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Critical perspectives on Teju Cole

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ABSTRACT

The introduction presents the key concerns and arguments of *Critical Perspectives on Teju Cole*. Introducing the essays of this volume, it offers insight into Cole's genre-crossing oeuvre and its critical study. It also broadens the outlook of this project by pointing to areas for further research.

KEYWORDS

Teju Cole; *Open City*; *Every Day is for the Thief*; *Known and Strange Things*; *Blind Spot*; photography; literature; essay; social media; intermediality

This collection of essays was prompted by a number of excellent presentations and robust discussions on the fiction of Nigerian American writer, and photographer Teju Cole at the Eleventh Biennial Conference of the Collegium for African American Research at Liverpool Hope University, June 2015. The study comes together amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the most recent uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement, founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin.¹ The former has given special urgency to the movement's demand for the eradication of white supremacy and structural racism, their impact amplified by the pandemic's disproportionate toll on the lives of Black and Brown people globally. While not an explicit focus of the following interventions, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the current context and note that the examination of the various stagings of the "afterlife of slavery" in Cole's work inevitably resonate with this unique moment in human history.²

The author of the widely acclaimed novels *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007, 2014) and *Open City* (2011), Cole's artistic production traces a wide expressive arc, from creative fiction and narrative non-fiction to blogging and tweeting, with essays, journalism, and photography in between. Over the last few years, Cole has claimed particular accomplishments in intermedial productions: a proficient photographer and former columnist of "On Photography" for the *New York Times*, he has exhibited in Italy, Iceland, India, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States, and has produced numerous publications combining photography and text.³

At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Cole became primarily known to western readers as the author of *Open City*. Among the glowing media reception many reviewers seized on how Cole evokes the "strolling spectator" reminiscent of "the Baudelairean flâneur" or "the work of W. G. Sebald,"⁴ or how his

prose “recalls [...] the young James Joyce’s in ‘The Dead.’”⁵ At the same time, media critics generally failed to acknowledge his Afro-diasporic and Afro-Atlanticist interventions in *Open City* and *Every Day*. The volume seeks to address this omission in (mostly) western media responses to Cole’s work, as well as other concerns such as transatlantic entanglements, cosmopolitan knowledge production, trauma and the ethics and aesthetics of its representation, and spatial memory in Cole’s writing. Interest in Cole has been gathering critical, if scattered, mass. After all, his *oeuvre* draws attention from various fields, such as American, Nigerian, postcolonial, African, Anglophone, transnational, and world literatures as well as from the studies of photography, the essay, and online media. We believe that the present studies provide a timely and wide-ranging exploration of Cole’s work by focusing early and coordinated scholarly attention on one of the most arresting voices of African-descended cultural production.

Transatlantic perspectives between Brussels, Lagos, and New York City

Cole’s book-length fiction can be inscribed within a generation of African-descended authors who are modulating the African American narrative and engaging in various ways with what historian Brenda Gayle Plummer refers to as a potential “problem: the privileging of black American perspectives.”⁶ Thus the anonymous narrator of *Every Day* inserts his perspective into the urban environment of his birth city, Lagos, after living in New York City for fifteen years, while the likewise Nigerian-born Julius in *Open City* mostly moves within the western cities of New York City and Brussels, while occasional flights of memory and dreams transport him to Lagos. In both instances, their American African perspectives negotiate an eclectic range of historical patrimonies, western and non-western, destructive and formative, exploitative and benign. If Julius and *Every Day*’s narrator are “citizens of a hegemonic state,” they also arguably challenge the “substantial – and some would say undue – influence [African Americans have had] over global conversations about race, liberation, and justice.”⁷

The scholarly response to Cole’s fiction has been predictably more nuanced than the early media reviews. *Every Day*’s and *Open City*’s narrative form, their multi-layered intertextual reference frames and the recurring themes and genre conventions have drawn increasing scholarly attention. As the existing research especially on *Open City*, but increasingly also on *Every Day* and Cole’s photography and essays show, Cole’s work provides a growing archive of artistic expression that lends itself to diverse analytical approaches and critical interpretations.⁸ While not dismissing or overlooking the presence of western cultural legacies in his work, scholars are alert to Cole’s place among recent writing from the African continent, and also his receptiveness to the African American intellectual tradition. Indeed, his ongoing and rich conversation with African American intellectuals, such as James Baldwin, notably crystallized in the essay “Black Body,” has become a focal point in Cole’s examination of Africanness, blackness, and marginalization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that has animated recent scholarship, evidenced by the essays collected here.⁹

In line with Plummer’s caution over “the privileging of black American perspectives,” in a recent *American Literary History* (ALH) special issue on twenty-first century African American literature, Yogita Goyal ponders the “need” for “new diasporas,” in contradistinction to the historical tendency to view “diaspora [...] largely [...] in terms of the African

American experience.”¹⁰ Citing the work of such African-descended writers as Taiye Selasi, Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Dinaw Mengestu, and Binyavanga Wainaina, Goyal pleads for “open[ing] up the script of diaspora itself,” one that takes account of “new migrations” not limited to those reflective of the forced historical migration produced by slavery.¹¹ While Goyal names Cole among the constellation of writers who bear witness to the African diaspora of recent times, her analytical focus on the latter (specifically Abani, Bulawayo, and Mengestu) suggests that if Cole reflects the “new diaspora” writing neither does he abandon “the frame of Atlantic slavery.”¹² This is borne out in this collection, not least in the essays by Isabel Soto and Dominique Haensell, which examine the presence and absence of the history of slavery, the slave narrative, and their relation to narratives of migration and racialized identity in Cole’s fiction.

Soto’s “‘Idea l’a need’ or, Enough Said: The Poetics of Reticence in Teju Cole’s *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*” identifies a “poetics of reticence” in the novels’ engagement with trauma and the identification with race, blackness, and Africanness. Soto shows how *Open City* and *Every Day* are both driven by the afterlife of slavery, migrancy, and the (dis)remembering and/or (dis)articulating of their traumas. In a similar vein, Haensell argues that *Open City* uses the trope of Black gendered and disabled bodies in spatiotemporal movement to address the entanglements of trauma, memory, affect, and history in the transatlantic world. Julius, Haensell contends in “Going Through the Motions – Movement and Metahistory in Teju Cole’s *Open City*,” appeals to “the status of world citizenship,” while the novel as a whole problematizes that appeal.

Not coincidentally, part of Cole’s ongoing conversation with Baldwin centers precisely on what patrimonies he feels entitled to draw on, whether western, non-western, ethnically dominant or otherwise: “I’m happy to own all of it,” is his response.¹³ Indeed, in the *ALH* issue, Erica R. Edwards’s essay on *Open City* identifies a paradigm shift in the representation of race in “the new black novel” reflective of a post-9/11 global re-drawing of race by the United States in order to “transpose the history of domestic racial terror – the racial terror of slavery and Jim Crow [...] [and] resecure and reorder the space of the homeland.”¹⁴ Edwards argues that Cole’s novel accommodates this shift in “the spatial imaginary of black American literature.”¹⁵ Madhu Krishnan also explores the function of spatiality in *Open City* and disengages it from Sebald or flâneurist frames, stressing instead its construction and “performance” as part of a postcolonial reality or “post-national space” present in contemporary African-descended writing.¹⁶ The ironic evocation of openness in the title is, according to Krishnan, ultimately exposed as “illusory” and “covering over a deeper and more sinister production.”¹⁷

The mixed heritage of Cole’s narrators – white western mother, Yoruba father, a life lived both within and outside the African continent – draws attention to the recurring themes of cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism in Cole’s *oeuvre*, which Maria Lauret calls “Afroc cosmopolitanism” in this volume. The former is dialogically – and ironically – thematized in a lengthy section of *Open City* in which Julius has conversations with Moroccan immigrants Farouq and Khalil on wide ranging subjects such as philosophy, world literature, Middle East politics, and western discrimination against Muslim immigrants and people of color. That the sequence unfolds in Brussels, the cosmopolitan city *par excellence* and administrative hub of the multi-national and multi-cultural project that is the European Union, as well as historical site of a most brutal colonial western government underscores the novel’s critical engagement with cosmopolitanism, and western legacies

of colonial violence and enslavism,¹⁸ as Souleymane Ba and Soto observe in “The Problematics of Openness: Cosmopolitanism and Race in Teju Cole’s *Open City*.” Belgium and its capital resist integrating Muslim “others,” with Bernard Ayo Oniwe noting wryly that “[t]he obligation of cosmopolitanism towards all human beings is not always met in Belgium. Racial prejudice and parochial imagination are still overwhelming.”¹⁹ The sequence is brought to a close when, back in New York City, Julius sends Farouq a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.²⁰ Lily Saint submits that Julius’s engagement with “global cosmopolitanism” is ultimately simply a “veneer” and never actualizes the ethical mission set out by Appiah.²¹ Ba and Soto, too, focus their attention on the challenges and contradictions of privileged, dominant notions of openness reflected in the concepts of cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism and the ways in which they are complicated through Julius’s and Farouq’s reflections on forced migration, isolation, war, global terrorism, and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States.

While Ba and Soto touch on the role of Brussels in *Open City*, in “From ‘Sepulchral City’ to ‘Open City’: Hetero-images of Brussels in Joseph Conrad and Teju Cole,” Elisabeth Bekers casts a more in-depth look at Cole’s fictionalization of the Belgian capital with a comparative analysis of the city’s representation in other Anglophone texts, especially Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As Bekers demonstrates, both narrators arrive in the city as outsiders and use Brussels to formulate sustained (post)modern critiques of colonialism and multiculturalism. In “Walking in New York City and Lagos: Spatial memory in Teju Cole’s novels,” Monika Mueller zooms in on the spatiality of two other main settings in *Open City* and *Every Day*, Lagos and New York City. Via the urban built environment as theorized by Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, Mueller analyzes the “spatial memory” that the two outsider-narrators create while walking city streets and how this memory helps the narrators to overcome isolation and detachment.

Intermedial dialogues

These studies by emerging and established scholars of American, African, and Anglophone postcolonial literature and history hailing from Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the United States share a focus on the recurring themes of memory, trauma, space, time, race, and diaspora. The last three contributions maintain this focus, while moving away from an exclusive examination of Cole’s acclaimed fiction and examine instead Cole’s non-fictional work. Cole’s first essay collection, *Known and Strange Things* from 2016, collects more than fifty of his essays, many of which he had previously published as photography critic at the *New York Times*, accompanied by a small selection of photographs, including his own. Its publication coincided with a solo photography exhibition, *Punto D’Ombra*, in Milan, and the Italian book version with the same title that combined Cole’s photographs and writing and appeared in English as *Blind Spot* a year later. Like his publications, Cole’s exhibitions frequently combine photography with texts and occasionally also other elements.²² “Black Paper” at the 2017 Performa Biennial in New York City, for example, fused performance with photography, music, video footage, and the recital of text.

Every Day and *Open City* had already brought together different media and engaged in an intermedial dialogue between literary genres, photography, (classical) music, and

canonical figurative western painting in textual and visual forms.²³ In an interview conducted in 2016 for this project “‘Here is where we meet’: An Interview with Teju Cole,” Cole and Miriam Pahl talk about this intermedial play of fiction and non-fiction as well as artistic, journalistic, and political modes of expression and social commentary that straddle Cole’s work from fiction and social media activity to essays and photography. Maria Lauret’s essay, “Teju Cole: Public Intellectual,” shows that Cole has become, not only a prolific writer and multi-media artist, but a true public intellectual. His genre-crossing work characterized by what Lauret describes as “connectivity and plasticity” strives for the creation of new (counter) publics in which the pressing socio-political issues of our time can be negotiated. With “Every Day is a Possibility: Modernity, Struggle, and the Politics of Solidarity in the Writing of Teju Cole,” Christopher M. Tinson takes a closer look at some of these intertextual conversations in Cole’s work. Tinson meditates on the role and the language of the state, local political struggles, and transnational solidarities in and across Cole’s *Every Day* and his journalistic writing, not least on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Like Lauret, Tinson contextualizes Cole’s *oeuvre* within a long history of political writing by public intellectuals, such as Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and Suheir Hammad, that spans Nigeria, Palestine, and the United States.

“Trac[ing] out a story from what is omitted”

As readers of Teju Cole’s work and editors, we hope that the present collection of essays will expand and deepen the growing scholarship on Cole. We are, however, inevitably aware of further possible readings not addressed here. There is clearly ample scope for exploring Cole’s use of photography and what Karen Jacobs refers to as “afterimages [...] the belated, psychically regulated optic” that mediate Cole’s imagining of the African diaspora, historic and current, and which she associates with Sebald’s own use of afterimages to convey his preoccupation with “traumatic displacements” after the Second World War.²⁴ Like Cole’s writing, his photography also reaches beyond a meditation on the representability of the African Atlantic and reflects on beauty, reality, truth, materiality, and its relation to photographic practices. Cole’s short stories show yet another side of this wide-ranging artist that deserves focused attention. Apart from “Modern Girls” and “Second God,” most recently “City of Pain” offered a glimpse into a city of “refugees” in the grips of an infectious, deadly disease called “the Visitation” that forces people into isolation which appeared far too familiar for readers across the world at the time of its publication in the spring of 2020.²⁵

But even *Open City*, to date the work that has received most scholarly attention and which the majority of articles in this volume also engage, invites continued study, encouraging readers to pursue and map out further stories. Allusive, unexplored threads in the novel, such as Julius’s competing gestures of suggestion and obfuscation regarding his sexuality and what may be understood as queer desire emphasize the richness and complexity of Cole’s novel.²⁶ Its intersectional dynamic proposes the inclusion of further experiential categories alongside race, such as sexuality, able-bodiedness, health, gender, masculinity, age, class, or origin in the study of his *oeuvre* as a whole. Indeed, the explicit, if marginal, presences in *Open City* that remain critical “blind spots” seem to urge further examination of other aspects of his output. Consider, for example, how much of Cole’s photographic work actually foregoes the representation of human subjects; the

few figures that do appear in his photographs remain frequently faceless or hidden from clear view.²⁷ This inevitably invites the question of how Cole's accomplishments as a complex, allusive writer and essayist speak to his work in photography, on social media, and in performance. The present volume can only begin to explore these questions. Ultimately, it appears that Cole's *oeuvre*, like his best-known work *Open City*, offers a broad and growing archive of multiple intersecting stories yet to be "trace[d] out [...] from what is omitted" (9).

Notes

1. Black Lives Matter, "Her Story."
2. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.
3. The Faber & Faber 2014 edition of *Every Day* intersperses black-and-white photographs by the author throughout the narrative. Cole's notable interest in the still image, whether his own or another's, is frequently conjoined with text. See his collaboration with Indian author Amitava Kumar in the photo-essay "Who's Got the Address?" published in *Domus* (2013) and *Guernica* (2013), or the book length *Blind Spot* (2016). His latest collaborative project is with photographer Fazal Sheikh, *Human Archipelago* that contains photography by Sheikh and texts by Cole (2019). Cole's most recent photography book *Fernweh* appeared in 2020 with his photography from several trips to Switzerland interspersed with narrative and aphoristic fragments from Karl Baedeker's 1872 *Switzerland: A Handbook for Travelers*.
4. Foden, "Open City," par. 7.
5. Syjuco, "These Crowded Streets," par. 6.
6. Plummer, "Congo Love Song," 75. See also Adams, "Not all Black People."
7. Plummer, "Congo Love Song," 75.
8. For analyses of *Open City*, see Oniwe, "Cosmopolitan Conversation" and Elze, "Cosmopolitan Place, Postcolonial Time." For analyses of Cole's writing and photography in *Every Day*, see Kappel, "Remembering the Travelogue" and Rippl, "Picturing Lagos." For studies that also address Cole's essayistic, photographic, and social media work, see Gehlawat, "Sharing Inwardness" and Mingazova, "The Double-take of Seeing" as well as Lauret's contribution in this collection.
9. Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, 3–16. In a recent interview, Krista Tippett remarks: "I sense that you have a conversation with [Baldwin] across time and space," adding, "I wonder how you sense [Baldwin] might be speaking or would speak to this moment we inhabit. Is that on your mind?" Cole replies, "Very often." Tippett, "Teju Cole," par. 27–28.
10. Goyal, "We need," 640–664.
11. *Ibid.*, 641.
12. *Ibid.*, 643. In *Runaway Genres*, Goyal reasserts that *Open City* "depart[s] from all available templates altogether. In fact, it seems to constitute itself in direct opposition to existing accounts of black Atlantic mobility," *ProQuest Ebook Central*, n.p.
13. Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, 10.
14. Edwards, "The New Black Novel," 665 (original emphasis).
15. *Ibid.*
16. Krishnan, "Postcoloniality," 677.
17. *Ibid.*, 693.
18. On the concept of "enslavism," see Broeck, *Gender*.
19. Oniwe, "Cosmopolitan Conversation," 55.
20. Cole, *Open City*, 186. Subsequent references to the novel appear in textual parentheses. For a detailed discussion of *Open City*'s relation to Appiah's work on cosmopolitanism, see Sollors, "Cosmopolitan Curiosity."
21. Saint, "From a Distance," 326.

22. For an analysis of the ways in which *Punto D'Ombra* and *Every Day* blend text and photography as a narrative form, see Festa, "Teju Cole's Narrative."
23. See Epstein, "Open City's 'Abschied'"; Neumann and Kappel, "Music and Latency"; Reese and Kingston-Reese, "Teju Cole"; and Rippl, "Picturing Lagos."
24. Jacobs argues that "Cole's distancing homage to Sebald's strictly measured but still constant faith in the representability of marginal lives reflects the scope of Cole's challenge to what can be securely known and represented of the African diaspora. In the very moments when we avert our gaze from these photographs' constitutive grains, dots, and lines, we find Judaic history texturing our vision of Africa and vice versa" Jacobs, "Photographic After-images," 87.
25. Cole, "Modern Girls"; Cole, "Second God"; Cole, "City of Pain." "Second God" was commissioned by BBC Radio 4 and made available exclusively as a radio story read by the British actor and rapper Riz Ahmed. On how some of Cole's twitter projects can also be considered "twitterature" short stories, see Stein, "Mobile Writers, Porous Texts," 142–144; and Pahl's interview with Cole in this collection.
26. For references to sexuality and queer desire in *Open City*, see Julius's conversations with Professor Saito, his observations about Kenneth, the Barbudan museum attendant, as well as his descriptions of other Black men's bodies (171–173, 53–54, 64, 189).
27. See Gehlawat, "Sharing Inwardness," 220.

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