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Exposure and Black Migrancy in Teju Cole

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Abstract: Through a reading of Teju Cole’s novel *Open City* (2011), this article argues that the exposure of black migrants constitutes the principal organizing conceit of global literary culture and knowledge production. The novel’s protagonist, a Nigerian emigre named Julius, is faced with ceaseless scrutiny as he traverses urban spaces in the US, Europe, and West Africa, meeting other migrants. In staging Julius’ encounters with others, the novel allegorizes a structure of racialized subjection continuous with the modern history of western epistemology and glaringly present in the contemporary. Yet it also provides grounds for a recursive ethic of opacity, which Julius eagerly endorses. The article surveys critical studies of race, migration, infrastructure, and world literature, in addition to Cole’s writings on photography. The aim is not only to uncover the logics of racialization at play in the enactment of culture, but also to conceive of culture itself as a historical infrastructure of privation and control.

Keywords: Teju Cole, world literature, migrancy, visuality, infrastructure

An Incessant Loudness

This article¹ understands *exposure* as a principal feature of the global present. Exposure means both being open—watching, or looking—and at the same time being scrutinized, surveyed, judged. Exposure constitutes the visual order of city life, manifest in looks of others, the overstimulation of the street, and the ubiquitous eye of urban surveillance infrastructures. Exposure is, furthermore, symptomatic of transnational migration, the trauma of the checkpoint: *Who are you? Where do you come you from? Why did you leave?* The effect, I argue here, is a latent dimension of what AbdouMaliq Simone, writing on the spatial formations of African cities, has called “people as infrastructure” (2004: 407), a conflation of body and environment that underscores the role of racialized knowledge

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formations in shaping planetary ontologies. While the human infrastructure Simone describes comprises networked relationships and performances, I wish to propose a parallel line of inquiry by asking how race itself might define a set of transnational infrastructures—surveillance, data, knowledge—and help us uncover their traces in the relational context of the global city.

I take as my primary example recent writings by the Nigerian-American photographer and novelist Teju Cole, whose work concerns subjectivity, migration, visibility, and urbanism. Cole emphasizes, especially in his 2011 novel *Open City*, the role of racial difference as a determining social and environmental condition. Cole's novel stages the exhibition of black, migrant bodies in urban space through the experiences and the perceptions of his protagonist, Julius, who fills his days with long walks through Manhattan and—in short, incidental sections—Brussels and Lagos. The streets animate Julius' mental life, forcing him into a state of chronic anxiety.

I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness, a shock after the day's focus and relative tranquility, as though someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set. [...] Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day. But the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them.

I took the subway home, and instead of falling asleep immediately, I lay in bed, too tired to release myself from wakefulness, and I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and sights I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which. (6)

Julius' attempts to put these impressions into language, to make sense of them like a "child playing with wooden blocks," expresses a plaintive hope to understand the experience of being with others. In Julius' life, the question of identity poses similar problems: he is confounded by a disagreement between his own experiences and the limited taxonomy of belonging he is afforded as a black man and a migrant. He feels confined by the mandate to identify—to give meaning to itinerancy, to migrancy, to blackness. For in expressing an identity, he becomes a ground for others' authentication. Those Julius encounters seem constantly to "lay claims" on him (41), calling him an African when he is in America, an American when he is in Europe, a European in Africa. Their ceaseless scrutiny generates in Julius a sense of ambivalent worldliness, a frequently-discussed feature of restless cosmopolitan life (Said 1993; Bender 2017), which, as I propose through an analysis of Cole's work, must also be understood in counterpoint to the alienation produced by racial difference.

The appearance of the racialized migrant body is, I argue, the animating conceit of *Open City* and an conceptual point of contact between comparative global imaginaries.

As visages of migrancy come to the center of global political consciousness (Nail 2016; Sassen 2014), the questions Cole raises in his work warrant renewed critical attention. The mediation of human experience through vast, highly dysfunctional and inhumane systems of (im)mobility and control has generated new and contested optical realities. As Cole himself has argued, any real reckoning with visibility—like reckonings in the fields of literature and history—must engage its relations to power, especially in the global afterlife of colonialism (Cole 2013). The same is true for resources, objects, and infrastructures. The systems of seeing and knowing through which the question of migration is apprehended have been inherited from colonial histories of “epidermal thinking” (Gilroy 2000: 46), spatialized in the form of the modern city, and perfected through continuous programs of surveillance, classification, census data, and biometrics (Browne 2015; Goldberg 2002; Wacquant 2002). These infrastructures are now turned in attention to the border, where migrants are scrutinized and exposed through the same technologies and thematic referents (Gamso 2017; Ahmed 2006; Mbembe 2017). The appearance of racialized bodies, in this sense, channels the anxieties of a dominant (white) social order. The hope, for dominant actors, is to withstand the breakdown of certain normative social formations—the nation, the metropole—and to contain the emergence of new ones.

In order to better understand these processes, we must ask: What are the visual conditions of black migrancy? And how have these conditions generalized, expanded, and absorbed differentiated value? How have they been functionalized? Aestheticized? In what ways do colonial systems precede, substantiate, or license infrastructures of postmodern globality? How have such histories contributed to the fortification of race itself as a prism for globalization’s networked continuities and structural differences? I address these questions by examining debates over the exhibition of the migrating black body in global urban space. Following Christina Sharpe’s vision of black life amid a maelstrom of fragmented, worldly traumas (2016), I take urban infrastructures as technologies of material and cultural organization. They are systems for making order out of the cluttered histories of oppression from which they came. Cole allegorizes these systems in many ways, excavating, for example, the emplaced history of imperialism—the slave burial ground below Wall Street in New York, a statue of Leopold II in Brussels—while exalting a vast network of western literary genealogies. He stages, in this way, a principal modern leitmotif: the consolidation of knowledge/power in the metropolis and the consequential entanglement all who speak, write, record, as well all who are written, recorded, and spoken *for*.

This meeting of concerns—the ontic and the epistemic, the thing and its meaning—will allow us to better navigate an ongoing debate over how to conceive of literature across time and space. For what we now term “world literature” performs exactly this doubled existence, constellating critical and semantic systems while materializing circuits of attachment and influence (Moretti 2000; Casanova 2004). This networked but social character has positioned world Literature as a cultural infrastructure that facilitates a contemporary, liberal preoccupation with interconnectedness while exalting metropolitan subjectivity (Spivak 2004). In literature—as in politics—transparency is imagined to generate empathetic good will, often between a metropolitan reader and a black native informant who stands in distorted opposition (Spivak 1999, Melamed 2013). Édouard Glissant has described this program of literary transparency succinctly: “I understand your difference, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh” (1997: 190). Subjects in this ubiquitous mode of interpellation are constituted by their interface with alterity—a Hegelian framework allegorized by Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and echoed by the functional role of the western canon in contriving normative subjectivity (Chuh 2019; Hartman 1998; Said 1984).

The efforts of Cole’s work will prove instructive in recognizing the black body as a functional site of negation (and in this way a principal object) in global infrastructures and, as a secondary process, highlighting the refraction of negative subjectivity within the figure of the migrant. In illuminating this two-fold process, Cole has appealed to what Glissant calls the “right to opacity” (1997: 189), a phrase which resonates strongly with calls for obfuscation in the face of surveillance society’s panoptic views while referring explicitly to the question of visibility in the production of knowledge. The opacity of the ocean’s surface, and the illegibility of bodies below, marks the denial of black subjectivity in the historical literature (McKittrick and Woods 2007). Glissant’s aim, in this sense, is to obstruct control mechanisms—including the mandate that minority subjects explain themselves, or be explained—developed over centuries. Such mandates are essential to modernity’s total epistemology; they continue to thrive in networked spaces of contemporary globality. Elaborating on this continuity, Saidiya Hartman argues that the archive itself is an index, indeed an architecture, of black negation. Hartman asks, surveying the records of slave trade predation and slaughter, “how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?” (2007: 3). What she goes on to propose is a kind of secondary, indeed subjugated mode of survival: “critical fabulation,” she writes, contests the authority of the archive—exploits its constitutive oversights—by “playing

with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view” (11). Literature remains an apparatus for worldly knowledge. But, because of the discursive potential that it fails, chronically, to contain, it licenses modes of performative refusal. We should take seriously the idea that such acts may alter the planetary formations with which they are always already engaged, and thus transform the apparatus of racial difference from which they attained their legitimacy. Cole prefers this option, elaborating a program of fictive identity—“we articulate ourselves to ourselves,” his narrator says (243)—with mixed but provocative results.

This article comprises three sections: the first (1) defines exposure within the interlinked frameworks of blackness and migration; the second (2) turns to *Open City*, exploring the implication of the forms of exposure I have discussed while examining the many migrants, refugees, and diasporic Africans that populate Cole’s novel; and the third (3) grounds these questions in the field of world-literary studies, asking what Cole’s works can teach us about its politics and prejudices.

On Blackness, Migrancy, and Exposure

In order to frame my interpretation of Teju Cole’s work, I here wish to comment on the centrality of exposure to the experience of black migrancy. Clearly the exhibition of black bodies in sites of transit, and under the conditions of the carceral state, underwrite what Achille Mbembe calls the “practical instrumentalization” of race (2015: 26). But a structure of exceptionality in the field of culture has modeled a related form scrutiny. Black works are included in normative institutional formations—the canon, the salon—under the conditions that they perform their exceptional status, either by enacting a compensatory politics of knowledge or by submitting to a structure of individuated reciprocal agency, with Fanon (for example) answering to Sartre. The relations that follow tend to reflect the enactment of culture as a European strategy of black negation. One can indeed turn to a figure like Fanon in order to see how these forms of exposure engage one another and interface with the social world. Fanon, terminally ill with Leukemia, strapped to his bed in a Washington DC hospital, expressed the idea himself: “During a night and day surveillance they inject me with the components of blood for which I have a terrible need,” Fanon wrote in a letter to the hospital, “and when they give me huge transfusions to keep me in shape—that’s to say, alive ... ” (Browne 2015: 3). Fanon in these remarks

sees his own life broken down and reconstituted by external dynamics, a process exacerbated by the constant observation of white doctors and nurses. He had of course already explored the phenomenology of subjection (“Look, a negro”) and conducted research on the effects of surveillance during the Algerian war. So did his work provide a rejoinder to the exception of Africa in Hegelian dialectics, in addition to qualifying European existential thought among his contemporaries. Paraphrasing Sylvia Wynter’s influential reading of Fanon (2001), the sociologist Simone Browne describes two outcomes of such experiences and practices: becoming a black object (embodying the ontological “fact of blackness”) and becoming a black subject (learning “what it is *like* to be black”) (7).² The ontology of exposure enacts the first term, the governing cultural context of modernity enacts the next, orienting the detritus of history in the present. This doubled form underwrites Cole’s attempt to narrativize everyday social experience amid what Christina Sharpe calls the “wake” of “quotidian disasters” that mark “black existence” (14–15).³

The proximity of such disasters with the minor pleasures of culture—pleasures which both obscure and ameliorate the history of disasters from which they proceed—demonstrates the contradictions inherent in thinking race through literature. In Cole’s work, these feelings appear partially and wishfully through a thicket of worldly objects, static, the “incessant loudness” (6) of the wake in its expansive generality. The fortunes of civilization lay on the other side, perpetually out of reach. In *Open City*, Cole’s narrator Julius describes attending a Mahler symphony at Carnegie Hall:

I am used to it, but it never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the whites in them. The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the concession stand. At times, standing in lines for the bathroom during intermission. I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. (252)

² See Katherine McKittrick’s introduction to *On Being Human as Praxis* (2015: 11). Specifically, McKittrick works through the ways in which “Fanon’s concept of sociogeny (our codes or masks or *mythoi* or origin narratives) is linked in semantically activating causal terms, with the bios phenomena of phylogeny / ontogeny. Our *mythoi*, our origin stories, are therefore always formulaically patterned so as to co- function with the endogenous neurochemical behavior regulatory system of our human brain.”

³ Sharpe (2016: 15): “Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and -African migration, structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that continues imperialisms/colonialisms, and more.”

Julius evokes the modernist idea of a threshold between the animal impulse and the ratio of man, a line that always threatens to disappear and swallow up the exception of blackness. The exhibition of an aberrant black body in Carnegie Hall seems to validate the understanding of culture as a civilizing body of art or ideas, signified in the novel by Mahler and numerous other figures of western achievement. Seeing himself through the eyes of others, Julius uncovers a structure of looking and a logic of emplacement that constitutes the differential form by which culture—and thus the claim to humanity itself—is named. Culture, in a series of untethered referents, swirls about Julius. But occasionally it falls away to reveal the man himself, alienated and exposed. Leaving the symphony, for example, Julius chooses the wrong exit and finds himself on a fire escape overlooking Broadway, the latch having shut as if to instantiate an awareness of his status as exterior.

The slick wirework was all that separated me from the street level of the city, some seventy feet down [...] My fellow concertgoers went about their lives oblivious to my plight [...] 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. (255)

Is there irony in this description of modernist sublimity? Julius' exposure to culture had first led him into "God's arms"—Mahler's symphony—where he had managed to suppress his sense of alienation. But, as the scene on the fire escape suggests, the promise of *humanitas* has turned out to be a ruse. Looking from an aerial viewpoint at the street below, Julius feels he has attained "solitude of a rare purity" (255). He momentarily gains the ascetic authenticity normally denied to racialized subjects, but here embodied (in a spatial allegory of aerial mastery) as a form of expulsion.⁴ There is thus great irony in Cole's invocation of "impossible elation," since he, a moment earlier, described the space's exclusionary nature, the white concertgoers "oblivious" to his emergency.

The scene invites us to consider the role of racial difference in western claims to culture. Black exceptionality grounds a program of integration by which universal history envelopes spaces hitherto imagined as empty and irrational. The resulting system of bureaucratic racial biopolitics comes to structure modern life in general while real political options seem remote or non-existent (Gilroy 2000; Wacquant

⁴ See Bruce Robbins, et al, observation about global perspectives and their material anchors (2015: 576): "Because of this very vastness, a scale that goes so far beyond our own personal resources of capital, expertise, labor power, and often even imagination, infrastructure tends to have the same stupefying effect as the Kantian sublime."

2002; Agamben 1995, 2008; Arendt 1958). Culture takes the place of politics, affirming the exceptional status of outsiders while interpolating normative subjects as well.⁵ Cole's description of commuters led "like animals stumbling to slaughter" (58) expresses disgust at the disembodied functionalism that results. He goes on to compare pedestrians walking headlong into the street to the migration of birds up and down the eastern seaboard—birds so transfixed by the diffuse light of the city that they plummet, some dozens or hundreds at a time, onto the streets or into the ocean. Cole's narrator also refers to the subways as "movable catacombs" where the "unacknowledged traumas" of the passengers, jostling on the crowded train, are compounded by the presence of "thousands of others in their solitude" (7). The infrastructures of light and confinement produce, out of global urban space, theaters of scrutiny and identification which attenuate "the reality of the outside as a dimension of human experience" (Sennett 1991).⁶ The racialized order of the city generates the psychic condition of terminal migrancy in which one's "identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who [they] really are" (Arendt [1943] 2007: 270). The loss of identity—a loss both recorded and omitted from the archive—validates dominant populations' territorial identifications, while also prompting the "vanguard" form of a searching, exilic people (274). Exposure stands as a seemingly universal experience that actually constitutes itself upon difference within a polity, a diaspora, even within vernacular and racialized social formation. It is the production of difference as a mode of what Paul Gilroy calls "neurotic orientation" (15) that ultimately licenses such performances of selfhood and belonging. The exploitation of difference as an absolute through reference to a specific racialized group is what completes the circuit.

Exposure, in this way, enacts the fundamental contradiction of modern liberal subjection and thus underwrites the historical emergence of white normativity. The visibility of black bodies as a global infrastructure models the "violence of abstraction" (Hartman 2008: 5) or "abjection from the realm of the human" (Sharpe: 14), which in turn graphs black migrancy onto the modern world and thus gives rise to seemingly universal features of modernity. I have mentioned already how evocations of opacity have challenged universalist epistemology in the global context. Cole has expressed a strong interest in

5 Arendt (1958: 322) suggests that the effects elide differences, thus producing in modern subjects a "sheer automatic functioning," a wish to abandon the "still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, 'tranquilized,' functional type of behavior."

6 Sennett (1991: xiii): "The exposed, outer life of the city cannot be simply a reflection of inner life. Exposure occurs in crowds and among strangers. The cultural problem of the modern city is how to make this impersonal milieu speak, how to relieve its current blandness, its neutrality, whose origin can be traced back to the belief that the outside world of things is unreal."

these processes. Writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, where he has served as a columnist and photo editor, he has praised the chiaroscuro of photographer Roy DeCarava's black portraiture: "instead of trying to brighten blackness, [DeCarava] went against expectation and darkened it further. What is dark is neither blank nor empty. It is in fact full of wise light which, with patient seeing, can open out into glories" (Cole 2015: 62). Underexposure proved a thematic solution to the ubiquity of the over-exposed black body and the demand—even in benevolent efforts by liberal photographers—for visibility. Cole turns to Glissant to explain DeCarava's technique, referring to the "opaque, dark, shadowed, obscure" side of black existence and thus the need for "visual stories about the hard-won, worth-keeping reticence of black life itself." Describing this alternative epistemology, Cole writes,

It is as if the world, in its careless way, had been saying, 'You people are simply too dark,' and these artists, intent on obliterating this absurd way of thinking, had quietly responded, 'But you have no idea how dark we yet may be, nor what that darkness may contain.

Cole's own photography demonstrates a kind of anti-portraiture by which photographic subjects retain a space of privacy, engaging in only partial, and indeed apprehensive, encounters with Cole, sometimes obscuring themselves behind an object or under shadow. This seems key to understanding how bodies interiorize objects. Exposure operates as something akin to the photographic process of etching light and shadow into a layer of silver to become an image, usually through a protracted temporality. As John Berger has noted, the time of photographic exposure is not a mere site of reduction, but a moment of constitution. "Exposure time does no violence to the time of the I am: on the contrary, one has the strange impression that the exposure time is the lifetime" ([1972] 2001: 285). Subjectivity appears as an outcome of ekphrastic recovery—reflecting what's behind the camera and before it, and indeed what's all around. The time frames are not merely deferred, but distended wildly across historical geographies.

In *Open City*, Julius' fitful attempt to reassemble the day's encounters might thus be reconceived as an wish to make knowledge, and thus make self, out of the disordered sensorium of existence. As critic Karen Jacobs observes in her reading of Cole, these moments occur fleetingly, automatically. They are "after-images" that register the delayed appearance of a suppressed social trauma (2014: 87). The openings presented in the novel, to which I now turn, do not have the power to overturn the system of negative cultural constitution for which the black migrant is the centerpiece. But they will help us understand with some clarity this system's relation to the literary and the global.

Laying Claims: A Close Reading of *Open City*

I have outlined a program of alienation and control, exerted through the exposition of the black, migrant body in transnational urban space, and resonant with composition of transnational literary and visual infrastructures. I have also detailed strategies from black cultural practitioners to un-work, subvert, and contest these programs, making special note of how such efforts necessitate a reckoning with the determining systems that produce normative relations and subjectivities. Here I discuss three sections of *Open City* in order to understand how Cole's ideas contribute to critical discourse around migration and exposure. I address the narrator's extended encounters with other black migrants, which begin as moments of external scrutiny before they are interiorized. Cole's novel is full of such encounters, which, by virtue of their duration, geographic reach, and viscosity, cull up an array of political, historical, and literary objects. These encounters mimic the itineraries of black migrancy in ways that variously parallel, support, and transgress dominant epistemologies.

In *Open City*, Julius' anxiety over personal exposure belies a strong interest in the social. He expresses a desire to "find the line" that connects him to the "stories" of others (59), but stops short continually, his efforts confined to a short list of compulsory social gestures: opposition, identification, affinity, and empathy. In a cab, Julius offends the driver by not saying hello. The driver asks why. Can't Julius see that he's another African? Julius responds, "my mind was elsewhere. Don't be offended, my brother, how are you doing?" But he admits, "I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me." The driver turns on the radio. "Anger had welled up within me," says Julius, "unhinging me, the anger of a shattered repose. The traffic finally eased, but the radio continued to blare inanities" (59). Later, another man, a museum guard, asks Julius, "Are you Yoruba? One of my housemates was Nigerian" (41). Julius admits, "I wished he would go away ... I thought of the cabdriver who'd driven me home—'hey, I'm African just like you, [The man] was making a similar claim" (53).

This chain of identification is inverted when Julius goes to Europe. At an internet café in Brussels, a clerk says, "You must be from America" (112). The clerk, who introduces himself as Farouq, volunteers his own Moroccan origins, and discusses his political philosophies. He criticizes the consensual politics of multiculturalism, preferring the concept of difference. "Difference is never seen as containing its own value," he says. "Difference as orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no" (104). The café is called to serve as a metaphor for contiguous relation. "It looked like fiction," says

Julius, surveying the room, “that such a small a group of people really could be making calls to such a wide spectrum of places” (112). Cultures are brought into contact, but do not connect. Farouq explains, “people can live together but still keep their own values intact.” Farouq also admits that he believes strongly in “divine law,” leading Julius to wonder whether he will be radicalized. Julius thinks of him as “in the grip of rage and rhetoric” and compares Farouq to the emergent right wing in Europe, characterized by a “cancerous violence.” Julius describes histories of exterminism in which “action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone, the way to catch the attention of the young and recruit them to one’s cause, was to be enraged” (117–118). This manner of oppositional identification seems to be confirmed in a subsequent encounter as Farouq and a friend, Khalil, demand from Julius a summary of American attitudes about race, about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, about Israel. “Does America really have a left?” “The American blacks—he used the English expression—are they really as they are shown on MTV?” They go on to make pronouncements. Hezbollah: “It’s resistance, simple.” Al Qaeda: “For us, America is a version of Al-Qaeda” (120–121). Julius calls them extremists, but this seems to him a knowing joke. He says, “I was pretending to an outrage greater than I actually felt. In the game, if it was a game, I was meant to be the outraged American” (120). Julius, despite what he admits is a general sense of uneasiness in engaging this dialogue, acquiesces to this staging of what Rey Chow (2006: 137) calls “coercive” mimesis, playing the obligatory part. Farouq, he decides, would be “one of the thwarted ones, whose script would stay in proportion” (136).

This episode does not end in Brussels, but back in New York, when Julius sends Farouq a copy of Kwame Appiah’s book *Cosmopolitanism*, which emphasizes the “obligations to others” that characterize the “challenge” of cosmopolitan ethics (Appiah 2007: xv). While this seems to be Julius’ reason for sending the book, his own practice shows the discomfort of such obligations: At the post office in Harlem, the clerk asks him where he comes from, adding, “I could tell you were from the Motherland.” He tells Julius that he’s “raising [his] daughters as Africans” (186). He calls Julius a “visionary,” a “journeyer,” and asks if Julius would like to come to a poetry reading he’s hosting. Julius demurely says “sure,” but makes note to avoid that post office in the future. Frustrated by the encounter, annoyed by the dull pain of such “obligations,” Julius walks the streets (188). There he hears a dirge from a funeral, recognizing it immediately as the anthem of his boarding school in Lagos, and stops to remember. At this moment all the problems of difference and sameness, sameness masquerading as difference, and the scrutiny of identification—“hey, I’m African just like you”—give way to a clearing. Julius remarks on the moment:

I experienced the sudden disorientation and bliss of one who, in a stately old house and at a great distance from its mirrored wall, could clearly see the world doubled in on itself [...] I could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began. This point-for-point imitation, of each porcelain vase, of each dull spot of shine on each stained teak chair, extended as far as where my reversed self had, as I had, halted itself in midturn. And this double of mine had, at that precise moment, begun to tussle with the same problem as its equally confused original. To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone. (192)

The mirror—an artifact of the urban environment charged with semantic value—appears in this case a metaphor for the capacity of the interpretive mind to uncover abstract experience (identity, difference, memory) in the traces of at-hand objects, and thus to produce the heterotopic grounds for writing fiction, whether it is the fiction of world literature or the fiction of one's life. Indeed, one exists in a constant state of “midturn,” as Julius says, oscillating between the world and the self, between the way one is perceived (as object) and the way one perceives (as subject). Julius may feel indistinguishable from an external version of himself, the expectations and demands of others internalized. But that feeling is conceived through an inescapable complex of mirrors, which reflect and diffract identities and memories to the point of abstraction, and which, at the point of such abstraction, license the myths of normative white identity (Lott 2018). This moment of auto-exposure is crucial to Julius' apparent wish for authentic subject formation—itself arrested in a pose of “midturn.” The prospect of subjectivity thus appears as an interplay between one's life and one's narration of that life, an interplay constituted in relation to others' perceptions. Julius goes to a detention center in Jamaica, Queens; a Liberian migrant has been detained there and Julius has agreed to go with his girlfriend, Nadège, to meet the man. Saidu, the Liberian, held for twenty-six months, smiles: “Are you African?” (66). Hearing, “yes,” he tells his story: two civil wars, a family murdered, internment, a plan. “He packed his soccer shoes, two spare shirts, and all his money,” emigrating illegally to Spain and then Portugal, where for two years he lived in a crowded Lisbon squat, scraping together money for a ticket.

“His journey ended at JFK, Terminal 4. They took him away at customs” (69). Throughout this encounter, the objects of infrastructure hang low. The space is abject, marginal—designed, as Julius says “not to be noticed.” (62) Julius makes note of the architecture of customs and borders—ID Cards, metal detectors, “over-size, bored, brusque-mannered people, people who made no pretense of enjoying their work.” He observes that “no one was reading” in the “purgatorial waiting room” (70). The room is given an anxious aspect by the hum of florescent lights and the smell of bleach. The room has a carceral ambience, akin to what Browne,

writing through the words of novelist Caryl Phillips, has described as “neither daytime nor night-time” but the “no time” of life under the permanent fluorescent glare, life conditioned by “isolation, routinization, inspections, premature death ... a body suffering brutalities at the hands of the prison guards” (44). The infrastructure is everywhere and nowhere. It is a discreet form for what Fanon calls an “aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order” (1963: 38). Julius starts when an officer taps on the table with his baton.

The visit was over. I raised my hand to the Plexiglas, and Saidu did the same. I don't want to go back anywhere, he said. I want to stay in this country, I want to be in America and work [...] When I got up to leave, he remained seated, and said, Come back and visit me, if I am not deported.

I said that I would, but never did.

I told the story to Nadège on our way back into Manhattan that day. Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story. I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself. (70)

Perhaps this passage, and in particular its final, reflexive gesture—admitting that one has contrived one's best self—is a way of expressing guilt. For, Julius admits, he has doubted all along Saidu's story, has wondered if Saidu had not been a soldier, feigning innocence. He says that the Americans had “their own reasons” for detaining him (65). It's appropriate, then, that Julius should see himself not as a “brother” of Saidu, but as a forgery—a “compassionate African” (70), who's fallen in love with the idea of himself.

But why and how did ICE detention, a crucible in other literary works for subjection of the migrant (Danticat 2008), become a stage for Julius' masterful self-regard? The novel here directs us to banal program of universal exposure, the outcome of modernity's expansive technics and bureaucracy. The vast interior imagined to comprise modernity becomes itself a stage of reflected subjects. We must, in such a space, “dutifully comply with the prescription continually to reinvent ourselves and manage our intricate identities” (Crary 2013: 72). True enough—and doubly for the “compassionate African.” Late in the novel, just before another encounter (Nadege has left him), Julius discusses these processes. He asks,

Who, in the age of television, hasn't stood in front of a mirror and imagined his life as a show that is already perhaps being watched by multitudes? Who has not, with this consideration in mind, brought something performative into his everyday life? We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don't, neither we nor our imagined audience is troubled, because we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves, and because we have through our other decisions merited

their sympathy. They are ready to believe the best about us, and not without good reason. From my point of view, thinking about the story of my life, even without claiming any especially heightened sense of ethics, I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good. [...]

I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives. (243)

This passage has been called upon to suggest the formation of an ethical paradigm in Cole's work, something like what the critic Peter Vermeulen has called a "minimal program" of literary cosmopolitanism (2013: 40–57). But after examining Julius' interactions with others, I interpret this not as a working program—or even a wholesome effort to establish such a program—but as a poorly conceived personal strategy. Julius is satisfied to perform well "most of the time." When he hasn't, he's merely presumed the sympathy of his "imagined audience"—which is itself a figment of his masterful self-possession. "We articulate ourselves to ourselves," he says, suggesting the kinds of pedantic circumlocutions by which he exits scenes and ends affairs. Yet, despite this assertion, he singles out with great scrutiny those who "blame others," who fail to see that they are the "common threads in all their bad relationships." This is a crucial moment in which Julius' character is productively unworked. Julius, who had been so steadfast in his solipsism, chooses to perform the role he is expected to play. Performance becomes a means of maneuvering interactions with others in order to mitigate exposure to those very people.

This strategy crumbles in the last act of *Open City* just after the passage I've quoted: Julius is accused by an acquaintance—Moji, an immigrant from Nigeria, who is the sister of a friend—of having raped her some years ago in Lagos. To this he expresses surprise, before Moji, mocking his stance of disbelief, tells him that he "has not changed a bit." She asks, "will you say something now? Will you say something?":

You'll say nothing, she said. I know you'll say nothing. I'm just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed. I know that. Look, bitterness has been eating away at me all this time, because this was so long ago, and it's my word against yours, and you'll say it was consensual, or that it never even happened at all. I have anticipated all your possible answers. (245)

Julius does not respond. He exits the scene before turning to a parable about the philosopher Nietzsche's "contempt for pain." He describes the way Nietzsche as a youth burned his hands with coal in order to prove the concepts of fearlessness and self-sacrifice. A moment later, however, Julius realizes that he had misremembered the story: it was matchsticks, not coal, which "an alarmed

schoolyard prefect knocked to the ground,” sparing young Nietzsche of scars. Julius was wrong (246).

We are prompted in this final dark anecdote to ask whether the presumption of empathy from an “imagined audience” is one consequence of one type of internalized exposure—a consequence that leads not to the “truth,” nor to acts of kindness, nor to grace. Julius’ self-address is not a reprieve from exposure and scrutiny, but the manner of its internalization. Denial resides as a strategy within displaced migrant subjects, a method for retaining some sense of normalcy under the chronic duress of exposure, here (in Cole) proceeding through a preoccupation with worldly matter and its licensure of digression and social maneuvering. Julius has commandeered his state of exposure, turning it around and thus embracing the fictive quality of his mirrored self.

This action is akin to the narrative strategies I outlined at the start. Against others’ attempts reconstruct you—attempts that bear the distorted impression of imperial othering—you assert your right to opacity. You write, act, perform against the historical lacuna that constitutes the ground of your own existence. Yet, as Cole shows, the effort at recalcitrance is itself compromised by another imperial valence, which, per Julius’ encounter with Moji, sees the site of black womanhood, and not blackness itself, as the quintessential ground for western epistemology (Spillers 1987). She, and not he, is the site par excellence of storytelling, the terra nullius for the enactment, the becoming of an idea: chauvinism, development, exception. Ethical questions raised by this scene are not as ambiguous as Julius would have his “imagined audience” believe. The limited performativity of life in front of the mirror is no real absolution. For it, too, remains contaminated by its provenance. As Mbembe says, this is the very core of black exceptionality—the realization that Julius, never granted access to authentic subjectivity, has been “set up for moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization” (2017: 26). If this insight is indeed along the lines of what Cole intends, then it proves a strategy for both character and author. Cole distinguishes himself from Julius while demonstrating the logic of the avatar-protagonist, a popular device in contemporary world literature which destabilizes very idea of an author’s voice. Julius has no choice but to make due with quotidian anguish, to accept moral failings—the failure to honor our “obligations to others”—and thus to accept the premise of alienation. And Cole does the same, providing something that looks like a program, but which upon further analysis is revealed to be a state of necessary self-deception. Julius’ apparent duplicity, as Hartman proposes in her theory of “critical fabulation,” is an effort to “jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (2007: 11). But the politics of this program are non-

specific and indeterminate. Whatever politics Julius does enact here involve identifying how the archive might be reconceived in order to make recompense for its structure of deliberate lack. To my mind, one of the successes of Cole's work is that in translating subjection into first-person plural, it allegorizes failed universal humanism. When we "articulate ourselves to ourselves" is we, ourselves, who are misled, so tangled is our very capacity to articulate with the determining epistemologies that produced us.

Between Literature and the World

Exposure is the stage on which the subject constantly, continually performs. One can certainly turn out an extensive genealogy of examples of works that demonstrate this idea. Cole's avowed influences, exilic novelists like V.S. Naipaul, J.M. Coetzee, and W.G. Sebald, demonstrate a recalcitrant wish to withdraw amid so many social embarrassments, only to be returned to the world perpetually due to the contingencies of exile. So, I think, do works by Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie—to name another contemporary Nigerian novelist who has attained transnational notoriety, with no shortage of public scrutiny—depict the solipsistic self emerging from the experience of over-exposure in the global city (2010).

A number of literary critics have, in turn, referred to urban and infrastructural ontologies in order to register a dissatisfaction with interpretative models that have too strongly, in the views of such critics, emphasized liberal cultural politics. The will to know that characterized such a politics, and which Glissant and others have so forcefully disavowed, had put at its center an untoward eagerness for the scene of cultural encounter. A series of new models, by contrast, promises only empirical objectivity, emphasizing networked global space as the basis for literary studies—very much an echo of new materialist philosophy's anti-social appeal. These works imagine global literary production as a world system (Wallerstein 1979; Braudel 1992; Miyoshi 1993) and apply this understanding to transnational writing and its cultures. Some even promote the mapping of literary history through geospatial information systems, archival data-mining, and digital diagramming, techniques that seem to heed Erich Auerbach's call for comparatists to commit to a "scientifically ordered and conducted research of reality" (1969 [1948]: 4). Many of such efforts have failed, terminally, to challenge the welthaben characteristic of western epistemology (Moretti 2000).⁷ Other works, like Pascale

⁷ See Franco Moretti's plea for "distant reading," which he explains with characteristic bravura: "the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be" (2000: 56–57); See also

Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), acknowledge literary chauvinism as a feature of metropolitan urban form. Urbanity is in this sense the formal condition that underwrites the production of world literature itself. Paris, in Casanova's view, is the world's literary core, sustained by a cultural economy that suppresses or absorbs regional and vernacular writings in order to materialize "world literary space" (88).

The potential problems with such methods are clear. For, along with the metropolitan subjectivity that licenses practices like "distant reading" (Moretti: 56) and sanctions an economy of "literary prestige" (Casanova: 24), there are so many kinds of infrastructures that remain invisible. A substantive description of world systems must make some recognition that there remains an externalized, suppressed, or obscured structure, or set of structures, to which surface object-relations are connected, and that these underlying structures are shaped by epistemological as well as ontological currents, patterns, and formations. Literature, in the social context of modern and imperial epistemologies, can attain the viscosity that Said (1984) suggests makes an object worldly: its attachments to politics, cultures, and histories, which weigh it down or send it reeling into another social or material orbit. One aim of infrastructural criticism, in this sense, may be "to unsettle the privileged obliviousness" that accompanies modern life, and even "to show that grasping the everyday means being surprised into recognizing precisely those entrenched habits of perception that mystify or occlude ordinary experience" (Levine 2015: 593). We must address not only the ways infrastructures license a critical obliviousness, but the ways careless, apolitical criticism underwrites the production of new infrastructure. As Emily Apter (2013) has recently suggested, what comes to light when one takes seriously the politics of global infrastructure is not a field of transculturation but a system of immobility and confinement. In Apter's view, it is "visual checkpoints and language barriers" that ought to be understood as the infrastructure of global culture today (117). Those who stand on the stage of exposure—the refugee, the prisoner, the black migrant—focalize the exclusionary logics of global modernity.

To argue that Cole's novel demonstrates, and does not merely depict, simultaneous orders of infrastructure, knowledge, and visibility is to evince much more than his awareness of the debates in a specific literary discipline. It is to suggest that literature, by virtue of its status between matter and idea, has the capacity to augment the terms of reality itself. As Mbembe says,

Gayatri Spivak's critique of Moretti, *Death of a Discipline* (2004: 72): "If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us."

for it to operate as affect, impulse, and speculum, race must become image, form surface, figure, and—especially— a structure of the imagination. And it as a structure of the imagination that it escapes the limitations of the concrete, of what is sensed, of the finite, even as it participates within and manifests itself most immediately through the senses. (Mbembe 2017: 76)

Books are exemplary tokens of this expansive imaginary infrastructure. As material agents among the density of urban space, they catalyze certain kinds of discreet imaginative work. Individuated encounters with such objects may give immediate dimension to global networks of relation that one would prefer to ignore as well as those which appear in the absence of normative organizing structures.

This kind of highly imaginative crossing over comes to light, as I suggested, through the discreet discourse that is in some sense opaque. How can opacity be spatial and meaningful, which is to say material and cultural, at once? I want to close by addressing this question, turning to Cole's novel *Everyday is for the Thief* (2007), which I hold out as a restorative complement to the kind of reduction that Cole so splendidly critiques in *Open City*. While Julius' world is one of exposure in its chronic, new world state, the unnamed narrator in *Everyday is for the Thief* experiences life in Lagos through the minor and discontinuous infrastructures of chance. In a scene on board a Lagos danfo—which I have chosen to cite here without determining commentary—the novel's narrator sees a woman reading a book by Michael Ondaatje, the Sri Lankan novelist and poet.

My mind runs a monologue as I watch the back of her head for the duration of the journey. I hope that she will not get off the bus before my stop at CMS, so that I can hop off as she does, walk alongside her, interrogate her. So that I can say to her, with the wild look common to all those who are crazed by over-identification, "We must talk. We have much to say to each other. Let me explain." In the last row of the danfo, I work on my courage. Lagosians are distrustful of strangers, and I have to speak the right words. [...] The bus comes to a stop. She disembarks, at Obamende, with her book, and quickly vanishes into the bookless crowd. Just like that, she is gone. Gone, but seared into my mind still. That woman, evanescent as an image made with the lens wide open. (43)

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