

Space, Narrative and Digital Media in Teju Cole's *Open City*

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Abstract

This article explores the metaphor of the novel as the actual “space” for creative expression to take place. It is “space” affected by social and technological developments, employed to “house” global concerns and perspectives. In this article, I intend to investigate the ways in which Teju Cole, an American writer of Nigerian descent, communicates his concerns to his audience and explores questions about crises and debates, responding to social, cultural and technological challenges of the twenty-first century both in print and electronic spaces. In particular, I investigate the ways in which Cole employs both narrative fiction and Social Media as political space in order to comment on twenty-first century events like 9/11, global terrorism and a renewed wave of racism.

Keywords: narrative, social media, political, activist, 9/11.

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Well into the twenty-first century digital technology has markedly affected the novel as both narrative form and actual “space” where creative expression can take place. It is this malleable writing space – affected by social and technological parameters – that writers employ to “house” their global concerns or their most intimate thoughts and ruminations. Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) is an engaging novel that offers itself as space capable of initiating multiple narrative possibilities. By also looking at the online extension of this literary work of fiction, the scope of this paper is to discuss how writing space and mediality acquire particular importance in the construction of the narrative and the reception of the writer's work both in print and in digital environments. In my emphasis on Cole's experimentations with different media and textures, I explore the different communication pathways he creates in order to configure a new literary space that answers to the latest socio-cultural manifestations in a digital globalized reality.

An active writer, philosopher and photographer, Cole¹ has produced an array of works that have already started to become subject of academic study for their richness of perspective, historical accuracy, philosophical depth and transnational engagement with the world as he experiments with written, visual and audio manifestations/forms. His printed publications include (apart from his novelistic attempts) a non-fiction collection of essays on art and literature and a book of photographic and textual experimentations. It is his emphasis on spatial narrations and the new associations that

¹ Teju Cole grew up in Nigeria but moved to the U.S. at the age of seventeen in order to study History of Art. He has been serving as the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College, teaching courses in writing, literature and art history.

can be made as he is seen crossing all kinds of boundaries (writing forms, media, genres, norms, cultures and nations) that I choose to investigate in *Open City*.

I begin to examine his first novelistic attempt as an act of recording urban lived spaces in New York as well as a documentation of memory through his connections with the American, African and European continent. In the novel, urban structures do not only refer to inhabited areas and the limitations of inclusion but constitute the past, present and future of their agents, made up of their histories, all determined by differences in origin, religion and political beliefs. In the same manner in which lived experience adds new dimensions to space, mediality also creates new layers to the narrative. It is suggested not only as a solution to the limitations of writing on printed space but also as an antidote to the limitations of history to include human pain and accept difference. In this context, I move on to examine the ways the writer employs new media, specifically, a complementary non-commercial website *he* has developed, and the multimodal extensions it offers in order to overcome the restrictions of writing human experience on print as he addresses his concerns in a globalized world.

The novel is divided into two parts: These are entitled Part 1: "Death is a perfection of the eye" and Part 2: "I have searched myself." The book's main character and narrator, Julius, is a half-Nigerian half-German young psychiatrist in training. Julius walks around New York (and, later, Brussels) and meets an interesting range of people, several of them immigrants or emigrants. This spatial story reserves a place in post 9/11 literature written five years after the horrendous attack. It can be read as an attempt to reconcile the trauma not only caused by the terrorist attack on 9/11 but also by a guilty American past, characterized by imperialist policies and stories of invasion. Cole's watchful eye offers new ways of seeing as he appreciates a panorama of cultural and historical exchanges in his peripatetic strolls. His mental speculations and affective responses unfold as he embarks on his actual wanderings around lived spaces, hoping to provoke the thoughtful engagement of the reader. In his online interview to Wayne Catan for *The Hemingway Society*, Cole begins to describe the intersecting experiences of a writer and citizen in post 9/11 New York:

I feel very fortunate to have written *Open City* and to have been so well rewarded for it. The book began like this: late in 2006, I was finally ready to put down some words about 9/11, not as an explanation or study of what five years in the city after that event had felt like, but as an affective response. I sat down one evening, wrote the words "Open City" at the top of a page, and began to unfold a narrative about a man living in New York. The man was an invention, but I slowly got into his head. The book took three years to write, a process entailing mostly long walks, night and day, interspersed with brief periods of writing things down.

Soon enough the reader realizes that Julius' walks eventually lead him to the inner paths of his soul in his journey towards self discovery. As an interesting web of transnational stories and experiences is woven, the references to his German-born

mother and his grandmother's connections with Belgium create links with the European continent and provide opportunities for a transatlantic and transnational engagement with U.S. politics. Julius does not remain unaffected by the environment around him or the interplay between spaces and perspectives. Rather, his actual positioning in the city attributes particular meanings to his surroundings and to what he experiences. As urban theorist Kevin Lynch notes in *The Image of the City* (1960) about the way we perceive urban space,

We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all (2)... [T]he environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual [...] is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action. (4)

In the novel, in the open – “open” in the title can be associated with free, unobstructed space but can also connote unrestricted practice – when not in conversation with himself, he meets an interesting selection of new and old friends as well as strangers, several of them immigrants: a Liberian, a Haitian shoe shiner and an angry Moroccan student, working at an Internet café in Brussels. They read and freely comment upon social and critical theory. Julius discusses Edward Said, Thomas Mann, Roland Barthes’ “Camera Lucida” and Peter Altenberg’s “Telegrams of the Soul,” among others. He often stops to wonder about the grandeur of art and Gustav Mahler’s, Peter Maxwell Davies’ as well as Judith Weir’s classical music. Inside the big Tower Record store that has announced its closure, he recognizes Henry Purcell’s anthem to Queen Mary, Mahler’s symphonies and Frédéric Chopin’s recitals, ironically commenting on the great reductions in the CD prices. These sonic conversations enliven the history of the place and take part in the synergies between past and present.

Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, the text appears very lean. Yet it is so dense in meanings, suggesting numerous intertextual associations and metonymic references. It abounds in images and sounds that stimulate the senses. Deprived of a complicated plot, the story leaves ample room for Julius’ philosophical musings. These form an inquiry into his inner self as he seeks answers about human existence as well as about the belief in philosophical and political constructions. Julius refuses to give clear answers to questions caused by his sightings. By contrast, he insists on offering different readings of the reality he encounters and of the space around him. In so doing, he asserts the assumption made by present day philosophers and scholars about the failure of language to represent the trauma² caused by the horrific event of

² Cathy Caruth’s edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) provides a thorough investigation and attempts to explain the intricacies of the historical phenomenon called “Post-

9/11 and its aftermath. In an effort to grasp the new meanings and extensions caused by such a dreadful incident, the philosopher Giovanna Borradori interviews Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida about the significance of this unspeakable event. For Derrida,

“Something” took place ... But this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event,” remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept ... out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly ... a ... rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about. (86)

The powerlessness of language to conceive this event and its aftermath is also addressed by Toni Morrison in her 9/11 poem “The Dead of September 11.” She directs it to the victims of the attack after exorcizing “false intimacy” and skillfully crafted affective language as no writing can convey the grandeur of their sacrifice:

To speak to you, the dead of September 11, I must not claim
false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed
just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear,
knowing all the time that I have nothing to say--no words
stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture
older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you
have become. (1)

In response to this philosophical and emotional inability to explain this unprecedented crisis as well as the “verbal impotence” (2) to describe it, which Richard Gray discusses in his work *After the Fall American Literature since 9/11*, Cole chooses to push writing and narrative boundaries to new directions.

Open City crosses literary genres, media and traditions in search of the right expressive medium. Through the eyes of Julius the narrator, the reader is provided with an accumulation of fictional data, historical information, images, voices and noises coming alive during his walks. Rather than a well-crafted, tightly knit plot, though, the writer enumerates episodic incidents; the characters are crafted out of their background knowledge of history of art and literature and not their actions. Through the descriptions of space and the verbal exchanges that take place there, he creates a mental landscape of the multiple concerns that overwhelm him. Since walking makes all this possible, it becomes *the* “space of enunciation,” as Michel de Certeau suggests in “Walking in the City,” in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984):

Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD). As she recapitulates in her Introduction to Part II: “Recapturing the Past,” “This singular *possession by the past*... extends beyond the bounds of a marginal pathology and has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time” (151; emphasis in original).

The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. At the most elementary level, it has a triple “enunciative” function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic “contracts” in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an “allocation,” “posits another opposite” the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation. (98-99)

For de Certeau, walking in the urban environment becomes an individualized experience that reveals special relations with the environment; it is an instance of it; or, as he claims, it is what parole is to langue in linguistic terms. In a similar fashion, in *Open City* the characters’ paths in life intertwine and become actualized acknowledgement of past experience; they give shape to inhabited space and enhance linguistic expression in the novel.

The story is narrated in first person. Composing it fulfills the writer’s esoteric need for self expression and gratification but also constitutes an immediate act of communication directed to the readers. In the first pages of the novel, he sets up the scene: “We have far too long been taught that the sight of man speaking to himself is a sign of eccentricity or madness [...]. But a book suggests conversation: one person is speaking to another [...]. So I read aloud with myself as my audience” (5). Recording and writing possibly act as forms of psychotherapy, Julius himself being both the psychiatrist and the patient: “The walks met a need: they were a release from the tight regulated mental environment of work, and once I discovered them as therapy, they became the normal thing, and I forgot what life had been like before I started walking” (7). The printed matter is the primary vessel of communication which Julius makes use of: Recalling St Augustine, who believed that “the weight and inner life of sentences were best experienced out loud,” (5) and listening to the incomprehensible announcements on the internet radio he begins to read words from the book out loud: “Sometimes, I even spoke the words in the book out loud to myself, and doing so I noticed the odd way my voice mingled with the murmur of the French, German, or Dutch radio announcers, or with the thin texture of the violin strings of the orchestras, all of this intensified by the fact that whatever it was I was reading had likely been translated out of one of the European languages” (5). Through this beautiful scene in the park out in the open, the novel delicately creates a polyphonic and multilingual stage for semantically rich words to be voiced and opinions to be heard. Yet, Julius seems more enamored with the musicality of the sounds coming out of different communication vessels (voices, the radio, musical instruments) rather than with the potential of the word to mean. This linguistic incomprehension seems to be granting Julius the freedom he needs to make sense of the world rather than hinder it.

Words constantly flounder in their aimless effort to signify. Still, the medium of the book communicates the recording of the main character's mental state of confusion that tends to deteriorate towards the end of the first part as he has to face and accept the loss of his family and girlfriend: "These pleasant thoughts were interrupted by a presentiment of the conversation I would have that evening with Nadege. And how odd it was, hours later, to hear her strained voice, in counterpoint with the protesters down below [...]. I tried to imagine her in that crowd, but no image came to mind, nor could I picture her face as it would be if she'd been in the room with me" (24). Instead of emotional outbreaks or rational reflections following their unavoidable breakup, inconsistent thoughts, memories and swiftly changing images of passing-by people fill the page: "THE FOLLOWING EVENING ON THE TRAIN, I SAW A CRIPPLE [...]. A few minutes later, when I got on the platform, I saw a blind man [...]. I was confused to see, just at this moment, another blind man." The only explanation he provides for what he is witnessing has its origins in Nigerian myth and is put down to the authoritative figure of the drinking god Obatala: "I got the idea that some of the things I was seeing around me were under the aegis of Obatala, the demiurge charged by Olodumare with the formation of humans from clay. Obatala did well at the task until he started drinking" (24-25). Human deformity and pain is at the hands of a drinking and potentially careless god who is curiously drawn as he pulls the strings. This image of the drunken Obatala giving shape to formless humans out of clay, placed in present-day places and sightings, creates awkward parallels with western cruel reality. As if the narrator has been drunk himself, it is as if he is experiencing a nightmarish dream only to actually wake up and find himself in present-day New York.

The plasticity that seems to characterize human nature is shared in both western and African traditions, though differently capitulated. The writer acknowledges that this sense of terror, loss and trauma, though put down to different (other-)worldly forces, is common in both traditions. Just before Julius finds himself in the empty space where the World Trade Center had once loomed, he takes time to hint upon the losses of the policies of assimilation and financial expansion of the American nation:

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 [...]. I walked north, along the promenade, listening to the water breathing. Two men shuffled toward me in shiny tracksuits, deep in conversation with each other. Why did I feel suddenly that they were visiting from the other side of time? I caught their gaze for a moment, but their eyes signaled nothing other than the usual gap between the old and the young. (55)

During his journeys and his mental ruminations, Julius seems to be walking on a thin line between the public and the private sphere of life. Although it is his inner self he is inevitably trying to locate, it is among the public that he mostly locates himself. He

searches for meaning through fragments of cultures, African, American and European. Yet, in his effort to assimilate the unfamiliar through Nigerian myths or historical facts about stories of American and European empowerment, he realizes that they do not offer the solace he needs. The American stories of triumph he recounts unavoidably denote disaster. Actually, both countries' past seem capable of erasing their people's histories. As soon as he leaves the plaza and the trading district that brings immense sorrow to all passers-by, Julius continues:

But atrocity is nothing new, not to humans, not to animals. The difference is that in our time it is uniquely well organized, carried out with pens, train carriages, ledgers, barber wire, work camps, gas. And this late contribution, the absence of bodies. No bodies were visible, except the falling ones, on the day America's ticker stopped. Marketable stories of all kinds had thickened around the injured coast of our city, but the depiction of the dead bodies was forbidden. (58)

The city poses as actual urban lived space, bearing its own history and Julius bears witness to and solidifies it through his encounters with the citizens. The way he writes about his outings near the vanished World Trade Center inevitably brings de Certeau's work to mind again. An excerpt from his "Walking in the City" about the experience of the monumental Trade Center in the 1980s reads:

SEEING Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals [...]. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already trans-formed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space. (91)

Through the oppositions that de Certeau creates, walking challenges the wanderer's vision and becomes a transformative experience, turning him into a voyeur.³

³ This concept of the potentially transformative experience of wandering and recording images and experiences in the city has its roots in Charles Baudelaire's much earlier conceptualizations of the "flâneur" archetype taking shape in his poetry collection *Le Fleurs du Mal* (1857). Particularly, the Flâneur, the Dandy and the Snob walk and observe the winding streets of urbanized Paris, expressing their sense of estrangement that modernity posed to people. This literary practice also had its impact on Benjamin Walter's writing and his exploration of Parisian arcades in *The Arcades Project*. Both these philosophers tried to encapsulate the impact of an urbanized modern city on the human psyche. In Paul Auster's much later *City of Glass* (1985), the postmodern adaptation of this flâneur type is deconstructed in a cityscape that is collapsing.

De Certeau continues his vision in a distance and from above the city: "To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp [...]. An Icarus flying above these waters" (92). Yet, what is narrated in *Open City* creates exactly the opposite effect. Instead of having an uplifting experience when standing in front of the place where once the twin towers stood, we follow the downward movement of the narrator's eyes as he describes the movement of the landing plane and the images of the city below:

I was saddled with strange mental transpositions: that the plane was a coffin, that the city below was a vast graveyard with white marble and stone blocks of various heights and sizes [...]. Then it came to me: I was remembering something I had seen a year earlier: the sprawling scale model of the city that was kept at the Queens Museum of Art [...]. On the day I had seen the Panorama, I had been impressed by the many fine details it presented: the rivulets of roads snaking across a velvety Central Park, the boomerang of the Bronx curving up to the north, the elegant beige spire of the Empire State building, the white tablets of the Brooklyn piers, and the pair of gray blocks on the southern tip of Manhattan, each about a foot high, representing the persistence, in the model, of the World Trade Center towers, which, in reality, had already been destroyed. (150-51)

The World Trade Center had been a powerful image of national and financial achievement and Cole has nothing to state about the destruction of an icon, but only evokes its memories through the medium of a museum exhibit. "As a novelist I wouldn't touch the World Trade Center, and the looming tragedy around it," the Jewish American novelist Thane Rosenbaum wrote after the horrendous attack, "I'm not ready to write or talk about it yet;" "silence might be the loudest sound of all" (*After the Fall* 53). Yet, neither Cole nor Julius chooses silence. They record their sightings and experiences through writing. In the reality of the novel and the reality of the world around us, the fall has taken place and there is no way up. The narrator is the pedestrian to whom the city has left little to dream about. In contrast to de Certeau's experience, he has turned from a visionary into a wandering figure searching for alternative ways to be lifted up again.

To Julius, the only uplifting experiences are created through art, music and literature, which provide vistas into the brightness of historical and cultural life of the place. The careful description of the city's scale model in the previous excerpt, like a painting, a loyal recording of memory, is reserving slots in time and space and spots on a map and in the history of the place. And Cole is suggesting a different conception of history, that of affective history, one that derives from the lived experiences of the agents and is not restricted to academic history. In his interview to Bridget Kendall for BBC, Cole affirms that "there are ways of doing history that are not restricted to academic history. Academic history has necessary restrictions on it but I think there is another kind of history that a creative writer can contribute: the

affective history that comes from one's interaction with the trace of the past." So, Cole's extremely dense writing does not build on historical facts or on real emotional involvement; it is not a journey towards a specific destination, rather it is a road within in search of his multiple identities in a globalized world.

This obvious mobility seems to be Julius' antidote against "melancholia" – identified by Sigmund Freud as emotional inertia – possibly as a post-traumatic state of 9/11 and helps him fight against emotional numbness. Instead of emotional exchanges, he invests in witnessing the world around him and finds an outlet in different imaginative structures and aesthetic experiences. He encounters trauma, which Gray defines as "a recalibration of feeling so violent and radical that resists and compels memory, generating stories that cannot yet must be told" (24). He domesticates it by walking and speaking about it. In dealing with such traumatic experiences, Cathy Caruth talks about the need to move from trauma to "a narrative memory" despite the possible loss in historical "precision" and "force." As she notes, "The trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall" (153). Since walking means writing in the novel, it also enables speaking about traumatic experiences by writing them down. It constitutes a symbolic walk, both a textual and an actual exploration of cityscape, landscape, memory and experience that oscillates between conversation and narration, fact and fiction, mythology and history haunted by an unvoiced guilt of the past.

In the second part, Julius commences a deeper inner self exploration that takes place mostly in Brussels. He needs to tackle a number of personal losses, his break up with his girlfriend, his respected professor's death, his argument and break from his mother, all of which can connote a more general loss of his past and origin. And, yet, his bonds with a European heritage – clearly more privileged in his consciousness than his ties with American culture and history – do not manage to relieve the anxiety. The communicative exchanges with people he meets there create a web of references that help him come to terms with not only a double (black) consciousness but also multiple dimensions of a global citizen in multicultural environments. The Black experience is not a central topic and is not discussed openly in the novel. Yet, slavery is a broader recurrent issue in Julius' meditations. Both Cole the writer and Julius the narrator are Nigerians coming to America from an unruly country for a new start, yet they have to come to terms with another one that has to deal with the results of its unjust imperialist policies. Julius is not a typical African American but is a citizen of the world in the twenty-first century who prefers to provide the reader with multiple perspectives coming from different lived experiences and spaces in times and history.

Yet, we can only but give a historical dimension to the meanings and purposes of this novel through the recording of voices of people from different continents, nations and religions. Then, his writing supersedes aesthetic concerns and turns more political. The characters in the novel read and talk about social and critical theory, art, and music (Mahler, Peter Maxwell Davies, Judith Weir). Cole crafts these characters

out of their political beliefs and their background knowledge of history of art and literature and not their actions. A lot of times harsh criticism of the American political system and a plea for acceptance comes from his multiracial friends. Respect for difference is expressed through the words of a “bad” muslim, his Moroccan friend Farouq. Farouq admits:

My experience at the American school [...] became combined in my mind with Fukuyama's idea of the end of history. It is impossible, and it is arrogant, to think that the present reality of Western countries is the culminating point of human history. The principal had been talking in all these terms—melting pot, salad bowl, multiculturalism—but I reject all these terms. I believe foremost in difference. Remember what I said about Malcolm X: this is what the Americans don't understand, that the Iraqis can never be happy with foreign rule.... No one likes foreign domination. Do you know how much Algeria and Morocco hate each other? So you can imagine how bad it is when it is a Western power doing the invasion [...]. I say all this not to make myself the representative of Islam. Actually, I am a bad Muslim.... (114)

Khalil, the Moroccan he meets at a cafe in Brussels, enquires about American political orientations and Julius takes the chance to make acute criticism:

Does America really have a left? he said [...]. Yes, I said, America has a left, an active one. Kahlil looked genuinely surprised. The left there, he said, must be further to the right than the right here [...]. Not exactly, I said, the issues are emphasized differently. There are the Democrats, who share the political power, but there is also a genuine left, who would probably agree with you on many things. What are the important issues there? Khalil asked? What do left and right disagree on? As I began to answer him, as I enumerated the diverse issues, I felt faintly embarrassed at how tawdry they were: abortion, homosexuality, gun control—Khalil looked confused by the last term [...]. Immigration's also an issue. (117-18)

As noted earlier, Julius touches upon the American guilty past of slavery, persecution of immigrant populations and suppression of Native Americans. He does not try to understand it, give reasons, come up with explanations or even come to terms with it. He just acknowledges it and prefers the comfort that art and philosophy can offer.

Going back and forth in time creates an interesting nexus with space as Cole crafts his story. The memories and recollections of incidents he recounts create detours and condition the reality of the fictional space. We can read the recorded experience of his disillusionment as Julius regains consciousness and wakes up from a dream. The image of him as a child running across Lagos with his sister again alludes to the sense of identity loss he is experiencing as a Nigerian American searching for his origins in Brussels. When he opens his eyes from a deep sleep we read:

The first question that found its answer was about the partner: I had no partner, I was alone. The fact arrived, and it claimed me immediately. The distress had been in not knowing. Then other information came: I was in Brussels, Belgium, in a rented apartment, the apartment was on the ground floor of the building, and the rumble outside was from the garbage trucks [...]. I was someone, not a body without a being. I had slowly returned to myself from a distance. (130-31)

All in all, these recollected thoughts and memories leave their “mark like a kind of overlay on the body of the work that has always already been altered without knowing it” (*Everyday Practice* 87). They mobilize multiple spaces away from the present and the reality of the novel. They create a fluidity that matches the writer’s tendency to escape form, tradition and past.

In *Open City*, all kinds of losses and limitations are enhanced due to the affirmation of the inability of writing to express human experience and of a history to preserve human identity and difference. Pieter Vermeulen notes, “Throughout, the novel is occupied with the challenge of finding an adequate medium or form. The intense evocations of aesthetic experiences test several aesthetic paradigms for this role: the portrait, the symphony, the fugue, the photograph, the cathedral, and so on” (45). Present time is somehow absent from the story and the characters’ lives and all the intertextual connections the writer builds seem to be working towards a way out of a socio-cultural void. We are following clues and not a tightly-knit narrative of an idle wanderer looking at Brewster’s paintings or listening to Mahler’s music. As reality seems disorienting, the narrator chooses to live in the realities and histories of the works of art that populate the novel. Julius admits in one of his musings: Only “[p]hotography [which Cole practices in real life] seemed to me, as I stood there in the white gallery with its rows of pictures and its press of murmuring spectators, an uncanny art like no other. One moment, in all of history, was captured, but the moments before and after it disappeared into the onrush of time; only that selected moment itself was privileged, saved for no other reason than its having been picked out by the camera’s eye” (152). Cole also discusses photographs in his online article “My Grandmother’s Shroud” in *The New York Times Magazine*: “Photographs are there when people pass away. They serve as reservoirs of memory and as talismans for mourning.” In the novel, he devotes three pages to talk about the life and work of the Hungarian writer and photographer Martin Munkácsi,⁴ a controversial figure who moved to Germany and then the U.S. The descriptions of his photojournalistic work (and the photo of the Liberian Boys as focal) which he brings into the narrative, freeze that very instant and privilege these moments in history over all others.

⁴ Martin Munkácsi was a Hungarian photographer who experimented with photographic viewpoints and worked in Germany for the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* from 1928 to 1934. On 21 March 1933, he photographed the *Day of Potsdam*, when President Paul von Hindenburg handed Germany over to Adolf Hitler. Although he was Jewish, he photographed Hitler’s inner circle. After being fired by the Nazi government, he moved to the U.S. and signed for *Harper’s Bazaar*.

Open City challenges form and tradition also by intersecting with new media practices. Apart from imagery and a wide selection of aesthetic forms that the writer employs, an intermedial language and form of writing arises. Now "open" creates further associations in mind related to the free space of the internet and the numerous possibilities that it facilitates. The World Wide Web becomes the hub where new forms of expression can be created. Cole explores new media narrative potentials through a complementary website that enhances the visual dimension of the novel. Similar to an online wiki it functions as the writer's multimodal journal,⁵ a dynamic form of combining audiovisual material that have stayed with the character and have framed his consciousness. Participants, content and the media platform converge and become involved in a new type of energy exchange that redefines analogue and alphanumeric communication realizations. And it is an acceptable practice within the postmodern tradition to test the limits and boundaries of different aesthetic forms, expressive vehicles and technological tools. According to Rosalind Krauss, "within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium...but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium... might be used" ("Poetics in the Expanded Field" 335).

Through real photos, videos, audio recordings and primary sources of the history of art that Cole discusses in the novel and provides in these web pages, he builds bridges with the recent past and allocates his stories and concerns in the real. This multimodal experience creates a different feel and aesthetic effect. It opens up new directions and vistas and provides a richer experience that unfolds at different levels. The website adopts the linking functions of the Internet in hypertextual construction so that the readers can click on the underscored titles and instantly be redirected to multimodal material. In the place of explanatory endnotes/footnotes in the novel, links are created online to actual excerpts coming from the novel in the form of post-it notes on a notice board. The fluidity of the changing digital codes creates a sense of flowing for the readers, whose reading of the novel is altered. What is more, the immediacy that linking grants creates a sense of urgency and supremacy of the real. A game of sight and voice shifts among the narrator, the characters, words and images begins. The webpages, constructed with hypertextual links resemble "a collage or patchwork quilt," to borrow W.J.T. Mitchell's metaphor (*Picture Theory* 419).

Cole's persistence in the importance of communication regardless of the medium is expressed through another quotation coming from the novel about the language of the deaf. This comes from Laurent Clerc's *An Address Written by Mr. Clerc and Read by His Request at a Public Examination of the Pupils in the Connecticut Asylum* in 1818 and one can access the actual text by clicking on the linked title:

... every language was a collection of *signs*, as a series of drawings is a collection of *figures*, the representation of a multitude of objects, and that the Deaf and Dumb can describe every thing by *gestures*, as you paint every thing with *colours*, or express every thing by *words*; he knew that every object had a

⁵ One can visit Teju Cole's online journal at <http://op-cit.tumblr.com/>.

form, that every form was capable of being *imitated*, that *actions* struck your sight, and that you were able to describe them by imitative gestures; he knew that *words* were conventional signs, and that gestures might be the *same*, and that there could therefore be a language formed of *gestures*, as there was a language of *words*. (37)

Yet, Cole's amazement at the power of sight is undeniable. Later on, one can read about the anatomy of the human eye or the definition of the photograph by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, which is "literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star."

Cole does not avoid referring to the limitations not only of speech and writing but of different forms of communication, this time referring to looking. On the website he provides a link to his interview to Steve Paulson "Well, if you're looking a lot, at some point you become aware of the limitations of looking. It's just like being a writer. At some point you understand there are things that words can accomplish and then there's a moment when words cannot help you. Looking has been so central to my way of being in the world that it goes a little bit beyond the conventional."

On this webpage, color is downplayed sticking to the black, grey and white scale giving an archival feel to the writer's electronic endeavor. Yet, the colored photo of the historic Trinity Church on Lower Broadway at the foot of Wall Street, taken in 1973 and belonging to the U.S. National Archive, serves to remind one of the existence of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Clicking onto the photo, one is immediately linked to numerous other views of the World Trade Center (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Photograph of St. Paul's Chapel with the Towers of the World Trade Center in the Background; *Archives Catalogue*, Archives.org, 1 June 2018, catalog.archives.gov/id/549918. Access 1 June 2018.

Another photo shows the shops of Radio Row in Cortland Street in 1966, before being demolished in order to give way to the now destroyed WTC. By creating connections with the real world, the novel challenges its own fictionality (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Berenice Abbott's "Radio Row (Cortlandt Street, Manhattan)." 1936. *Brooklyn Museum*, Brooklyn museum.org, 5 June 2018, www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/121247. Access 1 June 2018.

In postmodern fiction, the plurality of speaking voices and consciousnesses helps challenge linearity in narration and “traditional notions of perspective [. . .]. The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate ... or resolutely provisional and limited – often undermining their own seeming omniscience” (Hutcheon 11). In our case, Julius’ consciousness is made up of the consciousnesses of the people he exchanges ideas with. On the website, this becomes obvious when multiple perceptive media challenge the omniscience of the narrator. Multiple points of view are enabled via multiple postings, the one next to the other one, emanating stories within stories and creating subordinate levels of narration. Munkácsi’s photo of the naked Liberian boys (see fig. 3), a first glimpse out of his door as he sets off on his first walk, a discussion on Mahler’s Ninth Symphony on Youtube, a link to a Youtube video about Kokoro, the famous Lagos street minstrel, a posting of a song by Sarah Vaughan or John Coltrane’s Crescent jazz quartet all create a multimodal expression of the writer’s and narrator’s knowledge coming from the world.



Fig. 3. Martin Munkácsi’s “Liberia,”1931. *The Met*, Metmuseum.org, 10 June 2018, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265409. Access 1 June 2018.

New media provide new language forms and Cole’s use of new media in all his recorded practice expresses exactly this need to describe the indescribable in novel ways, to freeze and record the moment through new vehicles, to compose a new

vocabulary and contribute in the construction of a new aesthetic grammar that can generate highly dynamic processes. Cole, a multi-faceted identity of the twenty-first century chooses to share the findings of his personal ruminations through different media, print, photography and social media. Different artistic forms of expression and forms of communication on different media provide the space for it. This interplay between digitality and the printed format creates a new narrative "space" and an intermedial language that rejuvenate conventional forms of cultural expression.

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