

Solipsism and Solitude

The Alignment of Impressionism and *Flânerie* in Teju Cole's *Open City*

By Briana Finocchiario

Within Teju Cole's contemporary novel *Open City*, a Nigerian psychiatry resident named Julius wanders alone through the streets of New York and Brussels, where he spontaneously uncovers the hidden narratives of these urban palimpsests. As an acute observer void of empathy, Julius drifts detachedly throughout society but simultaneously cuts through its layered affectations with his skeptical gaze. Julius' paradoxical relationship with the city harkens back to that of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*, a solitary and observant stroller who "engage[s] with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them" (Vermeulen 41). Nevertheless, as Julius visually processes his surroundings, he inherently distorts the true nature of events. Alternately ambiguous and precise, Julius' solipsistic narration toys with human observation and thus evokes the essence of an Impressionist painting, which traditionally captures the fleeting perception of reality rather than reality itself ("Impressionism"). Thereby blending the literary and visual arts, Cole renders his novel *Open City* into an Impressionist painting, complicated by the exactness of Martin Munkácsi's photography, and portrays Julius as its subject: a

[SCAFFOLD: A SHOWCASE OF VANDERBILT FIRST-YEAR WRITING](#) | Vol. 1 | Spring 2019

Scaffold is a digital collection of first-year writing curated by the Vanderbilt [Writing Studio](#). By pairing each piece in the collection with a recorded reflection from the author, *Scaffold* aims to highlight the developing writing processes and learning experiences so central to the growth of undergraduate writers. We hope it acts as a future learning resource for students and instructors alike. Visit [Scaffold's website](#) to listen to the authors reflect and learn more about our review process.

The copyright to this work rests with the author. Proper attribution required. Vanderbilt retains a non-exclusive right to distribute the work as part of this collection.

modern *flâneur* who ultimately elucidates the alienation of the individual amid the urban landscape.

Wielding his descriptive phrases like brushstrokes, Cole illustrates his literary tableau from Julius' psychological perspective, which recalls an Impressionist composition. As suggested by the nineteenth-century art critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary, the Impressionist "...render[s], not the landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape" (qtd. in "Impressionism"). As a result, the artist's mentality inevitably projects itself onto the external environment and, by extension, infuses itself into the final *œuvre*. Such mental and physical terrains similarly coalesce into *Open City's* uninterrupted, first-person narration. When characters speak or converse throughout the novel, Julius absorbs their words into his mind, which is represented by the narrative itself, so that they become "formally indistinguishable from the narrator's own language" (Wood). Still, because this narrative technique dissolves interpersonal dialogue, it figuratively severs Julius' connections with others. Of additional significance, Julius' uninhibited stream-of-consciousness both ensues from and adapts with his unrestricted ambulations through the city. During his trip to Brussels, for example, Julius wanders into Notre Dame de la Chapelle, where he notices a young African woman vacuuming the floor; this quiet woman of unknown nationality stimulates a discussion of ethnic-related stereotypes and skepticism within Julius' roving mind. As Julius' spontaneous mental digressions build upon his visual understanding of the environment, the novel gradually becomes an Impressionist canvas that illuminates his individual, psychosomatic perspective of his surroundings.

Imbued not only with the artist's psychological reception of the *paysage*, Impressionist paintings also accentuate the

ephemeral effects of sunlight on the scenery and thus eternalize an impermanent phenomenon in nature. Although photographs exclusively engage with the concrete world, they likewise capture and preserve transitory events. Like a series of such snapshots isolated from the continuum of time, Julius' tangential anecdotes within *Open City* often fail to accurately elucidate the complexity of events in his life. A photographer himself, Cole highlights the work of Martin Munkácsi, whose prolific career flourished during the early-twentieth century, in order to underscore the slanted qualities of Julius' narration. According to the mid-twentieth-century photographer Richard Avedon, Munkácsi's dynamic photography depicted all that "[Munkácsi] wanted life to be" (qtd. in Tully 66) – and, by implication, discarded its undesired mundanities in "the onrush of time" (Cole 152). Likewise, Julius' singular stories collectively inform an idealized image of himself, for as he admits, "whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories[:] (...) we play, and only play, the hero" (Cole 243). For instance, as Julius encounters Moji, the sister of his childhood bestfriend, during his adulthood in the United States, he calculatedly emphasizes her "brittleness, the defensiveness [that] she seemed to have so readily at hand" without acknowledging that he rapes her during their youth in Nigeria (Cole 203). Even when Julius finally discloses his tainted past, he does so reluctantly, withholding the damning conversation with Moji until the end of the chapter and thereby diminishing it as an afterthought prompted by guilt. Albeit crisp and detailed at a singular level, these narrative snapshots inherently omit intermediate information, so they seemingly construct a romantic *impression* of Julius that typifies not a photograph but a subjective painting.

Within Cole's creative amalgam rooted in the Impressionistic style, Julius assumes aesthetic prominence as a modern *flâneur*, a figure of practical and thematic importance to the nineteenth-century art movement. As an artistic subject, the *flâneur* evokes the "strolling viewpoint" of the French Impressionist who watchfully sauntered through the Parisian cityscape before painting *en plein air* (Forgione 670). Because Cole grants Julius a privileged identity and thereby isolates him from general society, he symbolically likens Julius to this perspicacious man of leisure who solitarily roams through the urban environment (Shaya 47). A "half-caste" of Nigerian and German heritage, Julius psychologically straddles two distinct cultures, yet he fails to solidify a sense of belonging in either (Cole 132). Exemplifying this internal tension, his first name, "Julius," – a name shared by the Ancient Roman hegemon Julius Caesar and thus associated with Western culture – precedes his Yoruba middle name, "Olatubosun," and, by extension, overshadows it in significance. Nevertheless, since Julius' given name exudes his racial privilege, it also reinforces his "sense of being different, of being set apart, in Nigeria" (Cole 78). In fact, while Julius' childhood friends fear that Coca-Cola will darken their skin, Julius freely sips from the fountain of American consumerism, which highlights his unusual sophistication (Cole 132). This early manifestation of Julius' refinement later swells into intellectual arrogance that aligns with the "overdeveloped sensibilities" of the archetypal *flâneur* (Shaya 47). Comparable to the "fatally bourgeois" figure, Julius rises above the general population in America, as well, due to both his occupation as a psychiatrist and his identity as an outsider, which protect him from America's racist social institutions (Vermeulen 41). He even denies empathy to his dark-skinned "brother[s]," such as the nameless taxi cab driver, because he perceives them as socially

inferior (Cole 40). Suffused with the “aristocratic (...) spirit” of the *flâneur*, Julius thus wanders throughout the metropolitan milieu in solitude, a mode by which he physically solidifies his elevated status and, furthermore, symbolically shatters the idealistic construct of urban social integration (Shaya 51).

A liminal work that imbues written composition with visual illustration, Teju Cole’s *Open City* also reconciles the dichotomy between accuracy and sensation, which becomes entangled in its solipsistic narration. Similar to discrete and detailed brushstrokes, Julius’ anecdotal snapshots create a subjective perception of reality that is reminiscent of an Impressionist painting. Still, the Impressionistic style not only resolves the narration’s paradoxicality but also symbolizes the urban environment’s estrangement of the individual. Ultimately, like the juxtaposed swatches of color that pervade an Impressionist canvas, Julius and the urban crowd share a mutual aversion that belies the idyllic, macroscopic impression of unity within the modern city.

WORKS CITED

- Cole, Teju. *Open City*. Random House trade paperback ed., New York, Random House, 2012.
- Forgione, Nancy. "Everyday Life in Motion: The Art of Walking in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2005, pp. 664–687. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25067208.
- "Impressionism." *National Gallery of Art*, 2018, www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/impressionism.html#slide_1. Accessed 3 Dec. 2018.
- Shaya, Gregory. "The Flaneur, the Badaud, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860-1910." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 109, no. 1, 2004, pp. 41–77. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/530151.
- Tully, Nola. "Martin Munkacsi: Think While You Shoot!" *New Criterion*, vol. 25, no. 8, Apr. 2007, pp. 65–66. EBSCOhost, proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=505233057&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2013, pp. 40–57. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.37.1.40.

Wood, James. "The Arrival of Enigmas." *The New Yorker*, Condé Nast, 28 Feb. 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas. Accessed 3 Dec. 2018.