Open Library of Humanities

C21 LITERATURE
Journal of 21st-century Writings

Article

How to Cite: Bose, M., 2019. "Virtual Flânerie: Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 12, pp. 1–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.772

Published: 11 June 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

Open Access:

C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles.

Bose, M., 2019. "Virtual Flânerie: Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 12, pp. 1–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.772

ARTICLE

Virtual Flânerie: Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription

Maria Bose
Clemson University, US
mbose@clemson.edu

This article reads Teju Cole's award-winning novel *Open City* (2011) as an extended allegory for the operations of a 'technological unconscious' recently theorized by critics including Nigel Thrift, David Beer, Alexander Galloway, and Katherine Hayles. Cole is widely recognized for being an innovative social media activist; yet *Open City* has been labeled an 'antiquarian' text, the highly lettered account of a Nigerian-German flâneur (Julius) who 'aimlessly wanders' New York in search of his racial identity. The article argues that an emphasis exclusively on Cole's 'antiquarian' style risks missing his novel's formal engagement with the technological present. Drawing on Lev Manovich's account of the flâneur as a figural precursor to the Internet user, it suggests that the twenty-one short chapters that serialize Julius's 'aimless wandering' also chart his gradual slotting into an implicitly preferred racial identity category. Carefully mapping Julius's flânerie to the protocols of now-ubiquitous systems for user tracking and content personalization notably deployed by Internet browsers like Google, *Open City* subsequently shows how Julius's 'aimless' desire for serendipitous and diverse social encounters yields, instead, a subtly curated journey through New York cued by his perceived racial indicators. In this way, Cole's novel presents the 'Open City' a metonym for the 'open' Web in order to lay bare the ideology of 'openness' itself, giving the lie to pervasive cultural investments in the Internet as a 'postracial' global mode of production, and illustrating race's systemic drag within a current phase of tech-intensified capitalism whose putatively neutral proxies reiterate global class formations along racial lines.

Keywords: literary flânerie; racial formation; digital culture; 'postrace' aesthetics; contemporary novel; Teju Cole

In July of 2014, shortly after issuing his thirteen-thousandth tweet, Nigerian-born writer Teju Cole decided it was time to take a break from Twitter. Cole had joined the social networking platform in October 2009, prompted in part by what he saw as an opportunity to promote his then-forthcoming second novel, *Open City* (2011).

By the middle of 2014, Cole's Twitter account had amassed a following of nearly 200,000 users. Yet his decision to put the account on hold was not borne out of frustration with the medium. Much to the contrary, Cole's esteem for Twitter is well documented by *The Guardian*, *NPR, The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, and several other sources, all of which have published admiring articles on Cole's provocative Twitter projects.[1] Many of these articles offer praise for the 2014 short story 'Hafiz,' which Cole originally distributed on his friends and followers' twitter accounts before retweeting in full on his own. Others praise Cole's 'Small Fates' project, a series of fait-divers-style tweets trained on suggestive news items dating from the early twentieth century, such as the 1912 shooting of an unarmed African American man in New York City. Others still laud his 2013 'Drone Short Stories' (tweets that disfigure modernist classics with images of drone violence), or examine Cole's latest work (a 4000-word essay on the US-Mexico border crisis, tweeted in March of 2014 alongside images of 'The Fence,' and 'The Time of the Game,' a photo-essay assembled from crowdsourced images of a single moment in the 2014 World Cup final).

As the subject of critical and popular debate, Cole's projects suggest a conception of social media that is deeply empowering, a testament to the persistence of early Internet discourses celebrating the arrival of a free and open Web available to the political concerns of all racial groups.[2] Indeed, Cole's descriptions of his Twitter projects echo politically affirmative accounts of the network society.[3] He cites 'Hafiz,' which tells the story of an Arab American man who falls ill on the subway, as a 'small attempt to put a number of people into a collaborative situation' so as to form a narrative that would 'feel emergent, from a source that no one could have suspected' (2014). Cole defended his decision to release 'Hafiz' for free over Twitter as the result of his desire to 'create a "we" out of a story that [he] might simply have

[1] Other popular news sources that have commented on Cole's work include *Wired*, *Slate*, *Buzzfeed*, *Vice*, and *Mother Jones*.

[2] On the early rhetoric of racial inequality in online spaces, see Peter Chow-White and Lisa Nakamura (2011).

[3] See especially Manuel Castells' influential account of the network society (2000).

published in the conventional way.' 'A lot of people I want to be read by,' Cole continues, 'and a lot of people I want to speak to, don't have subscriptions to *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*, so it's important for me to speak to them in this way also' (2014). In doing so, Cole links the technical capacity of Twitter to foster 'emergent' and 'unsuspected' modes of distributed storytelling to his own prerogative, as a writer, to challenge the conventions of mainstream publishing. It is precisely because Twitter offers its social networking platform in the spirit of 'generosity' that Cole is able to deliver 'little bits of magic' like 'Hafiz' free of charge to the reading public (2014).

Cole is neither the first writer to undertake a digital storytelling project nor the first to cultivate a social media presence. Yet his Twitter agenda is unusual, in part, for the degree to which it resonates with his work as a novelist.[4] If, for many contemporary writers, social media afford opportunities to gain visibility and retain relevance at a time when the novel form has begun to feel obsolete for Cole, a platform like Twitter appears to offer much more: it is both a means to engage the changing nature of writing and publishing, and also a new style of writing rooted in 'emergent' and 'collaborative' structures of social experience. Perhaps this is why Cole originally published his debut novel, *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), on his Lagosian blog, 'Every Day,' and why he describes *Open City* as an attempt to emulate Twitter's 'pure, uncut, directly from the grain' mode of address (2015). Perhaps it is also why *Open City*, with its multiracial cast and wandering storyline, assumes a punchy, dispersed narrative form that seems in many ways the novelistic counterpart to Cole's Twitter

[4] In 2008, Rick Moody launched the multi-media literary journal *Electric Literature* by delivering a short story composed of 153 Tweets. That same year, Neil Gaiman worked with BBC Audiobooks to produce an interactive novel, which he subsequently tweeted. In 2012, both Margaret Atwood and Jennifer Egan published serialized work online. Atwood's novel, 'The Happy Zombie Sunrise Home,' appeared on Wattpad, while Egan's much-promoted 'Black Box' was tweeted by *The New Yorker* over nine evenings in late May and early June, a single tweet issued every minute between 8–9PM ET. Salman Rushdie, Haruki Murakami, Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman, and David Mitchell all interact with readers via their Twitter accounts. Ursula Leguin writes a blog and Veronica Roth curates a Tumblr, while Paul Coehlo and Gary Shteyngart prefer Facebook and Instagram.

feed, a version of the 'network' and 'hypertext' fictions that have proliferated since the beginning of the twenty-first century.[5]

This article argues that in addition to Cole's avowed emulation of Twitter's 'pure, uncut' style, *Open City* also registers Cole's interest in the relation between literary form and the algorithmic forms of racial ascription, sociality, and domination newly configured by Internet technologies. Cole sets *Open City* in the mid-2000s, well into the dot-com recovery period when market valuations for global tech corporations were soaring; and yet his novel does not overtly address any aspect of contemporary technoculture. Instead, *Open City* presents a series of literary and philosophical reflections issued in the antiquarian prose of its brooding protagonist Julius, a half-Nigerian, half-German psychiatry resident whom many critics have identified as a modern-day flâneur.[6] Over its twenty-one short chapters, *Open City* tracks Julius as he 'aimlessly wanders' about New York, meeting with a diverse catalogue of friends, and encountering a number of African and African American strangers who hail him as a fellow African, inviting Julius to identify with an objectified blackness organized around a set of racial keywords and stereotypical images (Cole 2011: 3). The novel also recounts Julius's brief trip to Brussels, where he goes in search of his German grandmother, as well as a handful of Julius's seemingly random memories from his childhood in Nigeria. Proceeding more or less without a plot, *Open City*'s major events appear to unfold obliquely, as if by accident. Yet this serial narrative obliqueness—a

[5] In this vein, Pieter Vermeulen describes *Open City*'s multivocal form as 'hyperlinked.' Cole's model of global multiculture might, however, be understood as distinct from the majority of 'network' of 'hypertext' fictions—Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2005), and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), to name but a few—insofar as it resists imagining multiculture as the contingent imbrication of diverse global actors striving for greater unity. Instead, *Open City* presents something akin to an egocentric social network: a strictly managed social field constellated by a central user (Julius) to include their 'friends' and 'followers.' In this sense, *Open City*'s network form resembles more hierarchical—and thus less 'open'—systems of relation organized by connectivity's technical protocols. See Pieter Vermeuelen (2013). On 'network' and 'hypertext' fiction's aesthetic principles and political ramifications, see Rita Barnard (2009), David Bordwell (2008), and, more recently, Aris Mousoutzanis (2016).

[6] See especially Nigel Wood (2011), Giles Foden (2011), Claire Messud (2011), Pieter Vermeulen (2013), Katherine Hallemeier (2013), and Stephen Miller (2015).

counterpart to Cole's decision to take up the belated figure of the flâneur—represents more than a stylistic homage to Twitter. Rather, the flâneur, who is frequently cited as a figural precursor to the Internet user, focuses Cole's critique of the hypermediated present out of which he writes.[7] Against the flâneur's apparent anonymity and unscripted freedom of movement, Julius's aimless walks repeatedly lead him to encounter African persons and content eager to gain his attention, the sign of some invisible 'classificatory architecture' working to render Julius knowable as a social type by gradually slotting him into a preferred racial identity category (Fourcade and Healy 2017: 10). An allegory for the operations of a 'technological unconscious' recently theorized by critics including Nigel Thrift, David Beer, Alexander Galloway, and Katherine Hayles, *Open City* carefully yokes Julius's flânerie to the protocols of now-ubiquitous systems for user tracking and content personalization notably deployed by Internet browsers like Google, showing how Julius's 'aimless' desire for serendipitous and diverse social encounters yields, instead, a subtly curated journey through New York cued by his perceived racial indicators. In this way, *Open City* presents the 'Open City' a metonym for the 'open' Web in order to lay bare the ideology of 'openness' itself, giving the lie to pervasive cultural investments in the Internet as a 'postracial' global mode of production, and illustrating race's systemic drag within a current phase of tech-intensified capitalism whose putatively neutral proxies and interfaces reiterate global class formations along racial lines. Doing so, Cole's novel begins to describe the present features of a technological unconscious that subtends literary and, moreover, racial form.[8]

Tracking, Tracing, Sorting, Morphing

In 'Remembering the Technological Unconscious by Foregrounding Knowledges of Position,' geographer Nigel Thrift observes that digital computing has given rise to an array of sociotechnical systems 'whose content is the bending of bodies-with-

[7] On the flâneur as precursor to the Web user, see especially Lev Manovich (2001). On the 'virtual gaze' and flânerie's traces in postmodern consumer practices, see Anne Friedberg (1993).

[8] Here I refer to Colleen Lye's concept of 'racial form,' a literary form that registers interethnic social and economic relations rather than one that expresses essential racial identities (2008).

environments to a specific set of addresses without the benefit of any cognitive inputs, [and whose aim is to create] a prepersonal substrate of guaranteed correlations, assured encounters, and therefore unconsidered anticipations' (2004: 177). In today's data-rich society, Thrift continues, bodies are continually being bent to the wills of marketers and the businesses they represent. As a result, the 'technological unconscious' names the role computing has come to play in 'track[ing]-and-trac[ing]' consumers so as to 'hypercoordinate and microcoordinate' them with the products and information to which they are ostensibly best suited (2004: 182, 177). Extending Thrift's concept beyond the realm of commerce, sociologists David Beer, Roger Burrows, and Scott Lash suggest that the technological unconscious might also denote much larger ontological shifts toward technology's constitutive rather than simply mediatory role in 'how we do things, the way we are treated, the things we encounter, [and] our [general] way of life' (Beer 2003: 987). Lash, for instance, sees information technologies as administering broad sets of 'generative rules'—'virtual [rules] that generate a whole variety of actual [rules]'—that obliquely regulate behavior, both online and off (2007: 70, 71). Operating in 'compressed and hidden [ways],' these now-pervasive technologies realize a 'post-hegemonic' regime of 'power through the algorithm' (Lash 2007: 70, 71).

Recent critical writing by Alexander Galloway—part of a group of contemporary theorists investigating the relation between new media and the control society, including Jodi Dean, Tarleton Gillespie, Geert Lovink, Mackenzie Wark, and Tiziana Terranova—sharpens Lash's sense of power through the algorithm by turning to the concept of protocol. Taken as a 'controlling logic' that moves outward from computer technology to affect all registers of social life, protocol, in Galloway's view, has emerged as the premier style of contemporary social management, one that both accommodates and reflects the twenty-first-century transformation of production, consumption, and sociality into a 'vital mass of immaterial flows and instantaneous transactions' (2004: 149, 20). In its organization of 'real human people,' Galloway suggests, protocol supplants individual identity with 'certain hegemonic patterns' borne of 'algorithmic collaboration' (2004: 114). In place of 'living bodies [with] [...] essences, or souls,' protocol, he continues, now defines individuals in terms of

'quantifiable, recordable, enumerable and encodable characteristics' amenable to digital technologies' more fluid and immanent forms of regulation (2004: 113).

As we will see, *Open City* describes a number of generative rules and protocological controls that everywhere seem to entrain Julius's behaviors and pattern his individual characteristics, working to hyper-coordinate Julius with an array of persons and products apparently indicated by his superficial qualities. But even before the novel describes these rules, or begins to register their effects on Julius, it signals Julius's suspicion that some controlling technical logic might be lurking in his everyday world, structuring it in ways he can neither understand nor resist. Early on, Julius is disturbed by his compulsion to sort and classify the neighborhoods he has visited on his most recent walk, a wearisome task that swiftly undoes the 'much-needed release' the walk was meant to provide (Cole 2011: 3). Julius recalls the incident:

> That night 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. Each neighborhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight … My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city; and only then did my hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive. (Cole 2011: 6–7)

Julius's strange episode of sorting neighborhoods into abstract shapes both illustrates and intensifies the problems of agency and protocological regulation to which Thrift, Lash, and Galloway refer. Attempting to 'release [himself] from the tightly regulated mental environment' of his work as a psychiatrist, a profession in which he is required to sort and classify patients according to the DSM-IV, Julius has yet to grapple with unconscious forces that would conform his imagination to famil-

iar organizational demands, forces seeking to generate abstract modes of relation between outwardly distinct 'psychic' substances (Cole 2011: 7). Julius's futile task of morphing neighborhoods into each other resembles one of the most basic practices of data management: commensuration, or the 'transformation of different qualities into a common metric' (van der Vlist 2016: 1). A computational technique for processing data assemblages such as search queries and content recommendations, commensuration's fundamental goal is to produce measurable data objects whose attributes can be effectively sorted and categorized. In line with Lash's sense of how information technology's generative rules have begun to '"sink" into [...] aspects of our everyday lives,' Julius's urge to de- and re-cipher the persons and things he has encountered on his nightly walk manifests a quasi-unconscious, technical control logic that compels him, even in moments of desired mental respite, to repeat the operations of a sorting algorithm (Beer 2003: 985).

Driven to collect and sort the data derived from his experience of New York neighborhoods, Julius's 'futile task' merges the city's real, material architecture with the 'abstract shapes' that comprise the digital economy's new 'classificatory architecture': algorithmic classification systems that operate by coalescing individuals with data-similar peers, often referred to as 'neighbors' (Fourcade and Healy 2017: 10). Attuned to the neighborhood as a categorical modulator of these individual and group qualities, *Open City*'s account of these sleepless acts of commensuration subsequently invokes the politics of geodemographic market clustering elaborated by Oscar Gandy, Jr. in his classic study of matrix multiplication. As Gandy shows, matrix multiplication deploys seemingly innocuous data proxies in order to identify, classify, and evaluate individuals on the 'basis of the populations or groups to which they have been assigned through [statistical] analysis' (2012: 128). During the 2008 financial crisis, for instance, predatory lenders mined ostensibly race-neutral consumer data in order to target low-income neighborhoods whose inhabitants were predominantly non-white, generating feedback loops between virtual and actual consumer features that naturalized and reinforced existing patterns of discrimination. Shuttling between the discrete 'incidents and sights' Julius experiences on his aimless walk, and the normalizing 'weights' and 'pressures' that would seek to

unify these experiences, *Open City* conveys an unsettling abstraction of the 'actual' New York into its 'virtual' counterpart. At the same time, the novel hints at Julius's imbrication within this new virtual architecture, anticipating an equally unsettling sense of himself as a 'character in a universe of drama putatively called Big Data,' one whose quantifiable features make him likely to find satisfaction in some neighborhoods more than others (Chun 2016: 2).

Eager though he is to lose himself in those moments of 'freedom' and 'improvisation' his aimless walks afford, then, Julius's nightmarish episode of 'sorting […] [his neighborhood] encounters like a child playing with wooden blocks' indicates his awareness that he, too, might be a mere wooden block in some other more omnipotent child's sorting-game (Cole 2011: 6). Soon after exiting the subway at Wall Street, Julius enters a vast atrium whose columns, he observes, 'could have been wrought from recycled plastic chairs, and […] [whose] ceiling seemed to have been carefully constructed out of white Lego blocks' (Cole 2011: 46). 'The feeling of being in a large-scale model,' he continues,

> was only increased by the lonely palm trees in their pots … [on one side of the hall t]here were five pairs of [backgammon] players … all of them black. On the other side of the hall, under the other long nave aisle, there was another pair of men, both white … I walked among the backgammon players, most of whom seemed to be middle-aged, and their languid, focused faces and the slowness of their movements did nothing to correct my impression of being among life-size mannequins. (Cole 2011: 46–47)

While Julius frequently describes the subway an as anonymizing organizational environment where commuters, dressed 'all in black and gray,' march along, 'shoulders up, heads low […] hemmed in on both sides […] penned in,' here, the subway's regulatory processes involve the segregation of black 'mannequins' from white (Cole 2011: 58). In a later scene, Julius wonders whether the subway might be able to sort individuals according to their precise racial composition: might he, a half-African émigré, find the subway 'line that connected [him] to [his] own part in […] [America's] sto-

ries [of immigration]'? (Cole 2011: 59). At other times, Julius describes the subway's organizing effects in psychoanalytic terms that seem to normalize racial difference, merging all individuals into an abstract 'human' race: '[t]he sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange to me, and I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counterinstinctive death drive, into movable catacombs' (Cole 2011: 7). Resonant with the Internet's subterranean fiber optic networks, New York's subway appears as a system wherein persons, like data, dart from one line to another, their final destinations open yet their paths determined by a series of oblique controls. Like neighborhoods morphed into abstract shapes, this 'large-scale model' stands in for any number of statistical models that work to determine an individual's position within the social marketplace, establishing relationships between that individual and, in this instance, the color-coded population to which they belong. In such a model, the illegible crowd is decomposed into grayscale colors, their otherwise unique impulses reduced to a shared 'counterinstinctive' drive. A figure for the technological unconscious, the subway spatializes the workings of data transfer while outlining the algorithmic logic of sorting, filtering, and classification to which Julius is at least partly alert. Here, bodies dissolve into colors, and colors are grouped along separate aisles, organized by a 'classificatory architecture' that segregates them into groups of homophilic peers. Thousands of strangers, all 'reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the[ir] solitude intensified,' are likened to the flow of information (Cole 2011: 7).

For Katherine Hayles, the 'unacknowledged trauma' Julius ascribes to solitary subway travelers presents a particularly useful site for elaborating the workings of the technological unconscious. Since trauma, like computer code, exists beneath the surface of consciousness, Hayles reasons that moments of psychic rupture are especially suited to reveal the entraining of human behavior by technology. As trauma manifests itself through 'significant puns, slips, and metonymic splices,' so code makes itself known to the user 'at those moments when the program makes decisions we have not consciously initiated' (Hayles 2005: 137). While *Open City* abounds in histories of actual trauma—Julius's conversations with various friends and strangers effectively chronicle the long twentieth-century of human rights abuses, from

the Japanese internment and the Nazi occupation of Europe to the Ugandan and Rwandan genocides—the most acute moment of traumatic rupture in the novel does not occur when Julius is accused of having raped a former classmate, but rather when he repeatedly fails to remember his ATM personal identification code. In such moments, *Open City* relates traumatic memory to the technological unconscious as two species of withheld information, each working beneath the surface of consciousness. The novel produces this analogy not only by drawing a series of parallels between human beings and bits of information, or between urban and digital architectures, but by embodying in the narrative of Julius's aimless wandering the basic principles of user classification imminent to data infrastructures that increasingly define the space through which we move.

Virtual Flânerie

Open City's twenty-one short chapters are framed and roughly chronologized by the dozen or so aimless walks Julius takes in New York and Brussels toward the end of 2006 and into 2007. Often detailed in conjunction with Julius's accounts of the migration patterns of New York's local birds, the walks also serve to focus Julius's wide-ranging thoughts on art, music, literature, philosophy, politics, and history, and to capture conversations between Julius and the many racially diverse individuals he meets both in New York and abroad. These interlocutors include Julius's former professor, a Japanese-American internee; a Barbudan museum guard; a Liberian immigrant awaiting deportation in Queens; a Haitian bootblack; a Belgian cardiac surgeon; a Czech travel agent with whom Julius has a brief affair; an African American postal worker; and a Moroccan philosophy student who runs an internet café in Brussels. Such chapters, in which Julius converses with these and other characters, assume the form of biographical vignettes, often revolving around the discussion of a work of literature or philosophy. These works range suggestively from *Beowulf* and *Piers Plowman* to Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," Kwame's Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*, and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Interspersed with these conversation-driven chapters are those in which Julius relates memories of his childhood in Nigeria, including his flogging by a Nigerian Military School instruc-

tor, the death and burial of Julius's father, and a scene of sexual awakening centered around Julius's secret enjoyment of a Coca Cola. Throughout the novel, Julius reflects upon his racial identity as a Nigerian-German émigré and attempts to work through his relation to his immediate American surroundings, his African homeland, and more distant German lineage. *Open City* repeatedly describes Julius's refusal to identify with African and African American strangers, despite persistent feelings of isolation. The novel ends by recounting a particularly traumatic incident suffered by Julius, and by revealing another perpetrated by him: Julius is mugged and beaten by a group of African American teenagers, and soon afterward, a Nigerian schoolmate named Moji, also living in New York, alleges that Julius raped her at a party several years ago. Although the allegation goes unconfirmed (Julius simply refuses to acknowledge the assault in any way), the incident lends the novel diegetic closure by furnishing a psychological explanation for Julius's melancholy and his walking habit.

Quipping that *Open City* deserves the epigraph '[w]alk and walk,' Stephen Miller joins the majority of Cole's critics in interpreting Julius as a modern-day flâneur (2015: 198). Issuing the 'ruminations of a deracinated New Yorker,' Miller continues, Julius walks from Manhattan to Wall Street and on to Washington Heights, offering insights into each place and its history but mainly 'think[ing] about identity' (2015: 198). Noting that Julius recalls 'at least three city walkers out of literary history: the "strolling spectator" type which has informed the novel from its earliest days; the Baudelairean flâneur which transferred into fictional prose with tales such as Andre Breton's Nadja (Julius's ex is called Nadège); and the "roving 'I'" of European romantic modernism, which has found its most eloquent exponent in the work of WG Sebald,' Giles Foden underscores *Open City*'s 'propensity toward form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination' (2011). Echoing Foden, James Wood suggests that Cole's novel is 'as close to a diary as a novel can get', noting that:

> while *Open City* has nominally separate chapters, it has the form and atmosphere of a text written in a single, unbroken paragraph: though people speak and occasionally converse, this speech is not marked by quotation marks, dashes, or paragraph breaks and is formally indistinguishable from

> the narrator's own language. As in Sebald, what moves the prose forward is not event or contrivance but a steady, accidental inquiry, a firm pressurelessness. (2011)

Observing that *Open City*'s most significant plot details are 'only very gradually sifted into the narrative,' such that we discover Julius is Nigerian 'by indirection,' Wood links *Open City*'s narrative obliqueness to the aimlessness of Julius's thoughts—his cosmopolitan ability to hold forth on subjects ranging from Velazquez, Mahler, and Barthes, to the New York slave trade and the anatomy of the bedbug (2011).

Expanding upon Wood's sense of *Open City*'s narrative indirection, Claire Messud suggests that the novel's 'unsettling realism' derives not only from its stylistic antiquarianism and investment in Julius as a cosmopolite and flâneur, but also from Cole's willingness to broach the 'greater subjects' to which these nineteenth-century forms and figures ostensibly give him access (2011). 'In our age of rapid technology and the jolly, undiscriminating ephemeralizing of culture and knowledge,' Messud writes, 'an insistence upon the high stakes—a desire to ask the big questions—can seem quaint, or passé, or simply a little embarrassing' (2011). *Open City* makes a point of asking 'the big questions' despite it being unfashionable to do so. Much like its narrator Julius, who rarely touches a computer or uses a cellphone, the novel eschews the lower stuff of the hypermediated life in favor of 'higher' and greater subjects. For Messud, one of the things that makes *Open City* so unsettlingly realistic is its refusal to engage the conditions of the here-and-now—the novel's 'quaint' yet powerful capacity to excavate the present while excluding many of its most prominent cultural forms.

Messud is certainly right to point out *Open City*'s low- or even anti-tech sensibility. On the rare occasion that Julius does mention using a computer, it is to listen to the 'disembodied voices' of radio announcers broadcasting from Germany, France, and the Netherlands (Cole 2011: 5). The young doctor does not engage with social media, and only occasionally checks his email. Preferring to make calls on a landline, Julius finds use for his cellphone as an alarm clock. His letters are written by hand and his meetings are conducted face to face. While Cole's decision to omit the

signs and objects of Internet culture, and his related choice to cultivate a 'sly, faux antiquarianism' (Wood 2011) associated with the flâneur narrative and type appear in line with the unsettling of novelistic realism Messud names, Cole's concern lies with something other than recovering 'the big questions' by paying homage to serious, pre-digital-era prose. Rather, the 'faux antiquarianism' of *Open City*'s figures and style belies Cole's engagement with the more 'ephemeral' conditions for identity construction imminent to the tech-integrated environments out of, and about which, he writes. In this view, Cole's retrieval of the flâneur, and his novel's subtly contrived isomorphisms between technical and literary systems, invert theories of 'media archaeology' proposed by critics including J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who view new media artifacts as 'remediations' of old (1999: 5). By contrast, *Open City*'s 'old' or 'antiquarian' figures encode the 'new' and hypermediated contexts of their making, intensifying flânerie's principles of anonymity and untrammeled cultural access through Julius's persistent fantasies of bodily suspension and perspectival illimitation. Like Madhu Krishnan (2015) and Pieter Vermeulen (2013), then, who interpret Julius's flânerie as the conceptual vehicle for Cole's critiques of postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism, I am interested in how Julius's flânerie interrogates a putatively 'postracial' phase of networked global capitalism by allegorizing Julius's interpellation into a racial identity category as he 'takes a walk' across the hyperlinked Web. In this way, *Open City* stages the breakdown of Julius's fantasies of racial unmarking and aesthetic self-constitution, challenging the Internet as a site for the 'postracial' imaginary, and affirming race's persistence as a fixed index of identity and as a fundamental operant of value within the tech-intensified global capitalist order.

For much of *Open City*, Julius conceives of himself not only as a 'postracial' subject but as an entirely unmarked one, liberated from categories of identity made manifest at the level of physical appearance. As such, Julius exceeds the flâneur's privileged movement though space and assumes, instead, a curiously disembodied and non-identitarian perspective akin to that of the 'virtual flâneur' theorized by Lev Manovich (2001: 274).[9] Able to see and move beyond typical frames of reference,

[9] In his pioneering study, *The Language of New Media*, Manovich proposes that the concept of 'navigable space,' which has been foundational to Web interface design and remains evident in browser

Julius never assumes that any city space is off limits to him, wandering with ease from the poorest neighborhoods of Central Harlem to luxury boutiques in the Time Warner building, his 'mobilized virtual gaze' peering down into the African Burial Grounds submerged beneath lower Manhattan, and rising up to the aerial viewpoint of migrating geese (Friedberg 1993: 4). Inhabiting a perspective Hamish Dalley describes as 'global-local,' where 'spatio-temporal locations can be constellated to create an ungrounded, non-teleological historical awareness' (2013: 31), Julius subsequently conveys the informational reach and perfect recall of the 'data dandy' theorized by Geert Lovink, imparting a string of affectless Wikipedia-like monologues as he hyperlinks from Paracelsus' Theory of Signs to the ophthalmic science of blindness (Manovich 2001: 270).

In this way, Julius fashions an identity bound by the parameters of culture and knowledge rather than those of the material world, casting himself a lover of Mahler, Bach, and Fela Kuti, a student of Freud, Appiah, and Benjamin. After all, Julius declares, 'Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question' (Cole 2011: 252). Julius will commune with these universal vibrations while listening to the 'disembodied voices' of German, French, and Dutch radio personalities, reading aloud passages from Barthes, Peter Altenberg, and Tahar Ben Jelloun (Cole 2011: 5). Suspending his actual body, and experiencing what Mark Hansen describes as the digital 'paradox of disembodied embodiment' (2006: 91), Julius imagines himself neither black nor white, but rather some other odd entity much like the audio data into which Mahler's music has been converted, a thing capable of 'mingl[ing]' with the fiber-optically-delivered 'murmur of [...] the radio, or with the thin texture of violins' (Cole 2011: 5). These scenes of disembodied communion notably echo Julius's account of the subway system's capacity to transmute passengers into color-coded units, their individual features reduced to a shared 'counterinstinctive' drive (Cole 2011: 7). Later, Julius will marvel at the silent 'together[ness]' of

---

names like 'Internet Explorer' and 'Netscape Navigator,' can be traced to the spatial sensibilities of the Parisian flâneur famously poeticized by Charles Baudelaire (2001).

a diverse group of patrons at an Internet café in Brussels, their embodied differences somehow dissolved into digital space (Cole 2011: 112).

Against these scenes of functional disembodiment, in which Julius's imagines he might choose a racial identity for himself or even forego race entirely as a category of differentiation, Julius's ostensibly aimless walks repeatedly lead him to encounter African persons in whose presence his race gets operationalized at the level of visual phenotype and through a repertoire of stereotypical racial signifiers: on the first and last of his wanderings, Julius takes arbitrary detours and winds up in Harlem, where he observes a diverse community of Africans and African Americans. In between, Julius's walks yield chance encounters with an African-born taxi driver, a Haitian bootblack, and an African American postal worker. On another occasion, after he involuntarily fails to exit the subway at his neighborhood stop, Julius embarks on a spontaneous tour of Rector street and winds up in a restaurant just across from the World Trade Center disaster site. There, he speaks with a Barbudan security guard. Other outings lead to chance encounters with a former classmate from Nigeria, a Liberian detainee, a Congolese bartender, and an African American World War II veteran. Julius's final walk through Harlem ends in a confrontation with three African American teenagers, who beat Julius and steal his wallet and cellphone.

With the exception of Julius's assault by the Harlem teens, each of these encounters unfolds similarly: a gesture of racial kinship is extended by the interlocutor, and subsequently rebuffed by Julius. The African cabdriver, for instance, feels slighted when Julius fails to greet him upon entering his car. 'Not good, not good at all, you know,' the driver chides Julius, 'the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I'm African just like you, why you do this?' (Cole 2011: 40). Although Julius apologizes for his behavior, he is irritated by the driver's presumption. 'I said, I'm so sorry about it, my mind was elsewhere, don't be offended, ehn, my brother, how are you doing? […] [But] I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me' (Cole 2011: 40). In *Open City*, claims of this sort are continually laid upon Julius, and continually refused. Kenneth, the Barbudan museum guard, attempts to discern Julius's racial background before delivering a monologue on his love of African culture. He subsequently recommends that Julius

visit a nearby restaurant: '[Kenneth] asked where I was from, what I did. He spoke fast, chattily. One of my housemates, once, in Colorado, he said, was a Nigerian. He was called Yemi. Yoruba, I think he was, and I'm really interested in African culture anyway. Are you Yoruba?' (Cole 2011: 53). Soon afterwards, Julius notices 'that [Kenneth's] eyes were asking a question: a sexual question. I explained to him that I had to meet a friend. I apologized for not having a business card with me, and said something about visiting the museum again soon' (Cole 2011: 54). Later, an African American World War II veteran is moved to tell Julius how proud he is to come to Julius's psychiatry office and 'see a young black man [...] in that white coat, because things haven't ever been easy for us, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle' (Cole 2011: 210). In the most dramatic of 'claims,' a postal worker named Terrence McKinney gushingly labels Julius a 'visionary':

> Say, brother, where are you from? Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland. And you brothers have something that is vital, you understand me. You have something that is vital for the health of those of us raised on this side of the ocean. Let me tell you something: I am raising my daughters as Africans. (Cole 2011: 186)

Aggravated, Julius resolves to avoid the post office at which McKinney works.

Captured in each exchange is a process of racialization that works to interpellate Julius into a vast, tenuous web of black transnationalism, where each interlocutor appears as a point or node upon that web, and each racial signifier—black, brother, Motherland, Africa—a keyword for its activation. Similar to Google's process of 'keywording' which, as Fredric Kaplan explains, operates by reconceiving of words as objects of value within a global, real-time linguistic market, Julius is hailed into a group of ostensibly like-minded peers through an ascriptive language imagined to resonate with his identitarian predilections (2014). Illustrating the slippage between Julius's anticipated identifications and his actual ones, these encounters subsequently dramatize race's reification into a set of signifiers and images whose proliferation across the Internet, Wendy Chun suggests, 'constructs race or ethnicity

as a category to be consumed' (2006: 154). Encouraging Julius to identify with the supposedly 'vital' and authentic racial content of his Africanness, Julius's interlocutors simply enumerate the 'African's' most basic traits. In so doing, they replicate the types of mechanisms for consumer profiling outlined by Thrift, Beer, Burrows, Lash, Galloway, and Hayles, allegorizing the operations of a 'technological unconscious' operating in the deep background of Julius's activities to make sense of his eclectic patterns of consumption.

In this way, and despite Julius's desire that 'every decision—where to turn left, how long to remain lost in thought in front of an abandoned building, whether to watch the sun set over New Jersey, or to lope in the shadows on the East Side looking across to Queens—[be] inconsequential, and […] for that reason a reminder of freedom' (Cole 2011: 7), his trajectories preemptively resolve upon African and African American persons, objects, and histories eager to command his attention: a conversation on the German occupation of Brussels ends with the suggestion that Julius listen to the late works of Art Blakey and Cannonball Adderley. A citation from *Elizabeth Costello* inexplicably leads Julius to consider the history of the New York slave trade (Cole 31). Later, Julius's memory of a recently-ended relationship shifts into his contemplation of the Haitian revolution. Other encounters feel similarly engineered, as though generated by a predictive algorithm: after viewing *The Last King of Scotland*, Julius encounters two children who make strange hand gestures at him and ask if he's 'a gangster' (Cole 2011: 30, 31). Finally, after visiting a Jamaican restaurant, Julius bumps into a metro passenger reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.

Unable to resist his thoughts' 'funnel[ing] toward common continuation[s],' Julius yearns for earlier styles of serendipitous discovery in which he is neither catered to nor known (Olofsson 2015: 249). Julius twice bemoans the closure of his local Tower Records and Blockbuster, brick-and-mortar locations where he recalls spending hours 'going through the CD bins [of classical music and classic cinema] with something of the patience of [a] grazing animal' (Cole 2011: 16). Upon learning of the closures, Julius observes that he 'didn't feel sorry for these faceless national corporations; far from it. They had made their profits and their names by destroying smaller, earlier local businesses. But I was touched not only at the passage of these

fixtures in my mental landscape, but also at the swiftness and dispassion with which the market swallowed even the most resilient enterprises' (Cole 2011: 19). Julius's unusual sympathy for the passage of certain material fixtures into the digital economy's seemingly immaterial ones reconfigures dilemmas he faces throughout the novel, between his voluntary, 'postracial' cultural affiliations with an elite class of intellectuals, and his involuntary microcoordination and hypercoordination (to recall Thrift) with precarious and minoritized Africans for whom his race exists as a central and automatic index of homophily. Implicit to Julius's frustration at being repeatedly hailed as African, then, is not simply his resistance to being reduced to a social subject around whom 'boundaries must be drawn, [and] multiple identities […] typified, so that [his] behavior can be steered and nudged in ways both personally gratifying and economically profitable' (Fourcade and Healy 2017: 20). Rather, Julius's frustration lies with how these repeated gestures of interpellation upend his desire to choose a racial identity for himself or even forego race entirely as a category of differentiation, emphasizing race's categorical durability in an 'ideological climate of ascendant postraciality' (Dubey 2017: 367). In this way, Julius's repeated encounters with African and African American interlocutors serve to illustrate race's systemic pull in a supposedly 'postracial' climate of tech-intensified capitalism, allegorizing race's appearance as an identitarian category superficially codified by the digital economy's new 'classificatory architecture' and thereby signaling its continued operation as a category of economic distinction within capitalism's broader trajectory. In doing so, the novel adumbrates the global computational structuration through which an ever-mutating race concept moves, revealing the 'invisible hand of cyberspace' pushing race into the realm of value creation on a global scale (Lessig 1999: 6).

Interface Effects: Racialization in a Postrace World

On one of his very first aimless walks, Julius finds himself at the Time Warner Center located on New York's Upper West Side. 'The area,' Julius notes

> had changed recently. It had become a more commercial and tourist destination thanks to the pair of buildings erected for the Time Warner corporation on the site. The buildings, constructed at great speed, had just opened, and

> were filled with shops selling tailored shirts, designer suits, jewelry, appliances for the gourmet cook, handmade leather accessories, and imported decorative items. On the upper floors were some of the costliest restaurants in the city, advertising truffles, caviar, Kobe beef, and pricey 'tasting menus.' Above the restaurants were apartments that included the most expensive residence in the city. (Cole 2011: 8)

Completed in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Time Warner Center was originally known as the AOL Time Warner Center, following the February 2000 merger of Internet provider AOL and media conglomerate Time Warner. The merger, though short-lived, was widely deemed historic. AOL co-founder and then-CEO Steve Case reasoned that it was only a matter of time before AOL Time Warner would surpass Microsoft and General Electric to become the largest and most valuable company in the world. Like most Internet companies forged in the mid to late nineties, however, AOL's market valuation fell dramatically toward the middle of 2000, just months after the merger with Time Warner was finalized. By 2003, as the Center was nearing completion, top executives from both companies had resigned, and 'AOL' was struck from the Center's Columbus Circle nameplate.

Overlooking Central Park, Time Warner's Columbus Circle address had long drawn the interest of real estate developers including the New York Land Company, Boston Properties, and Donald Trump, all of whom proposed the construction of lavish, multi-use buildings. The eventual bid went to Boston Properties with a design for two towers, each nearly 700 feet high, which were to serve as headquarters for the financial firm Salomon Brothers, as well as provide space for premium retailers, a hotel, and the high-end residences Julius mentions. While much of the initial commentary on the Center focused on its uncanny resemblance to the fallen World Trade Center towers, more recent coverage has turned its attention to the residences. These articles bring to light the remarkable number of foreign businessmen and state officials using shell companies to purchase Center condominiums. Hailing from Russia, India, Colombia, China, Kazakhstan, and Mexico, Time Warner's foreign investors stand accused of transforming the Center into a 'safe[ty] deposit box' and laundering

site for their fraudulently-acquired global wealth (Story and Saul 2015). Although many of these individuals are currently under investigation for labor abuses, environmental violations, and financial deception, they have been able to move their wealth abroad and keep it anonymous, thanks to Time Warner's famously relaxed real estate policies.

Julius does not linger at the twin-tower complex. Irritated by its 'generally snobbish atmosphere,' he quickly leaves to see a former professor (Cole 2011: 8). Yet, despite the brevity of his visit, the Time Warner Center announces what will be Julius's abiding fantasy throughout the remainder of *Open City*: that an individual might, in the manner of Time Warner's foreign investors, cast off their marked, sensorial body and enjoy the freedom that capital itself enjoys to circulate, unmarked, within the global economy. Embodied by Time Warner's anonymous buyers, and enacted within the Center's opaque system of global money, Cole further associates this fantasy with the general anonymity and functional disembodiment promised by Internet companies like AOL. In so doing, Cole exposes an economic truth lying heart of Internet companies' enduring appeals to leave the flesh behind: that the Internet does not simply invite its users to become disembodied like data but rather promises that they might become disembodied—de-raced, de-gendered, de-nationalized—like money, free to cross national borders with total impunity. Alert to the conceptual relation between the disembodied flow of data, and the flow of money and labor in the global economy, Cole's reference to Time Warner sets up the difference between the types of laboring bodies that will seem to enjoy capital's unrestricted freedom of movement (elite, de-raced bodies such as those of Time Warner's investors, but also of the high-skilled class of artists and intellectuals whose exclusive company Julius maintains) and those other bodies that will remain confined by racial categories and national borders both (the highly raced, proletarian, and precarious laborers on the opposite end of an ever-widening gap between rich and poor with whom Julius consistently rebuffs), between the fantasies of 'capitalist individualization, accumulation, and legitimization located at the rhetorical center of Internet utopianism, and race's systemic drag within a putatively 'postracial' phase of accelerated capitalism (Fuchs 2009: 84).

Julius confronts representatives for this lower-end, raced labor throughout his aimless walks: immigrants from Haiti, Barbuda, and a broadly defined 'Africa' working as cabdrivers, bootblacks, and security guards; Congolese and Rwandan refugees; an undocumented laborer from Liberia; African American youth participating in Harlem's informal economy of illicit drugs. As with Cole's reference to AOL Time Warner, where a new-media veneer just barely conceals the systematic reproduction of race and class relations, these figures bespeak an economic logic primed to keep racialized populations in place. They signal, as Chris Chen writes, an invisible architecture now organizing race as a 'relation of domination inside and outside the wage relation—reproduced through superficially non-racial institutions and policies' (2013).

Nowhere is this invisible architecture more suggestively elaborated than in a lengthy scene during which Julius visits an immigration detention center in Queens. There, in a 'long, gray metal box' located amid a 'vicious landscape of wire fencing and broken concrete,' Julius meets a Liberian rubber farmer named Saidu (Cole 2011: 62, 63). 'The meeting room,' Julius notes

> was as expected, perfunctory: a narrow rank of bays, split down the middle by Plexiglas, with chairs on both sides, and small perforations at face level. The man who sat in front of me had a broad white smile. He was young, and dressed in an orange jumpsuit, as were all the other inmates. I introduced myself, and he smiled immediately and asked if I was African. (Cole 2011: 64)

Here, Cole establishes a spatial configuration—two men, one free to wander cities and traverse national borders, the other captive behind a Plexiglas screen and imprisoned within a 'long, gray metal box'—that evokes the structure of a web interface, with the elite, first-world Julius occupying the Internet's 'client-side,' and the precarious, third-world Saidu its 'server-side' (Ortiz 2015: 678). In the client-server model for computer network architecture, the client-side refers to those interfaces that a user can see and with which they can interact. By contrast, the server-side consists of web applications where data is processed; these are utilitarian interfaces that remain

altogether invisible to the user. Given the two sides' varying objectives, the focus of client-side development is aesthetic; client-side developers are concerned with designing intuitive, easy to use websites for content entry and retrieval. Server-side developers, by contrast, train their efforts on data optimization and functionality, worrying less, if at all, about their interfaces' aesthetic appeal.

Offering a glimpse of what lies behind the Internet's client-side, Julius's encounter with Saidu unfolds multiple layers of allegorical meaning. Associating Julius with the side of the Internet that has been deliberately coded for its aesthetic qualities, Saidu, in contrast, assumes the functional position of the unseen code and machinery that structures web content for clients like Julius. As such, Saidu stands in for the vast population of hidden third-world laborers who support the Internet as a global mode of production. Establishing this dynamic between the Internet's aesthetic and functional realms, *Open City* illustrates how liberal fictions of raceless individuality entailed in the Internet's client-side operations actively conceal the highly raced, server-side labor that constitutes them, exposing how networks' supposedly de-racializing affordances merely mask—but do not erase—labor's racial points of origin beneath complex technical interfaces. In so doing, the novel suggests that while 'race' may seem to disappear into a colorblind Web, it reappears at the border controls designed to maintain economic hierarchies between developed and undeveloped nations, built into the global wage gap and perpetuated by the permanent oversupply of third-world laborers like Saidu. Raising his hand to the Plexiglas that divides him from Saidu, Julius will seem, if only for a moment, to acknowledge this reality. As he listens to Saidu's hesitating English, and admires his dark complexion, Julius will realize that his own fantasies of aesthetic self-constitution—his sense of Africanness as a skin out of which he might step—reinforces those 'postracial' mystifications to which Saidu's fixed, immobilizing Africanness gives the lie. Laying bare the invisible architecture Chen describes, *Open City* meditates on network capitalism's seemingly invisible mechanisms for racial differentiation and labor discipline, alert to the points of closure endemic to an 'open' global labor market whose spatial and social segmentation continues to occur along 'color-line[s]' (Du Bois 2007: 124).

Encapsulating Cole's critique of the digital contexts in which fantasies of racial unmarking and individualization collide, the encounter recalls Open City's persistent alternation between scenes of intellectual communion in which Julius conceives of himself as a 'postrace' cosmopolitan subject liberated from categories of identity made manifest at the level of physical appearance, and Fanonian scenes of visual recognition—such as this one, with Saidu—in which Julius is abruptly hailed as an 'African' according to an expansive rubric of blackness. Attuned to 'postraciality's' operation as the contradictory racial regime of our moment, the encounter emphasizes the hermetic and compensatory nature of Julius's individualistic and mediated conceptions of his identity as a 'virtual flâneur,' setting Julius's desired freedoms of identity and movement against the supranational backdrop of North-South economic division that continues, through the 'soft' effects of typification, and the 'harder' barriers of the global wage differential, to collapse black and brown others into coarse, unspecific categories of subalternity like the 'African.' In so doing, the scene also suggests Cole's apparent skepticism about the reparative capacities of cosmopolitanism—noted by Hallemeier (2013), Krishnan (2015), Vermeulen (2013), Alexander Hartwiger (2016), Emily Johansen (2018), and Lily Saint (2018)—in the arguably more urgent if also more subtle critique of a contemporary 'postrace' moment that has come to view race as an 'affective predilection' rather than a historical-materialist category immanent to the workings of the capitalist world system (Galloway 2012: 140).

Cole is not alone in critiquing our putatively 'postracial' phase of networked global capitalism, nor in seizing on the operations of a 'technological unconscious' to describe race's reconfiguration within a tech-integrated global economy whose digital objects and infrastructures continue to be posited as levelers of racial difference. Novels by Chimamanda Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Percival Everett, Michael Thomas, and Colson Whitehead similarly attune themselves to race's reconceptualization within the discursive complex of 'postraciality' and after its subsumption under increasingly abstract modes of value creation. Taking stock of race's rising economic abstraction, these writers mark out powerful affinities between the material forces of political economy that are now 'making' race in

the networked global market, and the textual and social materials they themselves deploy in their task to 'make' racial identities within the space of literary culture. Recognizing that the formal practice they inherit as novelists is inextricably bound up with how race is made and unmade in the service of capital accumulation, these writers speak to the evolving form and function of the novel in the twenty-first century. Their textual innovations suggest that the novel form can no longer describe an 'imagined community' keyed to the consolidation of a national and implicitly racial character (Anderson 1983: 25). Rather, through the depiction of the now-dispersed, attenuated, and globalized protagonists of their discipline, these writers sublimate technology into form, showing how the novel of ethnicity is beginning to reflect the dynamics of a new, tech-integrated global economic infrastructure in which traditional categories of race and nation are actively being unsettled and reshaped.

Competing Interests

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

References

Anderson, B., 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

Barnard, R., 2009. "Fictions of the Global." *Novel* 42(2): 207–215. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2009-006

Beer, D., 2003. "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and the *technological unconscious*." *new media & society* 11(6). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809336551

Beer, D., and R. Burrows, 2007. "Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: Some Initial Considerations." *Sociological Research Online* 12(5). Web. http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/5/17.html. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1560

Bolter, J., and Richard Grusin, 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bordwell, D., 2008. *Poetics of Cinema*. New York: Routledge.

Castells, M., 2000. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Chen, C., 2013. "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism." *Endnotes* 3. 10 Aug 2015. Web. https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/chris-chen-the-limit-point-of-capitalist-equality.

Chow-White, P., and L. Nakamura, 2011. *Race After the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Chun, W., 2006. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge: MIT Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2150.001.0001

Chun, W., 2016. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10483.001.0001

Cole, T., 2011. *Open City*. New York: Random House.

Cole, T., 2011. "Small Fates." Web. http://www.tejucole.com/other-words/small-fates/.

Cole, T., 2014. "Hafiz." Web. https://twitter.com/tejucole/.

Cole, T., 2014. "Teju Cole Writes A Story A Tweet At A Time." *Digital Life*. NPR. 16 Jan 2014. Web. https://www.npr.org/2014/01/16/262473432/forget-the-new-yorker-storyteller-turns-to-twitter.

Dalley, H., 2013. "The Idea of 'Third Generation Nigerian Literature': Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel." *Research in African Literatures* 44(4):15–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.44.4.15

Dubey, M., 2017. "Racecraft in American Fiction." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 50(3): 365–374. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-4194968

Du Bois, W.E.B., 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foden, G., 2011. "Open City by Teju Cole – review." *The Guardian*. 17 Aug 2011. Web. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review.

Fourcade, M., and K. Healy, 2017. "Seeing like a Market." *Socio-Economic Review* 15(1): 9–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/jzy7k

Friedberg, A., 1993. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Fuchs, C., 2009. "Information and Communication Technologies and Society: A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of the Internet." *European Journal of Communication* 24(1): 69–87. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323108098947

Galloway, A., 2004. *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*. Cambridge: MIT Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5658.001.0001

Galloway, A., 2012. *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gandy, O. Jr., 2011. "Matrix Multiplication and the Digital Divide" in *Race After the Internet*, Peter Chow-White, and Lisa Nakamura (eds.). New York: Routledge.

Hallemeier, K., 2013. "Literary Cosmopolitanisms in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*." *ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 44(2–3): 239–252. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2013.0023

Hansen, M., 2006. *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*. New York: Routledge.

Hartwiger, A., 2016. "The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest." *Postcolonial Text* 11(1): 1–17.

Hayles, N.K., 2006. "Traumas of Code." *Critical Inquiry* 33(1): 136–157. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1086/509749

Johansen, Emily, 2018. "History in Place: Territorialized Cosmopolitanism in Teju Cole's *Open City*." *Diaspora* 20(1): 20–39. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.20.1.006

Kaplan, F., 2014. "Search: Linguistic Capitalism and Algorithmic Mediation." *Representations* 127(1): 57–63. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2014.127.1.57

Krishnan, M., 2015. "Postcoloniality, spatiality, and cosmopolitanism in the Open City." *Textual Practice* 29(4): 675–696. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2014.987686

Lash, S., 2007. "Power after Hegemony? Cultural Studies in Mutation." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24(3): 55–78. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075956

Lessig, L., 1999. *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.

Lye, C., 2008. "Racial Form." *Representations* 104: 92–101. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2008.104.1.92

Manovich, L., 2001. *The Language of New Media.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Messud, C., 2011. "The Secret Sharer." *The New York Review of Books.* 14 July 2011. Web. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/07/14/secret-sharer/.

Miller, S., 2015. *Walking New York: Reflections of American Writers from Walt Whitman to Teju Cole.* New York: Fordham Univ. Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt-1287gcx

Mousoutzanis, A., 2016. "Network Fictions and the Global Unhomely." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 4(1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.7

Olofsson, J., 2015. "Google: A Means of Inscription, A Means of De-Inscription." *Between Humanities and the Digital*, Patrik Svensson, and David Theo Goldberg (eds.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Ortiz, A., 2015. "A Bottom-Up Approach to Teaching Server-Side Web Development Skills." *Proceedings of the 46th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education*, 678. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/2676723.2691922

Saint, L., 2018. "From a Distance: Teju Cole, World Literature, and the Limits of Connection." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 51(2): 322–338. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-6846174

Story, L., and S. Saul, 2015. "Stream of Foreign Wealth Flows to Elite New York Real Estate." *The New York Times*. 7 Feb 2015. Web. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/nyregion/stream-of-foreign-wealth-flows-to-time-warner-condos.html.

Thrift, N., 2004. "Remembering the Technological Unconscious by Foregrounding Knowledges of Position." *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 22(1): 175–190. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1068/d321t

Van der Vlist, F., 2016. "Accounting for the social: Investigating Commensuration and Big Data Practices at Facebook." *Big Data & Society*. January–June: 1–16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716631365

Vermeulen, P., 2013. "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." *Journal of Modern Literature* 37(1): 40–57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.37.1.40

Wood, J., 2011. "The Arrival of Enigmas." *The New Yorker*, 28 Feb. 2011. Web. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas.

How to cite this article: Bose, M., 2019. "Virtual Flânerie: Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 12, pp. 1–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.772

Published: 11 June 2019

C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS