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## Blackness Written, Erased, Rewritten James Weldon Johnson, Teju Cole, and the Palimpsest of Modernity

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# Blackness Written, Erased, Rewritten

James Weldon Johnson, Teju Cole,  
and the Palimpsest of Modernity

DAPHNE LAMOTHE

One hundred years separate the publications of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2012), compelling me to ask if these novels can speak to each other across the span of time and, if so, what meanings they reveal to readers about the similarities and differences between the modernist New Negro era and the postmodern era of post-blackness.<sup>1</sup> I and other critics have argued that African American modernism is characterized by the efforts of progressive artists, activists, and intellectuals to construct a pluralist cultural nationalism.<sup>2</sup> This thesis necessarily assumes that early twentieth-century culture workers retained a geographically rooted and specifically (black) American notion of identity. For example, in an earlier reading of *The Autobiography*, I argued that Johnson "makes a case, through the protagonist's involvement with African American ragtime, for understanding America to be a multiracial and pluralistic nation in which African American cultural contributions have played an important role."<sup>3</sup> The protagonist's peripatetic travels (from North to South to Europe and back to the United States) function as a sign of his anxiety and ambivalence about his identity; yet always throughout the novel his actions are driven by the desire to identify and claim spaces of communal and national belonging.

Certainly, the transnational movement between the United States and Europe of the Ex-Colored Man functions as one of several migratory circuits that signal the contingency of his racial identity and alliances. In this essay, I extend that argument by considering how Johnson's transnationalism functions trans-historically as well. In other words, I make an argument for the value of reading Johnson intertextually, as part of a dialogic network that extends across the African diaspora and connects black literature's past with its present, by juxtaposing it to the fiction of Cole, a Nigerian-born, New York-based author. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. defines "intertextuality" as a narrative practice of "repetition and revision."<sup>4</sup> Read-

ing Johnson—or, more specifically, his configurations of migration, race, racialization, and the problem of belonging—intertextually demands the presence of shared tropes and patterns of signification that pull various texts into dialogue with each other.<sup>5</sup> Such a connection rescripts Johnson's canonical African American narrative into a diasporic and transnational text. In this essay, I show that Johnson's and Cole's novels are tied together not only through the mirroring of their themes of migration, ambivalence, and belonging, but also through the authors' conceptualizations of race and belonging. Reading these novels intertextually also makes legible their narrators' capacity to function as a moral compass for the reader.

Johnson's and Cole's protagonists each grapple with the problem of alienation from self and other. The former is produced by the violence of the American color line and the latter by an existential crisis brought on by globalization. Both main characters work through the logic of the territorialization of identity, which resonates with Robert Reid-Pharr's critique of the notion of a "universal, transhistorical 'blackness.'"<sup>6</sup> Reid-Pharr musters legal, historical, and literary sources to support his contention that blackness is not only a social construct, but also a chosen identity. One example he uses is the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, reminding readers that the fair-skinned Homer Plessy would not have been identified, nor identified himself, as a person "of African descent" and that the U.S. Census retained the racial category "mulatto" until 1920.<sup>7</sup> These historical facts undergird Reid-Pharr's contention that the earliest black literature was the product of urbanization because southern black people's migration to northern cities was a process of "(Black) American community deformation and reformation."<sup>8</sup> In other words, readers of black literature must attend to the historical and social specificities of space and place in order to comprehend the emergence of definitions and redefinitions of blackness.

African American modernism is characterized by the longing for meaning and cohesion rooted in a reimagined and more inclusive cultural nationalism that is implicitly geographically bounded. In contrast, postmodernism and post-blackness are routinely described as deterritorialized and heterogeneous, resisting monolithic and unified constructions of identity. Yet I contend that even as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* explores the anxieties and aspirations of twentieth-century black Americans, it also—with a thematic focus on cultural and racial hybridity through its representation of the protagonist's transformation as a musician and his grappling with his mixed racial heritage—anticipates the postmodern turn of this moment. Or, to return to Reid-Pharr's analysis: the Ex-Colored Man's racial indeterminacy forces him into a position of having to choose or reject blackness, and thus he must grapple with his moral responsibility to a community besieged by racial hostility. And just as the twentieth-century urbanization of black sub-

jects forms the backdrop for the character's personal drama, the twenty-first century's urbanization of transnational black subjects leads to revisiting the themes of blackness, community, longing, and belonging in contemporary black literature. The physical and psychological similarities, as well as the similar philosophical conundrums of the protagonists of these two novels underscore how critical and foundational a text *The Autobiography* is to understanding twentieth- and twenty-first-century African diasporic racial formations. I move between the two novels in my analysis in order to expose their thematic similarities and to underscore the ways in which reading Johnson makes visible the still relevant and pressing questions of ethics and affiliation, which some contemporary social and political critics attempt to bury and suppress.

During the New Negro era, African Americans were reterritorialized: a predominantly southern, rural people reimagined themselves as northern and urban.<sup>9</sup> They were largely unified in the causes of racial uplift, social equality, and basic survival, though the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance parted ways over how to go about achieving these goals.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic diversity existed within the category of blackness, but political exigencies demanded collectivist thought and action. The Ex-Colored Man acknowledges as much at the end of the novel when, even as he reflects on and rationalizes his decision to pass as white and abandon any outward signs of racial kinship with other African Americans, he looks admiringly at race men and activists such as Booker T. Washington: "that small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race" with earnestness and faith.<sup>11</sup>

The relevance of these concerns to a non-American, racially mixed member of the African diaspora is far from self-evident. By foregrounding the story of an African immigrant to New York, Cole's *Open City* introduces a new framework for understanding blackness in the twenty-first century. The story of rural black Americans' migration (the subtext for the Ex-Colored Man's personal journey of self-exploration) is replaced with a narrative of transnational black migration, a foreseeable subject of interest in the contemporary publishing industry, given the rise of globalization and global economies. Like Johnson, Cole limns a narrative of dislocation, this time set on a global scale. Both the Ex-Colored Man and Julius, *Open City*'s protagonist, spend time in various European capitals, but Europe represents an idealized site of linguistic, musical, and artistic production for the former, who is momentarily captivated by the idea of living a life free of racism and full of art and culture if he were to remain there. Upon arriving in Paris, the Ex-Colored Man thinks to himself: "Paris became for me a charmed spot, and whenever I have returned there, I have fallen under the spell, a spell which compels admiration for all of its manners and customs and justification of even its follies and sins"

(*The Autobiography*, 94). The promised freedom of a cosmopolitan life tempts him keenly, though he ultimately decides to throw in his lot with the more unfortunate members of his race on American soil. The benefactor who has funded his travels until this fateful decision to return home makes explicit the bargain that the protagonist is forced to consider: “My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people in the United States?” (105). The Ex-Colored Man’s answer to this question, at least until he is brought face to face with the destroyed body of a lynched man, who embodies the tremendous costs of being black in a deeply racist society, is to embrace both the responsibility and the potential of working toward the collective building of the race’s future, and he returns to attempt to reclaim his place in the national conversation on blackness through the creation of “Negro music.”

For Julius, no such decision is ever forthcoming because he suffers from the malaise of postmodernity and refuses the responsibility of community and place. Julius’s world is one in which the anchors of human experience—time, place, the body—have been destabilized and rendered nearly invisible and inconsequential.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the Ex-Colored Man, who struggles with both his feelings of alienation from his racial community and his feelings of guilt when he ultimately chooses to disassociate from that community, there is no unified (black) self from which Julius might feel estranged. As a consequence, his racial hybridity poses less of a crisis than does the Ex-Colored Man’s because Julius, unlike his predecessor, faces no physical risks from crossing the color line. Instead, his identity—just as firmly rooted in a cosmopolitan indulgence in travel, taste, and aestheticism as the Ex-Colored Man’s—is constituted solely through his accumulation of books, paintings, music, and languages. Julius is completely unmoored and alienated from family, community, and nation; he differs from the Ex-Colored Man in that the narrative never explicitly entertains the idea that he can, or even needs to, choose blackness, as his literary ancestor once considered doing, whether from a sense of political engagement or communal responsibility.

Johnson anticipated this in his novel by considering how notions of black cosmopolitanism carry with them the possibility of racial unmooring. Indeed, when the publisher Alfred Knopf reprinted *The Autobiography* in 1927 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance and two years after Alain Locke’s publication of *The New Negro* (1925), there was an implicit invitation to readers to compare Johnson’s portrayal of black cosmopolitanism to Locke’s theorization of the same. Where Locke celebrates New Negro cosmopolitanism as proof of black people’s urbanity, sophistication, and progressivism, Johnson’s novel foregrounds more sharply the question of the relations between cosmopolites and the masses. The novel’s political acuity persists today, since

it also foretells the future of twenty-first-century black subjects, who might seem more free from racial caste structures—and indeed are freer than they have been in the past—and many of whom are also less motivated by clear and common goals determined by a unified community.<sup>13</sup> Then, and now, the decision to turn away from a collectivist identity or agenda carries with it, both authors suggest, a moral dilemma.

*The Autobiography* possesses an explicit moral compass that *Open City* lacks. It invites the reader's judgment of the Ex-Colored Man's eventual decision to renounce his racial kinship with black folks, even as it offers insight into the psychological and social factors that move him to do what he himself thinks is unethical: to choose, after all of his experiences, to pass as white. On the other hand, *Open City* operates on a more cerebral level, compelling the reader to follow Julius through his quotidian movements, narrating events from his perspective and without the clarity of distinguishing right from wrong, or victims from victimizers. Cole skims past the occasional moments of moral ambiguity, with his narrative obliging readers to draw their own conclusions about how a range of factors—race, gender, ethnicity, class—intersect and collude to produce Julius's central conflict, his alienation from self and others. Both novels are about ambivalence and are ambivalent about the integrity of their protagonists. Both grapple with the politics of race, explored from the perspective of the privileged professionals who at the turn of the twentieth century were known as the "talented tenth." And both explore the idea of blackness and the possibilities for black affiliation through unreliable narrators whose morally compromised natures implicate the reader. The reader's ability to navigate the novels' complicated geographical, political, and emotional terrains is enhanced when Cole's novel is anchored, through *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, to the very particular history of African American passing, racial uplift, and the talented tenth.

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*Open City* begins in media res, in the middle of an internal dialogue and with no clear introduction of either character or setting. The effect is to underscore Julius's lack of a starting place in his own life. The facts of his birth and upbringing in Nigeria and his eventual migration to New York for medical school and residency fail to capture the profound dislocation of his experiences, which are defined by his biracial and bicultural heritage (Nigerian father and German mother); the early death of his father and eventual estrangement for unknown reasons from his mother; the fleeting nature of his friendships and acquaintanceships; and the ambiguous reasons for the dissolution of the one relationship, with a woman named Nadège, that seemed to be the only constant in his life. Julius is defined more by lack and loss than by anything else, and he attempts to fill the gaps with long, leisurely

walks around the city. The novel begins, “And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city.”<sup>14</sup> Julius’s external travel is an analogy for his interior quest for self-knowledge. The streets of upper New York and Morningside Heights that he travels are central because they define the protagonist. He declares, “New York City worked itself into my life at walking pace” (*Open City*, 3). In this novel, the city is a character, and the city builds the protagonist’s character.

In contrast to the collective movement exemplified by the Great Migration, Julius’s transplantation to New York is a singular and individual journey. His aloneness seems not to trouble him at first. He describes the bustle of the city as disturbing his tranquility and calm (*Open City*, 6). And when at home, he fills his silent apartment with private pleasures facilitated by modern technologies. Radio and the Internet transport his beloved classical music from Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. He can tune out unwanted sounds like commercials (4) and allow in what he desires, specifically the compositions of Shchedrin and Ysaÿe. The music and the migrating geese that fascinate Julius are reassuring sounds and sights joined in the narrator’s mind because they transport him from his present circumstances, which are more troubled than readers are immediately led to believe. “I turned the computer’s speakers low and looked outside, nestled in the comfort provided by those voices. . . . Those disembodied voices remain connected in my mind, even now, with the apparition of migrating geese” (4–5). Here Julius apparently embraces the same logic of deracinated universalism espoused by the Ex-Colored Man’s benefactor, who attempts to persuade him to take up permanent status as a “citizen of the world.” The benefactor’s appeal to the Ex-Colored Man includes the following observation: “Music is a universal art; anybody’s music belongs to everybody; you can’t limit it to race or country. Now, if you want to become a composer, why not stay right here in Europe” (*The Autobiography*, 105). Yet, like the Ex-Colored Man, Julius will eventually discover that social inequities (segregation in the early twentieth century and the policing of national borders in the post-9/11 era) make geographic mobility for black people far more elusive and dangerous than either protagonist’s idealization of the traveling culture of music would have us believe.

Cole signals Julius’s cosmopolitanism early in the novel, not only by noting his musical preferences (European, classical, and avant-garde) but also by presenting his friendship with Professor Saito, a Japanese American octogenarian and scholar of literature; the men bond over their shared appreciation of *Beowulf* and other classics. As Julius recalls, “He must have seen something in me that made him think I was someone on whom his rarefied subject (early English literature) would not be wasted” (*Open City*, 9). Over cups of coffee, Saito shares with Julius scholarly interpretations and tales of life in academia,

as well as stories of his internment at the hands of the U.S. government during World War II. Even as Julius professes that “this last subject was so total in its distance from my experience,” he nonetheless feels a close affinity to the man (9). This meditation on sameness and difference is not inconsequential in a novel in which the protagonist struggles to identify, control, and redefine the boundaries between himself and others.

Cole’s description of the relationship between Julius and Saito is apparently concerned with the limits and potentials of affinity and affiliation across differences of age and ethnicity, whereas the dynamic between the Ex-Colored Man and his patron is defined by the proprietary, almost predatory attitudes of the benefactor toward his charge. Theirs is a relationship based solely on unspoken laws of cultural production and on consumption as a type of economic exchange. “Occasionally he [the patron] ‘loaned’ me to some of his friends. And, too, I often played for him alone at his apartments. . . . He would sometimes sit for three or four hours hearing me play, his eyes almost closed, making scarcely a motion except to light a fresh cigarette, and never commenting one way or another on the music” (*The Autobiography*, 88). Their bond is defined not only by a mutual appreciation of music, the universal language, but also by the Ex-Colored Man’s willingness to produce music on demand in return for generous compensation. The benefactor’s ravenous and selfish desire to consume (rather than share) the Ex-Colored Man’s music ultimately taints their relationship, and the protagonist describes him as being like a tyrant, relentless in his demands.

In contrast, when surrounded by European literature and music, or communing with Saito over their shared appreciation of culture, Julius is at peace. One possible explanation for the lack of tension is the absence of the racial and ethnic hierarchy and power imbalance that marks the Ex-Colored Man’s relationship to his benefactor and would-be mentor. Julius is freer to love all types of music because he is, compared to the Ex-Colored Man, more free. His appreciation of cultural artifacts invites greater scrutiny, however, when one considers how superficial this friendship, like most of his relationships, actually is. In other words, Julius’s attachment to things implicitly calls into question his freedom (from people). For example, when Julius discovers that his neighbor passed away months earlier, he is shocked by the realization that her absence made no discernible impression on him. As he struggles to recall the woman’s name and her husband’s, he thinks, “A woman had died in the room next to mine, she had died on the other side of the wall I was leaning against, and I had known nothing of it. . . . I hadn’t known him well enough to routinely ask how Carla was, and I had not noticed not seeing her around. That was the worst of it. I had noticed neither her absence nor the change—there must have been a change—in his spirit” (*Open City*, 21). Readers’ understanding of the anonymity that defines city life absolves Julius of his ignorance



of the small, personal tragedy unfolding beyond the wall that divides the two apartments. And yet this encounter plants a seed for the possibility that Julius's absorption in and love of books and music, which looks like aesthetic sensitivity from one vantage point, may be more akin to self-absorption and semipathological self-isolation from others.

One might be tempted to view Julius as a more extreme version of the Ex-Colored Man: Julius chooses isolation, as opposed to his predecessor, who is trapped by it. The Ex-Colored Man's difficulties in placing himself within a community have everything to do with factors beyond his control, namely his liminal racial and cultural status in a deeply segregated society. Yet the narrative pushes the reader to consider the implications of his allegiances, which are called into question whenever he enters a new community or, in the case of his childhood, when his identity is redefined within the context of that community. For example, in recounting his earliest memories as a schoolboy, the Ex-Colored Man recalls the white children—of which he believes himself to be a member—tormenting their black schoolmates, chasing after them and pelting them with stones. When his mother chastises him for this behavior and for using a racial slur, he says, "I did hang my head in shame, not because she had convinced me that I had done wrong, but because I was hurt by the first sharp word she had ever given me" (*The Autobiography*, 10). As the Ex-Colored Man grows and matures, the feeling of shame over misplaced allegiances will return, only tinted by his understanding of the nature and gravity of his betrayal. For much of the novel, however, he displaces the question of his racial identification, choosing instead to offer "detached" and sociological assessments of each community that he visits.

When living in Jacksonville, Florida, the Ex-Colored Man notes three classes of "colored" people: the desperate, who hate all whites; the servants, who are "simple, kind-hearted, and faithful"; and the independent tradesmen and the educated and well-to-do, who live in enclaves that are profoundly cut off from any contact with whites (*The Autobiography*, 55–58). Even New York, an apparently integrated city, offers very complicated models of interracialism, according to the protagonist. He describes the whites who frequent his favorite club, where he first learns to play ragtime, as either "sight-seeing, or slumming"; as minstrels who "came to get their imitations first hand from the Negro entertainers"; and as a small, mysterious group of white women, whose fascination with and eagerness to consort with black men belied their obvious wealth and educational status (78–79). American society's deeply stratified structure offers no easy or obvious resting place for Johnson's protagonist, who was raised by his mother in ignorance of his racial heritage, who acquires an understanding of his blackness as an adolescent and in early adulthood, and who must constantly negotiate his racial indeterminacy in a society that abhors racial mixing.

One hundred years later, Cole depicts an American social landscape that is many-hued, multiethnic, and apparently comfortable in its diversity. In the first chapter alone, he visits his Japanese American professor; takes note of the professor's Saint Lucian nurse; recounts a passing meeting with a Central or South American runner walking home after completing the New York City marathon (itself a celebration of internationalism); describes his neighborhood as inhabited by Senegalese immigrants and African Americans; and brings home a takeout meal of Jamaican curried goat and rice and peas. Yet the narrative suggests that these communities are little more than ephemera, much like the businesses that crop up and eventually fail in those same neighborhoods. Like the Ex-Colored Man, Julius takes note of the people he encounters. Whereas the former is driven by a sociological impulse to order and organize because he enters every community as an outsider, the latter is responding to a world that is defined by heterogeneity and multiplicity. One day, after a particularly long walk from his Harlem neighborhood to downtown and back, Julius reflects on the evening and on the city's refusal to mold itself to his intentions:

That night I took the subway home, and instead of falling asleep immediately, I lay in bed, too tired to release myself from wakefulness, and I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and sights I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which. Each neighborhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight: the bright lights and shuttered shops, the housing projects and luxury hotels, the fire escapes and city parks. My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did my hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive. (*Open City*, 6–7)

While the Ex-Colored Man never has to contend with the artifice of his social ordering, Julius recognizes almost instantly that he is attempting a fool's errand because the city and its inhabitants resist his easy categorization. This "failure" is a sign that his exceptional status as a highly educated, biracial doctor and world traveler does little to grant him any sort of special insight or analytical acuity—a notable counterpoint to the promise in the preface of *The Autobiography* that the Ex-Colored Man will give his readers "a glimpse behind the scenes" and "a bird's-eye view" of black Americans' racial drama.

All around Julius are reminders, like his widower neighbor, that freedom from attachments can be its own sort of prison. He is part of a community of strangers, and his accounting of what he sees while walking through Morn-

ingside Heights is simply a reflection of that fact. The city, Julius notes, is truly a place where one can be, as in a movie theater, “in the company of a hundred others but all strangers to me” (*Open City*, 29). Noting that his local Blockbuster video store is shuttering its doors, Julius thinks, “[National corporations] had made their profits and their names by destroying smaller, earlier local businesses. But I was touched not only at the passage of these fixtures in my mental landscape but also at the swiftness and dispassion with which the market swallowed even the most resilient enterprises” (19). Death haunts the city, and the only thing that thrives is the relentless pull toward profit and change. Madhu Dubey writes that the postmodern black city is marked by rupture in the assurance of a unified collective identity or, more accurately, in the idea of a “coherent community.” One hundred years after the Ex-Colored Man lamented his refusal to choose blackness, readers of *Open City*, a novel about the postmodern black city, witness its protagonist’s negotiation of a space in which “the idea of community [is] increasingly abstract and experientially unknowable.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike the Ex-Colored Man, Julius appears to never be in a position to choose lines of affiliation and allegiance.

For the Ex-Colored Man, the sociological impulse to sort and order the black community of Jacksonville resonates on two levels: first, it betrays his emotional detachment from that community even as he lives within it; and second, he means to make blackness legible to a white readership. Like Johnson’s protagonist, Cole’s wants to believe in his ability to sort and order the world, but for entirely different reasons and in an entirely different context. In 2012 the novel need not assume a sociological imperative and can instead remain comfortably under the label of fiction. Moreover, contemporary society is organized differently and cannot be defined in the binary logic of white and black. And still, the problem of belonging lingers, as Julius is haunted by the history and the logic of blackness as an idea and ideology.

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Open City* begin to isolate and underscore the histories of violence enacted in the name of enforcing the racial and other boundaries that lie at the heart of Julius’s conflict. I say this while noting that Julius never describes himself as in a state of emotional turmoil, nor does he interact long enough with any individual for a clear conflict to emerge. A vague sense of melancholy looms over the text, primarily centered around the fact that his girlfriend, Nadège, has broken up with him for reasons not entirely clear to the reader. The narrative hints at the kind of reading practice that would enable an understanding of his dilemma when Julius notes on his visit to Professor Saito, “I learned the art of listening from him, and the ability to trace out a story from what was omitted” (*Open City*, 9). Hence, readers are encouraged to understand Julius’s dilemma from his juxtaposition of memories and experiences, though they appear at first glance to unfold in a haphazard manner,

and he as narrator makes no effort to bring order. Readers move through Julius's narration of the personal to the political and historical, grasping to make meaning of it all.

Julius's past and present are defined by fragmentation and disconnection; indeed these are the conditions of the postmodern subject, from which there is no escape except through the veil of selective memory. He recalls his estrangement from his mother at the age of seventeen, which he connects to her estrangement from her own mother; the causes for this legacy of maternal alienation are "inchoate" (*Open City*, 34). Julius fondly recalls the single visit by his German grandmother, Oma, to the family home in Nigeria: "I was eleven when she came to visit, and I could see that both my parents were barely tolerating this strange old lady (my father sided with my mother). I also knew that part of what I was had come from her, and on this basis a sort of solidarity was established" (34). Julius's memories take on a nostalgic film when he remembers a trip taken to a sacred historical site noted for its warm springs. There, he and his grandmother sat in harmonious silence: "my parents were gone an hour, and in that hour we two communed almost wordlessly, simply waiting, sensitive to the wind in the trees nearby, watching lizards scuttle over the smaller rock formations that pushed through the earth like prehistoric eggs, listening to the thrums of motorcycles on the narrow road some two hundred yards away" (35). This memory stands as a powerful antidote to Julius's urban malaise and alienation. It echoes in many ways the Ex-Colored Man's memories of happiness and feelings of wholeness before the full awareness of his mixed-racial identity sets off a lifetime of searching and confusion. For the Ex-Colored Man, the memory of his mother holding him close, "softly crooning some old melody without words, all the while gently stroking her face against my head" is a counterweight to his emotional turmoil (*The Autobiography*, 5). He states, "The memory of that picture has more than once kept me from straying too far from the place of purity and safety in which her arms held me" (5). Yet neither character can escape the familial estrangement that is also their inheritance. Julius's parents never encourage Oma to visit again, and indeed he never sees her after that single visit. His refusal or inability to reconcile with his mother makes any desire to recover or recreate this harmonious moment impossible. After he shares the memory of his grandmother Julius visits the American Folk Art Museum and wanders through the galleries admiring the art. He finds the portraits calming, but also sealed off and hermetic, much like his memory of Oma. "Each of the portraits was a sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter" (*Open City*, 37). Julius will remain cut off from the possibility of interpersonal connection signified by that single and singular memory of his grandmother, and I would suggest that he simultaneously wills himself to remain detached from other, more painful memories that also recall the violence of estrangement.

In place of harmonious communion, Julius is left with urban alienation and conflict, illustrated by an anecdote in which he refuses to cede a taxi to a woman during a rainstorm. Julius surprises himself by raising his voice in anger at the woman's appeal to chivalry, an attempt to implicitly appeal to his sense of communal, albeit gendered, obligation. He refuses such pressure in this instance, and then ignores his communal obligation in the very next: he enters the cab and self-centeredly focuses on his immediate thoughts and needs. The state of his umbrella, recalling an address, remembering the museum visit—all of this filters through his mind before he finally looks up and speaks to the cabbie, an African like himself. "So, how are you doing my brother?" The driver stiffened and looked at me in the mirror. 'Not good, not good at all, you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I'm African just like you, why you do this?' (*Open City*, 40). The driver's anger at Julius's refusal to obey the rituals of racial and cultural solidarity is matched by Julius's resentment. He thinks, "I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me" (40). But, of course, the reader wonders if the thing he resents is also the very thing for which he longs.

A subway ride to lower Manhattan brings together all of these themes. Julius emerges from underground and walks to the site of the former World Trade Center. As he overlooks the ruins and the new construction overlaying it, Julius thinks, "This was not the first erasure on the site" (*Open City*, 58). Before the towers' construction, the streets had crossed residential neighborhoods, which were razed in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center; before that, those neighborhoods had replaced a late nineteenth-century enclave of Christian Syrians and Lebanese, who in turn had overtaken the Lenape whose "paths lay buried beneath the rubble. The site was a palimpsest as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten" (59). Here the reader can start to make connections and tie the strands of this narrative together, for the events of 9/11 provide the most obvious rationale for a twenty-first century dominated by policies that work toward the retrenchment of national borders, coupled with a widespread paranoia about the presence of black and brown migrants.

In *Color Me English*, Caryl Phillips ruminates on the themes of identity, belonging, and migration in the Black Atlantic. Phillips notes how both U.S. and British ideologies and practices of belonging and unbelonging have been intensified and transformed by the global "war on terror." Examining the anti-black and brown ideologies masquerading under the guise of national security, Phillips concludes, "Of course, most of the discourse is just plain, simple, old-fashioned malevolence towards the outsider, the person who not only looks different, but who dresses differently, or who worships in a place other than a church. It is an old European game and we have all seen and heard it before."<sup>16</sup> The interpersonal connection that Julius seeks may be always already

elusive, but his peripatetic ruminations suggest that a true understanding of the world and his place in it will start with the ability to recognize and reckon with the past. The narrator implies as much when Julius looks out across the river and catches sight of the Statue of Liberty and 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” (*Open City*, 54–55). The dashes in this sentence signal a present absence in the text between the early and later Africans: the African American descendants of “those early Africans,” who flocked to northern cities, and New York in particular, in a famed attempt to force the nation to live up to its democratic ideals. Perhaps these migrants’ journeys and unrealized dreams need not be mentioned because they are a haunting presence, shadowing the next group of migrants’ attempts to do the same.

These ruminations trouble the novel’s initial depiction of black life in the present day as free from racial, class, or cultural boundaries. Just as the optimism felt by the southern migrants of the early twentieth century was tempered by the continuing facts of racial segregation and violence, so is Julius’s middle-class existence revealed to be a distraction from the reality of most twenty-first-century black immigrants, who are not welcomed with open arms. For example, Julius remembers an excursion with an organization affiliated with Nadège’s church, ironically named “the Welcomers,” to a detention center in Queens that houses undocumented immigrants. There, he and the Welcomers joined a line of documented immigrants—Africans, Latinos, Eastern Europeans, and Asians—all there to visit people hidden away in a nondescript, one-story building, which Julius describes as “a long, gray metal box” (*Open City*, 62). Once admitted, he spends time talking to a Liberian man named Saidu Caspar Mohammed, who tells a harrowing story of his travel to America. Saidu recounts a tale of persecution during war, the brutal killing of his family, and his exhausting journey through Nigeria, Guinea, Tangier, Spain, and Portugal. After fighting to overcome national borders, linguistic barriers, and grinding poverty, he finally saves enough money to pay for a forged Cape Verdean passport and a flight to JFK, where he is promptly detained at Customs. Rather than receiving asylum or having the opportunity to breathe free air and step foot on American soil, Saidu is transported to the “gray metal box,” where he waits indefinitely for the time when he will be returned to Lisbon, his port of entry.

Though he appears moved by this story of exile, Julius has really only joined the Welcomers and listened to this man because he wants to impress Nadège with his “compassion” (*Open City*, 70), and the episode ends with yet another account of unexplained separation: he and Nadège “drifted apart.” One suspects that their breakup has something to do with Julius’s lack of a

moral center, which the anecdote about Saidu reveals to the reader. Julius cares more about how he appears to Nadège, whom he hopes to impress, than about what kind of human being he really proves to be. Other encounters reveal him to be emotionally cold, in love with his own cultural “sophistication” and worldliness and incapable of empathizing with those who are different from him. Even when he claims to identify with other Africans in their shared status as the unwanted or unseen, as in his observations of Ellis Island, one gets the sense that these are abstract musings rather than a concrete, lived reality.

Reading Julius’s halfhearted attempts at empathy and affiliation in comparison with the Ex-Colored Man’s efforts to relate to African Americans in *The Autobiography* sets into relief not only the flawed character of both protagonists, but also the context for understanding their unreliability. When first returning from Europe on a ship traveling back to the States, the Ex-Colored Man strikes up a friendship with an African American physician, one of the only other black men aboard the ship. During these long, far-ranging conversations on racism and racial progress, the narrator makes an attempt at racial affiliation: “We walked the deck for an hour or more, discussing different phases of the Negro question. In referring to the race I used the personal pronoun ‘we’; my companion made no comment about it, nor evinced any surprise, except to raise his eyebrows slightly the first time he caught the significance of the word” (*The Autobiography*, 110). In this passage, “we” is clearly the most significant word because it represents the protagonist’s efforts to live up to and act on his politically progressive intentions. Yet this friendship, again brief and temporary, precedes the Ex-Colored Man’s final sojourn, which anticipates Julius’s personal failures set against the backdrop of the failed promise of American opportunity and democracy. Johnson explores the idea of blackness as a choice in his depiction of a black man who has the option of choosing to pass. Though the Ex-Colored Man’s ability to choose is connected to his unique racial makeup, his predicament foreshadows a historical moment when some black people—albeit a very select few, like Julius—have the financial, social, and cultural capital to entertain the notion of choosing to turn away from the violence directed against blackness and its legacy.

Back in the States, the Ex-Colored Man travels the country gathering materials and inspiration for his music, while finding refuge in the homes of local black people. This happy existence ends when in one town he witnesses a lynching. Surrounded by the sight and smells of burned human flesh, he thinks, “A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive” (*The*

*Autobiography*, 137). Similarly, after the episode with the detainee and a surrealist conversation with a Haitian bootblack in Penn Station (surreal because the man's life story, recounted as he shines Julius's shoes, spans an improbable length of time and includes references to the Haitian Revolution and vague allusions to slavery and emancipation), Julius emerges from underground and imagines that he sees on the crowded streets the body of a lynched man hanging from a tree. Though only a figment of his imagination, it is an omen, a portent of death.

What does death mean in these contexts? For Johnson, the lynching he witnesses is a reminder of the hard inescapability of the color line. His musical aspirations pale in comparison to the threat of racism and racialist thinking, so in choosing to pass as white, the Ex-Colored Man chooses to run from death. *Open City* is not a passing novel in the traditional sense of the genre; Cole never suggests that his biracial protagonist's complexion is light enough to allow him to pass. But perhaps the point is that in the twenty-first century, education, financial security, and status as a professional give enough leverage to allow him to pass in spirit if not in fact. Julius's class affiliation is only one of the factors that contribute to his experience of crisis in communal cohesion. It certainly frames readers' understanding of his encounters with the Liberian and Haitian men, for they, unlike he, are submerged and hidden from the sight of the dominant society, one housed in a metal box, the other toiling away in the bowels of the New York subway system. Like the Ex-Colored Man, Julius runs from death or, stated differently, from the idea of abject blackness. Like Johnson, Cole acknowledges that the social and material obstacles faced by black migrants are unequal.

Cole's novel proves itself to be a literary descendant of *The Autobiography*, for they both use the black migrant in the (post)modern city to reflect on the challenges of race, identity, and belonging. And just as the Ex-Colored Man is pulled to look outside of himself and to grapple with his failure to live up to his own and others' expectations that he would act on his feelings of communal responsibility, so too does Julius. A hundred years after its initial publication, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* continues to resonate for contemporary readers, who recognize its prescience in its depiction of blackness not only as a condition that one is born into, but also as a choice to enter into community spurred on by feelings of love, longing, responsibility, and loss.

#### NOTES

1. "Post-blackness" is a concept that articulates the heterogeneity and contingency of racialized blackness. When I use this term, I do not mean to invoke the more neutered idea of the "postracial," a notion that assumes that it is possible in twenty-first-century America to "transcend" race and lead a color-blind existence.



2. Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1997).

3. Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro*, 69.

4. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 60.

5. Proving Cole's familiarity with, or intention to signify on, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in *Open City* is unnecessary to claiming their intertextuality: a careful reading of each book reveals their working with and through a set of shared tropes that have signaled outsidership and belonging in multiple black diasporic literary works.

6. Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Desire, Choice and Black Masculinity in Post-War America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), argues that naturalized conceptions of racial identity were neither inevitable nor compelled, but instead were deliberately chosen by black intellectuals acting on their perceptions of civic and communal obligation.

7. *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

8. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

9. Alain Locke, "The New Negro" (1925), in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (1925; rpt., New York: Touchstone, 1997), 3–18; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'? The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

10. Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1979; rpt., New York: Penguin, 1997).

11. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; rpt., New York: Penguin, 1990), 154. Future references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text. Johnson's impetus to consider the meaning of blackness was the turn of the new century, well before the Harlem Renaissance, the movement that reinvigorated the reading public's interest in the novel and gave it yet another layer of complexity.

12. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

13. The irony of this statement is that the promise of racial progress lies in close proximity to the persistence of antiblack violence and institutionalized racism, which renders this perspective more myth than reality. I return to this point later in the essay.

14. Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012), 3. Future citations to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

15. Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

16. Caryl Phillips, *Color Me English: Reflections on Migration and Belonging* (New York: New Press, 2013), 8.