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(In)Sights from *Àwòrán*: Yorùbá Epistemologies and the Limits of Cartesian Vision in Teju Cole's *Open City*

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Abstract

Teju Cole's *Open City* is often read as the quintessential Western cosmopolitan novel. But despite the protagonist's fixation with European aestheticism, the presence of African antecedents looms almost as an unacknowledged shadow in the acclaimed cosmopolitan novel. This article traces how Yorùbá visual registers about perception, subjectivity, and representation provide interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Cole's novel in ways that illuminate the conflicted, contradictory itineraries of the postcolonial African transnational figure. I argue that Yorùbá conceptual registers relating to visuality, especially the concept of *Àwòrán* and its insistence on intersubjective relations and the visual call of images, highlight a visual hermeneutics that inflect the construction of personhood in *Open City*. By tracing the centrality of Yorùbá optic codes to Cole's project, the article concludes that the novel's philosophically dense conversation with aspects of Yorùbá culture demonstrates how conceptual registers from African cultures might contour Afro-diasporic texts.

Keywords: Yorùbá epistemology; Afro-diasporic literature; personhood; cosmopolitanism; visuality; aesthetics

A person is a person because he sees and is seen by others.
—David Doris

To be alive [is] ... to be both original and reflection, and to be dead [is] to be reflection alone.
—Teju Cole

Introduction

Teju Cole's *Open City* is often read as the quintessential Western cosmopolitan novel. But despite the protagonist's fixation with European aestheticism, the

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presence of African antecedents looms almost as an unacknowledged shadow in the acclaimed cosmopolitan novel. As such, its Eurocentric criticism both overlooks how discursive prisms from Yorùbá epistemology structure the text and thus questions the validity of African cultural ethos for critiquing Western(nized) experience. Yet, Yorùbá visual logics, when considered alongside the vaunted cosmopolitan vision often emphasized in *Open City's* scholarship, focalizes conflicting visual registers that underpin Cole's insertional poetics. This prism also provides interpretative cues for understanding the meta-text of Cole's novel in ways that illuminate the conflicted, contradictory itineraries of the African postcolonial transnational figure.

My turn to Yorùbá visual epistemologies to read Cole's text might seem unfounded were it not for the extended, highly detailed, and philosophically dense conversation with aspects of Yorùbá culture that Cole's novel itself initiates. In arguing for the centrality of Yorùbá optic codes to understanding Cole's project, my contention is that Yorùbá insights about vision and visibility illuminate the discursive fields that mark the text's deconstruction of its protagonist and his baffling cultural affectations.¹ Probing a critical blind spot in current scholarship, this article traces how Yorùbá conceptual registers about perception, subjectivity, and representation, especially the concept of *Àwòrán*, offer a generative critical framework for elaborating a visual hermeneutics that inflects the construction of personhood in *Open City*. I argue that, through its elaboration of visually anchored intersubjective relations, *Àwòrán* provides a grammar for understanding the conflict between two optical fields through which the subject is refracted in this novel: the autonomous, disassociated subject constituted by Cartesian rationality and the empathetic, intersubjective self, constituted through its embeddedness in a social network. The article concludes by demonstrating the centrality of these optic codes to Cole's project, suggesting that the text's dialogue with Yorùbá culture exemplifies how conceptual registers from African cultures might contour the archeology of knowledge that Afro-diasporic texts perform.

Despite *Open City's* aspirations to transnational openness, critical readings of Cole's text locate it firmly within Euro-American cultural boundaries. Scholars are inspired by the transnational itinerary of the protagonist to centralize questions relating to the ethical difficulties of cosmopolitanism, racial disassociation, memory, and Eurocentric aesthetic ideals. Cole's protagonist has been read as exemplifying a bedbug in his parasitic mode of social interaction, in Rebecca Clark's view; displaying a fixation with musical aestheticism, as Josh Epstein argues; marking an early-twenty-first-century update of the figure of the *flâneur* famously theorized by Charles Baudelaire in "The Painter of Modern Life" and Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, as reviews by Giles Foden, James Wood; and Clair Messud suggest; and inscribing a restless and ambulatory

¹ In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Spivak defines "discursive fields" as a system of specific axiomatics discernible as part of the "systems of signs" at play in a particular society. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243–61.

automatism masquerading as cosmopolitan virtue, according to Pieter Vermeulen.² Within this dominant Eurocentric critical emphasis, however, the fact that ideas from Yorùbá culture contour many aspects of the protagonist's interactions and identity in *Open City*, such as his familial relations, his first language, and his childhood memories remain unaddressed, like a critical blind spot.³ An exception is Rebecca Cumpsty's brilliant essay, which argues for the acknowledgment of mediatory indigenous African epistemologies that render sacred what might otherwise be thought of as a secular environment of Westernized urban localities.⁴ Ultimately, however, Cumpsty fails to articulate what such specific forms of indigenous African epistemology might be and what culturally mediative roles they play in Cole's novel.

Yet, the precariousness that often afflicts the migrant African figure in transit through Western transnational spaces has prompted the quest for epistemological frames beyond those offered by Western liberal and capitalist ideals in Afro-diasporic writing. Such imaginary diasporas, as Appadurai tells us, are "space[s] of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern."⁵ This necessitates that criticism of diasporic texts extend "beyond the one-point perspective of Cartesian rationalism in the search for a forward-looking, transcultural and transitive place from which to look and be seen" in order to account for the juxtaposition of a myriad discursive *else/wheres* that bring their epistemological resonances into play to critique the experiences of the diasporic migrant subject.⁶ Voicing such underlying epistemes is also relevant, since, as Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts, a critical

² See Rebecca Clark, "'Visible Only in Speech': Peripatetic Parasitism, or, Becoming Bedbugs in Open City," *Narrative* 26.2 (May 2018): 186; Josh Epstein, "Open City's Abschied: Teju Cole, Gustav Mahler, and Elliptical Cosmopolitanism," *Studies in the Novel* 51.3 (Fall 2019): 413; Claire Messud, "The Secret Sharer.," rev. ed. of Teju Cole, *Open City*, *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2011.; Giles Foden, rev. ed. of Teju Cole, *Open City*, *The Guardian*, August 17, 2011; James Wood, "The Arrival of Enigmas," rev. ed. of Teju Cole, *Open City*, *New Yorker*, February 28, 2011. For more on the themes of cosmopolitanism in *Open City*, see Pieter Vermeulen, "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.1 (Fall 2013): 40–57, and Madhu Krishnan, "Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the *Open City*," *Textual Practice* 29.4 (2015): 675–96.

³ For example, von Gleich and Soto acknowledge Cole's place in the roster of African authors but remain invested in the dynamics of cosmopolitan knowledge production and transatlantic entanglements in their work. See Paula von Gleich and Isabel Soto, "Critical Perspectives on Teju Cole," *Atlantic Studies* 18.3 (2021): 289–97. Lily Saint's critique of the facile veneer of global cosmopolitanism in the novel retains a Eurocentric emphasis on the libidinal economy of the global north; see Lily Saint; From a Distance: Teju Cole, World Literature, and the Limits of Connection," *Novel* 51.2 (2018): 322–338, esp. 323). Madhu Krishnan's proposition that the novel be understood as centering "the 'worlding' of the non-occidental world" also stops short of delineating the contours of such an epistemic intervention. See Madhu Krishnan, "Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the *Open City*."

⁴ See Rebecca Cumpsty. "Sacralizing the Streets: Pedestrian Mapping and Urban Imaginaries in Teju Cole's *Open City* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54.3 (2019): 305–18.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

⁶ See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (Hoboken, NJ: Routledge, 2014), 46. My use of the term *else/wheres* implies particular spatially rooted discursive

engagement with modern African writing demands careful attention to “the inscription of the social world out of which one writes.” For Appiah:

Talk about the production of marginality by the culturally dominant is wholly inadequate by itself, for it ignores the reciprocal nature of power relations; it neglects the multiform varieties of individual and collective agency available to the African subject; and it diminishes the achievements and possibilities of African writing.⁷

The essential point that Appiah makes, which this article echoes, is that because cultures exist *dialectically* and “conflictual relations ... are the topos of contemporary African literature,” a nuanced engagement with modern African literature “depends essentially on seeing the writer, the reader and the work in a cultural—and thus a historical, political and social—setting.”⁸ As such, the process through which African experiential frames are being reconstituted in Afro-diasporic writing merit attention in order to identify the evolution of such cultural indices within the global literary imaginary.

A more capacious engagement with Afro-diasporic texts like Cole’s work therefore demands that we decenter Euro-America as a point of reference by scrutinizing mediatory indigenous African epistemologies that might underpin their discursive fields. Prompted by this imperative, this article asks: Can Yorùbá cultural particularities provide relevant interpretative cues for understanding *Open City*? Considering that the novel is set in New York and Brussels, with only Julius’s flights of memory linking back to his childhood days in Nigeria, to what extent can Yorùbá conceptual registers about perception, subjectivity, and representation illuminate our understanding of the novel’s critique of the protagonist’s objectifying, self-distancing ideology? Also, in view of Cole’s investment in questions of visibility in his oeuvre⁹ and *Open City in particular*, what insights can such a reading provide about the competing visual optics that define the African transnational migrant figure whose life is refracted through liminal, conflicted, and contradictory itineraries?

Yorùbá Epistemology: Perception, Subjectivity, and Visual logics

Cole’s subtle evocation of Yorùbá culture and socio-religious sensibilities in *Open City* justifies the positioning of epistemes from this context among the voices of varied “ancestors” that echo in the novel. The text’s tendency to turn visual motifs into discursive social commentaries, for example, suggests that rather than take Julius’s extensive musings on visibility for granted as merely an aspect

contexts that are drawn into a hegemonic sphere from Othered places, in ways that deflect, destabilize, and disrupt assumptions of a cohesive hegemon.

⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2.1 (Fall 1988): 174.

⁸ Appiah, “Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism,” 175.

⁹ In the postscript to his book *Blind Spot*, Cole describes the book as “the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision.”

of narrative detail, attention to these explicit reflections on the sense of sight, acts of looking, seeing, and visual inscription can disclose how Cole's novel maps an oppositional critical gaze that "looks to document" and deconstruct hegemonic assumptions and universalizing discourses.¹⁰

Delineating such an oppositional gaze, *Open City* stages a conflict between European Cartesian perspectivism as a scopic regime and the aesthetic sensibilities of Yorùbá visual hermeneutics introduced into the text by the protagonist's mnemonic journeys to his past. In his book *Vision and Visuality*, Martin Jay sees Cartesian perspectivalism as a dominant field of vision that defined the evolution of modernism.¹¹ In art, this viewpoint manifested as an "abstract coldness of the perspectival gaze due to a withdrawal of the painter's emotions from entanglement with the objects depicted in geometricalized space." As a result, "the participatory involvement of more absorptive visual modes was diminished, if not entirely suppressed, as the gap between spectator and spectacle widened." One important implication of the development of this optical order in European art was the envisioning of abstract, quantitatively conceptualized space as "more interesting to the artist than the qualitatively differentiated subjects painted within it [and] the rendering of the scene became an end in itself."¹² Because Cartesian perspectivalism viewed the world as "a standing reserve for the surveillance and manipulation of a dominating subject," the visual field depicted on the other side of the canvas was understood "as separate from the viewer [and] could become a portable commodity able to enter the circulation of capitalist exchange."¹³ Beyond visual arts, Lund Hans and Kacke Götrick in *Text as Picture* argue that similar representational optics emerged in literary texts, featuring as "iconic projection ... a well-defined tradition in Western literary history."¹⁴

Contrary to the linear, immobilizing perspective of Cartesian perspectivalism, *àwòrán* as a representational optic proposes a radically different conception of visuality. In African cultures, the act of looking involves "culturally determined

¹⁰ In her work "Black Looks: The Oppositional Gaze," bell hooks emphasizes the critical relevance of an oppositional critical gaze that "looks" to document and challenge hegemony. hooks opines that "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination ... opens up the possibility of agency" by enabling the claiming and cultivation of a political visual ethos "in order to resist." hooks further asserts that "the 'gaze' is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" because in such spaces of agency, "black people, ... can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see." Thus, acts of looking, seeing, and showing assume radical dimensions because they allow subordinates in relations of power relations to assert visual agency. See bell hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

¹¹ Jay explains that this perspective was "conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it. Such an eye was, moreover, understood to be static, unblinking, and fixated, rather than dynamic [or] moving ... from one focal point to another. For more, see Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1999), 7.

¹² Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1999), 7–8.

¹³ Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," 8, 10.

¹⁴ See Hans Lund and Kacke Götrick, *Text as Picture: Studies in the Literary Transformation of Pictures* (Lewiston, ME: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 2.

activit[ies] of visuality with ... expectations, limitations, capabilities, and epiphanies varying from one community to another.”¹⁵ Verbal-visual configurations and visual regimes often invite audiences “to look upon, gaze within, and see beyond in myriad ways that signal transitions of identity, experience, perception ... potentialities and possibilities.”¹⁶ My tracing of the subtext of Yorùbá visual registers in *Open City* draws from Babatunde Lawal’s critique of the nature, contexts, functions, and poetics of visual representations and their impact on Yorùbá cultural behavior in his essay “Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art.” Lawal’s exegesis of the concept of *àwòrán* probes the role of visual representation in reinforcing the body politic within the Yorùbá epistemological universe. According to Lawal, *àwòrán* is a mnemonic term that doubles as a generic concept for all artistic representation.”¹⁷ This concept delineates a work of art “as a construct specially crafted to appeal to the eyes, relate a representation to its subject, ... [and] convey messages that may have aesthetic, social, political, or spiritual importance.”¹⁸ Because of the tonal nature of Yorùbá language, a related word, *awòran*, refers, not to a representation but “to its beholder” being “a contraction of *a* (the one), *wò* (looking at), and *iran* (spectacle).” Lawal asserts further that “the meaning of the root verb *wò* (to look) remains intact in both words, linking the beholder to the beheld and the same term pronounced with different tones can mean “the beholder of the beheld.”¹⁹ In sum, the concept of *àwòrán* gestures to the reciprocal, dialectical process of looking involved in “bringing a work of art into being,”²⁰ as well as the process of engaging with such a product as representative of aspects of experience.

It is important to note that in its varied valences, *àwòrán* inscribes a mode of visuality that: (1) peers beyond the materially visible, (2) understands the beholder as simultaneously the beheld in a self-reflexive bifocal prism, (3) references the creative act of representation as a reciprocally co-constitutive process of subject formation, and (4) identifies an invocative, call-and-response relationship between spectacle and viewer as a primary feature of visual experience. Each of these discursive contingencies is useful in differentiating *àwòrán* from the Cartesian visual paradigm as anchored in Cole’s novel. Addressing the first, Lawal explains that in Yorùbá culture:

A strong belief in an interface of the visible and invisible, the tangible and intangible, the known and unknown ... makes it evident that the act of looking and seeing ... is much more than a perception of objects by use of the eyes. It is a social experience as well, involving, on the one hand, a delicate balance of culturally determined modes of perceiving and interpreting

¹⁵ Mary Nooter Roberts, “The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in *African Arts*,” *African Arts* 50.1 (Spring 2017): 60.

¹⁶ Roberts, “The Inner Eye,” 60.

¹⁷ Babatunde Lawal, “Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 83.3 (2001): 522.

¹⁸ Lawal, “Àwòrán,” 498.

¹⁹ Lawal, “Àwòrán,” 498.

²⁰ Roberts, “The Inner Eye,” 64.

reality and, on the other, individual reactions to specific images and spectacles.²¹

Understood as the intersection of perceptual knowledge and social registers of interpretation linked to image-making practices, *àwòrán*, as Lawal contends, “signifies much more than an image that recalls the subject. It also alludes to the creative process, especially an artist’s preliminary contemplation (*awò*) of the raw material and the pictorial memory (*iranti*) necessary for visualizing and objectifying the subject.” The organ of sight, the eyeball, is thought to have two aspects, “an outer layer called *ojù òde* (literally, external eye) or *ojù lásán* (literally, naked eye), which has to do with normal, quotidian vision, and an inner one called *ojù inú* (literally, internal eye).”²² In its composite optical valence, *aju inu* not only references qualities such as thoughtfulness, insight, and creativity but “is mainly a metaphor for the analytic eye that enables an individual to see beyond the surface, to relate visual to verbal imagery.”²³ A related term, or *ojù okàn* (literally, mind’s eye), is associated with memory, intention, intuition, insight, thinking, imagination, critical analysis, visual cognition, dreams, among other fields of cognitive activity.

A second discursive contingency of *àwòrán* as a self-reflexive bifocal prism arises from the intersection of these two layers of the eye to determine *iwòran*, the *specular gaze* of an individual. Lawal explains that “since the face is the seat of the eyes (*ojù*), no discussion of *àwòrán*, (representation) ... would be complete without relating it to *iwòran*, the act of looking and being looked at.” The stress on the root verb, *wo* (to look at), clearly shows that *àwòrán* (portrait or picture) is a “lure” for the gaze.²⁴ Located between *àwòrán* (picture or representation) and *iwòran* (the act of looking), artistic representation within the Yorùbá worldview is thus understood as that which amplifies the specular gaze that individuals project and also receive in the process of constructing themselves as persons. *Awòrán* (representation) functions as a conduit capable of recalling its referent through this visualizing process and *looking is an activity reciprocal in its format* and influenced by a host of factors, such as desire, mood, knowledge, and individual whims and caprices.²⁵ Thus, in their aesthetic intersection, the concepts of *àwòrán* and *awòran* and *iwòran* envision a mesh of rhetorical, material, and visual, image-making processes that implicate the perceiving subject in the act of figuration and function as guiding principles of Yorùbá artistic production that interweave visual and verbal imagery.

In the third semantic valence, *àwòrán* references the idea of creative representation as a co-constitutive formative process through which personhood is constructed. David Doris in his discussion of the role of objects and image-making practices in critiquing deviant personhood in Yorùbá culture suggests that

²¹ Lawal, “*Àwòrán*,” 521–22.

²² Lawal, “*Àwòrán*,” 516.

²³ Babatunde Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 239.

²⁴ Lawal, “*Àwòrán*,” 516.

²⁵ Lawal, “*Àwòrán*,” 516.

“looking is an act of creation” linked to social constructions of personhood in Yorùbá culture. In this context, *àwòrán* is a referent simultaneously to creative acts of representation, an object’s beholder, and that person’s experience of response,²⁶ all considered co-constitutively formative acts. The view of the self so registered is reciprocally constituted, a view echoed in the Yorùbá proverb, *Ọmọ ní àwòrán èrè*, which translates as “A child is an image of success.” In other words, because the child, by its resemblance to its parents, embodies and represents them, it becomes a tangible index, or representation, of consolidated parenting efforts. In this sense, *àwòrán* entails the view of Yorùbá subjecthood as “constituted not only in the recognition that one exists within an intersubjective social field, but also in the uncanny sense that one’s very subjecthood is structured as an intersubjective social field.”²⁷ Thus, it is “in acknowledging and embodying ... antecedent beings and forces [that] a person is better able to establish [their] own authority within the hierarchies of power that constitute the social world now.”²⁸

In its fourth discursive contingency, understandings of *àwòrán* centralize the call-and-response relationship between spectacle and viewer. Taking up this aesthetic dimension, Doris identifies the Yorùbá term *àpèjúwe*—literally, “that which calls out what the eyes see clearly”—as a concept suggestive of the importance of visual engagement wherein certain forms, by attracting the eye, call out for aspects of emotional investment—suffering, fear, and so on.²⁹ As Abiodun et al indicate, the modern Yorùbá term that references such an interactive viewer engagement most clearly is *ìlutí* or “call and response,” a prominent feature of contemporary music, dance, and etiquette.³⁰ Seen in this relational and invocative aspect, Yorùbá visual aesthetics relating to *àwòrán* suggest “a learned process, acquired from others who know how to look, each situation being defined additionally by the specific contexts of each viewing experience.”³¹

Read through the modality of looking that the discursive contingencies of *àwòrán* suggests, *Open City* proposes *affective visibility* as an indispensable aspect of a sensitive, recuperative, and empathic imagination within which persons are co-constitutively constructed with and through others in ways that exceed the limits of Cartesian perspectivalism. By affective visibility, I mean the capacity of visual cues to evoke a sense of the disremembered by instigating affective

²⁶ Roberts, “The Inner Eye,” 64.

²⁷ David Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49-50 (Spring-Autumn 2006), 115-38, esp. 120.

²⁸ Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” 115.

²⁹ David Doris, “Symptoms and Strangeness in Yorùbá Anti-Aesthetics,” *African Arts* 38.4 (Winter 2005): 24-31, 92.

³⁰ See Rowland Abiodun and Ulli Beier, *A Young Man Can Have the Embroidered Cloth of an Elder but He Can't Have the Rage of an Elder Conversations on Yorùbá Culture* (Bayreuth, Germany: Iwalewa Haus, 1991), 29.

³¹ Suanne Prestone Blier, *Art and Risk in Ancient Yorùbá Ife: History, Power and Identity*, c. 1300 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 115.

responses through specific mental images generated in a text.³² Through its reference to a pivotal constitutive force that defines the cognitive function and the subjective enunciation of the viewer and the viewed, *àwòrán*, as a critical concept, speaks to an “visual hermeneutics” intrinsic to a range of Yorùbá image-making practices that extend from visual arts to narrative practice, all of which cohere in the production of Yorùbá personhood as an ontological and social being.³³ As Doris explains, this visual epistemology “undermines the privilege associated with notions of unbounded human freedom” because the subject is “called into participation” within a social imaginary “where many things may be empowered to act as subjects.” In a process of *visual calling* that *àwòrán* posits, the image also sees its viewer because, as “the index of its creator’s intentional acts, ... it possesses a face that can be seen and eyes that see.” Such calling prompts a response in the viewer through a lawful power expressed in objects that embody *ọju*, a term that connotes “face,” “eyes,” and “presence.”³⁴ Transforming even as it is formed, *àwòrán* alludes to a dialectics of seeing central to an intersubjective, relational social network.

It is possible to identify within the intersubjective paradigm of *àwòrán* a similarity with the well-known notion of *Ubuntu*, “a South African concept drawn from the Nguni languages but one that resonates with similar concepts in other parts of Africa.”³⁵ Frequently traced to the often-cited proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, a person is a person through other persons, the defining principles of *Ubuntu*—as a foundational ethos, a philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview of African humanism—have been widely studied by scholars.³⁶ As Bhekizizwe Peterson submits, *Ubuntu* emphasizes the notion that “personhood, identity, and morality are not innate but are achieved in relation to and through social

³² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26, 27. Roland Barthes’s reading of photographs as scenes of culture in *Camera Lucida* identifies affective force as an “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of like an arrow, and pierces [him]” (26). This emotive force, which he names *punctum*, acts as a “sting, speck, cut, little hole” that defines his reaction to an image. “A photograph’s ‘punctum’ is that accident which pricks, bruises, and is poignant to [the viewer]” (27).

³³ David Doris asserts that, in its etymology, *àwòrán* as descriptor is applied to drawings, paintings, photographs, TV shows, and sculptures alike, suggesting that in Yorùbá culture, the view of the image as that which effects a pivotal cognitive function in the viewer intersects these representational genres. See Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” 115.

³⁴ Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” 121, 123.

³⁵ See James Ogude and Unifier Dyer, “Utu/Ubuntu and Community Restoration: Narratives of Survivors in Kenya’s 2007 Postelection Violence,” in *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, ed. James Ogude (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 206–26.

³⁶ See Ogude, *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*; Wim van Binsbergen, “Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society,” *Quest* 15.1–2 (2001): 53–89; Chris Vervliet, *The Human Person, African Ubuntu and the Dialogue of Civilizations* (London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers, 2009); Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1997); Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

interaction based on ethical conduct with others, especially in conditions that are marked by imbalances in social and personal power.”³⁷ The central idea of *Ubuntu*, which insists that personhood depends on a meaningful relationship with others, is echoed in the intersection of visuality, personhood, and aesthetic practices that *àwòrán* signifies.

As a critical visual ethos rooted in Yorùbá culture, *Àwòrán* provides relevant interpretative cues for understanding Cole’s character’s conflicted relationship with his cultural antecedents because of the contextual background of *Open City*. What comes to the fore in tracing the discursive contingencies of *àwòrán* in the novel are the operations of contesting visual paradigms that interact to define subjective legibility. From the narrator’s palimpsestic descriptions of sites of memory in New York City to the ekphrastic readings of paintings and photographs that Julius performs, the novel elevates vision into an ethos to inscribe a reality that is not so much beneath the surface as caught between interstices. In many instances, these visual moments reflect a challenge of the assumptions of universal subjecthood that ignore the ethical demands of intersubjective acknowledgment. Read through the lens of *àwòrán*, these instances of visualization register as iterative normative enactments that link characters to the subjectivities of others, past, present, and future, creating a narrative shroud from which the submerged reader emerges with a heightened, more composite awareness of the debris of violated lives that “underwrite monuments of European civilization and engendering new awareness of and empathy for the Other.”³⁸ In what follows, I will demonstrate how the concept of *àwòrán* as an aesthetic framework spotlights a subversive visual impulse in *Open City* in three specific ways. Firstly, I trace how this aesthetic undermines Cartesian visual logics and introduces different inflections to the grammar of place in the text. Secondly, I explore how Julius’s aspirations for legibility as a European aesthetic subject compromises his capacity as a reliable, *legible* character. Lastly, I consider how the protagonist and ritual artifacts as *àwòrán* (representation) *visually* call attention to the violences of aesthetic tourism and their attendant colonial histories in the novel.

Lines versus Mirrors: Optical Dissonance and the Bird’s Eye View

In *Open City*, the tensions between the distanced all-knowing Cartesian subject invested in the objectification of all within its gaze and the demands of *àwòrán*, a dynamic, multifocal visual ethic that considers looking as a co-defining process for the viewed and the viewer, both clash in the figure of the protagonist.³⁹

³⁷ Bhekizizwe Peterson, “The Art of Personhood: Kinship and Its Social Challenges,” *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, 75.

³⁸ Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 158; *Slate Magazine* (<https://slate.com/culture/2017/06/teju-coles-blind-spot-review.html>).

³⁹ Jay reads what he calls the “oculocentricism” of European modernity as a systematic structuring of visual fields underlying practices of spatial production that imagine the disinterested, disembodied subject as existing outside—and exercising visual control over—the world it claims to

Julius's fixation with the bird's eye view evokes a posture of Cartesian detachment and institutes one important discursive strategy through which the ensuing conflict of visual paradigms pivots: what I call the bird's-eye-view problematic. The epigraph to part 1 of the novel: "Death is the perfection of the eye," which proposes death "as the route to a kind of visionary fullness,"⁴⁰ gestures toward this problematic and signals a morphology of image texts and visually grounded conceptual references that Cole's protagonist leaves in the wake of his perambulations through New York.

It is noteworthy that Julius's visual explorations of the city parallel his hobby as a birdwatcher. Curious about how human life and activities below would look like from a bird's eye view, he wonders "if the two [his walks and bird watching hobbies] are connected."⁴¹ He finds, ultimately, that different bird species are "impossible to identify" through his distanced, objectifying gaze given that he can only see the birds as "tiny, solitary, and mostly colorless specks fizzing across the sky."⁴² By the end of the novel, however, the birds morph from abstract specks to tangible evidence that "something more troubling was at work"⁴³ when their deaths upon collision with the Statue of Liberty are recorded as a deeply tragic phenomenon. As a framing technique, the progression that the birds undergo from insignificant reference to central index of social tragedy is possibly analogical to the evolution toward a heightened ethical intersubjective sensitivity that Julius ultimately fails to undergo. The bird's-eye trope also interlinks pictures, art works, and "image-texts," such as the extended description of the former site of the World Trade Center, into discursive skeins that question the relationship between visibility and insight.

Because birds are associated with vision, open movement, and forward progress that require no contact, Rebecca Clark suggest that Julius's fixation with the birds "baits us to associate [them] with Julius and his mode of narration."⁴⁴ Clark asserts that operating from this privileged perspective, the protagonist's ability to "pan out to see, read, and map the whole, from a subject position of disinterested omniscience" appears unhampered.⁴⁵ Clark also notes

know only from afar. He traces the roots of this perspective to Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy (See Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," 4). Similarly, Hal Foster explains that this visual model of the modern era instituted a separation between subject and object that "renders the first transcendental and the second inert" (See Foster, "Preface," *Vision and Visuality*); for more on *àwòrán* as a codefining visual ethic, see Roberts, "The Inner Eye," 64.

⁴⁰ In his essay "On Carrying and Being Carried: From Translation to Migration and Back Again," Cole admits to a preoccupation with visibility embedded in this phrase. For him, *Open City* aims to an account of what happens when a person is looking at ... some sort of object that is somehow removed in time. (See Cole, *Interview with Anderson Tepper* (<https://tinhouse.com/a-conversation-with-teju-cole/>)).

⁴¹ Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012), 5.

⁴² Cole, *Open City*, 5.

⁴³ Cole, *Open City*, 251.

⁴⁴ Rebecca Clark, "'Visible Only in Speech': Peripatetic Parasitism, or, Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*," *Narrative* 26.2 (May 2018): 186.

⁴⁵ Clark, "'Visible Only in Speech,'" 186.

that “the bird’s-eye view is not just an idealization of a certain sort of freedom, ... but also a tool of graphic ... circumscription that allows one sort of pen to create another.” Although Clark’s reference to the pen implies the idea of *écriture*, it is possible to read here the acknowledgment of contesting scripts of legibility that Julius attempts to navigate in *Open City*. However, Clark understanding of Julius’s “need for others’ stories” merely as a posture of “disinterested omniscience”⁴⁶ and a symptom of a grotesque parasitic disposition that feeds off the trauma of others occludes Julius’s antecedents as a Yorùbá man in whose culture formations of personhood are largely intersubjective. Because social relations in this context often involve a “communicative process of a visual dialogue, of call and response, in which an individual is also implicated as an image to be regarded by others”⁴⁷ Julius’s often-suppressed desire to connect with others speaks is evocative of this sensibility.

Karin Barber amply demonstrates this point about Yorùbá intersubjective social ethos in her work on *oriki* (in Yorùbá meaning “oral praise-poetry”).⁴⁸ *Oriki* are names of appraisal that encapsulate the essential attributes of the subject they are called; their performances embody subject reconstitution “at the level of language rendered in the sensuous material of spoken utterance as a disjunctive stream of fragmentary, compressed images.”⁴⁹ What is noteworthy about the composition of Yorùbá personhood through the imagistic compositions of *Oriki* is that, although all *Oriki* mark individuality, they also have “a tendency to float, to be shared by more than one subject.” The multivalent format of *oriki* as “a tissue of quotations [and] a collection of borrowings from diverse sources” demonstrates that individual subjects “share with others the components that make up their innermost identity, and recognize fragments of it in other people wherever they go.”⁵⁰

The eclectic and incorporative mode of *Oriki* sheds light both on Julius’s mode of narration and discursive tensions defined by competing ocular fields in the novel. Rather than seeing Julius’s collaging impulse as parasitic longing, what becomes apparent is the disjuncture that his posture as an immigrant navigating between contesting visual paradigms with opposing terms of legibility imposes. On one hand, he is drawn to the intersubjective view of social relations as a call-and-response process of visual dialogue and reciprocal regard engendered by his formative Yorùbá cultural background. On the other, he is also lured by the demands of Cartesian perspectivalist vision to aspire toward the stance of “an isolated bourgeois subject, ... that fails to recognize its corporeality, its intersubjectivity, [and] its embeddedness in the flesh of the world.”⁵¹ Although the former emphasizes a correlation between self and other that Julius repeatedly

⁴⁶ Clark, “Visible Only in Speech,” 186.

⁴⁷ Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” 115.

⁴⁸ See Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yorùbá Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 249–50.

⁴⁹ Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*, 115.

⁵⁰ Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*, 249–50.

⁵¹ Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” 24.

attempts to establish in his ceaseless journeys, the later celebrates a distancing, immobilizing optic that impedes his efforts at doing so.

African Negation: The Colonizing Voice and the Dilemma of Legibility

Alienation and conflict arising from the detached, self-absorbed mode of relations that Cartesian perspectivalism promotes afflicts Julius throughout the novel. Although he often disavows Yorùbá notions of intersubjective empathy, the psychological costs perceiving the entire world and other people as a function of the narcissistic self are latent in aporetic moments that recur in *Open City*. For example, key narrative details are elided at critical textual junctures where “Julius’s motives and self-understanding are conspicuously withheld, often along with key bits of narrative information.”⁵² The reader is left in the dark, in one instance, as to Julius’s specific efforts to locate his grandmother, the primary purpose of his trip to Brussels. In another pivotal moment of his confrontation with Moji, a childhood friend who accuses Julius of rape, the usually voluble narrator is totally silent about his self-motivations. Not even her desperate pleas: “But will you say something now? Will you say something?”⁵³ can provoke a response. Instead, Julius turns to a narrative tangent about Camus and Nietzsche, recounting a “double story” reminiscent of what his conversation with Moji would have been had he been capable of intersubjective empathy. Beyond seeing these moments as “reiterat[ing] the scope of the African diaspora’s representational impossibility,”⁵⁴ *àwòrán* as a critical frame spotlights the floundering of a subject caught in the disjuncture between the imperatives of intersubjective ideals, on the one hand, and a flattened, distant, aestheticized ideology, on the other.⁵⁵

Julius’s rebuttal of intersubjective connection has ethical consequences because his aesthetic approach to the world results in ethical and psychological deformation. His aspirations to project the image of a citizen of the world is achieved at the cost of negating his African origins; his carefully curated cosmopolitan identity being a facade that earns him legibility within the global stage, where his Nigerianness and Yorùbáness might be looked at askance and assures him that “being Julius in everyday life ... confirm[s] [his] not being fully Nigerian.”⁵⁶ When Kenneth, another character, inquires about his Yorùbá background, Julius’s irritation is barely concealed. Linking this encounter to a previous experience, he says: “I thought of the cabdriver who had driven me home from the Folk Art Museum—hey, I’m African just like you. Kenneth was

⁵² See Karen Jacobs, “Teju Cole’s Photographic Afterimages,” *Image & Narrative* 15.2 (2014): 87–105, esp. 92.

⁵³ Cole, *Open City*, 237.

⁵⁴ Cole, *Open City*, 92.

⁵⁵ Cole explains that the novel is concerned with “the story of the *disregarded*, a category that immigrants overlap extensively with” in the sense of the ignored, the invisible.” See Cole, Interview with Anderson Tepper.

⁵⁶ Cole, *Open City*, 77.

making a similar claim.”⁵⁷ Julius’s cosmopolitan toga demands a disavowal of African antecedents, a repudiation echoed by other characters such as Dr. Gupta, who captures his repulsion with everything African, saying, “When I think about Africa, I want to spit.”⁵⁸ For Saidu, an inmate in a detention facility who arrives in America by way of Bamako, Tangier, Nigeria, and Liberia, these places exist as part of a narrative memory suffused with images of hunger, violence, war, and death. Within a global imaginary where the idea of the African had become ... “a shorthand for murderous”⁵⁹ ideas, Cole’s text critiques a continued inscription of Africa as an index of crisis within global sociopolitical discourses through the assimilatory pretensions of its protagonist.

Consequently, the critique of African negation that *Open City* conducts thus hinges on staging how Julius’s fixation with European aestheticism and colonizing optics relate to his disavowal of his African antecedents. Contrary to his isolationist tendencies, the novel’s intermedial opening moment in mid-thought “And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall...”⁶⁰ suggests a sense of continuation and relationality. Beginning from a crisscrossing of routes that intersects familiar city landmarks—Morningside Heights, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Morningside Park, Central Park, Sakura Park, Harlem, and the Hudson—Julius’s plotting of paths that link these places coincides with his efforts to evolve a viable narrative about his positionality as an immigrant subject living in New York. His fleeting encounters with other marginal subjects like himself, people outside the mainstream, who have arrived in New York via difficult journeys from other places, parallels these efforts. The novel charts a dizzyingly vast geographic range of personal histories that connects people from Nigeria, Morocco, Liberia, Rwanda, Belgium, Japan, Haiti, and Central America, through a catalogue of “arrivants,” who include a professor who lived through Japanese internment, a Liberian being held in a detention facility, a Haitian shoe shiner, and a Moroccan student working in an internet cafe in Brussels.

By recounting conflicting and connecting histories circulating in and through the quintessentially global city of New York that echo Julius’s personal experiences, the text suggests that an empathic social imagination that privileges the connectedness of human beings can negate the hazards that a dissociative view of the world poses to Others. What stands out in this human ocean of transnational flows is the ease with which the wayfarers can become coopted to serve as footnotes in more dominant narratives intended to overwrite their presence and legibility. The protagonist’s firm installation of himself in the readers’ sights as narrative authority personifies such a disposition, which manifests as the marginalization of Othered voices. Although Julius as aesthete-narrator invites his audience to read these encounters as moments of openness to alterity that enable cross-cultural connection, this invitation flounders when we pay attention to the imbalances of power with regard to who speaks, who listens, and who is spoken for. As Rebecca Clark succinctly puts it, Julius:

⁵⁷ Cole, *Open City*, 42.

⁵⁸ Cole, *Open City*, 32.

⁵⁹ Cole, *Open City*, 191.

⁶⁰ Cole, *Open City*, 5.

Plays fast and loose—or rather slow and loose—with narrative boundaries. He collapses all of the stories he hears and retells them in his own affectively flat, unhurried, unidirectional univocality. At the same time, he freely and invasively diagnoses, deconstructs, and symptomatizes any and all narratives that are not his own.⁶¹

Proud of his “refined” listening skills and powers of observation, Julius often overwrites the voices of other characters by superimposing his personal interpretations on their experience. He ceaselessly aspires to impress readers with his immense artistic and historical knowledge, detailed descriptions of various aesthetic experiences, and ready analyses of pressing sociopolitical issues tintured through his assumed lens of what constitutes a global imagination. In a posture reminiscent of the colonial overwrite of non-Western histories, Julius’s dictatorial regulation of voice as aesthete-narrator and cosmopolitan man of the world retains sole control over what he considers relevant moments of narratological focus, even when that implies occluding the trauma of others as the penultimate revelation of Moji’s rape reveals.

One does not need to search far to uncover the inspiration behind Julius’s “dilettantish cultural elitism.”⁶² His immersion in what Vermeulen calls “pseudo aesthetic solutions” and his self-congratulatory intercultural vision that is touristic at best is not isolated from his obsession with European “high” culture. This posturing frequently prompts Julius to “analogically transform [other characters] ... into flat works of visual art,” as is evident when he imaginatively “produces archetypical stories for the dancing Rwandans and the vacuuming woman”⁶³ he sees in Brussels. Such a universalist posture is not dissimilar to the sensibilities of Cartesian perspectivalism, which, Martin Jay notes, functions in the service of political self-understandings that “depend on distanciation,” argues “against the hermeneutic immersion of the self in the world,” and creates “the fiction of an objective distance from it.”⁶⁴ Because these affectations diminish his ethical stance as a reliable character, Epstein puts it succinctly when he says of Julius: if he expects healing from aesthetic identification, “he is looking in the wrong place.”⁶⁵

Staging Disjuncture: Visual Art and the Epistemological Implications of an Unraveled Protagonist

David Doris reminds us that visual arts in Yorùbá culture reflect “crucial components of a complex visual dialogue between their creators, their recipients, and the social forces that bind them all together.”⁶⁶ Etched through a

⁶¹ Clark, “Visible Only in Speech,” 189.

⁶² Epstein, “Open City’s Abschied,” 418.

⁶³ Clark, “Visible Only in Speech,” 193.

⁶⁴ Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” 24.

⁶⁵ Epstein, “Open City’s Abschied,” 414.

⁶⁶ David T. Doris, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yorùbá Culture,” *African Arts* 35.3 (Autumn 2002): 7–8, 10, 88, esp. 8.

profusion of references to visual art and detailed scenic descriptions, the grammar of visibility in *Open City* is not without epistemological implications, especially considering the detailed visual mapping that the protagonist provides of art objects and monuments linked to scenes of colonial effacement in New York and Brussels. When read within the context of Yorùbá culture where knowledge (*imo*) of experience is closely associated with visibility and a person is often believed to have *mo* (to know) of experience they have witnessed in a firsthand or in a personal manner, Julius's frequent return to and reflections at such sites both stages and questions the possibilities of recuperation that narrative ekphrasis as a mode of discourse offers, thus dramatizing the role on visibility in the very constitution of knowledge.

By emphasizing an agglomeration of individuals' views of the world that conform to or contest the givens of experience,⁶⁷ Cole's elliptical sampling of related visual tangents provide opportunities for deconstructing universalist assumptions such as the Cartesian optics that attract Julius. The juxtaposition of inner reality and obvious outward experiential circumstance in his reflections interlinks a collage of repeated image texts that invoke dyadic valences such as visible/invisible, public/private, near/far, and remembrance/forgetfulness.⁶⁸ In one iteration, for example, an inert figure in a postcard, "a small man ... whose face is invisible because of the shadow" becomes animated as a "witness, [who] watches [Julius] while [he] works."⁶⁹ In another, he is stranded on a fire escape after a concert, with the "street flashing in the visible distance" while "[his] fellow concertgoers went about their lives oblivious to [his] plight."⁷⁰ In yet another instance, he is intrigued by "an air of hermeticism" in John Brewster's portraits of deaf children, and although he acknowledges that each of the portraits is "a sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter," Julius feels drawn "deep into their world, as if all the time between them and [them] had somehow vanished."⁷¹ Such strategies enable Cole, as Epstein notes, to "derail narrative linearity, marking something both crucial and disruptive in the passage of time."⁷²

Because he is drawn to the possibility of intersubjective empathy that *àwòrán* suggests, Julius's reflections on art enable him, as it were, to riffle through time to identify resonantly proleptic moments, which, in their aesthetic force, suggest the suspension of time and its deleterious impacts, both on the individual figure and civilization at large. In a related move, he also turns to the photographic medium to assess its capacity for temporal suspension. His musing on Martin Munkácsi's photograph of three African boys running into the surf in Liberia and

⁶⁷ Doris, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yorùbá Culture," 8.

⁶⁸ For further discussion of the reconstellated model of the dialectic as critical reading methodology, see Ato Quayson, *Calibrations Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press), 2003.

⁶⁹ Cole, *Open City*, 240.

⁷⁰ Cole, *Open City*, 248.

⁷¹ Cole, *Open City*, 38.

⁷² Josh Epstein, "Open City's Abschied: Teju Cole, Gustav Mahler, and Elliptical Cosmopolitanism," *Studies in the Novel* 51.3 (Fall 2019): 413.

Henri Cartier-Bresson's "ideal of the decisive moment" presents such moments as recuperative: rendering legible that which would have been engulfed by the "onrush of time."⁷³ In these images, paintings, and photographs, Julius is drawn to a pattern of elliptical temporality that transgresses the developmental logic of a continuous, coherent linear trajectory of history as teleological progression. At play here is a resistant temporal consciousness that fosters iteration until the conditions of possibility that enable change can be imagined, if not achieved. By fracturing linear homogenous time through elliptical temporal supersession, the novel juxtaposes disjunctive spatial orders in an attempt to fill in the blanks of history. It thus assesses the possibility of finding an adequate medium for affectively preserving the past as a legible trace.

But such longings are merely temporary flights of fancy for Julius. Enamored of the ideals of a society where the maxim "Others are not like us"⁷⁴ propels the machinery of exclusion, his rarified sense of self impairs his desire to connect meaningfully with others and often leaves him adrift and empty, a consciousness echoed in his ceaseless walking. Yet, if, as Doris suggests, "the body and psyche of the individual are images through which the ... historical forces they represent continue to establish their authority within the world of the living,"⁷⁵ then Julius's performative self-distancing aestheticism introduces a disjuncture that seeps into multiple aspects of his life and social interaction and alienates him from family, neighbors, and friends. Proceeding from the individual and private to the public and collective, a counterpoint to this self-induced alienation is echoed in the histories of trauma, loss, and effacement to which the novel repeatedly returns. Julius's ruminations about the Native American loss of their collective past, historical trauma on African Americans, the negative space of Ground Zero, and so forth, all hint at the legacies of violence that continue to define the very question of minority existence on a global scale. Despite his awareness of these traumas, however, the protagonist remains largely aloof to any meaningful affective identification with the victims of these histories, restraining his interests to merely mining such traumas for their narrative novelty.

In deconstructing its protagonist, *Open City* subverts the vaunted "productive alienation"⁷⁶ and dissociative notions of objectivity that parody Cartesian optics in contemporary culture. By unraveling these ideals that Julius embodies, the novel enables us to see how competing optical fields define the legibility of the immigrant African subject within the global racial economy. An underlying narrative dissonance generated by these conflicting optics renders Julius aware that his encounters with others are hampered by "the persisting visual echo of something that was already in the past"⁷⁷ and he often feels "as though [he] had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus or fallen so far away

⁷³ Cole, *Open City*, 147.

⁷⁴ Cole, *Open City*, 207.

⁷⁵ Doris, "The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture," 120.

⁷⁶ See James Wood, "The Arrival of Enigmas," *New Yorker*, February 11, 68–72, esp. 70.

⁷⁷ Cole, *Open City*, 247.

from it that it had faded away.”⁷⁸ His conversations sometimes feel like “a film in which the soundtrack and the images were out of sync.”⁷⁹

Julius’s characterization as a trainee psychiatrist also enables Cole to speak to the ambiguities and disjuncture relating to knowledge and knowing that the protagonist grapples within the novel. His view of psychiatric practice, which he shares with a friend, subverts assumptions of the all-knowing rational subject by comparing the work of the creative artist to the diagnostic struggle of doctors to “marry the spirit of the material with its visible form.” Acknowledging that the “use [of] external signs as clues to internal realities,” whether in art or in medical diagnostic practices, “remains primitive at best, Julius states: “I viewed each patient as a dark room, ... the strongest symptoms are sometimes not visible ... and the mind is able to deceive itself.”⁸⁰ Coming near the end of a narrative where the reader spends much of the time “in” the protagonist’s mind, Julius’s questioning of the viability of psychiatry as a frame of objective diagnosis and knowledge production betrays the artificiality of the ideals he had long championed.

Also critiqued is the cosmopolitan penchant for summoning and discarding “computationally useful others”⁸¹ that defines the cultural economy of late capitalism. Simon Gikandi traces this aesthetic ideology to eighteenth-century Europe and cites its *modus operandi* as a fixation with Others where Otherness is simultaneously “the enabling conditions of beauty, taste, and judgment ... and the counterpoints or opposites of these conditions.”⁸² *Open City* queries such aesthetics of Otherness and its role in producing and unraveling the transnational migrant African subject. Farouq, a character who is critical of celebratory terms such as “melting pot, salad bowl, [and] multiculturalism”⁸³ invokes Edward Said in a discussion of Moroccan literature, to produce an indictment of the “orientalizing impulse” where cultural appropriation “as orientalist entertainment is allowed,” but not “difference with its own intrinsic value”⁸⁴.

The ethical implications of engaging Otherness as Orientalist entertainment are evident in Julius’s visits to Saito’s apartment, where he observes the “Polynesian masks” and “life-size Papuan ancestor figure” that the professor collects because he “adore[s] imaginary monsters.”⁸⁵ Along with other similar instances of “the aestheticized exotic,”⁸⁶ Dr. Saito’s ring of Polynesian masks can be understood as *àwòrán* in the *retrospective* sense in that they *visually* call attention to the violences of aesthetic tourism and its attendant colonial histories. Pointing to traumatic histories while simultaneously occluding them, these masks

⁷⁸ Cole, *Open City*, 248.

⁷⁹ Cole, *Open City*, 165.

⁸⁰ Cole, *Open City*, 230.

⁸¹ Clark, “Visible Only in Speech,” 197.

⁸² Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10.3 (September 2003): 455–80, esp. 458.

⁸³ Cole, *Open City*, 111–12.

⁸⁴ Cole, *Open City*, 102.

⁸⁵ Cole, *Open City*, 13.

⁸⁶ Epstein, “Open City’s Abschied,” 423.

introduce an ellipsis in the narrative, as Epstein suggests.⁸⁷ But rather than merely obscuring such traumas, the masks, by evoking the *else/wheres* from which they originate, produce an indictment of the spaces where they are present as complicitous in the violence of history. Thus, they draw both viewer (and reader) into “an awareness of [their] historical origins, as well as the institutions, laws of practice, other objects and indeed, people that brought [them] into being,⁸⁸ all factors constitutive of the ritual fields in which they were produced and which they, in turn, produce. In doing so, the masks project a dialectic gaze that displaces the capacity of the aesthete to meaningfully engage with the cultures they embody and represent. That the Orientalist aesthete is thus being diminished by such a gaze is undeniable. As later Julius observes amid these artifacts, “All that was missing ... were photographs: of family members, of friends, of Professor Saito himself.”⁸⁹ Saito’s terror of “real” monsters hints at the deformative alienation that such exploitative encounters produce.

Open City censures Julius’s performative embodiment of an exploitative, objectifying mode relation, which in Madhu Krishnan’s view, “masquerades as a universalism in which everything is connected, and subjects are freed from the imperatives of local attachments,”⁹⁰ as inadequate to the demands of intersubjective acknowledgment that Yorùbá conceptions of subjecthood necessitate. His failure to really *see* others in any meaningful way, in effect, cancels him out and results in his being reciprocally unseen as a participant in the “protective aegis of collectivity.”⁹¹ By the time the reader encounters the aporetic moment of revelation about his rape of Moji, it is apparent that rather than filling in narrative blanks to produce a coherent, reliable narrative, Julius’s narrative has, in actuality, been revolving around a giant blind spot that all his psychiatry skills fail to plumb. The moment when, stranded on a fire escape, he finds himself lost in relativity, between distant stars that emit “light present to [him] as blank interstices and the wailing of an ambulance “reaching [him] from seven floors below” dramatizes this subjective aporia and his confession that the starlight was unreachable to him because his “entire being was caught up in a blind spot”⁹² does not come as a surprise. From the Yorùbá perspective, he would be considered “having no face” (*kòlójú*) by the end of the novel; that is, his actions reveal him to be no longer a full and trusted participant in the dialogue that structures the human community. Because a person is a person because he sees and is seen by others, we see Julius, but he’s not really there.⁹³ His narrative authority unravels to reveal a performative aestheticism, nothing more than the callous,

⁸⁷ Epstein, “Open City’s Abschied,” 104.

⁸⁸ Epstein, “Open City’s Abschied,” 122.

⁸⁹ Cole, *Open City*, 164.

⁹⁰ Krishnan, “Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the Open City,” 689.

⁹¹ Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” 123.

⁹² Cole, *Open City*, 247–48.

⁹³ Doris, “The Unfunctioning Baby and Other Spectacular Departures from the Human in Yorùbá Visual Culture,” 126.

empty gestures of a “know-it-all” psychiatrist⁹⁴ incapable of real intersubjective empathy. In failing to meet the ethical demands of social reciprocity, he becomes an *àwòrán*, a representative object lesson, a diminished spectacle that offers “an unsettling analogue for an intimately dread urban pest.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

Open City deconstructs the protagonist’s negation of African antecedents by subtly centralizing epistemes of Yorùbá origin, specifically the view of art and representation as an ethically charged site of affective visibility. In doing so, Cole’s text responds to the clash of competing scopic regimes within transnational spaces, pointing toward the underlay of violent effacements that remain visible “in plain sight” if one cares to look. The novel, therefore, enjoins us to peer beyond the facade of empty cosmopolitan gestures and universalist assumptions to the material reality of normalized violence that confronts the immigrant subject.

It is important to note, in conclusion, that Julius is symptomatic of a global knowledge economy that celebrates an objectifying, self-distancing, and touristic vision, commoditized aestheticism and a voyeuristic fascination with trauma. This perhaps explains why Wood applauds Julius for being “central to himself, in ways that are sane, forgivable, and familiar.” For Wood, although Julius’s “selfish normality ... ordinary solipsism ... [and] lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul is an obstacle to understanding other people,” this posture still “enables liberal journeys of comprehension.”⁹⁶ The problem, then, is not only with the *àwòrán* (representation) but with the lens of its production. As the character himself muses: What are we to do when the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic? If Julius as a character is “marked by a malicious narcissism,”⁹⁷ what does this inscription reveal about the conditions of possibility and aesthetic ideals that have shaped him? Are these conditions still shrouded in a collective blind spot “so broad that it had taken over most of the eye.”⁹⁸

To these questions, Cole’s novel offers no easy answers. The global collective “eye” that Julius evokes remains imperfect, incapable of fully registering, acknowledging, or even transcending the occlusions of its blind spots, no matter how panoramic universalist assumptions may aspire to be. As *Open City* demonstrates, the inconclusive blind spot into which the novel’s ending seems to devolve is penultimate in a series of moments of narrative suspension and deflection. In the end, Julius, the would-be all-seeing narrator, dejectedly acknowledges that “the mind is opaque to itself, and it’s hard to tell where, precisely, these areas of opacity are.”⁹⁹ By leaving Julius and the narrative threads “stranded in the ellipsis” of an unresolved plot, the novel emphasizes

⁹⁴ Cole, *Open City*, 237.

⁹⁵ Clark, “Visible Only in Speech,” 197.

⁹⁶ See Wood, “The Arrival of Enigmas,” 72.

⁹⁷ Krishnan, “Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the *Open City*,” 677.

⁹⁸ Cole, *Open City*, 230.

⁹⁹ Cole, *Open City*, 230.

the need to “sit with the trouble” by staging a resistant elliptical, iterative temporality that insists that we imagine the conditions of possibility and alternative visual prisms and subjective postures that can enable ethical change. As the interaction between Yorùbá visual epistemologies framed around the concept of *àwòrán* suggests, it is within the ceaseless dialectic interaction between image and referent, spectacle and essence, and viewer and viewed that the ethical call to an intersubjective subjecthood that is reciprocally constituted emerges. This call, which Julius fails to answer, is *Open City*'s ultimate proposition as the key toward a more human world.

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