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## **Urban Mobility and Race: Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and Teju Cole's *Open City***

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In his 2000 study, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, Liam Kennedy argues that “race commonly functions to frame ways of seeing and reading the city.”<sup>1</sup> This claim still holds true today, but recent American fiction has helped to highlight the extent to which race, and more specifically blackness, continues to be transformed, making it necessary for us to alter and extend the ways in which we understand what Liam Kennedy has termed “the transparent presence and the signifying absence of race in the production of urban space.”<sup>2</sup> Kennedy’s analysis of fiction and film was “consciously skewed towards a white (WASP and ethnic) and black (African-American) axis of urban relations,”<sup>3</sup> but novels such as Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) and Cole’s *Open City* (2011) remind us that there are ways of being black in the United States that do not fit into the (admittedly broad) category of “African-American.” Like Kennedy, most critics of race and urban space in American fiction have understandably focused on the study of African-Americans as the main representatives of blackness in the United States. However, as Giles Foden has noted, a number of books written by authors with recent or current (rather than historical) African roots have focused “partly on how U.S. race issues subsume a variety of identity questions arising from an African-exile or postcolonial context.”<sup>4</sup> This article aims to update the discourse on race in urban studies and the novel by examining how the immigrant, exilic and postcolonial contexts shape and influence ways of seeing and representing American cities. American fiction has made

an important contribution to our understanding of city life, and for a century or more, American authors have written about what it is like to be an African-American living in a city, and what it is like to be an immigrant in the city. The novels under discussion here combine these two themes by filtering immigration through the lens of blackness: they engage with the ways in which their immigrant subjects experience urban life as black African males who are not African-American. Furthermore, though I use the term “immigrant” here as a kind of shorthand, the two protagonists understand and experience their lives in the United States, and their reasons for moving there, in complex ways that defy easy categorization. Mengestu and Cole extend the enquiry into urban life as experienced by a city’s various “others” by concentrating on a poor and marginalized man and a well-educated and privileged one: two contrasting figures united by the experience of belonging and not belonging—being American, but newly and reluctantly American; being black and African, but not African-American. Louis Chude-Sokei calls such characters “the newly black Americans,” and notes that the tensions between African-American and African diasporic communities are a major feature of “this new literature by Africans.”<sup>5</sup>

*The Beautiful Things* and *Open City* were published within four years of each other, and received great critical acclaim and a host of literary prizes. Though very different in style, plot, character and setting, they both deal with young African males who live in major American cities and search not only for an identity but also for a wider context or web of connections.

Mengestu’s novel tells the story of Sepha Stephanos, a young man who comes to the United States from Ethiopia to run away from political strife, and who ends up staying as a reluctant immigrant. Cole’s narrator is Julius, a New York-based psychiatrist who grew up in Nigeria with an African father and a German mother; he travels not back to Africa but to Europe—more specifically, to Brussels—to find out more about his past. These two characters are black and

come from Africa, but they are not African-American as the term is customarily understood. A study of the novels themselves can be aided by African-American literary scholarship, but only with limited success. For this reason, it is more fruitful to study these novels at the critical and theoretical crossroads where African-American, immigrant, and postcolonial literary studies meet. Within this essay, I will focus on the trope of urban mobility, which features prominently in both novels. How a person moves through a city, what they see, and how they are perceived are here shown to be experiences shaped by race and history. From the point of view of the people they encounter, these two men are primarily defined by their blackness: both Stephanos and Julius are aware of how others see them and of how they are categorized according to skin color. In contrast, their first-person narratives give us access to their interior lives and help us to understand how their experience of urban existence is colored by immigration, exile, postcolonial sensibilities, and a sense of alienation.

### ***1. Immigration and Cosmopolitanism***

The two novels I consider here have a very strong sense of movement, space, and place, and each adds different meanings to these categories. Mengestu's novel is set in Washington, DC, while Cole's is set mainly in New York. Both contain long descriptions of the urban environment and the narrators' interactions with it, and both feature protagonists with a developed and complex understanding of their relationship to their urban milieu. Stephanos lives and works in Logan Circle, a run-down neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Most of the action in the novel takes place in a small space: a couple of blocks, a park, his house, that of his white neighbor, and his store. Stephanos displays no great urban mobility, either literally or metaphorically, preferring to stay put. From his limited vantage point, he observes the life around him and thinks about his relationship to the rest of the city. Despite living in an African-

American neighborhood, his friends are not African-Americans, but other African immigrants. When he ventures out of Logan Circle, his movement around the city underscores his sense of alienation, of not belonging. Interestingly, though, he feels this sense of not belonging in relation not only to the white people he observes in the finer neighborhoods west of Logan Circle but also to the African communities he visits, where people still live as if they were back home. The character's alienation from white communities, African diasporic communities, and African-American communities marks Mengestu's contribution to our understanding of those "newly black Americans." Chude-Sokei argues that African immigrants "do not necessarily experience or respond to racism in the same way or share the same notions of identity or affiliation as African Americans."<sup>6</sup> Mengestu deploys images and metaphors of space to explore this in-between-ness and to highlight the competing demands on the African immigrant to assimilate either into white American hegemonic structures (signified in the novel by home and business ownership) or into African-American cultures.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Stephanos, who remains pointedly static during key scenes in *The Beautiful Things*, Julius is a keen and restless walker. Most of the novel details his wanderings around New York and Brussels while at the same time giving us access to Julius's meandering thoughts, triggered by the sights and sounds around him. His train of thought is subjective and personal, but it is made accessible through a dense web of references to classical music, Dutch painting, history, and literary and cultural theory. Where Stephanos seeks the company of other African men and sees hope in his friendship with a white woman and her mixed-race daughter, Julius is mainly alone. Moreover, the few important encounters he highlights in his narrative are with people who are neither black nor African. When a black taxi driver castigates him for his rudeness and tries to appeal to a bond of brotherhood between them, Julius resents and rejects the

offer of racial solidarity. The differences between the two narrators should, of course, be attributed to individual circumstances and the temperaments that their creators have endowed them with; however, they can also be understood in another way. Stephanos comes from Ethiopia, one of the few African countries that were not colonized during the “scramble for Africa.” Julius grew up in Nigeria with a Nigerian father, and he is therefore more typically the product of a postcolonial culture and education. Stephanos and Julius, in other words, can help us to understand blackness in the American city, not through the habitual lens of the African-American presence but through immigration from Africa and the legacy of postcolonialism.

Another way to frame the contrast between the two characters is to think of Stephanos as an immigrant or a diasporic subject and of Julius as an Afropolitan. Susanne Gehrman notes that, in its simplest form, Afropolitanism is “a form of cosmopolitanism with African roots.”<sup>8</sup> Since the publication of Taiye Selasi’s “Bye-bye Babar” in 2005, which championed the term and hailed the 1990s as the decade of the Afropolitan’s arrival on the world scene, the term has generated ongoing scholarly debate and controversy. Grace A. Musila, for example, argues that the need to define an African version of cosmopolitanism implies that ordinarily the African subject is excluded from the concept, while Gehrman outlines objections to the term relating to commodification and class bias.<sup>9</sup> The differences in class, spatial mobility, and the consumption of culture that we can see between Stephanos and Julius do largely support those criticisms, although Cole’s attitude to his protagonist remains contested, and it is difficult to determine the extent to which the author may be aligned with his fictional creation. Critical interpretations of Julius see him either as an embodiment or as a critique of Afropolitanism, whereas Mengestu’s intimate portrayal of Stephanos is a reminder that the poor immigrant (unlike his trendy and photogenic creator) remains unvarnished by the glamor of Afropolitanism.

In terms of migration narratives, Stephanos is something of a riddle. His story is not one of a teleological journey from Africa to America, and while the beginning of the narrative finds him owning a small convenience store, his trajectory is downwards rather than upwards. What Mengestu does not make explicit is the extent to which Stephanos is complicit in his fate. For instance, it could be argued that, as an immigrant, Stephanos measures himself by the tape of a world that champions the immigrant success story. He has likely internalized elements of the dominant notion that he is a failure who is not trying hard enough to live up to the narrative of successful integration. Equally, it might be that Mengestu has Stephanos deliberately sabotage himself, thereby creating an anti-hero whose rejection of the immigrant success story is meant to highlight the inequalities and the injustice lurking underneath the familiar narrative of the American dream of upward mobility. Either way, Stephanos is neither a traditional immigrant nor simply a victim of poverty or of circumstances. Coming from a country that entered the public consciousness during the 1980s famine, Stephanos could be expected to embody the stereotype of the happy, grateful immigrant who fled a bloody civil war and found a safe haven in the United States. Yet this is not how he sees himself. Unusually for an American novelist, Mengestu endows his protagonist with happy as well as traumatic memories of his African past. As Stephanos explains, “I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back.”<sup>10</sup> He sees his present life in America as “a poorly constructed substitution” for the life he had back in Ethiopia, the place where, as he says, “everything I had cared for and loved was either lost or living on without me” (40). These memories of a happier past both heighten his sense of loss and help to explain his ambivalence.

Julius is equally hard to read. He is fully aware of, and consequently appalled by, the oppression his country has suffered under colonial rule. His knowledge and understanding of colonial history enable him to see racial tensions in the United States as part of a transatlantic web rather than as a national problem. Yet he is also proud of his own participation in and celebration of Western culture, to which his colonial past has given him not only access, but also a stake: a sense that the forms of Western high culture—music, painting, and literature—that he enjoys also belong to him. Whereas Stephanos is an underachieving store owner, Julius is a successful professional. Unlike Stephanos, Julius has a sense of entitlement that could be ascribed to his background and upbringing. As the inheritor of postcolonial legacies, Julius participates in a cosmopolitan project that questions borders and national narratives. For example, critics have picked up on the fluidity of his national identity. James Wood defines him as “half-Nigerian, half-German,” while Miguel Syjuco refers to him as “something of an outsider” and “the perpetual Other.” Reviewing the novel for the *New York Review of Books*, Claire Messud speaks of Julius as a “young African” and “a wordly foreigner.”<sup>11</sup> What these various descriptions emphasize is that Julius is not a traditional immigrant, and his is not a story of becoming American. Far from producing a narrative that aims to create or enact a new American identity for the narrator, Cole uses Julius’s discourse to emphasize, in Pieter Vermeulen’s words, “metropolitanism, aestheticism, and intercultural curiosity.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, from the moment Julius tells his readers in the novel’s opening pages that he does not listen to classical music on American radio because he dislikes the commercial breaks, it becomes obvious that he has no desire to be seen as American. His observations about American life mark him as an outsider, though his knowledge of history and culture, coupled with his attention to the minutiae of American life, suggest a greater investment in his American (or, more broadly

speaking, Western) life than he might care to admit to. As Vermeulen notes, Julius's "wanderings and ruminations generate a perspective that is both intimate and detached, engaged as well as estranged."<sup>13</sup> Messud reads this ambivalence as an "un-American" sensibility and "a cosmopolite's detachment." In other words, Stephanos and Julius share a feeling of ambivalence concerning their American lives, but critics account for this ambivalence in varied ways that emphasize subtle differences in each character's national background and cultural heritage.

## ***2. Urban and Textual Spaces***

Both Mengestu and Cole use urban mobility as a spatial metaphor that has a dual function: it enables them to examine and represent new modes of international, cross-border movement, be it immigration, travel, expatriation, or cosmopolitan peregrination. At the same time, their spatial representations give shape and complexity to their narrative structures, producing formally striking novels that document the diverse and varied ways of being black in the American city. Both authors use their narrators' urban mobility to explore racialized spaces, where it serves as a correlative to the narrators' twofold predicament. As black men in large American cities, Stephanos and Julius are excluded from official, legitimate urban space; though very different in temperament and circumstances, they are both defined by alienation from their environment. However, their alienation is not presented as a direct result of the racism they encounter. Stephanos, for example, is alienated because he has been reluctant to embrace the immigrant narrative: he sees himself as an Ethiopian who lives in Washington, DC, rather than as an American, and he has little desire to integrate and succeed. Julius, meanwhile, is alienated in another way: he is not who he seems, and his inner world does not match up to the ways in which he is perceived by others. Julius does not fit the stereotype of the black man who walks

the streets aimlessly. Far from being homeless or down-and-out, he is a refined, cultured flâneur: a type easily recognized in a white character, but less so in a black African.

Each book's discursive structure is closely linked to its themes. Julius's ability to jump from one topic to the next, from Mahler to European history to Flemish painting, is the companion image to his urban wanderings. As his steps meander, so does his cultured mind. Stephanos, on the other hand, tries to come to terms with his status as an immigrant by conceiving his spatial relation to the city as a reflection of the immigrant experience. The ways in which the narrative meanders, backtracks, or deviates have their analogue in Mengestu's depictions of Stephanos walking the streets of the nation's capital. The ideas of a journey, a destination, and the telos of the immigrant narrative all converge near the book's end, describing Stephanos' walk home as he reflects on the meaning of the phrase "going back home" (174); this passage makes explicit the links between the novel's fragmented structure, its non-chronological narrative, and its narrator's uncertain national allegiance.

New York and Washington, DC, act as real and symbolic backgrounds to the two characters' life experiences, and depictions of the two cities are as varied and nuanced as the inner lives of the two narrators. It is therefore not easy to come to any conclusion about a pro- or anti-urban stance in each book, though it is worth considering briefly how they fit into African-American scholarship on the subject. In *The City in African American Literature*, Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler note that American literature since the nineteenth century has been dominated by a strong anti-urban stance, but they argue that a "substantial reversal of this anti-urban drive in American literature can be found in African-American writing."<sup>14</sup> In *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, Madhu Dubey reminds us that in the 1970s, African Americans became "a predominantly urban people" for the first time.<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then,

that so much of the literature since the 1970s has had an urban focus, though the extent to which this literature reverses the previous period's anti-urban drive is open to debate. The novels I am discussing are not anti-urban, though they highlight the conditions that shape—and often negatively affect—the black experience in America's large cities.

In *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature*, Tyrone R. Simpson II argues that even though “the formal barriers of segregation have fallen, the economic and physical structuring of American cities in the late twentieth century have created a situation in which a large number of black and brown Americans continue to reside in depressed inner city neighborhoods.”<sup>16</sup> Yomna Saber, meanwhile, observes that “blacks tell different spatial stories as they stumble upon spatial elements arising from issues of class, race and gender.” She borrows the phrase “spatial stories” from Michel de Certeau, noting how urban walkers “confer meanings on the itineraries they create for themselves.”<sup>17</sup> Saber's formulation is the most useful one, because it helps to illuminate both the similarities and the differences between African-American and other black spatial stories. Stephanos and Julius do indeed confer meaning on their itineraries, and that meaning is shaped by their experiences as exile, immigrant, and postcolonial cosmopolites. Stephanos makes comparisons between the U.S. and Ethiopian capitals that subvert the othering of African urban spaces, while Cole, as Madhu Krishnan argues, uses the trope of New York as an open city in order to unmask its cosmopolitanism and reveal “its liberatory excess as façade.”<sup>18</sup>

### ***3. Washington, DC and Addis Ababa***

Mengestu's narrator and protagonist tells a very complex and richly detailed spatial story. He lives and works in Logan Circle, and the setting becomes an important feature because the novel is, among other things, concerned with the benefits and perils of ghetto gentrification. The

setting is also significant for its symbolic value. Logan Circle was once an area of big mansions and wealthy residents that later fell on hard times. Stephanos explains its appeal, saying “I loved the circle for what it had become: proof that wealth and power were not immutable, and America was not always so great after all. The neighborhood, and by extension the city, had fallen, and every night I could see and hear that out of my window” (16). Here, Mengestu uses urban decay to highlight his protagonist’s status as a reluctant immigrant: rather than marveling at the splendor of the American city and working hard for the right to participate in city life, this character rejoices in the neighborhood’s downfall because it mirrors his own lack of ambition, his pessimism, and his rejection of the American dream. In other words, the decline that Logan Circle is undergoing serves as a kind of confirmation bias for the narrator.

Critics read Stephanos’ lack of ambition as indicative of the harsh conditions that immigrants have to face. Caren Irr, for instance, sees “a stagnant form of immigrant melancholia” in the novel’s opening pages, though I would argue that the melancholia is best attributed to forced exile rather than to migration, since migration is generally seen as being driven by the desire for self-improvement.<sup>19</sup> Irr does not fully address Stephanos’ sense of agency when she observes that he and his “trauma-scarred” friends are “melancholically suspended in a strange geography,” being “only partial occupants of the United States.”<sup>20</sup> The implication behind her reading seems to be that only a traumatized individual would refuse to participate in the American dream. Yet Mengestu portrays a more complex reality—one in which Stephanos is indeed traumatized and scarred by his African past, but also one where an African country, Stephanos’ Ethiopia, is not depicted as Africa normally is in American fiction. Stephanos’ Ethiopia is not only a site of trauma and suffering, and it does not only function as a repository of the past. Stephanos surprises the reader by likening Washington, DC, to Addis

Ababa (173–74); in so doing, he subverts familiar stereotypes of Africa as a space associated with the past and with rural life. His Addis is a modern city of parks and long roads that is not ideologically or figuratively subordinate to the American capital. The comparison highlights the fact that Stephanos has retained his allegiance to Ethiopia; circumstances may have made him an American, but he sees America as an Ethiopian. He brings to the American capital an African gaze, unencumbered by colonial legacies and latent feelings of inferiority, and he refuses to embrace its ideology. Stephanos is not depicted entirely as a victim of circumstances, though he has been a victim, traumatized by events in his home country and by systemic racism in the United States. He has agency, and he makes choices, though he is more *Bartleby* than Benjamin Franklin. “When asked by my uncle Berhane why I had chosen to open a corner store,” he explains, “I never said that it was because all I wanted out of life now was to read quietly, and alone, for as much of the day as possible” (40). Elsewhere in his narrative, Stephanos does speak more conventionally of “the early ambitions of the immigrant” (41), recalling the “hyperinflated optimism and irrational hope” (145) of his early days in DC. In these descriptions, Mengestu delivers a powerful message about the continuing effects of racism in the United States by showing that his protagonist’s actions have been shaped by not only the trauma of the African past, but also the grim reality he encounters when he becomes one of the United States’ “poor and black” citizens (41).

One of the ways in which the author highlights the character’s resistance to the idea that assimilation can be measured in material success is highlighted through his lack of mobility. The static parts of the novel successfully illustrate the complexity of a character who, perhaps, rejects certain opportunities because he feels he has been denied them. Throughout the novel, Stephanos looks out of his window, at home and in his store. He doesn’t walk much; he prefers to be an

observer rather than a participant. That is true of his life in Logan Circle, but it is also symbolic of his reluctance to become American. Chapter 3, for instance, opens with Stephanos being late for work. “There are those who wake each morning ready to conquer the day,” he muses, “and then there are those of us who wake only because we have to. We live in the shadows of every neighborhood. We own corner stores, live in run-down apartments that get too little light, and walk the same streets day after day. We spend our afternoons gazing lazily out of windows” (35). Here, and elsewhere in the novel, we see Stephanos going to work past the morning rush hour. We can examine his refusal to be part of the morning commuter crowd by recalling Michel de Certeau’s practice of everyday life. Whereas the “strategy,” to borrow de Certeau’s term, is for a city or indeed a country to go to work at a certain time in the morning, Stephanos’ “tactic,” his small and personal act of subversion, is to venture out when the crowds have gone. The city dominated by people going to work looks very different from the city after the rush hour, and by choosing to go out later, Stephanos aligns himself with those who do not participate in mainstream society, either by choice or by misfortune, usually due to complex socio-economic factors. By going out and sitting on a bench when he should be at work, Stephanos *enacts* his refusal to become American:

As I walk through the circle I decide to stop and take a seat on one of the new benches across from General Logan to listen to the birds chattering away loudly in the trees. . . . the birds cackle away in their treetops, and after watching them hop idly from branch to branch another half hour, I finally decide it’s time for me to rise and join the forces of the working world. (35–36)

The birds symbolize and amplify the narrator’s idle life, and also contain a Biblical reference: Stephanos does not have to embrace the American work ethic any more than the birds do. In

Cole, as I discuss below, birds are linked to the narrator's sense of being in a permanent state of transience: of being in a place but not belonging there, of being en route, on the go, a natural migrant with no respect for borders.

The opening pages of the novel emphasize Stephanos as observer rather than participant, voyeur rather than flâneur. Just as his late arrival at work signals his reluctance to join the mainstream, his observation of street life through windows heightens his outsider status: he is inside looking out, as it were, but in reality he is outside looking in, looking into a city and a nation where he thinks he does not belong. That sense of exclusion extends to the passages in the book where we see Stephanos on the move. Despite its emphasis on lack of mobility, the novel contains two significant passages in which Stephanos ventures beyond Logan Circle, traveling farther than the brief distance from his home to his store. The first episode takes place when a couple of white American tourists walk into his store. After a brief chat, he follows them as they walk west along P Street to Dupont Circle. A black man following a white couple is a racially charged image that speaks both of the black subject's exclusion from urban space and of the white subject's fear of the racialized other. However, this incident is also notable for other types of symbolic potential: in order to follow the couple, Stephanos simply walks out of his store in the middle of the working day. Vermeulen reads this passage as follows: "The narrator's casual defection not only suspends his investment in the dream of upward mobility, it importantly also occurs without a conscious decision on his side—without, that is, a strong affirmation of agency, but rather with an almost indifferent sabotaging of his potential for worldly success."<sup>21</sup> Vermeulen is, no doubt, right to read the episode as an example of self-sabotage, but, like Irr, he denies Stephanos the possibility of agency because, in the immigrant novel, agency is aligned with the teleological narrative of upward mobility. How can Stephanos have agency when he

ruins his chances of success? Yet this is precisely the novel's strength: that it validates the experience of those who, for complex reasons (not lack of agency), do not embrace the traditional immigrant story. To drop out of the story America tells itself, to exist in the margins of a city that tells the nation how great it is: these experiences, shared by many of America's "others," are under-represented in American literature and culture.

Life in the margins, unsurprisingly, is shown in the novel to be connected with blackness. African-American literature contains numerous potent images of the black male in the street, most memorable among them Easy Rawlings in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* and Bob Jones in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. The former, desperate to get home after a brutal police interrogation, wants to run, but tells himself to slow down: "I knew that a patrol car would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered."<sup>22</sup> The latter knows that he can't sit smoking in his parked car for long, because "they'd call the police. Any Negro in the neighborhood after dark was a 'suspicious person.'"<sup>23</sup> All Bob Jones wants is to be "just a simple Joe walking down an American street," "without distinction, either of race, creed, or color,"<sup>24</sup> but Himes suggests that this is not an option for his black protagonist. Mengestu's narrator is aligned with his fictional African-American predecessors. He too is aware of how his skin color excludes him from parts of the city and denies him the greater mobility afforded to whites. But he can also read the symbolic meaning of urban space by observing it through the eyes of the immigrant. Rawlings and Jones feel the injustice of being American citizens of long standing who are excluded in their own country, whereas Stephanos also feels left out because of his immigrant status. As he walks, he reflects: "Of all the streets that meet the circle, P is by far my favorite. As it heads west toward Dupont and Georgetown, it only grows prettier and wider, with the houses increasingly grand and luxurious, as if each step forward were a step toward paradise. . . . The

further up P you move, the better life gets” (73). The notion of heading west to get closer to paradise suggests two things. First, it suggests that Stephanos links his short walk west to westward expansion in the United States—in other words, with the narrative of hard work rewarded by success. However, it also suggests that Stephanos lives *east* of Eden, that Logan Circle is the land where Cain was banished. His neighborhood therefore is depicted as a figurative black ghetto, which acts as a space that excludes immigrants and African-Americans from the grand narrative that the city tells the nation.

The second journey is a train journey to his uncle’s house in one of the poor suburbs of Maryland, at the end of the Red Line. Stephanos’ Metro journey, like Julius’s subway experience in *Open City*, is imbued with symbolism: “The escalators that lead down to the Metro are vast and cavernous, an enormous yawning mouth that swallows and spits out thousands of people every day” (96). The imagery here is suggestive of hell, and the suggestion is reinforced later in the passage when Stephanos’ train of associations leads him to his friend Joseph, who reads out to his friends passages from Dante’s *Inferno* (a line from which gives the novel its title). In the earlier passage, it is the ghetto east of Dupont Circle that is seen as hell but here, it is mainstream American life, represented by the official, tightly regulated space of the Metro. Mengestu highlights his protagonist’s insecure relationship with the city and the nation by including a passage that once again echoes de Certeau’s theories about the organizing principles that govern cities: “the trains of this city continue to amaze me, regardless of how long I live here. It’s not just their size, but their order, the sense you get when riding them that a higher, regulatory power is in firm control, even if you yourself are not” (97). The passage closely resembles Michel de Certeau’s musings on the organization of the railway and the rail journey: “everything has its place in a gridwork. Only a rationalized cell travels. A bubble of panoptic and classifying power,

a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order . . . Everything is in its place.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Stephanos is not in his place, and the train ride episode helps us to understand not only his sense of alienation and exclusion, but also the official strategies and organizing principles that exclude groups or individuals from cities.

The train takes him to a different kind of urban space, one that is both familiar and strange—an uncanny African presence. Stephanos visits a tower block where Ethiopians live as if they were still in Addis Ababa and not Washington, DC. The congregation of racial, national, or ethnic groups is of course not new in American cities, with their Chinatowns and Little Italys. The new perspective that Mengestu brings, though, is in his dramatization of an encounter between people with differing degrees of allegiance to their originating culture. Stephanos begins by explaining that he moved out precisely because “living here is as close to living back home as one can get” (116); seeing the people “transported perfectly intact from Ethiopia” (115–16) helps him to understand how far he has come in his own reluctant shedding of his old identity. “There is a beauty and a terror to those floors” (116), he muses, seeing his own people through what Mary Louise Pratt calls “imperial eyes,”<sup>26</sup> using the kind of language that would be more familiar in a colonial encounter. The Ethiopian enclave is evoked in very different terms from Logan Circle, but both spaces help to emphasize the margins in a city that stands for a nation.

Of all American cities, Washington, DC, is the one that best exemplifies what Arjun Appadurai and James Holston call “one of the defining marks of modernity”: the linking of two “concepts of association—citizenship and nationality—to establish the meaning of full membership in society.”<sup>27</sup> Washington, DC, is a city that is literally as well as metaphorically readable. Government buildings and other public structures bear inscriptions that openly instruct, in democratic English rather than obscure Latin: from Union Station to the Department of

Justice, the National Archives, and elsewhere, its architecture speaks to the citizens, instructing them on the values that make them American and that make their country great: “The truth shall make you free,” proclaims Union Station; “The place of justice is a hallowed place,” says the inscription on the Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice; and the National Archives proclaim faith in “the permanency of our national institutions.” Paramount among these inscriptions is the engraved Gettysburg address alongside the imposing statue of Abraham Lincoln, the physical location of which reinforces the idea of a pilgrimage, the culmination of an urban journey. Stephanos recalls his early visits to the Lincoln Memorial as a time when he and his hopeful immigrant friends were seeking a space for themselves in the national narrative. Joseph had memorized the address, but later the friends stopped going because “reality . . . settled in” (47). The reality for the nation’s others is one of poverty, exclusion, and lack of opportunity; Stephanos’ observation highlights the disjunction between an urban space that dramatizes American nationality and the reality of city life for the immigrant.

As the narrative moves slowly to its conclusion, Stephanos asks, “How did I end up here? Narrative. Perhaps that’s the word that I’m looking for. Where is the grand narrative of my life?” (147). The answer is that Stephanos’ life, like the lives of millions of migrants, exiles and expatriates in the early twenty-first century, does not conform to a neat linear narrative. More than a century ago, Mary Antin could tell a story of linear progression from Polotsk to Boston and beyond; the spatial journey she and her family undertook was also an image of the journey of their lives, from being Russian to becoming American. Stephanos’ spatial experience points to a different model. The image that perhaps best describes his condition is not a journey, but his description of a street map, starting with P Street, which, “along with Rhode Island Avenue, Vermont Avenue, and 13th Street, hits the circle like the spoke of a bicycle wheel” (73).

Although Washington, DC, is built on a grid, with streets meeting at right angles, here another, less orderly map has been superimposed on that grid—one with diagonals and circles that disrupt the grid. It is those diagonals and circles that serve as a spatial metaphor for Stephanos' plight: his life does not move along a continuum, and the narrative can therefore not be constructed as a grid. Just as the streets of his new hometown run in different directions, intersecting and circling, so too his life, and his non-chronological narrative, converge, diverge, and circle right back. The novel ends with Stephanos in stasis, reflecting on movement. As he comes to accept his present life, he finds himself “neither coming nor going” (228), and the novel suggests that this is the closest he can get to feeling at home.

#### **4. *New York and Brussels***

*Open City* looks at race and the city in different ways, and the New York setting provides a useful contrast to Washington, DC. Whereas the latter epitomizes the triumph of urban planning as nation building, the former shows the disjunction between citizenship and nationhood. It is a commonplace that New Yorkers think of themselves as New Yorkers rather (or more) than as Americans, and Cole's novel makes astute use of the setting by asking complex questions about urban life, migration, and national allegiance. Julius is a man who walks freely around town; he does not feel that he belongs, observing what he sees as an explorer rather than a New Yorker, and yet there is no suggestion on his part that the city excludes him for reasons of race. Though he is fully aware of the racial divisions in New York, he possesses a sense of superiority that allows him to feel exempt from such divisions. This sense of entitlement, of being a free man in an “open city,” is partly the result of his specific background. Julius is a well-educated man with a twofold claim to a European heritage: his mother is German, thus connecting him biologically to “old Europe,” and as a postcolonial subject, he carries within him

the British colonial legacy. This position affords him a sense of distinction and superiority in the United States, where a British accent and a British education are markers of refinement and “class.” Julius does not align himself with the nation’s African-Americans, and therefore he feels exempt from racist treatment, though the story teaches him otherwise. At the same time, his status as a well-educated, cultured psychiatrist with a good job helps to test the hypotheses of thinkers such as Paul Gilroy, Anthony Appiah, and Walter Benn Michaels, who have argued that the United States should now be understood as post-racist, or that race is a socially constructed category that should not be used as a marker of essential identity.<sup>28</sup> Julius’s flânerie, along with his cultured gaze, do indeed convey the image of a post-racial subject, but Cole stages a series of encounters that help Julius to appreciate that his perceived social status does not exempt him from racism.

*Open City* can be compared to other novels that deal with postcolonial triangulation, such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, on the grounds that all these novels deal with postcolonial subjects who feel empowered rather than oppressed by the colonial legacy. In Lahiri’s text, we see Gogol asserting his place in the world neither by aping a culture to which he does not belong nor by claiming a “pure” Indian background. In *Americanah*, there is a wonderful episode where the protagonist, Ifemelu, makes a conscious decision to drop her newly acquired American accent. Worried that she might be treated as a slow-witted foreigner by other Americans if she speaks with a Nigerian accent, she reassures herself that she can always switch to the beautifully enunciated British accent, taught to her at school in Nigeria, and use it as an empowering tool whenever she fears condescension. In *Open City*, Julius not only takes pride in his country’s independence but also feels he has a rightful stake in his European heritage. This self-perception makes him feel superior to, but also

isolated from, African-Americans. Julius projects upon the streets he walks his vast knowledge of Western culture and history. His reading of the city streets is neither African (meaning “black” or “other”) nor depthless. Cole explicitly evokes the image of the palimpsest, much used in postcolonial studies, but here put to new use: we see that Julius’s postcolonial African gaze allows him to uncover layers of Western culture and colonial history. When he visits Ground Zero, Julius reflects on absence, thinking of the newly erased space in its earlier incarnations, before the World Trade Center was built, further back in time: “And, before that? What Lenape paths lay buried beneath the rubble? The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.”<sup>29</sup> He thinks of the indigenous dwellers “before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson.”<sup>30</sup> As a black man, Julius evokes Gómez because he understands the centrality of the slave trade to the United States’ ability to erase, renew, and forge ahead, even turning calamity into opportunity. At the same time, as a postcolonial subject, he is able to peel further layers of time, and to think of New York as a colonized space, one in which he is hoping to find “the line that connected me to my own part in these stories.”<sup>31</sup> Being Nigerian, Julius clearly does not belong to the United States as an African-American. Therefore, uncovering the layers that conceal New York’s colonial past helps him to understand how his adopted home shares with his place of origin a history of colonization. That, in turn, enables him to claim his place in the American nation: he finds his usable story, the narrative that binds him to the United States: the story of colonization and displacement rather than the story of the slave trade.

Teju Cole’s story features a narrator protagonist who walks for much of the novel, but Cole does not just give us access to Julius’s wandering thoughts as he wanders the streets. He

creates a complex picture of a man who is aware that he is a storyteller—a man who *performs* his inner thoughts for the benefit of his audience. The narrative opens with the words “And so.” Echoing Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*, the words cast the narrator in the role of the teller, a role familiar from various African and African-American traditions. In order to illuminate the nature of the connection between the storyteller and the city he walks in, Cole has Julius use two related images right at the very beginning of his narrative. The first is an image of migrating birds, or what he calls “the miracle of natural immigration.”<sup>32</sup> The second one is Internet radio, where national borders become obsolete and disembodied voices can be heard from all over the world. Both images relate to phenomena that transcend national boundaries, and both therefore give an early indication of how Julius sees himself in relation to the city where he lives: he is not American, but his presence there is as natural as the presence of the birds, and as easy in this technological age as finding a radio station from the other side of the world.

Starting from the novel’s first page, his walks are described in intricate detail, giving texture and an almost tangible presence to New York City. More importantly, we are given full access to the meanderings of his mind during those walks. The narrator thinks about music, art, literature, and architecture, dazzling the reader with the depth and quality of his knowledge. However, his richly cultured and educated interior world highlights a discrepancy: the black man walking idly in the city is an object of suspicion or fear, so even though we know him to be a man of culture, erudition, and good taste, we can assume that this is not how others will see him. The constant movement in the novel can also be seen as a spatial metaphor, as a way of understanding the narrator’s sense of not belonging in New York, or Nigeria, or anywhere else. Cole’s narrator displays a heightened awareness of how he is perceived by others; although he

does not see color, or African descent, or immigrant status as markers of his identity, he is aware that others in the city perceive him as though they were. Many of his walks center precisely on encounters that help both the narrator and the reader understand that narratives of urban life often rest on simplistic depictions of racial identity that efface the heterogeneity of residents' lived experience.

One of the key episodes in *Open City* is the narrator's visit to Brussels. The story of the visit, which takes up a significant part of the narrative, further emphasizes the triangulation that Julius embodies: the European colonial legacy, the Nigerian background, and his present life in America. It is hard to imagine reading a literary visit to Brussels without thinking of Charlie Marlow before and after his experience sailing down the Congo. Julius makes no overt references to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but Cole nevertheless emphasizes both the modernist and the colonial legacies through a different literary reference. The passage that concludes the visit to Brussels is closely modeled on the closing lines of James Joyce's "The Dead":

Night had fallen. I entered the apartment and threw off my clothes and lay in bed in the darkened room, naked. Heavy drops tapped on the window. The weather report was right: in ever widening circles from where I stood, rain was lashing the land. It fell heavily all over the Portuguese district, on the shrine to Pessoa and on Casa Botelho. It fell on Khalil's phone shop, where Farouq had perhaps just begun his shift. It fell on the bronze head of Leopold II at his monument, on Claudel at his, on the flagstones of the Palais Royal. The rain kept coming down, on the battlefield of Waterloo at the outskirts of the city, the Lion's Mound, the Ardennes, the implacable valleys full of young men's bones grown old, on the preserved cities farther out west, on Ypres and the huddled white crosses dotting Flanders

fields, the turbulent channel, the impossibly cold sea to the north, on Denmark, France, and Germany.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to being a stylistic tour-de-force and an elegant homage to Joyce, this passage achieves two effects. First, it emphasizes the commonality between colonial and exilic experiences across countries and decades. Joyce wrote his story in 1907, about three years into his peripatetic exile in continental Europe. Like Joyce, Gabriel Conroy, the protagonist of “The Dead,” has an ambivalent relationship with his country. He is accused of being a “West Briton,” an Irishman who has given up his Irishness, subsumed by the colonizing rhetoric of Great Britain. Julius is conflicted in similar ways, equally unable to decide where his national allegiance may lie. Secondly, the passage is notable for the ways it differs from Joyce’s. Whereas the latter moves westwards within Ireland, to places more “authentically” Irish, less touched by English imperialism and more associated with a Gaelic identity,<sup>34</sup> Cole’s passage transcends national borders more widely, as Julius reflects on the dead soldiers and battles Europeans have fought with one another in order to define and re-define their borders. The idea of the border is central to the Brussels episode in the novel, with Brussels being the “open city” of the book’s title. Julius explains how Brussels avoided aerial bombing by declaring itself an open city, opening its borders to its invaders. In another sense, one can also read New York as an “open city,” one that welcomes its migrants. Indeed, Julius links the notion of the open city with both migration and invasion as he reflects on new patterns of migration that have once again made Brussels an open city.

Julius links the notion of the city opening itself up to invading forces with the notion of Belgium’s new immigrants. Coming from a white author or a white narrator, this might be a problematic comparison, but here it is counterbalanced by Julius’s gaze. Where Charlie Marlow

sees Brussels as a “whited sepulchre,”<sup>35</sup> Julius sees streets filled with black or dark-skinned people. In this reversal of the colonial gaze, Cole highlights the ways in which cities are not “legible” in ways that are universal, but are rather open to different racialized perspectives. He goes on to give a composite view of the city: on the one hand, Julius sees the familiar “white” European Brussels, noting the medieval and baroque architecture, the old stones, trams, and an air of melancholy. On the other hand, he sees a city of non-white migrants, and he brings to his gaze the knowledge that they do not come from Belgium’s former colonies:

There were many people, many more than I had seen in other European cities, who gave the impression of having just arrived from a sun-suffused elsewhere. I saw old women with dotted black patterns around their eyes, their heads swaddled in black cloth, and young women, too, likewise veiled. Islam, in its conservative form, was on constant view, though it was not clear to me why this should be so: Belgium had not had a strong colonial relationship with any country in North Africa. But this was the European reality now, in which borders were flexible.<sup>36</sup>

Julius’s gaze combines the surface image of the present-day immigrants with a vertical reading of the city’s historical and literary past. In addition, his focus on the African immigrants in Brussels highlights Cole’s complex engagement with cosmopolitanism.

Julius is, as Katherine Hallemeier notes, “cosmopolitan in his outlook and aesthetics.”<sup>37</sup> His upbringing, his education, and his job allow him to adopt, in Hallemeier’s words, the stance of “the economically privileged cosmopolitan intellectual.”<sup>38</sup> This means that Julius’s reading of Brussels is one predicated on the knowledge of history, literature, and aesthetic appreciation of architecture. At the same time, the emphasis on the poor immigrants he sees in the streets serves as a reminder that cosmopolitanism has its flipside: the poor migrant workers for whom global

mobility is necessary for survival, rather than for cultural enrichment. Furthermore, Julius's "othering" gaze implies that he feels less black and less African than the migrants from a "sun-suffused elsewhere," a stance that is also evident in the New York sections of the novel, where he rejects the possibility of kinship with African-Americans. While the Brussels section helps Cole to remind us that cosmopolitanism should not be confused or equated with what Hallemeier aptly terms "an Americanization of global elites,"<sup>39</sup> the New York scenes also remind us that the category "American" itself is not monolithic.

Julius's ability to peel away the layers of urban space in order to see hidden histories is evident in both the New York and the Brussels scenes. Julius "sees" New York's colonial past, just as he sees Belgium's, and the informed gaze of the non-American black man creates a dynamic that is very different from the one we see in Mengestu's novel. Stephanos sees in the streets of Washington, DC, an ideology that he cannot fully embrace. He also sees evidence of economic decline rather than prosperity, and he sees streets, buildings and monuments that emphasize the ways in which the city excludes him, as a black man and African immigrant. Julius sees in New York a city that has thrived on reinvention and inclusion, yet he also understands that the city continues to exclude. Above all, he sees a city that has the ability to change, to deceive, and to conceal. Similarly, in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the heroine learns that human relationships, the material reality around her, and her abstract notions of the country are deceptive: "In America, nothing lasts. . . . the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate."<sup>40</sup> The illusory nature of America's promise to its immigrants also becomes evident to Julius when he gets off the subway at Wall Street and takes note of his surroundings:

My original impression of the grandeur of the space, though not of its size, quickly changed as I walked through the hall. The columns could have been wrought from recycled plastic chairs, and the ceiling seemed to have been carefully constructed out of white Lego blocks. This feeling of being in a large-scale model was only increased by the lonely palm trees in their pots, and by the few groups of people I now saw seated under the nave aisle to the right.<sup>41</sup>

The impression that New York's financial center is built on appearance and illusion is further underscored by Julius's description of the Stock Exchange; lit from below, it appears to be levitating, more mirage than reality. Yet the reality of the power that money can have is also never far from the narrator's mind. On Wall Street, he notices "Black women in charcoal gray skirt suits" and "young, clean-shaven, Indian-American men."<sup>42</sup> The subtext here is that money fully flattens race distinctions: that these men and women, despite being racially "other," are entirely assimilated to U.S. capitalist culture. With this observation, Cole appears to be nodding in the direction of arguments advanced by critics like Gilroy, Walter Michaels, and others, highlighting the ways that money and class can erode racial categories. However, if the Wall Street episode serves as opportunity to reflect upon the relations between race and class in America's current economy, another event in the novel contrasts the synchronic reading with a diachronic one. Looking out towards the Statue of Liberty, Julius narrates,

From where I stood, the Statue of Liberty was a fluorescent green fleck against the sky, and beyond her sat Ellis Island, the focus of so many myths; but it had been built too late for those early Africans—who weren't immigrants in any case—and it had been closed too soon to mean anything to the later Africans like Kenneth, or the cabdriver, or me. 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 cabdriver had meant. This was the acknowledgment he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every “brother” he met.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas the Wall Street passage appears to suggest that money and a good job buy the racialized other access to the whitest parts of the city, the Statue of Liberty incident provides the historical context, which emphasizes racial divisions. Throughout the novel, this movement between the (almost) post-racial present and the racist/racialized past allows Cole to explore blackness in the city in all its complexity. In this, Julius is ably aided by Cole’s intricate narrative structure. On the face of it, the novel is organized in an orderly manner: it consists of two parts, one with eleven chapters in it, the other with ten. Within this structure, though, Julius walks up and down, backwards and forwards, or round in circles, in actual streets as well as in the stories he tells. In this respect, his stories can be understood as spatial stories, too, not unlike the ones that Stephanos tells. Michel de Certeau writes: “What the map cuts up, the story cuts across. In Greek, narration is called ‘diegesis’: it establishes an itinerary (it ‘guides’) and it passes through (it ‘transgresses’).”<sup>44</sup> As they pass through the streets of Washington, DC, and New York City, the two narrators guide and transgress, and in so doing they tell new stories and transform the spaces they occupy along similar lines. Madhu Krishnan notes that “the performative nature of the literary text opens avenues for greater inquiry into the legacies of fragmentation . . . which continue to function in an allegedly cosmopolitan present,”<sup>45</sup> and her reading draws analogies between textual and spatial peregrination in *Open City*.

Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone remind us that, in the field of postcolonial studies, “space has *always* been central,” not only because the concept of space is “integral to the postcolonial experience,” but also because “place plays a significant role in how one defines

one's own identity and, equally, how that identity is defined by others."<sup>46</sup> Space is, by definition, equally central to studies of immigration, diaspora, and exile, but Krishnan argues that "the handling of space in both postcolonial and African literary studies has reflected a set of larger lacunae in the study of spatiality and, particularly, the role of imaginative literature in that practice."<sup>47</sup> The two novels by Mengestu and Cole engage with space in complex ways that start to fill that gap, acknowledging that space can be a record of time and history. Stephanos and Julius read spaces historically, bringing to Washington, DC, New York, and Brussels their knowledge of colonial history, of African dictatorship, and of America's historic and continuing exclusion of its others. Yet while speaking to diasporic and postcolonial concerns, these two books also define a new *American* spatiality. In his study of V. S. Naipaul, Timothy Weiss memorably claimed that "one can better know the center from the margins,"<sup>48</sup> and in this sense, *Beautiful Things* and *Open City* are not an immigrant novel and a novel about postcolonial triangulation as much as they are urban *American* novels: books that speak from the margins, but participate in the mainstream by painting vivid pictures of the complex demographic and economic heterogeneity of American cities. Moreover, by aligning their urban landscapes with the narrative structure of their stories, they produce writings that both participate in and enrich immigrant American literature at the same time that they widen the canon of urban American fiction.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Liam Kennedy, *Race and Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Giles Foden, "All Our Names review—Dinaw Mengestu's Drama of Displacement," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2014, accessed May 10, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/04/all-our-names-review-dinaw-mengestu-foden>.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, "The Newly Black Americans: African Immigrants and Black America," *Transition* 113 (2014): 70.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>7</sup> Chude-Sokei's article discusses extensively the competing demands on Africans to assimilate into different social orders.

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Gehrman, "Cosmopolitanism with African Roots: Afropolitanism's Ambivalent Mobilities," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2016): 61.

<sup>9</sup> Taiye Selasi, "Bye-bye Babar," <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>; Grace A. Musila, "Part-Time Africans, Euroropolitans and 'Africa Lite'," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2016): 112; Gehrman, "Cosmopolitanism with African Roots," 61.

<sup>10</sup> Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (New York: Riverhead, 2007), 41. Cited hereafter in parentheses in the text.

<sup>11</sup> James Wood, "The Arrival of Enigmas," *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas>; Miguel Syjuco, "These Crowded Streets," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2011, { HYPERLINK "[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?_r=0)" }; Claire Messud, "The Secret Sharer," *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jul/14/secret-sharer/>.

<sup>12</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37, no. 1 (2013): 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler Madison, eds., *The City in African American Literature* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Tyrone R. Simpson II, *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Yomna Saber, “Self-Perception while Walking in the City in Charles Johnson’s *Faith and the Good Thing*,” in *Urban Cultures Of/in the United States: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Andrea Carosso (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 121.

<sup>18</sup> Madhu Krishnan, “Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism,” *Textual Practice* 29, no. 4 (2015): 677.

<sup>19</sup> Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2014), 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, “Reading Alongside the Market: Affect and Mobility in Contemporary American Migrant Fiction,” *Textual Practice* 29, no. 2 (2015): 287.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990), 83.

<sup>23</sup> Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999), 173.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011), 111.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Cities and Citizenship,” in *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. James Holston (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>28</sup> See Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1992); and Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995) and “Plots Against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism,” *American Literary History*, 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 288–302.

<sup>29</sup> Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 59.

<sup>30</sup> Cole, *Open City*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>34</sup> For more information, see Elizabeth A. Sheehan, "Class, Gender, and the Rural in James Joyce's 'The Dead,'" in *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, ed Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 149-70.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, (New York and London: Norton, 1988), 31.

<sup>36</sup> Cole, *Open City*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Katherine Hallemeier, "Literary Cosmopolitanisms in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 44, no. 2-3 (2014): 240.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>40</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove, 1989), 181.

<sup>41</sup> Cole, *Open City*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Cole, *Open City*, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Cole, *Open City*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> de Certeau, 129.

<sup>45</sup> Krishnan 675.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone, *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Krishnan 680.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy Weiss, *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 12.