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The “fugitive notes” of Teju Cole’s *Open City*

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ABSTRACT

While Julius, the narrator of *Open City* (2011), foregrounds walks, intellectual digression, and stories of minor characters, personal traumatic memories paired with traces and remnants of chattel slavery and the slave trade haunt him. My analysis of Teju Cole’s novel focuses on flight as a physical and mental movement that Julius performs, trying to flee from an association with his Nigerian past and the past of the Atlantic world. His compulsive walks and cosmopolitan musings offer only temporary, improvised refuge. The text remains caught in the gendered history and anti-black legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery as well as the ways in which Julius is implicated not only as a witness and victim but also as a perpetrator. Gendered anti-black violence, I argue, forms the obscured ground on which Julius’s narration is built, while the novel’s narrative techniques of oversharing and evasion ultimately negotiate its narratibility.

KEYWORDS

Anti-blackness; Blackness; Black Atlantic; flight; fugitivity; *Open City*; slavery; violence; Teju Cole

Introduction or looking for the “fugitive notes” of *Open City*

The term *fugitive* appears literally only once in *Open City* (2011) by the Nigerian American writer Teju Cole, when the autodiegetic narrator Julius recounts a spontaneous visit to Notre Dame de la Chappelle during his winter vacation in Brussels, Belgium, and describes the idiosyncratic music he hears:

I noticed, just then, a dissonance in the sound of the organ music. There were distinct fugitive notes that shot through the musical texture, like shafts of light refracted through stained glass. I was sure it was a Baroque piece, not one I had heard before, but with all the ornamentation typical of the period, yet it had taken on the spirit of something else – what came to mind was Peter Maxwell Davies’s “O God Abufe” – a fractured, scattered feeling.¹

A little later, Julius realizes that the music is, in fact, a recording and that the sound of a vacuum cleaner is causing the “dissonance.” He starts to wonder where the woman, who is cleaning the aisle, might be from and why she is in this Brussels church:

I thought that she, too, might be here in Belgium as an act of forgetting. 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 Rwanda. And perhaps her escape was not from anything she had done, but from

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what she had seen. It was a speculation. I would never find out, for she possessed her secrets fully as did those women that Vermeer painted in this same gray, lowland light; her silence seemed absolute. (140)

The term “fugitive” is followed by the closely related terms “escape,” “refuge,” and “hiding place,” which become associated with “silence” and the “forgetting” of violence either witnessed or perpetrated. This concept of fugitivity, I argue, runs as a common thread through Cole’s novel. Loosely identifying the woman as Cameroonian, Congolese, or Rwandan, Julius considers Belgium a sanctuary for her even though she goes about the physically straining work of cleaning, precarious work primarily assigned to Black and Brown women, poor people, as well as migrants and refugees throughout the global North. The juxtaposition of Julius’s existence as an affluent US American tourist of German and Nigerian descent with a taste for Baroque music and seventeenth-century Dutch art with the assumed realities of a Black female migrant cleaner is telling for the larger tensions *Open City* grapples with in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, origin, and gender, and the ways in which they bear on people’s lives and movements.

In speculating about the woman, however, Julius might in fact be speaking more accurately about himself, projecting forgetting and flight onto her as a metaphorical “two-dimensional canvas, safely backdated to the seventeenth century”² and suppressing their ramifications in his own (hi)story in order not to undermine his cosmopolitan demeanor. Julius, a psychiatry resident at Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, takes long evening walks through Manhattan as well as in Brussels, his vacation destination, between the fall of 2006 and that of 2007. As readers find out during the course of the novel, which unfolds at Julius’s “walking pace” (3), he, too, “escaped” from his Nigerian past and seems to seek “refuge” in his flâneur-like existence in New York City and Brussels.³ While wandering, Julius muses about the cities’ architecture and their checkered histories, recounts conversations and individual stories of the people he meets, and contemplates art, music, literature, and philosophy. Sometimes the walks and musings evoke memories of Julius’s childhood and youth in Nigeria; these, however, irrupt only as fragments of otherwise incomplete or obscure narrative strands. Taken together the fragments convey that his Nigerian father had died of tuberculosis when Julius was fourteen years old and that he had become estranged from his white German mother after his graduation, when he left his home in Lagos in order to receive higher education in the United States of America, cutting most family ties. Towards the end of the novel, readers learn that, as a teenager in Lagos, Julius in all likelihood raped Moji Kasali, the older sister of a Nigerian high school friend, an incident he seems to have completely forgotten by the time he reencounters her by chance many years later in Manhattan.

Given his apparent amnesia regarding this incident and the ways in which Julius’s narrative seems to circle persistently around the presumed rape, psychoanalysis and trauma theory seem to lend themselves as valid approaches to the text. Tellingly, in an interview from 2015, Cole suggested that “a plausible framing device for *Open City*” would be “a series of visits by Julius to his psychiatrist” with “[t]he specific forms of oversharing and evasion one might engage in while talking to one’s shrink” during psychoanalysis.⁴ Considering the dominance of physical walking and mental wandering, concepts of flânerie and cosmopolitanism also appear useful. Rodica Mihăilă, for instance, describes Julius as a flâneur walking through the traumatized city after the terrorist attacks of 11

September 2001, whereas Alexander Greer Hartwiger uses Julius to develop his concept of a postcolonial flâneur and Pieter Vermeulen identifies the protagonist as a “fuguer,” a psychological concept that described “mad traveler[s]” in nineteenth-century France.⁵ In what follows I examine the narrative strategies that foreground certain textual strands, such as the walks and other people’s stories, to claim readers’ primary attention while “evad[ing]” other, more fugitive, aspects of the story and its narrator which remain, to paraphrase Julius, “secret” for the most part and only sometimes “sho[o]t through” and “fracture” the narrative “texture” (140, 138). I will not use trauma theory nor describe Julius as a (postcolonial) flâneur or fuguer, however. Instead, I ask with Werner Sollors whether “[i]n his aimless walks in the city, is [Julius] perhaps in reality always running away from something?” Yet, while according Sollors “the question at the heart of the novel” is “whether there can be cosmopolitanism after the Holocaust and the many other twentieth-century atrocities that it overshadows,”⁶ I argue that the concept of fugitivity that emerges from the archive of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, a concept that acknowledges their racialized and gendered afterlives, illuminates Julius’s constant compulsion to walk, overshare, and evade. *Open City*, like other works of recent Nigerian American writers, provides nuanced reflections not only on contemporary relations between Nigerian and US cultures and on changing Black identities and gender roles across the Atlantic today.⁷ It also reflects on the long history of anti-black racism in the United States and the larger history of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and colonialism between Africa and North America, thereby showcasing the many facets of the Black Atlantic as both Black and African as well as contemporary and centuries old.⁸

My reading of *Open City* therefore foregrounds flight as a form of physical and mental movement performed by both the text and its narrator, who flees from an association with his past and the past of the Atlantic world, yet emphasizes that this privileged middle-class protagonist of German and Nigerian descent should not be mistaken for a refugee. Although the sheer abundance of anecdotes and encyclopedic excursions seem to bury traumatic memories of Nigeria and the Black Atlantic, they nevertheless haunt the narrator, disrupting the narrative structure at certain points, and gesture toward what Julius wants to evade. His cosmopolitan demeanor, obsessive walking and musings about art and high culture can offer only temporary, improvised “refuge.” Ultimately, the text finds itself caught in the gendered history and anti-black legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery as well as the multiple ways in which Julius is implicated in these legacies: as a “brother [...] from the Motherland” (186), a high-achieving “young black man [...] in that white coat” of a doctor (210), and a man of “mixed race” (195). As Claudia Breger notes, the narrator is also “both victim and apparent perpetrator” of anti-black gender violence, on the run from being identified and self-identifying with this violence and the ways in which it becomes part of what Saidiya Hartman has described as the “afterlife of slavery.”⁹

For the concept of anti-blackness, I draw on the work of Christina Sharpe and Frank Wilderson who argue that we live in a world in which anti-blackness forms “the totality of our environments.”¹⁰ Creating and upholding an epistemological and structural demarcation between “the Human” and the “ontological position” of Blackness “as a grammar of suffering,” Wilderson maintains that anti-black violence has been directed against people racialized as Black “gratuitous[ly]” (at least) since the commencement of the transatlantic slave trade.¹¹ This violence is “ontological” and “metaphysical,” unleashed without the

prerequisite of transgression and considered “not a Black experience but a condition of Black ‘life.’”¹² This condition of life, however, eventually finds expression in gendered forms. As M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard remind us, it is Black women and Black trans women “who bear the weight of world-structuring antiblack violence most acutely – black women, who in spite of exhaustion and defeat agitate for different horizons of possibility for black life (for all of us).”¹³ In this context, fugitivity describes the historic physical, mental, and cultural practices of individual and communal forms of refusal of, survival despite, resistance against, and flight from anti-black violence by Black diasporic communities, and Black (trans) women specifically, what Hartman describes as “the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms.”¹⁴ Anti-black violence, I argue, forms the mostly obscured ground on which Julius’s narration is built, while *Open City*’s fugitive narrative technique ostensibly refrains from addressing anti-blackness even as it subtly negotiates the narratability of the racialized and gendered “scenes of subjection” that Julius refuses to associate with personally.¹⁵

To make this subtle negotiation visible, I suggest an attentive reading strategy that pits the novel against its protagonist and looks for breaches in the narrative flow, eruptions of transatlantic history, and the personal past of the protagonist. Trying to resist the allure of the narrative voice, I first examine the strategies that divert attention away from the narrator and his past. Julius not only appears to hide behind his wanderings, his encyclopedic knowledge, and the stories of minor characters – many of which are in fact literal stories of migration, flight, and imprisonment. The text also offers reasons to approach his narrative with skepticism as it subtly but repeatedly casts doubt on the trustworthiness of stories and the reliability of narration, as well as the ability of the mind to remember. Hamish Dalley suggests a “reading method,” not unlike my own that recognizes “not only [...] what is visible, but also [...] what has been erased” in Julius’s story.¹⁶ While Dalley argues that Nigeria is “the object that is most insistently *absent* to Julius,”¹⁷ my analysis focuses on the narrative strategies of flight that refuse identification with the history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery which – whenever it finds its way into the text – also triggers involvement with Julius’s past in Nigeria. After examining the narrative strategies of “oversharing” and “evasion,” my analysis will focus, secondly, on textual instances where diversion and deception seem to fail and the suppressed transatlantic past as well as Julius’s personal past in the form of his father’s death and the rape of Moji interrupt the narrative flow.

Oversharing walks, musings, and other people’s stories

In more than half of the chapters of *Open City*, Julius’s solitary walks through Manhattan and Brussels structure the narrative and provide frames into which intellectual digression and smaller anecdotes are embedded. The protagonist initially describes his compulsion to walk as a counterpoise to his workdays at the hospital, as a “therapy” that met a “need” and soon became “the normal thing” to do at least twice a week and on one of the weekend days (7, 6). He often feels compelled to go on his “aimless wandering[s]” (3) driven by an unconscious force that makes him suddenly launch on those walks without a specific destination in mind (44–45, 188). Recounting them usually involves detailed descriptions of the long route Julius takes and the immediate surroundings he

passes through, (over)sharing his observations about people, architecture, and the natural environment (e.g. 46–47). Details about the weather, the changing seasons, or occasional time designations (e.g. 8, 43, and 174) roughly define the timeframe and chronology of the novel.¹⁸ The narrative sequences of walks serve as inspiration and starting points for Julius’s musings and more often than not trigger associative digressions into art, history, and music.¹⁹ Such chains of association framed by walks not only take over much of the narrative attention and contribute to the slow progression of the plot; they also substantially fragment the novel as it falls apart into short threads that are picked up at different points in the text so that a plot is difficult to identify at times.

This narrative pattern is already noticeable by chapter 4. In the first section, the fragmentation develops from the juxtaposition of Julius’s walk through the Financial District that frames the chapter with his recounting of a psychiatry session with his patient M. from earlier that day and the digression inspired by the places Julius passes through during his walk (43–51). When Julius recalls how he stopped by Trinity Church, for example, “the unpremeditated idea that I might go inside and pray for M.” introduces a paragraph that reproduces what M. “had said to me earlier” from the patient’s first-person perspective and with almost no interjections from the narrator (48). Afterwards Julius continues to observe the surroundings of the church and its graveyard, followed by an excursus on the church’s history and its relation to Dutch settlement, whale hunting, and the novel *Moby Dick* (49–51). The digression is taken a step further through an indented paragraph composed of a quotation from “the story recounted by the Dutch settler Antony de Hooges in his memorandum book” reproduced in smaller print reminiscent of citations in academic and non-fictional work (50).

Apart from the walks and the intellectual digression, plot and narrative voice are concealed further, as Julius repeatedly shifts narrative focus away from himself toward other people’s stories. The vignettes of the numerous minor characters emerge from Julius’s conversations with people he meets on his walks, travels, and at work. He narrates their stories from a seemingly omniscient perspective in indirect speech with occasional interjections until – more often than not – the mediation of the narrator seems to disappear and blends into an embedded first- or third-person narrative of the minor characters themselves.²⁰ In this way, *Open City* offers mediated insight into a large cast of mostly secondary characters, many of whom are migrants or fugitives, just like Julius, that draw attention away from the protagonist.²¹ Whereas Julius and thereby the readers discover plenty about minor characters like the white Belgian physician Dr Maillotte or the Moroccan migrant Farouq, minor characters and readers learn very little about Julius’s familial background, with the narrator only gradually adding small, ambiguous pieces to the puzzle that is his past in Nigeria.

Importantly, Julius often distrusts the stories of others he puts at the center of his narration. As a psychiatrist in training, Julius is well aware of the unreliability of peoples’ stories, their judgments about themselves, and the ability of the mind “to deceive itself” (238) through the mind’s many “blind spots” (239). Moreover, while looking at a young crowd of Rwandans in a nightclub in Brussels, Julius confesses that he

felt some of that mental constriction – imperceptible sometimes, but always there – that came whenever I was introduced to young men from Serbia or Croatia, from Sierra Leone or Liberia. That doubt that said: These, too, could have killed and killed and only later learned how to look innocent. (139)

Here Julius continues his deliberations about reasons for flight and the perpetration, witnessing, and silencing of violence that he began when thinking about the woman in the Brussels church in the same chapter, interpreting, as Rebecca Clark notes, the clubbers' faces as flat, readable masks.²² Certainly, Julius's mistrust of other people, especially men, and his doubts about their innocence should make readers wary of the reliability of his own judgment and fugitive voice. In the course of the novel, readers will have cause to ask whether the detached, urbane narrative voice is masking a potential complicity with and perpetration of violence on his part, foreshadowing what will later emerge as Moji's rape accusation. When Dr Maillotte, who dominates their conversations with anecdotes about her life and only occasionally asks a few polite questions about Julius's background (88–93, 141–142), asks him what his first language is, he considers telling her that he spoke German to his mother as a child but ultimately decides against it because he “didn't want to get into the intricacies of the story” (142). Unpacking the “intricacies” of Julius's fugitive “story” buried under the weight of other, more cohesive narrative fragments about walks, excursions, and other peoples' stories represents one of the major challenges posed by *Open City*.

Fugitive memories of slavery and Nigeria

Towards the end of the long walk from Wall Street Station in chapter 4, Julius arrives at the Upper New York Bay from where he can make out the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in the distance. The sight triggers the first reference to the transatlantic slave trade in the novel, as Julius notes that Ellis Island “had been built too late for those early Africans – who weren't immigrants in any case – and it had been closed too soon to mean anything to the later Africans like Kenneth or the cabdriver, or me” (54–55). Kenneth is a Barbudian museum guard who Julius first meets during an earlier visit to the American Folk Art Museum and then reencounters in a restaurant he enters after finding Trinity Church closed (53–54, 51); the “cabdriver” picks Julius up after he leaves the American Folk Art Museum to go home (40–41). Julius feels that both Kenneth and the cabdriver lay claims on him as a fellow “African” (54), claims, he explains to the reader, he is not “in the mood for” (40).²³ Julius is reluctant to identify as an African descended person, nor with the African diaspora or the legacy of slavery and the slave trade attached to both – unlike his German heritage with which he actively wants to reconnect on his trip to Brussels (31–32).²⁴ However, on being confronted with two of the most well-known symbols of US American immigration, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, and the dream of freedom connected to them, Julius cannot help but see traces of the Middle Passage in their shadows.

Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, “we blacks,” had known rougher ports of entry: this, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cabdriver had meant. This was the acknowledgement he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every “brother” he met. (55)

Julius suddenly understands that the cabdriver and Kenneth seek “acknowledgement” of shared experiences of anti-blackness stemming from an inextricably connected trans-Atlantic history of the slave trade and slavery that Julius cannot escape from no matter how hard he tries.

This idea of Black diasporic “brother[hood]” appears a few times in the novel and remains problematic for Julius (40–41, 86–89). On one occasion, Julius exchanges the greeting he associates with the concept with two young Black men in Harlem on his way home; the two reappear in the company of another teenager shortly afterwards to rob, beat, and seriously injure Julius. Recounting the incident, he explains in more detail that what he had felt was

only the most tenuous of connections between us, looks on a street corner by strangers, a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being “brothers.” These glances were exchanged between black men all over the city every minute of the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each man’s mundane pursuits, a nod or smile or quick greeting. It was a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out here. (212)

In *Open City*, Julius’s ambiguous experiences of solidarity among Black men and its limits complicate the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade for Black communities today, what Hartman so pointedly describes as the “fugitive legacy” of “those who stayed behind” and of “the children of the captives dragged across the sea.”²⁵ The novel indirectly addresses fundamental differences in terms of history, class, and origin that may divide Black communities in New York City without, however, losing sight of the anti-black violence directed gratuitously and indiscriminately against those communities. It divides and binds together Black people in *Open City* through their shared “grammar of suffering” just as they may unite in their “anagrammatical” refusal of, survival despite, resistance against, and flight from past, present, and ongoing forms of violence.²⁶

This first direct reference to the Middle Passage in the novel is followed by a brief allusion to the slave trade at the end of chapter 4 that contextualizes it within other violent histories that have left their mark on US society. Julius’s long walk through Downtown Manhattan takes him eventually to the site of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which was “a massive construction site” at the time (57).²⁷ He contemplates the “disaster” but immediately connects it with other earlier “atrocities” (58), coming to the conclusion that

The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, written again. There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ship in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarreled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay. Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories. (59)

As Jens Elze notes, “[b]y [...] directing his gaze deeper and deeper into the construction site he retrogradingly tells the spatial history of the place to pre-Columbian times.”²⁸ Thus, Julius links the more recent atrocity of Islamist terrorism not only to the history of the slave trade but also to that of settler colonialism and the genocide of Native American people in the region. More importantly however, after mentioning the participation not only of white Italians Christopher Columbus and Giovanni da Verrazano but also of Black Portuguese Esteban Gómez in settler colonialism and the slave trade, he wonders about his own part “in these stories,” that is, about the ways in which he might be implicated in this complex transatlantic history.

This insight is followed in the next chapter by more stories of minor characters that address more atrocities and again de-center Julius's role. His conversation with the Liberian Saidu at a detention center in Queens quickly focuses on Saidu's story, told from a third-person perspective, about his long flight from war-torn Liberia to the United States. Julius is the mediating narrator, apparently recounting the unfiltered details of Saidu's life and providing "a sympathetic ear to a story that, for too long, [Saidu] had been forced to keep to himself" (64). Julius positions himself as both disinterested reporter and "listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle," not least in order to impress his girlfriend (70). While doing so, Julius barely mentions the fact that he too migrated from a country on the West African coast to the United States, admittedly under different circumstances and for different reasons. Here, Saidu's story indirectly points to the different forms of privileges stemming from class, origin, and the proximity or distance to whiteness and Western, more specifically US American cultures, that define the possibilities and circumstances of migration and travel to the United States today.

After two thirds of the story, Saidu's narration becomes increasingly vague and Julius eventually comments on what has been shared so far by expressing serious doubt about its truthfulness since Saidu "had, after all, had months to embellish the details, to perfect his claim of being an innocent refugee" (67). Julius wonders, "naturally, [...] whether it wasn't more likely that he had been a soldier" (67), a perpetrator of violence as opposed to its victim, whereas Saidu seems to anticipate doubt and explicitly maintains his innocence by explaining that pickpocketing a few times in Spain "was the only crime he ever committed" (68). Julius recounts Saidu's story, one of the longest about a minor character uninterrupted by other narrative fragments in the novel, only to eventually question its validity. He seems to want to avoid feeling associated with or implicated in this story of flight and incarceration, and related questions of victimhood and perpetration. After all, Saidu could easily be perceived as Julius's "alter ego."²⁹ Yet, the complex transatlantic history of the country Saidu hails from also remains unmentioned. The fact that, in the nineteenth century, free and formerly enslaved African Americans founded Liberia after having fled North America to start a new life on the continent of their ancestors further complicates the transatlantic history the novel's characters grapple with.

The narrative unit about the Haitian "bootblack" Pierre, who shines Julius's shoes in Penn station in Midtown Manhattan, immediately follows Saidu's story, while they both precede Julius's more explicit reflections on truthfulness, witnessing, and perpetration that he makes in reference to his stay in Brussels. Pierre's story is told primarily as an embedded first-person narrative without any commentary from Julius (71–74). In the cases of Saidu, the church cleaner, and the Rwandan clubbers, Julius expresses doubt about their trustworthiness and questions their role in recent histories of war and genocide at their places of origin. In Pierre's case, however, Julius does not even mention the fact that the elderly Haitian's life story covers historical events in Haiti and New York City from the eighteenth and nineteenth century that span more than a lifetime.³⁰ Apparently, Pierre fled Haiti with the family he "was in the service" of during the Haitian Revolution and came to New York City enslaved (72). Working as a hairdresser, he was eventually able to "purchase freedom for" his sister, his future wife, and himself (73). That Julius fails to comment on the story that reaches him "with that peculiar sense of

metamorphosis one experiences on waking up from an afternoon nap" (71), by pointing for example to its temporal inconsistencies or insertion of an excursus on Haitian history, is striking. Even more so when we note that towards the end of the novel's first part, Julius finds strange satisfaction in identifying "minor lapses" in Farouq's stories that, as Julius admits, cannot even be considered mistakes (114).

Why does Julius not mistrust a story that evidently bends historical time such as Pierre's but doubts that of Saidu and Farouq, and questions the blamelessness of the Rwandan clubbers? Pierre's language betrays his origin in earlier times and the style of his story is reminiscent of the genre of slave narratives.³¹ Even though he remains restrained in his literal reference to the history of slavery (he uses the term "service") and only briefly mentions "the terror of Bonaparte and the terror of Boukman" (72), Pierre's story of self-emancipation represents a more direct reference to chattel slavery and its transnational dimension in the novel. Told by a Haitian who cleans the shoes of business people in one of the largest underground transport hubs in the Western hemisphere, Pierre's story literally locates the transnational, ongoing influence of slavery in New York's "underground catacombs" (70), lurking beneath the surface of the so-called city of dreams. By inserting a slave narrative into the material underground landscape of today's Manhattan, *Open City* draws a map of the afterlife of slavery in New York that is buried underneath Julius's digression but resurfaces at certain instances.

Pierre's slave narrative leads directly to yet another reference to slavery and Jim Crow. When Julius leaves Pierre, he stumbles into the aftermath of a demonstration he describes in terms that recall the Draft Riots that took place in this area of Midtown Manhattan in 1863.³² Musing about the relation of past and present, a haunting sight strikes him:

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. [...] 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)

This trick of the eye, such that Julius's mind literally deceives him, is not only a nightmarish allusion to the anti-black violence of the Draft Riots but also more generally to slavery and the Jim Crow era with an instant and intense effect on Julius and his narration.³³ In fact, this momentary lapse into the time of slavery and Jim Crow, together with the scenes discussed above form a small but noticeable cluster of traces and recurrences of chattel slavery and the transatlantic slave trade during Julius's walks in the first part of the novel.

In the next chapter, the cluster culminates into recollections from Julius's time as a teenager in Lagos and at a military boarding school in Northern Nigeria, presumably around the time the rape would have happened (76–85). After evoking the Middle Passage, recounting Saidu's narrative of flight and incarceration and Pierre's slave narrative, as well as observing the specter of the Draft Riots against the backdrop of today's New York, "voices" from Julius's family history now "cut out of the past into the present" (74). Memories of death, sexualized violence, and migration in his family find their way into the narrative. Among other things, Julius tells of the early death of his

father from tuberculosis, of his mother's memories of her early childhood in Germany right after the end of the Second World War, and their increasing estrangement in the immediate aftermath of his father's death (78–81). Rape is also mentioned in this fragmentary family history. Retrospectively thinking about his conversations with his mother after his father's death, Julius

surmised that [his mother's mother,] my oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it. (80)

The detailed description of harsh physical punishment at his school – Julius is “caned” and shamed publicly for alleged stealing – follows, giving him “callous self-confidence” paired with a positive reputation with “the girls” (84). Julius remains mostly incapable or unwilling to explain the impact of those memories and experiences that involve an assumed rape and allusions to the awakening of teenage sexuality at this point or later in the novel. The chapter ends with Julius explaining how he migrated to the United States after his graduation without telling his mother (84–85). Clearly, the juxtaposition of these fragments of memory encourage a reading of Julius's move from Nigeria to the United States as a flight from traumatic memories of death and sexualized violence, all of which foreshadow Moji's rape accusation, an episode that remains unarticulated for most of the novel. Nonetheless, the clustered references to slavery that have entered the text in the two preceding chapters, disrupt the otherwise seemingly impersonal flow of digressive and evasive walks, musings, and conversations and enable Julius to start sharing – at least partially – some of what had previously been left unsaid or seemed utterly unsayable.

In the second part of the novel, chattel slavery and its relation to New York City are mentioned only twice, but much more explicitly than in the first part. Slavery and the slave trade become more conspicuous reference points and increasingly entangled with the plot as the novel progresses towards finally addressing the suppressed rape. At the beginning of part 2, Moji appears for the first time as what seems to be yet another migrant side character of *Open City*. When she approaches Julius in a supermarket in Manhattan shortly after his return from Brussels, Julius does not recognize her as the “older sister” of Julius's “school friend Dayo” until she introduces herself and he recalls having met her “two or three times in Lagos” at Dayo's home (156). Explaining how he and Dayo had lost touch, Julius briefly mentions in passing the event that Moji would later refer to as the night of the rape: “Then there had been a party at his house, a wild one, with lots of drinking” (157). Strikingly, Julius introduces the “reencounter” by musing about two senses of the past. On the one hand, he sees “a secure version of the past that I had been constructing since 1992” through “reiteration” and, on the other, an “irruptive, sense of things past” in which “something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa” suddenly reappears (156). Moji is just such a “someone long forgotten,” but her reappearance does not ensure “that what seemed to have vanished entirely existed once again” (156). Readers learn, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, that Julius's memory of Moji and his account of the teenage party are incomplete when she confronts him with her traumatic memory of the rape. While this memory has accompanied Moji every day of her life as she explains to Julius during her disclosure (244), the absence of that memory in Julius's narration seems to start haunting him in the next chapter.

Even though Julius seems initially to have no recollection of Moji at all and appears neither to remember nor care to narrate the events of that night – whether at this point or later in the novel – in the chapter immediately following their chance meeting, Moji’s “apparition” unsettles Julius profoundly (156). He forgets to bring his checkbook to a meeting with his accountant and cannot remember his bank account pin number either in order to withdraw the amount in cash he owes him (160–162). He hastily interprets his sudden forgetfulness as a sign of age, but his memory lapse continues to worry him; he is troubled and “awed by this unsuspected area of fragility in myself” (162). Fleeing from an in-depth engagement with this emotional agitation, Julius ventures on another walk through the Financial District of Lower Manhattan “down to Battery Park” from where he could again “see [...] the glimmering green figurine of the Statue of Liberty” (162) he had been looking at earlier when pondering the Middle Passage and “brother[hood].” Passing a playground, he suddenly recalls that “this had been a busy mercantile part of the city in the middle of the nineteenth century” and describes how – even though “[t]rading in slaves had become a capital offense in the United States in 1820” – New York bankers had continued to profit from slavery in various ways (163). In comparison to earlier mentions of slavery and the slave trade, this digression on the historical connections between the slave trade and the New York banking business is much more detailed, explicating, for example, the role “Moses Taylor” played first as a “sugar merchant” and then “board [and president] of the City Bank” (163). Julius even cites the *New York Times* from 1852, which criticized the bankers’ guilty involvement in the trade as “equivalent to the slave traders themselves” (163). In the first part of the novel, a culmination of indirect references to slavery and the slave trade triggers an involvement in Julius’s family history, whereas now it seems to serve Julius’s effort to avoid telling any more of Moji’s story.

It does not seem coincidental, then, that he also stumbles over physical evidence of slavery in Downtown Manhattan before readers finally learn of Moji’s accusation through Julius’s indirect reproduction of her account. Leaving a diner two weeks after the mugging in Harlem, Julius comes across the African Burial Ground Monument, a symbol for the communal history of chattel slavery in New York City buried under today’s streets of Lower Manhattan. As Julius explains, “in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” what now appears as a “small patch of grass” closed “for renovation” measured “some six acres” (220):

Into this earth had been interred the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves, but then the land had been built over and the people of the city had forgotten it was a burial ground. (220)

Most of the burial ground, just like Pierre’s underground slave narrative, “was now under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government” (220).

After glimpsing the economic entanglement of the banking industry with slavery at a playground in the Financial District, standing at a spot that memorializes the burial ground with a monument, Julius feels “steeped in [...] the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York” (221). He ponders the “evidence of suffering” of the “excavated bodies” in the form of “blunt trauma” and “broken bones” as well as the “hints of African religions” scholars had found in the graves in the form of “shells, beads, and

polished stones" (221). In his typical digressive fashion, Julius also elaborates on the problem of "cadaver" theft at the time, quoting "a petition by free blacks in defense of their dead" that eventually ensured that "the buried bodies of innocent blacks" were "left in peace and neglect" (221). Concerned about the difficulty of conceiving of the buried as "truly people" (222), Julius thus addresses not only physical traces of anti-black violence but also signs that attest to the ways Black people refused to be stripped of their communal histories, cultural identities, and a sense of themselves as humans by caring, in Sharpe's words, for the "dead and dying."³⁴

Significantly, the scene in which the teenagers violently mug Julius after greeting him in seeming solidarity closely precedes this last reference to slavery in the novel. Indeed, Julius had been pondering the attack and its bodily and psychological repercussions in the diner from where he had left to visit the site. Cole connects the two scenes even more directly when Julius ignores the "cordon" to the monument, steps onto the ground and lifts a stone from the grass. At that exact moment, an injury that persisted from the beating causes "pain [to] sho[o]t through the back of my left hand" (222). Put into a larger historical context, the pain functions as a physical reminder of Julius's own bodily implication in the complex history of the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and their afterlives as victim, witness, and perpetrator.

Afterwards, another of Julius's memories from Nigeria follows this textual strand about slavery in New York City. Actually, memories around his "father's burial in May 1989" (223) in the next chapter not only appear as a continuation of the memories of Julius's teenage years that were recounted in chapter 6; they also seem to evolve naturally from the visit to the African Burial Ground Monument. Sitting in the "movable catacombs" (7) of the New York subway on his way to work, Julius remembers that it is the anniversary of his father's burial, the memory of which had been "complicated" with famous "depictions of burials" and death over the years (228). The associative connection between Julius's chancing upon the historical burial ground and his father's burial manifests itself when Julius imagines his "father with coins on his eyes, and a solemn boatman collecting them from him, and granting him passage" (228). This quote echoes not only canonized representations of burials and death but also the bodies "found with coins over their eyes" at the burial ground Julius pondered earlier (221).³⁵ Fugitive memories from his personal past and the history of slavery follow each other closely to the point where they become entangled.

Withheld from most of the narrative, and foreshadowed through various strategies of evasion, Julius finally narrates the rape accusation in the following and penultimate chapter of the novel. He begins, however, by recounting his long stroll to the party to which Moji had invited him at her boyfriend's apartment (231) and then departs from the chronology of the evening to describe how he leaves the party in the early hours of the morning for his long walk home (241–243). Withholding to the limit Moji's disclosure, as a transition between the walk and the accusation scene, Julius muses again extensively about the mind and the role of male perpetrators of violence:

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. (243)

Here Julius gives a rather different account of the workings of the mind than that posited just a few pages earlier when he had expressed a critical awareness of deceiving minds and blind spots, ophthalmic and mental (238–239). Julius seems to prepare himself and the readers for what follows.

After these prologue-like remarks, Julius recounts how Moji confronts him with the rape accusation on the balcony of her boyfriend's apartment overlooking the Hudson River at the end of the party. She describes how Julius "had forced [himself] on her" while she was almost unconscious from drinking during the party that "her brother Dayo had hosted" and explains that she "still carried this hurt" today (244–245). The confrontation is mostly mediated through Julius's narrative voice who refers to Moji in third person and to himself in the first person and only briefly slips into a first-person monologue from Moji's perspective. Both before and after mediating Moji's accusations, Julius does not share his own point of view on the matter. Moji anticipates that he will not say anything in response and seems to understand well Julius's strategy of forgetting or suppressing painful memories of his past in Nigeria. She directly points to the fault at the core of this strategy, which the novel at large also exposes: "Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them" (245). For both the rape and slavery remain present absences or, rather, fugitive presences in the novel, forming the ground on which Julius walks obsessively and narrates evasively. Even though the narrator tries to suppress traumatic memories of his past in Nigeria and the larger past of the Black Atlantic, their irruptive re-appearances ultimately unsettle the deceptively self-possessed surface of Julius's narrative and reveal the flight from those memories as the narrative's driving force.

Conclusion, or fugitive insights into *Open City*

The unnamed narrator of Cole's first work of fiction *Every Day Is for the Thief* – who shares many characteristics with *Open City's* Julius such that they could in fact be the same protagonist – describes his personal past and that of Nigeria as "perhaps [...] connected, the way the small segment of a coastline is formed with the same logic that makes the shape of the continental shelf."³⁶ This simile also seems to describe the ways in which Julius, his relationship to Moji, and his narration are all caught up in the gendered history and anti-black legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery. Examining *Open City* for its absences and hauntings as well as its narrative strategies that aim to divert and evade, the novel clearly enacts a constant flight from Julius's personal past and from the anti-black world he is implicated in. The narrator's endless walks and musings fragment the plot and thrust Julius's intellectual narrative voice to the forefront, pushing the many loose textual strands and his obscure history out of the narrative focus. The walks and musings distract from Julius's conflicted past and frame his German Nigerian migrant identity as an intellectual cosmopolitan in the United States. However, being middle-class, well educated, and well-traveled does not allow Julius to wander the metropolis peacefully. Recollections of slavery, the slave trade, (forced) migration and incarceration as well as sexualized violence, as in the characters of Pierre, Saidu, and Moji, keep haunting him. They temporarily interrupt the elusive flow of his erudite, seemingly detached, narrative voice. What links those fragments is the thread of anti-black gender violence and Julius's attempt to avoid addressing or acknowledging this common ground. Framing Julius as a fugitive reveals his excessive cosmopolitan musings as narrative strategies designed to distract from

his own past and the diaspora he is inevitably a part of. He struggles to flee from the legacy of slavery and from his own implication in the violence attached to these legacies. While Stephen Miller might be right to claim that Julius “is never sure what story is his story: the slave story or the immigrant story,”³⁷ the novel shows that both are simultaneously inhabited by Julius and that they are inextricably related to each other and the gendered history of anti-black violence.

Reading the text in the context of an anti-black world in the gendered afterlife of slavery also shows how the novel questions the very concepts it invokes. Through its nuanced negotiation of the diversity of Black communities and their histories in New York City, the novel questions any monolithic notions of the African diaspora, solidarity, and racialized and gendered identities, if not the concepts as such. *Open City* does not address the surveillance and policing of the movement of Black people, specifically Black men in public spheres as explicitly as Garnette Cadogan does by illustrating the impossibility of the “Romantic experience of walking alone [while Black]” in US cities from a Black Caribbean immigrant perspective.³⁸ However, the narrative technique of flight nonetheless questions the usefulness of concepts such as *flânerie* and cosmopolitanism when related to Black people.

Ultimately, *Open City* meditates on the narratability of the legacy of anti-black violence through the mediation of some and silencing of other gendered and racialized narrative voices that address the abjection they are subjected to and impose on others. Cole thus also raises questions about fugitives’ inescapable complicity in what they flee from and the awareness that, wherever they go, there might be no real end to their flight. While Julius ultimately performs his own twisted form of care “for the dead and dying” by memorizing fragments of his family history and the history of the African diaspora in *Open City*, Moji is left painfully alone with her testimony of rape. She remains literally uncared for in this novel. *Open City* thus also illustrates how anti-black violence specifically affects Black women such as Moji or the seemingly nameless cleaner from Brussels and the ways in which their struggle to survive and refuse violence is structurally silenced. In fact, their stories of flight and survival prove to be even more absent from *Open City* than Nigeria, Julius’s personal history, and the history of slavery and the slave trade. Theirs are the ultimate fugitive stories of *Open City*, the traces of which may be too fragmented to be reconstructed but deserve to be uncovered all the same.

Notes

1. Cole, *Open City*, 138. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in textual parentheses.
2. Clark, “Visible Only in Speech,” 193.
3. On how *Open City* negotiates dominant and subversive concepts of cosmopolitanism and the figure of the *flâneur*, see, Breger, “Vicissitudes of Cosmopolitan Affect,” 117–120; Elze, “Cosmopolitan Place, Postcolonial Time”; Hallemeier, “Literary Cosmopolitanisms”; Miller, *Walking New York*, 198–204; Oniwe, “Cosmopolitan Conversation and Challenge”; and Sollors, “Cosmopolitan Curiosity.”
4. Cole in Bady, “Interview: Teju Cole,” paragraphs 5–7.
5. Mihăilă, “Healing the Nation,” 293; Hartwiger, “The Postcolonial *Flâneur*,” 2–5; Vermeulen, “Flights of Memory,” 40–57.
6. Sollors, “Cosmopolitan Curiosity,” 245, 242.
7. Other well-received contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian American authors writing in English about the relation between Nigerian and US cultures are, for instance, Chris Abani,

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Sefi Atta. Of course, Abani, Atta, Adichie, and Cole look back on a substantial literary history of reflections on the relations and conflicts between and among Nigerian and Euro-American cultures, with Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka being only the most prominent examples.
8. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.
 9. Breger, "Vicissitudes of Cosmopolitan Affect," 120; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.
 10. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 104.
 11. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 9, 11.
 12. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 229; Douglass and Wilderson, "The Violence of Presence," 119; Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 75. For further discussion of anti-blackness and critiques directed against Afro-pessimist conceptions of anti-blackness, see, Gordon et al., "Critical Exchange"; Sexton, "Afro-pessimism"; and Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness."
 13. Malaklou and Willoughby-Herard, "Notes from the Kitchen," 4, 10. For a detailed discussion of the complex relation between Black feminism and Afro-pessimism, see Malaklou and Willoughby-Herard, "Notes from the Kitchen" and the other contributions to their special issue "Afro-Pessimism and Black Feminism."
 14. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 234. On the concept of fugitive refusal, see, Camp, *Image Matters*, 86–87, 90–91; Camp, *Listening to Images*, 96, 109, 113–114.
 15. I take the expression "scenes of subjection" from the title of Saidiya Hartman's landmark study *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-century America*.
 16. Dalley, "Conceptualizing Historical Change," 30.
 17. Ibid.
 18. For an analysis of the narrative construction of time and space in *Open City*, see Elze, "Cosmopolitan Place, Postcolonial Time."
 19. Salient examples of these digressions are, for instance, Julius's detailed recollections of a visit to a music store (16–17), the American Folk Art Museum (56–40), the Cloister Museum (236–238), and a classical concert in Carnegie Hall (249–254). For a detailed summary of Julius's broad and diverse cultural reference frame, see, Sollors, "Cosmopolitan Curiosity," 234–237, 240–245.
 20. I take the notion of omniscience from Clark who describes Julius's as "a bird's-eye view, a privileged perspective that can pan out to see, read, and map the whole, from a subject position of disinterested omniscience (or at least omni-vision)." Clark, "Visible Only in Speech," 186.
 21. Julius's old literature professor, Dr Saito had moved from the United Kingdom to the United States where he and his parents were interned during the Second World War because of their Japanese descent (13–14). Farouq and Khalil, whose acquaintance Julius makes in Brussels, migrated from Morocco to Belgium to seek a better life in Europe. Dr Maillotte, who Julius meets on his flight to Brussels, moved from Belgium to the United States and continues to travel between the two places on a regular basis.
 22. Clark, "Visible Only in Speech," 193.
 23. In fact, during their second encounter in the restaurant Julius thinks that Kenneth is not only claiming him as a fellow man of African descent. He also feels that Kenneth's eyes were "asking a question. A sexual question," that leads Julius to excuse himself hastily (54).
 24. Julius first notes the urge to reconnect with his "oma" right after two white children from "a family of out-of-towners" label and racialize him as a "gangster" (31, 32). Breger reads this sudden urge as "an impulse to affirm his (white) European roots" against the racist remark. Germane to my argument, she proposes that "this reaction could code his sophisticated cosmopolitanism as a gesture of flight and attempted detachment from those other parts of his background that are constantly projected (back) upon him in New York as well as Brussels." Breger, "Vicissitudes of Cosmopolitan Affect," 120.
 25. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 234, 232.
 26. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 11; Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 75, 77.
 27. On *Open City* as post-9/11 fiction and its memorialization of the terrorist attacks, see, Freedman, "Teju Cole's Melancholic Fiction" and Mihăilă, "Healing the Nation," 286–294.
 28. Elze, "Cosmopolitan Place, Postcolonial Time," 98.

29. Sollors, "Cosmopolitan Curiosity," 240.
30. Haensell, "Going Through the Motions," forthcoming, *Atlantic Studies*.
31. On the genre of slave narratives, see, e.g. Fisch, *African American Slave Narrative*. Haensell also suggests reading Pierre's story as a slave narrative and points to stylistic similarities, whereas Isabel Soto convincingly argues that the sequence is actually a "re-writing" of the life of the historical figure Pierre Toussaint. Haensell, "Going Through the Motions," forthcoming, *Atlantic Studies*; Soto, "'Idea I'a need,'" forthcoming, *Atlantic Studies*.
32. Miller, *Walking New York*, 199.
33. This is, in fact, the second reference to the US American history of lynching in the novel. On a walking "detour" through Harlem, Julius mentions in passing that "enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans" were displayed on a table next to stands of "the Senegalese cloth merchants, the young men selling bootleg DVDs, [and] the Nation of Islam stalls" (18).
34. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 10, 12–13. Sharpe asks, "What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death?" She suggests "a method of encountering a past that is not past [...] along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are." *In the Wake*, 10.
35. Riding the subway, Julius also connects his father's burial to the Holocaust when the subway car's ventilation system reminds him of the "final terrible moments in the camps, moments that no one has survived to give first-hand testimony of, when the Zyklon B was switched on and all the human captives breathed in their deaths" (229). See also Sollors, "Cosmopolitan Curiosity," 242.
36. Cole, *Every Day*, 145.
37. Miller, *Walking New York*, 200.
38. Cadogan, "Black and Blue," 142.

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