is at the same time focalization through the hero. (1980: 218)

This kind of focalization can also be analyzed by looking at the dominant chronotope of Julius’s narration. Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of the chronotope, literally “timespace,” as a prerequisite unit of any narrative and also “a formally constitutive category of literature,” we may align at least

some aspects of Julius’s narration with a distinct generic convention (1986: 84). Especially certain temporal indeterminacies of Julius’s wanderings and his pedestrian recording of interchangeable, temporally reversible vignettes on everyday life in New York City, do in fact echo the “simplest time” chronotope of “adventure time.” Bakhtin identifies this particular spatiotemporal configuration with certain forms of classical Greek romance. This chronotope exhibits a “sharp hiatus between two moments of biographical time, a hiatus that leaves no trace in the life of the heroes or in their personalities” (ibid.: 90) and is predominantly marked by an “*enforced movement through space*” (ibid.: 105). Action, thus, is characterized simply by “a change in spatial location” (ibid.). Here, the lack of initiative or motivation on behalf of the character opens up room for fate, for chance encounters (as with Moji), or failures to meet (as in his trip to Brussels). We can sense in the ostensible aimlessness of Julius’s walks, his pronounced alienation and unmoored, billiard-ball like passivity, an echoing of the “random contingency” that marks the chronotope of “adventure time” as an ancient narrative form (Bakhtin 1986: 101). This is emphasized even more so by Julius’s avowed understanding of life as a series of disjunctures, of linear amnesia, rather than that of recursivity, continuity, or historical and social embeddedness. However, folding in the overarching structure of the narrative as serial confiding, the particular world-making of Julius’s confession can perhaps better be described with the Bakhtinian notion of an “adventure time of everyday life.” Here, time and space do in fact leave traces and bear significance on the development of the character, precisely through the pivotal moment we can identify as confession, if not even retroactive redemption. Elaborating on this particular chronotope, Bakhtin writes:

In this everyday maelstrom of personal life, time is deprived of its unity and wholeness – it is chopped up into separate segments, each encompassing a single episode from everyday life. The separate episodes [...] are rounded-off and complete, but at the same time are isolated and self-sufficient. The everyday world is scattered, fragmented, deprived of essential connections. [...] These temporal segments of episodes from everyday life are [...] arranged, as it were, perpendicular to the pivotal axis of the novel, which is the sequence guilt → punishment → redemption → purification → blessedness (precisely at the moment of punishment–redemption). (1986: 128)

In thinking about the effect of Julius’s story as a whole, it is important to register that different chronotopic modes – the simple chronology of “adventure time” and the vignette-like yet cathartic structure of the “adventure time of everyday life” that revolves around the pivotal axis of Moji’s accusation – are contrasted, conflated, and questioned in a way that essentially foregrounds their function as modes of storytelling. Moreover, we can now understand Julius as the author of a

particular kind of narrative, one that ostensibly develops and invests in a narrative movement akin to a “pedestrian unfolding of the stories accumulated in a place” but also follows a particular generic logic and motivation that is betrayed by its narrative levels (de Certeau 2008: 110).

Open City is, as Cole asserts in the aforementioned interview with Bady, “a narrative troubled from beginning to end by Julius’s origin in Africa” (2015: para. 7). The sudden “apparition” of Moji causes Julius to encounter “some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa” (156). Hence, Africa, as the repository of childhood memories, dreams, and distant traumas, plays hardly any role outside of Julius’s past and is relegated to his understanding of immaturity, origin, and youth.⁴⁵ At the same time, his linear, progressive movement away from Africa is troubled by Moji’s presence, who confronts his capacity to forget, to simply move on and maintain his “secure version of the past,” with the encumbering spell that his acts have cast on her own evolvment (156). While Julius had acted like he

knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when [they] met again [...], it hadn’t been like that for her [...] 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)

In the same way that Julius’s luxury of forgetting is related to Moji’s curse of remembering, various diasporic encounters throughout the novel highlight how Julius’s purportedly autonomous motions correspond to other, more conflicted and obstructed movements. The fact that his narrative, too, is “troubled from beginning to end by Julius’s origin in Africa” belies the motivelessness of his ambulation and renders these encounters particularly significant. It is possible, as many critics have, to read Julius’s *flânerie* as a failed performance of cosmopolitanism, highlighting instead how his hyper-individualism is fundamentally, and fatefully, connected to others.⁴⁶ Having established the crucial role that Moji’s disclosure plays in relation to narrative progress, it is possible to link this postlapsarian allegory to a more general, metahistorical notion of trauma, which situates

⁴⁵ This sentiment echoes of course Hegel’s description of Africa as “the land of childhood” or *Kinderland* (2011: 109).

⁴⁶ See Vermeulen 2013; Hallemeier 2013; Hartwiger 2016; and Krishnan 2015. Krishnan writes: “Like the memory of rape, Africa, for Julius, becomes a site of radical disconnection, a landscape to which he claims allegiance and whose memory severs, erased under a bland cosmopolitanism which seeks to eradicate the traces of its violent cleaving” (2015: 690).

particularly African American and postcolonial discourses within a wider debate about literary criticism.

3 “To Experience the Pain Afresh”: Metahistory and the Circling Movement of Melancholia

Compared to the other novels I discuss in this book, *Open City* addresses the notion of race much less overtly. To a large extent, this is due to Julius’s self-fashioning as a “rooted cosmopolitan” apropos Anthony Kwame Appiah, as we see him repeatedly wrestle with and bristle at various racial and ethnic conceptions.⁴⁷ Yet apart from these mostly unwanted interpellations, the aspect of race does not seem to play a hugely significant role. However, I conceive of Afropolitanism less as a cosmopolitan identity with African roots and more as a temporal mode of inquiry or ‘tool’ to think with. I suggest that the most interesting way *Open City* negotiates the subject of race and the politics of Blackness is not by explicitly referencing these topoi but through its juxtaposing of metahistoricist modes, or readings of history. This orientation toward questions of history and historicism rather than (merely) experience and ontology allows a reading of *Open City* that reconciles what may be indeed post-racial in its aesthetic with a rebuttal of the charge that it may not be concerned with race at all. Instead, the novel’s focus on issues like history, historicism, trauma, melancholy and recognition provides a very sophisticated metaliterary commentary on the post-racial moment and the temporal crux of such notions as post-critique and postmelancholy.

Even if one were to describe the novel’s overall aesthetic as post-racial, the term would not necessarily foreclose its engagement of race. As Ramón Saldívar points out, the undoing of and moving away from seemingly eternal, essentialist racial identities is not a process of forgetting but rather marked by a thorough engagement with history or, in his particular example, literary history. He notes that the term “postrace” should therefore always be used “under erasure

⁴⁷ Appiah, who subscribes to an understanding of racism as a “moral error” (1992: 18–19), fashions his notion of a “rooted cosmopolitan” in explicit opposition to ethnic, racial, or otherwise ascriptive identities. While cognizant of cultural difference, Appiah instead develops an ethics of individual affiliations where a liberal individualization compels one to grant precisely this liberty to others, especially other communities. See Appiah’s *The Ethics of Identity* (2005) and *Cosmopolitanism – Ethics in a World of Strangers* (1992), of which Julius incidentally also posts a copy to Moroccan shopkeeper Farouq. For a discussion of Julius as a thinly veiled version of Appiah himself, see Sollors 2018.

and with full ironic force” (2) – an irony, which can only become fully effective through the expansive historical knowledge of its source material. In a similar vein, Kenneth Warren’s polarizing *What Was African American Literature?* symbolizes anything but a clean cut with the past but, in its historicizing effort, an assessment of the current moment as one that is characterized by a move from the prospective to the retrospective (2011: 42). Before the legal and juridical achievements of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, Warren argues, African American literature typically projected into the future. He notes that, while the “past was indeed important,” it was primarily explored “as a way of refuting charges of black inferiority and only secondarily as a source and guide for ongoing creative activity” (42–43). Of course, this kind of neat categorizing is particularly antithetical to Afro-pessimist scholars, who are less interested in the shelving away of periods, but rather invested in the blurring of historical demarcations and the assertion of the past’s inevitable, constant return. Contrary to Warren, many scholars question the seismic effects of the Civil Rights movement. As Abdur-Rahman writes: “In the twenty-first century, the logics and implications of race have supposedly shifted, yet ongoing state violence and systemic exclusion expose racism as a lethal apparatus of psychosocial and material asymmetry superseding the legal remedy of recognition politics” (2017: 699). What Warren rightly exposes is the shift and turn toward the past, yet he errs in his interpretation of this shift’s affective components. Rather than being a “source and guide for ongoing creativity,” the past often figures much more problematically in contemporary African American writing. As Abdur-Rahman’s analysis of recent Black writing conveys, such novels rather express a profound “skepticism about accretive racial progress” (2017: 699), instead revisiting “histories that haunt and hurt” (695).

By having these violent histories come back and haunt the present, this kind of retrospective perspective reveals itself less as a self-congratulatory taking stock of historical milestones than as a deliberate abandonment of what one might call the cruel optimism of emancipation. Thus viewed, the political depression of Black America arises in large parts from what Lauren Berlant has called a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (2006: 21). Accordingly, looking back and dwelling on a history of racist compromise, backlash, and continuity sustains rather than heals the “open wound” of melancholia, and prompts a “refusal of nourishment” in the form of past achievements (Freud 1989: 587–589). Indeed, the term “melancholic historicism,” coined by Stephen Best in “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” seems apt in describing what Best similarly identifies as an “affective conception of history” (2012: 464). Framed as an auto-critique of what he sees as concomitant with his own “ethical imperatives and political commitments,” Best queries the paradigmatic domi-

nance of this affect as well as its metahistoricist usefulness (*ibid.*). With regards to confronting the predicaments of the present as well as assessing the past, he asks: "Why must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on the idea that there is continuity between that past and our present? What kind of history would permit one not only "to stay" with the dead but to rouse them from their sleep?" (*ibid.* 464–465). Answering with Leo Bersani's tackling of criticism's theological latency, exposing its "will-to-redemption" (2015: 465), Best concludes that this "kind of history," focusing on the 'healing powers' of repetition, springs from the "inability to reckon with the true alterity of the past." He argues that, in order to treat historical experience aptly, one must forego or short-circuit the redemptive function (*ibid.*).

On an even broader level, these debates can also be placed on a continuum responding to the humanities' turn from historicist, suspicious readings to reparative or surface analyses that question both mood and method of a form of critique that has, as Bruno Latour opts, supposedly "run out of steam" (2004). Questions of historiography become paramount when scholars like Rita Felski circumscribe this turn, emphasizing that "[t]he trick is to think temporal interdependency without telos, movement without supersession: pastness is part of who we are, not an archaic residue, a regressive force, a source of nostalgia, or a return of the repressed" (2011: 578). While the turn from suspicious to surface reading appeared tangible enough for the editors of *Representations* to dedicate an entire issue to "the way we read now," the definition of the critic's proper or improper historicism is fairly unclear. Similar to Best's critique of melancholic historicism, he and Sharon Marcus argue against an ideologically inflected historicism à la Jameson and advocate for "a clearer view of the past" (2009: 19). Yet at the very point where "the way we read now" perhaps promotes too clean a break with Jameson's "moral imperative" to "always historicize," Jennifer Fleissner detects an implicit hyperbolization of the concept, a claim to actually historicize more "rigorously" (2013: 700–701). That the purging of historicism seems rather futile, given the elusive nature of its aim, ties in with her observation that "[e]very time we believe we have made [history] our focus [...] it slips once again from our grasp." Equally persistent seems to be the historian's tendency to oscillate between a "fetishization of the archive" and a somewhat supercilious presentism (700). These debates throw into sharp relief how no positionality toward history can be conceptualized in a way that is not susceptible to methodological changes and critique. One way to circumvent this difficulty may be to change the conversation in the manner pointed out by Felski and also Fleissner, who wonders why, "if literary texts are to be neatly shelved as exempla of historical formations, we still place value on the moment of repeated reading" (2013: 703).

Open City actually always contrasts at least two ways of reading. One is indeed the archeological, deeply historicizing and unearthing of, for example, urban history, the other is accumulative, descriptive, and often engaged in the aesthetic experience of surfaces. These modes, however, are often so self-consciously enmeshed and conflated that none of them gains the epistemological upper hand, let alone moral authority. Interestingly, this process extends to the very notion of referentiality and reading itself. *Open City* is a markedly meta-fictional text, it is “a reader’s writing” (Bady 2015). It recurrently addresses reading and aesthetic consumption and is brimming with high literary and cultural references – to the point of a hyper-referentiality that has led Giles Foden to call Julius an “intellectual show-off” (2011: para. 9). Perhaps in respect to frequency, this device may function as an end-in-itself, but in terms of content, the selection of quoted artworks is far from arbitrary. In many ways, the various references present themselves as keys to unlock or as mirrors to reflect and contrast Julius’s state of mind. They are offered up as props, in every sense of the word, to support certain, perhaps even pathologizing, analyses, as well as functioning as theoretical prostheses that fetishistically direct to and conceal Julius’s psychological wounds. On the level of character, if not also of form, the novel ostentatiously indicates its autopoiesis and intertextual moorings via this referential density. Julius, who is estranged from his mother and appears to be a lover of photography, reads Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* on various occasions. Frequent mention of Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* evokes the concept of sympathetic imagination and echoes the centrality of rape in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. A mention of Bruegel’s *Landscape with Falling Icarus* recalls W.H. Auden’s and William Carlos Williams’s poetic treatment of the same, lamenting humanity’s indifference to suffering. Without suggesting that the intertextual and metafictional references are thus exhausted and are not in most parts and many ways much subtler and covert, it is one incident of name dropping that most distinctly indicates a blueprint for *Open City*’s play with temporalities, while shedding light on Julius’s own concept of history. On the day Julius and the Brussels shopkeeper Farouq engage in conversation for the first time, Farouq is reading “a secondary text on Walter Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History*” (103).⁴⁸

The distinctly Benjaminian frame adopted in *Open City* is remarkable in its scope. The treatment of mobility in a metropolitan environment immediately connects Julius’s ambling movements to Benjamin’s understanding of Charles

⁴⁸ It is in fact interesting that – perhaps because it is so obvious, perhaps because it is actually so close to the narrator that he is unable to distance himself from it in critical contemplation – Walter Benjamin is never referenced by him directly, never offered as analytical shortcut. Even in the mention of Farouq’s reading of him, he appears as citable text only in secondary instance.

Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur*. In Julius's melancholic gaze, his pronounced alienation even, or especially, among the urban crowd and his weaving of urban space into the "long poem of walking" (de Certeau 2008: 101), we hear a distinct echo of Benjamin praising Baudelaire's allegorical genius in *The Arcades Project*. Instead of narrating a sense of national or local belonging, the "gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays, instead, a profound alienation. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitants of our metropolises" (Benjamin 1999: 20). In *Open City*, Julius's observation of urban masses mirrors the disenchanting "shock experience"⁴⁹ Benjamin identifies in Baudelaire's irritation at being jostled by the crowd, turning the dazzling luster of a "crowd with soul and movement" (Benjamin 2003: 343) into a somber, threatening occurrence:

The sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange to me, and I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counter-instinctive death drive, into movable catacombs. Aboveground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified. (*OC* 7)

Interspersed with Julius's documentation of contemporary urban life are also numerous passages like this that link his concept of history to the bleak accumulation of tragedy evoked by Benjamin's Angel of History. In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin develops this figure apropos a painting by Paul Klee, showing an "angel who seems to move away from something he stares at," hurled backwards by the irresistible pull of a storm blowing in paradise. Before his eyes, the seemingly teleological chain of events that one might call moments in history transforms into "one single catastrophe." Benjamin's Angel desires to stay with and "awaken the dead," to "make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin 2003: 392). With this image, Benjamin develops a historical materialist view of history that, instead of relating the past only to itself by rigorously containing each moment within its epoch, instead thinks in the "tradition of the oppressed" and understands how the current state of emergency "is not the exception but the rule" (*ibid.*). Looking out the window on the drive from Brussels

⁴⁹ Benjamin's distinction of *Erfahrung*, experience over time, and *Erlebnis*, as the isolated experience of an isolated moment, as well as their respective functions in literary composition seem noteworthy here. Similarly, Benjamin's treatment of *durée*, as it occurs in Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, allows for a supplementary investigation of movement as spatiotemporal rhythm in *Open City*.

airport, Julius recalls the on-flight conversation with Dr. Maillotte of the previous night. In the mode of Benjamin's Angel, Julius concentrates on the historical trajectory of one moment in 1944, the single tragedy of human history:

I saw her at fifteen, in September 1944, sitting on a rampart in the Brussels sun, delirious with happiness at the invaders' retreat. I saw Junichiro Saito on the same day, aged thirty-one or thirty-two, unhappy, in internment, in an arid room in a fenced compound in Idaho, far away from his books. Out there on that day, also, were all four of my own grandparents: the Nigerians, the Germans. Three were by now gone, for sure. But what of the fourth, my oma? I saw them all, even the ones I had never seen in real life, saw all of them in the middle of that day in September sixty-two years ago, with their eyes open as if shut, mercifully seeing nothing of the brutal half century ahead and, better yet, hardly anything at all of all that was happening in their world, the corpse-filled cities, camps, beaches, and fields, the unspeakable worldwide disorder of that very moment. (96)

While *Open City's* adoption of a Benjaminian reading of history also coincides with the novel's decidedly modernist motifs,⁵⁰ this particular text has been related to diasporic theories of history and trauma in profound and lasting ways.

In his discussion of Benjamin's Angel of History, Stephen Best credits this notion of redemption apropos the "theater of the historical situation" (2012: 464) for constituting the prevailing mode of melancholic historicism in African American and Black Atlantic studies. Throughout *Open City*, we encounter this specific mode on several occasions, often related through the pathologizing eyes of Julius's profession. Initially, it is the mention of Julius's patient V., a historian and member of the Delaware tribe, that most explicitly transports Faulkner's notion that "the past is never dead – it's not even past."⁵¹ V. has written a historical biography of a particularly brutal colonizer of Manhattan Island, chronicling gruesome torture and genocide in the "calm and pious language that presented mass murder as little more than the regrettable side effect of colonizing the land" (26). Julius makes clear that V.'s depressive condition is in part

50 Apart from linking Julius's ambling movements to Benjamin's understanding of Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur*, other literary modernist antecedents to this kind of urban movement include James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Walt Whitman's wanderings in New York, while various motifs taken from William Carlos Williams to Ezra Pound permeate the novel.

51 In Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*, a short novel published prior to *Open City* by the Nigerian Cassava Republic Press and later republished with minor changes by Random House and Faber & Faber, this quote is actually directly referenced. Here, the unnamed narrator who, due not only to similar biographical details but also a strikingly similar tone, can be read as being the same as in *Open City*, ponders the memory of slavery in Lagos, Nigeria: "This history is missing from Lagos. There is no monument to the great wound. ... Faulkner said: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.' But in Lagos we sleep dreamlessly, the sleep of innocents" (Cole 2014: 114).

a product of the psychological toll these studies take on her, a work she describes, according to Julius, as "looking out across a river on a day of heavy rain, so that she couldn't be sure whether the activity on the opposite bank had anything to do with her, or whether, in fact, there was any activity there at all" (26–27). In a similar way that Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" from 1940 warns that "*even the dead* will not be safe" (2003: 391), V. verbalizes her fear of historical erasure: "I can't pretend it isn't about my life, she said to me once, it is my life. It's a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past. [...] And it's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me" (27). Later in the narrative, Julius's mention of V.'s death suggests that she has committed suicide (165).

While V. clearly suffers from her particular form of melancholy, it is important to note that the presentation of her case allows for an interpretation that locates the source of her anguish not in the inability to let go of the past, but in the academically prescribed constraint to treat the past as past. This constraint entails writing about it in the form of a "strict historical record" (OC 27) rather than voicing the simultaneity of past and present and perhaps even working through this trauma, in a subjective, repetitive mode recalling the "affective conception of history" that Best criticizes (2012: 464). Because Julius empathizes with V. more than with other patients, his own position toward her case remains unclear. Equally ambiguous is his attitude toward his patient M., who, like V., is one of the rare patients whose problems "were not relegated to the back of [his] mind when [he] stepped out onto the street" (44). Both V.'s and M.'s cases inflect and tinge Julius's experience of walking in the city and thus resonate in the way he conceptualizes history and memory. His thoughts on M.'s case punctuate the entire course of his longest urban excursion in chapter 4, where, instead of heading home at nightfall, he takes a train to lower Manhattan and spontaneously gets off at Wall Street. From the moment he passes the "ancient wall" hemming in the graveyard of Trinity Church, it appears as though he somehow enters an older, historical version of New York, echoing the way Walter Benjamin excavates the ancient Paris that literally underlies the surface of the modern metropolis in his *Arcades Project*. Here, Benjamin conjures an underworld that surfaces at night, ushering the nocturnal pedestrian through dream-like narrow passages into a darker, older realm of urban consciousness. After reflecting on the US-American forefathers buried in the graveyard, Julius enters an alley on his way toward the waterfront:

When I crossed the street and entered the small alley opposite, it was as though the entire world had fallen away. I was strangely comforted to find myself alone in this way in the

heart of the city. The alley, no one's preferred route to any destination, was all brick walls and shut-up doors, across which shadows fell as crisply as in an engraving. (52)

As he passes the ruins of the World Trade Center, Julius's preceding thoughts on New York's early beginnings as a trading post intersect with his encounter of contemporary memorials, again recapitulating the sense of pastness in the present. Interspersed with this literal and metaphorical meandering between past and present are the thoughts on his patient M., "thirty-two, recently divorced, and delusional," and, as Julius asserts, "completely in the grip of the delirium" (48). M. repeatedly recounts to Julius the painful story of his divorce, each time crying and experiencing "the pain afresh" (56). Julius naturally pathologizes his patient in a way that would seem innocuous, were it not for the fact that he himself has recently split up with his girlfriend and seems unable to confront his grief directly. Thus, while thinking about M.'s compulsion to repeat, Julius experiences an "unexpected pang" of his own: "a sudden urgency and sorrow, but the image of the one I was thinking of flitted past quickly" (56). Quickly too, does he assert himself: "It had been only a few weeks, but time had begun to dull even that wound" (56). Yet this professed equilibrium is belied by his unexplained behavior in the chapter's opening passage, where he feels compelled to lie underneath a rock in Central Park, "as though led by an invisible hand" (42). Only the unpremeditated mention of his breath returning to normal, quieting the "bellowing" in his ribs, suggests, by omission, the turmoil behind his calm and collected persona. His obsessing with M.'s case, then, allows us to doubt the emotionally flat tone Julius deploys in respect to his recent break-up as well as his professionally distanced attitude toward the dangerous, delirious grip of a traumatic past.

Generally, Julius puts some emphasis on the line that separates his avowed melancholic disposition, his "heavy mood" (43), from the pathological conditions of his patients. In many ways, this endeavor is so overdetermined that we can sense the degree of self-deception that is taking place. This does not mean, however, that Julius's attitude does not generally express a level of ambiguity that forecloses unequivocal diagnoses. In a section that opens with Julius's thoughts on Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," he affirms the grip of melancholia cloaking New York City, its inability to internalize the dead and complete the process of mourning, by drawing too neat a line "around the catastrophic events of 2001" (209). This sectioning off, he claims, has rather resulted in the incorporation of loss, creating an atmosphere of anxiety. He then goes on to discuss the memory of another patient of his, setting against "this bigger picture, the many smaller ones." Mr. F., an eighty-five-year-old veteran of the Second World War, had been diagnosed with depression late in life, after showing symp-

toms of appetite loss, low moods, and experiencing, as Julius recounts, "a racing of his thoughts that he described, with great difficulty – he was a reticent man – as an effort to keep from drowning." Mr. F. soon moved on to psychotherapy, and on one of the few occasions Julius had met with him, he had interrupted his medical assessment and spoken with "sudden emotion" in his voice: "Doctor, I just want to tell you how proud I am to come here, and see a young black man like yourself in that white coat, because things haven't ever been easy for us, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle" (210). This memory is presented without Julius's reaction to it, concluding the chapter. As far as we know, Julius may have never corrected Mr. F.'s reading of him as African American. It remains equally unclear whether Mr. F. actually misinterprets Julius's German-Nigerian ancestry or if he extends this redemptive moment to Julius nonetheless. The way that his comment is framed, however, how Julius describes him as someone bearing the "faraway look of those who had somehow gotten locked inside their sadness," suggests that he considers Mr. F.'s vision to be clouded, in the grip of repetition.

In these passages, Julius expresses a critique of melancholic historicism akin to Stephen Best's, for whom the emphasis on repetition results in a failure to treat the past adequately "as it falls away, as that which falls away – a separateness resistant to being either held or read in melancholic terms" (2012: 466). While Jennifer Fleissner points out that simply adhering to such a model may reinstate "the neatly periodized version of history [...] which these depictions of repetition legitimately critique" (2013: 706), she identifies in Best's account an important exposure of how that mode of criticism's assumptions have been relying on the transferability of past and present to such a degree that they may now even resemble the historicist ideology critique they set out to oppose. Even more importantly, she notes how this "twinning of past and present" (*ibid.*) also generates a certain affective mood through its flattening of history that may be claustrophobic but, in its repetitive sameness, perhaps equally *reassuring*. Fleissner quotes Eve Sedgwick's illustration of that particular Gothic sameness across history: "it happened to my father's father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me" (2013: 706). Extrapolating and reading the scene of Mr. F. as him reducing Julius to his version of repetitive history, Mr. F.'s historical conceptualization would seem to be both limiting and self-assuring. At least in Julius's interpretation, his presence and present denote for Mr. F. a Benjaminian constellation or struggle that is actually different and that he fails to recognize in its difference. On the other hand, a Benjaminian concept of history that alternates between the messianic moment of redemption and the repetition of sameness would only recognize redemption as repetition with a change. In this reading, Mr. F. has seen Julius quite clearly.

Nevertheless, the framing of this incident and Julius's emphasis on melancholy as an incomplete process of mourning suggests the latter, as Julius's reaction excludes the possibility for redemption, aligning Mr. F's concept of history with Best's understanding of melancholic historicism. Here, Benjamin's replaying of a historical moment is stripped of its messianic intention, as what is repeated is not necessarily the memory of a revolutionary moment, flashing up "in a moment of danger," but rather that of a trauma, accompanied by the kind of circling and lingering movement ascribed to Freud's pathologically melancholic person (Benjamin 2003: 391). In *Open City*, Julius gives us no clear perspective but again embodies ambiguity, moving swiftly on a continuum comprising the position of Benjamin's positivist *and* materialist historian, the simultaneity of present and past *and* their radical difference.

While Julius also attempts to adopt a melancholic mode, voicing the bleak critique of modernity that "atrocities are nothing new [...]. The difference is that in our time it is uniquely well-organized" (*OC* 58), his often distinctly objective, historiographical mustering of traumatic data ostensibly bars a meaningful reckoning with it in the present. Here, his concept of history resembles that of a positivist accumulation of historical events. Yet at the same time, Julius longs to savor the mood and atmosphere of a given period. More often than not, Benjamin's dialectical image is reversed when Julius's nostalgic gaze, emulating the sensitivities of the modernist *flâneur*, has to adapt the historical aura of an urban space to the lively complexity of the current moment. Upon entering a Portuguese restaurant in Brussels, Julius renders its contemporary international immigrant scene into a 19th-century *tableau vivant*, "an exact Cézannesque tableau [...] accurate even down to the detail of one man's thick mustache" (116). At other times, Julius is so transfixed by his meditations on history that he notes his surprise at how "the past had suddenly transformed into the present" (233). Generally, even though he frequently uses a Benjaminian perspective that is rooted in remembrance or mourning, he seemingly distances himself from it as a method to work through trauma in the present.

In a passage in which Julius switches from the usual soliloquy of his historical excursions to a conversation with friends, he holds forth at length on the absence of loss and atrocities in the present, compared to preceding histories. He elaborates on his theory with the historical example of the city of Leiden, which, during the time of the plague, "lost thirty-five percent of its population in a five-year period in the 1630s" (200). Julius asserts the relative luxury of living in the contemporary moment: Leiden, German for suffering, is of the past. That this contention only holds true for Julius's particularly periodizing view on history becomes clear when his African American friend adds: "What you said about Leiden, well, in a way, my family was Leiden" (202). He goes on to recount the

details of, as Julius describes it, "the appalling family background my friend had had to overcome to go to university and to graduate school, and to become an assistant professor in the Ivy League," ending the brief synopsis of a tragedy marked by harsh violence and loss with "a peaceful expression on his face" (203). Julius notes that he has heard this story before. This situation is different from the scene with Mr. F, as he cannot so easily diagnose his friend with the unhealthy repetition of traumatic events. In the absence of his scientific toolbox, he is asked to make sense of the social realities expressed by his friend, rather than attest a pathological behavior.

In grappling with the ubiquity and effect of racism, diagnosing his friend with melancholia would attribute the effect of trauma to his melancholic attachment to loss instead of the circumstances engendering it. Julius is uncomfortable and appears to find this situation embarrassing, and this is also shown by his reaction to Moji's emphatic yet clear-sighted remark on how, for Black people who have lived in the United States for generations, the racist structures must be "crazy-making" (203). When his friend's white girlfriend tries to smooth over the situation by joking: "Oh, man, [...] don't give him excuses!" Julius feels relief and an instant liking toward her. Moji, however, he finds abrasive, and he is "struck" by her "brittleness" (ibid.). The fact that Moji is willing to be moved by a past that is not hers, while Julius endeavors to treat the past only in relation to itself speaks to their complicated mutual history but is also indicative of Julius's conflicted attitude toward a traumatic diasporic past and present. While being attentive to and knowledgeable of history, he finds it difficult to concretely connect present grievances with their violent pasts. That this kind of preemptive emotional transference might indeed have its limits is shown by a particular noteworthy scene from the latter part of the book.

Shortly after being robbed and injured, Julius stumbles upon the memorial for the African Burial Ground, marked by a solitary monument in the midst of Manhattan. Due to renovation, Julius is unable to approach it directly, standing instead "a few yards" away (220). It is no coincidence that Julius finds himself cordoned off from the burial site, having, as he states, "no purchase on who these people were" (ibid.). The distance, marked here by a physical barrier, signals Julius's desire to treat the past as past, maintaining his aloofness and rooting his position in the notion that the past remains citable, yet unobtainable. However, instead of interpreting his inability to engage with the continuing presence of the past as an obstacle to understanding the present, one could also interpret this moment differently. Not having access to the past here might signal a vital necessity because its aims, ambitions, and futures need to be reformulated through the present moment. In *Conscripts of Modernity*, David Scott calls for this kind of adaption in respect to narrative modes, proposing a turn from the teleo-

logical agenda of romanticist anti-colonialism, which seamlessly merges a fixed past with an equally fixed future, toward a certain “tragic sensibility” that is more “apt and timely” to register the complexities of the current moment in decolonial and antiracist struggles (2004: 210). For Scott, a reiterated historical argument may not “have the same usefulness, the same salience, the same critical purchase, when the historical conjuncture that originally gave that argument point and purchase has passed” (2004: 50).

At the monument, Julius finds himself “steeped in [...] the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York” (*OC* 221). Slavery, here, is a legible trace or reflection of things past. Julius recounts the physical “traces of suffering” found on excavated bodies, “blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm,” but he finds it “difficult [...] from the point of view of the twenty-first century, to fully believe that these people [...] were truly people” (220). As he tries to overcome this distance, to bridge time, by stepping across the cordon, bending down and lifting up a stone, pain shoots through his injured left hand, rooting him firmly, instantly, in the present. This could be read as another reversal of Benjamin’s dialectical image, where instead of the past flashing up in the present, the complexities of a charged present assert themselves and arrest the “flow” of transference into the past. Instead of reading this passage as another instance of Julius’s chronic aloofness, one could thus interpret this detached curiosity as a clear demarcation and starting point from which to transfer an ‘archeological’ endeavor of excavating the past to one revolving around “the question of desire in relation to the dead [...] rather than the dead (or buried) themselves” (Ranjana Khanna qtd. in Fleissner 2013: 716).

These complex historicist configurations of *Open City* may be best understood as meta-historicist commentary that probes rather than definitively evaluates specific relations with and perspectives on the past. As such, the novel contextualizes a moment of calibration, in which the extent to which historical atrocities may bear on the present is measured apropos its own brand of melancholic retrospective – a nostalgia for the safety of an alleged ideological common ground, perhaps, or the redemptive promises of an archeological working through trauma. As Goyal notes, *Open City* “may easily be read as writing in the wake of the desire to connect or to believe, a work in synchrony with our post-critical times” (2017b: 66).

As such, the novel mirrors important debates in the humanities concerning the value or effect of a specific hermeneutics of history, while remaining skeptical and impartial toward either. Not entirely embracing a Benjaminian or messianic view of history by questioning its melancholic revolving around the originary site of loss and proclivity to conflating past and present, the novel equally reveals the danger of a positivist, linear or additive, mere mustering of history

that severs the present’s ties to painful pasts – while remaining wary of the ideological implications of either mode. While the call for replacing suspicious with surface readings may challenge the moral safe ground and performative mastery of ideology critique, it doesn’t exempt that way of reading from similar mistakes. “[I]n the cool distance it assumes from the past,” as Fleissner notes, such a model “no less attempts to deny its implicatedness in the issues it studies than do the more morally charged distancing gestures of ideology critique” (2013: 708).

4 “Voices Cut Out of the Past Into the Present”: Blackness in Diaspora Time

The ambiguity of its metahistorical purport notwithstanding, *Open City* provides a staunch critique of totalizing aspirations of mastery, whether in relation to historical discourse, temporality, space, or through these theme’s metaphorical amalgamation: movement. Repeatedly, Julius is shown as failing in his attempts at mastery, feigning a sense of coherence he cannot quite maintain. The dissolution of linear movement becomes particularly striking in relation to the space-time of Blackness, both in its physical, bodily dimension and its temporal mediation of race in/as history.

While Julius’s long walks construct a sense of duration, albeit interspersed with the chronicling of personal and urban history, there are moments when the phenomenological experience of time is substantially altered. These moments are almost always connected to a distorted concept of physical integrity, movement, and the body. The moment when Julius is attacked and beaten, is particularly explicit: “We find it convenient to describe time as a material, we ‘waste’ time, we ‘take’ our time. As I lay there, time became material in a strange new way: fragmented, torn into incoherent tufts, and at the same time spreading, like something spilled, like a stain” (219). Here, the physical threat of disintegration is coupled with the dissolution of linear time, throwing into sharp relief the privilege and precariousness of Julius’s ambling, unfettered movements through time and space. But it also serves as an invocation of a different, fragmented temporality that is marked by the ‘human stain’ of race. Opening the scene, Julius sees two young men at a crossing and overhears some of their talk, marked by the kind of vernacular that suggests they are Black. Julius further observes: “They walked effortlessly, lazily, like athletes, and I marveled at their prodigious profanity for a moment, then forgot about them” (212). Julius had exchanged a glance, a nod with them, interpreting this “gesture of mutual respect [as] based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being

‘brothers’” (212). A few moments later, they pass him again and fail to acknowledge him, causing Julius to be “unnerved” at this misrecognition (212). Seconds later, they attack him, steal his phone, and kick his curled-up body. In truth, Julius is the one who has misrecognized, has failed to see the tenuousness of that purported, superficial solidarity, made porous by economic and class disparities. He has not only misread the age of these boys, who turn out to be “no older than fifteen” (213), but also their “profanity” and the effortlessness of their movements. When they later “melt [...] away” to somewhere “deep in Harlem” (214), it becomes clear how the limits of their environment will affect and most likely curb their movements in the world, athletic bodies or not.

Later, when Julius examines his wounds, he seems astonished at the fact that he had never acknowledged the privilege of an intact body: “How could I have been less than completely aware of how good it was to be injury-free?” (215), he wonders. Physical integrity and its relation to movement as such is a particular preoccupation of Julius. While getting on a subway in chapter 2, he notices “a cripple” (24) moving onto the carriage, triggering thoughts on the Yoruba deity Obatala, associated with physical infirmity and blamed for the making of “dwarfs, cripples, people missing limbs, and those burdened with debilitating illness” (25). That Julius is able to move freely in New York City, more freely than many others perhaps, is also indicated by a prior passage, where he observes a crowd of women from his apartment window, marching through the nocturnal streets, chanting, beating drums, and blowing whistles. At first, Julius cannot make out what they are saying, but soon it becomes clear that he is witnessing New York City’s “Take-Back-The-Night” movement: “We have the power, we have the might, the solitary voice called. The answer came: The streets are ours, take back the night” (23). Yet the very moment that the women shout “*Women’s bodies, women’s lives, we will not be terrorized*” (ibid.), Julius shuts the window, distancing himself from his role in and contingency upon the precariousness of other bodies.

Julius feigns a sense of coherence, metaphorically likened to his free and autonomous walking through New York City, in order to make legible the particular textspace that is his story. At certain points of juncture, the nodes where his adopted mode threatens to disintegrate, we gain a glimpse of other, underlying (hi)stories. In this sense, *Open City* employs the structural equivalence to the kind of Benjamin-influenced reading of diasporic narratives that, as Goyal writes, releases “the alternatives that a single line of narrative has to suppress in order to constitute itself as dominant” (2010: 16). Moreover, and not only in form but also in content, the novel stages the contrast between the isolated temporal moment and hero of the “adventure time” chronotope, and the specific historicizing mode of what Goyal terms “diaspora time” – a time which, instead of

being defined by “the ‘homogenous, empty time’ of progress” is more appropriately understood as “a time that is characterized by rupture but also by various kinds of imagined or projected simultaneities” (Goyal 2010: 15). A particularly dense exposition of “diaspora time” can be found in chapter 5, which is worth looking at in more detail.

The chapter opens with a memory inserted into the linear progression of the narrative. Julius remembers the day that he and his girlfriend Nadège visited a detention center in Queens. The visit, we learn, is erotically motivated. Julius distances himself from “that beatific, slightly unfocused expression” he identifies with the “do-gooders” organizing the visit (62). Instead, he fantasizes how Nadège might fall in love with the idea of him acting as “the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle” (70). At the facility, Julius is assigned to a selected inmate, a young man from Liberia named Saidu, who tells him in great detail about the stunted movements of his arduous journey to the United States. Saidu, Julius notes, is “well educated,” showing “no hesitation in his English,” and Julius lets him speak “without interrupting” (64). His story begins roughly 10 years earlier in 1994, in the midst of Liberia’s first civil war, with the bombing of his school – the same school in which “he had been taught about the special relationship between Liberia and America, which was like the relationship between an uncle and a favorite nephew” (64). He recounts the tragic losses of his family members and various confrontations with different military groups, some more fortuitous than others, interspersed with the itinerary details of his year-long flight. Hitching a ride with Nigerian ECOMOG soldiers, walking “on foot to Guinea, a journey of many days,” and crossing the Sahara on a truck full of multinational refugees, he reaches Tangier. Here, he notices “the way the black Africans moved around, under constant police surveillance” (67). Saidu manages to enter European soil on a rowing boat to Ceuta, continues on a ferry to Spain, and then makes his way to Lisbon, where he spends two years working as a butcher’s assistant and then as a barber, sharing a room “with ten other Africans” until he has saved up enough money to fly into JFK airport with a fake ID.

As Julius recounts Saidu’s story in the manner of an extradiegetic narrator, the flow of the story is interrupted by Julius’s doubts: “I wondered, naturally, as Saidu told this story, whether I believed him or not, whether it wasn’t more likely that he had been a soldier. He had, after all, had months to embellish the details, to perfect his claim of being an innocent refugee” (67). This play on the reliability of the narrator is complicated even further by the second part of the chapter, set again during the course of Julius’s primary narration. Here, Julius is confronted with another diasporic narrative, this time presented in the unmarked direct speech that is characteristic of Julius’s encounters with other urban dwellers.

In the “underground catacombs of Penn station,” he meets a Haitian, a shoeshine named Pierre, so old-fashioned that the “older term” bootblack seems more appropriate. He tells Julius how he “came from Haiti, when things got bad there,” when both black and whites were killed (70–71).

Pierre’s story spans many decades in New York, is marked by a religious rhetoric, and focuses at length on his life in the service of the Bérards, with whom he had come from Haiti. Even after the death of Mr. Bérard, a “cold man at times” but with a heart, who taught him “to read and write,” Pierre stays in the service of his wife because “Service to Mrs. Bérard was service to God” (73). Pierre is able to work as a hairdresser outside of the house and earn “enough to purchase freedom for [his] sister Rosalie” (72). Only after the death of Mrs. Bérard does he seek “the freedom without,” finally marrying his sweetheart Juliette at age forty-one and building a school for Black children (74).

While this kind of rhetoric is already peculiar, it is the specific dates and historical events around which his story is built that reveal what an unusual narrator Pierre actually is. The killings, under the “terror of Boukman,” he notes, were as bad as under “the terror of Bonaparte,” indicating the era of the Haitian revolution from 1791 to 1804, namely the slave revolt led by Dutty Boukman and the previous French rule under Napoleon Bonaparte (72). Pierre also mentions the difficult years of yellow fever in New York City, taking the lives of many, including his sister Rosalie. The last record of yellow fever in New York is dated to 1822 – more than 40 years before the 13th Amendment officially ended slavery in the United States. Set against the hard facts of history, Pierre’s story is not a strange narrative, it is a slave narrative.⁵²

The presentation of this story leaves no doubt about it being anchored in Julius’s narrated present. What is missing is Julius’s direct reaction to the telling, leaving the temporal plausibility of the story entirely uncommented. When he leaves and steps outside, he merely remarks upon how his “shoes gleamed, but the polish revealed only that they were old and in need of replacing” (74). Julius, it seems, has encountered a walking and talking ghost in Penn Station. Then, however, something remarkable happens to his perception of the city. Julius sees an overturned police barrier and perceives some kind of “silent commotion” (74). The following passage concludes the chapter:

⁵² In fact, the historical details allow one to identify Pierre as the historical figure Pierre Toussaint, (born 1766 in Saint-Domingue, died 1853 in New York City) a former slave who was brought to New York, became a famous hairdresser and Catholic philanthropist, and named himself Toussaint after the leader of the Haitian revolution. See Sontag 1992.

That afternoon, during which I flitted in and out of myself, when time became elastic and voices cut out of the past into the present, the heart of the city was gripped by what seemed to be a commotion from earlier time. I feared being caught up in what, it seemed to me, were draft riots. [...] What I saw next gave me a fright: in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head to toe in black, reflecting no light. It soon resolved itself, however, into a less ominous thing: dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind. (74–75)

Julius imagines a violent scene from New York City’s racist draft riots of 1863. More accurately, he experiences the simultaneity of “diaspora time,” in which, as Goyal writes, the Benjaminian “‘time of the now’ is shot through with the memory of the Middle Passage” (2010: 15). While Julius may be able to distance his biography from the unfortunate story of Saidu or the anachronistic narrative of Pierre, the history of place simply overwhelms his present and momentarily arrests his linear movement, frightening him and flooding his ostensibly safe and removed ‘now’ with the knowledge of past continuities.

Apart from illuminating the intricate temporal layering of *Open City*, the chapter under discussion is also extraordinary in its metafictional purport. The way that Pierre’s story is inserted into the narrative, complete with the register and rhetoric of the slave narrative, but at the same time part of Julius’s intradiegetic world-making, introduces a postmodern play with genre while complicating the generic status of this ostensibly realist novel as a whole. In juxtaposing the generic conventions of Pierre’s slave narrative with those of Saidu’s refugee story, Cole draws attention to the implicit claims of autobiographical authenticity inherent in both stories – and in the overarching frame of *Open City* itself.

Broadly looking at the generic conventions of the slave narrative, one could call the claim to authenticity both its major concern and formative constraint. As the authorship of these narratives was routinely questioned, the narrative would almost always address the question of literacy, stressing the way that the author had been taught “to read and write” (*OC* 72), often by his or her master, thus proving to be “well educated” (64) enough to be the author of their own story. In one of the most renowned slave narratives, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), the author is particularly aware of these pitfalls, including several self-reflexive passages addressing the conventions of the memoir and stressing the authenticity of his tale. In its wider reception, especially in the 20th century, the question of this authenticity was further extended to the accuracy of the historical details. Many scholars doubted whether he could have really been born in the “part of Africa known by the name of Guinea” in 1745 or whether he had gained the necessary information on this area and the Middle

Passage while growing up in the Americas (Equiano et al. 1969: 1).⁵³ Commenting on this debate, Paul E. Lovejoy writes: “Despite the existence of documentation that refutes his claim to an African birth [...] *The Interesting Narrative* is reasonably accurate in its details, although, of course, subject to the same criticisms of selectivity and self-interested distortion that characterize the genre of autobiography” (2006: 318). Elaborating on the function and origin of these debates, he adds:

The issue is clear: are his descriptions of his experiences of Africa and the notorious “Middle Passage” fabricated or are they derived from his personal experience? It might be argued that it does not matter that much in terms of Vassa’s impact on the abolition movement, which was profound, because a fictionalized account of his childhood might have been just as effective for political purposes to garner support for the abolitionist cause as an account that was in fact the truth. (2006: 319)

Distinguishing fact from fiction and the claim to authenticity became crucial questions in the time of abolition and they remain equally crucial questions for an African refugee like Saidu. The gruesome details of Liberia’s civil wars are told to an effect and, as Julius notes, might be embellished “to perfect his claim of being an innocent refugee” (67). Read as fiction, and not merely an appeal to a legal status, Saidu’s story might also be considered effective for political purposes, even, or perhaps especially, if he had been a child soldier in Liberia. One is reminded of certain generic conventions in postcolonial literature, for example the purportedly rallying effect of Dave Eggers ventriloquizing a Sudanese child soldier in *What Is the What* (2006) or the open debate amongst contemporary African authors on whether bleak depictions of the African continent are “performing Africa” in a way that may be meant to evoke “pity and fear” but merely succeeds in producing “poverty-porn” (Habila 2013: para. 1). We may read this chapter as Cole’s meta-fictional commentary on these debates, and on the generic constraints of diasporic writing. Identifying two examples of narratives that wittingly adhere to their respective genre conventions, we are invited to interrogate the way we actually read Julius’s story, questioning what kind of expectations we bring to the narrative of a young, bourgeois, and cosmopolitan Nigerian. Especially, one might add, if he shares these characteristics with the actual author.

53 Most notable among these scholars is Vincent Carretta, who maintains that Equiano was a literary figure, conceived by the author Gustavus Vassa, actually born in South Carolina. The published narrative did indeed bear two names, his birth name Equiano and his slave name Vassa, by which the author went publicly. For Carretta, this distinction is crucial, as it reveals the difference between literary figure and author. See, for example, Carretta 1999 and 2005.

While the generic issues of autobiography naturally dovetail with notions of accuracy and authenticity, the impetus of these questions arises from their convergence at the point of history. This, at least, is what Paul de Man suggests in “Autobiography as De-Facement,” where he notes that since “the concept of genre designates an aesthetic as well as a historical function, what is at stake is not only the distance that shelters the author of autobiography from his [sic] experience but the possible convergence of aesthetics and of history” (1979: 919). Here, de Man also problematizes the notion of the author’s identity verifying the authenticity of an autobiographical text and proposes an understanding of autobiography as mode of reading or understanding that in fact pertains to all texts and all readings. Instead of the life or the subject matter determining the genre, he notes “that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact [...] determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium” (1979: 920). For de Man, the notion of writing determining life is fundamentally a function of language folding back unto the subject.

The complex blurring of fictionalized historiographic and fictionalized autobiographical writing in *Open City* is thus a particular apt illustration of the historical function of genre and also stages the tensions arising from so-called autoethnographic writing. Exposing how we bring certain expectations to these generic forms, as well as positing Goyal’s notion of “genre as the presence of the past in the present,” we may think about the continuation of certain claims read into the narratives of the Black Diaspora (2010: 10). In the case of Julius’s story, or *Open City* as an Afropolitan narrative, the claim here may not be to the status as a human being, as in the slave narrative, nor the claim to legal protection and citizenship, as in a refugee’s or immigrant’s tale. Its quasi-autobiographical mode can, however, be read as a claim nonetheless, an appeal perhaps to the status of world citizenship, or more accurately to liberal cosmopolitanism. Bringing Julius’s narrative in conversation with two other diasporic narrative modes exposes the way that liberal Western cosmopolitanism, as it is widely understood, functions as a neo-nationalism that diasporic subjects are generically and legally expected to appeal to. The way that Julius embodies and complicates these claims is an important critique of this kind of surreptitious yet prescribed functionalism of autoethnography and problematizes the ontological status of Black cosmopolitanism.

In a way, the fugitive movements of Liberian Saidu, manumitted Haitian slave Pierre, and ambling Julius are brought into conversation and presented as a single form of Black movement. Through this juxtaposition, the reader is again reminded of how contemporary Black movements are anything but free and continue to be shaped by various kinds of bordering. What may be read

as post-racial in the novel's aesthetics, the rendering of a protagonist author who rejects recognizable racial scripts, is actually a nuanced investigation of how the difficulties of Black movement aren't always as obvious as the often visible race lines that run through a city or along global borders. These lines sometimes also present a question posed internally, as Julius moves and asserts himself along those visible lines and others, less visible but all the more intransigent. Thus viewed, *Open City's* conveys a notion of fugitivity as a response to or escape from the discursive reach of a liberal hegemony commanding very distinct modes of recognition and subjecthood. It may also reveal the author's desire to slip through the net of any single ascription, including narrow conceptions of Blackness. In "On the Blackness of the Panther," Cole writes:

Escape! I would rather be in the wild. I would rather be in a civilization of my own making, bizarre, contrary, as vain as the whites, exterior to their logic. I'm always scoping the exits. Drapetomania, they called it, in *Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race* (1851), the irrepressible desire in certain slaves to run away. (2018: para. 21)

In this chapter of *Open City*, Julius experiences a simultaneity that transports him through the arduous routes of the Sahara, and the slave ship, to the catacombs of New York City. Embedded in this triadic encounter is not only the acknowledgment of how race in/as history has positioned each of these men in a particular constellation, but also the anticipation of a certain fugitive movement. How indeed might we think of a Black diasporic encounter that operates outside the theater of representation, and that might have escaped the logic of legitimization and recognition? What if these encounters, what if the dialogism of this novel occurred outside of history or at least outside that model of time which, following Bergson, can only ever account for and measure the moment as that which has passed?⁵⁴ A model which, at the same time, is also the mechanical, progressive clock-time that sought to mechanize the enslaved and that their fugitive movements seek to resist? As a Boston emissary observed in 1865, the year of emancipation, the "sole ambition of the freedman" appears to be to "cultivate" and "plant" what and when he wishes: "to be able to do *that* free from any outside control, in one word to be *free*, to control his own time and efforts without

⁵⁴ Distinguishing between the "lived time" and the "clock time" of experience, Bergson develops the notion of duration (*durée*) as "the very stuff of our existence and of all things" (1965: 62). Rather than measuring time spatially, in closed-off units, the "duration lived by our consciousness is a duration with its own determined rhythm, a duration very different from the time of the physicist, which can store up, in a given interval, as great a number of phenomena as we please" (1991: 205).

anything that can remind him of his past sufferings in bondage. This is their idea, their desire and their hope" (qtd in Foner 1994: 459). The freedom to experience 'now' in its duration, as a state of being in which the past touches present and future in a continuous yet open-ended flow, may be the ultimate utopian horizon limned here.

5 "In the Swirl of Other People's Stories": Toward an Ethics of Listening

Benjamin develops his Angel of History – the historical materialist view of history – apropos the dominant historicism of his time, which not only claims to understand the past "the way it really was" but naturally sympathizes with the victor's story (2003: 391). Notably, while often being attentive to the histories of the oppressed and marginalized, there are also those crucial moments in *Open City* that remind us how Julius is the hero of his own story. For Benjamin, the "process of empathy" with a historical epoch is already suspect because the historicist inevitably sympathizes with history's victors and thus becomes complicit in the lineage of rulers stepping "over those who are lying prostrate." Knowing this, the perspective of the historical materialist should be characterized by a "cautious detachment" (Benjamin 2003: 391–392). Considering Benjamin's wariness of emotional transference, and echoing Stephen Best's concerns with melancholic historicism, an important question arises: To which degree does an ethical relation to the past actually predicate an emotional response?

As noted above, Julius's capacity for moving and thus writing and weaving this urban text relies on his sense of integrity, and his progress appears to be contingent on others' arrested development. Furthermore, his authorial distance from the stories of others is purportedly engendered by the fact that he has no place in them, or at least that his connection is not legible to him (59). Julius wanders through New York like an Isherwoodian camera, simply recording the city's everyday life, passing little or no judgment whatsoever. In conceptualizing chapter 5 even further, one might ask what it means to hear ghostly voices, to simply record and not comment on them, as if they were present. Julius, in many ways, is a chronicler, if not a storyteller, confronted with the loss experienced by others. One might even go so far as to consider the entire narrative as being motivated by the recording of loss. *Open City* is not what Goyal has termed a "comforting narrative of hybridity and redemption." Most established notions of collectivity are, if not negated, at least questioned by the atomized diasporic model embodied by Julius (2010: 208). Moreover, while stressing the pervasiveness of individual and collective trauma, the model of subjectivity proposed

here also foregrounds the predicament of rooting one's sense of individual and group coherence in a fetishized notion of loss, or, in Julius's case, the fetishistic disavowal of loss. The notion of fetishism is important here because of its ethnographic connotations and allusion to the linkage between primitivism and the avant-garde, but also because it introduces the aspect of visibility and the danger of transmuting violence into a reified and aestheticized spectacle of suffering.

At this point, it may be helpful to briefly recollect the concept of fetishism in the writings of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin. In *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx draws attention to the strange faculty of commodities to denote value in the "fantastic form of a relation between things," thus substituting relations between people and masking the actual constitution of their value through largely exploitative social relations and modes of production (165).⁵⁵ With reference to the religious origin of the word, Marx called the curious quality that attaches itself to commodities fetishism. The concept of the sexual fetish developed by Freud in the eponymous essay of 1927 is a result of the (male) child's disavowal of what is fantasized as the mother's castration, in which both perceived lack and denial are mingled and transferred onto another, fetishized object.⁵⁶ Laura Mulvey notes that despite raising different issues – Marx being concerned with the want of indexical value, Freud with an excessive inscription of value – both use the term to explain "a refusal, or blockage, of the mind, or a phobic inability of the psyche, to understand a symbolic system of value, one within the social and the other within the psychoanalytic sphere" (1996: 2). It is this aspect that informs my use of the term here. Both notions of the fetish conceal a labo-

55 As cannot go unnoted here, the slave as not only virtually "speaking" commodity presented a peculiar riddle to Marx, who was indeed well aware of how capitalism relied on the "primitive accumulation" of colonial exploitation. As he writes: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population of that continent, the beginning of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production" (1976: 915). In the section on the "The Fetishism of the Commodity," Marx invites the reader to imagine commodities speaking about their fictitious value, ventriloquizing, as Fred Moten writes in "Resistance of the Object," the commodity's "impossible speech" (2003: 9). In this much-cited chapter of *In the Break*, Moten traces "the historical reality of commodities who spoke – of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and 'freedom'" (ibid. 6).

56 Here, too, a crucial qualification must be made. As Moten writes: "It is important to note in this regard that black castration is not just to be seen as *prospective* figure and *symbolic* inability, since for the black tradition, castration is not just phantasmic possibility or introjection based on a fleeting glance at that which is read as sexual difference, but is also the proper name of an oft-repeated literal, historical, material event" (2003: 177).

rious or traumatic condition with a glossy surface; they both stand in for and suppress a violent history.

Open City, adopting what many commentators describe as a Sebaldian tone, foregrounds a general preoccupation with historical trauma that corresponds with what Roger Luckhurst has dubbed our “contemporary trauma culture” (2008: 2). Yet it also appears to subtly critique the very pervasiveness of this fascination, its fetishization of the archive and memory and perhaps also the melancholic circularity, claustrophobic reassurance, and potential reification that may result from this. It does so by routinely uncovering and recording violent and marginalized histories – yet refracted through the lens of an unreliable and most likely morally reprehensible narrator.⁵⁷

This in turn raises the question of what might ensue if everything is rooted in loss, everyone is guilty, every people’s history marked by trauma. Does this notion not promote the very blurring of distinction, the kind of pervasive, flattening fascination with history and trauma that arouses in scholars like Andreas Huyssen the urge to properly “discriminate among memory practices”? (2003: 10). While this would appear to be a rather fruitless endeavor, one might ask instead how the hard backdrop of the systemic becomes visible apropos such fleeting yet particular concepts like experience, memory, and culture. In many ways, the ectoplasmic traces of past violence have congealed into grooves that not only shape certain ways of thinking, seeing, and doing. They also channel flows of wealth and stratify societies in manners so rigorous that the imaginative act of tracing back their originary moments will hardly undo them. As Goyal notes, when diasporic subjects are linked by “feelings of shame, guilt, and loss, rather than by skin color, or a political identification [...] the historical specificity of slavery as a transnational system of labor disappears from view” (2010: 208).

While a central concern of *Open City* seems to be the possibility of understanding both the insight and the blindness of a given perspective on history – and indeed Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* is directly referenced – it seems as though the novel refrains from presenting the past as a transformative key to unlock the problems of the present or provide a different future. Especially, one might add, if this transformation relies on the process of uncovering, witnessing, and working through trauma in a way that attaches surplus value or excess desire to the past’s open wounds. Although Julius’s meandering narrative seems to be motivated by the acknowledgment of his guilt, this retroactive real-

⁵⁷ At the heart of the novel, as Kappel and Neumann write, lies this “performative paradox of a weighty historical narrative that asks readers to think about historical atrocities through the use of an ethically unreliable narrator who abuses the privileges afforded by his hegemonic position as a male, intellectual American” (2019: 57).

ization neither changes the course of history nor necessarily informs his present. “I don’t think you’ve changed at all, Julius,” Moji finally says to him, “[a]nd maybe it is not something you would do today, but then again, I didn’t think it was something you would do back then either. It only needs to happen once” (245).

When Julius appears almost entirely unmoved by Moji’s accusation, it becomes apparent that there are other important forms of movement that are mostly lacking, and conspicuously so, from this spatiotemporally invested novel. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai offers a definition of the category of “tone” as “a literary or cultural artifact’s feeling tone: its global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world” (2005: 28). Looking at *Open City*’s tone, it is striking how the effect of the lulling, pedestrian rhythm of Julius’s recounting could be best described as atonal or lacking affect, similar to the way that Julius himself relates to the world. Especially, but not only, in his reaction to Moji, Julius shows barely any immediate signs of emotional investment, displaying instead the very same “flat affect” (244) or “affective disorder” (7) he ascribes to Moji’s accusation or researches in his clinical study on the elderly. While the additional qualification of Moji’s delivery as being “emotional in its total lack of inflection” perhaps belies his own emotional equilibrium, his manner throughout the narrative is one of distance and detachment (244). Only the individuals whose stories he records are emotionally invested; loss and “irrational” attachment are to be found in others. At one point, Julius reflects on the Moroccan shopkeeper Farouq and the dangerous pull of political vehemence on young people: “It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?” (107).

A key to interpreting Julius’s pronounced solipsism and his ostensible lack of affective transference lies perhaps in *Open City*’s particularly dense descriptions of aesthetic experiences, as well as the manner in which Julius aestheticizes moments of commonality and potential understanding. Transference does occur in the novel, repeatedly, yet it is the kind of emotional transference engendered by an aesthetic experience, converting even uncomfortable and painful emotions into an aesthetic spectacle and potential source for consumption. In “Flights of Memory: Teju Cole’s *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” Pieter Vermeulen further discusses the scene of Moji’s revelation. He notes: “Julius’s response, when it comes, is startling in its inadequacy. Rather than speaking, he imaginatively converts the river, at which Moji had been staring during her monologue, into an aesthetic spectacle: “the river gleamed like aluminum roofing” (2013: 53). Julius bars the possibility of understanding by actively digressing and invoking the notion of solipsistic, aesthetic pleasure. Over-

all, *Open City* is marked by thick, often exaggerated descriptions of Julius's aesthetic experiences. It is interesting how movement is employed here, too, when Julius professes that he is "rapt" by the opening movement of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* or when the meditation on John Brewster's paintings, "outside the elite tradition" but imbued with "soul" (36), causes Julius to leave the museum "with the feeling of someone who had returned to the earth from a great distance" (40). Overall, the effect of *Open City's* extensive use of ekphrasis is markedly not that of communal experience, stressing instead the sense of isolation inherent in Julius's aesthetic consumption.⁵⁸ There are instances when that commonality is evoked, it seems, only to provide a contrast to his pronounced solipsism. For example, when he remembers his visit to the opera: "And a few minutes before this, I had been in God's arms, and in the company of many hundreds of others, as the orchestra had sailed toward the coda, and brought us all to an impossible elation. Now, I faced solitude of a rare purity" (255). This emphasis on solitary spectatorship also harks back to the figure of Benjamin's alienated *flâneur* and is particularly evident at the points where this modernist sentiment is employed to aestheticize everyday experience, instances where the narrator appears to enter into a cathartic moment of commonality.

The opening scene of chapter 17 is such an instant. It is set in spring, at a "picnic in Central park with friends." From the narrative distance of retrospection, Julius notes how the burgeoning sunlight makes him more sociable, actively seeking out the company of others. He is, for the first time in the narrative, part of a 'we' that is not the anemic, heteronomous 'we' of pensive abstraction but denotes an active, concrete collective. Reclining on a blanket in a group of four and watching the happy scenes of family life around him, Julius merges not only with his group, but with the entire city around him. "We were part of a crowd of city dwellers in a carefully orchestrated fantasy of country life" (194), he notes, playing on the illusiveness of this idyllic urban moment and his own performance in it. While this passage harnesses certain modernist sensibilities in its aestheticized consumption of a colorful, vibrant mass, those moments are also interspersed with acute feelings of isolation and separateness, the kind of cosmological loneliness that perhaps only occurs among large groups of people. This peculiar *mélange* of sensations, and the modernist blueprint to this urban experience, is skillfully signposted by the opening paragraph to this serene scene, which evokes Ezra Pound's *In A Station of the Metro*. Lying in the grass, gazing through the "petals of the cherry blossom," Julius becomes aware of "a sudden apparition of three circles, three white circles against the

⁵⁸ For further elaboration, see Neumann and Rippl 2017, or Rippl 2018.

sky.” The circles turn out to be parachutists, illegally landing in Central Park. While watching them descend, Julius feels “the blood race inside [his] veins” and is suddenly transported back to a childhood memory of rescuing another boy from drowning. Even though the occasion is one of a positive, altruistic connection, Julius dwells on the sensation of being “all alone in the water, that feeling of genuine isolation, as though [he] had been cast without preparation into some immense, and not unpleasant, blue chamber, far from humanity” (196).

In a scene during Julius’s time in Brussels – a trip which could be read as a reverse journey into the heart of darkness⁵⁹ in its listing of European barbarisms – Julius enters a church and is mesmerized by the sound of Baroque music: He is soon startled, however, by “distinct fugitive notes that shot through the musical texture” (138). The “unsettling half step of a tritone” he perceives is in fact the sound of a cleaning woman’s vacuum, intermingled with the sound of recorded organ music (*ibid.*). The woman, he assumes, is most likely part of the African immigrant communities he has encountered in Brussels. Julius wonders whether her “presence in the church might doubly be a means of escape: a refuge from the demands of family life and a hiding place from what she might have seen in the Cameroons or in the Congo, or maybe even in Rwanda” (140). While Julius identifies the “fugitive” (138) blues notes of her presence and perceives them in their tension and dissonance with a “European” idea of harmony, it is only later, during his lunch with Dr. Maillotte that the echo of the tritone, or the flattened fifth, morphs into the commodified pleasure of jazz. Sophisticated Maillotte, brimming with life stories featuring royals and millionaires, may be an outspoken connoisseur of jazz, but she is not particularly fond of difference and dissonance in society. When Julius confronts her previous assessment of a color-blind Europe with Farouq’s experience in Belgium, she brushes him off:

Our society has made itself open for such people, but when they come in, all you hear is complaints. Why would you want to move somewhere only to prove how different you are? And why would a society like that want to welcome you? But if you live as long as I do, you will see that there is an endless variety of difficulties in the world. It’s difficult for everybody. (143)

Julius launches into a feeble attempt to convince her otherwise, but finally succumbs, sinking into the comforts of refinement, “the smell of food and wine, interesting conversation, daylight falling weakly on the polished cherry-wood of the tables” (142). This bleak vision of an open society is rarely lifted, as Julius’s ability to record difference never suggests an engagement with it. Yet, as Theodor

⁵⁹ Isabel Soto in conversation with the author.

Adorno notes in relation to the social role of art, "what does not exist, by appearing, is promised" (1999: 233). And perhaps this is how we can read the prospects evoked by Farouq, who, for all his shortcomings, wants to understand "the historical structure that makes difference possible" (114) and for whom the telephone shop functions as "the test case" of how "people can live together but still keep their own values intact" (112). In Julius's eyes, however, this minor cosmopolitan space still looks "like fiction" (*ibid.*).

These explicit musings on the fugitive notes created by contrapuntal presences encapsulates much of *Open City*'s particularly dire sense of hope, including the sliver of hope embodied by literature and its simultaneous inclination toward commodification. These scenes project yet another notion of fugitivity that transcends an understanding of Julius as a suspect *fugueur* fleeing from a shameful history but limns the promise of Black life as a different kind of life, Black ways of living as alternatives to the way life is commonly ordered, and as something that can be glimpsed in fiction. Viewed temporally, or musically, the diasporic master trope of 'movement' thus acquires additional meaning. In "Fugitive Justice," Best and Hartman examine the distinct *mélange* of hope and resignation in Ottobah Cugoano's slave narrative "from the retrospective glance of our political present" (2005: 3). Thus viewed, fugitivity, the "master trope of black political discourse," transpires "in the interval between the no longer and the not yet, between the destruction of the old world and the awaited hour of deliverance" (Best and Hartman 2005: 3). Here, they write, "we find the mutual imbrication of pragmatic political advance with a long history of failure; in it, too, we find a representation in miniature of fugitive justice" (*ibid.* 3). Or, as Fred Moten writes in "The Case of Blackness": "Black [...] is the victory of the unfinished, the lonesome fugitive; the victory of finding things out, of questioning; the victorious rhythm of the broken system. Black(ness), which is to say black social life, is an undiscovered country" (2008: 202).

In Farouq, Julius encounters someone who wills this undiscovered country into existence with a perhaps too literal vehemence, and he finds in the character of Maillotte someone who is simply unable (and unwilling) to listen, to discern the alternative order from the commodified chaos of jazz. In its general emphasis on art and aesthetic pleasure, *Open City* could perhaps be read as an exaltation of cultural and aesthetic refinement, yet one that self-consciously confronts the limits of aesthetic consumption by contrasting it with (the lack of) an ethical understanding that comes to fruition through listening and responding. In a way, the novel also foregrounds its own commodity form, its proclivity toward a fetishistic distraction from and reification of suffering, without entirely undermining the utopian potential of art.

Open City, one could say, stages the tense conversation of postmodernity by bringing various historicist modes and ways of being in dialogic relation while suspending the finite judgement of a totalizing viewpoint. Tracing its genealogy as a literary or linguistic concept back to Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, the dialogic primarily describes the way that a literary work is in open exchange with other discourses. Grounded, however, in the understanding that "[e]very utterance participates in the 'unitary language' [...] and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia" (1986: 217), the dialogic extends well beyond the communication between two parties, or discourses, but denotes the socially stratified orientation of all words or utterances. According to Bakhtin, dialogism thus accounts for the diversity of voices in a novel, rendering it a particularly "distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre" (ibid. 300). The dialogic in a novel may describe the relationship between the author and the narrator's story, the double-voiced discourse inhabited by character speech and also the social embeddedness of the novel's heteroglot background. Moreover, dialogism is encountered in the very condition of language, as any "object is always entangled in someone else's discourse about it, it is already present with qualifications" (ibid. 330). Rather than begetting monolithic or monologic conceptualizations, the spectral dispersion of the artistic "image" creates an "atmosphere filled with [...] alien words, value judgments and accents," allowing the "social atmosphere of the word" to sparkle (ibid. 277). Such open-endedness and complexity is necessarily opposed to the closedness of value judgements.

Understanding how the narrative situation of the novel informs the way that information is presented reveals the dialogic nature of *Open City*. Read as a series of sessions with a therapist revolving around the pivotal moment of confession, the role of the implicit reader of Julius's account is that of a purportedly neutral witness or patient listener rather than that of a judge afforded with the morally invested, elevated, and totalizing bird's eye perspective that is both evoked and rebuked in the novel's coda. This patient-therapist relationship is mirrored in, or rather transferred onto, Julius's numerous encounters with other people's stories that cast him in the role of witness or chronicler, rather than passer of moral judgments. In his review of *Open City* in *The New Yorker*, Wood conflates these differing modes, interpreting Julius's neutral detachment as an ethical mode of being. Highlighting the passage in which Julius verbalizes his confusion at Moji's accusation, its threat to conceiving himself as "never less than heroic," Wood applauds the novel's display of "ordinary solipsism," but does not take the subsequent revelation into account (2011: para. 18). He thus identifies the narrative stance of *Open City* as one that showcases the somewhat necessary "limits of sympathy." He further praises the way this "lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul" is portrayed as admittedly sometimes being an "obstacle to un-

derstanding other people" but as not reducing the value of this kind of "solitary liberalism" as an enabler of comprehension (*ibid.*),⁶⁰

That there is not merely a certain plurality of readings taking place, but something that may be better understood as a kind of conscious disavowal, is apparent in the way the novel's more sinister notes can so easily be overheard or appear understated. The character of Julius allows for these contrary readings: his own ambiguousness not only permits, but actually *conditions* ambiguous interpretations. As Bakhtin argues, all rhetorical forms are "oriented toward the listener and his answer" (280). He notes that the orientation of the speaker "toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener," and "[u]nderstanding comes to fruition only in response" (282). Equipped with the knowledge of multiple worlds, and poised at the metahistoricist vantage point of Afropolitanism, *Open City* knowingly orients itself toward conflicting histories and horizons. While the historical and present-day atrocities he records may provoke an emotional reaction in readers, they could, however, also easily be registered as a mere mustering of information or even, in the case of Moji's rape accusation, be completely overlooked.

Julius's movement does not enact an ethical response but actually evokes that question. Most important, his movement creates the textspace that allows for a response to happen. Under every narrative move of this novel at large lies the open question of how people are moved to feel, to develop an ethical and emotive relation toward the world. Readers are invited to register Julius's passivity and complacency despite his selective focalization. If they can see beyond the manner in which he either sexualizes or demeans Moji, they can recognize how she is altogether more perceptive and cognizant of the way her Blackness intersects with other collective identities – while acknowledging that her

60 Two individual academic articles on *Open City* both reference this popular review by Wood, only to depart strongly from his interpretation of Julius's detachedness as "selfish normality." Pieter Vermeulen identifies Wood's review as trying to bring the novel in line "with the dialectic figure of flaneur" (52). He contrasts this with his own interpretation of the novel as substituting the *flâneur* with the *fugueur*, a figure identified by Ian Hacking as the dark counterpoint to the exalted, celebratory movements of the modernist *flâneur*, characterized by vagabundry and "ambulatory automatism" (Vermeulen 2013: 54). For Vermeulen, this crucial difference prohibits a reading of *Open City* as a prime example of "literature's enabling role in fostering cosmopolitan feeling and understanding" (41). Similarly, Katherine Hallemeier's essay develops a more critical argument against the backdrop of Wood's endorsement of Julius's cosmopolitan liberalism. Highlighting the way Wood foregrounds how this kind of liberalism is engendered by erudite, "bookish" types like Julius, she argues that both *Open City* and the preceding *Every Day Is for the Thief* "self-consciously embrace and critique the literariness that is integral to the protagonists' cosmopolitan identities" (2013: 240).

investment banker job at Lehman Brothers in 2007 implodes an all too simplistic articulation of solidarity or complicity. Readers can, however, also choose not to see this.

The ambiguous reading responses engendered by the counter-narrative of Moji's accusation could also be related to the varying impact made by challenges to hegemonic histories – particularly from decolonial and diasporic perspectives. Thus, Julius's detached observations of the world still provide the necessary clues to perform what Edward Said has called a contrapuntal reading as an alternative to a "linear and subsuming" historiography (1994: xxv). Whether this moves one to emotions and to action, if not to activism itself, is yet another issue.⁶¹ In walking, encountering, and recording, Julius becomes the dialogic textspace of the novel. Merely witnessing these voices, however, does not generate an ethical relation to them in the same way that an ethical relation to the present is not necessarily predicated on the ability to "stay with the dead" and actualize the past in the present. Instead of merely pathologizing Julius's attitude toward others or imbuing it with an ethical purport, one could also read his uninvolved staging of other people's stories in correspondence with the novel's negating of totalizing unity, especially the kind that is promised by the aesthetic consumption of an art work. The function of Julius's isolated and unresponsive observation might best be understood as the staging of heteroglossia and otherness that allows equally for the recognition of collectivity, the emotional thrust of an ethical positionality, or the celebration of solipsistic liberalism.

Open City highlights the cynicism and privilege behind the kind of flat affect that poses as liberal imagination, yet it also explores the limits of grounding collective identity in transhistorical feelings of guilt, anger, or melancholia. Neither formulating a moral directive nor offering a totalizing viewpoint, it nevertheless raises the question of how attentive we want to be toward the world and its different voices, of how we want to live our lives among them. The novel also points toward the complicated and conscientious labor behind this seemingly innocuous ethics of listening, as an already complex and cacophonous present is shot through with contrapuntal fugue notes, as well as past voices vying for the attention of patient listeners. As an instance of the Afropolitan moment, the novel thus knowingly historicizes a moment in which the making of history itself be-

⁶¹ Thinking about "animatedness" as a most basic form of affect and its racialization apropos the genre of the propaganda novel, Ngai writes: "In this manner, the racialization of animatedness converts a way of moving others to political action ('agitation') into the passive state of being moved or vocalized by others for their amusement" (2005: 32). Perhaps Julius's pronounced unwillingness to portray this causal sense of agitation could be related to an understanding of *Open City* as the polar opposite of a didactic novel.

comes the lens through which to view the complexities of a contemporary diasporic imaginary. It utilizes this moment as an opportunity to reflect on the aestheticization, or even fetishization, of loss and the limits of an archeological working through trauma, without entirely undermining the importance of documenting and witnessing historical violence. As such, it performs a balancing act that questions rather than displaces certain modes of recognition. Similarly, while configuring a post-Black aesthetic as that which moves away from monolithic inscriptions and hollowed appeals to racial solidarity, it still employs race in/as history by inscribing its own purportedly cosmopolitan or Afropolitan movements into a tradition of Black fugitivity.