

“I Was in No Mood for People Who Tried to Lay Claims on Me”: Community, Hospitality, and Friendship in Teju Cole’s *Open City*

“No estaba de humor para las personas que trataban de interpelarme”: Comunidad, hospitalidad y amistad en *Ciudad abierta* de Teju Cole

FATMA AKÇAY

Institution address: Universidad de Córdoba. Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Plaza del Cardenal Salazar, 3. 14071. Córdoba. Spain

E-mail: z62akakf@uco.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-6601-4489

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Abstract: This article examines community, friendship, and hospitality in Teju Cole’s novel *Open City*, drawing on Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*, Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, and Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* and *Of Hospitality*. I aim to show how the representation of migratory experiences in this novel revolves around the contrast between operative communities based on immanence, fusion, and essentialist concepts such as race and ethnicity, and inoperative and elective communities characterized by openness and exposure to alterity. I examine how friendship and hospitality prove to be the necessary force in the novel to transform New York and Brussels into truly “open cities” hospitable to people of different races.

Keywords: Community; friendship; hospitality; openness; alterity.

Summary: Introduction. Operative and Essentialist Communities. The Elective Community: Friendship and Hospitality. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo examina la comunidad, la amistad y la hospitalidad en la novela *Open City* de Teju Cole, basándose en *The Inoperative Community* de Nancy, *The Unvowable Community* de Blanchot, y *The Politics of Friendship* y *Of Hospitality* de Derrida. Pretendo mostrar cómo la representación de las experiencias migratorias en esta novela gira en torno al contraste entre comunidades operativas basadas en la inmanencia, la fusión y conceptos esencialistas como raza

y etnia, y comunidades inoperativas y electivas caracterizadas por la apertura y exposición a la alteridad. Examino cómo la amistad y la hospitalidad demuestran ser la fuerza necesaria en la novela para transformar Nueva York y Bruselas en verdaderas “ciudades abiertas” que son hospitalarias para personas racialmente diversas.

Palabras clave: Comunidad; amistad; hospitalidad; apertura; alteridad.

Sumario: Introducción. Comunidades operativas y esencialistas. Comunidad electiva: Amistad y hospitalidad. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Teju Cole belongs to the third generation of Nigerian writers whose works address issues of migration, dislocation, and cross-border movements. In his introduction to *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, Helon Habila refers to these writers as “post-nationalist” (viii), as they have freed themselves from the “almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics” (viii). Cole’s novel *Open City* has such a post-national and transnational dimension, as it depicts the life of a character of Nigerian origin, Julius, in New York. The novel has been critically examined from the perspective of cosmopolitan identity and community.¹ In her article “History in Place: Territorialized Cosmopolitanism in Teju Cole’s *Open City*,” Emily Johansen discusses how the novel suggests the possibility of creating cosmopolitan communities in the form of inoperative communities that reject any form of hierarchical structure and categorisation.

In this article, I contribute to this discussion of community in Cole’s novel by arguing that the communitarian theories of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot can be drawn upon to examine the protagonist’s portrayal of the coexistence of diverse people and communities in contemporary New York and Brussels, and his relationship to these social groups and collectives. My focus, however, is not on the concept of cosmopolitanism, but on the concepts of friendship and hospitality—as theorised by Jacques Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship* (1997) and by Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle in *Of Hospitality* (2000)—in order to argue that they are central to the protagonist’s experience of community.

In *Open City*, characters of African descent ask for recognition to connect with Julius based on the injustices and inequalities they have experienced in history. Therefore, they expect to create a sense of

¹ See Hallemeier and Oniwe.

community based primarily on their place of origin, skin color, and discourses of victimhood. This is the type of community that Nancy identifies as operative in *The Inoperative Community* (1991), characterised by “immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy” (9). Julius, however, ceaselessly refuses to become part of an organic community based on race, place of origin, or shared vulnerability. I argue, therefore, that he prefers instead inoperative communities and elective communities, that is, communities of choice based, in his case, primarily on intellectual affinities. In his experience of community, friendship as discussed by Blanchot in *The Unavowable Community* (1988) and Derrida, along with Derrida’s notions of hospitality, plays a key role. Hospitality, understood as openness to the racial and migrant other, is a common thread throughout the novel, in which New York and Brussels are portrayed as only partially ‘open cities’ because of the racist ideologies and practices still prevalent towards African and black people.

1. OPERATIVE AND ESSENTIALIST COMMUNITIES

Julius, who has a German mother and a Nigerian father, and is originally from Nigeria, is an intellectual with a cosmopolitan spirit living in New York. He is completing a fellowship at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and has a deep knowledge of humanistic heritage, ranging from art, music, history to politics. From the beginning, the novel draws our attention to Julius’s constant activity of walking, an individual act linked to his sense of isolation and marginalized position in New York. Andrew P. Roger refers to Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) to describe walking as a tactic used by “those without a place” in order “to create space for themselves in environments defined by other people’s strategies” (128). It may be argued, then, that Julius uses walking as a tactic to resist the exclusionary aspect of space as defined by the strategies of hegemonic power in New York. Unlike the figure of the *flâneur*, much revered by twentieth-century modernist writers, Julius, however, can be more readily associated with, as Pieter Vermeulen argues, “the nineteenth-century figure of restless mobility: the *fugueur*” (42). Vermeulen describes the *fugueur* as “‘mad travelers’ who unaccountably walked away from their lives” (42), which fits Cole’s description of Julius travelling to New York to break away from his national and ethnic community in Nigeria and walking around the city to overcome his sense of loneliness.

The novel begins with Julius introducing his routine of evening walking, which is modelled on the way he observes the migration of birds from one place to another from the window of his apartment: "Not long before this aimless wandering began, I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment, and I wonder now if the two are connected" (Cole 3). Birds, especially migratory birds, are an important motif, described at one point in the novel as "homeless travelers" (Cole 181). The metaphor constructed between migratory birds and migrants like Julius is clear, for both are in a state of mobility and dislocation. Migratory birds seek to transform their new environment into a place of belonging; they seek to make it their "home." Similarly, as Julius wanders aimlessly, he negotiates and reflects on his place in New York, along with that of collectives that have traditionally occupied and continue to occupy a marginalized position, such as African Americans and "recent immigrants: Africans, Latinos, Eastern Europeans, Asians" (Cole 63). My particular focus, therefore, is on the relationship between his walks and his experience of community.

I will first show how Julius refuses to make connections with people who claim to be related to him because of their shared racial identity or African heritage, which implies a rejection of an operative community, as defined by Nancy. The operative community, according to Nancy, is built upon a common "substance or subject—be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation" (15). These moments could also be read in the light of Blanchot's conception of "traditional community," the community "imposed on us without our having the liberty of choice in the matter: it is *de facto* sociality, or the glorification of the earth, of blood, or even of race" (46). The rejection of such a communal affiliation is seen in the passage in which after leaving the American Folk Art Museum in New York, Julius gets into a cab. As he is still thinking about a portrait by John Brewster of a deaf young girl, Sarah Prince, he does not immediately realize that the cab driver is an African, like him. Julius, then, addresses the cab driver to give him his address:

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? He kept me in his sights in the mirror. I was confused. I said, I'm sorry about it, my mind was where, don't be offended, eh, my brother, how are you doing? He said nothing and faced the road. I wasn't

sorry at all. I was in no mood for *people who tried to lay claims on me*. (Cole 40, my emphasis)

This passage is particularly revealing because it shows how people may demand recognition and brotherhood from people who are related to them by their common race, national origin, or ethnicity. Yet Julius rejects this kind of connection based on similarity. The commonalities and the recognition of them are precisely what Nancy questions in his understanding of community: “he or she does not resemble me as a portrait resembles an original. It was this type of resemblance that constituted the initial given of the classic and tortuous problematic (or impasse) of the ‘recognition of the other’” (33). As opposed to a recognition of the self in the other—just “as a portrait resembles an original” (33)—that we find in operative and traditional understandings of community—represented in this passage by the cab driver—Nancy suggests a kind of community which “does not occur through the mediation of specular recognition” (33). Therefore, it is a community in which the other is characterized by an excess that cannot be recognized or appropriated: “the sovereign exposure to an excess (to a transcendence) that does not present itself and does not let itself be appropriated (or simulated) that does not even *give itself*” (18, emphasis in the original).

In the passage from *Open City* quoted above, the driver approaches Julius through a logic of “specular recognition” (33), which Julius rejects. The passage’s focus on the concept of community is also evident in its use of the term “brother,” which leads us to Derrida’s argument in *The Politics of Friendship*, where the French thinker undertakes a revision of the concept of friendship in the Western philosophical tradition. Derrida goes back to Cicero, whose conception of friendship exemplifies the idea of the friend as one of the same kind. According to this conception, the friend is not “the other,” but “the same”: the “ideal double, [the] other self, the same as self but improved” (4). Derrida, however, wonders: “why would the friend be *like* a brother? Let us dream of a friendship which goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double” (viii, emphasis in the original). The use of the term “brother” in the passage from Cole’s novel exemplifies this idea of friendship based on what Derrida calls “the principle of fraternity” (viii). It is this fraternity that the cab driver expects of him because of their common African origin. Julius’s use of the term “brother,” however, is a mere convention, for he does not consider the cab driver to be his brother or “congeneric double” (viii) at all.

The rejection of connections based on race, skin color, and place of origin features prominently in the novel, suggesting the failure of the operative community, as in the passage in which Julius involuntarily engages in a conversation with an African American postal clerk. Julius refuses to choose stamps with flags, wishing for "something more interesting" (Cole 186). Julius's post-national mindset is evident in this choice, which shows his aversion to national symbols.² The postal worker, Terrence McKinney, on the other hand, invokes a logic based on common African roots: "Say, brother, where are you from?' Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland" (Cole 186). Similar to the cab driver, Terry assumes a commonality that connects him and Julius because of their shared history and suffering and the fact that they still "remain the unconquered" (Cole 187). He tells Julius that he wants his children to preserve their original African values, calling Julius a "visionary" (Cole 187), and telling him that they need to be a guide for future generations. Julian, however, has the following thoughts: "I made a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future" (Cole 188). This passage demonstrates that Julius, as Susanne Gehrman argues, "may identify politically as Black, but obstinately refuses any racial group affiliation . . . and challenges victimhood discourses attached to Africa" (68). With his refusal to befriend the postal worker simply because they share the same African and racial origins, Julius once again rejects a conception of community and friendship based on the experience of brotherhood. It may be argued, then, that in Cole's novel we find a critique of the figure of the friend similar to the one that Derrida makes in *The Politics of Friendship*: "the figure of the friend, so regularly coming back on stage with the features of the *brother*—who is critically at stake in this analysis—seems spontaneously to belong to a *familial, fraternalist* and thus *androcentric* configuration of politics" (viii). The failure of a politics of community based on fraternity—and thus on homogeneity and similarity—reaches its climax in the eighteenth chapter. When he first encounters two young men on the street, Julius assumes "a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being 'brothers'" (Cole 212). However, the assumption of solidarity and respect based on shared racial origin and gender is radically broken when they attack and

² As Serena Guarracino argues, Teju Cole, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are among "the writers encompassed in the burgeoning corpus of third generation Nigerian literature [who] do not operate on a national level" (3).

beat him. Fraternity emerges in this passage as a fallacy, an idealistic notion of communal belonging that is not realized in actual social relations based on mutual respect and mutual aid.

Julius's experience of community also plays a central role in his stay in Brussels, where he travels in search of his maternal grandmother and where a significant part of the novel unfolds. On the plane on the way there, he befriends Dr. Maillotte, a Belgian surgeon. When she learns that Julius is a psychiatry fellow, she asks him if he has ever been to Harlem Hospital in New York (Cole 88) where—she adds—there are “a lot of Africans, Indians, Filipinos, and really, it is a good environment” (Cole 89). Dr Maillotte states that she was educated at the Catholic University of Louvain, whose main requirement is to be Catholic in order to teach there. Yet she claims the Catholic University of Louvain to be better than the Université Libre de Bruxelles, founded and run by Masons, where one cannot climb the academic ladder unless one is a Mason. Dr. Maillotte's words illustrate the exclusionary nature of operative communities. The institutions Dr. Maillotte mentions refuse entry to those who might pose a threat to their homogeneity. The implicit assumption is that an African immigrant, like Julius, would not be welcome there. She also refers to Belgium's unsuccessful resistance under the rule of Leopold III to the Nazi onslaught, which she witnessed when she was fifteen years old, referring to the Nazis as “parasites” (Cole 90). It is revealing that Dr Maillotte pays attention to the Nazis, who, according to Nancy, embody the logic of immanent and operative community in its most extreme form, since they wanted to eradicate those who differed from their homogeneously conceived community: “the logic of sacrifice aimed at all those in the ‘Aryan’ community who did not satisfy the criteria of pure immanence” (12). Those who represent alterity and difference are seen as a threat by the immanent community and risk exclusion and even annihilation.

During Julius's stay in Brussels, his tendency to approach people who follow his intellectual interests is again evident. This is at the heart of his relationship with Farouq, a Moroccan translation student who speaks English, Spanish, Arabic and French. Farouq has been living in Brussels for seven years and works at the Internet and telephone shop Julius visits regularly. In their relationship, we see how diasporic subjects can form communities with other migrants to alleviate their sense of disillusionment and to resist antagonistic conditions. As Delphine Fongang argues, this kind of connection in Cole's novel “symbolizes the development of cluster immigrant communities within the larger diasporic community to cater for

other dispossessed migrants (as part of a surviving strategy) in a hostile environment” (143). When Julius addresses Farouq for the first time, calling him his brother and shaking his hand, he immediately regrets it, thinking that this gesture may make him seem insincere. Julius confesses that “I wondered how this aggressive familiarity had struck him. I wondered, also, why I had said it. A false note, I decided” (Cole 102). This passage again brings to mind Nancy’s theorization of a community which does not ask for recognition: “It does not seek the self-appropriation of subjective immanence” (34). The novel suggests that Farouq has no desire at all to be recognized and appropriated as a brother from the point of view of a community characterized by an “immanent unity” (9), a unity that arises from his and Julius’s common African origin. Julius himself understands that Farouq would find his gesture insincere, for Farouq responds only “[g]ood” (Cole 101), “with a quick, puzzled smile” (Cole 101).

Julius and Farouq’s friendship—which will be analyzed in detail in the next section—takes place against the backdrop of a context characterized, as depicted in the novel, by increasing fear and even violence towards Arabs and Africans. In such a context, Julius feels uncomfortable and tries to avoid the bars and restaurants dominated by whites. He reflects that already in fifteenth-century Ghent, “the stranger was nothing unusual” (Cole 106) when Turks, Arabs, or Russians were present, adding that

the stranger had remained strange and had become a foil for new discontents. It occurred to me, too, that I was in a situation not so radically different from Farouq’s. My presentation—the dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger—made me a target for the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlaanderen: I could, in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist or “Viking.” But the bearers of the rage could never know how *cheap* it was. They were insensitive to how common, and how futile, was their violence *in the name of a monolithic identity*. (Cole 106, my emphasis)

In the lines above, Julius criticizes the exclusionary nature of organic communities formed on the basis of homogeneous identity, pointing to its effects on migrants—and thus “strangers”—like him and Farouq. This passage evokes Sara Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters* (2000) where Ahmed discusses the implications of being “the outsider inside” (3). Being a stranger in a foreign country puts into question the “relations of proximity

and distance,” that is, “by coming too close to home, [aliens] establish the very necessity of policing the borders of knowable and inhabitable terrains” (3). When African migrants like Julius and Farouq find themselves in territories mainly occupied and defined by Europeans and *whites*, they are automatically perceived as “strangers”; they are seen as having invaded that territory, which triggers in *whites* the need to protect their space. The novel illustrates the violent consequences of such perceptions of migrants by drawing attention to a number of “hate crimes” (Cole 99) promoted by the policies and ideology of right-wing parties such as the Flemish right-wing party Vlaams Belang (Cole 98), which incite fear and hatred against foreigners. An example of this is the crime committed by an eighteen-year-old boy who perceives Africans as “*makakken*” (Cole 99), a term that suggests a similarity between Africans and monkeys. The boy ends up killing a girl from Turkey and a nanny from Mali, along with the Flemish child she was caring for. However, he only expresses regret for having killed the Flemish child (Cole 99). Returning to Ahmed, this event demonstrates the perception of migrants as “strangers” that may lead members of the community to carry out violent actions aimed at expelling them “from the purified space of the community” (22).

Back in New York, a concert at Carnegie Hall dedicated to the music of Gustav Mahler, which Julius attends, is particularly revealing for Nancy’s description of the exclusionary nature of operative communities and Ahmed’s notion of the stranger. Finding himself among white and well-off people, Julius feels like Ota Benga, a young African man who was put on view in a cage at the Bronx Zoo in the United States (Cole 252). When he was finally freed from the zoo, he attempted to go back to Africa but could not. Ota Benga could not bear the emotional toll of his sufferings and committed suicide in his early thirties. According to Dorottya Mózes, what Julius feels is “the impossibility of escaping the White gaze” (278), which also evokes the scene in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) in which a child shouts “Look, a Negro! . . . see the Negro! I’m frightened! Frightened! Frightened!” (84). Julius is perceived as an Other—a stranger, borrowing Ahmed’s term—primarily because of his racial difference, which sets him apart in a white-dominated place and racially homogeneous community. Julius muses on these exclusionary homogeneous places by saying, “it never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the

whites in them” (Cole 251). His reflections highlight the paradoxical dimension of cities like New York and Brussels, which are characterized by hybridity because communities of different racial and ethnic backgrounds live together there, but at the same time are still dominated by racist, white-dominated practices that condemn the African and migrant Other to a position of marginality and oppression, i.e., to the role of “stranger.”

2. THE ELECTIVE COMMUNITY: FRIENDSHIP AND HOSPITALITY

In contrast to the essentialist and exclusionary notion of community suggested by the white-dominated concert at Carnegie Hall or the perception of Africans as “*makakken*” analyzed in the previous section, *Open City* also offers examples of elective communities that are heterogeneous and thus hospitable, emerging from acts of friendship and hospitality. This would be the case of Farouq’s Internet and telephone shop, where all kinds of people go to communicate with people from all over the world: “Colombia, Egypt, Senegal, Brazil, France, Germany” (Cole 112). Farouq believes that he can coexist and live with all kinds of people and still retain the idiosyncratic characteristics that set him apart from others:

it is a test case of what I believe; people can live together but still keep their own values intact . . . people can live together, and I want to understand how that can happen. It happens here, on this small scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale. (Cole 112–13)

Farouq’s words imply a belief in a sense of community based on differences rather than homogeneity. It can be said that his friendship with Julius is in some ways an example of such a community, a friendship based not on their common continent of origin but on their intellectual interests. They engage in a series of historical, political, and literary conversations, many of which concern Farouq’s belief in the value of difference and Julius’s rejection of groups formed around a homogeneous sense of identity. They discuss Tahar Ben Jelloun, a Moroccan writer who lives in France and has written all his works in French. Farouq claims that Ben Jelloun relies on an Orientalist view of his country and is not realistic because he does not refer to real problems in his books. He claims that it is “mythmaking” (Cole 103) to respond to the “oriental fantasy” (Cole

104) in order to gain recognition and be published in the West. Farouq invokes Edward Said to support his notion of the importance of difference, claiming that “difference as orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no” (Cole 104). Farouq himself clearly resists the binaries dictated by the dominant discourse and perceptions, as he does not fit into the stereotypical image expected of him in relation to his place of origin. Tahar Ben Jelloun, on the other hand, as Farouq claims, reinforces these stereotypes in his works in order to be a recognized author in the West.

Farouq reinforces his argument by bringing Malcolm X into the discussion. According to Farouq, “Malcolm X recognized that difference contains its own value, and that the struggle must be to advance that value” (Cole 105). Farouq’s praise of difference may be related to the novel’s critique of communities formed on the basis of homogeneous identity and its defence of openness to otherness in the coexistence of people from different racial backgrounds. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006) can be seen as the basis for the understanding of cosmopolitanism that we find in *Open City*. This is, in fact, the book that Julius sends to Farouq when he returns to New York. Oniwe approaches Appiah’s concept of cosmopolitanism as a humane idea that embraces all differences between people (45). This cosmopolitan understanding of community includes everyone, even those who hold essentialist ideals of community, to make living together possible. Oniwe notes that “as Appiah the self-avowed cosmopolitan posits, ‘We do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogenous system of values, in order to have a home . . . one distinctively cosmopolitan commitment is to pluralism’” (45).

Julius’s and Farouq’s relationship, then, suggests an experience of community that departs from the essentialist and operative community, but is rather an “elective community,” as defined by Blanchot (46). Such a community, unlike the “traditional” one, is not “imposed on us” but is characterised by “the liberty of choice” (46). An example of such a community would be the community of friends (33), a form of community that is particularly evident in the friendship between Julius and Professor Saito in New York and to which the novel devotes much attention. Professor Saito, of Japanese descent, is an eighty-nine-year-old homosexual professor emeritus of early English literature who was formerly Julius’s mentor at Maxwell University. Professor Saito has always been kind to him, and throughout the novel, they have various

conversations based on their intellectual and cultural interests. Over coffee, their discussions range from Beowulf and other classics to Professor Saito’s experiences as a student before the outbreak of the Second World War. In most of the passages analysed in the previous section, we have seen the failure of community and friendship based on commonalities that depend on race and African origin. Julius and Professor Saito, on the other hand, share neither their racial nor their national origins, and therefore their friendship is of a different kind:

After we became friends, I made it a point to see Professor Saito two or three times each semester, and those meetings became cherished highlights of my last two years at Maxwell. I came to view him as a grandfatherly figure entirely *unlike* either of my own grandfathers (only one of whom I’d known). I felt *I had more in common with him* than with the people who happened to be related to me. (Cole 10, my emphasis)

As can be seen from this passage, Julius and Professor Saito’s friendship is not characterised by brotherhood. The fact that Julius emphasises how Professor Saito is “entirely unlike” members of his family—his grandfathers, in particular—suggests that Professor Saito does not fit into the category of friend according to a familial or fraternalist logic (*Friendship* viii), as defined by Derrida. They are friends, on the contrary, “of an entirely different kind . . . without common measure, reciprocity or equality. Therefore, without a horizon of recognition. Without a familial bond, without proximity” (*Friendship* 35). They can also be seen as an example of the elective community of friends as defined by Blanchot: “One calls it elective in the sense that it exists only through a decision that gathers its members around a choice without which it could not have taken place” (46–47). The particular idiosyncratic nature of their relationship is also evident in the fact that when Professor Saito dies, Julius does not know who to talk to about his death, as they have no mutual friends or connections:

I did not know whom to call. He had meant so much to me but, I realized, our relationship had been so private or, rather, outside a network of other connected relationships, that hardly anyone else knew about it, or about how important it had been to us”. (Cole 184)

This passage suggests that Julius's and Professor Saito's friendship does not operate according to prevailing conventions or conventional bonds. In this sense, again, it resembles the "elective community," as defined by Blanchot: a community "that attracts the beings in order to throw them towards each other (two by two or more, collectively), according to their body or according to their heart and thought, by tearing them from ordinary society" (47). This kind of friendship, then, is not based on the expectations or dictates of ordinary society but is detached from them. There are other examples of this kind of friendship in the novel. We see it in Julius's relationship with an African American assistant professor whom he refers to simply as "my friend" (Cole 179). Their conversations range from the origins of the tree species in his friend's garden to environmental issues and recycling. It appears to be a form of friendship not rooted in "affinity or proximity" (*Friendship* 3) or a "schematic of filiation" (*Friendship* viii), as defined by Derrida. These relationships reveal a kind of friendship that transcends immanent ties and is imbued with heterogeneity. This kind of community thus contrasts with the racial, national, and familial community to which one is inherently assigned without freedom of choice.

The novel suggests that Julius has never felt part of a racial, national, ethnic, and familial community. Because he had a German mother and a Nigerian father, he was considered a "half-Nigerian, a foreigner" (Cole 83) in Nigeria. His foreign name, Julius, contributed to the fact that he did not feel "fully Nigerian" (Cole 78). After his father's death, he became estranged from his mother and eventually stopped speaking to her. He organizes a trip to Brussels to locate his maternal grandmother, but he is unable to find her. His experiences of friendship and his social relationships with people based on his intellectual curiosity, on the other hand, prove to be temporary. Professor Saito's death and his friend's move to another city reinforce his loneliness and the impossibility of lasting communal ties in this novel.

Julius, then, can be said to walk the streets to overcome his sense of loneliness and to resist the alienating nature of the city. It is the act of walking that enables him to cross different places, however homogeneous they may be, and claim his right to be there. Julius refers to walking as "therapy" (Cole 7) and describes the feeling he has while walking as one reminiscent of freedom:

Every decision—where to turn left, how long to remain lost in thought in front of an abandoned building, whether to watch the sun set over New Jersey, or to lope in the shadows on the East Side looking across to Queens—was inconsequential and was for that reason a reminder of freedom. (Cole 7)

Julius notes, however, that the impressions he receives from people while walking exacerbate rather than alleviate his loneliness: “the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them” (Cole 6). Julius’s sense of loneliness is thus underlined by his walks in the city. New York is indeed portrayed as a city where people are doomed to isolation and inwardness: “Everything was built up, in concrete and stone, and the millions who lived on the tiny interior had scant sense about what flowed around them” (Cole 54). This description of New York and the people who live there is also reflected in the passage where Julius describes his experience in the New York underground, which is full of people, as an experience that reinforces his loneliness (Cole 7).

This alienating character of the city is felt especially by immigrants and refugees, such as those Julius meets during his visit to an immigrant detention center in Queens. Julius is assigned to a young asylum seeker named Saidu, from Liberia, who recounts his painful migration experience to Julius. Saidu’s mother and sister were killed by Charles Taylor’s troops during the Liberian civil war. Because he was a man, he had to work on a farm, from which he later fled when soldiers cut off the limbs of his fellow workers. From Liberia, Saidu made his way to Tangier, from Tangier to Ceuta, from Ceuta to Algeciras, from there to southern Spain and then to Lisbon, where he raised enough money for his ticket to the USA by working in a butcher’s shop and a hairdressing salon. He finally arrived in the USA with a forged Cape Verdean passport and his mother’s birth certificate, as he did not have one himself. After 11 September 2001, however, strict immigration restrictions were enforced. While Saidu would have received asylum without any problems before 11 September, he was denied it after 11 September: “the lawyer they assigned to me said I might have had a chance before 9/11” (Cole 69).

Saidu’s experience may be read in the light of Derrida’s discussion of hospitality. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida distinguishes between traditional/conditional and absolute/unconditional hospitality. Traditional hospitality may be identified with juridico-political hospitality, which is limited by law. Traditional hospitality implies that the host has the right to

choose his guests before deciding whether to admit them, grant them the right of asylum or expel them. The host thus decides whether the guest has earned the right to hospitality or not. Derrida's argument is that once the host selects and excludes in the traditional sense of hospitality, they are exercising violence. Absolute hospitality, on the other hand, requires that the host does not expect the guest to speak their language and does not ask for the guest's name. Absolute hospitality only takes place when the host gives the stranger full control of their house, as if the stranger were the master of the house. However, this is beyond the realm of possibility, and therefore absolute hospitality would consist of making this impossibility possible. Absolute hospitality would therefore mean that asylum seekers like Saidu are unconditionally welcome "before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77).

I will draw upon the distinction between Derrida's concept of unconditional hospitality and Kant's understanding of hospitality, as discussed in *Of Hospitality*, to illustrate why Saidu's request for asylum is rejected. Derrida explains how Kant prioritizes communal relations over unconditional hospitality. Kant takes in a guest who asks him for refuge from the assassins who are looking for him. However, Kant does not lie to the assassins to protect his guest when they ask for him, as he believes that no one should lie to anyone under any circumstances. Kant's response demonstrates a high regard for communal duty and therefore represents a reverence for communal bonds (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 67–68). This makes Kant's and Derrida's understanding of hospitality different. On the one hand, Kant views the reception of the guest from a legal and conditional perspective. It involves rules and conditions that must be followed in order to protect refugees like Saidu. On the other hand, Derrida describes unconditional/absolute hospitality as a hospitality that is devoid of calculation and welcomes the absolute other without questioning their identity. Unconditional/absolute hospitality, according to Derrida, is,

A law without law, in short. For if I practice hospitality "out of duty" [and not only "in conforming with duty"], this hospitality of paying up is no longer an absolute hospitality, it is no longer graciously offered beyond debt and economy, offered to the other, a hospitality invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 83)

The novel’s concern with the possibility of hospitality towards African and black migrants is reminiscent of the motif of migratory birds mentioned earlier. At one point, Julius reflects on the sparrows he observes through the window as follows:

There were sparrows flitting about in the distance, attempting to find a place to rest for the night . . . As I reflected on the fact that in each of these creatures was a tiny red heart, an engine that without fail provided the means for its exhilarating midair maneuvers, I was reminded of how often people took comfort, whether consciously or not, in the idea that God himself attended to these homeless travelers with something like personal care; that, contrary to the evidence of natural history, he protected each one of them from hunger and hazard and the elements. (Cole 181)

It could be argued that Derrida’s idea of absolute/unconditional hospitality is echoed in Julius’s reflection on sparrows as “homeless travelers” in search of a place to stay. A hospitable God is portrayed as an ideal host, in contrast to the authoritarian forces that have prevented Saidu’s entry into the United States. God offers unconditional hospitality to migratory birds in search of a place where they can find shelter overnight. Saidu, on the other hand, together with many others, is denied entry into the United States where he has come to seek protection from the danger in his country of origin. In *Open City*, then, Cole draws our attention to the status quo of nations such as the United States as exclusionary and inhospitable places, while pointing to the need for them to become hospitable places. Saidu did not choose his birthplace. He is not responsible for the political upheavals taking place there. His family was killed, and he was subjected to abuse and violence. His fate calls into question the ethics of traditional, juridico-political hospitality that determines who is admitted and who is rejected.

The novel points out that long before September 11, the city of New York was characterized by a lack of hospitality, especially toward African migrants and African Americans. Thus, as Julius reflects on the various historical events and processes that took place in New York, he repeatedly encounters signs and traces that point to the status of black people as unwelcome Others. Julius refers to a site that was an African burial ground in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an area of “some six acres, as far north as present-day Duane Street and as far south as City Hall Park” (Cole 220). He highlights that “the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves” (Cole 220), were allowed to be

buried at this site, which was not considered part of the city: “It was here, on the outskirts of the city at the time, north of Wall Street and so outside civilization as it was then defined, that blacks were allowed to bury their dead” (Cole 220). This passage underlines the irony of the novel’s title, for New York was never truly an “open city”—a hospitable city—for the African slaves. Since they were not considered proper residents of the city, or even proper human beings, they could only be buried “outside the city walls” (Cole 222). Derrida discusses hospitality to the migrant who is an *arrivant* in the context of the concept of the border, “the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families, and genealogies” (*Aporias* 34). We see this boundary materialized in the walls of New York City, which determined who belonged to the city and was welcome and who was instead considered a stranger. Ahmed has also consistently considered borders and boundaries as central to the recognition of the stranger as “the outsider inside” (3): “the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and exclusion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities” (6). The image of New York as a city enclosed by borders comes into full play in chapter four, as Julius walks to the South End and heads towards the waterline:

The strangest of islands, I thought, as I looked out to the sea, this island that turned in on itself, and from which water had been banished. The shore was a carapace, permeable only at certain selected points. Where in this riverine city could one fully sense a riverbank? (Cole 54)

The fact that New York is built on an island that is “turned in on itself,” with a shore that acts as a “carapace, permeable only at certain selected points” suggests the exact opposite of openness and hospitality, but rather a space—and thus a community—that is “sealed: it is like a body that is fully contained by the skin” (Ahmed 25). The obvious implication is that such “an organic community . . . does not let outsiders (or foreign agents/viruses) in” (Ahmed 25) and is not open to all—an idea hinted at later in the text when Julius turns his attention to Ellis Island, which functioned as the country’s main immigration station in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “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” (Cole 55). Julius’s

reflections strongly underscore Ellis Island's mythic status as a symbol of the United States as a land of hospitality for newcomers, offering hospitality to Europeans but not to black people. Julius acknowledges the value the island may have had "for European refugees" (Cole 55) but adds that "[b]lacks" knew "rougner ports of entry" (Cole 55).

The novel references a long tradition of fear and rejection of the African and black stranger that leads to "violence in the name of a monolithic identity" (Cole 107) in both New York and Brussels. The novel thus focuses on the historical and legal conditions that constrain and limit hospitality, which contrasts with the heterogeneity that characterizes these cities in the present. Therefore, the novel, which deals with hospitality in the cosmopolitan contexts of New York and Brussels, is also in dialogue with Derrida's remarks on hospitality toward migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001). In this text, Derrida introduces the notion of a kind of cosmopolitan city where migrants can seek refuge from any kind of threat. Derrida thus develops the concept of "open cities" or "refuge cities" (viii), "where migrants may seek sanctuary from the pressures of persecution, intimidation, and exile" (viii). Such cities would welcome newcomers according to Derrida's concept of absolute/unconditional hospitality, Kant's concept of moral law, and Levinas's concept of infinite responsibility (xi). The existence of such cities which do not homogenize and do not exclude the other, would welcome migrants of all kinds without assimilating them or expecting anything in return, and would be a solution to the agonizing migration experiences and the grim fates of most of Cole's characters.

Open City ends with Julius recalling the death of migratory birds when the Statue of Liberty acted as a lighthouse, directing ships into Manhattan Harbor; "that same light," however, "especially in bad weather, fatally disoriented birds. The birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city, somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame" (Cole 258). It is telling that these birds lose their lives crashing into the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of freedom and hospitality for newcomers. Julius elaborates on the "large number of birds [that] met their death in this manner" (Cole 258), particularly in 1888:

On October I of that year, for example . . . fifty rails had died, as had eleven wrens, two catbirds, and one whip-poor-will. The following day, the record showed two dead wrens: the day after that, eight wrens . . . the sense persisted

that something more troubling was at work. On the morning of October 13, for example, 175 wrens had been gathered in, all dead of the impact, although the night just past had not been particularly windy or dark. (Cole 259)

With these words the novel ends abruptly. The fatal fate of the birds refers not only to the unfulfilled migration experience of many of the novel's characters, but also to the experiences of forced resettlement, suffering, exile, torture and ultimately death that African and black people have had throughout history. Hospitality thus becomes a chimaera and an unfulfilled expectation.

CONCLUSIONS

In *Open City*, Julius oscillates between rejecting organic communities based on African origin and race and experiencing friendships rooted in his intellectual interests, which transcend racial and ethnic boundaries. However, these friendships prove to be transient and ultimately dissolve. Julius's mistrust of operative, organic and essentialist communities points to their marginalizing dimension, which in the urban context of New York and Brussels is shown in the lack of hospitality towards the black migrant, who is condemned to the role of "stranger."

The novel thus questions the extent to which New York and Brussels are actually open and hospitable cities. Although both New York and Brussels are racially heterogeneous, they are portrayed as being shaped by an urban, spatial logic that is both "protective and defensive" (Ahmed 26), which corresponds to the functioning of immanent and operative communities. In the part of the novel devoted to Brussels, particular attention is paid to how migrants and foreigners are met with suspicion, fear and even violence. The city functions largely as "an organic community" (Ahmed 25) characterized by "the expulsion of difference" (Ahmed 25) to create "purified spaces" (Ahmed 25). Places like Farouq's shop stand for the possibility of a different kind of coexistence between people of different origins and races, a coexistence in which there is no longer a difference between natives and strangers, a kind of community characterized by friendship and hospitality. However, it is a friendship "of an entirely different kind" (*Friendship* 35), as defined by Derrida: a friendship that is not based on sameness, fraternity, or commonality, but on the absence of commonalities of race, ethnicity, or national origin.

As Julius's thoughts and reflections on the Statue of Liberty and other parts of the city show, the novel is highly critical of the common notion of New York as a city open and hospitable to all foreigners and migrants. The idea that New York is an open and welcoming city may be true for migrants of European origin. Yet there have also always been communities and racial groups that have been systematically marginalized and excluded in this city: black slaves, the African American community and, more recently, black migrants of African descent. With the image of migratory birds crashing into the Statue of Liberty, Cole undermines the myth of the United States as the promised land for all immigrants and newcomers, highlighting instead the lack of hospitality experienced by migrants like Saidu, especially after 11 September.

Julius remains trapped in his role as "the dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger" (Cole 106), a role that is largely forced upon him given the exclusionary spatial, social, and racial configurations that prevail in the urban contexts in which he finds himself. Walking proves to be only a temporary release from such constraints, just as migratory birds find temporary shelter. In New York, it is still possible to be in "all-white spaces" (Cole 252) like Carnegie Hall, whose "homogeneity . . . causes no discomfort to the whites in them" (Cole 252). In such a context, however, Julius experiences Mahler's music as "not white or black" (Cole 252), suggesting the possibility of overcoming racial discrimination and separation so that, as Farouq puts it, "people can live together" (Cole 112).

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