

Essays

Cosmopolitan Conversation and Challenge in Teju Cole's *Open City*

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“The memory of my conversations with him had convinced me to send him Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*”¹

In Teju Cole's *Open City*, variants of the cosmopolitan ideal are held out and examined to reveal their complex claims and challenges in a globalized world still underpinned by lingering individual national and cultural attachments. In light of the conversations that took place primarily in Brussels between Julius, the central character and Farouq, his Moroccan friend, I engage in this article with a textual and theoretical analysis of cosmopolitanism. My analysis of *Open City*'s cosmopolitanism is primarily and theoretically framed by the novel's reference to Kwame Anthony Appiah's book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.²

Globalization as an agent of human and ideological mobility can be credited with hastening the decay of national boundaries and the resultant interaction and mingling of people of different national and cultural allegiances. Globalization's effect on the circulation of people and ideas across once highly controlled and restrictive national boundaries, has led to more and more people refusing to be restrained by a parochial view of others. Through this openness, they envisage a closer affinity with different “others” across national boundaries. Hence, a vision of a more cosmopolitan way of living is conjectured as part and parcel of the narrative of the nascent twenty-first century global community.

However, recent scholarly discussion on globalization has generated much controversy on what could be the incontestable conceptual meaning of the term. Perhaps a non-controversial and unifying position on the hotly debated meanings of *globalization* and, consequently, its contemporary uniqueness is how, as a process, it has created a faster and more diverse mobility of people and ideas across the global world.³ In addition to the advent of faster and fluid flow of ideas across national boundaries via more effective and expansive media, the migration of

people from one remote part of the world to another through a more efficient transportation systems continues to undermine the capability of national boundaries to restrict citizens' embrace of multiple belongings and identities. National boundaries are randomly defined, and imagined nations of modernity demand loyalty of their citizens, a demand that precludes an extended equal commitment to strangers from different nations. In reality, however, a constructed narrow belonging to a geopolitical space is disintegrating in the postmodern global imagination. As Benedict Anderson argues, "Nation, nationality, nationalism – all have proven notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze."⁴

Cosmopolitan Conversation: A Conversation of Difference

The necessity and inevitability of conversations among people who hold different cultures and values are two aspects of Appiah's detailed discussion of cosmopolitanism that are essential to my analysis of *Open City*. While a universalist or humanist worldview devoid of provision for differences and an uncritical patriotism lacking in universal focus are both obstacles to forging a united world, conversations and ecumenical dialogues are considered effective means of bridging this disconnection. Indeed, Appiah's purpose in *Cosmopolitanism* is to bridge this cultural gap. His intent in writing the book, he argues, is to diminish the bifurcation of the world into the West and others, the divide between two ends of the continuum of socio-economic class.⁵

Appiah suggests a cosmopolitan practice that rests squarely on conversations with the cultural values of a different Other conducted to the point where "getting used" to these new values is reached by both parties. This does not imply an agreement or a consensus, but just a familiarization with the values of the Other. Thus the goal of learning about the civilization, arguments, and achievements of the Other is a familiarization: "Conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people to get used to one another."⁶ The cross-cultural conversation that Appiah proposes is primarily between two individuals, particularly strangers, and it is an encounter that is set in motion and based upon small things (not necessarily upon universals). From there, they discover more

about what they do not share in common. This is what Appiah calls *cosmopolitan curiosity*.⁷

By way of cross-cultural conversations, cultures interact, and communications occur. Cultures encounter each other and grow in the process. The interactions and interpenetrations of differences are made tenable on the basis of a common humanity, and it is this shared humanity that demands a response to the call of a different and strange Other. The version of cosmopolitanism proposed by Appiah is thus human-centered, engenders a conversation, and is open to differences offered by the human species. This cosmopolitan ideal is captured in the following words from the comedy *The Self Tormentor* by Terence, an African-born Roman dramatist: “Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto. ‘I am human: nothing human is alien to me.’”⁸ The point being made here is that a global citizen is an individual open to conversation with a different Other because of a commonly shared humanity, and during the process of cultural mingling a migrant is at home everywhere. A cosmopolitan does not seek for cultural homogeneity as a condition for calling her place of residence home; as Appiah the self-avowed cosmopolitan posits, “We do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogenous system of values, in order to have a home.”⁹ Hence, a cosmopolitan welcomes differences while valuing an actual human being. This is what makes him or her comfortable with different places and people. The respect for human beings and of universality are what oblige a cosmopolitan to be tolerant of different others, of all people. Consequently, Appiah argues that “one distinctively cosmopolitan commitment is to *pluralism*.”¹⁰ The form of cosmopolitanism espoused by Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism* and in his other works on this concept is usually invoked in the context of the movement of people across boundaries and the consequent emergence of a diverse cultural spectrum. I shall now turn to the ways in which cosmopolitanism is taken up fictionally in Cole’s *Open City*

Challenging Cosmopolitan Ideology and Identity

Open City revolves around the wandering of Julius, a German-Nigerian immigrant psychiatry intern living in the city of New York. His nomadic habit takes place in the broader frame of his travelling between the United States, Belgium, and Nigeria.

Julius lost his father as a young man, had a problematic relationship with his mother, and had difficulty living in Nigeria. This led to his migration to the United States to study. His life in the United States is troubled by a difficult relationship with Nadege, his girlfriend, as well as problems of racism and nationalism. The solitary roving of this peripatetic across city spaces and national borders leads to uncovering of layers of the forgotten history of racism buried in the memories and landscapes of the city. His constant mobility also brings him into contact with a variety of people and cultures in the cosmopolitan cities of New York, Brussels, and Lagos. However, the narrative is also a journey into his personal life.

This migrant narrative portrays cosmopolitan lifestyles and characters and touches on a number of encounters and conversations between the protagonist and different nationals. What constitutes immediate and particular interest to me is an examination of the ways in which cosmopolitan ideology is expressed in *Open City*. I will analyze Julius' encounter with Moroccan emigrants Farouq and Khalil during his visit to Belgium. Afterward, my exploration will dovetail into an assessment of cosmopolitan identity built on the cosmopolitan ideal so envisioned. I argue that Julius represents a cosmopolitan aspiration to a worldliness not constrained by race, religion or nation. At the same time, as the protagonist aspires to practice the cosmopolitan ideal of openness and dialogue with a different other opening himself to the needs of a stranger, embracing and indulging in what Appiah calls "the cosmopolitan enterprise of cross-cultural understanding,"¹¹ he encounters challenges to the cosmopolitan ideal, even though this is an ideal necessary to navigate a global world of difference.

A focus on conversations between Julius and Farouq, a Moroccan Muslim living in Brussels, Belgium in a post-9/11 period, unveils a discourse of the cosmopolitan ideal in the form advocated by Appiah. Their conversations expose the complexity involved in living out the cosmopolitan ideal in a city historically structured for the thriving of such an ideal. In Brussels, the principle of cosmopolitanism that Julius tries to live by takes on a deeper dimension when compared to his experience in New York. Racially-toned hostility was brewing in Belgium when Julius arrives. A seventeen-year-old Flemish boy had been robbed of his MP3 player and stabbed several times in a crowded open platform

of the Gare Centrale by two other youths presumed to be Arabs. As a result of this, there was a violent and racial backlash by the Flemish against the immigrants Arabs from North Africa as well as against blacks from Congo. The racial violence by the Flemish on Arabs and Blacks, as readers later found out from the narrator, was a misguided one: "But the murderers in the Gare Centrale case, as it turned out, weren't Arab or African at all: they were Polish."¹² It is not really the pure racism that reared its ugly face in this particular case that is damaging to the cosmopolitan identity of Belgium but the indifference to a violated stranger in a public space. The crowds of people who witness the assault do nothing and just walk away, indifferent to the unjust violation of another human. The Bishop of Brussels jabs at the human conscience of all Belgians when he asks, "Where were you at 4:30 p.m. that day?"¹³ The bishop's homily lamenting "a society so indifferent that everyone around had refused to help a dying boy"¹⁴ speaks to the decay of humanistic value in the city of Brussels.

Whatever happened to the cosmopolitan vision of Brussels? In the imagination of Julius, Farouq and Dr. Maillotte, Brussels is presumed to be an epitome of cosmopolitan civilization similar to what Appiah proposes in his *Cosmopolitanism*. For Farouq, leaving Morocco for Belgium comes with the assumption that he is moving into a Europe alive and nurtured on a cosmopolitan ideal of openness to difference, both cultural and religious. After all, to preserve and protect her historical antiquity from the wrecking violence of the Second World War, Brussels' leaders declared "it an open city,"¹⁵ which literally spared it from bombings, but also metaphorically implies that all peoples, not only Flemish and Walloons, are welcome to make it a home.¹⁶ More so, like other European cities, the flexible borders that mark the age of globalization now allow a faster and fluid flow of migrants into Brussels. But the reality of Brussels does not merge with how it is imagined by Farouq and Julius. There is some oddity in how Mayken, a native, and Julius' landlady during his brief stay in Brussels perceive or choose to imagine the city. Mayken's narrow nationalism is the telescope by which he envisions Brussels. In her understanding, the city was originally planned to cater equally to the Flemish and Walloons but the annoying reality on the ground is the influx of immigrants from Africa and the Middle East. This tips the balance in favor of the Walloons and other French speakers from

other places to the supposed detriment of the Flemish. Similarly in Farouq's imagination, prior to his migration to Brussels, Belgium represented a receptive space to a different other, to a stranger which fits into an artistic representation of the place in the 1430s work of Jan van Eyck where "Turks, Arabs, Russians all had been part of the visual vocabulary."¹⁷ Ghent, as Julius reminds us in his reflection is the place known for its openness, particularly to those from the Near East. Jan Van Eyck's paintings not only testified to the multiculturalism of the town but also "depicted himself in a large red turban."¹⁸

However, time wore out the cosmopolitanism of Belgium or reveals a lack of cosmopolitanism that existed. The "natives" have become hostile to immigrants, especially those of color. Strangers, Arabs and Africans especially, are not just viewed suspiciously, as Mayken suggests, but are feared for being a threat to the resources available in this European cosmopolitan space central to the European Union's goal of unifying the different cultures of the continent. Also, in the post-9/11 context, the immigrants are viewed as agents of Islamic terror as part of a fear based not on fact but on assumptions about strangers that are not Flemish or Walloon, those who are not part of the original members of the nation. In this projection of fear, the individual, Farouq for instance, is not evaluated as an individual human person but as a member of a different and threatening ethnic nationality whose goal in Brussels is to contaminate the purity of Flemish society. In this frame of thinking and its assumptions about a foreign immigrant, there is no room given to conversation. The chance for conversation has been sacrificed on the platform of extreme loyalty to the nation, viewed in a monolithic mold exclusive of interpenetration with others who are different. The sense of cosmopolitan curiosity, an effort to learn about an individual's cultural values and personal experience that Appiah advocates, is never given a chance here.

Even a member of the cosmopolitan elite such as Dr. Maillotte could not carry out a truly cosmopolitan conversation on the topic of Arab migrants to Belgium. Her cosmopolitan culture only reflects in her taste for music that is essentially western in form since it is mainly in the Jazz mode. But in regards to openness to cultural and religious pluralism, it appears that Dr. Maillotte chooses not to see beyond her privileged and parochial position

as a white Belgian-American. Even when an attempt is made to set a cosmopolitan conversation in motion, the tendency is to approach the different Arab other as a non-appreciating nuisance. This claim is substantiated during Julius' conversation over lunch with her at the restaurant Aux Quatre Vents in Brussels. Julius makes mention of a race- and religious-related experience Farouq shared with him at a previous meeting, implying that the Belgian society is not "color-blind,"¹⁹ as Dr. Maillotte had asserted earlier during her conversation with Julius on the flight from New York to Brussels. Presenting Farouq's difficulty with finding acceptance as an Arab in Belgium, Julius tells Dr. Maillotte that his "friend's specific trouble is about being here and maintaining his uniqueness, his difference."²⁰ When he asks her view on this claim, Dr. Maillotte's caustic remarks about Farouq's choice to live out his unique life experience and difference in Brussels correlates with her justification for the unwelcoming postures of the Belgian nation to the likes of Farouq, whom she castigates for complaining about his suffering as if others didn't suffer as well: "Our society has made itself open for such people, but when they come in, all you hear is complaints. Why would you want to move somewhere only to prove how different you are?"²¹

On one hand, it is quite perturbing that the same Dr. Maillotte who had earlier complained to Julius earlier that she couldn't "stand American public morals,"²² hence her frequent return to Belgium, is critical of Farouq's resistance to the overbearingness of Belgian public morals on cultural purity. On the other hand, her criticism of Farouq is a misreading of the Moroccan view that each person comes with a unique experience and background, and in cosmopolitan living, the differences are to be welcomed. He is not proving how different he is, but just living out the values in which he was raised. It appears that Julius tries to take up the cudgel on behalf of Farouq by affirming that the émigré is not a resentful person but instead truly expresses a genuine hurt from the monolithic vision of Belgium being pushed down his throat in the society and especially in the University where he was studying. Ultimately, conversations between Dr. Maillotte and Julius on Belgian society's attitude towards immigrants and different cultures fail to produce fruits of cosmopolitan curiosity.

However, hope for a useful cosmopolitan conversation is restored in the series of dialogues between Julius and Farouq, who

clarify the problem of acknowledging difference in terms of the value of the individual. The chance meeting of Julius and Farouq at the Internet and telephone café managed by the latter offers a hint to the central argument on difference proposed by Farouq. The type of multiculturalism espoused by Farouq is indicated not only in the multiple languages heard concurrently but also by the destinations of calls made in the café.

In Farouq's Internet and telephone call café, we see a miniature display of cultural diversity. There are Arabs and Africans making calls from different telephone booths to Colombia, Egypt, Senegal, Brazil, Germany, Nigeria and the United States. In reference to these cross-cultural and cross-border exchanges, Farouq says to Julius: "It's a test case of what I believe; people can live together but still keep their own values intact. Seeing this crowd of individuals from different places, it appeals to the human side of me, and the intellectual side of me."²³ Using Edward Said's *Orientalism* as his inspiration,²⁴ Farouq desires a situation in Belgium where all the different nationalities and religions are recognized and not merely tolerated. He wants recognition of difference with its own values. Farouq points to Said's experiential relation to the Palestine/Israeli problem where it became clear to the critic "that difference is never accepted"²⁵ as a platform upon which to argue that even when a Near Easterner's difference is welcome it "is never seen as containing its own value. Differences as orientalist entertainment are allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no."²⁶ In other words, a Near Easterner is "accepted in the West on the basis of its presumed exoticness and for the purpose of aesthetic consumption but when it comes to worldview founded on the Oriental's cultural and religious values, values that are integral to its identity, the West becomes non-receptive.

Farouq's "difference" project is not only anchored on his understanding of Said's *Orientalism*, it also resonates with Malcolm X's principle of difference during the American civil rights era. Malcolm X's appeal to the difference of black culture and experience is the basis of Farouq's preference over Martin Luther King's Christian Universalist approach to dealing with racism against black Americans.²⁷ Malcolm X "recognized that difference contains its own value, and that the struggle must be to advance that value."²⁸ Farouq would not concede to the practicality of Martin Luther King's principle even after Julius explained

to him its Christian foundation. He could not accept the idea of playing the “victimized Other” as an Arab living in a culturally monolithic Belgium, hence his affiliation with Malcolm X’s philosophy of insisting on living from the value of one’s cultural and religious heritage.

Perhaps what becomes an immediate worry for Julius is the violence associated with establishing and maintaining such different cultural and religious, that is, Islamic values in a Belgian society that has a narrow nationalistic imperative. The seething violence embedded in Farouq’s sentiment flies on the wing of Malcolm X’s choice of violence as a necessary method for bringing about the reality of difference.²⁹ This momentary consideration of possible violence exploding from Farouq’s insistence on inserting his Moroccan value into the cultural bedrock of his adopted nation brings to Julius’ consciousness the danger embodied in loyalty to nation or any cultural value: “It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties.”³⁰ Here, Julius’ interior questioning of Farouq’s loyalty to his cultural values, which comes with a risk of fanning racial violence, concurs with Martha Nussbaum’s denunciation of primary loyalty to country or culture over loyalty to humanism or universalism. Nussbaum’s ideal appears to be attractive to Julius in the context of the violence that Farouq’s loyalty to his Arabic difference could foment. But then he quickly re-assesses his misgiving about Farouq’s choice of loyalty with the possible violence that attends it, deciding that a rejection of loyalty to any political or cultural cause because of possible violence could be another form of danger.

Julius’ disinclination to welcome Farouq’s approach to promoting difference in a hostile and violent society like Belgium has roots in the cosmopolitan ideal Julius lives by and that conditions him to resist any form of national or cultural claims. He appears to question Farouq’s choice of embracing his own different cultural identity in a pluralistic society. Julius represents here a classical form of cosmopolitanism that prioritizes worldly or multiple identities over a particular one. His hesitancy toward Farouq’s Moroccan loyalty as a migrant to Belgium is derived from the nationalistic implication it may result in. A glimpse of this fear of a nationalistic attitude toward life can be observed in the discussion they have about Moroccan writers Tahar Ben Jelloun and

Mohamed Choukri. Farouq argues that Ben Jelloun tries to win the Western audience by not being socially conscious and culturally positive in his portrayal of the Moroccan experience. He then argues that Choukri, whom he prefers as a representation of the social reality of the Moroccan people because he lives among them and relates to their different cultural values, is better than Tahar Ben Jelloun, who lives abroad. But the interesting point here is that Farouq clearly affirms that Choukri's novel, *For Bread Alone*,³¹ does not translate to "any connection to nationalist ideal."³² In other words, Farouq makes a distinction here between loyalty to one's different cultural and religious values and loyalty to a nation that is intolerant of a different Other. This distinction is similar to that made by Appiah between discontinuing his loyalty to his country if it fails to live by certain liberal principles that guarantee respect for human rights of all groups and continual loyalty if the nation-state continues to uphold liberal principles of equality. Julius' fear of the violence that may erupt from Farouq's qualified embrace of his different value and its acceptance in Belgium is subtly allayed in Farouq's affirmation of an anti-war approach to social problems and reflected in his statement on being a pacifist: "I don't believe in violent compulsion."³³ This sort of assurance becomes imperative in the context of the violent impulse that propelled the perpetrators of the terror of 9/11. Farouq is not willing to follow a mere emotional impulse that is lacking in critical evaluation in strongly asserting his different values. Farouq's cosmopolitanism is positively portrayed here. But a critical look at Farouq's cosmopolitanism also reveals a flaw in terms of its practicality. He fails to fully live by the ethos of the liberal tolerance of difference by his demonization of Moroccan writer Ben Jelloun, who, like Farouq, lives in Europe. Farouq condemns Jelloun on the basis of the writer's choice of a different and contrary understanding and portrayal of their common native place Morocco in his novel. Farouq's intolerance of a different view of Morocco from another Moroccan constitutes a defect to his cosmopolitan ideal of accepting differences.

Farouq's failure to tolerate difference, however, inflicts little damage on his cosmopolitan propositions for Belgium, which affirms that people with differences can live together in one country. This claim is reiterated in an allusion made during a conversation with Julius at the telephone center he manages: "I

strongly believe this, that people can live together, and I want to understand how this can happen. It happens here, on this small scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale.”³⁴ Farouq derives emotional and intellectual satisfaction from working in the telephone shop because the theory of difference he advocates is exemplified there. The cross-cultural interaction and harmony alive in his shop offer proof of what he theorizes: “It’s a test case of what I believe; people can live together but still keep their own values intact.”³⁵

Farouq not only firmly believes in a cosmopolitan celebration of difference, he equally seeks to understand its practicality on a larger social scale. Farouq’s cognitive approach to the cosmopolitan civilization he visualizes for Belgian society is not predicated on the merit of a mere miniature version of it that takes place daily in his Internet and telephone shop — it also has an intellectual foundation. As a widely read cosmopolitan-minded person,³⁶ Farouq is not only enlightened on the strength of his adoption of Said and Malcolm X’s teachings on difference for his project. He can also critically evaluate what he considers the pseudo-pluralist principles behind Fukuyama’s philosophy about the end of history, which arrogantly argues “that the present reality of Western countries is the culminating point of human history.”³⁷ Farouq rejects closure in the form implied by Fukuyama’s theory of ideological history by adding a different ideological value to what is already present in the West, particularly in Belgium.³⁸

In trying to understand the practicality of differences cohabiting together in Belgian society, Farouq dismisses modern concepts like *melting pot*, *salad bowl*, and *multiculturalism*. Rather, he sees the embrace of these terms in some Western countries as an indirect way of imposing their cultural position over those of the non-Western Others. He understands multiculturalism’s claim in this guise as imposition of a narrow Western culture, which he rejects. However, he reiterates his affirmation of difference: “I believe foremost in difference.”³⁹ In addition to embracing the ideas of Said and Malcolm X, Farouq also borrows from Walter Benjamin’s idea advanced in *On the Concept of History*,⁴⁰ and he believes “that his subtle revision of Marx can help” him “understand the historical structure that makes difference possible.”⁴¹ Also of influence on Farouq’s intellectual formation is the Islamic philosopher and scientist, Averroes, who also influenced medieval

Western thinkers. “Not all Western thought comes from the West alone,” Farouq adds.⁴² Farouq’s eclectic borrowing from Western and Islamic Middle-Eastern intellectual traditions and the apparent harmonization of these different traditions point to the practicality of the cosmopolitan ideal he proposes for Belgium.

However, Farouq’s desires must confront Belgian society as portrayed in *Open City*. His first experience of the country is colored by ongoing violence emanating from racially-toned events. The native Flemish community is represented by its right-wing political party, the Vlaams Belang, who claim that those who fight for immigrants’ human rights are in fact practicing a form of “reverse racism” against the party. The locals attribute most criminal acts to Arab and black immigrants as illustrated by a journalist in the novel: “Belgian society was fed up with ‘murdering, thieving, raping Vikings from North Africa.’”⁴³ Even when it turned out that not Arab but Polish immigrants were responsible for the murder of the Flemish boy in the Gare Centrale case, and in spite of the efforts of the Muslim community to reach out to the white Belgians for a peaceful co-existence over the murder case involving a Flemish, discontent and violence against immigrants escalate even further. The narrator refers to a number of incidents to corroborate the increase in tenor of racial based violence across Belgium:

In Bruges, five skinheads put a black Frenchman into a coma. In Antwerp, in May, an eighteen-year-old shaved his head and, after fulminating about *makakken*, headed for the city center with a Winchester rifle, and started shooting. He seriously injured a Turkish girl and killed a nanny from Mali, as well as a Flemish infant in her care. Later on, he expressed a specific regret: for having accidentally shot the white child. In Brussels, a black man was left paralyzed and blind after an attack on a petrol station.⁴⁴

The failure to respect human dignity shared by all, irrespective of race and color, and the failure to live out a cosmopolitan responsibility towards unknown individual as in the case of the murdered Flemish teenager, indicate troubling moments in the aftermath of 9/11.⁴⁵ These events contradict the “openness” implied by the centrality of Belgium to European unity and the flexibility of its boundaries that have permitted an influx of immigrants. Despite what appears on the surface as a cosmopolitan civilization in

Belgium, what really exists in practice is a defiant clutch on an original idea of the country as a home primarily for the Flemish and to a limited extent, the Walloons as well. Other cultures and races are not treated and identified as an integral part of the national culture.

The race-based existential anomalies that take place in Belgium points to the conflict that may erupt when an appeal to the humanity of an individual is sacrificed for an uncritical loyalty to parochial demands of culture and nation. This picture of Belgium negates its old claim to cosmopolitanism. As the critic Henry Jenkins states, "Cosmopolitans embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience."⁴⁶ Cole's novel abounds in examples of this form of embrace of cultural differences in the person of Julius, but his efforts to appeal to a commonly shared humanity suffer a setback in Brussels. The obligation of cosmopolitanism towards all human beings is not always met in Belgium. Racial prejudice and parochial imagination are still overwhelming. This is the challenge to the promises of cosmopolitanism that I have been analyzing so far. As contemporary violence against culturally different Arabs suggests in the novel, a cosmopolitan Julius is confounded by the reality of blind nationalism and racism in Brussels and its implications for him:

[T]he stranger had remained strange, and had become a foil for new discontents. It occurred to me, too, that I was in a situation not so radically different from Farouq's. My presentation-the dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger-made me a target for the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlanderen. I could in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist or 'viking.'⁴⁷

Julius's expectations of cosmopolitan compassion to a stranger, the Other, give way here to the lived reality of racism and xenophobia in Brussels. His different skin color, a reality that disconnects socially from people around him opens his eyes suddenly to the limitation of cosmopolitanism ideal of common humanity.

Despite the glitches in Belgium, the aspiration toward a cosmopolitan ideal that extend beyond the boundary of Farouq's Internet and telephone shop remains a legitimate one. Brussels, as the capital of a global body like the European Union, could have been a model for the realization of this ideal, but it falls short.

Based on Farouq and Khalil's experiences of Belgium, and of Europe as a whole, this location represents a failed dream for free expression of difference. Farouq indicates this position in the following words: "When we were young, he said, I should say, when I was young, Europe was a dream. Not just a dream, it was the dream: it represented the freedom of thought. We wanted to come here, and exercise our minds in this free space. . . . But I have been disappointed. Europe only looks free. The dream was an apparition."⁴⁸ Khalil echoes Farouq's declaration afterward when he says, "Europe is not free."⁴⁹ This assertion interestingly inspires his aim to understand why this is so and argue for the possibility of a reversal. Despite all the disappointment he encounters, Farouq continues to nurse a desire to understand how a cosmopolitan ideal of acceptance of difference can take place in Belgium.

The answer to how this can happen is not clearly given in Cole's *Open City*, and perhaps the writer did not intend to provide one. Nevertheless, Julius suggests that the potential for a productive epistemological approach to the quest could be traced from Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism* when he mails a copy of the book to Farouq from the United States. Julius carries memories of his cosmopolitan conversations with Farouq long after he returns to New York: "The memory of my conversations with him had convinced me to send him Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*. I sealed the envelope, and the postal worker showed me various booklets of stamps. No flags, I said, something more interesting."⁵⁰ Even during this narrative moment in the post office Julius faces and tries to avoid nationalistic shadows, when he presumes what the postage stamp carrying the American flag might indicate to Farouq. But he can only resist the claim of belonging for a moment because coincidentally, while he is in the process of carrying out his business in the post office, the clerk there named Terry recognizes and addresses him in terms of racial and nationalistic origin: "Say brother, where are you from? 'Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland."⁵¹

Julius' resistance to being addressed and claimed on the basis of his African roots and his rejection of this restrictive identity constitute a different form of challenge to the cosmopolitan ideology he strives to live by. At different times in his meeting and conversations with Dr. Maillotte and Farouq, Julius diplomatically avoids dwelling on where he comes from. He does not easily

claim a particular national identity even if he admits at one time to being a Yoruba Nigerian and at another time, an American. At other moments, he tries to assert his German heritage. It is obvious that Julius strives to fashion his identity as he chooses to reflect his cosmopolitan ideal of embracing multiple belonging—the ideal world citizen. This ideal is tested a little in Belgium but takes more complicated twist and turns in New York.

In New York, the challenge to the cultivation of a cosmopolitan lifestyle comes in multiple forms. I will now explore this resistance in terms of identity-centered discourses. Julius' embrace of cosmopolitan identity and the obstacle to this choice of social identification by way of narrow national and racial claim on him by others will constitute the context for this exploration. Like the numerous birds he refers to during his observations as he walks, Julius embodies their ability to see a more comprehensive view of the "open city" of New York. Through his birds-eye view, he unveils layers and varieties of hidden stories embedded in the cosmopolitan city. It is pertinent to note that the cities that Julius navigates in the novel—New York and Brussels—are cosmopolitan in many regards, but particularly in the diversity of people and regarding the combination of native born citizens and immigrants who, on the basis of a common goal, try to weave their differences into a mosaic. As Suman Gupta states, these global cities are "simply enormously cosmopolitan—these are nodes of immigration and global movement, so that they present an extraordinary mosaic of diverse populations coexisting and cohabiting."⁵²

Cosmopolitan Contradictions: A Cosmopolitan Resistance to Native Claim

This coexistence is however, not untroubled or without conflicts. Julius' major encounters and engagements with difference and diversity in New York offer a platform for analyzing another angle of the depiction of challenges to cosmopolitanism in the twenty-first century African migrant novel. Julius, the central character in *Open City*, epitomizes the nomadism and worldliness associated with a cosmopolite. As an immigrant psychiatry intern in New York, he walks—sometimes aimlessly and randomly—around New York to escape from the work-related stress and trauma associated with a recently ended relationship with his girlfriend, Nadege. His isolated

urban wandering is not to be seen merely as a form of therapy from work stress and heartbreak but as the symbol of his desire for freedom from the confinement to a fixed space. Like the birds that he pays attention to in his observation of his environment, Julius navigates the city space untethered from any narrowing or constricting forces. His frequent walks lead to encounters, even if they are often in the form of a detached engagement with the diverse and different people and cultures he comes across.

Julius' interactions with the culturally diverse population of New York City support his cosmopolitan commitment to pluralism and mental curiosity about a different Other. In his lonely walks, Julius displays a cosmopolitan mind that matches the magnitude of the city of New York as suggested in his ability to switch with ease from speaking on history, biology, and psychology, to analyzing literature and history that span across the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America. His vast and diverse knowledge is often accompanied by his curiosity and solidarity (even if often somewhat detached) with the strangers he encounters. He is drawn to different individuals of different nationalities and, in some cases, enters into their lives to share in their experiences.

But unlike in Brussels, where he engaged in an intimate and interactive way with people he encountered, in New York, his rapport with most people he came across is less familiar. Even when his acquaintances are his own next door neighbors, Seth and his partner, Carla, Julius is not curious enough to know about them or share in their life experiences. He fails to notice either their presence or absence or the events that are unfolding in their lives. On one occasion when he runs into Seth, he decides to ask about Seth's significant other, Carla, only to be told she had died months earlier.

Julius' lack of attention to Seth and Carla, who are spatially closer to him than the "others" he encounters contradicts his cosmopolitan and humanist character. He is totally confused by how blind he was to their plight. For someone who is driven by the ideal of responsibility to others, the failure to notice and to share in the suffering of his neighbors is a lacuna.

In contrast to this failure to display cosmopolitan curiosity and compassion toward his neighbors, we find examples of his compassion and friendship in his relationship with Dr. Saito, his literature class professor, and Saidu, a Liberian refugee. With Dr.

Saito, Julius spends time and makes sacrifices to listen patiently to him as he gets closer to death. Julius' sympathetic and attentive traits are plainly displayed as he spends more and more quality time with this dying man. With Saidu, an undocumented immigrant he visits with Nadege at a holding facility in Queens, Julius reveals a compassionate disposition as he listens patiently to the incredible story of the Liberian who travelled to the United States with a Cape Verdean passport made for him by a Mozambican while he was in Spain: "I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself."⁵³

Julius' idea of himself as a compassionate person interested in the lives of others corresponds to what appears to be Cole's invitation to readers to view Julius as an incarnation of the cosmopolitan ideal of responsibility to the lot of another human being. However, this humanistic ideal that Julius often tries to put into practice—a pure concern for others based on a shared common humanity, and not on a racial or nationalist interest—is frequently challenged by his encounters with Africans and Caribbean nationals who try to "claim" him as one of their own. In one instance, an African cab driver feels offended that Julius fails to fraternize with him when he boards his taxi. The unnamed cab driver responds coldly to Julius' greetings: "Not good, not good at all, you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I'm African just like you, why you do this?"⁵⁴ Julius' response to the drivers' complaint sounded apologetic but was less than sincere: "I said, I'm sorry about it, my mind was elsewhere, don't be offended . . . I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me."⁵⁵ When Julius later evaluates the friction between himself and the taxi driver, he realizes that the driver feels unacknowledged and expects his fellow African brother to at least give him that friendly recognition. In another instance, a Caribbean museum security officer runs into him in a restaurant and shows interest in knowing about his African background. This upsets Julius as he sees this as another case of an African trying to claim him.

These instances of Julius's harsh response to Africans and West Indians who try to "claim" him, as he says, illustrate his desire for building a cosmopolitan relationship tied primarily to individuals as human, not as a fellow tribal or country man. But paradoxically, in a

similar situation when Dr. Maillotte, a white Belgian-American who sits next to him on his flight to Brussels and begins a friendly conversation with him by making references to his African background, Julius does not respond in the same irritable and detached way he did to the Africans who come along his path during his walks within the city of New York. This contradicts Julius' claim to cosmopolitan compassion for other human beings.

The instances identified and discussed above and others in the novel indicate a problem with the principle of cosmopolitanism that Julius aspires to. While on one hand, Julius reflects a cosmopolitan attitude by virtue of constructing a detachment from a particular and fixed belonging and by involvement with a diversity of people and cultures, on the other hand, he fails to capture the cosmopolitan spirit of care and respect for others by the very act of deliberate detachment from a provincial belonging and aloofness toward those who make claims to racial and cultural affinity. This juggling of the demanding choices of detachment or connection with strangers is also reflected differently in terms of location. In New York, he appears to be very selective in deciding to whom he extends deep fellowship, while in Brussels, he seems to display less caution in bonding with strangers. In Brussels he made acquaintances and enduring friendships with Farouk, Khalil and, to a lesser degree, with Dr. Annette Maillotte, whereas in New York, he mostly encountered strangers. He thus complicates the cosmopolitan call to engage all categories of people in conversation by choosing to engage some (Dr. Maillotte and Farouk) and deliberately ignoring others who happened to be darker skinned (the Africans, African-Americans, and Caribbeans). A cosmopolitan attitude that Appiah proposes in *Cosmopolitanism* encourages a conversation with all, which would include those with pure nationalistic intent, with the choice of course of not having to agree with them. All in all, in Brussels or New York, Julius generally shows a concern for diversity and curiosity about others.

In the concluding chapter to *Cosmopolitanism*, Appiah reiterates the need for ongoing cosmopolitan conversations with the obligation to every human being as a central theme. Appiah's recommendation also comes with an acknowledgement that to practice the cosmopolitan ideal, the mechanism of the nation-state remains a necessity. He recognizes the problem with globalism but he still insists on a cosmopolitanism that accounts for

conversation, curiosity and engagement with other human being, especially individuals not necessarily related to us by race, color or religion, the stranger. Appiah concludes on the last page of *Cosmopolitanism*: “If we accept the cosmopolitan challenge, we will tell our representatives that we want them to remember those strangers.”⁵⁶ Perhaps, when Farouq reads Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism*, he will get a better understanding of how cosmopolitan life can happen on a larger scale despite the challenge cosmopolitanism faces and how it continues to be a major recourse for a challenge to uncritical nationalism.

Notes

- ¹ Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random, 2011), 186.
- ² Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).
- ³ Suman Gupta, *Globalization and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 1.
- ⁴ As Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, “Nation, nationality, nationalism-all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze” (London: Verso, 2006), 3. , “Nation, nationality, nationalism-all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze.” In this unstable context that definition of a nation-state based on arbitrary rules laid down by colonial rulers of Africans has been discussed by historians and political scientist as a contributory factor to the lack of integral development and political stability in contemporary Africa. In Ieuan Griffiths’ “The Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries,” *The Geographical Journal* 152, no. 2 (1986): 204-216, the origin of this problem is linked to demarcation of African countries by Europeans at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 while William FS Miles and David A. Rochefort in “Nationalism Versus Ethnic Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *American Political Science Review* 85.2 (1991): 393-403, argue that ethnic affinities across boundaries are not detriment to claims of national identity created by boundaries. See also discussions on other implications of the blind partitioning of country borders irrespective of the affinity of the different ancient nations who make up these nations in Jeffrey Herbst, “The Creation and Maintenance of National Boundaries in Africa,” *International Organization* 43, no. 4 (1989): 673-692, and Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju, “Partition Culture Areas: A Checklist,” in *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations across Africa’s International Boundaries, 1884-1984*, edited by Anthony Ijaola Asiwaju (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1985), 252-59.
- ⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), xxi.

⁶ Ibid., 85.

⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Ibid., 113.

¹⁰ Ibid., 144.

¹¹ Ibid., 132.

¹² Cole, *Open City*, 99.

¹³ Ibid., 98. .

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Cole is clearly referencing the title and events of Roberto Rossellini's 1946 movie *Roma, Citta Aperta*. In allusion to the realist movie about ironic sense of its freedom from bombardments in Nazi-occupied city of Rome during World War II, Cole is drawing out a parallel with Brussels, "an open city" violated by racial and cultural based hostilities despite being freed from military attacks from Germany and its allies.

¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 89.

²⁰ Ibid., 142-143.

²¹ Ibid., 143.

²² Ibid., 142.

²³ Ibid., 112. .

²⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Malcolm X was very critical of Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violence and integrationist approach and offered a different approach to gaining civil rights for blacks "which stressed the need for self-defense and political struggle waged by 'any means necessary,'" Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787* (London: Routledge, 2003), 108.

²⁸ Cole, *Open City*, 105.

²⁹ In some ways, Malcolm X's turn to violence finds correlation in Franz Fanon's philosophy of violence as a means to achieve decolonization and overcome colonial racism. Fanon writes: "In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists. This determination to have the last move up to the front, to have them clamber up (too quickly, say some) the famous echelons of an organized society, can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence," Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2004), 3.

³⁰ Cole, *Open City*, 107.

- ³¹ Mohamed Chokri, *For Bread Alone* (London: Telegram, 2006).
- ³² Cole, *Open City*, 103. .
- ³³ Ibid., 115.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 113.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 112. .
- ³⁶ Farouq’s intellectual interests are vast and diverse. He reads and discusses works of Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, Paul De Man, Edward Said, Malcolm X, Noam Chomsky, Karl Marx, Benedict Anderson, Francis Fukuyama and others. Farouk wrote his controversial and discredited thesis on Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 114.
- ³⁸ In *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992), xi. Francis Fukuyama argues that “liberal democracy may constitute the ‘end point of mankind’s ideological evolution’ and the ‘final point of human government,’ and as such constituted the ‘end of history.’” Farouq would consider this controversial contention an obstacle to implanting what he considers a different ideological value he brings with him from Morocco to Belgium.
- ³⁹ Cole, *Open City*, 114. .
- ⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (New York: Classic Books, 2009).
- ⁴¹ Cole, *Open City*, 114.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 99.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ There were cases of race-based violence and xenophobia reported across major Belgian cities in 2006 that appear to form the basis for Teju Cole’s references to racism and extreme forms of nationalism in *Open City*. Paul Bond, “Belgium: Racist murderer linked to Flemish nationalists,” *World Socialist Website*. See <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2006/06/belg-j21.html> June 6, 2006 (accessed January 6, 2016).
- ⁴⁶ Henry Jenkins, “Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence,” in *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*, eds. Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Desiree Baolian Qin-Hillard (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004), 117.
- ⁴⁷ Cole, *Open City*, 106.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 122. .
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 186.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Suman Gupta, *Globalization and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 39.
- ⁵³ Cole, *Open City*, 70.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 40.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 174.

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