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’AS VIVID AS BLOOD IN A SINK’: (RE)READING QUEERNESS AND REPRESSION IN TEJU COLE’S OPEN CITY

by

Jack Hoda

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) is an exemplar work of contemporary fiction. For its complex representation of subjectivity, hypnotic narrative tone, and global political scope, the novel has been praised by readers and critics alike. Julius, the text's first-person narrator, guides us along seemingly innocent wanderings throughout New York City, ruminating on history, art, and politics while presenting himself as the enlightened, cosmopolitan ideal. However, the shocking penultimate revelation that Julius raped a young woman from his past alters our encounter with the text and its narrator. We come to realize that this meandering novel is, in reality, a carefully curated attempt to repress a violent past. Many scholars, and Teju Cole himself, have explored the benefits of rereading *Open City* with the revelation of Julius's rape in mind, noting the various hidden signs that become more obvious indicators of his problematic character. However, no critic has paid adequate attention to Julius's sexuality. By adopting a psychoanalytic lens invested in Julius's memories, dreams, familial dynamics, and psychic aversions, this project uncovers a complex network of signs indicating that Julius is, in fact, a queer character. Once identified as queer, I argue that the intense intersections of Julius's emerging sexuality, uncomfortable family dynamics, and learned toxically masculine traits from military school converge to produce his violent actions and the subsequent repression of his victim intertwined with more subtle aversions to queerness, sexuality, and intersubjectivity.

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I am equally grateful for the invaluable insights of Dr. Ery Shin and Dr. Shane Wood. Dr. Shin's profound knowledge of theory and keen eye for argumentative fallacies sharpened both this project and my own academic approach. Likewise, Dr. Wood's passion for graduate students and dedicated mentorship has meaningfully impacted me as a writer, professional, and educator.

Finally, I must thank Teju Cole for writing this novel which enraptured me within my first few weeks of graduate school and became a constant anchor for the challenging two years that followed. Cole's erudite writing and conscientious photography have served as my entry point to contemporary art, and I will continue to follow his career with vigor.

DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to my late grandmother, Lilla Hoda, a beautiful and complex woman who passed in the middle of my graduate studies. MamaLil, as we call her, introduced me to art at a young age through her love of musicals, Elvis Presley, and Frank Sinatra. Without her, I may never have found myself in literature.

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INTRODUCTION

“To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone.”

--Teju Cole, *Open City*

“When we write fiction, we write within what we know. But we also write in the hope that what we have written will somehow outdistance us. We hope, through the spooky art of writing, to trick ourselves into divulging truths that we do not know we know”

--Teju Cole, “Blind Spot”

In her 2016 book, *Unmaking Love: The Contemporary Novel and the Impossibility of Union*, Ashley Shelden argues that contemporary novelists are complicating the conceptual and aesthetic meaning of love. She proposes that these writers demand that we stop thinking of “love (union, wholeness) and that which threatens it (negativity, division)” as separate but rather “as intimately and inextricably connected” (3). In contrast to the unifying, healing energy that imbues conventional representations of love throughout literary history, Shelden argues that the contemporary approach to love more accurately captures the full scope of intimate relationships. While this claim is not entirely new, Shelden’s framework of “negative, queer love” (which she understands as synonymous or overlapping terms) aligns with Teju Cole’s cryptic representation of relationships in his 2011 novel *Open City* (Shelden 3). In contradiction to Leo Bersani’s oppositional situating of love and queerness, Shelden writes that “the contemporary novel exposes the ways in which love is *not* opposed to queer negativity. Rather, love itself becomes ‘antiloving,’ that is, imbued with all the corrosive force of the

negative" (2). In this view, the unifying potential of love transforms into a disruptive pressure through the infusion of queerness—not only queer sexuality but also the queer in all things: the unexpected, the strange, the disconnected, the deformed. I argue that Cole's *Open City* reflects Shelden's framework through its narrator and protagonist, Julius, for whom intimacy with others remains almost completely unavailable. Throughout the novel Julius struggles with love, friendship, family bonds, and even passing encounters with strangers because of his own unacknowledged queerness, dysfunctional family dynamics, ambivalent masculinity, and repressed interpersonal violence.

For its complex representation of subjectivity, hypnotic narrative tone, and global political scope, *Open City* has been praised by contemporary readers and critics alike. Upon publication, the novel quickly achieved critical and popular success and has only continued to amass a wide-ranging body of critical scholarship, evidenced by the recent publication of a volume titled *Critical Perspectives on Teju Cole* which largely centers *Open City* within Cole's growing body of intermedial work. The novel is an enigma, a seemingly aimless first-person narrative by a half Nigerian, half German immigrant living in New York City. Julius is a psychiatry fellow at once so engrossed in and avoidant of his personal psyche that the text often reads like a patient case study rather than a traditional novel. Most critics have called Julius a wanderer, a cosmopolitan, and a flâneur. More unconventionally, Rebecca Clark, in "'Visible Only in Speech,'" reads him as a parasite while Maria Bose, in "Virtual Flânerie," compares him to a virtual search engine. These characterizations are supported by considerable evidence, but, I argue that, most of all, Julius is a careful curator of his pseudo-narrative. The novel engrosses a first-

time reader with its perceptive and ruminative narrative voice. It is thrilling to be inside the mind of such an observant, well-read, self-reflective, and seemingly compassionate narrator, but the novel's eventual revelation about Julius's past casts a shade over the preceding pages, fundamentally altering how we interpret them and our narrator. Specifically, in the final third of the novel, Julius encounters a childhood acquaintance from Nigeria, Moji Kasali, who finally, in the novel's penultimate scene, accuses him of raping her when they were teenagers. This accusation initially comes as a shock to the reader, but upon rereading the novel, signs of Julius's guilt become more apparent. Indeed, I argue that Moji's disclosure becomes a lens through which to reread *Open City*, revealing an unconscious layer of the text that is propelled by erotic discomforts and aversions: negative affections that signal us to the initial violence and resulting repression of the rape but also to its likely *source* as some sexual deviance more deeply withheld in Julius's memory.

Moji's confrontation reveals that a narrative previously considered desultory or even somnambulistic is, in reality, a tightly woven fabric of memory, history, and identity. As Aliki Varvogli writes, "[Cole] creates a complex picture of a man who is aware that he is a storyteller—a man who *performs* his inner thoughts for the benefit of his audience" (250). Julius's not-so-aimless wanderings throughout New York City shape the narrative. As he encounters buildings, monuments, artwork, and people, he leads us through well-informed reflections upon the histories of locations and cultures, sociopolitical digressions of various historical tragedies, and selective memories of his childhood in Nigeria. Somehow, Julius's overwhelming wealth of knowledge seems effortless, as if exceedingly accurate depictions of obscure local histories are files resting

in the back of his mind, awaiting external circumstances to influence his digressions. Cole has himself referred to Julius's narration as an "aimless drift" at first glance ("Pitch Forward"). This drift is enjoyable, and Julius is certainly attractive. He perpetually fluctuates between enlightening aesthetic experiences and disruptive—even antagonistic—interpersonal encounters that initially seem comical and unavoidable. However, as upon learning of Julius's sexual violence, his struggle with interpersonal connection takes on a new meaning. We find that each of Julius's social relationships is influenced by erotic discomforts that signal the repression of his violence toward Moji—an act which I argue is itself a violent libidinal response to earlier signs of queerness in Julius's character, signs of queerness that are not so much repressed as they are ignored.

My emphasis on rereading *Open City* through Moji's rape is not new to Cole scholarship; however, my argument pursues the psychoanalytic diagnosis that the novel invites and that few critics have explored explicitly in terms of queer subjectivity. Rebecca Clark, in her discussion of surface and symptomatic readings of the text, rightfully claims "that it is nearly impossible to surface re-read *Open City* after this revelation" (183). Pieter Vermeulen argues that Moji's confrontation reveals "Julius's compulsive walking and remembering are not simply a carefully cultivated case of flanerie, but testify to a more sinister condition," diagnosing him with "dissociative fugue" ("Flights of Memory"). Alexandra Kingston-Reese notes that "given that this development occurs late in the novel, it *implores* rereading. You feel as though you've missed something; you've ignored signs of a disturbed pathology" (73). Cole himself, discussing this very phenomenon, has said that he "like[s] it when a book has something for the re-readers, so [he] put a number of things in *Open City* that won't be caught on a

first reading—they just register as part of the apparently aimless drift of the book—but that on a second reading will be as vivid as blood in a sink" ("Pitch Forward"). Readers and critics alike agree that Moji's revelation fundamentally alters our encounter with the text. Such a truth hardly requires rereading to experience. However, each of these critics—and Cole himself—point to the fact that our understanding of *Open City* is incomplete without a thorough review that uses Moji's revelation as a new hermeneutic lens. While others have offered compelling readings of Cole's novel by taking this approach, I believe that Julius's subtle disinclination toward sexuality warrants closer interrogation. Indeed, Paula von Gleich and Isabel Soto recently suggested the potential of such a reading, contending that "Allusive, unexplored threads in the novel, such as Julius's competing gestures of suggestion and obfuscation regarding his sexuality and what may be understood as queer desire emphasize the richness and complexity of Cole's novel" (293).

The critical blind spot concerning eroticism in the novel is especially glaring when considered in terms of both Julius's profession as a psychiatrist and his stated appreciation of Freud's "literary truths" (208). Such elements of the text invite a psychoanalytic reading that highlights memory and motive in order to identify patterns of behavior that account for Julius's discomfort with both intimates and strangers. Rereading *Open City* with Moji's confrontation in mind yields just such a pattern in Julius's erotic encounters and sexual aversions. By erotic encounters, I mean not only sexual intercourse but also the erotic tension that pervades many of Julius's intersubjective encounters, and, specifically, his noticeable discomfort with queerness—both in himself and others. While Julius's repression of his attack against Moji is blatant,

his responses to queerness are much more subtle, difficult to identify and categorize. I argue that the two diagnoses are certainly connected, and their relationship is complex and intertwined. Especially through his wanderings in the ironically named "open city" of New York, Julius's repression of the rape and his aversion to queerness and intimacy are difficult to disentangle. However, the key to this pathological bind lies in his childhood memories, which provide evidence of both oedipal dysfunctions and queerness, or at least sexual deviance, in his character. A critical interrogation of these memories reveals how such surfacing and yet-unwanted queerness may be the catalyst of his violence towards Moji, the rape itself being a desperate and distorted attempt to assert his heteronormative masculinity.

Before Moji's confrontation, an initial read of *Open City* reveals subtle threads of queer potential, beginning in Julius's childhood memories. The investigation of these memories with Moji's revelation in mind provides both further insight into his pathology and an opportunity to map out the time surrounding the rape. These memories invite a psychoanalytic approach for several reasons. The memories display Julius's upbringing with his biological family who are otherwise absent from his contemporary life. His memories additionally reveal a telling ambivalence toward an especially constructed, toxic masculinity defined by violence, stoicism, and assertive sexuality. In an interview with *Tin House*, Cole says about Julius's childhood memories that he "wants to take you into his confidence and yet the whole time he is withholding himself. There is so much he is trying *not* to tell. So that's what the Nigeria section of the book was about" ("A Conversation with Teju Cole," my emphasis). For Julius, the narrative asides exploring his childhood serve to distract from the guilty unconscious of the narrative present, but

one can never completely erase the traumatic material that selective memory—the unconscious's attempt to erase or modify surfacing memories to prevent pain—means to keep at bay (Tyson 15). These memories themselves are revealing, and as we later reapproach his childhood with Moji's rape in mind, Julius's psychic profile begins to cohere.

MEMORY, FAMILIAL DYSFUNCTION, AND SEXUAL DEVIANCE

In one of the novel's earliest presentations of his childhood memory, Julius recounts the lingering aftermath of his father's death to tuberculosis. Notably, Julius's father is never physically present in his memories outside of his burial. In this way, Julius's childhood embodies the absence and loss of the father that induces his fear of abandonment and underscores the racialized and gendered tension between him and his mother. The memory in question explores Julius's estrangement from his mother following his father's death, an estrangement that finds home in his obscured national and racial identity as he reflects on his name as a modified version of his mother's German name, Julianna. He is troubled by the fact that "The name Julius linked [him] to another place and was, with [his] passport and [his] skin color, one of the intensifiers of [his] sense of being different," (78). Notably, the typical restraint Julius and his mother show towards each other breaks in a soft moment in which he recalls her sharing untold memories of her childhood in Germany. Her divulgence of her own selective memory amidst contemporary trauma reflects Julius's similar processes in the narrative present. However, rather than becoming a moment of reconnection or bonding, the pair move on from her emotional testimony as if the moment never happened. Their silence becomes a "rift that wouldn't heal" (81). As Shelden writes, "The contemporary novel shows us that love is neither unifying nor unified; it is the place of division, divorce, and fissure" (5). Similarly, Julius's memories of the ties between his family members highlight the points of division among them, propelled by a complex interfacing of loss and myriad tensions anchored in their differing identities. His past in Nigeria presents an unconscious

blueprint for his relationships in the present day, characterized by oedipal dysfunction, an unstable sense of identity, and anxiety about intimacy, trust, and abandonment.

The aforementioned scene between Julius and his mother leads directly into another memory, this time of Julius's return to military school following his father's death. Julius takes great pride in "not play[ing] the helpless orphan" and "accruing some sort of manly virtue" by throwing himself into manual labor (81). Julius's attempts to *perform* manhood in the absence of his father are disrupted by violence and humiliation when he mistakenly takes a discarded newspaper belonging to Musibau, the school's music teacher. Musibau accuses him of being a thief and parades him around the school, physically abusing and insulting him. The episode culminates with Musibau caning Julius in front of his drawing class. Julius shares, "I bared my buttocks and bent over, using the blackboard for support. He caned me. It took effort, and he sweated from the exertion, methodically bringing the cane down on me," (84). Julius's description of this scene strikingly evokes penetrative sex, and its infusion with such violence suggests lingering trauma intertwining his early impressions of sexuality with masculinity, violence, and humiliation. These paired scenes presenting Julius's disunification with his family and the virulent culture of the military school set a tone for his childhood memories, which summon an atmosphere of loss, interpersonal tension, sexual humiliation, and above all, an anxiety about his public and internalized performances of masculinity. Julius's endurance of this caning makes him "a little legend" at his school, a title which invokes pride in him regardless of the emasculating use of "little" (84). The internally perceived elevation of his masculinity relies in part on displays of violent domination and

humiliation, setting a dangerous precedent, especially for Moji, as we later learn that the rape occurs less than a year after this event.

Given Julius's acknowledgement of Freud's "literary truths" (208), the novel's dream sequences, along with Julius's memories, should serve as red flags, calling us to read deeper and question Julius's conscious thoughts. Midway through the novel Julius has a strange dream that evokes another memory from his childhood. His dream depicts him running a marathon across Lagos, Nigeria with a sister who he doesn't actually have. Julius then remembers that he has no sister, and this realization that he is "an only child," abruptly awakes him (130). He arises in a state of confusion, unsure of where he is, and his barely conscious mind fixates on a sense of loss that he in fact has no siblings. He realizes, "there was no one else in bed. Was I alone because I had no partner, or because my partner was far away?" (130). Julius's waking mind associates the companionship of his dreamed sibling with the sexual companionship signified by the bed and likewise associates the loneliness of being an only child with the absence of a sexual partner. Notably, his use of the gender neutral "partner," rather than "girlfriend" as he does at other points in the novel, indicates his vulnerability and sexual openness in this liminal space between dreams and reality. As many critics of Freud contend, interpreting manifest symbols to uncover the latent messages distorted within a dream is a notoriously unstable practice; however, the memory that follows this dream in Julius's narration intimates both the latent eroticism within the dream and the relationship his unconscious narration establishes between siblinghood and same-sex desire.

The dream of running with a sister leads Julius to a memory that takes place when he was nine, a year before going to the military school. A reflection of the loneliness

implied by the dream, in his consequent memory, nine-year-old Julius sits at home alone after school. With no one else present besides his hard-of-hearing grandmother (on his father's side), he attempts to entertain himself. We are told about the various activities his mother restricted from him as a child. For example, he mentions that if the electricity were not out, "[he] might have watched some television. [He] wasn't permitted to do so on school days," (131). Next, he moves to the kitchen to anguish over his mother's prohibition of Coca-Cola. Julius says, "I liked Coke…But in our house, as with all good things in childhood, Coke was a controlled substance" (132). His desire clashes with his mother's status as the giver of permission. He reflects that "these rules were all [his] father's…The enforcement, though, had fallen to [his] mother, and if [he] resented the rules…[he] did so on [his] mother's account," (133). Here, although his father is responsible for the resented childhood rules, Julius's frustration and resentment targets the female and foreign (because German) authority in his life: his mother.

As his memory reveals, Julius's rebellion continues as he attempts to masturbate for what may be the first time. To further avoid doing his homework (the only activity expected of him by his mother in this memory), he "put a searching hand into [his] shorts. [He] took off [his] shorts and briefs, and removed [his] T-shirt as well. [He] lay on [his] back, and fondled [himself], but had no imagination, had no idea of what to do" (134). At such a young age, this result is not unexpected, but the disappointment sends Julius on a frantic search for a magazine that he remembered seeing years before. Julius reflects, "It must have been something a wayward uncle of mine had left around, a glossy magazine (my memory could not have invented such details), and what it depicted was what I now desperately had to see again" (134). He searches throughout his father's study and under

all the beds in the house but comes up disappointed. What especially interests me about this memory is that Julius never specifies the content of this magazine. It is rare for Julius to bring up images without explicitly disclosing their visual details. When he visits art galleries and museums, he spends pages describing a single painting. He often mentions specific texts and divulges their content liberally, sometimes quoting directly from a source, and when he leaves out a detail, this omission often signals its important, if unconscious, significance to him. Of course, one can assume the magazine is pornographic, but of what kind is left completely to the reader's imagination. Based on further examples of Julius's obfuscation of same-sex desire, it is possible that the material is homoerotic—and if not homoerotic, then perhaps Julius could be just as interested in the images of the men in the magazine (if there are any) as the women. Following Julius's disappointing search, his seemingly instinctual need to defy his mother leads him back to the kitchen to take a bottle of Coke and "[suck] down the contents so fast that [his] throat hurt" (135). This memory captures several layers of Julius's unconscious pathologies. His resentment of his mother's rule enforcement provides deeper insight into the conflict between them, accentuated by the brief mention of his father's absence. His attempt to masturbate connects a rebellious impulse with the sexual energy and loneliness invoked by the dream while his omission of the magazine's content suggests a homoerotic inclination to this sexual energy.

In addition to these selective dreams and memories, Julius has several brief encounters in the narrative present that reveal his unconscious connections between sibling-like relationships and instances of same-sex attraction or homosexual identity. For example, Julius experiences a pair of fraught social interactions with a security guard

from the American Folk Art Museum, including a repulsion from what he perceives to be an explicit homosexual advance. His first encounter with this security guard occurs within the Folk Art Museum, while Julius enjoys an extended and solitary aesthetic experience in an exhibit of John Brewster's paintings. The security guard approaches Julius to tell him that the museum is closing, and Julius reports that "[he] forgot how to speak and simply looked at him" (40). The episode only differs from other displays of Julius's difficulty with social interactions in that the security guard is given such little narrative attention, much like the magazine in his previous memory. The obscurity of this first meeting with the guard indicates Julius's repression of the man, a defense mechanism likely brought on by their second uncomfortable encounter. In other words, the guard is omitted, which becomes especially clear in contrast to the detail Julius provides of a sequence of jarring social encounters that follow his departure from the Folk Art Museum.

Outside the museum, Julius has a brief exchange in the pouring rain with a woman who tries to take his taxi. He refuses, annoyed, and enters the cab in a disoriented and agitated mental state, neglecting to greet the driver. When he eventually comes to his senses, Julius asks, "So, how are you doing, my brother?" (40). "My brother" is a greeting that Julius and other men throughout the novel use to acknowledge their shared African identity or ancestry, but the greeting is also tinged with a claim of racial ownership that Julius often resists. Stephen Miller, discussing the use of this phrase in the novel, similarly argues that "Julius refuses to allow people to lay claims on him because of his race" (199). While I agree that this phrase and its related laying of claim is especially concerned with racial identity, it seems to me that there is a sexual claim at

play as well, which will become more potent as his narrative progresses. This greeting of sibling-like affiliation is met with distaste as the cab driver responds, “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?” Julius thinks, “I wasn’t sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me” (40). Although there does not seem to be evidence of erotic tension in this exchange, the situation with the taxi driver comes to Julius’s mind again when he meets the security guard a second time, an encounter that becomes defined by its more overtly sexual tone.

Shortly after these events, Julius embarks on another wandering episode throughout the city, arriving at a small restaurant with neon signs whose name he conveniently forgets the name. Notably, Julius reports that “The few patrons, it seemed, were all men, and most sat alone” (52-3). This observation perhaps identifies the location as a cruising site—a locus for meeting strangers for spontaneous and anonymous sexual encounters—for gay men while accentuating the isolation of lone men like Julius in New York City. The security guard from the Folk Art Museum sits beside Julius, who doesn’t place him, foreshadowing how Julius will similarly fail to recognize Moji when he first runs into her in a grocery store. As the guard, Kenneth, recalls their first meeting at the museum, Julius acknowledges his familiarity, conceding, “I nodded, faint though the memory was” (53). As with Moji, here Julius struggles to overcome his unconscious repression to summon recognition. Likewise, his arising and discomforting sexual identification with Kenneth gets projected as annoyance at forced ethnic affiliation, which appears to echo his experience with the taxi driver. He says, “Kenneth was, by now, starting to wear on me, and I began to wish he would go away. I thought of the

cabdriver who had driven me home from the Folk Art Museum" (53). Julius associates his erotic discomfort with an aversion to being "claimed" by other diasporic Africans, but the repressed sexual material crystalizes as he realizes that "[Kenneth's] eyes were asking a question. A sexual question" (54). To avoid this erotic dilemma, Julius experiences an abject reaction in his immediate aversion to and departure from the man.

Abjection, coined by Julia Kristeva, refers to the horror or revulsion experienced in a loss of distinction between the Self and some unpleasant or unclean Other (2). Kristeva's abjection here functions to break down Julius's imaginary boundaries around his selfhood, and his intense aversion to a perceived sexual advance from Kenneth is situated in the knowledge of his sameness with Kenneth's unclean, unnatural, and undignified queerness. However, Julius is too progressive to register his reaction as (internalized) homophobia. Again, Julius displaces this aversion, rationalizing his abjection as pity rather than self-disgust. He claims, "I felt a little sorry for him, and the desperation in his prattle," but pity does not invoke such extreme and immediate aversion (54). While Kenneth may embody a kind of mirror that forces Julius to face his own same-sex desire, he also signals to Julius that something within his own affect betrays him as queer. The fact that Kenneth's eyes ask the "sexual question" implies that he sees something in Julius that may answer, "yes." While this realization shocks and horrifies Julius, it should not surprise us. Kenneth's seemingly over sexual advance present considerable risk to Julius's mental state. However, Julius shares other relationships with men that, for their less explicitly erotic nature, allow him some level of psychological safety to unconsciously explore his attraction and queer tendencies.

QUEER ATTRACTIONS, ANXIETIES, AND ACTIONS

Here, it should be noted that at the start of the novel, Julius has a girlfriend, Nadège, who has recently moved across the country to begin a new job. Julius hopes that they will last over long-distance, but the pair rarely communicate, and Nadège eventually finds a new partner. He reflects on their relationship, looking for evidence of its inevitable failure, by sharing a memory in which he accompanied a group from Nadège's church to a nearby immigrant detention center. Each member of the group is assigned an inmate to visit, and Julius himself spends time with a young man from Liberia named Saidu. When he sits across the plexiglass from Saidu, Julius describes him, "He was as good-looking, as striking in appearance as any man I had ever seen. He had delicate cheekbones, a dark, even complexion, and the whites of his eyes were as vivid as his white teeth" (64). The physical description of Saidu is more sexually charged than any other physical description Julius offers throughout the novel. Indeed, the contrast between Saidu's physical appearance and that of a woman with whom Julius later has sex is striking. Julius tinges his description of Saidu's beauty with a slightly effeminate quality, emphasizing his "delicate" features and "even complexion." Just as Julius's dream-sister can be interpreted as a projection of his desire for an ungendered "partner," here Julius often conflates gender distinctions in his representation of physical attributes, feminizing men as he will later defeminize women.

Julius is enthralled by Saidu's face, reflecting his complete absorption into Saidu's story which details how he arrived in the detention center. Saidu shares a narrative of a boy struck by war, loss, and trauma. After losing his entire family in the Liberian civil war, Saidu meandered his way to Europe, settling in Spain to work until he

saved enough money to immigrate to the United States, only to be detained for over two years. For almost six pages, Julius reports Saidu's story uninterrupted, but exactly half-way through, his voice interjects, "I wondered, naturally, as Saidu told this story, whether I believed him or not, whether it wasn't more likely that he had been a soldier. He had, after all, had months to embellish the details, to perfect his claim of being an innocent refugee" (67). Julius's seemingly unwarranted suspicion warns of his own narrative deception. Julius's entire narrative is an effort at "perfect[ing] his claim" of being a progressive, sophisticated, and detached cosmopolitan, despite his violent and complicated history, but he also continues, in this very episode, to lie to both Saidu and Nadège. Indeed, as their time together comes to an end, Saidu asks Julius to come visit him again, and Julius reports: "I said that I would, but never did" (70). The memory shifts to the aftermath of his visit with Saidu in which he recounts the experience to Nadège on the bus ride home. He reflects, "Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story. I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself" (70). Again, Julius draws our attention to the artificial mask that he curates for others, lulling us into the false perception that his narration, at least, is honest.

Saidu's name uncannily resembles that of another major character, Dr. Saito, who is associated with Julius's anxieties about queerness as well as his oedipal dysfunctions. As we have seen, Julius's problematic biological family plays a decisive role in the trauma that he experiences in his life. While his sexual and queer aversions find resonance in anxieties about siblinghood, his oedipal dysfunctions arise in connections with older figures who operate as unconscious correctives for his relationships with his

mother/grandmother and father. First, we meet Dr. Saito, a former professor and close friend who seems to fill the role of Julius's absent father. Dr. Saito survived Japanese internment camps during World War Two and, crucially, is openly gay. Long before Julius reveals Dr. Saito's sexual orientation, he notes that "[he] felt [he] had more in common with [Saito] than with the people who happened to be related to [him]" (10). He never elaborates on the basis for their commonality beyond a shared intellectualism or perhaps a passion for literature; however, the narrative reveal of Saito's sexual orientation is meaningful. Before Julius goes to visit him for the first time in the narrative, he notes that Dr. Saito "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" (9). As Saito's sexual orientation and declining health become the two most prominent aspects of his character, the possibility that what he saw in Julius was a shared sexual deviance becomes more and more likely.

During a later visit to Dr. Saito, Julius reads to the aging man from a newspaper about contemporary political developments in civil unions for same-sex couples. As the news story develops and Saito begins to ruminate on such social advancements, Julius dissociates from the conversation, noting, "I became like one who was no longer there," "I…fully under[stood] the printed words but without engaging with them," and "we discussed the story, and that, too, I did at a certain distance" (171). Julius's dissociation signifies an obvious discomfort with discussing Saito's homosexual identity that is further accentuated in his inability to ask questions of his former professor that he clearly wants to ask. Julius notes that Saito has no discomfort discussing his sexual orientation, but Julius "wish[es] [he] had asked what [Saito's] late partner's name was…But in spite

of [himself], unable to be fully present to [their] conversation, [he] could not lead it in this new direction" (172). Saito's name recalls Saidu, and the former's deceased partner remains unnamed in another instance of Julius's convenient omissions, such as the name of the diner where he meets Kenneth, the details of the magazine in his childhood memory, and the name of his best friend whom he only ever refers to as "my friend." Julius recognizes that Dr. Saito noticed, "perhaps, that my attention was flagging, and he said, as if he were waking someone who had fallen asleep, You're still young, Julius. You must be careful about closing too many doors" (172). Saito is not oblivious to Julius's dissociation from a discussion about homosexuality, and, like Kenneth, he seems to see something in Julius that Julius either refuses to or cannot see himself. His aversion to Saito's comment is clear as he ponders, "I had no idea what he was talking about," and immediately shifts to a four-page digression about the bedbugs that plague Saito's apartment (172). Julius's avoidant interiority signals his inability to discuss same-sex attraction, and his aversion surfaces as anxieties about the potential health risks of homosexuality displaced onto the bedbugs.

The bedbugs, and Julius's several digressions about them, serve a vital function in the text. Rebecca Clark argues that the bedbugs reflect Julius himself, labeling him "a narrative parasite…[that] uses others for story making…feeding off of their unacknowledged personal trauma" (192). I find Clark's reading incredibly convincing, but Cole also presents a long unacknowledged connection between the bedbugs and the pejorative label of "buggery" as a term for homosexuality. Julius's obsession with the bedbugs displaces his anxieties toward the danger of queer sexuality, namely the potential of contracting HIV. Just as Saito calls out his dissociation, Julius notes that

“The bedbugs were on my mind” (172). Following his visit with Dr. Saito, Julius’s narration fixates on bedbugs as an association to HIV/AIDS. Although his narration specifically differentiates the bugs from AIDS in their non-lethal basis, his extended aside draws many unintentional parallels. He notes that “They [are] hard to fumigate into oblivion, and their eggs [are] almost impossible to kill,” mirroring the contemporary state of HIV treatment (173). The virus is impossible to kill or cure; however, antiretroviral treatments will reduce the amount of the virus in the blood to what is known as an “undetectable” status, similar to how Julius later describes bedbugs as “visible only in speech” (173). Julius states that bedbugs do not “discriminate on the basis of social class and, for that reason, [are] embarrassing,” calling attention to the universality of HIV and the absurdity of its immediate, shaming attribution to specified social groups (173). The most obvious example of the bedbugs as an analogy for HIV is the shared site of transmission: the bed. Both infections disrupt the sanctity and romance of the bed as a space of rest and desire. Additionally, Dr. Saito calls attention to the bite of the bugs saying that he is “being eaten up by the little creatures….They bite. Like this, one, two, three; breakfast, lunch, and dinner, along your arm” (168). His reference to impressions upon his skin, signifying the infestation of the bugs, mirrors Kaposi sarcoma lesions or cancerous skin abrasions symptomatic of someone who has progressed from HIV to AIDS. From Dr. Saito’s first mention of the bugs, Julius becomes distracted. His fixation on bedbugs during and after this encounter works to trivialize his potentially dangerous identification with homosexuality displacing his anxieties about HIV onto a scientific interest in—even silly paranoia of—the bugs.

While Julius establishes that Dr. Saito is in declining health due to cancer (and not HIV or AIDS-related diseases), Julius's last encounter with the professor comes after the bedbug episode and represents a man on the brink of death, with an appearance that could unconsciously be conflated with another illness. Dr. Saito is "tiny and white and weaker than [Julius] had ever seen him. His eyes, though they were rheumy and almost closed, were the only part of him that seemed fully there" (179). Julius describes his old mentor quite strikingly as a fading AIDS patient, and only several weeks later, Dr. Saito does die. Their last encounter discomforts Julius so much that his paradoxical fears of intimacy and abandonment lead him to neglect visiting Saito again before his death. Thematically, homosexuality becomes further associated with disease, death, and loss beyond the bedbug metaphor, and Julius once again loses a father figure.

While Julius's relationship with Saito seeks to replace his own absent father, an intimate encounter with a middle-aged woman in Belgium might be read as an unconscious attempt to reconcile the generational estrangements between himself, his mother, and his grandmother. Nearly a fourth of the novel covers Julius's trip to Brussels, where he uses all three weeks of his accumulated vacation time to search for his grandmother (on his mother's side), his oma. Only a few pages before he announces this decision, his rumination on his mother's childhood in Germany reveals that, in 1945, "[his] oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it" (80). Here, Julius implies that his mother is a product of rape, "a world that, in some odd way, [he] was the unaware continuation of" (80). Upon rereading, Julius's acknowledgement of his grandmother's

likely rape stands out as an overlooked tell of his own violent actions, but it also calls us to consider the echoes of generational trauma suffered by Julius's family. Just as his own father is all but absent from his narrative, Julius knows nothing of his maternal grandfather aside from the likelihood that he was a rapist. Julius's mother, born of this assault and estranged from her own mother, marries and bears Julius with a man who remains absent from the child's life. Finally, Julius separates himself from his mother and their life in Nigeria just as she had fled her mother and life in Germany. Julius's flight indicates his avoidance of not only familial trauma but also his own reenactment of the violence wrought upon his oma by raping Moji. Julius's reflection on his oma's rape provides additional context to what was originally a surprising decision to travel to Brussels. We know little about his grandmother aside from a brief memory of her visiting him in Nigeria as a child, but the revelation of her rape suggests that Julius's attempt to find her may be an unconscious effort to redeem himself of his assault against Moji.

Julius's search for his grandmother unsurprisingly produces no results, but he does experience a level of erotic freedom in Belgium that he is not able to have elsewhere, leading to the only sexual encounter dramatized in the novel. While in "a café in Grand Sablon one afternoon," Julius takes notice of a fellow customer: "…a middle-aged tourist who,…was scrutinizing a map….she looked pallid, and her gray hair caught the light with a dull shine" (108). This tourist—not precisely masculine but certainly not conventionally feminine—is juxtaposed with the waitress serving Julius: a "tall girl who…had a Parisian rather than Bruxelloise affect….She was about twenty-two or twenty-five,…with heavy-lidded eyes and a winning smile." As Julius describes the waitress, a much younger and more traditionally feminine woman, he is surprised by

what he perceives to be a flirtatious advance. She sits with him to have a conversation, yet Julius is “uninterested,” and his responses are “polite and even a little curt” (109). The café is empty, and one could reasonably assume that the waitress, bored, is simply being friendly, passing the time. However, Julius, as in his encounter with Kenneth, is instinctively averse to what he deems an erotic advance. Whereas Kenneth’s overt masculinity triggers Julius’s anxiety over same-sex desire, the waitress’s conventional femininity and beauty does nothing for him sexually. In contrast, the older, defeminized tourist draws him in, avoiding his unconscious distaste for traditional forms of both masculinity and femininity, even as her “gray hair” and “pallid” skin could make her serve as a double for the grandmother he seeks.

As Julius and the tourist pay their bills, he continues to describe her with subdued language, including “pallid,” “heavy circles around her eyes,” “kind smile,” and “quiet friendliness” (109). Leaving the café at the same time, the pair brave the pouring rain together under Julius’s umbrella, and the tourist invites him back to her hotel for a drink. Julius follows her to her room, and the resulting anonymous sexual encounter immediately evokes the queer act of *cruising*. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner describes cruising as follows:

“When gay men or lesbians cruise, when they develop a love of strangers, they directly eroticize participation in the public world of their privacy. Contrary to myth, what one relishes in loving strangers is not mere anonymity, nor meaningless release. It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which one’s sexuality finds an answering resonance not just in one other, but in a world of others.” (179)

Julius's encounter with the tourist provides not only an intimate interpersonal connection but also an entry point to a sexual community. By participating in this historically queer communal practice, Julius achieves a level of intersubjective connection that he normally reserves for aesthetic encounters, such as his sporadic visits to art museums or his attendance at a Mahler concert in Carnegie Hall in the final chapter. But, like those aesthetic experiences, his pleasure is truncated; though this displeasure arises from within himself whereas his aesthetic experiences are most often interrupted by outside forces.

The act of cruising involves anonymity, public encounter, and vague sexual invitation. Each of these characteristics presents itself in Julius's encounter with the tourist. The pair only exchange names after they have sex, with Julius both forgetting her name and giving a false name for himself. They happen upon each other in the public café, and the sexual invitation is expressed wordlessly, through provocative glances and a gentle hand on the back. The tourist's physical description as "gray," "thick," and "pliant," especially in contrast to the pretty waitress, highlights a disinclination for conventional femininity and heterosexual attraction. More specifically, by engaging in consensual sex with an older, defeminized woman, Julius unconsciously attempts to correct the violence done to his oma and redeem his own sexual transgression. Within Shelden's framework, this act of healing would be possible with a traditionalist use of love as a thematic force of unification; however, Cole's contemporary approach "give[s] up on the possibility of union, completion, or coherence…resist[s] the temptation to be seduced by the illusory promise…of amorous union" (Shelden 9). Rather than allow

Julius the power to erase these wrongs, Cole queers this sexual act to disrupt Julius's refusal of intersubjectivity and trouble his repressive tendencies.

Having sex with the tourist serves two functions for Julius's unconscious: redemption for violent sexual transgressions—both his own and those against his grandmother—and a displacement of homoerotic desire onto a defeminized woman. Julius notes that "best of all,…had been *her* pleasure," indicating a distinct *lack* of pleasurable achievement for himself (111 my emphasis). Upon leaving the encounter, Julius notes, "To my lightness and gratitude was added a faint sorrow," revealing not only a lack of pleasure but also an actual dissatisfaction in his achievement of displaced desire rather than what may be possible through a purely homoerotic encounter (111). This inherently generative cruising act takes on an especially deconstructive form when read through Shelden's framework of negative love. Cruising, as a historically queer, erotic practice, embodies the disunity of contemporary love that is the focus of Shelden's work. Cruising creates counterpublics for pleasure-seeking among groups excluded from normative sexual culture while also emphasizing the antisocial aspects of eroticism in the act's necessity for anonymity and subtlety. Julius's encounter with the tourist captures this antisocial tendency while emphasizing his inability to experience pure pleasure.

SIBLINGHOOD AND SAME-SEX DESIRE

Whereas the tourist woman and Dr. Saito become projections of Julius's parental absences and generational trauma, his queer erotic anxieties become most clear in his friendships with men, which are often characterized by some level of racialized brotherhood. Julius is an only child; therefore, he never developed through the expected phases of sibling rivalry or experienced the trauma of being usurped for his parents' affections. This lack creates what some psychoanalysts refer to as "the dilemma of the only child."[1] Juliet Mitchell argues that the absence of siblings stymies the only child's psychosexual development, forcing them into a state of constant expectancy, always awaiting or dreading the arrival of the one who will dethrone them ("Why Siblings?"). The psychological effects on Julius of being an only child seem to conflate with his ignored queer desires, aligning the taboo of homosexuality with the ultimate taboo of incest. The residual effects of Julius's sibling expectancy surface in his dream of an imagined sister and in another, later dream sequence in which his mother calls his ex-girlfriend, Nadège, his sister (177). In this dream sequence, Julius's mother and Nadège stand together among the ruins of a bombed-out market in Basra. In the dream, Nadège says, "What is worse than the bombs?...Bedbugs!" (177). Through the bedbug's prior association with queer sexuality, Julius's dream seems to be reporting his superego's admonition that homosexual desire, perhaps even more than violence, is the ultimate shame. Before Julius can respond, his mother says, "Listen to your sister, Julius" (177).

[1] For an explanation of the title, "the dilemma of the only child," see the article of the same name by Alissa D. Eischens.

Nadège, with whom Julius has an erotic past, becomes both the long-awaited sibling and the voice of the superego, policing Julius's queer sexuality.

Beyond the overt dream sequences, more subtle evidence of this conflation between queer desire and siblinghood arises in Julius's inconsistent ambivalence to the phrase "my brother." As we have seen, his use of the phrase "my brother" results in a tense encounter with the taxi driver outside the Folk Art Museum, but a conversation with an African American postal worker produces similar results. Noticing that Julius is African, the postal worker, Terry, proceeds to spark a conversation about the spiritual situations of Africans and African Americans before reciting his original poetry and calling him "Brother Julius" (186-8). To all this, Julius exhibits obvious discomfort and makes "a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future" (188). Julius's reactions to the taxi driver, Terry, and the security guard, Kenneth, all suggest an instinctive resistance to the racial and sexual claims underlying the title "brother." However, Julius's disdain for these men and their racial, sexual expectations contradicts those times when he proceeds to lay similar claims on other men.

The first of these reverse interactions takes place in Brussels, where Julius wanders into a local Internet café for a feeble attempt to locate his grandmother. Instead, he has his first meeting with the manager of the café, Farouq. Upon first seeing Farouq, Julius describes him with language that vaguely suggests attraction saying, "The man behind the counter must have been in his early thirties. He was clean-shaven, with a lean, pleasant face and lank black hair" (101). This description, while rather mild compared to the one he provides for Saidu in the immigrant detention center, invites the reader to reassess Julius's eventual return to the café to check his email. He arguably seems much

more intent to connect with Farouq, saying, "But this time, as I left, I surprised him by asking for his name, in English. Farouq, he said. I introduced myself, shaking his hand, and added: How are you doing, my brother?" (101). Unlike his previous aversions to the familiarity implied by the phrase, he boldly lays his claim on Farouq. After leaving the Internet café this time, Julius "wonder[s] how this aggressive familiarity had struck [Farouq]. [He] wonder[s], also, why [he] had said it" (102). Julius himself, unsure why he so "aggressively" forces this connection with Farouq, obfuscates his intent, consistent with his narrative obfuscation of queer desire. As his relationship with Farouq develops, both his attraction to the other man and his ambivalence about their connection grow. Julius has a brief second encounter with Farouq before the chapter closes, but the intrigue surrounding Farouq apparently surfaces as misgivings over his radical political ideals (107). Notably, this disruption in Julius and Farouq's connection leads directly to the aforementioned sexual encounter with the tourist, suggesting his need to release libidinal energies activated by his attraction to Farouq.

The lingering disappointment of Julius's sexual encounter with the tourist leads him to a more sustained pursuit of Farouq's company. Farouq invites him out for drinks to continue their discussions of political philosophy. The ensuing evening of conversation between the pair and Farouq's friend, Khalil, is ripe for the study of Cole's explorations of political philosophy, African diasporic identity, and globalism; however, here I want to focus on the subtle evidence of queerness and attraction that arise throughout their dialogue. After Farouq introduces Julius to Khalil as "more than a customer," the evening begins with introductory pleasantries (117). Julius congratulates Khalil on his recent marriage, and asks Farouq if he is married, to which "They both laughed, and [Farouq]

shook his head and said, Not yet" (117). This response indicates a back story, but Cole leaves it to the imagination, moving the conversation quickly to political ideologies. Is Farouq a womanizer? Is he, like Julius, averse to romantic connection? Is he queer and therefore only recently allowed the right to marry in Belgium? Such questions remain unanswered, but perhaps the indication that Farouq may be "available" propels the growing tension in their conversation as, in Edward Comentale's words, their discussion "turns brittle" over their disagreements "about U.S. imperialism and its terrorist backlash" (108).

As their argument turns heated, Julius makes a connection that he "must have been subconsciously working" through since he met Farouq (121). He suddenly realizes that Farouq resembles Robert De Niro in his role as a young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather II*, describing him saying "The straight, thin, black eyebrows, the rubbery expression, the smile that seemed a mask for skepticism or shyness, and the lean handsomeness, too" (121). The connection is telling, as the comparison to the handsome and charismatic De Niro all but admits attraction. The recognition continues to resonate as he thinks "once I saw it, it was impossible not to be incessantly drawn into the comparison, or be distracted by it,…Perhaps this is why, when I first met Farouq, I had been taken aback. I had subconsciously overinterpreted his smile, connecting his face to another's, reading it as a face to be liked and feared" (121). Julius becomes aware that his unconscious mind has betrayed him, and we may more accurately read Farouq's face as one to be attracted to and, therefore, afraid of. The comparison to De Niro's version of Vito highlights the hybridity of gender presentation that originally lulls Julius into a comfortable attraction, allowing him to play with the idea of connecting deeply with this

person. De Niro's Vito, while certainly masculine as a ruthless gangster and patriarchal figure has a much more effeminate affect than when he is played by Marlon Brando as an older iteration of the character. As a young Corleone, De Niro is slender, beautiful, and soft-spoken with sharp facial features and an even complexion, recalling Julius's description of Saidu, "as good-looking, as striking in appearance as any man [he] had ever seen" (64). As we shift to Julius's most meaningful same-sex relationship, it will become clear that the fondness and fear that characterize Julius's attraction to Farouq quite accurately reflect his attitudes toward sexuality, queerness, and connection more generally.

Perhaps one of the most significant, because subtly rendered, same-sex connection that Julius has in the novel is with a "friend" who happens to be the only recurring character without a name, a companion in New York who is only referred to as "my friend." This friendship generally functions as a sublimation—redirection of deviant sexual energies to more productive, "higher" goals—of erotic energy, primarily working to reframe Julius's homoerotic attraction as a stable, mutually beneficial friendship. The sublime friendship, in addition to rationalizing queer sexuality, also works to bolster Julius's repression of his sexual trauma.

When we first meet the friend early in the novel, he offers Julius a psychological reprieve from a potentially dangerous moment of surfacing repressed experience. The thought of an upcoming phone conversation with Nadège, who has recently moved across the country, on the phone causes Julius to note the intense pain of their obvious and unsurprising breaking apart (24). Julius's thoughts are interrupted by the approach of feminist protesters outside his building. He and his neighbors "[lean] out their windows"

and "[crane their] necks toward Amsterdam Avenue" (22). Julius is interested in these "young women" and their "chanting" until their protest shifts from ambiguous platitudes about power to the overtly feminist, "*Women's bodies, women's lives, we will not be terrorized*," with its implicit reference to bodily autonomy and sexual violence. Immediately following this chant, Julius "shut[s] the window," and his narration refocuses, suppressing the protester's chants to reflect on a pleasant memory of his unnamed friend. The resulting episode introduces the reader to "a young professor in the Earth Sciences Department…[whose] interests [are] broader than his professional specialty suggest[s]" (23). Julius is attracted to the man's intellect and experience, his expert appreciation of jazz, and his parental affections. Julius experiences obvious pleasure in divulging this relationship; however, "These pleasant thoughts were interrupted by a presentiment of the conversation [he] would have that evening with Nadège" (24). Upon rereading, we understand that the combination of Julius's emotional pain from his strained conversation with Nadège and the diction of the feminist chants outside his window draws Julius dangerously close to recalling his repressed violence toward Moji. To save himself from this catastrophic memory he must immerse himself in the libidinal pleasure of his relationship with his friend and their encounter earlier in the day. This sublimation serves to protect Julius from repressed trauma while achieving a form of intersubjective pleasure denied by Nadège's distance.

Julius's friend becomes a more present figure as the narrative progresses. Eventually, Julius recounts a picnic in Central Park with the friend, the friend's new girlfriend, and, surprisingly, Moji. The picnic occurs after Julius runs into Moji but before she confronts him about the rape, suggesting that his choice of her as his

companion was likely a spontaneous decision, made to avoid the embarrassment and loneliness of being a third wheel on his friend's date. The newly formed group discuss a range of topics from climate change to Julius's patients, but the friend's testimony about his personal history offers a notable juxtaposition to Julius's relationship to trauma. Rather than avoiding his problematic past, the friend openly shares it past with the group. He reveals a family history of drug addiction, promiscuity, and suicidal action, but once his story is complete, Julius notes that "having spoken, he had a peaceful expression on his face" (203). In his healthy capacity to face and process his traumatic experiences, the friend serves as a foil for Julius, who is unable to face the fact that he raped the woman sitting next to him nor the depth of his feelings for man in front of him. Julius envies the peace his friend experiences by facing his trauma. Throughout the picnic, Julius's contribution to the conversation is an extension of his narrative voice throughout the book, as he digresses into lengthy ruminations on the state of man or the environment, sharing stories of his patients' trauma rather than anything substantial about himself.

The contrast between Julius and his friend deepens as Julius notes his friend's easy interaction with his new girlfriend, Lise-Anne, compared to the obscure—at least to Julius at the moment—tension with Moji. Julius's description of his friend's new relationship additionally exhibits a feeling of ownership over the friend. He notes that "[Lise-Anne] already understood him, which was more than could be said for his last several girlfriends" (197). Julius notes his friend's past infidelity and alludes to sexual promiscuity that casts doubt on this new relationship. After the friend shares about his past, Julius notes that "[he] knew the story," showcasing an deeper familiarity with the friend relative to the women in the scene (203). The episode culminates with Julius

displacing his sexual energies onto the present women as well as the absent Nadège. He claims, "Lise-Anne was immediately likeable. In contrast, I was struck by Moji's brittleness, the defensiveness she seemed to have so readily at hand….But I found it appealing,…I suddenly imagined us together in a sexual situation. She was no Nadège; this attraction was of a different valency" (203). The friend serves as a catalyst for libidinal energy that must be reassociated with women in order to remain normalized, so Julius redirects his desires to the most relevant feminine figures, focusing on Moji—the most available. But, it is also worth noting that this comparison between all three women allows him to avoid commitment and attraction to any one of them. Indeed, they are all conveniently unavailable as Moji, too, has a boyfriend. This fact allows Julius to pose his attraction to the women as a hypothetical while using them as a kind of veil to conceal his possibly real desire for his friend. His repressed prior violence towards Moji surfaces as the bizarre "brittleness" that he both "found appealing" and is unsure that he can "term it attraction" (203). Julius must redirect libidinal energies away from his friend in order to maintain the sublimated, productive friendship and avoid his sexual discomfort. However, when directed at Moji, his sexual appetite encounters another mental block in the form of his repressed trauma, leaving him disconcerted for the duration of their picnic.

Notably, after Julius's final visit with Dr. Saito, which he leaves feeling so disconcerted over the latter's physical and mental state, Julius seeks out his unnamed friend for comfort. Julius's friend offers a new perspective on Dr. Saito's final words, which Julius interprets as the nonsense of a dying man, lamenting Saito's declining mental state. Saito's final words to Julius are, "I don't know what you do in Africa, but I

must say, I'm ready to go into the forest. I am ready to go in. It is time for me to enter the forest and lie down, and let the lions come for me" (179). Julius views Saito's words as the ramblings of a declining mind, which saddens and frustrates him as he "had hoped that, even as [Saito's] body broke down, that intricate mind of his, one of the best [Julius had] ever known, would soldier on" (180). In response to this, the friend challenges him, saying "I wonder why so many people view sickness as a moral test. It has nothing to do with morals or grace. It's a physical test, and usually we lose" (180). The friend's more empathetic view of Saito's decline highlights Julius's anxieties about death and loss, sourcing from the original abandonment of his father. Julius's unconscious association of mental stability with moral and ethical rightness suggests his own fear of the potential danger to his mind given his own transgressions. Nevertheless, the friend's presence and reassurance ease Julius's anxieties, allowing him to be fully present for his friend's rumination on death which further highlights his psychological profile as a narrative foil to Julius's.

The friend reinterprets Saito's words about walking into the forest as a justified desire for autonomy and dignity in death, which inspires him to reflect on his personal philosophies about suicide and his plans for the end of his own life. His later comparison of this desire for a dignified death over a slow, painful one to "suicide ideation" situates his contemplation as an inward expression of the death drive, or the natural instinct toward death (182). Julius's narrative distance from the friend's monologue indicates his parallel distance from the repetition compulsion of traumatic experiences traditionally associated with the death drive. Generally, pathologies like Moji's (as we will review shortly) or the friend's result in reliving traumatic experiences, which indicate signs that

the death drive is moving toward a state of non-existence. Julius consistently represses his traumatic experiences and deviant impulses, unlike Moji and the friend who remember, repeat, and divulge their traumas.

Although the friend is never explicitly associated with the recurring racial and sexual identifier "my brother," I argue that, like his name, Julius's suppresses this sibling-like connection. The friend's narrative proximity to Moji—via their group picnic and a later episode that works to catalyze Julius's revelation of the rape—places him in an erotic triangle with Julius and Moji that overlaps with another triangle, a triangle which substitutes the friend for Moji's brother, Dayo. When Julius first reencounters Moji in the narrative present, a little over halfway through the novel, he does not recognize her. When she finally introduces herself, Julius's memory of her is tied to her brother, Dayo, with whom he was once friends. As we puzzle together the disparately placed recollections of the period surrounding Julius's rape of Moji, it becomes clear that Dayo Kasali, like the friend, is an erotic catalyst. His identification of Moji with Dayo sends Julius into a brief recollection of his friendship with the brother. The two boys had been close friends in the early years of military school, but Dayo had transferred to a private school later in their careers. Julius notes that their "friendship faded" due to the distance, but "About a year later, [he'd] met [Dayo] at some tennis courts in Apapa. He was with a girl, playing the man-about-town, and [their] conversation was stilted" (157). The awkwardness that Julius feels in their encounter is not initially odd, but Julius's thoughts about Dayo's girlfriend beg further interrogation. Julius describes her saying, "his girlfriend had on a white polo shirt and tight shorts, and looked bored, and was, as such, the instant object of my envy. That I had my own girlfriend didn't matter. Dayo's girl

struck me as impossibly cool" (157). The questions that arise here are reminiscent of those surrounding the pornographic magazine from Julius's earlier memory. Is Julius envious of Dayo or of Dayo's girlfriend? Does he want her, or does he want *to be* her? Not long after their meeting at the tennis court, Julius attends a party at Dayo's house, "a wild one, with lots of drinking" (157). Although the detail does not seem necessary, Julius adds that "The girl wasn't there by that point—they'd split up—and I had split up with my girl, too" (157). As we later surmise, this is the party where Julius rapes Moji. Dayo sits at the pinnacle of two triangles with Julius—one including his ex-girlfriend and one including his sister. If we consider Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's hypothesis of "the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" and her discussion of erotic triangles theorizing that "the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved," we must address the potentially erotic energy between Julius and Dayo and its relationship to Julius's rape of Moji (1, 21). In the hypermasculine family and academic environments of Julius's childhood and teenage years, it is possible to read his assault on Moji as a violent response to or rebellion against surfacing queer erotic feelings for Dayo. This possibility could account for the ever-present clustering throughout the novel of Julius's discomforts with queerness, sexuality, the claims of "brothers," and, finally, with Moji herself. These intertwining aversions propel Julius's narrative, but they additionally coalesce to uncover the climactic revelation of Moji's rape to the reader.

THE REVELATION OF THE RAPE

The three core narrative signifiers of homosexuality—the friend, Dr. Saito, and bedbugs as a symbol for HIV/AIDS—notably coalesce into an epiphany that launches Julius's retelling of Moji's confrontation, a scene that actually occurs before he divulges it to the reader. Julius approaches his apartment building to find his neighbor, Seth, dumping two mattresses outside. Seth explains that the mattresses "have been invaded by bedbugs" before asking Julius if he has noticed any in his apartment. Julius hasn't; however, he then remembers that "before he left about two weeks earlier, [his] friend had mentioned trying to rid his place of them" (242). This memory leads Julius to think about the circumstance of his friend leaving New York City for the University of Chicago and his "surprise" that Lise-Anne, "the new girlfriend" had gone along (242). The conscious culmination of bedbugs as a signifier of Dr. Saito, disease, death, and the fresh loss of his friend allows Julius a realization: "…it was at that particular moment, speaking with Seth in the front of the infected mattresses, that I had an inkling of how acutely I would feel the absence of my friend" (242-43). Bedbugs and the discarded, infected mattresses, as a locus of displaced anxieties toward queer sexuality, act as a catalyst for Julius to realize the significance of his relationship with the friend. Without the friend, Julius lacks a libidinal relationship to sublimate his queer desire, and, therefore, loses his ability to achieve displaced pleasure and avoid his repressed traumatic material: the rape as a reaction to his own queerness. Immediately, his realization of this loss leads him to recount Moji's confrontation, which had chronologically occurred before his encounter with Seth and the infested mattresses but had been suppressed within the narrative itself.

Before turning to the moment of Moji's accusation, I want to spend more time with Moji herself. When he first encounters her in a grocery store, Julius is unable to identify Moji, an especially odd lapse of memory considering his often-concrete recall regarding other people in his life, cultural histories, artwork, and academic knowledge. With our belated awareness of Julius and Moji's past, their chance meeting takes on a new life. Julius prefaces the encounter with a rumination on memory, on the discontinuity of recollection before saying, "The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa" (156). The precise use of "*something* or someone" is especially telling, referring early to the rape itself (my emphasis). Julius's use of "Africa" in this context additionally others the continent and his past there in a way that reflects his discomfort with racial claims on his identity. This preface to their encounter quite blatantly reports that he has repressed Moji, and, though he continues not to recognize her, the shadows of their violent history begin to surface. He reports that "An old friend came to me…or rather an acquaintance whom *memory now made convenient* to think of as a friend" (156 my emphasis). Julius's attribution of friendship serves to shadow the traumatic violence that this encounter with Moji recalls. However, the true repressed violence of their relationship reassociated as a passing irritation and discomfort with an unwarranted social interaction. Moji's bright smile and jocular chiding are met with a "lighthearted apology" for not recognizing her, "mask[ing] the irritation [Julius] suddenly felt" (156). Not only does Julius become preoccupied with his irritations but also he digresses into a brief recollection of Moji's brother, the possible source of Julius's lust, triangular catalyst for his rape of the sister, and indication of his erotic ambivalence toward siblinghood. Julius continues to perform

nervous social cues of impatience in hopes of ending the interaction and, later, again refers to Moji's marveling at their chance meeting as an irritation (158, 159). Julius's negative feelings of annoyance and impatience toward Moji and this encounter serve to mask the surfacing memories of his past violence toward her as well as the feelings for her brother that inspired the violence. Until the narrative uncovers this violence later in the novel, the displacement effectively hides Julius's assault and his attraction to Dayo.

When Moji later confronts Julius about his attack, his narration suppresses both her confrontation and his response to this revelation as Julius refocuses from the encounter to the landscape. He reports her words, appropriating the story in the way he does with every other character or history throughout his narration—a style that Clark describes as parasitic paralleling the bedbugs (Clark 185). Notably, Moji says that "her brother Dayo knew that these things had happened" but never discussed or did anything about it (245). Julius reports her recollection of the rape in third person, but after Moji shifts from the actual rape to the aftermath, he allows her some narrative autonomy with direct quotation:

"You'll say nothing, she said. I know you'll say nothing. I'm just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed. I know that. Look, bitterness has been eating away at me all this time, because this was so long ago, and it's my word against yours, and you'll say it was consensual, or that it never even happened at all. I have anticipated all your possible answers. This is why I've told no one, not even my boyfriend. But he sees through you anyway, you, the psychiatrist, the know-it-all…I don't think you've changed at all, Julius. Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them…But will you say something now? Will you say something?" (245)

Up until now, Julius has likely deceived his reader into accepting the persona that Moji so expertly cuts through. Even while granting Moji some agency through the first person, Julius trivializes her account with his interjections that "Moji went on in this vein for what was probably six or seven minutes," that "Moji's voice…had taken on a strained, shattered tone, as if she were going hoarse," and that "[He] thought she would begin to cry, but to [his] relief, she didn't" (244, 245, 246). Julius's discomfort with the potential for Moji to cry signifies that her emotional response, even more than her demand, "will you say something now?" would demand a response from him. Although he reports Moji's complete recollection, he does not respond to her accusation, and he exhibits no sign of either believing her account or internalizing his own recollection of the event as he immediately refocuses on the "ris[ing] sun" and "the river gleam[ing] like aluminum roofing" (246). Rather than spending any more time with Moji or her accusation, Julius reflects on a historical aside about Nietzsche that he misremembers in much the same way that he misremembers Moji in the grocery store, conveniently as a friend rather than an acquaintance. He recounts a story in which a young Nietzsche held a hot coal in his hand to prove a point about pain to his schoolmates, an anecdote that prioritizes masculinity and power, recalling Julius's time in the military school. Julius notes that "several days afterward," he looks up the Nietzsche story only to find that his subconscious input a hot coal where Nietzsche had actually used a cluster of lit matches (246). This aside ends the chapter and progresses the narrative beyond Moji, but it also leaves with a parallel. Julius proves just how untrustworthy his memory is and that, like Nietzsche, he will carry "the resulting scar with him for the rest of his life" (246).

The rape that Moji recounts to Julius produces asymmetrical, mutually traumatic effects. Moji identifies Julius's psychic reaction as a form of repression in saying, "[he] had acted like [he] knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when [they] met again." However, she also identifies her own psychic pathology in response to the trauma: "…denial had not been possible for her. Indeed, [Julius] had been ever present in her life, like a stain or a scar, and she had thought of [him], either fleetingly or in extended agony, for almost every day of her adult life" (244). Moji experiences repetition compulsion—the ongoing repetition of traumatic events with subconscious intentions of dealing with the trauma—of both Julius and the violence he once enacted upon her. Moji's traumatic response juxtaposes and accentuates Julius's intense repression. Her detailed memory of the event, her ongoing agony, and her firm belief in the truth of her claim magnify and set into relief Julius's inability to remember, experience, or feel pain or guilt. This contrast calls into question the entire novel thus far. How much of Julius's narration is mere distraction? How much is misremembered and/or selectively curated? How are his relationships and other social encounters misrepresented to preserve his constructed self-image? Moji's revelation offers a lens through which to view the narration as a repressive journey with Julius's assault acting as the traumatic locus of the novel's negative approach to love. The recounting of the rape reveals Julius's repression as the primary force of his narrative, shaping both Julius's sexuality and his relationships. Though, in the end, as the dream-Nadège states, the bedbugs are worse than the bombs. Julius's violence can make it out of the narrative, but his queerness remains uncovered, begging us to dig further beneath the surface of the text.

Using Moji's revelation of Julius's sexual assault as a lens through which to read his repressive storytelling uncovers a framework for his seemingly aimless wanderings. Julius's subconscious is constantly at work, shielding him from the surfacing repressed material of his traumatic past as well as his dissociative queer erotic desire. When read through this lens, Julius loses agency as the storyteller, and the text itself reapportions narrative significance. Minor characters and plot developments, such as Julius's encounter with the Folk Art Museum's security guard, take on new interpretive power in helping us to understand Julius's mental, emotional pathology. The novel's only sexual encounter, a seemingly fleeting moment in the narrative, becomes a locus for Cole's disunification of love and eroticism through queer, antisocial cruising. Dr. Saito takes on an even more nuanced position as Julius's symbolic father figure but also the embodiment of his homoerotic fears and anxieties. Julius's unnamed friend, previously a passing character who merely enabled plot development, becomes central to Julius's erotic discomforts, catalyzing the penultimate disruption of his repressive forces subduing Moji's confrontation. As a work reflective of Shelden's understanding of love as a queer, disunifying, and dysfunctional force, a persistent psychoanalytic reading of *Open City* uncovers merely one side of the literary, theoretical polyhedron of its narrative. *Open City*, more than many traditional novels, presents endless opportunity for both aesthetic appreciation and theoretical deconstruction, claiming its place among great contemporary novels as a nuanced, innovative work of art.

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