

## CHAPTER 6

### AFROPOLITANISM AS AN EXTENSION OF COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE IN TEJU COLE'S *OPEN CITY*

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Since the word Afropolitan was introduced through Taiye Selasi's article "Bye-Bye, Babar" (2005) and Achille Mbembe's essay "Afropolitanism" (2005),<sup>1</sup> the term's meaning, role in African identity politics, subsequent discussions regarding political and cultural movements and literary genres, and (according to critics) promotion of cultural commodification, have made the term divisive and alluring. Both Afropolitanism's definition and application in literature, politics, and culture remain difficult to define, although common themes—an emphasis on mobility and cosmopolitanism; a desire to locate one's identity in relation to Africa—are present in each variation.

Selasi, who is most often credited with the term's cultural popularization, claims that Afropolitanism is "about the challenge faced by a certain demographic of Africans, both in and outside of Africa, in declaring their own identities" (2014, online). Mbembe, likewise, locates Afropolitanism in relation to identity (claiming it is "a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity") but also approaches the term philosophically and politically by envisioning Afropolitanism as a force challenging Négritude and "victimhood discourses attached to Africa and the Black Diaspora", thus "elevat[ing] Afropolitanism to a philosophical concept" and assisting with "an integral transformation of identity politics" (in Gehrman 2016, 63).

Many writers and scholars reject Afropolitanism. Notable criticisms include Emma Dabiri's "Why I'm Not an Afropolitan" (2014) and "Why I am 'Still' not an Afropolitan" (2016), and Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's statement that Afropolitanism is "crude cultural commodification [...] potentially funded by the West" (in Santana 2013, online). Others, however, recognize its purpose in African identity politics and scholarly debate. Chielozona Eze supports the need for new identity-

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based definitions of diasporic Africans, observing that “identity can no longer be explained in purist, essentialist, and oppositional terms or by reference only to Africa” and suggesting that “Afropolitanism captures the complexity of identity in a hybrid, postmodern world” (2014, 240). For Simon Gikandi, Afropolitanism is a progression of political thought for Africans: “a hermeneutics of redemption” representing the desire to “rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis that consumed movements such as Négritude” (2011, 9).

I propose here a definition of Afropolitanism that considers both its politics and its cultural and philosophical concepts of identity: Afropolitanism is, as I define it, a political and cultural movement and literary genre used to identify Africans (often educated, often successful) who live outside of their country or continent of origin—typically in a Western metropolis but also on the African continent—and whose lives reflect varying measures of cultural, racial and linguistic hybridity.<sup>2</sup>

Along with Selasi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, American-born, Nigerian-raised author Teju Cole remains closely associated with Afropolitanism; indeed, Ede refers to Cole's *Open City* (2011) as “that novel with its most archetypal of literary Afropolitan characters” (2016, 94). Identity and mobility are key features of Cole's literature: *Open City* spans three continents and is narrated by Julius, a psychiatry resident raised in Nigeria but college-educated in the United States. He is the quintessential Afropolitan character: an educated, middle-class protagonist with cultural and historic ties to Africa, who lives in a metropolis (New York City) and visits another (Brussels). Cole himself is complacent towards the term, stating “I'm an Afropolitan, a pan-African, an Afro-pessimist, depending on who hates me on any given day. I embrace all those terms” (in Bady 2015, online).

Julius walks New York as a modern *flâneur*, weaving both his own history and that of the city into his narrative: he details memories of his maternal grandmother and German mother, his Nigerian father's death, his boarding school in Nigeria, and also U.S. histories of racism and genocide towards Africans and Native Americans. Julius reveals how he is estranged from his mother (although he never discloses why) and claims to visit Brussels to reconnect with his grandmother (yet makes no effort to contact her; instead, he socializes with, among others, a doctor and a Moroccan immigrant).

Throughout the novel, Julius admits to falsities: the fake name he gives a lover in Brussels, his lie that Yoruba was his first language (it was actually German), the reasons he gives his Moroccan friend, Farouq, for visiting Brussels. These white lies initially appear almost endearing: Julius is human, with both flaws and the desire to protect his privacy and inner feelings (yet with the openness to share his truths with the reader).

However, this reader/narrator relationship is complicated when Julius neglects to mention a conversation with Moji, the sister of a childhood friend. Julius does not recognize Moji in a New York grocery store when she approaches him and invites him to a dinner party, an evening of which he provides a detailed account. Several chapters later, Julius admits what he initially omitted: after dinner, Moji revealed that Julius had raped her when they were both teenagers in Nigeria. Julius never admits to the crime nor does he reveal his reaction to Moji's disclosure.

The character of Julius, his experiences within the metropolises of New York and Brussels, and his relationship to Africa are indicative of the complex relationship between Afropolitanism and postcolonialism. I choose the term 'postcolonialism' (without the hyphen) to reflect, as Mishra and Hodge stated, the "ideological orientations" (1991, 399-414) of the term as opposed to the historical emphasis of imperialism. I suggest that Afropolitan literature reflects the concept's conscious response to the ghost of postcolonialism and provides agency for Afropolitan writers to examine postcolonialism's effects on the works of contemporary writers, even when the writers and their protagonists are geographically distanced from the original site of postcolonial trauma.

## **Afropolitanism and Postcolonialism**

Given the starkly contrasting historical and cultural differences of Afropolitanism and postcolonialism, it is easy to overlook their association. While postcolonialism highlights the struggles of the colonized and their desire for independence, Afropolitanism provides an identity for those geographically and culturally removed from their nation of origin. A key concept of Afropolitan literature (as suggested in its very name, which plays on the word 'cosmopolitan') is the metropolis; in contrast, many postcolonial texts (Chinua Achebe's 1958 *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 1977 *Petals of Blood*) are set in the African countryside. Susanne Gehrman describes the movement as "cosmopolitan in scope, anti-essentialist, open to cultural and intellectual hybridization" (2016, 64). Afropolitanism additionally (to date) deals strictly with middle class, educated characters.

Afropolitan literature further contrasts with postcolonial literature through its emphasis on the individual's "intense artistic self-perception or self-identity" (Ede 2016, 91) as opposed to postcolonial literature's desire to belong to one's nation. The goal of its literature, as Selasi suggests, is to:

[...] complicate Africa—namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to

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understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. Rather than essentialising the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity; to honor the intellectual and spiritual legacy. (2005, online)

While different in scope, Afropolitan literature is not so far removed from postcolonialism. In refusing to oversimplify Africa, Selasi speaks to the “postcolonial gesture of twisting the simplified colonial image of Africa” (Gehrmann 2016, 63) which, as I contend, establishes Afropolitanism as both an extension and rejection of postcolonialism. The Afropolitan author's desire to engage, critique, and repudiate postcolonialism illustrates the consciousness with which Afropolitan authors approach their literary past. Rather than developing what Leela Gandhi calls “postcolonial amnesia”, Afropolitans approach, rewrite, and engage with postcolonialism, thus illustrating how the writers remain “aware of the ideological choices they are making” (Ede 2016, 97). The well-travelled and well-educated characters of Afropolitan literature challenge postcolonial views of Africans as backward, primitive, and uncivilized; this “challenge” enforces the presence of postcolonialism within contemporary works and fortifies deep postcolonial ties to culture and literature of Africa, even when its authors and characters are geographically distanced from the place of colonization.

Scholars have examined Afropolitanism's relation to Postcolonial Studies to locate how (or if) its literature relates to preceding genres such as postcolonialism. Sara Marzagora states that Afropolitanism is “the latest manifestation of the ‘posts’ in African Studies”, calling Afropolitanism “a politically disempowering reproduction of colonial and colonized knowledge” (2016, 168). To some, Afropolitanism is the natural progression for contemporary writers who still bear the weight of postcolonialism: Amatoritsero Ede portends that the movement is “a coping mechanism against the nausea of history” whose cultural politics occur “within a postcolonial context”; he also believes that Afropolitan literature contains an “over-emphasis on aesthetics” with little “mediation of ethics or progressive politics”, which is “the symptom of an insidious and imperialising past, whose continuing existential and neo-colonial effects new writers seem to ignore” (2016, 98). A thorough analysis of Cole's *Open City* reveals that the author indeed writes with a conscious awareness of postcolonialism: Julius' experiences with racism and genocide in New York City, his journey to Brussels—the European embodiment of colonialism, as seen through Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—his allusions to Edward Said, and the use of the character Farouq as metaphor for the failure of postcolonialism précis the relationship between Afropolitan literature and its colonial and postcolonial histories.

## **The Afropolitan Writes Back: A New Look on Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse**

Described by Ede as a “Renaissance man” (2016, 94) Julius’ interests span art, classical music, philosophy, literature and African folklore; mixed with his education, cultural background, and successful medical career, Julius challenges African stereotypes of primitive or uncivilized characters. Just as Gehrman claims that Selasi speaks to the “postcolonial gesture of twisting the simplified colonial image of Africa” (2016, 63), I suggest that Cole continues this conversation through the complex, self-aware, yet often untrustworthy protagonist whose relationship with Africa and postcolonialism is as complicated as his character.

As a novel set in two major Western cities, *Open City* maintains the characteristically Afropolitan interest in the metropolis. Cole does not simply use the city as a backdrop to the immigrant experience; rather, he interlaces the history of New York—particularly its genocide of the Native Americans and its enslavement of the Africans—into the narrative in order to evoke the postcolonial existence within modern New York. Gehrman notes that Julius’ “African roots bind him back to unsettling experiences, even inside the open space of New York City” (2016, 68) yet Julius’ connection to these events is more complicated than one might expect. This is most notable in Julius’ experience, which is “steeped in [...] the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York” (Cole 2011, 221) when he visits what was historically called the “Negro Burial Ground”. Julius notes the hardship of those buried there (“bodies bore traces of suffering: blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm. Many of the skeletons had broken bones, evidence of the suffering they’d endured in life”) yet he lacks the connection one might expect from someone with “African roots”, as Gehrman notes:

How difficult it was, from the point of view of the twenty-first century, to fully believe that these people, with the difficult lives they were forced to live, were truly people, complex in all their dimensions as we are, fond of pleasures, shy of suffering, attached to their families. (221-222)

What Julius will not admit (or perhaps cannot feel) instead manifests itself physically. Before his visit to the burial grounds, Julius is mugged by two young African-American boys; his hand is seriously injured (he later undergoes surgery to repair the damage). At the burial grounds, Julius explains that he “lifted a stone from the grass and, as I did so, a pain shot through the back of my left hand” (222). Through his emotional indifference to the history of African slaves and his opposing shared physical pain, Cole illustrates the complexities faced by the Afropolitan

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when dealing with colonial and postcolonial history; by providing such opposing physical and emotional accounts, Cole maintains Selasi's desire to "complicate Africa" and the experience of being African.

A portion of Julius' "Renaissance man" persona includes his love for the works of Gustav Mahler. While his affinity for classical music does help solidify Julius' position as a complex, well-rounded Afropolitan character, a scene related to a Mahler concert also provides an account of the Afropolitan connection to postcolonialism. Julius notes "Almost everyone, as almost always at such concerts, was white. It is something I can't help noticing" (251). Yet Julius makes a startling admission, stating at the theatre "I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx zoo in 1906" (252). *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement* considers Benga "one of the more infamous instances of human display" and an attempt to "demonstrate the closeness between primitive people and primates" (Prasad 2003, 153). Cole's reference to Benga indicates how aware Julius is of being the "subject of human gaze" (Prasad, 153). It also illustrates Cole's preference to ignore Gandhi's "postcolonial amnesia", instead choosing to (as mentioned previously) approach, rewrite, and engage with postcolonialism; in this case, through characters such as Benga who were used in postcolonial discourse as examples of colonial cruelty.

Except for the incidents at the burial grounds and the theatre, Julius keeps these experiences with postcolonialism at arm's length, responding to postcolonialism through its effects on other characters. Julius' patient V., for example, seeks help for depression while researching her book on Native Americans, becoming inhabited by the nation's dark history: "It's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me" (27). As a contemporary (presumably postcolonial) researcher, V. should represent postcolonial agency and the ability to overcome the oppressive colonial past; instead, she remains haunted by the realities of a dark history, seeking professional help to assuage the trauma inflicted upon her through the knowledge she acquires in her research.

In 1998, Gandhi suggested that African writers developed "postcolonial amnesia" and were "often deluded and unsuccessful in their attempts to disown the burdens of their colonial inheritance" (4). Nearly two decades later, Afropolitan writers illustrate how this amnesia has been overcome: Cole engages with and responds to postcolonialism in an effective way. He further illustrates this progression of thought with Farouq, the Moroccan immigrant whose dreams of academic success are not realized in Belgium and who harbors a deep-seeded hatred for Western imperialism. Farouq embodies postcolonial constraints and confinement, as seen through comments clearly aligning his ideals with postcolonialism. Most notably, when he admits he "wanted to be the next Edward Said", states "No one

likes foreign domination” (128), and reminds Julius of Eastern influence on Western thought by asking “Do you know Averroes? Not all Western thought comes from the West alone” (114). To Julius, Farouq embodies postcolonial discourses past, which is seen with Julius’ observation: “As we spoke, it was hard to escape a feeling that we were having a conversation before the twentieth century had begun or just as it had started to run its cruel course” (126). Julius describes Farouq as intelligent, but also as flawed; he recalls an instance when Farouq misspeaks and refers to himself as an autodidact when, in reality, he had used the term previously to describe writer Mohamed Choukri:

This was a small instance, not of unreliability, but of a certain imperfection in Farouq’s recall which, because of the absolute sureness of his manner, it was easy to miss. It in any case made me revise my previous impressions of his sharpness, even if only modestly. These minor lapses—there were others, and they were irrelevant lapses, actually, not even worthy of the label mistake—made me feel less intimidated by him. (114)

When reading Farouq as the embodiment of postcolonial ideas, we can recognize Cole’s reaction to postcolonialism through Julius’ own reaction to this character. Julius recognizes Farouq’s intelligence, stating “There was something powerful about him, a seething intelligence, something that wanted to believe itself indomitable. But he was one of the thwarted ones. His script would stay in proportion” (129).

Julius chooses not to engage Farouq in conversations regarding politics and culture, claiming that “the skein of argument was beginning to feel like futility piled on futility; it was better to save my breath” (124). Rather, upon returning to New York, he sends Farouq a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006). That Julius would send Farouq reading material is not surprising—their first conversation involved several authors, including Tahar Ben Jelloun, Walter Benjamin, and Choukri—but his choice of Appiah’s work is significant. Appiah describes a specific type of modern intellectual that Farouq embodies in the chapter “The Counter-Cosmopolitans” (subtitled “Believers without Borders”). Considering how the metropolis plays a key role in Afropolitan identity, a “counter-cosmopolitan” individual would be inherently counter-Afropolitan. Yet Appiah’s description of counter-cosmopolitans is reminiscent of Selasi’s description of the Afropolitan, an educated individual who speaks many languages and has many homes and nationalities or identities:

They believe in human dignity across the nations, and they [...] share these ideals with people in many countries, speaking many languages [...] but these people also resist the temptations of the narrow nationalisms of the

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countries where they were born. [...] they oppose them [traditional loyalties] because they get in the way of the one thing that matters: building a community of enlightened men and women across the world. (Appiah 2006, Kindle locations 2013 and 2018).

I argue that *Cosmopolitanism* provides a new perspective into Farouq, Julius, and Afropolitanism: Farouq not only embodies postcolonial constraints, but also exemplifies a form of counter-Afropolitan—at times similar to Julius (and Afropolitans) in experience and education, yet different in ideology, related to Western dominance and his place in the Western world. As both the postcolonial and counter-Afropolitan and counter-cosmopolitan, his existence aids in further formation of an Afropolitan identity.

The connection, I contend, is not related to similarity and difference between Farouq and Julius, but rather to the complicated way in which Julius defines himself through Farouq. According to Appiah, Muslim fundamentalists in the Western world (such as Farouq) “sometimes agonize in their discussions about whether they can reverse the world’s evils or whether their struggle is hopeless” and “resist the crass consumerism of modern Western society and its growing influence on the rest of world” (2006, Kindle location 2018). Julius recognizes this torment within Farouq, observing “A cancerous violence had eaten into every political idea, had taken over the ideas themselves, and for so many, the only thing that mattered was the willingness to do something” (107). In this passage, Julius seems to recognize the counter-cosmopolitan’s desire, described by Appiah, to “reverse the world’s evils” (107). Yet in the same paragraph, Julius also expresses the ambivalence related to the hopeless struggle which Appiah describes. Julius muses that “It seemed as if the only way this allure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?” (107)

These revelations allow Cole to locate Julius against the counter-cosmopolitan and also place him on ethically higher moral ground: where Appiah’s counter-cosmopolitan oscillates between violence and hopelessness, the Afropolitan remains stably educated and informed, recognizing the ethical importance of remaining so (and attempting to pass on this “knowledge” to the ill-informed postcolonial, counter-cosmopolitan individual). Julius’ gift to his radical friend (and his use of literature rather than discourse to express the Afropolitan ideologies Julius represents) frames both an interesting argument on Muslim experiences in the Western world and a fascinating case of intertextuality being used to enhance the ideals, ethics, identities, and motivations of the Afropolitan.



## Conclusions

The suggestion that Afropolitan literature exists in duality—as a response to and an extension of postcolonialism—does not negate the efficacy of Afropolitanism to challenge definitions of African literature or identity. However, an intricate part of understanding Afropolitan literature remains in its relation to postcolonialism, particularly the ways Afropolitan writers, attempting to create something new, echo the desires and tendencies of writers from previous generations. Through the Afropolitan political agenda (as illustrated in its rejection of concepts of victimhood) and its desire to respond to postcolonialism, Afropolitan writers follow a pattern modeled in postcolonialism: a reinvention based not on new ideas, but on those of previous discourses. Just as postcolonialism was “lumbered by the discourse of the colonized” (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 281). Afropolitan discourses and literature remain fixed to and located within postcolonialism.

Arguably, this fixture is non-negotiable: despite cultural and geographical differences between Afropolitan authors and predecessors, ties to the African continent and its postcolonial past remain. Yet considering Afropolitanism the next logic step in African identity politics locates Afropolitanism (as a political movement, genre, and cultural concept) both within and outside postcolonialism. Recognition of the ways Afropolitan writers respond to and navigate postcolonialism within literature illustrates how Afropolitan authors have indeed forged new identities: albeit, of course, with postcolonial ties.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although this paper uses the essay from the 2007 publication of *Africa Remix*, Mbembe’s work was originally written in French in 2005 under the title “Afropolitanisme”.

<sup>2</sup> In “Afropolitanism” (2007), Mbembe noted that Johannesburg’s social environment was “likely to revive African aesthetic and cultural creativity”, calling the city the “centre of Afropolitanism par excellence” (*Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, 29).

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