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African Identity and Diasporic Consciousness in Teju Cole's *Open City*

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Abstract: This study examines the construction and transformation of African identity in Teju Cole's *Open City* through the theoretical lens of Afropolitanism. It examines how migration, cultural memory, pre-migration socialisation, and diasporic consciousness shape the identity of Julius, the novel's protagonist. Drawing on Afropolitan discourse, the study explores the tension between rooted African cultural values and the realities of global mobility for Africans abroad. It argues that African identity is neither fixed nor singular but remains dynamic and pluralistic within changing historical and social contexts. Through a close textual analysis of the novel, the study reveals that Julius's early exposure to Yoruba cultural traditions and communal values is undermined by traumatic personal experiences and emotional alienation, leading to an unstable sense of belonging before he migrated to the United States. His subsequent encounters with racial discrimination, cultural hybridity, and social isolation further complicate his identity, producing a fragmented Afropolitan consciousness that is neither wholly African nor fully Western. The study concludes that *Open City* challenges essentialist notions of identity by presenting the African identity as an evolving construct shaped by memory, history, migration, and individual experience.

Keywords: African Identity, Afropolitanism, Diasporic Consciousness, Colonialism, Racial Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

The concept of African identity presents multiple layers of interpretation and analytical complexity for contemporary scholars. While recognised as a multifaceted construct characterised by a multiplicity of meanings and historical derivations, it is simultaneously an evolving phenomenon that continuously accommodates contemporary manifestations of the African personality. This conceptualisation is linked to a protracted history of trauma and systemic injustice, rooted in the transatlantic slave trade and the

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structural violence of colonialism. The historical trauma embedded within the construct persists into the contemporary era, manifested through enduring modern realities that evoke lingering collective pain.

One of the central crises confronting the discourse on African identity is the absence of a singular, monolithic paradigm encompassing the entire continent. Africa is inherently pluralistic; although the majority of its population is Black, the continent comprises hundreds of distinct cultures, epistemologies, and lifeways that resist reductionist categorisation under a unified image. Rather than being rigid or homogenous, African identities are inherently dynamic and heterogeneous. While certain enduring structural characteristics may underpin the conceptualisation of African identity, these traits shift and manifest differentially depending on specific socio-historical contexts (Marova 43).

This heterogeneity was exacerbated and weaponised by the colonial enterprise. Prior to colonial intervention, diverse African cultures and value systems possessed varying degrees of historical connection; however, colonial regimes systematically manufactured and institutionalised divisions along ethnic and regional lines, thereby deepening domestic differences and disputes. This fragmentation of African identities continues to present a formidable obstacle to continental integration, social cohesion, and regional solidarity. Consequently, many scholars attribute these ongoing crises of self-definition to colonial legacies, arguing that imported Western behavioural paradigms and epistemologies structurally destabilised indigenous societies and worsened the repudiation of native cultures (Touoyem 2014). Thus, rather than a singular African identity, there exists a multiplicity of diverse yet subtly interconnected African identities.

The geographical cohabitation of vast populations over millennia does not in fact engender absolute cultural or identity homogeneity. Neither geographical location nor phenotypic markers automatically signify a uniform identity. The Black Consciousness movement explicitly recognised this misconception, directly challenging reductionist views of identity by framing blackness as an intentional, politically conscious mental attitude rather than a mere racial descriptor (Azanian People's Organisation 28). The movement argued against utilising the term as an amorphous umbrella category for all non-white individuals, emphasising that non-whiteness must not be conflated with authentic blackness. For this organisation, genuine African identity and Black Consciousness are located within the behavioural choices, attitudes, and ethical postures of individuals, with an active connection to, passion for, and advocacy on behalf of the motherland.

In sum, although African identity remains a complex and contested construct generating divergent understandings, it is a reality that must be actively embodied by African peoples. For the concept to meaningfully represent these individuals, they must exude an African ethos and behavioural alignment, transcending mere geographic origin or skin colour. The Azanian People's Organisation's insistence on anchoring authentic African identity within attitude and behaviour stems from the historical adulteration and misconceptions engineered by colonial authorities. The socio-political fabric of Africa was structurally corrupted by colonial incursions, which severed the organic bonds connecting the people to one another and to the continent.

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Furthermore, authentic identity formation has been severely compromised by the systematic distortion of authentic indigenous identities. In contemporary Africa, identity construction and configuration are frequently instrumentalised to serve state-centric political agendas; indeed, states often manipulate demographic and statistical data to legitimise exclusionary policies and validate their socio-political consequences (Bayart 1993). Consequently, identities across the African continent remain primarily structured around rigid anthropological, ethnological, and demographic structures inherited from deep colonial history.

Beyond the manipulation of geography, demography, and culture to serve Eurocentric political and economic interests, colonial regimes also perpetrated a gross misconstruction of African peoples. Africa was Eurocentrically represented as a continent of darkness, primordial villages, and inherent barbarity. Imperial invaders justified the colonial project under the guise of a civilising mission to eradicate this alleged barbarism, a narrative thoroughly debunked by historical realities. This duality is acutely exposed by Kanneh, who highlights a structural tension in colonial literature wherein the continent is trapped between two deeply flawed perspectives: the racist myth of a stagnant, savage Africa existing outside of historical time, and an idealised, celebratory counter-narrative that ultimately objectifies and distances authentic African realities from the authorial voice (25).

Africa was never the monolithic, barbaric landmass depicted by colonial discourse and imperialist writers; rather, this was a distorted identity imposed upon African peoples. The systemic misrepresentation of Africans and other colonised civilisations globally catalysed the emergence of post-colonialism and corresponding literary movements, as subaltern cultures began to "write back" to the imperial centre to accurately represent their own civilisations and cultures.

Furthermore, African literature serves as a vital medium for analysing and preserving the continent's diverse cultural traditions, positioning identity construction and cultural aesthetics at the forefront of its creative project. Through their narratives, African writers continuously navigate the complexities of self-definition and cultural preservation amidst rapid societal transformation (Onwatuegwu 24). Ultimately, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) maintains, this literature remains deeply embedded within its socio-cultural environment, acting simultaneously as a mirror to and a critical evaluation of the community. He conceptualises this imperative as the "decolonisation of the mind," wherein Africans systematically reject the flawed identities constructed for them in order to project an authentic African selfhood.

For Ngũgĩ (1986), the authentic decolonisation of the mind, particularly within the realm of creative expression, commences with the reclamation of indigenous African languages over European tongues. Throughout Decolonising the Mind and Moving the Centre, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o establishes an intimate connection between language and culture, positioning them on a nearly interchangeable axis. Because both elements serve as foundational blueprints for a society's value system and identity, he asserts that language operates as "the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (15). Through

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his scholarship, Ngũgĩ implores Africans to embrace and write in their native languages, arguing that the continent cannot fully dismantle Eurocentric misrepresentations without first reclaiming its identity through linguistic sovereignty.

In summary, African identity is pluralistic and cannot be reduced to a singular concept, image, or static idea. To legitimately claim an African identity, an individual must manifest it through their attitude, behaviour, and ideological commitment to Africa. This implies that continental origin or Black phenotypical traits are insufficient markers of an authentic African; the identity must be actively articulated through deeds and actions. This tension constitutes a predominant thematic preoccupation in Teju Cole's *Open City*, wherein the protagonist, Julius, exhibits a deeply conflicted African identity following his migration to the United States. While his subjectivity is not entirely subsumed by a conventional diasporic consciousness, he remains disconnected from his African roots, rendering him alienated from other African characters within the narrative.

Accordingly, this study will examine the specific attributes of Julius's African identity as depicted in the text, tracing the trajectory of how these attributes were acquired before emigration, his subsequent migration, and his resulting diasporic experiences and consciousness. Although Julius remains alienated from his African heritage, he is similarly resistant to full assimilation into a standard diasporic consciousness. Instead, Julius reminisces on his African experiences and identity from a position of great displacement within the diaspora, ultimately failing to connect deeply with either his home culture or his adoptive environment

Afropolitanism

Afropolitanism is a modern concept that has been used severally in defining the identity and behaviour of Africans in the diaspora. The originators of the terminology explained it to be a term representing the lives and experiences of Africans in the diaspora. Unlike Africans living in Africa, Africans abroad have different sets of experiences and consciousness. According to Kasanda (2018, 379), this concept is championed as a more effective tool for capturing the struggles of African liberation and identity than conventional viewpoints. Rather than adhering to old narratives, its advocates view it as a revolutionary redefinition of space and sensibility that reshapes Africa's engagement with the international community. Central to their argument is how modern globalising forces have catalysed new cultural configurations, which are visibly reflected in contemporary fashion, art, folklore, and literature.

Afropolitanism connects and champions African identity than other forms of concepts and discourse. It also brings diversity to the discourse of African identity, as its preoccupation is the identity, experiences, and consciousness of Africans abroad. These Africans abroad have several qualities that make them different from the ones on the continent. Despite these earlier theoretical foundations, the formal coinage of Afropolitanism is independently credited to the concurrent 2005 publications of Taiye Selasi and Achille Mbembe. Selasi conceptualises the term through a socio-economic lens, characterising it as a distinctly urban, upper-middle-class lifestyle adopted by a new

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generation of African emigrants. Settled predominantly within major global capitals, these individuals are defined by their cultural hybridity as well as their seamless social and professional integration into Western societies. As Selasi observes that, Afropolitans "are the newest generation of African emigrants, or more accurately [...] You will know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, the product of clean-cut cosmopolitan couples" (3).

Alternatively, Mbembe (2005) defines Afropolitanism as an identity-based concept exploring how Africans interact with and position themselves in relation to the wider world. Mbembe views the phenomenon as a unique way of inhabiting and negotiating global realities. Central to his argument is the assertion that geographical fluidity, individual autonomy, and cultural synthesis are the defining hallmarks of this contemporary mode of existence (Mbembe, 11). Thus, Afropolitanism studies the way Africans abroad relate to the foreign environment and culture. It also studies the unique features of Africans abroad, ranging from their cultural hybrid nature to a universal approach to life to multiple language use and so on. Afropolitanism and most of its features will be adopted in examining the events of the text. Julius' experiences in the US, his reminisces of his experience in Africa, and his interaction with other individuals will be studied.

Conceptualising African Identities within Local Cultural Contexts in Teju Cole's *Open City*

Teju Cole's *Open City* has been interpreted severally as a metropolitan text, acknowledged as one of the pioneering literary works of this form originating from the African continent. The narrative follows the trajectory of Julius as he moves through global cities, systematically examining the geographical space of these urban centres and the social dynamics of their residents. The inherent sophistication of the narrative mode is noteworthy, as the narrator furnishes an in-depth account of the inhabitants' lives within these cities and their surrounding environments. *Open City* employs a non-linear narrative structure, moving back and forth in time to trace the developmental life of Julius. The primary narration commences with Julius situated in New York, a physician whose habit for extended walks allows him to contemplate the urban sphere and engage in spontaneous interpersonal interactions. Subsequently in the text, the narrative reverts to Nigeria, Julius's country of origin. His experiences within Nigeria are substantially documented in the novel, explicitly outlining his dissatisfaction with the country.

Prior to Julius's migration to the U.S., the text offers a profound illumination of his native African identity. Within *Open City*, there exist diverse variations of African identities and their textual manifestations. The African identity situated on the African soil is distinct from the African identity negotiated in the diaspora. The identity on the African continent is primarily showcased as one whereby individuals reside within a closely-knit communal structure, where the tenets of familial affection and cohesion are deemed sacrosanct. For instance, in a conventional African setting, the nuclear family is often deemed insufficient as the sole unit of binding kinship; the extended family network is

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important. This precise relational structure is represented in Teju Cole's *Open City*. The inherent closeness and support of the extended family are prominently illustrated when Julius's father passes away. Julius and his mother are not unilaterally responsible for grieving and interring their patriarch; rather, the entire extended family network becomes actively involved.

Apart from the fundamental connection to family, especially the extended family, which Julius acquires as an element of authentic African identity, the text presents additional forms of identity markers. Julius achieves a very deep intrinsic connection to his African roots, being fundamentally interwoven with his native environment. He also internalises some ethical ideals traditionally associated with a proper African man. One such ideal internalised by Julius is the need for compassion and protective instinct to a considerable extent, demonstrating care for those within his care, particularly individuals deemed vulnerable. Even in his childhood, he exhibited a protective outlook towards a vulnerable classmate. Recounting his primary school years, Julius narrates that during that period, "I had seen myself as a grown man, protecting her as one might protect a pet, having many children with her, but I did not think of having her as a girlfriend. I don't think I even had such a concept then" (61). This recollection signifies that Julius's protective actions were devoid of ulterior motives, constituting the fulfilment of a perceived social responsibility required of him.

In Nigeria, Julius receives instruction concerning his heritage and the historical lineage of his people. Additionally, he acquires knowledge of the mythology and culture of his community. All these factors contribute to the formation of Julius as a comprehensively fully realised African man. Although Julius will subsequently attempt to relinquish some of these defining characteristics, he retains a substantial amount, permitting these early influences to partially define his personality.

In conclusion, Julius's early life in Nigeria establishes a deeply rooted African identity defined by communal responsibility and a sophisticated social structure. Through his experiences with his father's burial and his upbringing within an extended family network, he internalises the traditional values of kinship and social duty. Although he later adopts the detached perspective of a global wanderer in New York, these foundational years ensure that he carries a permanent connection to his heritage and ethical ideals. While learning African ideals and getting to know African identity markers, Julius goes through the African or Nigerian socialisation before he migrates out of Nigeria. This socialisation help a great deal in his overall identity formation in the text. His experiences in Nigeria are heavily different from his experiences outside Nigeria.

Pre-Migration Socialisation, Cultural Memory, and Identity Formation in *Open City*

Prior to his emigration to the US, as previously established, Julius undergoes an initiation into and a connection with his African culture. He assimilates the genuine Yoruba cultural values before his departure for the US; these foundational values persist as integral components of his identity even after his relocation. At various points during his movement across global cities, he recalls the history and narrative traditions of his people with a

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special fondness. On one specific instance, while traversing New York and encountering individuals with physical disabilities, he recalls the historical narrative and the legend of Obatala. Obatala, in Yoruba cosmology, is the deity of creation, charged by Olodumare with the divine task of moulding human beings. According to that legend, the genesis of physically challenged individuals is directly attributable to an error committed by Obatala. The narrator describes Obatala's transgression:

> I got the idea that some of the things I was seeing around me were under the aegis of Obatala, the diety charged by Olodumare with the formation of humans from clay. Obatala did well at the task until he started drinking. As he drank more and more, he became inebriated, and began to fashion damaged human beings. (26).

This invocation of the Obatala narrative highlights Julius's understanding of his people's culture and traditional narratives. The narrator employs this story to delineate the Yoruba cultural explanation for the existence of physically challenged persons. Julius's act of recounting this story demonstrates that, notwithstanding the degree of change he might have undergone in the US, he still retains significant traces of his people and remains deeply rooted in his origins. The narrator concludes Obatala's story by specifying that "due to he gets drunk sometimes on duty, Obatala creates imperfect human beings like 'dwarfs, cripples, people missing limbs, and those burdened with debilitating illness'" (27).

The Obatala narrative establishes a Yoruba philosophical perspective where the physically challenged are viewed as individuals who are not culpable for their circumstances. This perspective is instrumental in cultivating Julius's capacity for compassion and sympathy toward specific causes. As a child, Julius must have also been subjected to other modes of cultural indoctrination, where he was informed not only of mythologies and legends but also of the authentic history of his lineage. Collectively, these experiences construct his sense of attachment to Nigeria.

Additionally, other forms of socialisation and identity formation occurred in Julius's life prior to his emigration to the US. Some of these modes are not fully linked to his life history and culture. One such form is his formal education. Julius's tenure in elementary and secondary school significantly contributes to the shaping of his adult identity. However, similar to the majority of his experiences in Nigeria, his recollection of his time in secondary school is overwhelmingly negative. In Julius's initial description of the institution, he inserts the highly charged, traumatic term: discipline. "Discipline" is a term frequently weaponised by Nigerian adults to intimidate and coerce their children. Often, "discipline" is a misdirected form of threat employed either to compel children into desired behaviour or to allow Nigerian parents to project an image of effective parenting, whereas the term frequently masks instances where children were simply abused.

Julius recalls his secondary school, NMS, as, "NMS was my father's idea. It was a distinguished institution, and it was famed for producing disciplined teenagers. Discipline: the word had the force of a mantra among Nigerian parents, and my father, who indeed had a strong distaste for formalized violence, was taken in by it" (75). The duration of Julius's attendance at the school proves entirely tragic for him, an ordeal exacerbated by his emotional distance from his mother, which prevents him from sharing the details of his

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misery within the militarised environment. He is left to endure the pain and trauma in isolation. Due to this act and others, Julius develops such an intense aversion to his country that he eventually grows up to despise his own name. His name, which ought to function as his principal identity, defining and embodying his selfhood, is detested by Julius. Furthermore, Julius associates his first name as an unwelcome appendage of his mother, whom he also dislikes. Although he is deeply critical of his Christian first name, he adopts a less critical stance toward his Yoruba middle name. The narrator highlights this internal conflict:

> The name Julius linked me to another place and was, with my passport and my skin colour, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different, of being set apart, in Nigeria. I had a Yoruba middle name, Olatubosun, which I never used. That name surprised me a little each time I saw it on my passport or birth certificate, like something that belonged to someone else but had been long held in my keeping. Being Julius in everyday life thus confirmed me in my not being fully Nigerian. My mother disliked Julius, my name, as she disliked anything that came from sentimentality. (78)

Julius's reflection suggests he feels like a stranger in his own country, a condition akin to suffering an identity crisis within one's native homeland. In contrast to other texts with similar theme and plot, where characters maintain some form of connection to their home countries, *Open City* presents a protagonist who is disillusioned with his native land, extending even to the rejection of his personal name. This dissatisfaction originates from his negative lived experiences within the country and the complex, fraught nature of his familial relationships.

Unlike many Africans who derive a sense of pride from their names, feeling deeply connected to cultural and familial roots, Julius does not share this sentiment. Upon his relocation to the US, the existing disconnection from his land and culture fails to make his condition better. Although Julius does not feel affiliated with his culture and immediate family, he is surprisingly and emotionally connected to his German grandmother, Oma. This attachment stems from the bond forged during the time they spent alone, having been neglected by Julius's father and mother.

Julius is not the sole character in the text whose memory of Africa is fraught with negativity. Other characters are also portrayed as having unfavourable recollections of the continent. These individuals maintain only a tenuous connection to Africa, their memory being one dominated by war and chaos, a continent besieged by conflict, economic deprivation, and famine. One such figure is Saidu, a Liberian national Julius encounters during a visit to the prisons. Julius listens to Saidu's tragic narrative as Saidu faces impending deportation. Saidu's traumatic experiences in Liberia are detailed:

> His school, near the Old Ducor Hotel, had been shelled, and burned to the ground in 1994. A year later, his sister had died of diabetes, an illness that wouldn't have killed her in peacetime. His father, gone since 1985, remained gone, and his mother, a petty trader at the market, had nothing to trade. (64).

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Saidu's existence in Liberia was difficult, prompting his flight at the earliest available opportunity. Saidu and Julius share a common thread in their unfavourable memories of Africa. Saidu's experience is undoubtedly more acute, tragic, and violent, yet their experiences belong to the same category of alienation. Neither desires a return to the continent, resulting in the relegation of their African identities. The suppression of the African identity is the principal factor explaining Julius's pronounced affinity for Europeans and his struggle to connect authentically with other Africans. This deficient connection to Africa critically impacts Julius's interactions with fellow Africans on US soil. Julius's complicated childhood, dysfunctional family structures, and problematic communal experiences collectively contribute to the development of his detached adult personality.

Furthermore, Julius's early life is characterised by a dichotomy: it possesses the features of happiness, namely, his parents' marriage and their middle-class socioeconomic status, yet it lacks fundamental fulfilment. Their family unit is not closely-knit, and displays minimal or negligible emotional warmth. Julius does not experience the anticipated communal upbringing typical of many African children. His family structure is fractured, underlain by a history of familial negativity. This dearth of affection and unity within the family unit is exacerbated by the death of Julius's father during his secondary school years. This event constitutes a traumatic experience for Julius, which further intensified his emotional distance from his mother.

In conclusion, the pre-migration socialisation of Julius in *Open City* reveals a paradoxical relationship with his African identity, where deep cultural knowledge is overshadowed by personal and familial alienation. While he internalises the sophisticated mythologies and communal structures of the Yoruba people, as seen in his invocation of the Obatala narrative, these roots are unable to provide him with a sense of belonging due to the traumatic and tragic nature of his upbringing. His rejection of his own name and his intense antipathy toward his mother serve as early markers of the detached, cosmopolitan personality he later adopts in the diaspora.

Migration, Displacement, and the Emergence of Diasporic Consciousness in *Open City*

Migration of the African characters in the texts inherently leads to displacement, culture shock, and the acquisition of a diasporic consciousness. These psychological and social factors, hugely associated with Afropolitanism, are significantly represented in Teju Cole's *Open City*. Julius serves as a paradigm character symbolising these factors and experiences within the text. Other characters and events also serve to illustrate these features. As individuals move from one nation to another, there is an inevitable experience of culture shock and a degree of cultural erosion. Furthermore, a sense of displacement and a fresh consciousness and identity emerge. Julius, being a character with a complicated African identity, finds his transition from Africa to the US relatively easy. Nonetheless, his migration still results in forms of displacement and a diasporic consciousness. To fully grasp this, it is essential to understand the specifics of his migration. The narrator details the process:

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> The end of my time at the school coincided with the end of my time in Nigeria. My mother knew I was taking the SAT, but she didn't know about my applications to colleges in America; my purchase of a post office box helped perfect the concealment. I used up my few savings on college application fees. I had no luck with Brooklyn College, Haverford, or Bard (names I had plucked out of a tattered volume at the library of the United States Information Service in Lagos). I got into Macalester, but was offered no money; but Maxwell accepted me, and gave me a full scholarship. (84)

The course of Julius's life is thus charted. Julius borrowed funds from his uncles, which enabled him to purchase a ticket to New York and commence life in the US strictly on his own terms. However, Julius still experiences cultural surprise and shock upon his arrival in the US, despite his prior alienation from Nigeria. Nigeria and the US are dissimilar; their lifestyles and cultures diverge. In the US, he encounters racially induced discrimination, migration-related issues, and the general alienation of migrants on American soil. Julius experiences all of these phenomena.

Concerning racially-induced subjugation, there is substantial evidence presented throughout the text. One notable event is the brutal depiction of the murder of a black man, whose corpse is disrespectfully displayed. This spectacle is shocking for Julius, who is unaccustomed to such extreme violence, and at that moment, he confronts the stark reality of a murder motivated by racism. The text reveals the unsettling details of this injustice:

> What I saw next gave me a fright: in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head to toe in black, reflecting no light. It soon resolved itself, however, into a less ominous thing: dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind" (75).

In addition to this race-linked incident, Julius is forced to reconcile with the violence pervasive in the US, a stark contrast to the relative peacefulness he knew in Nigeria. Julius migrates to the US from a comparatively peaceful Nigeria, but his narrative differs from the experiences of other immigrants. He subsequently becomes aware of diverse migration histories, including those who fled from war, such as Saidu, previously mentioned. Other Africans whose stories Julius documents are the Rwandans. The Rwandans Julius encounters in the US exhibit typical behaviour, seemingly unaffected by having witnessed one of the world's deadliest genocides. Julius's observation of them and his subsequent exposure to their history shock him. For these Rwandans, their African identity is synonymous with loss, violence, and trauma. Most of them harbour no positive imagery or memory of their home country, Rwanda. In the US, they project an image of liberation and refuse to let the memories of the past define them.

Julius cannot fully comprehend the depth of their pain and trauma since he does not originate from a region that experienced such dangerous war and genocide. The ironic fact about the Rwandan genocide is that it was fuelled by ethnic hatred, a sentiment horribly similar to the racial hatred prevalent in the US and Europe. Julius struggles to

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comprehend why such extreme violence is motivated by prejudice based on one's origin or skin colour, as this level of systemic hatred is alien to his upbringing.

Julius encounters the same racially motivated violence and discrimination during his wanderings and visits to Europe. He fully experiences the discrimination and subjugation of people of colour during these excursions. He also becomes aware of the threats they face. The subjugation and threats intensify due to the increased migration of Africans to Europe and America. Julius recounts one such appalling incident:

> I was in Belgium at the very end of 2006, a year in which several hate crimes had ratcheted up the tension experienced by non-whites living in the country. In Bruges, five skin heads 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 centre with a Winchester rifle, and started shooting. He seriously injured a Turkish girl and killed a nanny from Mali, as well as the Flemish infant in her care. Later on, he expressed a specific regret: for having accidentally shot the white child. (Cole 97)

The sheer violence and hatred deeply shock Julius. In direct contrast to Nigeria, this race-based violence is something entirely unfamiliar to him. These European individuals willingly allow themselves to be consumed by fear and hatred. These experiences serve to further alienate Julius and other black individuals. Even though Julius may have felt a sense of displacement as a Nigerian in Nigeria, in the US, he still struggles to feel like an integral part of the black community.

Julius is also fully isolated in the US. He is employed and cultivates a few friendships, but he lacks a fundamental sense of belonging to the country. Julius exists in the country as if floating, merely living, without a deep and passionate affection for or connection to this nation. To cope with his isolation, Julius is perpetually mobile, wandering and observing global cities. The narrator states, "Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousand seven, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them" (6). The countless number of people he encounters daily during his walks does not mitigate the isolation he feels; they fail to fill the disconnection he experiences with his immediate environment.

This displacement and isolation suffered by Julius is so thorough that he does not connect deeply with most people in the US, including his professional associates, friends, and neighbours. Julius isolates himself to such an extent that he does not align with other Africans. He develops a diasporic consciousness that can be barely distinguished between his African identity and the identity of the country he resides in. This is a very strange phenomenon for an Afropolitan. Julius, having previously lacked a strong African identity, is easily influenced to acquire a total and complete diasporic consciousness that effectively alienates Africa. In fact, the erasure of his African self is represented by his choices in music, attire, language, and acquaintances. Throughout the text, Julius seldom speaks or converses in Yoruba, and this serves as one of the most visible forms of the erasure of his

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African identity. Julius converses primarily in English, and at times, he expresses a desire to converse in German, his mother's language. His Yoruba name, as previously established, is relegated to the past, forgotten, and used only for official documentation. The narrator outlines the result of Julius's alienation:

> I would sometimes listen to the radio. I generally avoided American stations, which had too many commercials for my taste, Beethoven playing, instead tuning to Internet stations from Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands. And though I often couldn't understand the announcers, my comprehension of their languages being poor, the programming always met my evening mood with great exactness. (Cole 5)

Julius is so alienated that he prefers to listen to European radio stations broadcasting in foreign languages rather than American stations that do not suit his specific interest. According to Taiye Selasi's concept of Afropolitanism, Julius is an apt example of an Afropolitan, given his deep and diverse cultural hybridity. Julius is not confined to a single culture or set of cultures. Possessing multiple origins, Julius allows himself to be easily influenced by multiple cultures, even those unrelated to his heritage. He speaks multiple languages, while neglecting his own primary language, Yoruba. Julius is presented in the text as a highly willing conduit for Western cultural indoctrination and influence.

Julius's experience of migration in *Open City* serves as a good example of how physical relocation triggers a shift into a complex diasporic consciousness. Unlike many migrants who seek to cling to their heritage for safety, Julius's journey is marked by an easy transition into Western life that ironically results in total emotional isolation and cultural erosion. His life in the United States and Europe exposes him to a world of racial violence and systemic othering that he never encountered in Nigeria, yet he responds to this not by seeking African brotherhood, but by retreating into a detached, individualistic state. By choosing European aesthetics and languages over his own Yoruba roots, Julius embodies an extreme form of the Afropolitan who is at home nowhere, floating through global cities as a perpetual observer.

The Origin Complex, Paradox of Identification and Self-Realisation in *Open City*

After Julius relocates to the US, he encounters new cultural norms, populations, and lifestyles that differ from his Nigerian background. Like all migrants, he must navigate the process of adapting to new customs while processing memories of the past. In terms of dealing with the past, the process is uncomplicated for him, as he readily shuts off most of his memories concerning Nigeria. In his attempt to assimilate the new culture, Julius shows no reluctance in completely discarding the past. The narrator conveys Julius's reasoning about the past as "the past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity" (151). Julius explicitly declares that the past, for which Nigeria stands as a metonym, is forgotten. He posits that his Nigerian memories are not worthy of recollection or reliving; they are simply to be disregarded.

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Ironically, his experience in the US is not entirely favourable either. Upon migration, Julius does not immediately perceive the country as a home. Several encounters illustrate his indifference to his new country. First, Julius is categorised as part of the black community, a racial designation he had never previously applied to himself. In the US, one of his initial culture shocks is the realisation that he must identify as a black man and be subjected to the prevailing stereotypes associated with black people. The stereotyping of black people is so severe that it is intergenerationally transmitted to children. Black individuals are judged collectively based on the stereotypes held by other racial groups, rather than being evaluated individually. These stereotypes are frequently linked to racial discrimination and subjugation. Julius experiences a racism-linked cajoling and misidentification during a walk home one evening. Julius's experience is disturbing because the perpetrators are children. The narrator recounts the distressing incident:

Hey mister, she said, turning to me, wassup? She made signs with her fingers and, with her brother, started laughing. The little boy wore an imitation Chinese peasant's hat. They had been mimicking slanted eyes and exaggerated bows before they came to where I was. They now both turned to me. Are you a gangster, mister? Are you a gangster? They both flashed gang signs, or their idea of gang signs. I looked at them. It was midnight, and I didn't feel like giving public lectures. He's black, said the girl, but he's not dressed like a gangster. I bet he's a gangster, her brother said, I bet he is. (33)

These children possess a psyche that has been severely conditioned to believe that most African black males are inherently gangsters. It is shocking for Julius to be labelled a gangster when he is not even dressed as one. As an adult, Julius does not display any offence, but he fails in his capacity as an educator by not providing the children with a corrective thought on his own identity and that of the broader black populace.

Julius's aloofness concerning issues of racial discrimination is largely a consequence of his African childhood. Having grown up in Nigeria, where the majority is black and racial discrimination is less overt, he does not readily grasp the gravity of race-linked oppression in the US. His reticence on such matters is also attributable to his lack of an authentic African heritage; his identification with Africa is already compromised. Julius finds it difficult to recognise himself as a black man with a unified black experience in the US. This unease manifests during solidarity discussions with his fellow black individuals. On one occasion, he has to consciously coerce himself to use the pronoun phrase "we blacks" instead of simply using the term "blacks." The narrator writes of this when Julius says,

Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees.' Blacks, 'we blacks,' had known rougher ports of entry, "this, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cab driver had meant. This was the acknowledgment he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every 'brother' he met" (55).

Before Julius can assent to the use of the "we blacks" tag, he engages in conflict with the black cab driver who accuses him of failing to identify with his fellow black people. It can reasonably be argued that Julius possesses minimal cultural memory of his origin: Nigeria. Upon migrating to the US, he actively abandons his Nigerian memories and

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advances into his present life in the US, assimilating and accepting the prevailing cultural and belief systems of the host country. As previously stated, Julius's experiences in this text contradict the common experiences of African migrants as defined by the Afropolitanism framework espoused by Taiye Selasi. Typical African migrants maintain a deep sense of connection to Africa, rooted in African culture, lifestyle, and tradition. This is not entirely the case for Julius.

What Julius lacks in terms of an authentic African identity, he compensates for with his seamless assimilation into the US and his precise description and analyses of American society. *Open City* provides more profound insight into non-African individuals and their respective cultures than it does into African ones. It is through Julius's sustained interaction with non-Africans and some Africans that he acquires genuine understanding of people both within and outside America and Europe. It is through his constant discourse with people that he first realises how race-conscious America is, and through this realisation, he also uncovers the suffering endured by people in the US. This suffering is particularly harsh for migrants, as he hears multiple narratives detailing their hardships.

Julius's early identity construction in New York is defined by a deliberate severance of cultural memory, creating a vacuum where a traditional sense of belonging once existed. By discarding his Nigerian past as empty space, Julius attempts to bypass the typical migrant struggle, yet he finds himself involuntarily ensnared by the American racial hierarchy. This analysis in this section so far has evaluated how his postcolonial experience of displacement is unique; unlike the typical Afropolitan who maintains a dual consciousness, Julius's global mobility is predicated on an initial rejection of his African heritage. His struggle to adopt the collective "we" when referring to Black identity illustrates the friction between his desire for individual transnationalism and the external pressures of racial categorisation. Ultimately, Julius's experience reveals that while Afropolitanism offers a framework for reconstructing the self, the pursuit of a rootless global identity often leaves the individual vulnerable to the very systems of alienation they sought to escape.

In *Open City*, Julius achieves a complex form of self-realisation through his solitary perambulations and intellectual reflections. Julius's sense of self is constructed through a refined, albeit detached, engagement with the world. His self-realisation is an intellectual project; he finds coherence by viewing himself as a cosmopolitan observer who can interpret the histories of others even as he obscures his own. By walking through the streets of New York and Brussels, Julius reorients his identity around the concept of the citizen of the world, using his vast knowledge of classical music, art, and history to create a stable, sophisticated interior life that shields him from the immediate trauma of his Nigerian past.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that African identity in Teju Cole's *Open City* is presented as a fluid, contested, and continually negotiated construct shaped by history, migration, memory, and personal experience. Through Julius's life before and after

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migration, the novel reveals that identity extends beyond race or geographical origin to encompass cultural consciousness, socialisation, language, and emotional attachment. Although Julius acquires significant elements of Yoruba culture and African communal values during his formative years, his traumatic upbringing, fractured family relationships, and dissatisfaction with Nigeria complicate his sense of belonging long before he migrated to the United States.

Furthermore, the study establishes that migration intensifies Julius's identity crisis rather than resolving it. His relocation exposes him to racial discrimination, cultural hybridity, and the realities of diasporic existence, yet he neither fully embraces his African heritage nor completely assimilates into American society. Instead, Julius embodies a paradoxical Afropolitan consciousness characterised by displacement, emotional detachment, and a persistent search for self. His experiences demonstrate that global mobility can create opportunities for intellectual growth while simultaneously producing profound alienation and cultural disconnection.

Open City challenges simplistic definitions of African identity by illustrating its complexity within an increasingly globalised world. The narrator suggests that authentic self-realisation cannot be achieved through the rejection of one's cultural roots or through uncritical assimilation into another culture. Rather, the novel advocates a critical engagement with memory, history, and heritage as essential foundations for negotiating identity in both local and transnational spaces, thereby enriching contemporary discussions on African identity, migration, and Afropolitanism.

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