

Perspective

Literary Cosmopolitanisms in Teju Cole's  
*Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines cosmopolitanism in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007) and *Open City* (2011). The protagonists of both texts maintain cosmopolitan identities largely by embracing an international literary culture in which elite cosmopolitan fiction relays the experiences of marginalized cosmopolitan subjects such as migrant workers and refugees. The texts, however, suggest the parochialism of the protagonists' cosmopolitan sensibilities by introducing characters who possess creative resilience and language skills that the protagonists lack. Cole's texts thus foreground the limits of a literary cosmopolitanism that privileges Anglophone fiction published in New York and London and gesture toward alternative literary cosmopolitanisms notable for their linguistic and geographical diversity, if not their glamour. Although Farouq and the "yahoo boys" aspire to membership in an elite cosmopolitan culture, their lives are non-spectacular and relatively immobile. Cole's texts value a cosmopolitan literariness that neither hails from the intellectual cosmopolitan elite nor takes the dispossessed cosmopolitan migrant for its subject.

**Keywords:** Teju Cole; cosmopolitanism; translation; publishing

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Teju Cole is perhaps best known in North America for his novel *Open City*, published by Random House in 2011 and winner of the 2012 PEN/Hemingway Award. The novel, written in the first person, relays the thoughts of Julius, a young psychiatrist completing his residency in New York City in late 2006 and early 2007. Julius, as Claire Messud suggests in her review of the novel, displays "a cosmopolite's detach-

ment from his American experience.” His is “a worldly foreigner’s New York, colored by simultaneous curiosity about and recoil from the city’s history and essences” (Messud). Julius’ cosmopolitan intellectualism undoubtedly accounts for some of *Open City*’s critical acclaim. Anthony Cummins, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, submits that the text’s frequent allusions to artists such as J.M. Coetzee, Roland Barthes, and Wong Kar Wai seem to “enact a fantasy about the contemporary significance of high culture” that “flatters” the “sensibilities” of literary critics. Cole’s fiction explores the attitude of cosmopolitan detachment, as well as that attitude’s relation to immersion in an elite cosmopolitan literary culture.

Cole’s interest in literary cosmopolitanism is not new to *Open City* but is a continuation of ideas first explored in *Every Day is for the Thief*. The novella, which was released in 2007 by Cassava Republic Press, is not yet available in North America although Cole’s website promises that “a revised version will be published in the US and the UK in 2014 by Random House and by Faber respectively.” The fiction begins with an “Author’s Note” that claims that “[t]he unnamed narrator of the story is similar to me in certain ways, and different in some other ways” (*Every Day* 6). While the narrator may be both like and unlike Cole, he bears a striking resemblance to the narrator of *Open City*. Like Julius, the unnamed narrator works as a psychiatrist in New York; like Julius, he attended a Nigerian military boarding school in Zaria in his youth; and, like Julius, his Nigerian father died when he was young, and he is estranged from his European mother. Both protagonists wander city streets through 2006 and 2007, although Julius wanders New York (and, later, Brussels), while the unnamed narrator negotiates the streets of Lagos, the city to which he returns after a fifteen-year absence. The unnamed narrator, like Julius, is cosmopolitan in his outlook and aesthetics and routinely cites internationally known authors such as Vikram Seth and Gabriel García-Márquez as he reflects, “with a mix of curiosity and recoil” (Messud), on the history and culture of Lagos. In this paper, I argue that *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City* self-consciously embrace and critique the literariness that is integral to the protagonists’ cosmopolitan identities. At the same time, I contend that

the texts qualify this focus by gesturing toward alternative models of literary cosmopolitanism.

The cosmopolitan literariness embodied by both Julius and the unnamed narrator of *Every Day* resonates with that of the cosmopolitan aristocrat described by Bruce Robbins in “The Village of the Managerial Class” (2001). Robbins delineates the “eroticization of cosmopolitan knowledge” in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and the desire for the “masks of decency, professionalization, and asexuality” in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (“Village” 24, 29). Both Julius and the unnamed narrator are akin to Robbins’ characterization of Ondaatje’s Count Almasy and Ishiguro’s Lord Darlington. The narrators resist all claims to intimacy that threaten their professional demeanor. Julius bristles at others’ attempts to read him as “African” (Cole, *Open* 40), while the unnamed narrator is “irritated” when a vendor identifies him as an “oyinbo” or foreigner (*Every Day* 48). Both men prefer that their relationships eschew their personal histories and focus instead on books. Among Julius’ closest friends in New York is Professor Saito, a man with whom he values conversations about “early English literature” and topics particular to academe (*Open* 9). The narrator of *Every Day* is attracted to (but never speaks to) a “mysterious woman” on a bus because she is reading one of Ondaatje’s novels (37). Drawing on Robbins’ essay, one may conclude that the high value Cole’s characters assign to cosmopolitan cultural production is precisely what enables their cosmopolitan detachment.

Cole’s texts extend Robbins’ work, however, insofar as they prompt analysis of the affective composition of elite cosmopolitan characters and the ethical composition of the kinds of narrative such characters produce. Both Julius and the unnamed narrator offer accounts of themselves that are self-consciously transnational in scope; they frequently allude to world literature and other arts and incorporate and reflect upon experiences of displacement and migration in the context of globalization. For example, Julius relates the story of the Haitian man he encounters in Penn Station (*Open* 70), while the unnamed narrator highlights the diversity of people waiting in line at the Nigerian Consulate in New York (*Every Day* 9). The frequent incorporation of

others' stories into their own can be read as admirably worldly, problematically passive, or both.

Such readings have been articulated by prominent reviewers of *Open City*. The *New Yorker's* James Wood, for example, lauds the novel for its aura of cosmopolitan knowingness. He concludes his glowing review with the observation that "[m]ore than anything, *Open City* seems a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism common to thousands, if not millions, of bookish types." Wood, who may himself be a bookish type, celebrates Cole's protagonist: "He is central to himself, in ways that are sane, forgivable, and familiar." Wood acknowledges that Julius's "selfish normality" may prove "an obstacle to understanding other people" but suggests that his "ordinary solipsism" has the advantage of enabling "liberal journeys of comprehension." A similar reading can be extended to *Every Day*. Wood argues that Julius tends to be absorbed by his "own small hardships," such as forgetting the number for his ATM card. The narrator is likewise anxious about the minor challenges he faces, such as noisy electric generators and a fever (*Every Day* 56, 121). Yet his self-absorption, like Julius', arguably produces "liberal journeys of comprehension" that provide insights about the neighbors and city he judges from a careful distance.

Although the "selfish normality" Julius and his counterpart display in their storytelling may be "ordinary" among "bookish types," it is not, as the novels highlight, necessarily benign. Messud argues that Julius' solipsism is linked with irresponsibility and a "potentially criminal blindness." Early in the novel, for example, Julius, at the invitation of a woman who later becomes his girlfriend, visits a detention facility for undocumented immigrants run by the Department of Homeland Security. At the facility he meets Saidu, who recounts his harrowing journey from his school in Liberia to New York's John F. Kennedy airport. At the end of the visit, Saidu asks Julius to visit again: "I said that I would, but never did" (*Open* 70). Saidu's story, however, becomes an opportunity for Julius to present his future girlfriend with an image of himself as "the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle" (70). Saidu, the abject cosmopolitan,

becomes a literary, potentially erotic resource for Julius, the economically privileged cosmopolitan intellectual.

The scene, in which an elite, worldly cosmopolitan storyteller benefits from another's story, resonates with one in *Every Day*. The narrator has been tasked by a New York acquaintance with delivering books to Mrs. Aboaba, who is "a distinguished lawyer" (117). The books, by Tony Judt, Samantha Power, and Lynne Truss, are not available in Nigeria. Mrs. Aboaba sends a young law clerk, overqualified for running such errands, to fetch them. Like Saidu, the messenger attempts to establish more than a fleeting relationship with the narrator: "Actually, I want to know you. I mean, to have us know each other, you know. Maybe one day, by knowing you, I can have a chance to go to America. To know each other, actually, just as friends" (119). The narrator wants to seem decent and promises to exchange contact information soon: "I shake his hand, knowing full well I will never see him again" (120). The law clerk's story becomes one of many anecdotes that the narrator draws upon while pursuing his dream of becoming a professional writer. He reflects: "The details I find so alluring in Gabriel Garcia-Marquez here await their recording angel. All I have to do is prod gently, and people open up. And that literary texture, of lives full of unpredictable narrative, is what appeals" (53). As the clerk disappears down the road, he becomes little more than literary texture: "[H]is figure gradually becomes insubstantial as the little clouds" (120). As with Julius and Saidu, the narrative connection between the narrator and the law clerk is fleeting and laced with betrayal.

The contrast between the characters finds a ready correlate in current cosmopolitan theory, in which the liberating travel associated with the cosmopolitanism of wealthy intellectuals stands in tension with the delimited migration often associated with marginalized "actually existing cosmopolitanism" (Robbins, "Introduction"). In Gillian Young's articulation of the binary, economic privilege correlates with a cosmopolitan "physical and intellectual mobility" that demarcates "power through footloose freedom and [a] sense of control" (147). The economic exploitation of "migrant domestic labour," refugees, and unemployed youth, in contrast, correlates with cosmopolitan "global mobility" that

frequently signals disenfranchisement (Young 147). *Open City* and *Every Day* stage this stark contrast between freedom and coercion on a transnational scale and intimate that, at best, a literary cosmopolitan outlook exposes the contrast and, at worst, reinforces it.

I argue, however, that Cole's texts also endeavor to escape the binary that would laud an elite cosmopolitan storyteller for her worldliness and judge her for her betrayals. The texts question both Julius' and the unnamed narrator's authority through those characters who offer alternative visions of cosmopolitan literacy: namely, Farouq and the so-called "yahoo yahoo" or "yahoo boys" (Cole, *Every Day* 27), young men from the universities who spend their nights composing emails that contravene section 419 of the Nigerian criminal code by promising "a large share of one fund or another in exchange for a 'small' advance fee" (25). These characters, much like Saidu and the law clerk, lack the institutional and economic privilege of Cole's narrators but are better able to negotiate perceived cultural differences. The texts thus gesture toward a literary cosmopolitanism premised on neither revealing nor exploiting the reality of "other" lives. Instead, the characters portend an understanding of literary cosmopolitanism distinguished by linguistic and geographical diversity among the producers of, and audiences for, literary culture.

*Open City* suggests a cosmopolitan literariness that stands as an alternative to Julius' cultivated detachment and elite intellectualism through Farouq, a young scholar who works at an internet café in Brussels. Farouq's "deeper" project is to understand "how it can happen" that "people can live together" on a large scale (113). His purpose is similar to that implicit in Julius' wanderings, but his approach is different. Whereas Julius is relentlessly detached, Farouq is passionately engaged. Farouq notes that people live together on a "small scale, in this shop" (113). That they do so is largely thanks to Farouq's skillful deployment of multiple languages. Julius observes: "He spoke French, Arabic, English, as was appropriate; with the man who had been calling Colombia, he exchanged a few words of Spanish. His judgment of the right language to use with each person was swift, and his manner so friendly that I wondered why I had the impression, when I first met

him, that he was distant" (113). Farouq's facility with languages, which he associates primarily with his "practical" project of pursuing a part-time master's degree in translation, emerges as a promising means of pursuing his deeper project of cosmopolitan community (113).

Farouq's ability to engage a linguistically diverse set of people in conversation throws into relief the limits of Julius' elite intellectualism. Notably, when Julius first pays Farouq for his use of the internet, he communicates "in broken French" (101); it is only when Julius switches to English that the two "make friends" (102). Similarly, it is only with Farouq's help that Julius is able to converse with the former's "best friend," Khalil: "Farouq had to translate . . . for me, because Khalil had spoken too quickly for me to catch" (117). Julius views Khalil, who expresses support for Saddam Hussein and Hezbollah and claims to "understand why" Al-Qaeda attacked the twin towers, as an "extremist" (120). Farouq, who speaks the English, Arabic, and French necessary to communicate fluently with Julius and Khalil, befriends both, despite their opposing political views. He does not "cast judgment" on Al-Qaeda (121), yet, unlike Khalil, does not "view America as monolithic" (125). Compared with Farouq's friendships, Julius' continued dedication to an elite literary culture seems parochial. Some time after he leaves Brussels, Julius sends his friend a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*, a book notable for its subordination of cultural exchange to mainstream liberalism and careful distinction of its ideas from those belonging to people Appiah terms "fundamentalists" (Cole 186; Appiah 146). Farouq's multilingualism allows him to engage substantively in intimate conversations outside the purview of Anglophone liberal literary culture.

Julius treats his friend warily, perhaps in part out of awareness that Farouq's capacities in some ways exceed his own. If Julius is mesmerized by Farouq, he also compulsively looks for "minor lapses" that confirm "a certain imperfection in Farouq's recall" (Cole, *Open* 114). He thus reassures himself that, while he is a successful doctor, Farouq has been denied an MA in critical theory and is perhaps not as brilliant as he seems. Wood notes that the text maintains the possibility that Farouq was denied a degree because he plagiarized his thesis, although Farouq

denies the charge (Cole, *Open* 128). The novel also invites the reading, however, that Julius' need to identify Farouq's vulnerabilities stem from the insecurity he feels when confronted by a man with "seething intelligence" who has "no desire to visit America," a country in which Julius has chosen to live yet inhabits only restlessly (129, 126). This reading is supported by a narrative pattern in which Julius' relationships with others continually illuminate the boundaries of his self-knowledge. The starkest example of this dynamic occurs at the climax of the novel when Moji, an old friend, shakes Julius by confronting him with how much she has suffered because he raped her in 1989 (244). Julius had forgotten the attack. In a similar vein, Farouq casts doubt on Julius' authority and, by extension, the authority of the international literary culture of which he is a part.

Farouq's multilingual networks and engagement with textual translations foreground the fact that *Open City* is an Anglophone work and, as such, limited in terms of the conversations in which it participates. The novel casts into doubt the cosmopolitan character of international literary fiction that is primarily published in English, in a book industry in which only 2–3% of books in the United States and the United Kingdom are translated and a world in which a disproportionate number of translated texts are translated from English (Mélitz 206). While Farouq's academic career is a failure in both his eyes and Julius', the multilingual exchanges in Farouq's shop perhaps hold more potential for the project of understanding how to live together than the sharing of Appiah's liberal philosophy.

If *Open City*, through Farouq's plans to be a translator, imagines a literary cosmopolitanism that bridges linguistically diverse audiences, *Every Day* imagines a literary cosmopolitanism that includes the geographically diverse production of literary texts. When the narrator of *Every Day* encounters an alternate form of cosmopolitan communication, he, like Julius, is visiting an internet café. It is there that he encounters the "yahoo boys." As in *Open City*, the novella invites a comparison between the narrator and those he encounters at the café, albeit one focused less on the philosophical question of how to best pursue cosmopolitan community through the circulation of stories and more on



the question of how and why such stories are produced. If Farouq and Julius share a project, so too do the narrator and the “yahoo boys.” The “yahoo yahoo,” the narrator notes, write “enterprising samples of narrative fiction” (Cole, *Every Day* 27); “[t]he stories unfold in ever more fanciful iterations and, as in the myth, those who tell the best stories are richly rewarded” (27–28). It is just such a rich reward the narrator seeks in his journey to Lagos, where he finds “a wealth of stories” that he longs to rework into the next *A Suitable Boy* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Cole, *Every Day* 56).

As in the case of Julius’ scrutiny of Farouq, the unnamed narrator’s views of the “yahoo boys” encourage the reader to question the narrator’s authority. For the narrator, these “rough-looking youth” are part of a national “tragedy” of corruption that mangles “what little good name their country still has” (*Every Day* 27, 28, 27). Just as Julius finds Farouq vaguely threatening and consequently domesticates his ideas as inconsequential, so the narrator dismisses the “yahoo yahoo” as driven by “greed” (*Every Day* 28). As in *Open City*, however, *Every Day* gives ample reason to question the narrator’s perspective. Once again, the narrator’s need to judge others seems closely linked to his own vulnerabilities. While these vulnerabilities may include a reluctance to acknowledge that the publication of international literary fiction is inextricably bound up with capital, and that the narrator might share the greed he attributes to the “yahoo boys,” the text also suggests that the narrator’s readiness to condemn the college students stems from an awareness that they are able to produce stories in Lagos, while he is not. The closing pages of the novella reveal that, by the narrator’s own account, the story we have just read has been enabled by his decision to leave a city in which there is a “rarity of creative refuge” and “[w]riting is difficult, reading out of the question” (56). The city, he avers, is “a hostile environment for the life of the mind” (37); the art and history museums seem inferior to their New York counterparts, and most bookshops contain a distressing lack of “international literary fiction” (93). Yet the “yahoo yahoo can work for long coffee-fuelled stretches” (27). Their creativity seems unimpeded. The “yahoo yahoo” belie the claim that Lagos is inimical to profitable creativity and draw attention

to the limitations of an elite cosmopolitan writer who is creatively paralyzed when he leaves New York.

The publication history of *Every Day* supports a reading that questions the narrator's skepticism of literary production in Nigeria. Cole's first novella was, in fact, substantially written in Lagos as a blog, and the blog was read by, among others, editors at Cassava Republic ("Every Day"). Although the blog has since been deleted, excerpts available on *languagehat.com* demonstrate the closeness of initial entries, perhaps composed in internet cafes, and the final work. Cole's first novella questions the idea that Lagos cannot be a literary centre (particularly in the internet age) and highlights the problematic nature of identifying as cosmopolitan a body of fiction disproportionately produced and published in Northern metropolises.

Neither Farouq nor the "yahoo boys" fit comfortably into a cosmopolitan theory that identifies either elite travellers or disenfranchised migrants as cosmopolitan subjects. Rather, they are, as Justin Neuman describes in an analysis of Coetzee's fiction, characters "drawn from the broad middle zone between abject refugee and empowered members of a global elite" (132). They are more immobile than mobile, their lives more ordinary than spectacular. Cole's "middle zone" cosmopolitans aspire to membership within the global elite, but they remain among what Julius terms "the thwarted ones" (Cole, *Open* 129). Yet Farouq and the "yahoo boys" respectively possess an aptitude for multilingual conversations and creative resilience that contain cosmopolitan potential. Cole's texts reveal, and arguably exploit, their stories. The texts also, however, use those stories to reflect on the limits of a cosmopolitan literary culture composed of Anglophone works published and distributed by presses in New York and London.

Cole's career thus far is one that has affirmed the value of literary production outside of the U.S. and England. At the same time, Cole has used such literary production as a means to literary stardom and a New York publisher. Cole's fiction might be read as interrogating this path to membership in the cosmopolitan literary elite, a path that Cole recommends to an imaginary Lagosian author in "Eight Letters to a Young Writer," a series originally published in 2008–2009 in the Nigerian

newspaper *NEXT*. In “Sixth Letter: Home,” Cole advises his imaginary correspondent: “There are those among us writers who are convinced . . . that literary achievement is not possible here. . . . I hope you haven’t fallen prey to such thoughts” (27). While it might be true that institutions, readers, publishers and distribution networks are in the U.S. and England, he writes, there is an “abundance” of stories in Lagos (27). Cole encourages his correspondent to record those stories in a blog: “Blogging,” he writes, “is the way forward now” and can provide “an unparalleled launching pad. . . . It’s the way to get noticed—but only if you have a talent worth noticing. Can you imagine if we had one hundred and fifty Lagos bloggers, each of whom was writing descriptively about his or her neighborhood every day?” (30). The prospect of one hundred and fifty bloggers describing daily life in Lagos is bracing, but, if all of those bloggers are writing in English with the keen intent of garnering an American publisher, perhaps not as bracing as it could be.

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