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“Describe the problem properly”: Teju Cole’s aesthetic of uncertainty

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I write in a time of a genocide that diminishes us all. My work is dedicated to all who suffer at the hands of narcissists, demagogues, and avarice, and all who stand up to these corrosive forces. In the words of Edward Said,

> …thinking might perhaps acquire and express the momentum of the general, thereby blunting the anguish and despondency of the lost cause, which its enemies have tried to induce.
>
> We might well ask from this perspective if *any* lost cause can ever really be lost.

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the intermedial body of work by the work by the Nigerian American writer and photographer Teju Cole (1976 -). I argue that his work is best understood as a single, overarching project, unified by what I term Cole's 'aesthetic of uncertainty.' This aesthetic uses uncertainty and cognate terms such as hybridity, ambiguity, indeterminacy and opacity to stimulate and engage his audience by leaving them unsure, through different means and to different ends. I show how in his fictional work this happens narratologically, but also by blurring boundaries of genre, and subverting market expectations. Generic indeterminacy also plays a role in Cole's visual mode, as he combines images and text in innovative, productive ways that provoke his audience to examine their own understanding of photography's affordances, and how they look at the world. I then consider the complex strategies of mediation that Cole utilises, through the lens of recent work by Anna Kornbluh. The philosophical and musical manifestations of uncertainty are under consideration in the final main chapter, as I explore the ethos of the blues and Black Pragmatism in Cole's most recent novel. I conclude by considering Cole's uneasy status as a public intellectual and his own uncertainty in the role. I use a mix of methodological approaches that are appropriate to each chapter, but each one is built on a foundation of close reading that seeks to locate the texts, whether fictional, factual, photographic, or a hybrid of these forms, as part of a vast network of informing intertexts.

Introduction

> Inside this modest thing called literature, I have found reminders to myself to negate frontiers and carry others across, and reminders of others who carry me, too. Imagine being in an emergency: a house on fire, a sinking boat, a court case, an endless trek, a changed planet. In such an emergency, you can no longer think only of yourself. You have to carry someone else, you have to be carried by someone else.
>
> -Teju Cole, *Black Paper*

This thesis is born out of a fascination with the work of Nigerian American author, photographer, and critic Teju Cole that began when I read his novel, *Open City,* in 2011. This has grown with the arrival of each subsequent project of his, whether digital and ephemeral - as through his use of social media - or through the more traditional means of dissemination though books, public lectures, interviews, and exhibitions. As Cole's oeuvre has rapidly expanded and tested generic boundaries over the past decade, it has retained a remarkable cohesion and vision of purpose that has given each new work a role in broadening his singular aesthetic, by asking his audience to engage patiently and thoughtfully with things that are not immediately clear. Speaking about his work in an interview, Cole stated his belief that "if you spend enough time with a still image, it can be drawn out, it has things to say to you," and claimed that his written work is driven by the impulse to ask "how can you do something that's a little bit arresting and not merely beautiful but that creates a capacity for a doubt and for rereading" in order to capture that "surreal lyric moment" (Kumar, 2013).

In essence, this is an artistic statement of intent toward a practice that utilises slow and careful deliberation in the act of creation to invoke slow and careful deliberation in the act of reception. I term this Cole's 'aesthetic of uncertainty.' This thesis is an analysis of the strategies Cole uses to achieve this aesthetic, an evaluation of how the aesthetic may be received by his audience, and an exploration of the social and political circumstances that make Cole's artistic approach apposite to our times. It is an appraisal, more broadly, not so much of how we read now, as how we *could* read now. Cole's work, I show, fits with a very contemporary demand for unmediated instant gratification coupled dialectically with a toolbox for slower, more considered

ways of seeing, reading, and thinking – 'uncertainty' being a word strong enough to carry polyvalent significations and hermeneutic capabilities.

My research and initial conceptualisation of this project began in the spring and summer of 2020. The idea of examining Cole's development of an aesthetic of uncertainty came quickly. Working in a teaching job that had suddenly become an online one, finishing a master's degree entirely off-campus, awaiting the end of restricted movement and the creation of a vaccine, applying for grants, and beginning a PhD were all activities that brought about personal uncertainty. Meanwhile, the world appeared to be heading inexorably towards climate crisis with little convincing political will to do anything about it. There is no true measure of chaos and uncertainty, but events since 2020 have made the world feel a particularly uncertain place, and one on the precipice of becoming even more volatile and inhospitable.

Teju Cole (the pen name of Obayemi Babajide Adetokunbo Onafuwa) was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA in 1976, before returning shortly after with his Nigerian parents to Lagos, where he was raised and educated. His American citizenship by birth enabled him to return to the United States as a young adult, where he initially studied medicine before transferring to art history, a path that took him through to a PhD in early Netherlandish art from Columbia University. During the course of his studies he was a prolific blogger, and kept a travelogue of a return trip to Lagos. It was augmented by black and white photographs he had made[1] during his trip, marking the development of a hobby into a more sustained and professional practice. The small Nigerian press, Cassava Republic, took note of Cole's intermedial travel blog and were keen to publish it. This became *Every Day is for the Thief*, published as a novel with photographs in 2007, and largely sold only within Nigeria. More widespread success would follow with his novel *Open City*, published by Penguin Random House in the USA and Faber & Faber in Europe. The story, told from the perspective of a narrator who shares many traits and interests with Cole, received immediate critical acclaim from several influential reviewers as well as several awards and inclusion on 'Best of Year' lists. A revised edition of *Every Day is for the*

[1] Here, and throughout this thesis I use the verb 'make' rather than the more common 'take' in reference to the act of photography, as it is line with Cole's preferred term, which mirrors that of Susan Sontag, among other visual theorists.

Thief followed in 2014, this time published for a global market. Many of the photographs were changed, and were reproduced with greater clarity, giving them a slightly less enigmatic quality.

In the meantime, Cole was establishing himself as a photography critic for the *New York Times*, as well as publishing essays in various journals and magazines, and developing his own photographic practice. A collection of essays, largely previously published, called *Known and Strange Things* followed in 2016, cementing Cole's reputation as a non-fiction writer, as well as a novelist and photographer. The book also anthologised some of Cole's output from the social media network then known as Twitter - a medium he had fully embraced for the possibilities it offered for the quick dissemination of pithy, often dark, humour and political commentary. His political stances on matters such as Palestine and western neo-imperialistic attitudes to Africa were strident and unambiguous, even as the approach he took was somewhat unorthodox. It was in a series of tweets, collected in an essay of the same name, that he coined the phrase "White Savior Industrial Complex' to describe paternalistic and exploitative stances common amongst white Americans towards complex problems affecting disparate African regions.

Blind Spot, published in 2017, is an innovative combination of image and text that burnished Cole's growing reputation as a photographer and built on an earlier exhibition he had held, also titled 'Blind Spot' – a reference to an experience Cole had of temporarily losing his sight in 2011. The book garnered praise for its formal innovation, and its effective combination of text and image drew comparison to photographer Roy DeCarava and poet Langston Hughes' 1955 collaboration, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a depiction of daily life in Harlem. Unlike this book, though, *Blind Spot* takes a more oblique approach to connecting text and image where their connection is not necessarily obvious, and sometimes requires esoteric knowledge. This is part of a method that the critic Alexandra Kingston-Reese has termed Cole's 'slant rhymes' (2019: 57) after the poetic technique of ending lines with sounds that fall just short of rhyming. Speaking of this, Cole has said that he sees *Blind Spot*

> as a unified story, but one in which each fragment of prose is dense in the way that a poem is dense. There are thematic breadcrumbs scattered throughout the text, but, yes, it is oblique. It's not meant to be obvious, but a more

> psychologically resonant series of fragments that detonate on some deeper level.
>
> (O'Hagan, 2017: n.p.)

Working in a similar vein, in 2019 Cole contributed the text sections of a collaboration with photographer Fazal Sheikh, published by the German photography specialists, Steidl. *Human Archipelago*, combining Sheikh's portraits of displaced people and some more thematic landscape photography with Cole's text, was a lyrical and affecting portrayal of the crisis of forced displacement that had become the subject of increased media coverage throughout the 2010s, and a humanitarian crisis whose tangible (and also highly misrepresented) outcomes had huge political ramifications, not least through the seismic results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum.

In early 2020 Cole published *Fernweh*, his first high-end photography book, with specialist press MACK Books. *Fernweh* was a subtle and subversive vision of tourism, especially as it pertains to Switzerland, where all the images were made. *Fernweh* was published weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic forced much of the world into extended periods of lockdowns and restricted movement, giving a sense of prescience to its introspective, figureless scenes. Cole brought the isolation of this period to bear through *Golden Apple of the Sun*, another photobook with MACK, this time combining still life photography of his kitchen counter with an extended essay on food, the colonial history of food commodities such as sugar and salt, and the practice of still life painting. The photographs and essay were composed in the lead-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, in which Joe Biden (temporarily) deposed Donald Trump. Immediately preceding this election and the subsequent publication of *Golden Apple of the Sun*, Cole's second essay collection *Black Paper: Writing in Dark Times* was published by University of Chicago Press. In keeping with its title, this is a collection that deals with the darker and more difficult aspects of life, such as the loss of several people close to Cole, for whom he composes elegies. It also deals with a resurgence of right-wing, nativist politics during Trump's first presidency. Aesthetically, its style is frequently allusive and more fragmented than his previous essays, reflective of a growing public mood of uncertainty and confusion.

In late 2023, Cole returned to the novel form with *Tremor*. Playing with the tension and intimacy enabled by apparent real-life knowledge of the author, this is arguably Cole's most overtly autofictional novel to date, featuring a protagonist, Tunde, who shares Cole's background, nationality, musical tastes, workplace, home location, and much more. The novel was well-reviewed, broadly, although some critics saw it as somewhat humourless and suggested that Cole's work was not showing variation. These reviews tended to use only Cole's previous novels for context, with no reference to his work in non-fiction writing of various kinds, or his photography. As such, they are a reminder that the literary establishment has tended to classify written and visual work as entirely separate, even as Cole's own oeuvre makes a sustained case against this.

Within months of the publication of *Tremor*, Cole published in another mode: the short story, or, more precisely, the short story image-text. In his third publication with MACK Books, *Pharmakon*, published in March of 2024, he combined his figureless photographs of landscapes, rocks, walls, buildings, pavements, and trees with twelve short stories, varying in length and style, but all relatively brief. These slippery and connotative stories, which often allude to forced displacement and matters of biopolitics without ever being explicit or didactic, pulsate against the superficially serene images, in a book that furthers Cole's project of seeking deep audience engagement by provoking question about the relationship between image and word.

I provide this overview of Cole's publishing career as each of these texts, to varying extents, is discussed in subsequent chapters. My contention is that what I term Cole's 'aesthetic of uncertainty' works across his body of work and is contingent on its multi-modality. Whether it is in the mode of fiction, personal essay, critical writing, photography, or hybrid image-text combinations, Cole's written and visual work should not be considered separately, as to do so is to occlude its intermedial potency. I propose the 'aesthetic of uncertainty' as a heuristic and productive framework for considering Cole's entire body of work to date.

In doing so, I ask how Cole reifies uncertainty on the page and makes it a tangible part of his work across different genres and media, and how this intermediality contributes to it. In creating his aesthetic of uncertainty, Cole took (and continues to take) risks with regard to acquiring and maintaining a certain level of readership.

The act of alienating some readers by subverting ideas about cosmopolitanism and providing an ambivalent, self-contradictory protagonist in *Open City*, a book that went against the grain of market expectations of migrant fiction. Christina Sharpe writes in *Ordinary Notes*, that

> There is a certain mode of reading connected to a tradition of colonial practices in which every book by any Black writer appears as sociology. Then all of that book's explorations, its meanings, and its ambitions lodge in a place called identity. This often-white reading either does this directly, as in, *in this book about identity*… or indirectly, by way of excepting a particular Black writer from this dreaded trap by writing that they "bravely" eschew identity. The reviewer might then draw a comparison between that Black writer and Sebald and imagine this a compliment of the highest order. Or the reviewer might make clear that the Black writer in question is not one-of-those-Black-writers who center their work in the abundance of Black life.
>
> These readers and reviewers are stuck on something they call identity and not something called life or genre or craft or intertextuality or invention or literary tradition.
>
> These readers continually misread the note. They decant all complexity, all invention into that thing they name identity that they imagine is both not complex and not relevant to them.
>
> (2023: 97)

I came upon this observation by Sharpe, which I quote in its entirety due to its acuity, late in the process of writing this thesis. The colonialist mode of reading all texts by black[2] writers as sociology is one I encounter occasionally, usually from a white scholar who feels they are doing vital work in the area. Teju Cole may well be the writer Sharpe has in mind when she refers to comparisons to Sebald, a common and almost unavoidable practice when writing about Cole. My project here is to neither

[2] Although the capitalisation of 'black' to refer to race and culture has become more popular since 2020, when the *Los Angeles Times* adopted 'Black' as their house style, there remains no firm consensus on the matter. In this thesis, I follow Teju Cole's habit of non-capitalisation, only using the capital B when quoting those who do, or referring to a specific movement or concept, such as 'Black Power, 'Black Pragmatism,' or 'the Black Aesthetic.' For a trenchant argument against the capitalisation of 'black' see Whittaker, 2021.

centre nor circumvent Cole's identity as a black artist, but to focus on precisely the invention, intertextuality, and craft that characterise his body of work and make it distinctive and valuable.

To elucidate my argument, I will first define what I mean, and do not mean, by 'aesthetics,' before moving on to how I approach Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty. In light of its common misappropriation as a substitute for 'beautiful' (more on which below), it should be noted that 'aesthetic' stems from a Greek verb meaning 'to perceive.' Our perception, and concomitant judgement, of aesthetic value is socially conditioned and not arbitrary. Whether or not we realise it, social use of aesthetic valuation by pronouncing on our perception of "good art and literature," for example, is a means for people to reproduce their own status and interests. "Aesthetics has a bad reputation," began Jacques Rancière in his 2004 work, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, translated to English in 2009. Rancière's words often feel so contemporaneously relevant that they might have been written yesterday, but this declaration appears to have aged poorly in 2025. Literary studies underwent an 'affective turn' in recent decades that has brought the word 'aesthetics' back into popular usage and led to such widespread absorption of the term into the lexicons of the fashion, beauty, fitness, and interior design industries that one may encounter the word several times in the course of an average day. 'Aesthetic' in the singular is now in common use as a synonym for 'attractive,' often in a minimalist way that is perceived as elegant and indicative of refined taste.

In literary criticism, one might occasionally wonder if the same interpretation has taken hold. In *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*, Timothy Aubry contends that "while political or ideological questions have been the conscious focus of much literary scholarship over several decades, aesthetic pleasure has served as its unacknowledged motive" (2018: 4). Aubry identifies a distaste for discussing aesthetics amongst ideological critics that dismisses the aesthetic as frivolous and superficial, even as they depend upon it to account for the vessels that carry the ideology of which they are suspicious. The 'hermeneutics of suspicion' diagnosed by Paul Ricoeur in his younger peers of the 1960s, such as Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, and seen in many scholars who have followed in their mode was recast by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as 'paranoid reading,' a method that is detrimental to our appreciation of a text and, potentially, ourselves and our relationships with others.

Contrary to this, Sedgwick advocated for 'reparative reading' (1997). Consequently, critics such as Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best have advocated for 'surface reading' (2009), and Rita Felski for 'postcritical reading' (2017). These are, in essence, arguments for returning to the primacy of the text and recentring the focus on textual analysis. Politics and art are inseparable, but there may be methods of reading texts that start from the ground up and seek to find the politics of the art, rather than laying a template over it. Aubry believes that ideological reading methods have come to taint the type of textual analysis now taught in universities, and that this serves hidden masters. He argues that the

> effort to foster aesthetic sensitivity, an ability to appreciate a given object, text, or idea for its own sake rather than for the uses it might serve, would appear to contradict what is for many students, teachers, and administrators the very mission of higher education.
>
> (2019: 13)

I see this thesis as a modest contribution towards a wider, boundaryless project, quietly undertaken all over the world, of fostering aesthetic sensitivity for its own ends, of making human experience a rich, rewarding and consoling one, of doing everything in our power to make life bearable, not bare. Walter Benjamin wrote, in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' that

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.
>
> (2015: 248-9)

In an age where aesthetic appreciation is often viewed as worthwhile only when directed in service of the economy, the concept of an aesthetic of uncertainty assumes a singular resonance — that of affective resistance. Uncertainty has immense generative potential in psychological and emotional terms, but little in the context of economic production. In fact, it is seen only as a problem – and a discrete category of economic research.

Uncertainty is perhaps the most dominant mode in which we live our lives under neoliberalism/late-stage capitalism/the end of the Anthropocene, or however we term the undeniably unstable and disconcerting contemporary moment. It is also, though, a mode that we are actively discouraged from being in, as partisan politics and the entrenched type of discourse that dominates social media force us into entrenched views and render almost every facet of public life a team sport. We are, after all, leaving unprecedentedly large digital footprints -a track record of statements, endorsements and preferences that is almost impossible to erase. Even as we find ourselves increasingly unsure of what to think, we present ourselves as more certain than ever, feeling compelled to do so.

The scientists behind the Doomsday Clock, attempting to measure our proximity to total global annihilation, chose, in January 2025, to inch the clock another second forward to 89 seconds to midnight, reflecting widespread dismay at some of the governance of the world's major nuclear powers and the threats inherent in the rapid advances in artificial intelligence (Mecklin, 2025: n.p.). If we assume that the Science and Security Board of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has put some serious thought into such an alarming proclamation, drawing the conclusion that we are living in a time of unprecedented existential uncertainty is not unreasonable. In *For the Time Being*, writer Annie Dillard warns against an inclination to view our present moment as being exceptional:

> Is it not late? A late time to be living? Are not our generations the crucial ones? For we have changed the world. Are not our heightened times the important ones? For we have nuclear bombs. Are we not especially significant because our century is? - our century and it unique Holocaust, its refugee populations, its serial totalitarian exterminations; our century and its antibiotics, silicon chips, men on the moon, and spliced genes? No, we are not and it is not. These times of ours are ordinary times, a slice of life like any other. Who can bear to hear this, or who will consider it?
>
> (1999: 38)

Dillard was writing, though, before a terrorist attack in 2001 brought mass death to American soil and a retaliatory war that caused regime changes and chaos in the Middle East, and circumstances that enabled new and ever more elusive forms of

terrorist cells to be created. She was writing before the Internet became a constant presence in our pockets, in our hands and on our wrists, offering to help us in warm tones from speakers in living room corners, claiming to make life more convenient while always complicating it, increasingly providing as much fake news as real. She was writing before the two terms of a U.S. president who was still largely viewed as an irrelevant reality TV personality rather than a political concern as recently as 2015. She was writing before the UK Brexit referendum plunged the European Union into existential crisis. She was writing before the so-called "migrant crisis" that came to wide public attention in the mid-2010s, when rising deaths of displaced people in the Mediterranean Sea and their increased presence in border zones across Europe meant their plight could no longer be ignored by popular news media, rendering their lives a biopolitical football. Dillard was writing before an unprecedented pandemic affected the daily life of nearly every human being on the planet, bringing widespread death; and sickness, and multiple societal aftershocks that are still being felt, amongst them being new schisms of distrust between authority (political, medical, scientific) and ordinary people, providing new opportunities for conspiracy theories, paranoia, and exploitation. She was writing before the war in Ukraine and the war on Gaza, the mass fear and death that they have brought, along with dissemblance and disinformation that work with unprecedented speed. And yet, Dillard was correct and remains correct. She continues,

> Take away the bomb threat and what are we? Ordinary beads on a never-ending string. Our time is a routine twist of an improbable yarn…There must be something heroic about our time, something that lifts it above all those other times. Plague? Funny weather? Dire things are happening…Why are we watching the news, reading the news, keeping up with the news? Only to enforce our fancy - probably a necessary lie - that these are crucial times, and we are in on them. Newly revealed, and we are in the know: crazy people, bunches of them. New diseases, shifts in power, floods! Can the news from dynastic Egypt have been any different?
>
> (38)

We live in uncertain times because we live in a world that is inherently, inescapably uncertain. Cole's work bears testament to this, and locates itself, I argue, in multiple texts and traditions that capture something of our eternal uncertainty. It is not a

modish attempt to capture the zeitgeist, but a recognition that the way we see, read, and think now is preoccupied with uncertainty, including, but by no means limited to, the forms of uncertainty that trickle down to economists and become quantifiable. In *Human Archipelago*, his collaboration with Fazal Sheikh, Cole writes

> The fire is not in the future, so don't ask when it will be. The fire is not yet to come, for it has happened already. Describe the problem properly.
>
> There is no "news." There is only the established material manifestation of aspects of an already established reality. There is nothing in the papers today that does not follow on from such-and-such-a person being in such a role, such-and-such people having such access to power. If we have limited energy to expend, best not to spend it on the theater of surprise.
>
> Don't wonder how far they'll go, you already know the answer: as far as possible. And so this is a time for a precise enmity.
>
> Describe the problem properly. The fire is not in the future.
>
> (2018: 95)

I have chosen Cole's repeated maxim of "describe the problem properly" as part of my title for the thesis for the tension it immediately creates with the subtitle of 'Teju Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty.' Is his work describing the problem properly, or is it preoccupied with uncertainty? I argue that in creating an aesthetic across his work that invokes political, social, personal, affective, artistic, generic and emotional uncertainty, Cole is not attempting a definitive answer to what the problem *is*, but new modes of thinking about the world and how we live in it.

In theorising uncertainty in a literary sense, the work of Mette Leonard Høeg and C. Namwali Serpell has been particularly instructive to my research. Høeg argues, in the introduction to her edited collection, *Literary Theories of Uncertainty* that, in the field of literary studies

> The notion of uncertainty of meaning has always existed and been relevant, if not in the form of explicitly recognized and theorized concepts, then implicitly present as the defining opposition of certain and decided meaning. In this sense, all theory of literature, interpretation and meaning is also theory of uncertainty.

(2021: 1)

Such a bold statement deserves consideration. Høeg's contention throughout her work on uncertainty is that unstable meaning, ambiguous phrasing, and readerly suspicion are key constituents of how we encounter literature, and what makes them appealing and engaging, so much so that uncertainty constitutes "the crucial dark matter of all art," and "an already existing but under-illuminated theoretical dimension of literary theory" (2022: 9-10). Høeg does concede, though, that

> A variety of subforms and related terms such as 'undecidability', 'indeterminacy', 'ambiguity', 'indistinction', 'obscurity', 'vagueness', 'opacity' and 'indiscernibility' appear at the heart of some of the most central discussions about the meaning and nature of literature.
>
> (2021: 2)

Throughout this thesis I use several of these terms and treat them, in line with Høeg , as belonging under the umbrella category of 'uncertainty'. While I aim to keep the proliferation of terms to a minimum for the sake of clarity, there are occasions when the more precise or contextualised term is used, such as 'opacity' or 'indeterminacy.' In the humanities, opacity has become a word almost inextricable from the Martinican philosopher Edouard Glissant, whose conceptualization of the term has become a piquant and generative presence in postcolonial and Black studies in recent years. Its presence in Cole's work is explored in the chapter on *Blind Spot*. Indeterminacy bears a similar level of synonymity with Jacques Derrida. In my chapters on *Every Day is for the Thief* and a chapter taking a broader look at how some of Cole's hybrid work stands up to Anna Kornbluh's recently-diagnosed cultural logic of 'immediacy', I examine the destabilising and generative aspects of Cole's approach to indeterminacy. The more explicit influence of Derrida as a public intellectual and provocateur upon Cole is discussed in my concluding chapter in a reading of his essay 'Unnamed Lake.'

Curiously, but perhaps due to her focus on nineteenth and twentieth century literature, Høeg's two books on literary uncertainty make no mention of C. Namwali Serpell's more twenty-first century-oriented *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, published in 2014. Here, Serpell reimagines William Empson's seminal 1930 work, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, making the case that literary uncertainty's capacity to push us

beyond the bounds of our own experience is ethically formative, borrowing from cognitive psychology's concept of 'affordances' – the potential use or purpose of an object or environment. Serpell seeks to examine how, in literature, "an intense, structured uncertainty can refract – rather than merely reflect – an ethical disturbance," unsettling the reader's moral values rather than guiding them (2014: 2). Her concern, therefore, is on the aesthetic achievement of literature and its affective outcomes, choosing the word 'affect' due to its "connotation of a two-way street: it is passive and active, a subjection to the world and an orientation towards it" (5). Here, Serpell inclines, as I do, towards Eric Shouse's understanding of an affect as a corporeal, "non-conscious experience of intensity…a moment of unformed and unstructured potential" (Shouse, 2005: n.p).

This is significant in the context of this thesis, as I demonstrate throughout that Cole often plays with his readers' paratextual knowledge and prior expectations, meaning that sensations of surprise, shock, and uncertainty that his work generates are often contingent on knowledge, and therefore fall more into the category of feelings or emotions, rather than the "prepersonal" quality that Shouse, through Brian Massumi, ascribes to affect. But there are also, of course, affective sensations that the audience feels in response to the aesthetics of Cole's work, particularly his photography. 'Affect', as I use it, should be understood to connote this sense of *a priori* bodily response, in contrast to the also-frequent *a posteriori* challenges to cognition that Cole's work poses. 'Uncertainty,' in short, is used to designate the affective, embodied, and automatic responses of the reader, along with the slower and more informed cognitive processes of information being parsed through knowledge, experience, and intertextual recognition.

Serpell, like Høeg, recognises the polyvalency of 'uncertainty' and its apposite application to literature, saying

> I prefer the word uncertainty over its semantic siblings precisely because it captures the interactive, temporal, and experiential qualities to reading. While its kin terms (ambiguity, difficulty, indeterminacy) tend to get attributed solely to the literary object, uncertainty can refer to either the object or the cognitive state of the observer. It is the quality or "state of not being definitely known" or "the state or character of being uncertain in mind." Drifting between reader and text, uncertainty invokes both…(and) uncertainty feels

> analyzable, an experience that emerges out of specific structures, rather than a mere overlay of obscurity or vagueness… (It) molds the reading experience into the shifting, variable mode of uncertainty that sets aesthetics, affect, and ethics into an ongoing dance.
>
> (9)

The rich semantic possibilities latent within 'uncertainty' are what led me to settle upon it as the most apt descriptor of Cole's overarching aesthetic across his intermedial body of work. Uncertainty, although somewhat defined by its negative prefix, is far more than a simple lack of certainty. It is a state wherein we ask questions of ourselves, and of the things that have provoked our uncertainty. Have I missed something? Should I read this again? What am I looking at? How am I supposed to feel? Why do I feel this way? Is this what I thought it would be? These are all questions that an uncertain encounter with art in any form can raise, and answering them begs our attention and sustained engagement. Our focus oscillates between outward and inward directions. We are forced to think about what we know and what we have already read but, above all, we are required to listen to ourselves. Author Tom McCarthy describes this process of self-mediation as "the individual remix" that happens when we encounter any form of writing, as we blend our processing of new information with previous reading and prior knowledge (2012: 23-9).

Uncertainty can feel nebulous and infinitely subjective in a psychological or affective sense, but it is measured by metrics in financial settings and, at the time of writing, the world economic uncertainty index shows a certain kind of fear and doubt on ever-fluctuating graphs that visualise, as their primary function, market instability and consumer confidence levels. The launch of this index in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 outbreak became a pandemic, notes that " global uncertainty has increased significantly since 2012" to levels that are "exceptional in a historical context" and unprecedented in the sixty year period that was analysed (Ahir et al, 2020, n.p). A key aspect of the methodology in compiling this report is tracking the use of 'uncertainty' and its variants in thousands of national economic reports from 143 different countries. In doing so, the index also illustrates the corrosive effect of ever-present uncertainty on people's mental states. People are not their investments, of course, nor are they their bank accounts, their property, or their jobs, but where

economic uncertainty is rife, it follows that political, social, and personal uncertainty is also widespread. *How Should A Person Be?* begs the title of 2013 hybrid fiction-memoir by Cole's near-contemporary Sheila Heti, a question that captures something of the zeitgeist of the early decades of the twenty-first century in its bold declaration of existential and moral uncertainty. The individual's confrontation of the question of how best to behave and carry oneself in life is a daily battle, and an unwinnable one.

John Dewey, that most American of philosophers, grappled with the inherent uncertainty of the world and concluded that what he termed 'the quest for certainty' was a futile project, and that life is more gainfully lived through acceptance of uncertainty. In the chapter examining Cole's 2023 novel, *Tremor*, I look at how Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism, reimagined by Eddie S. Claude Jr. as Black Pragmatism, guides the ethos of *Tremor*, while the novel is built on the aesthetic base of jazz music and 'the blues' – forms of music that reflect an historical and ongoing ethos of uncertainty and a belief in life as an unending series of obstacles to be overcome. I do so not to locate Cole as a pragmatist per se, but to argue that his work is built on foundations of prior aesthetic modes of living and thriving through uncertainty.

While uncertainty characterises our times and - for many people - our modes of thinking, it is also arguable that certainty is the root cause of our present circumstances, exemplified by heads of state who never express doubt in their public utterances and whose personal convictions, time and again, bring fatal consequences for many. Behind them stand billionaires, technocrats and oligarchs whose refusal to vacillate has undoubtedly aided their accrual of vast wealth, and whose constant certainty that they are acting correctly appears to hold wide public appeal. Everything in current affairs tells us that certainty is certainly beguiling. In a world fraught with decisions around complicity in environmental damage, exploitation, human rights abuses, wealth distribution, and discrimination, we are all so entangled in ambivalences that we cannot possibly always act in ways that feel ethically clean.

Karen Barad, approaching the question of how to live ethically, describes a form of living that involves “taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world’s vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us and it flourish” (2007: 396). Such interconnectedness means, though, that as the philosopher Timothy Morton puts it, “it always feels as if there’s a piece missing.

Something just doesn't add up. We can't get compassion exactly right. Being nice to bunny rabbits means not being nice to bunny rabbit parasites" (126). Utilitarianism simply does not cut it once we grasp the impossibility of determining the greatest meaningful happiness of the genuinely greatest number. We have no answer to Heti's question of how a person should be. Uncertainty is the space occupied by those who put thought into this question in any way. In the other corner: the figureheads of rapacious capitalism and genocidal nationalism.

Where, then, does the work of the artist come in? A moral authority in a time of turpitude? If we hold to the unbridled uncertainty riding roughshod over our lives, there can be no moral authority. Artists can make us feel things, but do these feelings spur us to do things, and what are the implications if they do? I posit that by asking a lot of his audience through narrative ambiguity, intertextual and intermedial complexity, and visual opacity, Teju Cole makes them do things while reading and looking that actively provoke uncertainty, rather than assurance. Work hard and know less, in short.

In *Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works*, Tom McCarthy baldly states "I have nothing to say…indeed I'd go so far as to claim that no serious writer does" (2012: 10). While McCarthy has a reputation as something of a literary provocateur, he was likely not being entirely glib or facetious with this statement. A distaste at being perceived as overtly polemical or transparently moralistic is shared by many contemporary fiction writers, who prefer to be noticed for the impressionistic qualities of their work, and their formal innovations. Teju Cole sounded a note not unlike that of McCarthy when he claimed that "I am a novelist and my goal in writing a novel is to leave the reader not knowing what to think. A good novel shouldn't have a point" (2016: 342). I explore this statement and its implications throughout the chapters that deal with Cole's novels, and in doing so attempt to parse our beliefs about what the role of fiction is, and what we gain from the act of reading if we are not explicitly being taught something.

I hold to Mette Leonard Høeg's belief that uncertainty is "a fundamental dimension of literature" (3) and broaden it by transplanting the same logic to visual culture, and the complex interplay between word and image. Generative A.I, over the course of my time writing this thesis, moved from being largely the province and sometimes promise of science fiction, to being an existential threat to the livelihoods of creative

artists, thinkers and educators. In a sea of simulacra, though, the text and the image retain a central role in communication and a general assumption of authenticity amongst those who consider themselves capable of discerning such things, at least for the time being. Our reception of both forms, though, is increasingly informed by other media. In writing about Anna Kornbluh's recent, and somewhat divisive intervention, *Immediacy, or the Cultural Logic of Too-Late Capitalism* (2024), I explore how Cole's work uses uncertainty to complicate mediation of art, using the porousness of the media he works in to explore its latent potential for self-mediation, and posing questions around the position of the work of art in the age of digital manipulation.

Artistic instincts can be both blunted and sharpened by commercial interests, and in my chapter focusing on two of Cole's most Nigeria-centric works I ponder the role of market demand and publishing pressures upon Cole's work and, more broadly, upon African literature and writing that remains stubbornly categorised as 'postcolonial' and 'world' literatures. Uncertainty here takes the form of the hybridity at play in Cole's merging of fiction and photography, and also in the generic indeterminacy created by the blurring of fact and fiction that caused publishers much anxiety in the wake of a high profile literary scandal. This points towards questions of how much our knowledge of an author's biography impacts upon our reading of their work, along with expectations around the narrative arc and emotional properties of the stories told by migrant protagonists.

My goal is not to add a sense of certainty to anyone's reading of Cole but to shed light on the intertexts, gestures and strategies that may enrich an appreciation of his work by enhancing our understanding of his aesthetic of uncertainty. In arguing for Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty, I treat his entire body of work – which to date constitutes novels, short stories, personal essays, photography, photography and art criticism, social media storytelling, and curation – as belonging to an overarching project. As such, neither visual nor written work is valorised over the other. This is apposite when dealing with an artist who has shown no distinct preference for one mode over the other, and who has garnered a strong reputation across various fields, arguably to an unparalleled degree. Cole's status as a writer whose photography is broadly regarded with equal esteem to his written output makes him a highly unusual artist. Popularity and critical regard can often bring a successful artist the opportunity to

indulge a hobbyist pursuit in a more professional context, but commercial success and popular acclaim do not tend to follow, and a dual career does not often prove attractive or viable.

The intermediality and intertextuality of Cole's oeuvre opens bountiful hermeneutical possibilities, insofar as each form that Cole works within is strengthened and layered by knowledge of his work in other forms. In my chapter on 'immediacy', I examine how Cole's work in various hybrid forms complicates the idea of mediation by providing its own, in-built forms of intermediality that enable self-mediation and interpretation through the cross-pollination of ideas and understanding brought to bear by differing levels of knowledge and appreciation.

Beyond the specific consideration of Cole as an artist, in this thesis I aim to explore how aesthetics works today as, in the words of Rancière,

> a regime for the functioning of art and a matrix of discourse, a form for identifying the specificity of art and a redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience.
>
> (2009: 14)

What is at stake, always, in considering the matter of aesthetics is the question of where art's boundaries between form, message, and meaning lie, how porous they are or whether they exist at all – which is to say, whether or not we need to think of these abstract spatial metaphors as signifying anything concrete and definitive. In foregrounding the evocation and experience of different elements of uncertainty, I place the unifying aesthetic of his work above its constituent parts. That is to say, the creation of uncertainty in his audience is equally valid whether it is achieved through a novel, a tweet, a public lecture, an Instagram post, or a photography book. As Marshall McLuhan puts it, in a playful reworking of his earlier dictum of 'the medium is the message':

> All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage.
>
> (1967: 26).

We are susceptible to the aesthetic impact of each and every medium we encounter, and any artist with the skills to work across a panoply of media is well aware of this. Through the aforementioned forms, and others, Teju Cole works his audience over completely. Explicating the strategies through which this is achieved is the central aim of this thesis, but it has a wider application in terms of how we perceive the value of working across different artistic forms that are often treated as entirely separable and that are, in contemporary parlance, siloed from one another.

Reader-response is a crucial aspect to consider in appraising Cole's work owing to how acutely he engages with it. He often speaks, in discussing both his writing and photography, of anticipating the audience's reaction and averring against it, especially when he believes the text is too straightforward, too easily interpreted, or appealing in a conventional way. In this sense, the aesthetic of uncertainty is a provocation to sensibilities. This does not mean that Cole sets out to outrage or offend his audience, nor to consciously test their patience, but simply that doing any of these things incidentally is of little concern to him, and does not impinge on his artistic vision, nor its realisation.

In discussing Cole's novels, I bear reader response in mind in ways that are particularly informed by the ideas of Peter J. Rabinowitz and Suzanne Keen. I examine a wide range of scholarship on Cole's work and treat these scholars as generally numbering amongst Cole's most informed readers, conscious of his narrative techniques and, in many cases, keen to read underlying ideology, religious grounding, socio-political context, and stylistic influences into the text. I show how Cole's work has extended an invitation to undertake highly attentive reading, with details and implications that the author fully expects the majority of his audience to miss, and a small number to relish. Considering the most insightful and forensic analysis of Cole's texts, while offering my own contribution through close readings, I highlight these texts' vast potential for sustained and generative exegesis.

There is, of course, even in the most probing and committed literary analysis, widely-varying interpretations and, concomitantly, wildly-diverging levels of admiration for the texts. It is not the critic's primary job to merely admire, of course, but it ties in with the second aspect of how I consider reader response: the average reader, an amateur figure with the potential to sway perceptions, and therefore sales figures and awards adjudicators. The literary market affects all works of literature, as I

demonstrate in my second chapter through consideration of scholarship by Pascale Casanova, Dan Sinykin, Sarah Brouillette and Paul Crosthwaite, amongst others. Terence Cave has shown, in *Thinking With Literature*, that the act of reading is a process of filling in the meaning of "empty spaces" of texts that "conscript our cognitive capacity for inference" and the basic skills of recognition (2016: 4-5) – a process that mostly occurs rapidly and unconsciously.

The aesthetic of uncertainty is an artistic and affective recognition of the impossibility of narrating totality in the contemporary world. It is the unavoidable sense of confusion and conflict we feel when thinking about major world events and the question of how to live an ethical life. Uncertainty, of course, is not merely a contemporary condition. Uncertainty is ancient, as is the practice of trying to put shape on it. The arc of history may bend towards establishing greater certainty in our lives, but it is surely a failed project. The acceleration of communication technology's capabilities in the first two decades of the twenty-first century embodies what has become known as the Information Age, with everything we could wish to know mediated to us by a device we keep in our pockets. With this, of course, has come the rise of misinformation – created and disseminated rapidly for ends that vary from playful and merely mischievous to murderous to the point of genocidal, and all that lies in between.

I posit that Cole creates his aesthetic of uncertainty as a potential antidote to political and ideological intransigence and/or blindness. This is to suggest that there is an ethically and socially ameliorative potentiality to engendering a method of reading literature and looking at photography that starts from and finishes at an uncertain vantage point. The role of this thesis is not to resolve any of the transmedial uncertainty that characterises Cole's work, but rather to examine the forms that it takes, the techniques that achieve it, its theoretical and cultural underpinnings, and its potential limits. At issue is the question of where aesthetics meets ethics, and what the implications are for audiences confronted with unprecedented assaults on their attention spans by various forms of technology and media, often in the guise of simplistic propaganda, distorted facts, and egregious misinformation. John Berger, writing in October 2002, immediately prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, described that moment in time in stark terms:

> People everywhere - under very different conditions - are asking themselves: Where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue, without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?
>
> Might it not be better to see and declare that we are living through the most tyrannical - because the most pervasive – chaos that has ever existed? It's not easy to grasp the nature of the tyranny, for its power structure (ranging from the two hundred largest multinational corporations to the Pentagon) is interlocking yet diffuse, dictatorial yet anonymous, ubiquitous yet placeless. It tyrannizes from offshore - not only in terms of Fiscal Law but in terms of any political control beyond its own. Its aim is to delocalize the entire world. Its ideological strategy - beside which Bin Laden's is a fairy tale - is to undermine the existent so that everything collapses into its special version of the virtual, from the realm of which – and this is the tyranny's credo - there will be a never-ending source of profit. It sounds stupid. Tyrannies *are* stupid. This one is destroying at every level the life of the planet on which it operates.
>
> (in Levi-Strauss, 2002: ix-x)

Berger, a friend, mentor, and significant moral and creative influence upon Cole, was writing at a stage where the Internet was only beginning to be a presence in everyday lives, and not yet the potent tool for manipulation and malign dissemination that it would soon become. Berger died in 2017 and did not live to see the social and political atomisation that would be brought about by the UK's Brexit vote, the COVID-19 pandemic, the two presidential terms of Donald Trump, the expanded influence of technology billionaires on politics, and the full and overt embrace of extreme-right ideology and disinformation amongst much of the political mainstream, whose dissemination has been enabled and accelerated by the takeover of the social media network Twitter (now X) in 2022 by Elon Musk.

Referring to Friedrich Schiller's eighteenth century concept of aesthetic education as a means of alleviating humanity's dependence on coercive ideologies, literary critic Geoffrey Hartman suggests that "As art produces permanent transitional objects, so the concept of aesthetic education suggests not so much an end state or utopia as its

continual re-envisioning" (2002: 7). For all its political concerns, Cole's work is rarely didactic or demagogic in tone. The coercive ideologies that Schiller and Hartman note are now harnessed and transmitted by corporate entities and immensely wealthy individuals as much, if not considerably more, than by state powers. Such ideologies, of entirely unregulated free markets meeting ever-greater restriction of movement for the impoverished, hold appeal to those who see the apparent certitude of fixed borders and unfettered flow of capital, coupled with an unapologetic return to an imperialist mindset to be a balm against the flux and instability of modern life.

Cole's body of work provides an aesthetic education through its intermediality and intertextuality, and the ways in which these function to create uncertainty, rather than an end state. The "permanent transitional objects" of his art render them part of a continuum of history, entirely non-teleological in nature. In the chapter on Cole's 2016 image-text work, *Blind Spot*, I discuss the book through the lens of Walter Benjamin's idea of jetztzeit, or 'now time,' wherein an artist creates a space freed from the ordered time of the ruling classes. I juxtapose this with a reading of the book through visual theorist Ariella Azoulay's concept of 'potential history,' where the imperialist apparatus of the camera is repurposed as an emancipatory tool that allows the victims of imperial violence to reclaim their histories.

An enormous amount of photography criticism still pays due deference to a small number of key visual theorists and their core texts, such as Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. Critics such as John Berger, Geoff Dyer, David Campany and WJT Mitchell are also referenced frequently, but it is fair to say that the field of photography lacks the range and diversity of renowned scholars that literary studies possesses. Photography and visual culture is a younger field, of course, and one that is less widely taught in third level institutions, and barely at all at secondary level. In an age where we are bombarded with images every day, new and updated forms of visual literacy are essential. Nathan Jurgenson has done much to contribute to this field through their analysis of social media photography, and their work has been helpful in considering Cole's use of Instagram, and the ease with which he not only shares his work in the digital realm, but makes its instant transmission a component of his creative output. In a time of split-second dissemination of images and the constant need for vigilance around their

manipulation and distortion for political ends the camera remains, as it ever was, a weapon of imperialism. Ariella Azoulay has made a significant contribution to our understanding of this, and her work is central to my analysis of Cole's photographic output. Azoulay believes that visual theorists such as Barthes, Sontag, and Baudrillard fell prey to "image fatigue" and

> simply stopped looking. The world filled up with images of horrors, and they loudly proclaimed that viewers' eyes had grown unseeing, proceeding to unburden themselves of the responsibility to hold onto the elementary gesture of looking at what is presented to one's gaze.
>
> (2006: 11)

There can be no doubt that our entanglements and, conflicting loyalties around nation states, ethnicities, institutions, financial interests and historical guilt mean that many of us are, if we spend time thinking about it, thoroughly indicted by the images of wars and atrocities that we encounter every day. The volume of images that cause such fatigue has grown exponentially, as photographs and video clips of war coalesce uncomfortably with advertising, sponsored content, selfies, pet portraits, and holiday snaps. Cole's visual work operates within this disconcerting digital space, wherein we are never certain what we will be looking at next. I treat this as an important part of his artistic output. In exploring his work through the lens of Kornbluh's concept of 'immediacy,' I evaluate the impact on the audience of work being presented in a way that is not so much unmediated as it is uncontrolled, and therefore uniquely-mediated to each individual. Each viewer sees Cole's photographs in a different sequence of images that is dictated by who else they follow, how often they use the app, what has previously piqued their interest, and boundless other factors dictated by the opaque machinations of algorithms. The experience of uncertainty implicit in the usage of social media is, then, harnessed by Cole for aesthetic purpose.

There have been several doctoral theses to date that focus on Cole's writing as a point of comparison with one or more other writers, most notably Alexandra Smith's *Writing Against the Image: Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, and Aesthetics of Failure in* 2015, which has led to further excellent analysis of Cole's work in her book *Contemporary Novelists and the Aesthetics of Twenty-First Century American Life*,

published as Alexandra Kingston-Reese in 2020. My research is indebted to the clear-sighted and trenchant analysis that Kingston-Reese has brought to the study of Cole's work, and to the many scholars cited throughout who have approached his texts with imagination, insight, and sustained attention to detail.

This thesis is, to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing, the first to focus solely on Teju Cole, and the first to focus on his photography alongside his written work. A guiding principle, elaborated upon at various intervals, is that his body of work, as rapidly as it is evolving, constitutes a single overarching project, and that no mode of it should be given precedence over the other. I hold to Karen Beckman and Liliane Weisberg's belief that

> the coexistence of writing (including but certainly not limited to fiction writing) and photography, and the efforts of these two already hybrid modes of representation to articulate their identities in relation to each other, has always generated a kind of uncertain energy, the kind of energy we find in the realm of the experiment, the crossed border, and the bastard outcomes of surprising encounters.
>
> (2013, xii)

It is precisely this uncertain energy and the bastard outcomes latent within Cole's writing and photography, I aim to show, that animate his aesthetic of uncertainty and drive its capacity for surprise, reconsideration, and a re-evaluation of the ability of art and all things aesthetic to revivify our perspective, our ways of seeing, and our sense of how we should be.

My approach throughout the thesis is to follow as many of the threads that make up the tapestry of Cole's work as possible. The idea of arguing for an intermedial aesthetic of uncertainty across his work is one that was conceptualised and approved for funding prior to the publication of four new books by Cole during the duration of my research. All of these works have added depth and complexity to his canon, and led to new avenues of enquiry, but none of them have dissuaded me of the conviction that there is a defining, intermedial aesthetic of uncertainty that guides his project. Despite this, Cole's work has continued to surprise me, and to be exciting to encounter. Its intertexts and (often overt) theoretical and philosophical allusions mean that my approach is often maximalist in connecting Cole to the constellation of

writers and artists who inform his work, with the aim of expanding its aesthetic appreciation.

I argue that the hybrid and intermedial body of work created to date by Teju Cole is part of a single, unified artistic project that seeks to induce uncertainty in its audience through a wide range of narrative strategies, stylistic choices, visual opacities, philosophical allusions, and generic indeterminacy – all of which combine to create Cole's 'aesthetic of uncertainty.' Uncertainty, I argue, is a compelling sensation that is onto-epistemic, in that it exists in affective, embodied forms prior to any acquired information, but also as a higher and more complex cognitive state, hinging on existing knowledge.

The chapters in this thesis follow roughly the chronological order in which Cole's texts were published for a global audience. The first chapter is therefore on *Open City*, wherein I examine how the novel's minor characters are a key component in Cole's strategy of undermining the reader's trust in his narrator, and in exposing the artifice of his veneer of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. My chronological approach allows for the fact that even avid followers of Cole's career are unlikely to have read, or had the opportunity to read the original version of *Every Day is for the Thief*, while allowing me, in the second chapter, to consider its positioning in the literary marketplace in the wake of the success of *Open City*, extending uncertainty into the realm of publishing, genre categorisation, and a particular market anxiety that the writer and critic David Shields memorably terms 'reality hunger.'

My third chapter moves from Cole's incorporation of photographs in a novel into his first sustained photographic publication, *Blind Spot*, wherein I examine how the hybrid nature of the book's combination of image and text forces the reader to consider the relationship between the forms and engage with the opacity of meaning that Cole creates within a work that is always evocative and allusive, but never conclusive.

In the fourth chapter I examine four of Cole's texts published between 2019 and 2024 - *Human Archipelago*, *Fernweh*, *Golden Apple of the Sun*, and *Pharmakon* - in the context of a recent theoretical intervention from Anna Kornbluh, in which she diagnoses 'immediacy' as a problem pervasive throughout contemporary art and

literature. I consider the implications of new and evolving forms of mediation, and the strategies Cole uses in animating self-mediation for his audience.

In my fifth chapter, I read Cole's most recent novel, *Tremor*, as a novel that is homologous to jazz and blues music in its structure and tone, evoking uncertainty as a mode of living through its tonal shifts, repetitions and its ethos of Black Pragmatism.

This leads to the concluding chapter, wherein I consider Cole's overall body of work and probe how some of his personal essays function as a hermeneutic key to the creation of an aesthetic of uncertainty across his intermedial body of work, as well taking a closer look at the role his social media output has played.

Chapter One

"All strangers to me": cosmopolitan conversation, stranger fetishism, and reader response in *Open City*

> How does it feel to be a problem?[...]Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?
>
> - WEB Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

This chapter examines Teju Cole's 2011 novel, *Open City*, and argues that his use of minor characters is a narrative technique that allows the author to explore the implications and limitations of "conversation" as a vehicle for cultural and social enrichment. Keeping reader-response to the forefront, I undertake close readings of several encounters that the narrator, Julius, has with strangers he meets. In doing so, the protagonist's aesthetic cosmopolitanism is exposed as an artifice of high cultural hubris, Orientalism, and stranger fetishism. I show how the realities of contemporary mobility and forced displacement experienced by one minor character lead to what Michel Agier terms 'banal cosmopolitanism': the condition of travel and encounter experienced in oppressive border situations where cultures, languages, and nationalities co-exist closely in circumstances that are far from the celebratory visions of Kwame Appiah's (and, by extension, the narrator's) cosmopolitanism, or the joyous intercultural mélange of Taiye Selasi's image of Afropolitanism. The chapter focuses on decentring the diegetic narrator and examining the minor characters and the context that invites reader engagement with the text and undermines popular perceptions of the outcomes and benefits of cosmopolitan conversation and encounter with the stranger. In terms of the wider arc of my thesis, the chapter is a key component in mapping the elements that constitute the 'aesthetic of uncertainty' that I argue characterises Cole's overall body of work.

Teju Cole's *Open City* was published in 2011 by Faber & Faber. It was Cole's second novel, after 2007's *Every Day is for the Thief*, but was generally promoted and reviewed in Europe and the USA as his debut work, as his earlier novel was only published in Nigeria, before being reworked and published to a wider audience in 2014. *Open City* features an autodiegetic narrator, Julius – a Nigerian-German psychologist living in New York who recounts his walks around the city (along with a

brief interlude in Brussels) and his encounters with various strangers. These are punctuated by ekphrastic appreciations of the art and music he enjoys, epiphanic meditations on the socio-historical layers of New York and Brussels, and memories of his childhood in Nigeria, which gradually reveal a troubled and complex relationship with his mother. In tandem with this, an undercurrent of misogyny within Julius develops throughout the novel, culminating in a late revelation that has a profound impact on the reader's perception of the character. In the nineteenth of the novel's twenty-one chapters, a woman named Moji, who features only in the latter half of the novel, informs Julius that he raped her when they were teenagers. The veracity of this accusation is never firmly established, leaving a resonant and lingering tone of uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Ever-resistant to calls to clarify or confirm the question of rape in his novel, or to justify its open-endedness, Cole has stated that "my goal in writing a novel is to leave the reader not knowing what to think. A good novel shouldn't have a point" (2016: 324). Nevertheless, it is natural to suspect a degree of disingenuousness on his part, or an attempt to imply a point through the inherent undecidability of the text – an attempt whose success demands huge attention on the part of the reader.

Given the dark and introspective climax to *Open City*, critical attention has largely been focused on the character of Julius, reading his complex and self-deceptive personality through a postcolonial lens that explores his educated, erudite narrative voice in the light of his ethical failings. My approach is to examine how the words 'stranger' and 'conversation,' recurring words in some of the key texts on cosmopolitanism, are used in *Open City* by paying close attention to some of the strangers Julius encounters. Analysing these encounters, I argue that Cole seeks to bring the section of his readership that subscribes to prevailing understandings of cosmopolitanism as a holistic and universally-beneficial lifestyle choice toward a reconceptualisation of it as a mode of living that for many entails little choice, few social and personal benefits in the form of mutual understanding, and questionable potential for self-improvement through cultural exchange.

As cosmopolitanism is such a central element of the aesthetic of *Open City*, and to Julius's self-fashioning, it is worth disentangling the term's history and resonances. Cosmopolitanism is an ancient term, the meaning of which has undergone an accelerated evolution in more recent times and made it increasingly difficult to

define. It has its origins in the Greek words 'cosmos' – meaning universe, and 'polis' – meaning city. By extension, a 'cosmopolite' was "a citizen of the world" – a phrase credited to Diogenes of Sinope, the founder of the Cynic movement, when asked where he came from (*Britannica*, 2022: n.p.). The word gained prominence under the later Stoic movement, whose adherents rejected prevailing understandings around the city-state *polis* being one's entire *cosmos*, and of a dichotomy of Greeks and barbarians, instead emphasising kindness to strangers and captives as a means to show love to oneself. In turn, this laid the groundwork for the Stoic-inflected form of Christianity promulgated by the apostle Paul, who decreed in the first century BCE to the citizens of the ancient world that "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, New Revised Standard Version). Cosmopolitanism thus operated as a signifier of both identity and responsibility - a conceptualisation that largely holds true today amongst those who class themselves as cosmopolitans. Timothy Brennan, a scholar of cosmopolitanism who has never been slow to express his misgivings on the concept, summarises its trajectory from the Stoics to the seventeenth century thus:

> Links, on the one hand, between a humanist utopia of one-world culture and, on the other, explicit plans for the organization of a world government, have existed for a long time, and have done so precisely under the banner of cosmopolitanism. There have been murmurings of the world community of peace among the pre-Socratics and within the early Christian church, as well as among varied movements throughout the European Middle Ages. By the seventeenth century, cosmopolis came into its own vision of practical world government enabled by the philosophical and moral buttressing of intellectuals.
>
> (1997: 3)

Cosmopolitanism's next significant evolution would come with the publication in 1789 of one of the defining documents of both the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, which claimed that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good" (1789: Declaration 1). This was followed in 1795 by Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, which built on his earlier article

"Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Standpoint" (1784). In his proposition of cosmopolitanism as the basis of perpetual peace, Kant failed to anticipate or conceive of categories of violence that are not immediately visible, or experienced corporeally. The forms of extractive capitalism that are the bedrock of settler colonialism, for example, or the crushing consequences of cultural imperialism and mass marketing upon languages, epistemologies, literary and musical forms, rituals, and relationships. Cosmopolitanism, in short, was the socio-cultural logic of globalisation long before the term was coined.

In 1886, *The Cosmopolitan* was first published in New York, as a magazine aimed at affluent, middle and upper-class women that focused on home décor, fashion, travel, careers, and entertainment. 'Cosmopolitan' continues to be synonymous with the magazine in many parts of western society – thus adding to the term's entanglement with capitalist consumerism, as it became increasingly associated with worldliness and social capital achieved through consumption. The term, though, changed valency after the cataclysmic events of the First World War of 1914-18 and became used increasingly as an antisemitic slur, particularly the term 'rootless cosmopolitans', which was popularised by both Hitler and Stalin during the interwar period (Appiah, 2006: 4).

The term was rehabilitated after the Second World War, and was a philosophical and ideological touchstone in the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and the subsequent drafting of the *Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948 (Benhabib, 2016: 27-31). Since then, usage of the term has evolved in line with an accelerated pace of globalisation and ever-shifting social and critical responses to it. Anthropologist Paul Rabinow claimed in 1986 that cosmopolitanism should be defined as "an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates" (258). Inevitably, growing awareness of the climate crisis has affected perspectives on cosmopolitanism. Writing in 2006, German sociologist Ulrich Beck argued that the conditions of society in the new millennium required "a new historical reality [...] a cosmopolitan outlook in which people view themselves simultaneously as part of a threatened world and as part of their local situations and histories" (2006: 48). The onus is therefore placed on the individual to recognise their cosmopolitan responsibilities on a planetary scale.

Given its complex and contested history, Bruce Robbins asserts that “Situating cosmopolitanism means taking a risk” (Cheah & Robbins, 1998: 2). One difficulty with defining cosmopolitanism is its malleability, partly caused by its expanding multidisciplinary affiliations and reinterpretations. Kwame Anthony Appiah's 2006 book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* alone leaves us with "rooted," "toxic", “situated” and “contaminated” cosmopolitanisms, and Homi K Bhabha has built on the concept of "vernacular" cosmopolitanism – a celebratory form of multicultural ethics. Such polyvalency has led the postcolonial literature scholar Sam Knowles to refer to “the unsettling generality of cosmopolitan ideas” that causes the term to lose its “epistemological potency” (2007: 11). Similarly, economic geographer David Harvey has spoken of the “proliferation of hyphenated-cosmopolitanisms," and "counter-cosmopolitanisms" that mean the concept is

> particularized and pluralized in the belief that detached loyalty to the abstract category of "the human" is incapable in theory, let alone in practice, of providing any kind of political purchase even in the face of the strong currents of globalization that swirl around us.
>
> (2009: 79)

Recently, the shortcomings and non-reciprocal nature of the concept have been heavily criticised, not least by Isabel Soto and Souleymane Ba, who argue that

> The paradoxical (Cynics), critical (Stoics), and utopian (Enlightenment philosophers) aspects of cosmopolitanism in the long tradition of Western thought have no application as far as the African individual is concerned. Given the enslavement, discrimination, and systemic racism endured by Afrodescended peoples in Europe, Asia, and America, who would then venture to call them, even today, “citizens of the cosmos” while their movements around the world have been, and remain, subject to armed surveillance, military intervention, or a foreign government’s scrutiny?
>
> (2021: 302)

Use of ‘cosmopolitanism’ in the African context has thus largely been reserved to refer to those who would colonise, proselytise, and extract on the continent. The minting of the term, ‘Afropolitanism,’ was therefore taken by many as a necessary corrective. Its origins are contested, but the word was certainly popularised by

Ghanaian author Taiye Selasi in 2005 in an essay entitled 'Bye Bye Babar,' as a descriptor for young, often diasporic Africans whose global cultural tastes and mobility united them:

> They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos.
>
> (2005: n.p.)

This depiction, which celebrated worldliness and mobility while overlooking the continuing struggles of most Africans to obtain their fair share of material wealth and opportunities in the contemporary world, was soon to attract criticism, not least by Nigerian-Irish writer Emma Dabiri, who found the label "too polite, corporate, glossy," as it "reeks of sponsorship and big business with all the attendant limitations" (2014: n.p.) Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe was less explicitly critical of Selasi, but instead reshaped Afropolitanism into an ethico-political stance that placed less emphasis on new opportunities for mobility, and more on existing histories of pan-African cultural flows that reject Africa's definition on European terms (2007: 28).

Regardless of the multiple refinements, reshapings, and reiterations that cosmopolitanism has undergone, the British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah remains most synonymous with the term, thanks to the publication in 2006 of *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* - a work that responded to the pressing existential threat of fundamentalist terrorism. The book's presence hangs over *Open City* (published in 2011, set in 2006) in significant ways, aside from the fact that it is explicitly referenced in the text. *Cosmopolitanism* is rooted in the political and social concerns of the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and the subsequent US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Cosmopolitanism, for Appiah, might be boiled down to the question of how we live together harmoniously when our ideological differences can provoke mass murder, acts of terror, and war. He believes that cosmopolitanism is the route to mutual understanding and that

"What academics sometimes dub "cultural otherness" should prompt neither piety nor consternation" (2006: 27). Appiah leans heavily on the metaphor of 'conversation' and argues that "conversation between people from different ways of life" is the best way of examining the question of "what we owe strangers by virtue of our shared humanity" (2006: xix). The word 'conversation' provides a bridging point to Cole's novel, so much so that literary scholar Werner Sollors (2018) suggests that the word is a leitmotif, and an intertextual reference to Appiah's book. Sollors may well be right, as 'conversation' occurs forty-five times in *Open City*, often in conjunction with 'stranger.' The word's verb form, 'to converse,' comes from a Latin root that means 'to turn around' or 'to associate with' (Merriam-Webster, 2023: n.p.). This implies that a conversation is a form of collaborative speaking, wherein the participants reach collective conclusions, sway one another's opinions, or persuade each other of facts previously not accepted. The word carries connotative heft and, within a piece of fiction, the potential to evoke a sense of uncertainty, as well as the opportunity for a new presence in the text and an encounter that augments, decentres, or complicates the narrative.

In stark contrast to Appiah's celebratory take on cosmopolitanism, French anthropologist Michel Agier has argued that 'banal cosmopolitanism' is the dominant mode of experience for many migrants, characterised by uncertainty:

> In a global and hybrid world, where experiences of the unfamiliar and of uncertainty is practically everyday, this condition is born on the border, that is, in everything that makes for the border. This includes uncertain places, uncertain times, uncertain identities that are ambiguous, incomplete or optional, indeterminate or in-between situations, uncertain relationships. These are border landscapes, in which encounters and experiences bring into relation a here and an elsewhere, a same and an other, a 'local' fact and a 'global' context (simply meaning someone or something that comes from 'outside').
>
> (2016: 8)

Agier's work, *Borderlands*, lays bare the liminal, indeterminate nature of the spaces and patterns of living that refugees, asylum seekers and displaced migrants endure. It is a life far-removed from the mutually-enriching certainty of the mode of

cosmopolitanism propounded by Appiah, who states that "Cosmopolitans think human variety matters because people are entitled to the options they need to shape their lives with others" (2006:115), yet fails to make a single reference throughout his book to refugees or asylum-seekers and where their entitlements sit in the hierarchy of cosmopolitan needs. Instead, the reader is exhorted to converse with the stranger at every given opportunity. What, though, is the stranger?

To be a 'stranger' in someone's eyes is to be unfamiliar to them, either physically or socially. Someone can be a stranger when we have seen them many times, but do not feel that we know them. This can be as simple as not knowing their name. But a named person may still be a stranger, considered to be so because we do not know a sufficient amount about them. The word often carries an air of threat, connected as it is to the adjective 'strange,' a word that is generally used as a pejorative and that suggests an irregular quality that is off-putting, confusing, or unsettling. Etymologically, the word is connected to the Old French and Middle English words for 'foreign' or 'alien' and suggests something or someone that is out of place. This sense is furthered by the word's connection to the Latin root 'extraneus' and the Spanish 'extranjero' (external), from which we can identify the origins of the English word 'extraneous' – carrying the implication irrelevance or immateriality, of not being needed, of being surplus to requirements (Merriam-Webster, 2023: n.p.)

Postcolonial and affect theorist Sara Ahmed argues in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (2000) that when we 'recognise', in the verb's sense of 'to know again', someone as a stranger, they are not truly unfamiliar to us, but are being recognised in the ontological category of 'the stranger':

> Through strange encounters, the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger'. In the gesture of recognising the one that we do not know, the one that is different from 'us', we flesh out the beyond, and give it a face and form.
>
> (3)

Ahmed seeks to question the assumption that an ontology of strangers naturally exists and argues that, "to avoid such an ontology, we must refuse to take for granted the stranger's status as a figure" (3). Whether we engage in discourse that seeks to

expel the stranger as the 'origin of danger' or welcome them as the origin of difference, we are, Ahmed argues, complicit in ontologising the stranger as a category. As such, we partake in 'stranger fetishism'. This is Ahmed's repurposing of the Marxist category of commodity fetishism, where the social relations of labour are transformed into commodities that become figures detached from the social and material relations of their existence. Stranger fetishism, then, is "a fetishism of figures" that "invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts the stranger off from the histories of its determination" (2000: 6). In conceptualising stranger fetishism, Ahmed diagnoses a social and political norm rather than an obscure practice. It is a malign practice, but a common one, ultimately born out of fear. Ahmed points out that the common distinction drawn between anxiety and fear is that fear has a specific, approaching object as its root cause. She believes that this is not necessarily correct, and that even the fleeting 'passing by,' or complete absence of the object creates an impression that is different to anxiety (2004: 65). When we ontologise 'the stranger' as a figure and use the term as a singular referent, "it functions to elide the substantive differences between ways of being displaced from 'home,'" instead concealing differences and allowing "different forms of displacement to be gathered together in the singularity of a given name"(2000: 5). We can only avoid fetishising the stranger by considering the social relationships that the term conceals, and the ways in which

> the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel), as well as epistemic communities.
>
> (6)

Using Ahmed's concept as an analytical lens, I examine how Cole uses 'stranger' alongside 'conversation' to imply a failed reciprocity on behalf of his protagonist, but also an affective framework of anxiety that captures the post-9/11 mood of mistrust.

Teju Cole's *Open City* is set in 2006 – rendering its half-Nigerian, half-German protagonist Julius as a figure who, aside from being a confirmed admirer of Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (published that year), exists in the wake of Selasi's viral article (published the year before), and is the embodiment of its

diasporic, hybrid, educated and mobile young Afropolitan. There is a large and ever-growing body of scholarship around Cole's work, and much of it focuses on *Open City*. Some early critical readings of the novel, such as Katherine Hallemeier's "Literary Cosmopolitanisms in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*" (2013) and Bernard Ayo Oniwe's "Cosmopolitan Conversation and Challenge in Teju Cole's *Open City*" (2016), were quick to focus on the overtly cosmopolitan aspects of the narrative, but tended to take the superficial celebration of cosmopolitanism at face value. Pieter Vermeulen's work was amongst the first to probe the issue more deeply, first through "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism" (2013). Vermeulen's reading of Julius as a *fugueur* rather than a *flâneur* provides an evocative way of considering the murky, opaque aesthetic that Cole establishes through the inner workings of his character's mind. Vermeulen's coining of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' is a valuable descriptor for the narrator's use of travel, acquaintances, and high culture to create a persona of worldly refinement that is gradually exposed as shallow and without any ethical underpinning. Vermeulen followed this with a slightly broader survey of the field in a comparative article called "Reading alongside the market: affect and mobility in contemporary American migrant fiction" (2015) that locates *Open City* within a category of novels that "invite consumption as moving tales of migration and exile," but ultimately "frustrate the expectation of a significant emotional experience" because of how they "generate an intractable affective force that undercuts readers' identification with their protagonists" (2015: 278).

A similar idea, with a greater emphasis on urban geographies, was explored in Madhu Krishnan's "Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the Open City" (2015), that explores the catachresis and ambiguity inherent in Cole's use of the phrase 'open city' – initially a military term, now ironised in a postcolonial context. In Kristian Shaw's book, *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2017), he argues that while *Open City* may avoid challenging the systems of global inequality, through a sustained critique of Julius's unethical subjectivity it suggests that a critical awareness of cultural discrimination (and active individual agency to lessen marginalisation) are apposite goals for the globalised world (Shaw, 2017: 115). Souleymane Ba and Isabel Soto's "The problematics of openness: Cosmopolitanism and race in Teju Cole's *Open City*" adds to the analysis of both the cosmopolitan and Afropolitan aspects of the novel by asking

> whether the principles of openness, proclaimed in the title of Cole's novel, and cosmopolitanism, a seemingly compatible ideal, are not in fact self-referential illusions, cloaking systemic barriers between the West and the rest.
>
> (2021: 299)

The paper is part of an important tranche of new scholarship on Cole published in a special edition of *Atlantic Studies* in 2021, whose notable contributions include Dominique Haensell's exploration of movement and meta-history in *Open City* and Maria Lauret's considerations of Cole as a public intellectual and his novels as explorations of what she terms 'Afrocosmopolitanism'.

Most recently, Utitofon Inyang has made a valuable contribution to consideration of Cole's novel with "(In)Sights from Àwòrán: Yorùbá Epistemologies and the Limits of Cartesian Vision in Teju Cole's *Open City*" (2022), a paper that pays valuable attention to the often-overlooked influences of Yorùbá epistemology upon Cole's work. Inyang points out that scholarly readings of *Open City* invariably come from within a "dominant Eurocentric critical emphasis," meaning that

> the fact that ideas from Yorùbá culture contour many aspects of the protagonist's interactions and identity in *Open City*, such as his familial relations, his first language, and his childhood memories remain unaddressed, like a critical blind spot.
>
> (2022: 218)

Inyang argues that the Yorùbá concept of 'aworan' – a complex and multifaceted conceptualisation of sight, vision, and engagement with an artwork being a layered and reciprocal interaction between the work and the beholder – is a natural and necessary means to consider the novel. The case Inyang makes for reading *Open City* through this lens is persuasive enough for the idea to be applied to Cole's work across genres, and makes an important intervention that sheds new light on its Afropolitan elements, and how Afropolitanism can be reconfigured to emphasise local cultural production in place of the Eurocentric and consumerist tone of its origins.

The cosmopolitan identity and self-fashioning of Julius having already had such excellent close attention paid to them, in this chapter I examine the equally complex status of some of the novel's secondary, minor characters, for whom

cosmopolitanism is a banal reality, rather than a glamorous opportunity for personal development. The life stories of these characters, as mediated through Julius, provide tantalising insights into modes of existence and epistemologies far beyond his experience, in spite of the narrator's failure to probe their finer details. In his study of minor characters in literature, Alex Woloch argues that the disparity between the attention afforded to major and minor or incidental characters allows novelists to comment on social hierarchies and cultural prejudices (2003: 13-20). For Woloch, the minor character is essential to narrative as they mark the "appearance of a disappearance" and "enfold the untold tale into the telling" (42). That is to say, the fleeting appearance of a minor character within a fictional narrative provokes curiosity in the reader as to their broader background or motives, and furthers the sense of realism by replicating life's ephemeral encounters. I contend that Cole utilises the space between his protagonist's presentation of the strangers he encounters and the reader's potentially much deeper understanding of the history and symbolism attached to their backstories to further their engagement with the novel and destabilise their trust in the narrator. As such, it is a key component of what I term the 'aesthetic of uncertainty,' that coalesces across his intermedial body of work, uniting its disparate strands.

The 'space' between text and reader that I reflexively refer to in my previous paragraph is a choice of word born out of a schooling in literary criticism that often draws upon spatial metaphors and imagery in describing reader-critic relations to the text. Literary scholar Rita Felski is sceptical about the prevalence of spatial metaphors such as "standing back" or "digging down" in literary criticism, where we often see texts described as having "strata" or "strands" (2015: 52-54). She believes that critics keen to demonstrate their skill in deciphering or excavating hidden meanings "have often failed to take texts at their word – missing things that seem obvious yet are worthy of sustained attention" (55). In the vein of Felski, I approach *Open City* in the mode of 'postcritical' reading, where the reader places themselves in front of the text and examines how it relates to the social world. This, for Felski, is a process of "forging links between things that were previously unconnected" (173) and "creating something new in which the reader's role is as decisive as that of the text" (174). In reading *Open City*, I draw upon sources from various disciplines in order to situate the novel at a confluence of social and political concerns that relate to the figure of the 'stranger' and draw links between connected elements of the text that

are not hidden by the author, but left in the background to be found by the reader who is paying sustained attention. The novel, I argue, is one that invites deep engagement, knowledge and research on the part of the reader and that is illuminated by contextualisation of both heavily-foregrounded cultural, political, historical, and geographical references, and passing references that initially appear insignificant.

Through the minor characters of *Open City*, Cole offers a rich seam of subtext, allusion and background that is largely occluded by his protagonist but left available to the reader, who is given the option of filling in lacunae with their own knowledge, or of adding significant context through a relatively small amount of research. In doing so, Cole utilises realist fiction as a vessel for sustained engagement with social issues that is not foreclosed to the reader's direct participation with the text. There is, as such, an internal critique of superficial reading practices and expectations that seek clarity of plot, comprehension of motives, and a straightforward, digestible moral or point of the story. Literary scholar Margaret Cohen argues that certain texts do not require decoding so much as placement in the correct discursive context in which to best illuminate meanings that are relatively self-apparent but are nevertheless overlooked by the critic (2009: 51-75). In line with this, I apply what Edward Said terms 'contrapuntal reading': a method of reading texts "with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (1994: 78-9). For Said, a close reading "will gradually locate the text in its time as part of a whole network of relationships whose outlines and influences play an informing role in the text" (2019: 533).

This form of reading must suppose certain epistemologies or ideological stances from the reader in order to be both effective and affective. Statistically, one should not assume the reader to hold a well-informed, culturally-aware, broadly anti-imperialist, anti-chauvinist standpoint that renders them sympathetic to the plight of "the victimised Other." Yet, to read *Open City* without certain suppositions around its probable readership, even if seemingly speculative, is to miss its implicit conversational provocations to the reader and its ability to turn a mirror toward them in its narrative meditations on 'blind spots.' Narratology theorist Gerard Prince defined three types of readers. There is the *real reader* – who is holding and reading the book and is not fictitious or a projection. The *virtual reader* is the potential

person who the author writes for beyond themselves, on whom they "bestow certain qualities, faculties and inclinations…according to the obligations he (or she) feels should be respected" (in Tompkins, 1994: 9). Finally, there is the *ideal reader*, who would understand the writer's communicative intentions perfectly, due to shared ideology and perceptions (9). Cole's virtual reader and real reader may often align, aided by a literary marketplace keen for what Pieter Vermeulen terms 'migrant fiction' at the novel's point of release (2015: 273), and positive reviews from critics whose publications would attract the kind of university-educated, middle-class, broadly left-leaning readers best positioned to appreciate (or even simply recognise) the panoply of cultural and theoretical references that the narrator guides us toward.[3] Speaking of *Open City* as part of a cluster of new novels that he saw as encompassing 'the theory generation,' the critic Nicholas Dames wrote that theory "might be most interesting not when it changes the form of fiction, but when it becomes an uneasy part of fiction's *content*" (2012: 159). The central means of integrating theory into *Open City* comes through the protagonist's encounters with multiple minor characters, whose roles in the novel vary in length between a paragraph and a chapter.

Examining the role of minor characters in *Open City* involves consideration of what Alex Woloch calls "the dynamic flux of attention" between the protagonist and the incidental characters. It is the "distributed field of attention" of a novel's character systems that creates "tension between structure and reference generative of, and integral to, narrative signification." (2003: 17). As I will show, the ekphrastic assertions that scaffold Julius's aesthetic cosmopolitanism, combined with Cole's use of intertexts, expand the concept of 'conversation' by placing the novel in conversation with the reader; testing and rewarding knowledge, and inviting reader engagement through research. My reading of *Open City* takes the details, intertextual references, geopolitical context, and dialogic nuance provided at the surface level of the text to be a sufficient basis for consideration of its aesthetic and of Cole's attempt to provoke deeper reader engagement. Mieke Bal argues that

[3] *Open City* received extremely positive reviews from, among many others *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Observer*, *The New Statesman*.

> Fiction is a useful tool precisely to make the realities at stake tangible, so that they can be experienced on a profound level where cognition, understanding, empathy, and other forms of affect emerge
> (2021: 13).

Bal accepts reception theory's contention that the reader is in dialogue with the text, but argues that we first need to look at how the text is structured before we can examine their response to it (2021: 15-16). This chapter argues that Cole's use of minor characters as a means of widening the novel's lens beyond the inward gaze of its narrator - whose perspective often borders on solipsism, despite his penchant for ekphrasis and historical rumination – is a means of making the realities of banal cosmopolitanism and the border condition tangible.

The sense of empathy that Bal lists among the affects achieved through fiction has been the source of a certain amount of debate in recent years. Bal may well have been influenced by Martha Nussbaum, who defines empathy as an "imaginative reconstruction" of someone else's experience, whatever its emotion or outcome (2002: 302).). Under this understanding, most fictional literature should be viewed as innately empathetic, particularly that which is grounded in realism. Empathy, seen in this way, is the motive and guiding force behind the creation of fiction, as much as its desired outcome. Where this is complicated by Cole, though, is in the narrative restraint shown in the telling of his secondary characters' tales, as mediated through Julius's neutral, almost affectless voice. There is space left by Cole for the reader to form their own "imaginative reconstruction" of these characters' experiences beyond that provided by Julius, or seemingly by Cole.

Julius is swiftly established within the text as an educated, artistically-minded narrator whose reflections, digressions and expansions into ekphrasis, history, and memory match the rhythm of his apparently aimless walks around New York. His curiosity extends to people, yet he "encounter[s] the streets as an incessant loudness" (Cole, 2011: 6) and finds the sight of thousands of people "hurrying down into underground chambers" – the subway – to be "perpetually strange" and a "counterinstinctive death drive" that gives way to intense and disquieting thoughts:

> Aboveground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them

> for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified.
>
> (7)

Tonally, this marks a departure from the opening pages that details the routes Julius walks and the books and music that excite him by bringing us deeper into his interiority and alluding to his own 'unacknowledged traumas.' The ambivalence of Julius's relationship to strangers is thus established, and the push-pull dynamic between his cosmopolitan curiosity and intensely private nature remains throughout the novel. He seeks to avoid the crowds that throng around the city on marathon day, before reluctantly making conversation with a runner who has just finished (8). In learning that his next-door neighbour's wife had died some six months earlier without Julius noticing, he reflects upon the distance he has maintained from his neighbour and his emotional inadequacies with a sense of shame that subsides "all too quickly" (21). Watching a film on his own in the cinema, he feels himself to be "not alone, exactly: in the company of a hundred others, but all strangers to me" (29).

We learn early in the novel that Julius has recently ended a relationship with a woman named Nadége, whom he speaks of with a mixture of wistfulness and coldness. It is in a recounted memory of when the relationship was ongoing that we see Julius's first meaningful encounter with a stranger. He goes to a detention centre on the outskirts of New York at the invitation of Nadége with a group called 'The Welcomers,' described as "a mix of human rights types and church ladies," many of whom, he feels, have "that beatific, slightly unfocused expression one finds in do-gooders" (62). The centre is in a "grim," "ugly" and "industrial" landscape of wire fences, abandoned construction equipment and prefabricated buildings and the detention facility "a long, gray metal box, a single-story building that had been contracted out to Wackenhut, a private firm, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security" (62). This low-key observation on the privatisation of state carceral facilities is not expanded upon by the narrator, but draws attention to a phenomenon that has grown exponentially since the time of the novel's setting and is widely perceived as being to the particular detriment of the Black community in the USA (Ramirez, 2015: 217–236). The context is thus established of an oppressive space, run for profit, in which discriminatory and exploitative practices are rife.

Queueing to enter the detention facility along with the other members of the Welcomers group, Julius and his cohort are joined by an eclectic group of "recent immigrants: Africans, Latinos, Eastern Europeans, Asians," who he describes as the people "who would have cause to visit someone in a detention centre" (63) – an assertion that indicates that most clandestine migrants to the USA make their journeys in the hope of joining with an existing network of friends, family, and compatriots. "Everyone," Julius informs us, "with the exception of the Welcomers, seemed to be there to see family members" (63). "Oversize, bored, brusque mannered" security officers who "made no pretense of enjoying their work" usher visitors from an airless and harshly-lit "purgatorial waiting room" for forty-five minute visits to detainees. In Julius's case he is assigned to Saidu, a Liberian man in an orange jumpsuit with "a broad white smile" who is "as good-looking, as striking in appearance" as anyone Julius has ever met (64). Saidu's opening question as to whether Julius is a Christian is met with slight bemusement from the narrator who "hesitated, then told him I supposed I was" (64) – indicative of a character who chooses the path of least resistance by providing the preferred answer, rather than a true one, to a man who wishes to be prayed for. There is no mention made in the rest of the novel of Julius's religious beliefs, aside from early references to Yorùbá cosmology that would not, strictly speaking, be compatible with Christianity.

Julius's conversation with Saidu is presented as a report on the Liberian's experience. There are few words directly spoken by Julius, but he notes that when listening to Saidu he "encouraged him, asked him to clarify details, gave, as best I could, a sympathetic ear to a story that, for too long, he had been forced to keep to himself" (64). Julius's desire for clarity in Saidu's story is an apparently contingent part of providing sympathy, as he sees it. This is the first indication that transparency, and what an adjudicator might deem the 'legitimacy' of a migrant's narrative, is of significance to Julius, and that he may identify as a gatekeeper to America more than his distaste for the physical surroundings of the detention facility has indicated. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed states that

> the limits of disgust as an affective response might be that disgust does not allow one the time to digest that which one designates as a 'bad thing.' I would argue that critique requires more time for digestion. Disgust might not allow one to get close enough to an object before one is compelled to pull away.

(Ahmed, 2004: 99)

Julius, repeatedly expressing his disgust at his surroundings, effectively begins the process of pulling away from the circumstances of the detainees before he has spoken to anyone.

Saidu's journey of over 5,000 kilometres across the north-west of Africa takes an indirect route from the Liberian capital, Monrovia, to the Spanish exclave of Ceuta, passing through Guinea before an interim period of stasis in Bamako, capital of Mali, where he spends an indeterminate amount of time, estimated at around six months, living on scraps and sleeping under tables (65-67.). His story – or, at least, Julius's account of it – is occasionally rich in incidental details and, at other points, entirely lacking in specifics. He does not recall his journey from Gbarnga in northern Liberia to Bamako in Mali, and we learn little of his trip of over 4,000 kilometres in the back of a truck with various men from neighbouring countries (67) There is verisimilitude to this narrative approach from Cole, as trauma and exhaustion mean that displaced migrants often struggle to recount certain details of their journeys, precisely the unacknowledged traumas Julius earlier speaks of during his discomforting epiphany in the subway.

Julius, prone to expansiveness when detailing matters of personal interest, can be seen in his dealings with Saidu and other strangers to miss the nuance and deep context brought to bear by even modest insight into some of the places and people that come up in conversation. Liberia is mentioned by Saidu as having four letters in common with America (64-5), but the two countries' connections go far beyond that. Anthropological field research conducted by Micah Trapp has shown that "an enduring transnational entanglement between the United States and Liberia has shaped the contemporary processes of homemaking" for displaced Liberians to such an extent that anyone in a refugee camp who has attained a certain standard of material comfort is referred to by other Liberians as being "already in America" (Trapp, 2015: 37-9). The association of the USA with wealth and opportunity is by no means unique to Liberians, but there is a particularly deep affiliation with the country for Liberians that comes from the country's foundation as an American colony.

The establishment of Liberia was not an act of repatriation, but an attempt to form a new American colony in West Africa by the American Colonization Society, who sought to rid the USA of the freed Black slaves, who had become extraneous to their image of the new state, by settling them in a west African colony, procured with a mix of finance and force. Most freed slaves, however, were unwilling to leave the USA and settle in a new colony that, in most cases, was distant and culturally distinct from their place of origin. There was a certain amount of success, though, in recruiting a small number of primarily middle-class, free Black men, who had been denied success in the USA by its endemic racism. Consequently, many of the eventual settlers were American-born, and often of mixed race, leading to the gradual emergence of a new class system where those with lighter skin and European surnames ruled over less privileged settlers, and the autochthonous, newly-colonised people, for whom the implications of liberty in the name 'Liberia' were bitterly ironic (Trapp, 2015: 34).

The character of Saidu can thus be read as a possible descendant of African-American slaves who returned to a designated colony from the land where they had been enslaved and then liberated. His ancestors having been forcefully brought to the USA and then detained there, he is now denied entry to the country. With the threat of deportation back to his port of origin of Lisbon in Portugal, and likelihood of subsequent expulsion from the European Union, Liberia belies its name and becomes a potential penal colony for Saidu. The Liberian Declaration of Independence of 1847 proposed that citizens of the new state should feel no identification with Africa or African people, as the foundation of the state was to be understood as an act of American philanthropy, leading the transplanted citizens to differentiate themselves from the 'aboriginals' socially, racially, and politically (Mbembe, 2021: 51-2). Cole's choice of Liberia as Saidu's point of origin, rather than one of the many other countries whose citizens have been swept into the ongoing crisis of forced displacement, is loaded with historical layers and ironic implications and reinforces *Open City*'s position as a novel of socio-political critique that invites reader engagement in the form of a process termed 'creative cognition,' whereby knowledge is retrieved and recombined to form new understanding. For Julius, though, the process of letting Saidu's narrative unfold is tempered with scepticism:

> 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)

The implication on Julius's part that a soldier from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia would be less deserving of asylum than an "innocent refugee" presupposes a degree of agency on the part of soldiers that they likely would not have had, along with a casual judgment of which side of the Liberian civil war was in the right, and therefore deserving of refuge. His fascination with Saidu's story whilst choosing to mistrust him is indicative of the extractive mindset with which Julius approaches interactions with those less privileged than him, where cross-cultural conversation is delimited by a coldly-restricted level of empathy. Ahmed believes that the "production of authentic and inauthentic migrant perspectives clearly relies on assumptions about what migration already is, as well as what it *should be*," creating a "hierarchy of perspectives on migrancy" that detaches it from lived social circumstances and assumes that "there are better and worse ways of 'being a migrant'" (2000: 82).

While Appiah rejects the idea of 'cosmopolitanism' being used as a synonym for 'globalization' or 'multiculturalism' and proposes that it be understood as something closer to its original meaning ,'world-city,' Agier builds upon this when he asserts that this world-city must be understood as

> the sum of all the border situations experienced today…that form the common social contexts where singularities and inequalities, projects of life and representations of the other, are born and confront one another.
>
> (2016: 157)

This is the very aspect that Julius's version of cosmopolitanism, filtered through Appiah, lacks: the understanding that "the cosmopolitan context of cosmopolitics" as Agier sees it, is that "the relationships that are formed at border situations can no longer be explained by the ethnic or national context in which the discovery of other peoples has been conceived in the past" (157).

In this context, Cole's insertion of Saidu into Julius's narrative casts a shadow over the rest of the novel and serves as a rebuke to the western liberal who seeks to accrue their "human variety" through brief encounters with the suffering and subjugated. Julius's false promise to return to visit Saidu exposes the cheap consolations of his preference for aesthetic cosmopolitanism over the banality of lived experience and lays bare the falseness of Julius's sympathetic cosmopolitan persona - further emphasised through his admission that he had used the experience as a means of furthering his allure to Nadége - the young woman who would briefly be his girlfriend:

> 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.
>
> (2011: 70)

Saidu, moving tortuously and stealthily through countries, evading border controls, and repeatedly trapped where he does not want to be, is a truer 'cosmopolitan' than Julius, in the sense that his experience marks what Agier sees as the 'cosmopolitan condition' – being at the border. Far from a luxurious or culturally-enriching experience, Saidu lives a life of 'banal cosmopolitanism' – a pattern of slow or stunted border crossing, held up by geopolitical and biopolitical concerns that pay scant regard to the circumstances and needs of the individual.

Appiah argues that consensus is not a required goal of conversation, "especially not about values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another" (2006: 85). The value of Julius and Saidu's conversation in terms of their adaptation to one another is surely negligible, though. Their conversation's impact on the reader is to potentially leave them suspicious of both men, due to Julius's implication that Saidu's story has been falsified for sympathy, and his own inward admission that he had no further use for conversation with Saidu, once he had harnessed the encounter's potential for romantic capital with Nadége. Michel Agier argues that the stranger "occupies a position of knowledge by taking the place of an observer, on the edges and at the limits," that therefore means they "can always be considered as the emissary for the interests of strangers in general" (2021: 102). Reading the strange encounter of Julius and Saidu in this way, the question arises as to whether the

protagonist perceives Saidu as an emissary for the interests of strangers, and thus as a threat.

Julius's encounter with a Moroccan man, Farouq, is foregrounded by Cole's contextualisation of Brussels as a postcolonial city struggling with a sharp rise in racism and right-wing politics. It is a city whose "peculiar European oldness - manifested in stone" (Cole, 2011: 97) belies what Julius sees as its popular image as a newly built, technocratic city, central to the foundation of the European Union. Its fine architecture had been "spared the horrors" (97) of war that were visited upon many rural parts of Belgium, its surrendered status as an "open city" meaning that it did not become "another Dresden" (97). Instead, it was allowed to remain largely "a vision of the medieval and baroque periods," (97) whose development as a major European capital and the colonial headquarters of the Belgian empire inexorably led to it becoming the busy, cosmopolitan city that Julius finds in 2006. What surprises him, though, is the large presence of Arab peoples, whose countries did not have colonial relationships with Belgium - in contrast to the more easily-explained sizeable Congolese population (98). Julius notes the prevalence of women wearing headscarves or veils, observing that "Islam, in its conservative form, was on constant view" (98).

The current "European reality" of "flexible" borders is the explanation Julius settles on for the volume of migrants whose presence he perceives as contributing to the "palpable psychological pressure in the city" (98). His landlord, Mayken, makes what Julius assumes to be a "snide" reference to Arabs and Africans making up four percent of the city's population, implying that they outnumber the Flemish population - of which Mayken's name and "Dutch vowels" (96) suggest she is part - by four to one. But he also believes it to be a "modest estimate," (98) based on the demographic he sees on the streets and public transport:

> Even in the city center, or especially there, large numbers of people seemed to be from some part of Africa, either from the Congo or from the Maghreb. On some trams, as I was to quickly discover, whites were a tiny minority.
>
> (98)

The "some trams" aspect of this sentence is significant, as it could either speak to a ghettoising process in Brussels, whereby certain ethnicities are highly concentrated

in one particular area, or a false perception on the narrator's part - suggestive of his discomfort at feeling in the minority and an unconscious identification with whiteness. These observations establish the scene of racial tension that Julius describes following the murder of a Flemish 17 year-old by two men, believed to be Arab, which stokes hatred, social division, and leads to electoral gains for the right-wing, anti-immigration *Vlaams Belang* party - whose name translates as 'Flemish Interest' (Wingfield, 2008: 104). When it transpires that the murderers were Polish citizens, the public debate moves on to whether they are gypsy or Roma (Cole, 2011: 99). Cole's language remains highly neutral in these passages, with his narrator maintaining his cool, detached persona and showing no tonal indications of discomfort. As Julius moves, though, to describing further "ugly incidents" (99) of attacks on non-white citizens of Belgium, his discomfort becomes more apparent. He notes how centre-right politics moved towards the divisive, derogatory language of *Vlaams Belang* and a phrase as nakedly racist as “murdering, thieving, raping Vikings from North Africa” is accepted approvingly by parts of the mainstream media (99). Relatedly, on his visit to Brussels’ central Parc du Cinquantenaire, Julius’s language strengthens when he states that it was "built by a heartless king" (100). Under a bronze plaque depicting the first five Belgian kings, he observes how the inscription in French is not triumphal in its phrasing but expresses "gratitude for triumphs achieved" (100). Belgium's official postcolonial stance, we are now given to understand, is to reflect on its wealth and political pre-eminence as being born out of good fortune, rather than violent and extractive conquest. Such an observation is a subtle corrective and rejoinder to the preceding descriptions of Brussels; initially awestruck by its architectural greatness and seemingly incognisant of the methods of capital acquisition that lay behind the city’s construction.

Sara Ahmed defines ‘encounter’ as “a meeting which involves surprise and conflict” (2000: 6). In using encounter as a means of avoiding stranger fetishism, Ahmed suggests that we ask how “identity itself become(s) instituted through encounters with others that surprise, that shift the boundaries of the familiar, of what we assume that we know” (7). Julius’s encounter with Farouq is, on the surface, exactly that: an attempt to move beyond what he assumes he knows and to “shift the boundaries of the familiar” for himself. Close reading of the text shows this to be a failed attempt, wherein the protagonist’s need for control and a sense of superiority means that he

only attempts to impart western, US-centred values and knowledge, leaving the ideas and embodied experience of Farouq obscure to him, if not the audience.

Julius first meets Farouq while making phone calls from the Internet café where the Moroccan man works, as part of Julius's "desultory" efforts to track down his grandmother (101), who he believes to be living in Brussels. Farouq is described as "cleanshaven, with a lean, pleasant face and lank black hair" (101). Their initial interaction is purely transactional, but upon returning to the cafe the next day, Julius makes the decision to engage in conversation with Farouq:

> 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? Good, he said, with a quick, puzzled smile. As I stepped out onto the street, I wondered how this aggressive familiarity had struck him. I wondered, also, why I had said it. A false note, I decided. But soon after, I changed my mind. I would be going into the shop for a few weeks, and it was best to make friends; and that interaction, as it turned out, set the tone the following day.
>
> (101-2)

Greeting someone as "my brother" is not an 'act of aggressive familiarity,' when it forms part of their natural pattern of speech, but Julius's perception of it as such suggests that there is a performative aspect to his use of the words that mark it as something more cynical than code-switching.[4] His only other use of 'my brother' occurs when he defensively responds to a taxi driver who accuses him of not showing mutual respect to his fellow African (40). When Julius mulls over whether his greeting to Farouq was a "false note" or not (102), we gain insight into his approach to social interactions and his motivations in cultivating or encouraging any form of friendship. Addressing this awkward interaction, Pieter Vermeulen believes it serves as an example of how "the novel chronicles Julius's difficulty managing his distances from and attractions to the lives of others," while proving that "the aesthetic experiences that are explicitly invoked to aid this management of affective and cognitive distance turn out to be of no help"(2013: 50). Julius, an apparent subscriber to Appiah's strand of cosmopolitan thought, appears to be readying

[4] Code-switching, also known as 'code-mixing' is the practice of moving freely between languages, dialects, and social registers, usually in speech. See Auer, 2002.

himself for a sustained anthropological project of learning about a stranger through conversation that is as much a part of his self-construction as is his bricolage of artistic and literary interests and high cultural references.

Striking up conversation with Farouq, Julius asks where he is from, incorrectly guessing at the major cities of Rabat and Casablanca when he learns that he is Moroccan (Cole, 2011:102). The author's choice of origin for Farouq is significant, but is not expanded on in the text. Tétouan is a port city on the north coast of Morocco, located close to the major shipping routes to Spain. As such, it lies a relatively short distance from the European mainland and is inextricably linked to movement between the continents of Africa and Europe – and therefore the crisis of forced displacement that has dominated European political discourse over the past decade, to which Cole's subsequent work has made frequent reference.[5] Tétouan lies within an hour's drive of Ceuta, referenced earlier in the novel during Julius's encounter with Saidu, for whom it is his illegal gateway to Europe. Ceuta is a Spanish exclave that, along with Melilla, forms the only land border between Africa and Europe. Ceuta is the port of entry for many Europeans visiting attractive tourist sites such as Tétouan, and these visitors pass strict border controls that largely seek to block African citizens with no EU visa from travelling in the other direction. A UNESCO heritage site, Tétouan's history as a Phoenician-Roman city, then a twin city of the Moorish capital of Granada in southern Spain (Britannica, 2022: n.p.) makes it a nexus of the Arab, African, and European worlds. Farouq, we learn, is a proudly Moroccan man who deeply values the intellectual achievements of Arab thinkers such as Averroes, while also being strongly engaged with the ideas of European philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, and Walter Benjamin.

Julius misses the opportunity to discuss the implications of Farouq's being born at this intersection of European and Arab worlds. Instead, he falls back on assessment through cultural capital. Farouq, when Julius meets him, is reading a secondary text on Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History' that he is keen to discuss. Julius, though, proffers the fact that he has recently read a novel by the Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun, presumably *The Last Friend*, referenced in the opening chapter (Cole, 2011:

[5] Cole's collaboration with photographer Fazal Sheikh, *Human Archipelago*, is his most notable work on forced displacement, but essays in *Known and Strange Things* and *Black Paper* also contain strong commentary on the issue.

5). Farouq believes that Mohammed Choukri's *For Bread Alone* provides a better account of the realities of Moroccan life, and describes Choukri and Ben Jelloun as rivals, "who have had disagreements" (103). This is a curious characterisation, given that Choukri died in 2003, three years before *Open City* is set, and omits the fact that Ben Jelloun provided the French translation of *For Bread Alone*. Farouq's dubiousness around Ben Jelloun's "big reputation" that comes from the "certain poeticity" of being a writer in exile disconcerts Julius, who offers another Ben Jelloun novel, *Corruption*, as evidence of the author's engagement with everyday life that he feels Farouq fails to perceive (103).

Julius is taken aback by the unexpectedly "crisp, uncertain intellectual language" employed by Farouq in his critique of Ben Jelloun's "mythmaking," "oriental stories," and detachment from the quotidian (103), leading the reader to suspect a unidirectional approach to Ahmed's "shifting the boundaries of the familiar." Struggling to keep up with Farouq's line of argument about the influence and demands of Western publishers and their market, Julius mirrors Farouq's use of 'oriental' as a rebuke when he says

> It's always difficult, isn't it? I mean resisting the orientalizing impulse. For those who don't, who will publish them? Which Western publisher wants a Moroccan or Indian writer who isn't into oriental fantasy, or who doesn't satisfy the longing for fantasy? That's what Morocco and India are there for, after all, to be oriental.
>
> (104)

The repetition of 'oriental' naturally leads the conversation to the thinker synonymous with the word, the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. When Farouq expresses his admiration for Said in relation to a quote from Golda Meir about there being no Palestinian people, Julius suppresses his instinct to correct him on what he suspects is a misquote, as he is not entirely sure (105) - a pattern that is repeated throughout their interactions. As their conversations unfold, it becomes increasingly apparent that, despite his best attempts, Julius never fully has the measure of Farouq. Talk moves on to the Black Rights leaders, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Expressing a preference for the more militant ideology of Malcolm X, Farouq expresses his dislike of the Christian ideal of 'turning the other cheek,' as

espoused by King, and rejects "the expectation that the victimized Other is the one that covers the distance, that has the noble ideas" (105) – a phrasing that Julius finds strange, yet more resonant than in an academic context (105). Farouq, he believes, is

> as anonymous as Marx was in London. To Mayken and to countless others like her in the city, he would be just another Arab, subject to a suspicious glance on the tram
>
> (106)

Further reflection, though, prompts Julius to change his mind and decide that what Farouq received on the trams was not a quick suspicious glance, but "simmering, barely contained fear." He becomes aware that he also could suffer the rage of right-wing racists and "be taken for a rapist or "Viking"" (106). This brief moment of empathy very quickly gives way to a further statement of differentiation by Julius, where his American identity and mode of thinking presents an opportunity for unwarranted superciliousness. Unable to initiate the conversation that he wishes about the *Vlaams Belang* party and what life had been like in the wake of recent acts of violence, because Farouq is speaking with a colleague, Julius abruptly expresses frustration:

> It suddenly occurred to me that, even if he had been alone, I wouldn't have wanted to talk. He, too, was in the grip of rage and rhetoric. I saw that, attractive though his side of the political spectrum was. A cancerous violence had eaten into every political idea, had taken over the ideas themselves, and for so many, all that mattered was the willingness to do something. Action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone, the way to catch the attention of the young and recruit them to one's cause, was to be enraged. It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?
>
> (107)

The phrase "cancerous violence" jars with Julius's generally measured descriptive style, feeling excessively emotive. It was a term often deployed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in the months preceding the US military invasion of Iraq, and was subsequently parroted by Fox News and other right-wing media outlets

(Jackson, 2005: 155). While interpretation of Julius's unspoken accusations and of the dynamic between he and Farouq is made complicated by Julius providing the seemingly ethical and authoritative voice, there nevertheless is an aggressive leap in logic in his phrasing and a gap between what Farouq has said and how it has been summarised. Internalising and reproducing the language and rhetoric of American right-wing politics, Julius participates in an updated form of orientalism that became particularly virulent in the post-9/11 years: a characterisation of Muslims as inherently violent. Addressing rising Islamophobia and pejorative depictions of Muslims, Said wrote in 2004 that "Whatever else is true about the Arabs, there is an active dynamic that can't easily be caricatured as just one seething mass of violent fanaticism," (2019:523) and, as such, excoriates those

> who have seen in the atrocities of 9/11 a sign that the Arab and Islamic worlds are somehow more diseased and more dysfunctional than any other, and that terrorism is a sign of wider distortion than has occurred in any other culture
>
> (523)

Julius is depicted as one of these people, presenting as highly informed and sympathetic to the plight of the victimized Other, but inclined to an unconscious bias towards an essentialist understanding of Islamic culture as intrinsically violent. Farouq; citizen of Tétouan, multilingual, transcontinental, cross-cultural in philosophical influences, is nevertheless strictly categorised by Julius in a reductive and unjustified fashion that speaks of a need to ensure that the stranger remains a stranger. Sara Ahmed argues that

> The stranger is someone we have recognised as 'a body out of place' and is therefore a category within knowledge rather than coming into being in an absence of knowledge.
>
> (2000: 55)

Farouq remains a body out of place in Julius's perception, and a category formed through *a priori* knowledge, as opposed to any constructive process of listening with openness to change. Julius's delusion of enthusiasm for intellectual communion with Farouq is belied by an inability to relinquish any control and to regard Farouq as an intellectual equal, or more. Upon his return to New York, Julius will post Farouq a

copy of Kwame Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. In it, Appiah argues that

> The great lesson of anthropology is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree, but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end.
>
> (2006: 99)

"Sharing a human social life" and "making sense" of Farouq are at the core of Julius's intentions in engaging with him, as they socialise together and gradually share more of their innermost thoughts, even as their conversations tend to revolve around the ideas of others. Tellingly, Julius's next encounter with Farouq runs counter to the narrator's previous claims of violent and divisive rhetoric and is more in line with Appiah's idea of the Internet helping us to "affect lives everywhere" and "live together as the global tribe we have become" (2006: ii), reinforcing the cosmopolitan sentiment that Farouq's experience and intellectual interests gradually make apparent to the reader, if not to the narrator. Farouq proudly informs Julius of how many people have been using the Internet café to call home for New Year or Eid, showing him a screen that logs simultaneous calls to Egypt, Senegal, Colombia, Brazil, France and Germany. This "wide spectrum" of calls "looks like a fiction" (Cole, 2011: 112) to Julius, suitably impressed. Farouq sees the café as a "test case" of the possibility of harmonious living, where differing values operate side-by-side and remain intact (112).

Open City is set in the heyday of the Internet café as a phenomenon – a point in time where usage of the Internet and email, instant messaging, and cheap international phone calls was growing, but not yet accessible to many people in their homes or on handheld devices. The first iPhone would not be available for another year, and those who rented apartments or lived precariously were unlikely to have Internet access at home. The confluence of different nationalities, cultures, and languages of which Farouq speaks admiringly was born out of necessity rather than preference, and the prevalence and significance of Internet cafés would become far lower as smartphones became desirable, then essential (as they gradually became more affordable) objects, and wireless Internet began to be seen as a basic household and business amenity.

Farouq's symbolic reading of the Internet café as a 'test case' for society recognises it as an inherently cosmopolitan space but fails to recognise the potential for market forces to deconstruct these spaces by providing the means for the general public to voluntarily segregate as soon as they could afford to. Ironically, Farouq provides his own counterpoint when he tells an anecdote of working as a janitor in an American school in Brussels, where he impressed the principal of the school during an informal conversation with his understanding of Gilles Deleuze's waves and dunes theory and was invited for a follow-up meeting, only to then be ignored (113).

Despite this, we learn that Farouq has pursued the goal of becoming a translator of Arabic, French, and English while also doing courses in media translation and film subtitling, working towards his "deeper project," "the difference thing" of understanding how "people can live together" as happens "on a small scale" in the shop where he works (113). Julius, though is distracted by Farouq's declaring "as I told you, I'm an autodidact" (113), recalling that that Farouq had only previously used the term to characterise Mohamed Choukri, not himself. This is correct (104), if we assume Julius to be a reliable narrator whose initial account is accurate, but Farouq's mistake seems unimportant. Yet this "certain imperfection in Farouq's recall," combined with other "minor" and "irrelevant lapses" allow Julius "to feel less intimidated by him" (114). This is a telling narrative disclosure that reminds the reader of Julius's insecurities and points to his discomfort at being bested intellectually by a young Arab man. As if discerning this, Farouq talks of how his experience at the American school put him in mind of Francis Fukuyama's idea of the end of history:

> It is impossible, and it is arrogant, to think that the present reality of Western countries is the culminating point of human history. The principal had been talking in all these terms — melting pot, salad bowl, multiculturalism — but I reject all these terms. I believe foremost in difference.
>
> (114)

There are strong echoes here, and in Farouq's previous observations on diversity and difference, of Edward Said, who wrote in 2003 that

> The whole point about human diversity is that it is in the end a form of deep coexistence between very different styles of individuality and experience that

> can't all be reduced to one superior form: this is the spurious argument foisted on us by pundits who bewail the lack of development and knowledge in the Arab world.
>
> (2019: 524)

In the interactions between Julius and Farouq, Cole presents a narrator wedded to Eurocentric epistemologies engaging with a character whose religious and cultural background, lived experience, philosophy, and reading habits help him bridge any divide between Christian, Judaic, atheistic and Islamic modes of thinking, much as Said's did. "I wanted to be the next Edward Said!" says Farouq, in a later declaration of his thwarted academic ambitions (Cole, 2011: 128). But it is a philosopher of antiquity to whom Farouq next directs Julius's curiosity:

> Do you know Averroes? Not all Western thought comes from the West alone. Islam is not a religion: it is a way of life that has something to offer to our political system.
>
> (114)

Averroes is yet another pointer, along with Tétouan and Mohamed Choukri, to Farouq's trans-continental perspective and, indeed, that of Islam in general. His name is a Latin corruption of Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), an Andalusian philosopher regarded as "one of the great figures of philosophy within the Muslim contexts, and a foundational source for post-classical European thought" (Ben Ahmed and Pasnau, 2021: n.p.), whose work in uniting Aristotelian thought with Islamic theology had impacts in the fields of logic, medicine, metaphysics, rhetoric, jurisprudence and beyond. Farouq emphasises Averroes's influence on him whilst acknowledging that he is "a bad Muslim" who currently does not "practice very well" (114). He anticipates Julius's unspoken misgivings about his ideology, saying

> I am a pacifist. I don't believe in violent compulsion. You know, even if someone is right here with a gun pointed at my family I cannot kill this person. I mean it, don't look so surprised. But, my friend, he said in a tone that indicated he was wrapping things up, let us meet the day after tomorrow. You're a man of philosophy, but you're an American also, and I want to talk to you more about some things.

(115)

This passage sees Farouq assume control of the dialogue of enquiry between the two men, his casually dismissive “you’re an American” reversing the dynamic of assumptions and preconceptions seen in Julius’s unvoiced thoughts on ‘cancerous violence’ and taking on a pedagogical nature. The American, simultaneously curious but closed toward Farouq’s ideas, needs to be educated, or rehabilitated, through further conversation.

Cole's stylistic decision not to use quotation marks to indicate direct speech means that the reader has to pay close attention to whether we are being made privy to a character's exact words, a paraphrasing of them, or Julius's internal thoughts and digressions (and it is not always clear which of these are vocalised). Julius's final encounter with Farouq sees Cole make particularly effective use of this technique, allowing a conversation between three men - Julius, Farouq, and Farouq's boss and friend, Khalil - to feel fragmentary and alcohol-influenced, full of ambiguity, cliché, and misunderstanding. Julius joins the two men in a Portuguese bar, upon Farouq's invitation. Farouq and Khalil sit in a haze of cigarette smoke, drinking a strong Belgian beer called Chimay, which Julius also orders (117). The scene is set as both cosmopolitan and transgressive - alcohol and nicotine being prohibited substances in Islam - a fact already acknowledged in Farouq’s self-image as a "bad Muslim" (114).

Khalil, Farouq’s manager and close friend, is a more abrasive presence in the novel than his employee and conversation with him is a further destabilisation of the already delicate power dynamic between Julius and Farouq, exposing Julius’s need for control. Khalil prefers to engage in conversation only through French, a language that Julius repeatedly avoids using, describing his ability as “poor” (88). It is unclear whether the conversation proceeds in broken French or in English, or whether Farouq acts as interpreter, as is implied when he translates “gun control” (118) for Khalil when Julius lists the central issues of concern for the American left. This is in response to Khalil inquiring whether the USA has a political left, and his subsequent jibe about it being “further to the right than the right here” when Julius responds affirmatively (117). There is more humour to be found in Khalil’s interjections than in the contributions of either Julius or Farouq, a note of mischievousness that the narrator either doesn’t pick up on or is unable to match in levity.

Khalil's clichéd provocations do not always read as sincere expressions of his thought, but as a means of testing Julius's logic and commitment to his position. This position, broadly speaking, is that the September 11 terror attacks were an act of unprovoked aggression against the entire Western world, fuelled by the cancerous violence that harnesses young Muslim men's rage and rhetoric. Khalil provides grist to this mill when he and Julius argue over Khalil's sentiment of support for Hamas:

> And Hezbollah, I said, you support them, too? Yes, he said, Hezbollah, Hamas, same thing. It is resistance, simple. Every Israeli home has weapons. I looked at Farouq. He looked at me levelly and said, It's the same for me. It is resistance. And what about Al-Qaeda? I said. Khalil said, True, it was a terrible day, the twin towers. Terrible. What they did was very bad. But I understand why they did it. This man is an extremist, I said, you hear me, Farouq? Your friend is an extremist. But I was pretending to an outrage greater than I actually felt. In the game, if it was a game, I was meant to be the outraged American, though what I felt was more sorrow and less anger. Anger, and semi-serious use of a word like *extremist*, was easier to handle than sorrow. This is how Americans think Arabs think, I said to them both. It really saddens me. And you, what about you, Farouq? Do you support Al-Qaeda, too?
>
> (120)

Here, the lack of quotation marks means it takes a moment to resolve which character speaks the line "This man is an extremist," which is only clarified once Julius says "I was meant to be the outraged American." His "sorrow" at Khalil and Farouq confirming "how Americans think Arabs think" belies the fact that Julius is keen for the Arabs he is in conversation with to subvert the dominant American public image of Muslims - "the expectation" as Farouq had previously put it, that "the victimized Other is the one that covers the distance, that has the noble ideas" (105). During a discussion around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the legacy of the Holocaust, Farouq and Khalil argue that Europe lacks freedom because "If you say anything about Israel, you have your mouth plugged with the six million" and suggest that death is ultimately incommensurable, while also listing genocides that had higher death totals than the Holocaust (122-3). As their declarations become looser and more provocative, such as Farouq's declaration that "America is a version of Al-Qaeda" (121), Julius feels a reassuring increase of control:

> The statement was so general as to be without meaning. It had no power, and he said it without conviction. I did not need to contest it, and Khalil added nothing to it… It might have meant more weeks back when the one speaking was still an unknown quantity. Now he had overplayed his hand, and I sensed a shift in the argument, a shift in my favor.
>
> (122)

Farouq has become a known quantity to Julius, who has turned conversation into competition as a means of reaffirming American hegemony and his own refusal to bridge the gap between he and the victimised Other. The tables are turned once again, though, when Farouq raises another thinker Julius is not familiar with:

> Have you read a man called Norman Finkelstein? I shook my head. Look him up if you have the chance; he is Jewish, but he has written strong study of the Holocaust industry. And he knows what he is saying, because his own parents survived Auschwitz. He is not anti-Jewish, but he is against the profit making, and the exploitation that the Holocaust is used for. Do you want me to write the name down? You'll remember, you're sure? All right, read him ,and tell me what you think.
>
> (123)

Farouq's mention of Finkelstein is significant, given that *Open City* is set in 2006, but published in 2011. The "study of the Holocaust industry" that Farouq refers to is *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, published in 2000, but Finkelstein's biggest controversies occurred in 2007 and 2008, when his public arguments with the Zionist and law professor Alan Dershowitz saw unsubstantiated accusations of being in league with Holocaust deniers made against Finkelstein, and the ultimate refusal of De Paul University to grant him the tenure that their own board had voted for (Abraham, 2014: 80-87). These would have been anachronistic details for Cole to have included in the novel, but when Farouq urges Julius to look up Finkelstein, it is an implicit invitation from Cole to his reader to do likewise, to be in conversation with the book. The writer plays with the possibility of the reader encountering facts that update Farouq's minor summary of Finkelstein's work, whilst also bolstering the point that both Farouq and Khalil make about censorship and freedom of speech. Finkelstein's controversies speak to

American institutional discomfort around those who question the occupation of Palestine by the Israeli state and the support it receives from the American government in doing so. His fate is illustrative of the apparent lack of free speech around the Holocaust and the ease with which any criticism of Israeli state actions can be conflated with antisemitism – even against a Jewish academic such as Finkelstein, whose parents were concentration camp survivors.

Julius proposes that Farouq and America "are ready for each other" (Cole, 2011: 126) even as he recognises the naïve romanticism of Farouq benefitting from the "inferno" of "encounters with American freedom and American injustice" (126), and fears the logistics of having Farouq as a guest and the realities of his likely experience as "a solitary North-African Muslim with leftist beliefs" (126). Punctuating this, however, are Julius's recurring mental digressions into Farouq's physical similarity to the actor Robert de Niro, particularly in the role of the young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather II* (121). This is raised first in an inward deflection of Farouq's contention that "the Palestinian question is the central question of our time" (121) and recurs sporadically for the rest of their encounter. Farouq, having revealed his suspicion that his MA thesis was rejected by his Brussels university due to anti-Muslim prejudice in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks (128) is understood by Julius as a wounded "would be radical," whose pain leaves Julius seeing him as "the young Vito Corleone" moving across rooftops with "a single murderous action in mind" (129). As Farouq drains his glass and their encounter draws to a close, his categorisation in Julius's mind is complete:

> There was something powerful about him, a seething intelligence, something that wanted to believe itself indomitable. But he was one of the thwarted ones. His script would stay in proportion.
>
> (129)

In anticipating Farouq's future, or lack of, Julius reaches for a popular American reference, and devalues Farouq's knowledge and experience by placing his own opportunities in the American academic system as the most desirable future for a young Arab man. Far from shifting the boundaries of Julius's assumed knowledge, Farouq is fully ontologised as a stranger.

The minor characters of *Open City* embody elements of a form of cosmopolitanism that increasingly brings tragedy. There have been over 40,000 deaths in border situations since the year 2000, many of these by drowning at sea (Agier, 2021: 121) – a consequence of a form of biopolitics that has been pithily summarised, paraphrasing Foucault, as "make live, and let die" (Lemm & Vatter, 2014: 12). Cole, recognising the problem and the trajectory of the crisis long before it had been diagnosed by many, skilfully locates his novel at the nexus of cosmopolitan conversation as a proposed solution to post-9/11 tensions, per Appiah, and the growing politicisation of the stranger as an alien figure.

Open City is a work of fiction, as are the pervasive narratives in political and media rhetoric of the extraneous, alien stranger. This is an ontological category reified from a collective and long-standing anxiety around our failure to convincingly conceive of, and legislate for, mobility for all. This anxiety would feed into the growth of nativism and a form of right-wing populism that brought about the seismic, socio-politically divisive events of Donald Trump's presidency and the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Cole, through his migrant minor characters, draws our attention to our relationality and complicity in the ongoing tragedy of forced displacement by creating figures whose entanglement in colonial histories and geographies connects them to complex and unfinished pasts. The hierarchy of readerly attention, though, is where the potency of this redress occurs. In mediating the narratives of Saidu and Farouq, in particular, through the eyes of his diegetic narrator, Cole indicts the reader who unquestioningly trusts Julius. If it is only by the end of the novel, and the persuasive allegation by Moji that Julius is a rapist, that the reader starts to distrust the narrative voice, then their distrust has either arrived too late, or invited a second reading. In the final chapter, Julius refers to his own 'blind spots', foreshadowing the preoccupation of a later book, the hybrid image-text work *Blind Spot*. The significations of Cole's minor characters' brief, tautly-constructed biographies number amongst Julius's blind spots and are occluded in the narrative voice, but need not remain obscure for the informed or curious reader. Narratologist Mieke Bal argues that

> Fiction is not the opposite of reality. It is a special inflection of reality, the latter enriched by the imagination. In this way, art is able to provide visions,

> including knowledge, that other forms of knowledge production have difficulty in achieving.
>
> (2021: 35)

The imagination-enriched knowledge that is produced when reading *Open City* will, for a certain proportion of Cole's readers, pertain to their perception of cosmopolitan experience as a mode of self-fashioning and of their awareness, or lack thereof, of the banal cosmopolitanism that occurs in border situations where mobility becomes threatened or thwarted. The tangible realities of cross-cultural encounter are exposed as unidirectionally beneficial to the participant with greater wealth, education, social status, and potential for unhindered global mobility. Where Julius nakedly gains the kind of cultural and social capital that he contentedly lists as achievements through his conversations and encounters with strangers, he is seen to give little in return. Instead, the minor characters emerge as the ones whose stories and backgrounds invite the reader's interest and compassion. Poet and critic Claire Schwartz believes that

> Texts are sites of return, not because their certainty calcifies ways to be, but because their uncertainty is infinite, and to commune with that uncertainty is to enlarge the possibilities of becoming.
>
> (2022: n.p)

It is in the conversation that takes place between the reader, the narrator, and the opaque presence of the novel's minor characters that communion with uncertainty takes place – creating doubt, ambiguity, and a space for second thoughts that gives *Open City* its particularity and resonance, and its centrality to Cole's aesthetic project. In the following chapter, I consider how Cole built upon these foundations through the revision and wider republication of his 2007 work, *Every Day is for the Thief*, and how its indeterminate form was shaped by the literary market.

Chapter Two

Reality Hunger: generic indeterminacy, intermediality, and the literary market in *Every Day is for the Thief* and 'Water Has no Enemy'

> How does the real get into the made-up?
>
> Ask me an easier one."
>
> - Seamus Heaney, 'Known World'

Following the success of *Open City* in 2011 there was an inevitable market demand for Teju Cole to produce further novels; a demand that his publishers were keen to meet. It took until 2023 for Cole to publish an entirely new novel, *Tremor*, but he satisfied the appetite for new work first through the wider publication of *Every Day is for the Thief*, which had previously only been published in Nigeria by Cassava Republic Press in 2007. The book's status as a novel, though, is complicated, due to its origins as a blog that Cole had kept during a trip to Nigeria, and the presence of Cole's own photographs throughout the text. In this chapter I examine how Cole's ability to complicate the boundaries of fact and fiction and the multifaceted techniques he uses in doing so are key constituents of the overarching aesthetic of uncertainty that I argue characterises his work. Along with *Every Day is for the Thief*, I also close read Cole's essay 'Water Has No Enemy' and consider how its publication in *Granta Magazine* was indicative of the interest among certain readerships in intermedial and generic complexity, and uncertainty of factuality. Further to this, I consider how such publications can confer literary acceptability, and even consecration.

Within my thesis of establishing Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty this chapter deals with what is arguably the most crucial driving force in cultural production, but one that is easily elided within literary studies: the market. The chapter contends that Cole's work, from its earliest iterations, was both a rejection of certain expectations and conventions of literary publishing, and an acquiescence to others. I examine how commercial forces shaped Cole's creative output and, in doing so, extend the aesthetic of uncertainty to the category of publishing by arguing that Cole's aesthetic takes shape from an at-times awkward positioning within the industry. I contend

that whilst his hand was inevitably strengthened by the critical and commercial success of *Open City*, Cole's early work had to grasp for autonomy and was shaped by, amongst other factors, the "reality hunger" of an early-2000s reading audience that demanded genre clarity and exerted pressure on publishers to bring renewed specificity to the division of fact and fiction.

Literary scholar Sarah Brouillette, whose work on establishing the literary market of postcolonialism is key to this chapter, argues persuasively that "there is a relationship between the material aspects of a book's construction and the meaning any reader might glean from it" and that, additionally, "the seemingly extratextual world surrounding books," such as "the institutions and circumstances that make up the field of postcolonial literature, is also material for the construction of specific kinds of meaning" (2007: 2). Building on this, I contend in this chapter that Cole harnesses the reader's knowledge of certain material aspects of his books' construction and their concomitant perception of its indeterminacy as a creative force – one that underpins his aesthetic of uncertainty.

My argument is that Cole's work amounts to a deconstruction of ideological certainties through aesthetic techniques. As a materialist reading of his work, this chapter draws upon recent key texts in the so-called 'sociological turn' in literary studies and considers how critics, lecturers, and curriculum-creators treat the market category of 'postcolonial literature.' At issue here is the degree of self-reflexivity that the academic and professional literature industry shows, and the extent to which the academy recognises its entanglement within the publishing industry.

My intention is not to investigate or interrogate the "truth" of any of the events in Cole's works, be they nominally fiction or non-fiction. Rather, it is to examine how the slippage between the real and the made-up serves to create generic indeterminacy on the page and uncertainty in the mind of the reader. While Seamus Heaney's question, posed in the chapter's epigraph, can never be fully answered, I examine the narrative strategies, photographic techniques, and stylistic choices that enable Cole to put the real into the made-up and thus complicate the binary of fiction and non-fiction for his readers. I look at how popular and long-standing ideas about narrative empathy influence perception of approaches to storytelling and of the role that the contemporary publishing industry plays in shaping literary forms. I place particular emphasis on the genre of 'autofiction,' and of the market demands in the

nominal field of ‘world literature,’ where works by writers of African origin are invariably located. In doing so, I show that the indeterminate categories that Cole’s work falls into are a necessary component of his examination of what he terms “the limits of seeing,” by throwing open to question the mindset and reading strategies through which contemporary audiences approach literature, photography, and other art forms. In reading Cole’s work, I consider David Shields’ concept of ‘reality hunger’, alongside the ideas of Lydia Davis on essay writing and the portrayal of truth, and Paul Crosthwaite and Dan Sinykin on the influence of the publishing industry on literary form and content.

American author David Shields, in his mould-breaking manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, weaves together his own thoughts on representations of reality in art and its accompanying techniques with a wide selection of quotes from artists and writers, in a fragmentary style. Citations for all external quotes are only provided in an appendix that Shields claims his publishing house's legal department insisted upon against his will, and that he asks his audience not to read (2010: 209). "Every artistic movement from the beginning of time," he believes, "is an attempt to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art" (2010:3). Shields argues that an

> artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet unstated one is forming; whose key components include “spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation… self-reflexivity… a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real. (5)

Shields' book was, aside from an embrace of the burgeoning reflexive artistic movement that he discerned, also a rebuke to a counter-balancing form of literary puritanism that was growing contemporaneously. It was epitomised by the James Frey scandal of 2003, an affair to which Shields makes scattered explicit references throughout *Reality Hunger*, and which animates its central thrust. Frey is the author of the memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, which details a life of alcoholism and addiction, before culminating in the redemption of sobriety. It was popularised through endorsement from Oprah Winfrey, whose televised book club held, and continues to hold, the capability of increasing a book's sales by millions. After an investigative journalist exposed several of Frey's anecdotes as being heavily-

embellished or entirely fabricated, Winfrey turned on Frey, publicly castigating him for betraying the trust of his readers and her viewers, who took inspiration from his tale of carnage and recovery. Public indignation was stoked, and Frey's publishers made the decision to offer refunds to anyone who had purchased the book, provided they posted a specified page as proof of ownership, with the likelihood of anyone having kept their receipt long having passed. The decision was made by booksellers and libraries to continue stocking the book, but some chose to categorise it as 'fiction,' and later printings contained an 'author's note' from Frey that unambiguously stated that parts of his narrative were invented. (Rich, 2006: n.p.)

Frey's mistake (or that of his publishers), perhaps, was that he had not marketed his book in a similar manner to that of Dave Eggers's meta-memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). After its earliest editions, all copies of the book were sold with an addendum, *Mistakes We knew We Were Making*, in which Eggers outlines and clarifies each embellishment or distortion of the truth in his narrative, as he sees it. Eggers's tactic appeared at the time to be an act of postmodern literary gamesmanship, acknowledging the fragility of memory, and sportingly conceding the necessity of imaginative embellishment in constructing a coherent and readable narrative. His book arriving two years before Frey's, though, there may also have been an element of prescience and commercial nous on his and his publisher's part - cognisant of what Shields labels 'reality hunger': a reader-driven commercial demand for a clear sense of factual, historical accuracy in certain forms of writing that runs counter to his belief that "The origin of the novel lies in its pretense of actuality" (2010: 13). Shields does not quote or refer to Cole in his book, but one suspects that he might have made reference to Cole's then-obscure first novel, had he read it, or his second, *Open City*, had it been published sooner. The following section explores how Cole's first foray into fiction illuminates some of the anxiety around form and fact that continues to dog the publishing market in the wake of the James Frey scandal, whilst providing him with an opportunity for formal innovation and the genesis of his aesthetic of uncertainty.

Every Day is for the Thief is Cole's first novel, despite not always being referred to as such. Originally published only in Nigeria by Cassava Republic Press in 2007, it received a wider audience after the critical and commercial success of his *Open City* in the USA and Europe in 2011 led to Penguin Random House (in the USA) and

Faber & Faber (in the UK and Ireland) publishing a new edition in 2014. The anonymous narrator describes his experiences of returning home to Lagos after several years in the USA. Repeatedly frustrated by the corruption and criminality he encounters, he is sharply critical of the way in which culture and history are treated by both the Nigerian government and people. The novel does not have a discernible plot or story arc, perhaps due to its origins as a blog that Cole kept during his own return visit to Nigeria from the USA. Despite this, Cole describes the book as 'fiction,' whilst maintaining that the strict delineation between fiction and history is "an Anglo American obsession" – unnatural in art, and commercially-driven:

> It's not at all a natural way of splitting up narrated experience, just as we don't go around the museum looking for fictional or nonfictional paintings… It's the least illuminating thing we could ask about their works…Writers know this too, but I think they knew it a lot better before the market took such a hold. (2016: 79-80)

What, precisely, is the market that Cole describes and how has it taken a hold in a way that has led to authorial anxiety around the clear division of fiction and non-fiction? Sarah Brouillette pithily suggests that the idea of the market can be read "as a metonym for the late capitalist economy and its intrusions into every global locale" and that, in the postcolonial context,

> it is not too much to say that the image of the market reader, like the image of the ignorant and obnoxious tourist, is one inevitable product of postcolonial guilt, a guilt which is one correlate of the ethical challenges presented by analyses of postcolonial cultural markets. (2007: 21)

Brouillette both builds on and diverges from the work of Graham Huggan, who identifies a trend he calls the "anthropological exotic" through which African literature is filtered and through which it acquires much of its market value. For Huggan, the "anthropological exotic" is a perceptible and consumerist mode of writing that "invokes the aura of other, incommensurably 'foreign' cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the 'foreign culture' itself" (2003: 37).

Cole's status as both an African and an American writer means that the ideas of Brouillette and Huggan on the postcolonial market do not always transfer smoothly

to discussions of his work. Cole's evolving position, post-*Open City* in 2010, as an art critic, essayist, and photographer, means that he has avoided certain pigeonholing as a 'postcolonial novelist'. Nevertheless, his first two novels were undoubtedly sold under the categories of African literature. While speaking of as broad a category as 'African literature' smacks of what Gayatri Spivak calls the "sanctioned ignorance" of lumping all the literature of a vast and diverse continent into one basket (Spivak, 1993: 279), it is undeniable that it exists as a publishing, marketing, and academic category. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines it as "the body of traditional oral and written literatures in Afro-Asiatic and African languages together with works written by Africans in European languages," before further broadening the term to include "Modern African literatures [that] were born in the educational systems imposed by colonialism, with models drawn from Europe rather than existing African traditions." (2024: web, n.p.).

To better understand this, though, it is worth considering the long history of the novel as an entity. Cole's suggestion, in the above quotation, that the novel had traditionally occupied more ambiguous territory around the division of true and invented narrative certainly holds water. Steven Moore, in his extensive two volume *The Novel: An Alternative History* defines the novel as "a book-length work of fiction" (2013: vii), traces the settling of the form to the early-modern period, and shows very clearly that the form had involved metafictional and autofictional dimensions from very early on. *Don Quixote*, published in 1605, is, for Moore, "unquestionably about the art of fiction, both writing and (mis)reading it" (2). He detects autobiographical elements in some of its episodes (5), as well as throughout the major novels of the next two hundred years through Wieland (87), Moritz (116), Cao Xuejin (467) , Margaret Cavendish (586), Kirkman, (595), Dunton (619), through to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which he views as a repackaging and extension of various contemporary trends in non-fiction adventure and survival narratives into a kind of "spiritual autobiography" (657), as is *Moll Flanders* (662). Mary Wollstonecraft's 1788 autofictional (although Moore does not use this term) novella, *Mary: A Fiction* is, for Moore, "daringly defiant, beginning with its subtitle" (840).

Wollstonecraft's method of indicating genre in her subtitle allowed her to differentiate her novel from the popular romance novels of the time and distinguish her protagonist from those portrayed by the likes of Richardson and Rousseau (841).

It also established the crucial role of what Gerard Genette calls the 'metatext' in reader response. Wollstonecraft recognised that our experience and perception of a text begins before the narrative commences, and that the material at the threshold of a book is indicative of its direction, and causes the reader to set their expectations accordingly. The metatext, for Genette, is one of a number of 'paratexts' that include

> A title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals, whether allographic or autographic" (1997: 3)

Consideration of all of these paratexts is germane to the study of Cole's work, but of central significance is the subcategory of 'metatext' that Genette identifies: a declaration of genre along the lines of "this book is a novel" (8). In a subtler version of Wollstonecraft's aforementioned subtitle, it is only at the fourth use of the title *Every Day is for the Thief*, printed on the book's cover, and two separate, prefatory pages, that we see a declaration of 'FICTION,' capitalised but printed in small, faint grey letters in Cole's novel. This subtitle, in fact, occurs only after the first photograph in the text, printed on the verso of the full title page, which lies on the recto. Overleaf again, there is a strong declaration on the copyright page:

> *Every Day is for the Thief* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Although this is a relatively standard publisher's declaration, it reads as somewhat disingenuous in light of how Cole has subsequently discussed this work, and when we consider that a certain number of readers would know that the text originated in a blog based on a real trip that Cole took, and that resemblance to certain locales is therefore definitely not "entirely coincidental," but a key part of the process of the real getting into the made-up. More to the point, it contradicts Cole's author's note in the original Cassava Republic version of the text:

> Writing about Lagos presents unique challenges. What could possibly be said about this most complex of cities that could compete with the reality? *Every Day is for the Thief*, written after I revisited Lagos after a long absence, is a

> novel. I have sought to capture a contemporary moment in the life of the city in which I grew up. Much of the impetus comes from real-life events. The unnamed narrator of the story is similar to me in certain ways, and different in some other ways. But he and I are not the same person. My hope is that the fictional story I've told through him is, in the deepest sense of the word, true. (2007: 6)

Here, the author tentatively disassociates himself from his narrator, whilst acknowledging their commonalities and the factual basis of many of the novel's events. Around the time of the publication of the second, revised version of *Every Day*, Cole told the *New York Times* that he believed the concept of "the novel" to be "overrated," and that "the writers I find most interesting find ways to escape it" (2014: n.p). Yet the various paratextual markers that insist on Cole's book being a work of fiction therefore logically also insist on the reader encountering it at its threshold as a novel. The sentiment of the novel as an entity from which to escape may also account for Cole's next seven published works being unquestionably *not* novels, before his return to the category with *Tremor* in 2023, itself a novel that blurs fiction, autofiction, and metafiction in even more overt and complicated ways. One senses that Cole's feelings about the publishing industry not allowing freedom for unprescribed reader-response mirror those of Gérard Genette, who opines in *Palimpsests* that

> the text is not supposed to know, and consequently not supposed to declare, its generic quality: the novel does not identify itself explicitly as a novel, nor the poem as a poem…One might even say that determining the generic status of the text is not the business of the text but that of the reader, or the critic, or the public. (1997: 4)

In the context of the contemporary fiction market, the sentiment of allowing the reader to determine the genre of a text feels admirably naïve. Genette's point, made in a work first published in 1982, came at the start of a changing era for the publishing industry, one that the literary historian and critic Dan Sinykin characterises as an 'age of conglomeration.' In *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*, Sinykin identifies 1980 as the Year Zero of the conglomeration era, the point when "market segmentation and sales prioritization had become the norm" (2023: 27), and argues that the

process of large multinational publishing houses buying up and subsuming smaller ones has led to a narrowing of the range of fiction being commercially published, and of ever-tighter adherence to certain narrative and generic conventions, as formal inventiveness was shunted to the side in favour of conventional genre fiction that guaranteed the sales figures which were demanded by boards and shareholders only interested in the bottom line. A damning statistic cited by Sinykin reveals that over the ten year period from 1986 to 1996, sixty three of the top one hundred best-selling novels in the USA were written by only six different authors (27). Sinykin's focus, though, is not only on what the mass-marketisation of fiction did to commercial novels, as he examines the publishing alternatives to financial incentives:

> nonprofit presses, which rose in response to conglomeration, rejecting its values, needed, in the 1990s, to embrace multiculturalism, leading authors who published in that sector to write dazzling allegories in which they toyed with the racialized demands placed upon them through their narratives. (2023: 10)

This is a consequence of what Paul Crosthwaite, a scholar who specialises in the intersection of economics and literature, terms the "neoliberalization" of the literary market that creates not only "a mounting demand to satisfy perceived market preferences" amongst publishers, but has also had a significant impact on how writers go about their work, as it has become "the core subject matter of many of the most significant works of contemporary fiction." Crosthwaite believes that ambitious contemporary writers may stand ideologically at odds with the market, but also harness its logics for their own aesthetic or politically radical objectives, "even as such authors also highlight the market's more general tendency to foster orthodoxy and conservatism" (2022: 179).

Teju Cole can certainly be numbered amongst these writers, as his novels have all contained aspects of metafiction and autofiction that make them difficult to categorise and that have complicated their promotion and dissemination in certain senses, from his earliest published work. *Every Day is for the Thief* was first published by Cassava Republic Press, based in Lagos, whose editors identified something saleable in the concise and singular style that marked Cole's blog posts on his return to Lagos and asked him to convert it into a longer text. Cassava Republic was founded upon an ethos of publishing pan-African writing, with an emphasis on

ensuring that the books they sell are both affordable and attractive to their primarily Nigerian audience (Wallis, 2016: 43-4). Cassava Republic, and other independent African presses, were reacting to a rising global market for 'world literature' that saw the continent's most talented writers absorbed into an Anglophone publishing scene centred in the USA and UK that made their books unaffordable or inaccessible to the very people they were ostensibly about. Accompanying this, there was a market pressure to create a type of story that aimed to both gently shock the reader, while confirming their expectations under the guise of autodidacticism and self-improvement. As Madhu Krishnan puts it:

> Since its inception as a global market category, African literature, or more precisely the concept of African literature, has been bound up intimately in the production, circulation and dissemination of a more generalized idea of Africa.
>
> (in Brouillette, 2017: 137-8)

There was thus a need for African presses to both work with a shared Pan-Africanism, whilst also emphasising the specificity of their locations, balancing this all the while with local market appetite for high-end production values and a broader perspective. African literature scholar Kate Wallis argues that Cassava Republic's decision to publish *Every Day* in 2007 was, in large part driven by the financial necessity of selling books to Nigerian third-level students who studied prescribed African literature texts. Its publication therefore "brings into clearer view the complex and shifting relationship between value, audience and the medium in which literature is produced" (2016: 44), reflecting market conditions and pragmatism as much as public taste and popular demand.

The 'reality hunger' that David Shields diagnosed as a dominant force in prestige publishing at this time was, in part, driven by a pervading belief that reading literature is a means of increasing one's empathy – especially with those in exotic or unfamiliar circumstances. The question of 'empathetic response' from a reader, and what this might mean in tangible terms, is one that I touch upon in several chapters. Narrative theorist Suzanne Keen argues that "readers' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion" (2007: 88). It is important to note that for Keen, who has written at length on the topic, readerly

empathy does not automatically imply a compulsion to support those who have suffered in the manner the text depicts, to change habitual behaviour, or to engage in any altruistic acts. The empathetic response that a text may trigger, then, is a purely emotional, possibly fleeting reaction that Keen believes the reader is more likely to allow themselves when they believe that a story is fictional. (73) In this regard, Cole's text will elicit very divergent affective responses of highly variable durations, depending on the reader's prior knowledge of the text's composition and their level of engagement with, and trust in, its paratexts.

In *Every Day is for the Thief*, an overt-yet-subtle indicator of the fictionality of the narrative is the recurring presence of a man in a sky-blue baseball cap in very different locations. Each of the four times he appears, he is described as being blind or having trouble with his eyes, but the narrator never engages directly with him and he remains an unspeaking minor character. He is first seen rubbing his eye in the Nigerian consulate in New York (2014: 6) where the narrator endures the frustration of encountering petty corruption while obtaining a visa. He is later seen sitting next to the narrator on a bus in Lagos, where his eye is now "swollen" (38). Most tellingly, his blindness unnerves the narrator when he sees him in a field, despite there being no indication that he remembers him from the previous occasions:

> Six men sit in the shade of a large Indian almond tree. One of them, a young man in a sky-blue cap, is blind in one eye. For some reason, I keep thinking his damaged eye is rolling over to look at me. (60)

Finally, he is seen working as a carpenter on the penultimate page of the novel, with "one eye closed as he works" (161). These slightly inconsistent descriptions incrementally build an image of a narrator who is attentive to small details at hand, but lacking in memory – a portent for the narrative arc of Julius in *Open City*. Speaking about this character in an interview, Cole notes that it is rare for readers of *Every Day* to notice the blind man's recurrence "because a lot of people are reading this almost as if it's a memoir, they're just reading past certain strategies inside the book," despite him being "a very obviously fictional character even in a book that has an extensive non-fictional framing to it." For Cole, the half-blind man in the sky-blue cap is "a witnessing angel who is there in many scenes as someone else who's watching. The things he's watching are hard to watch in general. He's also not really of our world, he's here and he's not here" (Naimon, 2020: n.p.). Cole's awareness of

the novel being read as non-fiction by a sizeable proportion of his audience is significant, as it sheds some light on the compositional process of the book. The blind man does not feature in the early blog version of the book, indicating that it began life as a more conventional travel journal, with Cole adding the fictive and mildly supernatural element of the blind man as he adapted the book for publication.

An aspect that further complicates the question of genre in *Every Day* is its use of photographs made by Cole. These are printed in black and white and are placed between most, but not all, chapters of the novel. They do not appear to directly relate to the events or impressions recounted in the narrative but sit obliquely beside the text. In his consideration of the novel, Gabriele Rippl argues that

> By blurring the link between text and photo and by often disconnecting the photos from their very rare, tentative, and rudimentary ekphrastic references, Cole leaves his readers puzzled, unable to relate word and photographic image in traditional ways. This complication of the reader's reception of text-cum-picture is an effective way of appealing to him/her to become involved co-producers of meaning, even though meaning remains inconclusive. (2018: 481)

The idea of Cole's readers as "co-producers of meaning" is a guiding principle of his aesthetic of uncertainty – spanning his entire body of work. It is, of course, arguable that all dialogical and experimental works of literature – if not all works of literature - ultimately compel their readers to become co-producers of meaning. Rippl's phrasing evokes reader-response theory, particularly Peter J. Rabinowitz's concepts of 'authorial audience' and 'narrative audience.' Rabinowitz's model follows on from Barthes' idea of 'the death of the author' in suggesting that reader-response theory does not need to be hostile to readings of authorial intention, as he believes that the majority of readers make sincere efforts to understand what the author is saying. When a reader is able to infer which literary conventions the author is operating with or against, and these match the author's implications about these conventions, effective authorial reading has occurred. Such a model therefore places significant value upon reciprocity and interaction between the author and their audience (1998: 37-39).

This model, which Rabinowitz outlines in *Before Reading*, moves beyond Wayne Booth's idea of the 'implied reader' to a more nuanced paradigm. Rabinowitz classes

readers into two groups which are not mutually exclusive. The 'authorial audience,' is what we are part of when we recognise a text as fictional and therefore not real. Here, the reader thinks alongside the author and engages with the craft and thought processes behind the text's composition while becoming a member of the author's hypothetical ideal audience. Alongside this, there is the 'narrative audience' who suspend their disbelief and accept the claims to truth of a work of fiction, following its inner logic, or that of its characters. This is the observer position we occupy while engaged in reading (40-41).

If, as Cole believes, literary conventions have led many of his readers to approach *Every Day* as a memoir, then the novel belongs for them in the category of what Suzanne Keen terms 'disguised fiction': types of novels that purport to be non-fictional, classic examples of which being Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or Defoe's *Diary of a Plague Year*. This appears counter-intuitive, as *Every Day* contains the paratextual signifier of 'fiction,' as noted previously. In a time, though, where autofiction and fictionalised memoirs have become commonplace, it is not surprising that a reader might choose to find autobiographical elements in a book that purports to be a novel. In the case of *Every Day*, where some early readers might have followed the text's beginnings in blog form (and many later readers are fully cognisant of it), it is especially understandable. Thinking through Rabinowitz's model, Keen argues that

> In the case of disguised fictions, the beliefs of the narrative audience may possess peculiar powers. In some instances, they may override the usual situation of the authorial audience, where we know at the outset that the text at hand is fictional. When narrative audience and authorial audience hold identical beliefs about the truth of a text that happens to be fictional, then all the formal qualities that are supposed to distinguish fiction from nonfiction have failed to be discerned. (2015: 130-1)

Keen argues that the inherent flexibility of a readership is still tempered by their knowledge and expectations, meaning that

> Their experience and judgment of a narrative in part stems from their successfully recognizing the position that the text asks them to assume, whether they collaborate by joining the authorial audience, or whether they dissent by deliberately reading against the grain. The interpretation of

> paratexts is thus one of the most important activities a reader undertakes, even when it is done automatically and rapidly. (136)

This being the case, it is important to note that any reader could easily have missed the minor and consciously understated declarations of fictionality in *Every Day*, or chosen to disregard them based upon prior knowledge of Cole's blog, or of interviews and other publicity material surrounding the book's publication. The presence of Cole's own photographs speaking both directly and obliquely to the events recounted in the narrative not only complicates the question of *Every Day*'s factual/fictional breakdown, but of what kind of text we are encountering even if we choose to treat it as based on real experience. Or a fuller experience, suggesting that the photographs tell the true story of life in Lagos, as Cole's sees it. Cole's choice of making the photos black and white is a departure from the common practice of depicting Africa in bright, even garish, colour. The emphasis in such pictures is on vivacity, vibrancy, lucidity, and transparency. Black and white photographs, on the other hand, convey seriousness, subjectivity, sombreness and, very often, a layer of opacity or obscurity. "Darkness is not empty," writes Cole in both *Blind Spot* and *Black Paper*, "it is information at rest." Much information is allowed to rest in *Every Day is for the Thief* – the genesis of Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty. The uncertainty here is the reader's: confronted by images that withhold so much and subvert the tropes of African travelogue (or, more specifically, the western traveller in Africa), there is an element of speculation expected from the reader. If not, their acceptance of opacity is required. There is a gap between the image and the text, and a gap between what could have been shown in the images and what Cole has chosen to show. As in *Blind Spot*, Cole's skill is not only in the technical proficiency of his photographs, but in what is left obscured and ambiguous - the allure for the audience lying in what they don't know.

Photographs taken by the author of a work are more commonly an aspect of travelogues or photobooks. There is, however, a certain amount of precedent in using photographs in works that are nominally novels, most pertinently in WG Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*, which both contain a mix of found images and Sebald's own photographs. These images are of central importance to the reader's experience in fully enjoying the books and should not be understood as merely

decorative, as Nick Carr, Curator of Photographic Collections at the University of East Anglia, points out:

> Photography was an essential part of Sebald's creative process. The images in his books are not just "illustrations" added to support the text but are as fundamental to his work as the words with which they share the page. In this respect, the pictures of the Suffolk coast that punctuate *The Rings of Saturn* are like postcards sent by Sebald to the reader. (McNay, 2019: np)

As Sebald was an undeniable influence on Cole's work,[6] Warr's idea of images functioning as postcards to the reader is equally apposite to *Every Day is for the Thief*. Cole believes Sebald's writing "tested, much more than that of most other writers, the boundaries of what we consider fiction," and that the presence of photographs in his work can appear to be entirely testimonial in nature "until we notice the slight fracture between the claim in the text and the photograph." As such, the images help to "create the uncanny, destabilizing mood of his books: it must all be true, we think, but we know it can't all be true" (Cole, 2016: 81-2). In *Every Day*, a similar 'slight fracture' exists between the photographs and the text. The images consequently create a similar sense of instability and uncanniness, and therefore function as postcards from an unsettling, uncertain space that subvert expectations of the travelogue and do little to further any sense of attraction the reader might have to Lagos. More than this, the opaque and tangential nature of the images and their relationship to the text means that the work's genre feels indeterminate – a word which I use in line with the definition given by visual theorists David Campany and Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa:

> Indeterminacy is not quite the same as ambiguity, or mystery, or enigma, or even open-endedness. Rather, it signals a state of potential; a raw condition of susceptibility that is a condition of photography, although it is easily occluded by the various forces that may want to claim it, tame it, put it to work, foreclose it. Against those forces, the image can be kept indeterminate, the doors held open, if only provisionally, to admit possibility – the possibility of those differing experiences, together. (2022: 97)

[6] Cole has referenced Sebald in several interviews and wrote an essay about visiting the writer's grave that appears in *Known and Strange Things*.

This “raw condition of susceptibility” is felt even before the narrative begins (at least lexically), as Cole places a photograph on the verso, next to the title. A shirtless man is pushing a cart through a courtyard in what appears to be driving rain. As he does so, an older man begins to open a large, spiked security gate to let him out of the compound. The younger man is strong, athletically built, and appears to be moving at speed toward the gate, having completed a delivery. There is a sense of socio-economic division that is reinforced by the blurred presence in the foreground of a balustrade - presumably part of a balcony that the photographer (Cole) stands on. To the left of the frame, the fronds of a palm tree occlude some of our view of the gate and the area outside of the compound. The physical comfort of the photographer and the disparity between him, the delivery man, and the man opening the gate (presumably a member of staff) is uneasily established. The available view of the area outside the compound gives telephone poles that appear to be teetering dangerously and housing whose relatively poor state is suggested by apparent fire damage on the nearest building. Beside the gate, there is a van parked so close as to appear to be waiting for someone.

Figure 1 Every Day is For the Thief, n.p.

What appears at first to be an oblique or mundane image to accompany what the reader has been told is a novel becomes, upon consideration, a location-specific provocation. It is a depiction of (dis)advantage and social strata that sets a tone of unease. The image then speaks to the epigraphs Cole uses to open his novel. First, from poet Maria Benet's *Mapmaker of Absences*:

> The window was one of many, the town was one. It was the only one, the one I left behind.

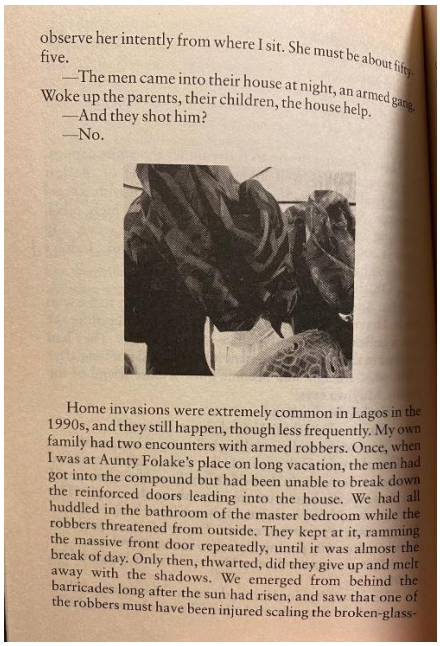
This connects the perspective the audience has just been given with the prospect of a narrative of return, one that is beset with a sense of both ambivalence and inevitability. Cole had initially intended to call his book *The Return*, but Cassava Republic's publishing director had persuaded him that the title needed to "sing to a Nigerian audience" (Wallis, 2016: 44) and so Cole opted for the translation of a Yoruba proverb, provided as the book's second paragraph, first in the original language and then in English:

> Every day is for the thief, but one day is for the owner.

This saying espouses a belief in ultimate justice - the idea that those who habitually steal, lie, or cheat will eventually be caught. Cole's choice to use only the opening half of this formulation as his title lends a pessimistic tone to the book. It is unlikely that the redemptive second half has been omitted merely for the sake of brevity. In short, before a single line of the narrative has been read the audience has been confronted by a socially discomforting photograph, a debatable paratextual claim of fictionality, a poetic image of wistful mobility, and a proverb whose truth, we are given to understand, may be up for dispute by the author. The complex imbrications of image, text, paratext, and intertext are put in place early and are emblematic of the overall aesthetic of uncertainty experienced when reading *Every Day is For the Thief*.

There are two textual references to the narrator taking photographs (2014: 68, 73) but they are made in passing and indicate a touristic, hobby-like approach to the practice, rather than the diligent and patient approach that the images suggest. Cole claims to have only gained an interest in photography and to have begun pursuing it as a serious practice around 2006, presumably around the time that he undertook his trip to Lagos that forms the source material of this book. Cole's photographs are made with a level of care and attention that requires time and skill, and would likely

be amongst the activities that would be emphasised in an immersive, peripatetic narrative. It is therefore a viable option for the reader to see the narrator and the photographer as separate entities, to see the photographs as those of Teju Cole, and the narrative voice to be that of a fictitious persona. Accepting the idea that the photographer and narrator are not the same person inevitably alters how we receive the images. They become tonal and affective, not diaristic, and reflect a broader and more engaged perspective than that of the narrator. Or, simply, it is a fuller experience, suggesting that the photographs tell the true story of Lagos - Cole's version of it. It is important to note that the images contained in the 2007 Cassava Republic iteration of *Every Day* are almost entirely different from those in the 2014 and are presented quite differently. Where the photographs in the later version are often given a full page (and sometimes two) to themselves, the images in the earlier version are presented in small and often indistinct form on the same page as the body of the text (as shown below), making it much easier to ignore them, or attach little significance to their presence. The reasons behind the change of images have not been commented upon by Cole or his publishers and may amount to little more than a preference for newer images that were made with greater confidence as Cole developed his skill as a photographer and established himself as a photography critic for the *New York Times*.



observe her intently from where I sit. She must be about fifty-five.

—The men came into their house at night, an armed gang. Woke up the parents, their children, the house help.

—And they shot him?

—No.

Home invasions were extremely common in Lagos in the 1990s, and they still happen, though less frequently. My own family had two encounters with armed robbers. Once, when I was at Aunty Folake's place on long vacation, the men had got into the compound but had been unable to break down the reinforced doors leading into the house. We had all huddled in the bathroom of the master bedroom while the robbers threatened from outside. They kept at it, ramming the massive front door repeatedly, until it was almost the break of day. Only then, thwarted, did they give up and melt away with the shadows. We emerged from behind the barricades long after the sun had risen, and saw that one of the robbers must have been injured scaling the broken-glass-

Figure 2 Layout of original edition of Every Day is For the Thief (2007)

Due to the unlikeliness of many of Cole's readers in the global north having encountered the Cassava Republic edition, and the fact that all scholarly work thus far has been based on the 2014 edition, my discussion of the photographs in *Every Day is for the Thief* focuses on those in the 2014 version, where the combination of improvements in printing technology, the higher budget available to European and American publishers, and Cole's own development as a photographer gave them new precedence, and a discernible role in dictating the book's aesthetic and affective impressions upon the reader. In their compelling chapter on Cole's first two novels in *Verbal-Visual Configurations in Postcolonial Literature*, Rippl and Birgit Neumann suggest that the photographs in *Every Day is for the Thief* "remain mysterious, ungraspable and indistinct, and attempts at establishing their meaning can never come to a final conclusion" (2020: 214). Considered in another way, one might argue that the photographs' meaning lies in their opacity. They may add a certain verisimilitude to our sense of the narrator being in Lagos but, rather than being illustrative or journalistic, they are tonal or, perhaps, consciously atonal – making their contribution in mood rather than plot.

There is a distorted aspect to the image that immediately precedes the first chapter. The image, the second in the book and still appearing before any text, is a photograph of three men conversing, seen through a window. The cracked pane of glass is at odds with the relaxed pose of the foremost man, who leans his right arm casually against the frame of the window, the slightly oblique angle giving it an exaggerated length. His left hand is on his hip, his body almost entirely eclipsing the view of the man in front of him. Seeing the image refracted through cracked glass adds a frisson of tension, despite the pictured men seeming calm in their body language. The patriarchal pose of the man with the raised arm chimes with the narrative of corruption in the opening chapter. This is a man who appears to expect things to go his way. Cole's opening chapter describes the narrator's frustrations when encountering petty bureaucracy and blatant corruption at the Nigerian consulate in New York whilst trying to obtain a visa (2014: 3-8). The events in the image do not occur in the consulate, but speak allusively to an oppressively masculinist form of authority through the central pose, and of a flawed, strained infrastructure though the cracked glass. Even as the novel's protagonist returns to Nigeria (for reasons that are left unclear), his postcards are not celebratory, but ask "Do you wish you were here?"

Figure 3 Every Day is For the Thief, 2

Cole's photography, in his debut novel and elsewhere, often makes use of glass – in reflections, refractions, and in fragments. There are innovative aspects to this, but it is also an homage to a long-standing tradition. In an essay entitled 'Shattered Glass', he discusses this tradition:

> Glass is everywhere in photography. From Eugène Atget's reflective vitrines to Lee Friedlander's sly self-portraiture, photographers have long been in thrall to the visual complications glass can inject into a composition. Glass is present not only as photography's seductive subject but also as its physical material. In the nineteenth century, photographs were commonly made on wet-plate negatives, glass coated with photosensitive emulsion, and then on the improved and portable dry-plate negatives, before, in the twentieth century, film was manufactured with sufficient strength to serve as a transportable base for the emulsion. Sometimes the very glass of the negative becomes part

of the photograph's story. André Kertész photographed a view over Montmartre in 1929, presumably through an open window. He left Paris and moved to New York and was not reunited with the negative until the 1960s, by which time it was cracked and badly damaged. But this damage became the story. Looking at Kertész's 1970 print of the negative, it's easy to think that what we are seeing is a photograph of a city through a broken window, perhaps one shot through with a bullet. It is in fact a photograph of a city printed from a damaged glass-plate negative. (2021: 96-7)

Figure 4 Broken Plate, Paris, 1929

As in Kertesz's *Broken Plate, Paris* (pictured above), the cracked glass in Cole's photograph complicates the image and may lead to distorted readings of it. Writing many years after the publication of *Every Day is for the Thief*, Cole's analysis of Kertesz's photograph elucidates a complex and problematic paradox of photography: we instinctively trust it as representative form and yet we make our own readings of it. His use of images throughout the novel is a subtle undermining of our trust in photography, where the aesthetic of uncertainty is established in the interplay and interstices between them. In allowing the flaw of the broken plate to become part of his image's message, Kertesz showed his audience not only that they could be susceptible to visual trickery but that the indeterminacy of photography as a medium creates the potential for multifaceted readings, and for a degree of audience agency.

It is, after all, entirely possible to be aware of the true cause of the cracked glass in Kertesz's photograph and continue, or choose, to see it as a cracked window pane. Likewise, the indeterminacy of a blog/travelogue/novel hybrid gives the reader options in how to perceive events and their presumed meanings. In Cole's image of the man with the upraised arm we can probably take the broken glass at face value, even if we recognise it as an homage to Kertesz, but we are left unsure of the image's broader meaning, only at this point knowing that a sense of menace and unease has been established. As an audience, the aesthetic pleasure of encountering a text or image is sometimes achieved through a process of complicating a given reality and making the familiar feels strange, as though encountered for the first time.

Once he has arrived in Nigeria*, Every Day is for the Thief* 's narrator tours Lagos, often riding around on public transport against his middle-class aunt's wishes, noting everything he sees and absorbing the "energies of Lagos life — creative, malevolent, ambiguous" (2014: 35). From the opening pages, where he frustratedly awaits his visa at the Nigerian consulate in New York, the reader is encouraged to share the narrator's conclusion that Nigeria has become hopelessly corrupted at all levels. He feels ambivalence towards Nigeria, stating that "I can no longer bear the violation, the caprice, the air of desperation" (109).

The narrator meets with a young man who needs favours from him in the hope of one day moving to the USA and establishing a life there. He has the opportunity to show kindness but refuses to allow the "social gap" (152) that he believes exists to be bridged by enthusiasm and application on the part of the young man, despite the fact that the narrator recognises that he used to find himself in such "socially asymmetrical situations" (152). His point of cultural comparison is typically western: the character of Leonard Bast from *Howards End*. When given the opportunity to provide some retroactive reciprocity, he instead makes an excuse to delay giving his contact details to the young man, knowing he won't see him again.

The narrator's cultural references throughout the book are predominantly westernised and male, and include Shakespeare, Dickens, Beckett and Faulkner, with only a brief mention of the existence of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (116) – a rising star of Nigerian literature at the time *Every Day* was written, and a near contemporary of Cole's. The pricing of Adichie's books was a complex matter in

Nigeria at this time, due to the ongoing battle that publishers had with piracy, which was believed at the time to account for 75% of the book market (Wallis, 2016: 43).

This reality is reflected in *Every Day* when the narrator is briefly confused by the owner of a jazz shop, who tells him that he can only purchase the CDs he is interested in at an "absurd" price but can buy a pirated copy very cheaply. (2014: 129-130) He ponders the implications of an apparently legitimate business dealing in counterfeit goods "Do they have any idea that this is a problem? Or is it enough to settle for sophistication without troubling oneself about the laws that defend creativity?" (130)

Whilst the frustrations that *Every Day*'s narrator feels towards the perceived barren cultural scene and ubiquity of piracy in Lagos are comprehensible to Cole's global north audience, we see in the protagonist a failure to fully appreciate the social and material conditions that lead to such circumstances. Sarah Brouillette proposes that we consider Nigerian publishing under a schema "mapping two separate but interlinked domains" (2020: 10). These are 'developmental publishing,' which aims for an expansion of the literary market, proclaims reading as a universal good, and is often supported by governments, arts foundations, and NGOs that work in tandem with private, for-profit publishers who seek to cultivate a commercial audience for local writers. On the other side of the schema, there is 'picaresque publishing,' which is driven by an entrepreneurial strand of survivalism, seeking to serve more local, impoverished, already-existing audiences, rather than developing new ones. As such, Brouillette tells us, "it is more aligned with demotic popular urban forms, with piracy, and with reading materials that are not quite books as we have known them – with what we can describe as picaresque forms, then, like flash fiction and short, uplifting poems read on smartphones" (11).

Brouillette's description is of a literary scene a decade or so on from the publication of *Every Day is for the Thief*, but reflects the same material conditions that make Ondaatje readers on public transport "as rare as hen's teeth" and necessitate widespread piracy for literary fiction published in Europe or North America. Cole's publishing history certainly originates in the picaresque, with blog posts freely-accessible to anyone who could access the Internet, before a move into locally-published and relatively-affordable paperbacks through the Nigeria-only Cassava Press. Later publication with Penguin Random House and Faber & Faber was not so much a move towards developmentalism as a leap past it into multinationalism.

Cole's post-2007 work has been published by large presses that charge accordingly, with no separate Nigerian imprint publishing his work there at a more affordable price.

In common with Julius, the narrator of *Open City*, the cultural hegemony that privileges work by white men who speak a European language appears to have colonised the narrator, rendering his cosmopolitanism more of an affectation than a reality. If language is understood, in the Wittgensteinian sense, to be world-constituting rather than merely world-disclosing, then we are inevitably given to understand that the narrator is living in an Anglophone, Eurocentric one.

Philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Appiah, writes that

> A cosmopolitan openness to the world is perfectly consistent with picking and choosing among the options you find in your search. (2006: 33)

Cole's narrator appears to feel a sense of discomfort around his Nigerian identity that the author does not share. His distaste and frustration around the condition of Nigeria and its presentation of itself to the outside world speaks to a jaundiced brand of Afropolitanism – where the 'Afro' prefix is something to be surpassed if it will not be altered. 'Afropolitanism' is an enticing, if potentially misleading theory to draw upon when reading Cole's novels. As discussed in my previous chapter on *Open City*, what Taiye Selasi's piece (and the subsequent debate around it) confirmed was that there was a readily identifiable space within public discourse for modes of thinking about forms of African identity that encompassed those with a mix of African and non-African parentage, those who had moved to the global North for career and economic purposes, and those who had remained in Africa but whose tastes and preoccupations tended toward the European and American. It being an undoubtedly subjective, personal account, 'Bye Bye Babar' was not intended to create a formal academic theory, as Selasi makes clear when she writes

> …ten years later I evaluate the essay only on the terms on which I wrote it. I was not (and am not) interested in creating categories for creative output – less in reifying the grotesque social and economic inequalities that continue to distinguish twenty-first century life on the continent. (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016)

Cole does not use the term 'Afropolitan' in either his essays or fiction and, when asked if it applies to him, shows a benign indifference, as seen in a conversation with Selasi where she suggests to him that "those set on classifying African writers have lost you," to which Cole responds

> I'm a bit of a problem for the categorisers, partly because I don't fight the categories. I'm comfortable being described as Afropolitan, or African, or American, or pan-African. Or Yoruba, or Brooklynite, or black, or Nigerian. Whatever. As long as the labels are numerous. (Selasi, 2016: n.p.)

While Cole proclaims himself comfortable with numerous markers of identity, his first two novels are riven with the tension created by characters who do not seem to feel fully at home anywhere. When the narrator of *Every Day* visits Nigeria's national music school (MUSON), there is an air of metropolitan snobbery to his observations:

> The best thing about MUSON is that it is well organized. Better organized, in truth, than I've come to expect anything in Nigeria to be (2014: 82).

The receptionist at the school explains that it is funded by private donors and, recognising from his accent that he doesn't live in Nigeria, says "You know, a rich guy like yourself can just give us one million naira. Just like that" (84). Here, the narrator's sense of otherness is keenly felt, and he understands that he is perceived as more American than Nigerian – a status that he feels uncomfortable with when he comes to learn that the music students pay far more for an expatriate teacher than an equally-qualified Nigerian one (85).

The narrator repeatedly finds himself in a position whereby his otherness leaves him very much in a hierarchy – one that is equal parts frustrating and advantageous to him, and part of the social and affective complexity of identity that many postcolonial migrants and people of mixed cultural backgrounds feel. Cole has never used the term 'postcolonial' in his work, fictional or non-fictional, perhaps because of the connotations it can hold and the invitation it can appear to extend to both publishers and academics to market and discuss it within distinct parameters. Almost a decade after the writing of *Every Day is for the Thief*, Cole famously coined the term "white industrial saviour complex" to describe the innate paternalism, condescension, and self-interest at the heart of contemporary western attitudes to African affairs (2016:

340). His status as a Nigerian-born author preoccupied with politics of mobility means an Afropolitan reading of his work is one of the more natural interpretative lenses available to the reader of *Every Day is for the Thief*, and one that much scholarly work around the text has prescribed.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer and literary critic, famously stated that African literature should be written in African languages (1986: 29). *Every Day is for the Thief* largely takes place in Lagos, the most populous city in Nigeria, and makes some use of Yoruba and Igbo words, but was written in English and features characters who primarily speak English to one another. This reflects the reality of language in Nigeria, where English is the *lingua franca* between groupings divided by first language, though often spoken in pidgin or creolised forms, or in a relatively formal tone. So formal, in fact, that the narrator doesn't seem able to use any other register but is reliant on others to do so, as seen when he and his friend stop to fill their car at a petrol station: "I am impressed by the way Rotimi talks to the woman at the pump. He falls into a casual vernacular that erases the social distance between them" (2014: 95). Elsewhere, the narrator shows a similar sense of distance from overtly pidgin patterns of speech, including one phrase whose connotations he actively dislikes:

> A phrase I hear often in Nigeria is *idea l'a need*. It means "all we need is the general idea or concept." People say this in different situations. It is a way of saying: that's good enough, there is no need to get bogged down in details. (137)

The narrator finds this to be a way of recusing oneself from upholding standards of safety and quality of work. As such, he finds that "Nigerians do not have the philosophical equipment to deal with the material goods they are so eager to consume," rendering them unable to manufacture the aircraft and cell phones that they use:

> we do not foster the ways of thinking that lead to the development of telephones or jet engines. Part of that philosophical equipment is an attention to details: a rejection of only the broad outlines of a system, a commitment to precision, an engagement with the creative and scientific spirit behind what one uses. (139)

Such dismissive, condescending, and essentialist sentiment characterises the narrator as a cosmopolitan of post-Enlightenment, progress-oriented ideals. Appiah writes that

> one characteristic of European cosmopolitanism, especially since the Enlightenment, has been a receptiveness to art and literature from other places, and a wider interest in lives elsewhere [...this is] the second strand of cosmopolitanism: the recognition that human beings are different and that we can learn from each other's differences. (2006: 32)

Learning from differences appears to be a unidirectional process for the narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief*. When visiting the national museum of Nigeria, he is told that photography is prohibited by a staff member who sings Christian hymns to herself as she works. He sees her religion as disconnecting her from Nigerian tradition and describes her as "a victorious Christian among the idols" (2014: 73), suggesting a yearning for the kind of pre-colonial ideal that Gayatri Spivak and Ania Loomba warn cannot be recovered. He believes that nobody in the museum cares about the artefacts and that the best ones have been sent to European and American museums (74). There is further disappointment when he discovers that the most popular artefact in the museum is the bullet-riddled Mercedes Benz in which a Nigerian dictator was assassinated and is irritated by an "underwhelming" plaque "doubtless written by a colonial officer" that refers to the "obnoxious practice" of slavery (79), and now functions as an official Nigerian response to it. The postcolonial context of Cole's work is succinctly expressed when the narrator frustratedly reflects that

> History, which elsewhere is a bone of contention, has yet to enter the Nigerian public consciousness, at least judging by institutions like the museum... No one could possibly form a positive impression of Nigeria on the basis of this museum... What, I wonder, are the social consequences of life in a country that has no use for history? (79)

This is one of the many passages in the novel where the line between Cole as writer and his anonymous narrator becomes blurred. Cole's non-fiction writings have shown him to be cognisant that Nigerian society has as much use for history as any other, and that there are figures who have dedicated their careers to providing meaningful interpretation of Nigerian art and history to the wider public, not least

Bisi Silva and Okwui Enwezor, notable Nigerian curators for whom he writes deeply heartfelt elegies in his essay collection, *Black Paper* (2021:51-6). The depiction of the state museum as a flat, charmless mediation of national history may well be - or have been - an accurate one, but Cole is informed enough to know the difference between societal demand and governmental provision, i.e. the gap between what the public wants to know and what the state curates for them. *Every Day*'s narrator, though, reflects a more idealistic and Western outlook, seemingly unaware of constraints on financial and human resources, when he mutters frustratedly about the lack of respect afforded to art in contemporary Nigeria:

> I honestly expected to find the glory of Nigerian archaeology and art history on display here (…) the art for which Nigeria is justly admired in academies and museums the world over.
>
> It is not to be. Though there are examples of each kind of art, they are few, are rarely of the best quality, and are meagerly documented. (2014: 73-4)

The narrator bemoans the fact that many of the artifacts he wishes to see are the victims of "recent plunder" by western entities, missing the irony of this entirely when he compares the poverty of his experience in Lagos to his "excellent" experiences of Nigerian art in New York, London and Berlin (74). These museums had set the works in their "proper cultural context," creating

> a desire in me to see this astonishing art at its best, to see it in its own home. London, New York, and Berlin had made me long for Lagos. The West had sharpened my appetite for ancient African art. And Lagos is proving a crushing disappointment. (74)

The narrator's desires for Nigerian art to be mediated to the public should not automatically be read as representing those of Teju Cole, an art historian better-versed in the realities of plunder, patrimony, and presentation. Instead, the reader encounters a character whose perspective is redolent of that of Kwame Appiah, whose ideas around art objects, cultural patrimony and national repatriation hinge on an understanding of art that is narrow and imperialistic in tone - treating it largely as a commodity to be enjoyed by the beholder or owner in a way that is often anachronistic. In a piece entitled "Why Africa, why Art?" published by the Royal Academy and the Guggenheim Museum in 1995, Appiah writes, "There is no word in

most of the thousand or so languages spoken in Africa that well translates the word 'art'" (21). Appiah's implication is that many of the African artefacts displayed in European and American museums today were formed with ritualistic intent and not as aesthetic objects, meaning that art appreciation is therefore something of a higher order cognitive skill, pioneered by Europeans. Ariella Azoulay points out the folly of this argument, pointing out that many older forms of European languages also did not contain the word 'art,' in the rarefied sense in which we understand the word today:

> The word art as it emerged in the mid-to-late eighteenth century was linked to the imperial conquest and mastery of time, as if time were not something shared in common, but a divisible thing to be allocated. The mastering of time is a key aspect of imperial violence that separates objects from people and places them in a progressive, linear timeline ('art history" is paradigmatic) in which colonized people and colonizers occupy different positions and roles. (2019: 60)

The desire that the narrator of *Every Day* feels to have Nigerian art contextualised and mediated in an imperialistic style raises questions about who he wants to be impressed by Nigeria's precolonial art, and why. When he opines that no one can form a positive impression of Nigeria on the basis of this museum, it becomes clear that his concern is for an outsider's opinion, not any of Nigeria's roughly two hundred million citizens. The critic Yvonne Kappel has noted how Cole's text inverts the usual structures of one of its nominal genres, by framing the protagonist as neither insider nor outsider:

> The postcolonial travelogue deals primarily with defining a home by articulating experiences that are removed from dominant Western concepts, thereby setting itself apart from the traditional travelogue. Teju Cole's protagonist, however, depicts his journey to his home country Nigeria by applying Western cultural concepts to an African environment. (2017: 68)

As such, Kappel argues, he reinforces and reproduces the colonial effort to depict Empire in terms of 'sameness.' However, she maintains that

> by reproducing this discourse, he does not affirm its validity but rather questions it by highlighting its limitations. By thus drawing on these

> categories, Teju Cole's travelogue highlights the ambivalences of categories that build on binary oppositions. His appropriation in fact problematizes the very essence of these categories and their applicability to non-European contexts. (68)

The generic hybridity of *Every Day* and the indeterminate nature of both its images and text problematises western ideas of the travelogue and lays the foundation for Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty. The reader is forced to consider their expectations and may find the formal merging of travelogue, diary, novel and photobook to be disorienting. These expectations may have been informed by the cultural current of Afropolitanism, and the commentary around it. The narrator fits a certain mould of the Afropolitan, insofar as he is young, African, and highly educated, with broad cultural interests and a sensibility very much informed by his travels and experience of other cultures. Yet he also represents the volte-face of Afropolitanism: the implication of the primacy of norms shaped by the global north and a sense of antipathy toward his home country that centres on its perceived moral inferiority.

As Cole's artistic career has progressed, his options for the dissemination of his work have grown. *Every Day is for the Thief* began in blog form – essentially cost-free for both the author and the reader and available to anyone with an Internet connection. By not being subject to the market pressures and spatial constraints of print publishing, blogs gave writers an opportunity to self-publish to a potentially large audience, with near-total freedom of expression. Such liberation allowed bloggers to explore life-writing free from the fiction/non-fiction binary that had arguably reached its nadir in the James Frey affair and the market anxiety caused by both reputational damage and the cost of refunds.

Every Day is for the Thief's publication simultaneously broadened and narrowed its market. A text being in print heightens its prominence, placing it in shops and making it available to those who would not consider reading a blog, while also making it eligible for literary awards that could provide valuable financial rewards and status. With the transition to print, though, comes a certain forfeiture of the creative freedom of self-publishing, along with the loss of image fidelity that printing photographs on paper intended only for text brings. Neither the Cassava Republic nor the Faber & Faber versions of the book used sufficiently high quality paper to reproduce the images faithfully. As such, they are not as sharp or resonant as they

might have been, and photography is not to the forefront of the book – perhaps a preference for publishers dealing with a complicated category of book. The words of the text though, are rendered stylishly and given new authority in their presentation, and in their mere existence in a printed book. This aside, working under the imprimatur of major publishers has not forced Cole to compromise his aesthetic of uncertainty, and in fact has bolstered it, with additions to his blog material the key to creating the generic indeterminacy of *Every Day*. Paul Crosthwaite maintains that

> There are scenarios in which the very shaping of the contemporary literary field by market logics may be conducive – rather than solely obstructive – to both political and aesthetic nonconformity. (2022: 189)

Cole's words would gain greater authority again with the global publication of *Open City* in 2011, where the influence and reach of his publishers, along with Cole's growing presence in respected magazines such as *The New Yorker*, meant that even the first editions of *Open City* were blurbed by such significant literary critics as James Wood and Hari Kunzru. The novel was well-received, translated into multiple languages and supported by a worldwide author tour.

Publication in *Granta Magazine* gave Cole further literary cachet. *Granta*'s reputation for publishing the best up-and-coming new writers alongside established prizewinning and bestselling authors makes it a highly-respected journal, and a literary tastemaker. *Granta*'s capacity for establishing a writer's place in the mainstream is significant enough for it to dedicate specific issues to crowning lists of Best New Writers from various countries, or under a particular age. Its commitment to publishing a large amount of writing in translation gives it international appeal and an important place in the world literature market. To feature in *Granta* meant Cole was accepted and respected in the Anglophone literary mainstream, whilst cementing an image of being formally adventurous, but not quite avant-garde.

Cole's first piece in *Granta* was an essay titled 'Blind Spot' (several years prior to his book of the same name), a short account of brief periods of blindness that he suffered. This essay, which would later become part of Cole's first collection of non-fiction, *Known and Strange Things*, fits very neatly into the category of memoir or life-writing, in a way that his second *Granta* feature, 'Water Has No Enemy,' does not. This piece gives a more journalistic account that, whilst never fully decentring

the narrator, allows the particularity of the events he witnesses and the people he encounters to take most of the reader's attention.

'Water Has No Enemy' features a detached narrative voice in common with *Every Day is for the Thief,* but differs by devoting more detailed attention to a specific incident. Presented as part of an edition of *Granta* simply titled 'Travel,' the essay also fits into the travelogue genre, and does not make any claims of fictionality. Like *Every Day*, the narrator (who we assume to be Teju Cole, for lack of any narrative implication, character description, or paratextual marker to the contrary) is a Nigerian man who has returned from Lagos, wandering and photographing alone, wary of the corruption and criminality he encounters as he goes. While walking on a popular beach, he witnesses a man driving a buggy along the shore get washed out to sea, before being rescued by a swimmer and revived (2014: 239-240). Later, Cole meets the man who almost drowned to learn his story and the after-effects of his near-death experience. A photograph, credited to Cole, is placed at the end of the text that seemingly confirms the factuality of the incident as it depicts a prone man being carried onto a beach by a group of men at sunset, with a roiling sea behind them. Cole's photography plays a greater narrative role in this relatively short essay than in *Every Day*. Making photographs provides his chief reason for being on Bar Beach and emerges as a source of tension with various people who either object to being photographed, or wish to be his subjects. This is perhaps the most immediately legible of any of Cole's published photographs to date, insofar as it sits as a self-contained, journalistic story in itself whilst also affirming the veracity of the prose narrative.

Figure 5 'Water Has No Enemy,' Granta 124, 250

This sombre image stands in contrast to the vivid and richly allusive illustration by Nigerian artist Lemi Ghariokwu that is placed before the text – an image potentially more in line with the stereotypically bright hues associated with Africa to which *Every Day*'s atonal images sit in contrast. Ghariokwu designed multiple album covers for the well-known Nigerian Afrobeat performer Fela Kuti, whose lyrics are quoted in Cole's text (as is his song 'Shufferin' and Smilin'' in *Every Day is for the Thief*) and whose track 'Water No Get Enemy' provides the inspiration for the essay's title.

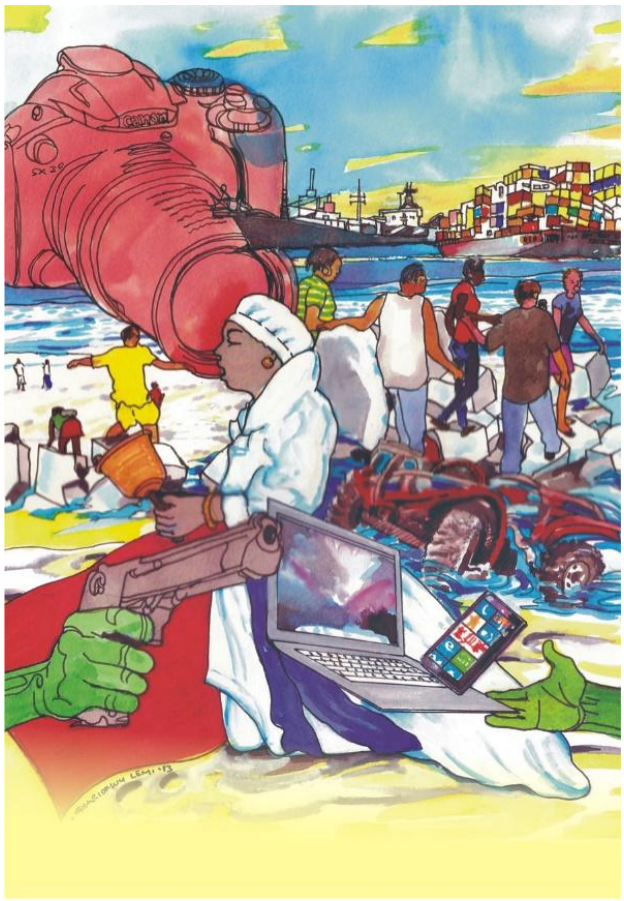


Figure 6 Lemi Ghariokwu, illustration for 'Water Has No Enemy,' Granta 124, 236

Ghariokwu's image suggests intrigue and adventure while foregrounding the themes and images of Cole's essay, pointing towards the prominence of photography, crime, and technology within the piece, as well as the central incident of the submerged beach buggy. The presence of shipping containers and a woman in white robes gesture to other formative influences on Cole's experience of Nigeria: the structuring forces of global trade and the almost omnipresent strain of evangelical Christianity.

> It is my first time back to Bar Beach, the most famous beach in Lagos, in almost twenty years. This was a place of weekend leisure for people of all classes when I was growing up, though my family did not visit it often, sometimes just once a year. It was also a place of violence, particularly during the years of military rule, the preferred spot for public executions at which alleged armed robbers, drug offenders and accused coup plotters were tied to wooden poles and shot before a gathered crowd in the early hours of the morning. These shootings – called 'the Bar Beach Show' – had a spiritual element to them: there were rumours some of the condemned had amulets that could protect them from bullets. The men of the firing squads were careful to remove these objects before taking up their positions. The most notorious armed robber of my childhood days, Lawrence 'The Law' Anini, a serial killer of police officers, was executed on Bar Beach in 1987. The beach was also a favoured gathering place for members of the aladura ('people of prayer') churches, particularly those affiliated with the Celestial Church of Christ. Aladuras wear white robes and practise a syncretic form of Christianity in which holy water and traditional beliefs about the sea play important roles. Their love of the sea was why Bar Beach was the setting of two of Soyinka's satirical plays about false prophets and gullible followers.

This passage provides a remarkable amount of context in around 240 words. We understand that the narrator may well have been exiled from Lagos, having returned to the beach for the first time in twenty years, we perceive the dissonance of public executions taking place in a popular leisure spot, and how this fed into superstitions and folk beliefs that are part of Nigeria's intense religiosity. Cole uses his liminal positionality as a Nigerian-American to strong effect here. He is a writer familiar with Nigerian norms and the pressures and idiosyncrasies of daily life, but they are not part of his practice of everyday life and he is aware of their unfamiliarity to a large section of his audience. As in his previous work, he presents vignettes of shocking violence and local folk beliefs without comment or apparent judgment, but with just enough background detail to prevent the alienation of his audience. His reference to the widely-respected Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka is a gesture towards *Granta*'s well-read metropolitan audience – a high-cultural bridging point to a beach on Lagos where superstitious crowds gather to watch political executions.

Timothy Brennan has argued that "a *politics* of names and faces" is the "calling card" of the prestige afforded to a "new cosmopolitan" strand of literature (1997: 200), whereby postcolonial writers are invoked as a means of interpreting foreign and violent political histories that means they "exist not as individuals but as elements in an intertextual coterie that chooses them as much as they choose it" (1997: 203). Responding to this, Sarah Brouillette suggests that such a situation exists "in part because the niche marketing that some associate with the promotion of exoticism is also the publishing industry's response to proliferating possibilities for accessing segmented markets of readers on a global scale" (2007: 70), forcing writers to become emblems of their respective nations and cultures, "not because writers are the market's passive dupes," but because the

> tendency within the globalized literary marketplace to manipulate and market the distinctions between biographical authors overlaps with the tendency within the postcolonial field of production to privilege work that can be identified with a specific geographical struggle or political history. (70-1)

Cole's work on Nigeria covers a geographically-specific struggle, but not one that has an identifiable label or discrete and definable time period, unlike, for example, Soyinka's writing on the Biafran War. Where 'Water Has No Enemy' is most comparable to *Every Day is for the Thief* is in its depiction of the casual and near-constant threat of violence in Lagos and the difficulty of existing in contemporary Nigeria. The narrator is harassed for money as he walks along the beach making photographs, and is robbed at gunpoint for his laptop. At a party he converses with a man, Brother Jimoh, while the party's host retreats to a "quiet corner of the house to beat his wife" (244). This vignette is not elaborated upon and is allowed to stand without judgment or commentary to enhance the sense of shock that such a stark recounting of domestic violence creates. Later, we learn of Brother Jimoh's death in the same coolly observational tone. Cole's narrative voice, across genres, never strays into omniscience, but remains grounded in factuality and a sole viewpoint that is perceptive only in what he sees directly or is told by other characters. In narrating with such restraint, the unsatisfying and occluded nature of many of the encounters and occurrences of Cole's narrative form a key part of his aesthetic of uncertainty. Realism, for Cole, is achieved through the technique of leaving his readers unsure of

what has happened and how they are supposed to feel about it. Essayist Lydia Davis, a formal influence on Cole, believes that

> The less mediated a work is, the more personal, in a sense, and the more private, the more closely involved the reader feels in the process of the work and the more she or he participates or feels participation in the creation of the work." (2019: 157)

From this perspective, Cole's largely unmediated narrative style means that his reader is always involved. His narrators do not know things that they logically ought not to know, which means that his audience also does not. The genre-straddling nature of the piece allows it to feel private and personal whilst extending an invitation to readerly participation. Lydia Davis experienced pressure from her publisher to write a novel and eventually did so with *End of the Story*, a text that operates in her characteristically self-reflexive and metafictional vein by being a novel about the novelisation of a break-up. Cole's body of fictional work at the time of writing encompasses *Every Day is for the Thief*, *Open City*, *Tremor* and the short stories in his photobook *Pharmakon*. The three novels in particular show an ever-greater move towards metafictionality and autofictionality, whilst remaining cognisant of market demands, and Cole's status as a mediator of exotic experience to his metropolitan audience. The question remains as to exactly to what degree the market "hold" that Cole has spoken of has impinged upon his creative freedom or impacted his choices in creating his intermedial aesthetic of uncertainty, although he maintains that it is negligible. "I think I would have been happy with a smaller career as long as I could write my work with the kind of freedom that I'm doing my work," Cole said in 2021, in an interview with *Open Country* – a Nigerian literary magazine. "What I would not have been happy with is if somebody had said, 'Ah, the way you make it is to write certain things in certain ways because that's what we expect of an African Writer.' But, you know, nobody ever said that to me" (Obi-Young, 2021: n.p).

The through line that connects *Every Day is for the Thief* to Cole's most recent work, across genres and media, is a commitment to asking how realism is presented and on whose terms. Why, Cole's work asks, does the reader hunger for factuality and generic determinacy in prestigious prose publishing, and who is guiding this? The answer to the second part of this question is surely the conglomerate publishers who,

as Sinykin and Crosthwaite show, compel writers to work within increasingly narrow parameters in terms of genre, content, and style.

This chapter establishes a materialist-oriented reading of Cole's body of work and shows how his intermedial aesthetic of uncertainty works by operating within certain marketing norms while disrupting and circumventing others. In doing so, there are wider implications than the exploration of a single artist's creative vision, albeit a successful and influential. At stake is the degree to which we as scholars deem 'postcolonialism' to be a process of radical decolonisation and a praxis of liberatory resistance, rather than a form of individualistic, self-improving cultural tourism – a market category and a commodity that exists within a culture industry beholden to late capitalism. Cole's ambiguous positionality in *Every Day is for the Thief* and 'Water Has no Enemy' creates a complex reading experience that is further muddied by theoretically-informed critical appraisal reading ethnic autobiography and the anthropological exotic into texts that ultimately resist this taxonomy.

In this chapter I have shown how Cole's published body of work has been marked from its earlier iterations by self-reflexivity and generic indeterminacy that plays with audience, critical and market expectations even as it functions as a literary commodity. *Every Day is for the Thief* established Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty by using its hybrid of fiction and fact to sate some of the 'reality hunger' of the literary market that time, whilst fitting within the complex framework of the novel. This use of photographs to create tone and discordance rather than narrative thrust gave it an intermedial dimension that further complicates the book's categorisation.

With the publication of 'Water Has No Enemy', we see the anointing of a new postcolonial literary star for an audience seeking to have exoticism mediated and familiarised. There, also, we see Cole embrace his identity as a photographer and foreground its narrative capabilities, along with its tonal potential. In the following chapters, I explore how these two characteristics are expressed in Cole's entry into a new and smaller market segment, firstly with his image-text work, *Blind Spot*, in the third chapter, and then with his high-end, luxuriantly published photobooks. I consider his work under the aesthetic category that cultural theorist Anna Kornbluh terms 'immediacy,' arguing that while Cole's tendencies toward autofiction can lead to his work being located in this category, his photographic work is a conscious and sustained attempt to work in a model of slower, and more considered mediation.

Chapter Three

Obscurity and "radiating narratives" in *Blind Spot*

> The measured relegation of a few photographs to the sphere of art ignores, in a way so common in the discourse of art, the circumstances of its production and the involvement of a host of potential participants who might have taken part in its production.
>
> -Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*

Following the publication of *Every Day is for the Thief* and since the beginning of his tenure as photography critic for the *New York Times* in 2015, Cole's work has increasingly celebrated and scrutinised the intersections of the different forms in which he works. After the success of *Open City* in 2011, he gained prominence and was invited to literary festivals and residencies all over the world, giving him greater opportunity to exercise his love of photography, which had already been glimpsed through the presence of a small number of his photographs in both versions of *Every Day is For the Thief*. Consequently, Cole published a book of photography and writing, first in Italian as *Punto d'Ombra* in 2016, and then in English in 2017 as *Blind Spot*. Some of this work had previously been seen in a photography exhibition of the same name, and on Cole's Instagram account under the hashtag #blindspot. Announcing the book's publication in a now-deleted post on Instagram, Cole revelled in the book's generic indeterminacy:

> 'What's it about?' 'It's about 330 pages. – 'Is it memoir or art theory or a long essay, or is it a book of photographs or a documentary film, or is it travel writing or theology or cultural criticism? 'Yes.' June 2017, Random House.
>
> (in Weikert, 2021: 392-3)

The work pairs photographs made by Cole in a range of global locations with a text that augments the image in some way (and vice versa). Some speak directly and acutely to the image they accompany, whilst others take a more oblique approach, and require greater thought or recondite knowledge in order to relate them.

This chapter focuses on *Blind Spot* through close readings that treat each paired image and text as a single entity. Taking the view that Cole's intermedial work is part

of a single, overarching project, I draw frequently upon work that Cole published before and after *Blind Spot* in support of my arguments. Cole has claimed that one of the things that unites his work across different media is his

> persistent interest in the idea that places are retaining some charge from the things that happened in them and that a sensitive observer can attempt to elicit or recover those hidden or radiating narratives
>
> (2020b: 35;33).

In this chapter, I take the phrase "radiating narratives" to mean the stories that emerge through sensitive and attentive looking, enabled through photography, that serve as an act of commemoration. Through Walter Benjamin's idea of 'Eingedenken' or 'remembrance,' I examine the ways in which Cole's image-texts connect past, present and future. The temporal disruption that occurs through Benjamin's concept is then applied to Ariella Azoulay's ideas of the 'civil contract of photography' and 'potential history' and I show how Cole knowingly and explicitly works within her framework.

The chapter is divided into the headings of Obscurity, Radiation, and Forced Displacement as a means of examining the disparate strands of Cole's thought, before unifying them by arguing that the message of his work is to look more attentively at the things we might ordinarily ignore, thereby finding the significant in the mundane and identifying our own 'blind spots' – cultural, historical, ideological, emotional – with a view to overcoming them. There are immediate and rewarding aesthetic outcomes to this for the audience, but also deeper ethical consequences. In terms of the overall argument of this thesis, this chapter probes the nexus of aesthetics and ethics that characterises Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty.

Radiation

A sense of Cole's religiosity (or at least of a sense of reverence for religious belief) is evoked by the Christian references that accompany many of the opening image-text pairings of *Blind Spot,* among which are the reference to Fabritius not living to the age of thirty-three, the age at which Jesus Christ was said to have died, and the use of the biblical myth of Babel. This takes a more ambivalent tone – one that is to remain throughout the book – in a pairing made in Muottas Muragl, in Switzerland. The central European country has been the subject of much of Cole's photography. After

Lebanon, it is the second-most featured country in *Blind Spot*, and is also the singular focus of Cole's 2020 photobook, *Fernweh*, in which many of Cole's Swiss images from *Blind Spot* are reused and recontextualised – including the Muottas Muragl image. It is emblematic of Cole's approach to the country in its presentation of a superficially calm image that plays with the tension between nature and human construction and Switzerland's global presentation of itself as a pastorally beautiful, peaceful and neutral state. The photograph is a quiet, seemingly serene image of a careful, painterly composition. The highest and most distant mountains in the background are a reflection, a fact only confirmed by the abrupt severance of the peak by the metal strip that encloses the glass Cole peers through. A cursory glance would suggest that they are a full part of the 'view' as we would expect to see it, and one imagines that careful balancing of colour and light levels were needed by the photographer in both capturing and processing of the image to maintain this illusion. Nothing is quite what it appears to be, and the reader's gaze is destabilised. Accompanying the photograph is a text that opens starkly:

> They used to burn women here. In these peaceful-looking cantons, women accused of consorting with the Devil were executed in the most sadistic ways imaginable, for God's greater glory.
>
> (2017: 12)

Acts of brutality and barbarism are as likely to be perpetrated in the name of faith as acts of tenderness and remembrance, Cole reminds us, and we may find their remnants anywhere. He continues, "Now the landscape is long settled, like a reputation. The eye scans and organizes the folded mountains. All is at peace."

But all, of course, is not at peace in the paired photograph. The image, as discussed, gives a false sense of a settled landscape. Ariella Azoulay is a significant visual theorist who Cole has both written about and collaborated with. In *Potential History* she examines the imperial origins of photography and the ways in which it was and is used to document conquest and to subjugate. In a passage that resonates with Cole's seemingly innocuous use of "settled" she writes

> Much has been written on the colonization of land – colonialism's signature enterprise, as the etymology of the word suggests (the Latin *colonia* means "settlement" or "farm").

(Azoulay, 2019: 75)

As previously shown, etymology is significant to Cole and to interpretation of his book. The presence of human interference in Cole's pastoral scene is apparent, first, in the metal bars that cross the image – and it is in one of these bars that we see a reflection of the highest peak in the photograph, confirming that the mountains we see in the background of the image lie behind the photographer, not in front of him. It also serves as a crude reminder of the fact that our encounter with landscapes, especially when we view them from on high, is facilitated by construction. Cole often seeks to replicate the kind of experience we have when sightseeing – the ugly and cumbersome nature of tourist offices, hotels, and viewing points. Speaking on the creation of *Fernweh*, Cole said,

> I like an unspoilt view of nature, but I know that nature is always spoilt by human observation. So the spoilt view of nature is something that I like as well. It does not mean that I look for the abject, but that I accept the human infrastructure that makes nature available to us.
>
> (MACK Books video, 2020: 09;10)

Aside from glass and metal, there are traces of human habitation visible in the image, with roads, walls, and lone farmhouse. In the text, Cole continues,

> Nevertheless, in one enciphering corner of my mind I believe still that every line in every poem is the orphaned caption of a lost photograph. By a related logic, each photograph sits in the antechamber of speech. Undissolved fragments of the past can be seen through the skin of the photograph. The tectonic plates are still busy in their rockwork, and there is a faint memory of burning ash. The difference between peace and mayhem is velocity.
>
> (2017: 12)

The evocation of vast tranches of lost photographs brings a deep connection to photography and the recording of history. There are, of course, no photographs of the witch trials of Early Modern Europe, which were pioneered in Switzerland. But there would have been poems and oral folklore around them, most of which is now lost to us. The mountains of the picture bear witness not to the violence of paranoid and misogynistic faith, but to the physical turbulence of the ever-shifting tectonic

plates below the surface of the picture. The photograph, under consideration, becomes more temporal than spatial. Continuing her point about the documentation of colonialism, Ariella Azoulay states that

> Not enough, by contrast, has been written about another, complementary aspect of colonialism: the colonization of time. The intertwinement of spatial and temporal conquest is responsible for the most durable forms of imperial violence in which citizens participate, often unbeknownst to them, through a plethora of mechanisms, sciences, idioms, assumptions, laws, norms, gestures, inclinations, aesthetics, affinities, and so on that became part of the exercise of imperial violence.
>
> (2019: 75-76).

The laws, norms and gestures that brought about the burning of women through religious justification are ultimately elements of imperial violence. Such violence, juxtaposed against this seemingly "settled" landscape could feel unlikely. There are no indicators of it in Cole's photograph, and he is aware of this. Our remembrance of events is mediated and selective on the part of those who rule, and the power of the photograph to commemorate is questionable. Artist and visual theorist David Campany believes that

> The photograph can be an aid to memory, but it can also become an obstacle that blocks access to the understanding of the past. It can paralyse the personal and political ability to think beyond the image. Proper knowledge depends not just on the photograph itself but on the place it is afforded in the always fraught project of remembrance.
>
> (2007: 186)

It is here that Walter Benjamin's concept of '*Eingedenken*' (remembrance) provides a means of interpreting Cole's work. The idea remained somewhat underdeveloped during Benjamin's short life, but is elucidated as a form of poetics through which he reads Baudelaire and Proust. Benjamin believes that there are isolated temporal structures in the brevity induced by standard forms of modern media and communication that deprive us of the opportunity "to assimilate the data of the world around [us] by way of experience. [The] intention is just the opposite, and it is

achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader" (159). Therefore, he writes,

> The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*).
>
> (1969: 163)

Both *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* can be translated to mean 'experience,' but the latter refers to episodic, countable moments in a life - perhaps ultimately forgettable ones. *Erfahrung* refers to meaningful experience that leaves a lasting impact. Cole's work functions as an act of remembrance that seeks to re-connect his audience with things that happened far beyond their own realm of experience. In Benjamin's essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," he outlines his theory of '*Eingedenken*' as a means of inserting an empty time sequence into an artwork that allows an interruption of a linear conception of time. By creating '*Jetztzeit*,' or "now-time," memory is transformed into a sense of present outside of time. As the Benjamin scholar Charlotte Bohn puts it,

> Returning to the disruptive conjunction of past and present, in which a yet unseen, yet unheard, yet unsolved moment is articulated, *Eingedenken* seems to counter any attempt to prematurely pacify past suffering and reconcile past wrongs. It cuts through the illusion of a completed past and mobilizes an attitude of unrest.
>
> (2019: 48)

The same can be said of the way in which Cole's images carve out a space in time by disrupting past and present. The narratives that radiate from damaged and decorated walls in Tripoli and Btouratij clash with the stasis of a jettisoned carousel horse in Rome. Empires cross the bridge from shadow to light and back again, illuminating the moment in which we view them, yet needing to return to obscurity. In Muottas Muragl the reflections on glass create a cognitive dissonance. Radiation is defined scientifically as "energy that comes from a source and travels through space at the speed of light," (CDC, web, 2015) and the mountains we see in glass are not on

precisely the same plane of time as the green ridges that unfold in front of the photographer. Here is “the illusion of a completed past” in an image that, semantically, exists in no time at all. How, then, are we to mobilize our “attitude of unrest,” or to leave burnt women at rest?

Azoulay views standard history to be an imperial discipline that seeks to create plausible narratives based on the notion of linear progress in time, where worlds are “shredded violently into legible pieces to compose historical narratives” (2020: 286). Her idea of potential history is “an onto-epistemic refusal to recognize as irreversible” the damage that imperial violence creates and a stance that refuses to inhabit the position of the historian who arrives after this violence has been “made part of the sealed past, dissociated in time and space from where we are” (2020: 286). Cole’s matching of text and image throughout *Blind Spot* is an act of potential history, refusing to allow atrocities to be sealed into a foreclosed space in the past and instead treating them as active constituents of the landscapes he photographs. As such, remembrance and agency are granted to the maltreated and the dispossessed.

Figure 7 Muottas Muragl, Blind Spot, 13

Figure 8 Muottas Muragl, Fernweh, n.p.

We see this again in an image-text named for Vals, a rural village in Switzerland. The text begins with Cole's description of the conditions under which his accompanying photograph was made: "Windless day. Optical bliss" (142). The picture foregrounds a large, traditional farmhouse, freshly painted. Pastoral farmland rises steeply behind it, moving to forest and then a rocky mountain top whose shape, when combined with the cloud over it, echoes that of the farmhouse. As in Muottas Muragl, all is seemingly at peace. As in Muottas Muragl, Cole has a story from Swiss history that will shatter the serenity of the image. Here, he describes the plight of the 'Verdingkinder' ('contract children') – Swiss children who were taken by the authorities from impoverished families to serve as slave labourers in farms across the country. This practice is believed to have started in the early 1800s and was widespread until the 1960s, although not actually made illegal until 1981. The children, aside from doing years of unpaid physical labour, frequently suffered physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Belatedly, and only once the issue had come to wider public attention, did the Swiss government agree to financially compensate the thousands of *Verdingkinder* still alive in Switzerland. Cole points to the emotional futility of such gestures:

> The fund was about half a billion francs. What it could not salve was the memories for these children of unmarried mothers, these gypsy children,

> these poor children: the angry shouts, the cold nights that cut like a blade, the hatred we naturally bear toward the weak and helpless, the terror of the long days in those mountains with their rough stones and vertiginousness and mocking beauty.
>
> (2017: 142)

The potency of the lengthy final sentence lies in its use of the pronoun 'we.' Pointing out the historical crimes of others is easy, Cole's words suggest, but accepting complicity – not through our direct actions, but through our basest human tendencies – is not. It is 'we' who hate the weak and the helpless, not 'they'. It is important to note that multiple states have a long and proven history of similar types of child abuse and exploitation that have emerged from nominal state "care," including Ireland, the USA, England, Australia, Malta, Germany, and The Netherlands (Baer, 2016: 68). There is no implication of this being a singular Swiss phenomenon by Cole – it is worldwide and widespread. What is important, in this radiating narrative, is that the episode is not foreclosed to the past. As in Muottas Muragl, our perception of the pictured landscape is inevitably affected by the text. Peter Wollen writes,

> The aesthetic discussion of photography is dominated by the concept of time. Photographs appear as devices for stopping time and preserving fragments of the past, like flies in amber…The lover of photography is fascinated both by the instant and by the past. The moment captured in the image is of near-zero duration and located in an ever-receding then. At the same time, the spectator's "now," the moment of looking at the image, has no fixed duration.
>
> (2009: 76)

Wollen's language here is highly reminiscent of Benjamin's 'Jetztzeit' or 'now-time,' and serves to emphasise one of the signature qualities of Cole's photography: its general absence of time-markers. The lack of clearly depicted human figures means that we can't use fashion choices or bodily movements as temporal indicators, and the "fragments of the past" that Wollen speaks of remain undefined. It is only through the qualities of light on display that we gain some form of temporal anchor but only within the timeframe of a day, rather than an action.

The blue sky and bright white clouds above the farmhouse in Vals would suggest, perhaps, early afternoon – when we might expect to see human activity. Having read the text, we scan the grassy hill for signs of suffering. They aren't there, as such, but there may now appear to be a greater proportion of bare rock. "The rough stones and vertiginous and mocking beauty," as Cole's stark prose puts it. A lush pasture becomes harsh, and the yellowing discolouration on large areas of the grass assumes the quality of a stain. *Verdingkinder* may or may not have laboured in these fields and slept under the sloping roof pictured. This is the defining characteristic of *Blind Spot* – the image and text interact so as to become inseparable. Once the text has been read, there is no seeing of the image of the farmhouse, the forest, and the hill without a threatening timbre. The image, in turn, adds authority and empathy to the text. Here is a Black photographer, finding himself on a bright day in Switzerland with a camera and the optimum conditions to create a more conventional image of natural beauty, choosing instead to reflect on and memorialise slavery and suffering. In *African American Environmental Thought* (2007), Kimberly K Smith argues that there is a long tradition among African American intellectuals of identifying how those who are enslaved become alienated from the land they inhabit, or suffer a distorted view of their environment. In this light, a narrative of shared, global suffering emerges, and an unexpected commonality between the Swiss and the African American experience.

Figure 9 Vals, Blind Spot, 143

Cole's follow-up photobook to *Blind Spot* was *Fernweh*, published in 2020. This work solely focuses on Switzerland, and many of the images in the book are the same as the Swiss images from *Blind Spot*, or at least are photographs taken in the same location in the same timeframe. In *Fernweh*, however, they stand without a supporting text – save for the occasional fragment of text extracted from an old Baedeker guidebook. Both the Vals image at hand and the aforementioned Muottas Muragl picture feature again in *Fernweh*. At first glance, both are identical. Close inspection, though, shows that the Vals image in the later book has a broader view, taking in a greater amount of both the foregrounded farmhouse and the sky above the mountain. This lends a different valence to the image that, coupled with a more vivid, richer colouring that is in keeping with the aesthetic of *Fernweh*, removes the hard edge from the image. The editorial and artistic decisions made by Cole in *Blind Spot*, we can therefore conclude, are central to maintaining a tone consistent with his texts. Speaking of his move towards near-absolute focus on only the visual in *Fernweh*, Cole was frank about the process of making his previous book:

> There's nothing wrong with writing by itself. And there's nothing wrong with photography by itself; quite the contrary: a photo followed by a photo followed by a photo has a power that needs no additional help. What happens when I think about different ways to combine photographs and texts is that I'm hoping to create a third thing. I resist calling the result of that effort the best of both worlds. It's a bid to create another world, one that borrows elements of these preexisting worlds. The impetus to make *Blind Spot*, even though it was an organic wish to make that "third thing," and even though it turned out to be one of my favorite projects I've ever done, was also, I admit, rooted in a bit of worry about whether the images could hold the page by themselves.
>
> (Shah, 2020: np)

In the corresponding image of Muottas Muragl, the only apprehensible difference is that the *Fernweh* version features a lens flare to the bottom-right of the photograph. This indication of the photographer's presence is a reminder of the fallible and subjective nature of the camera itself. The visual theorist Vilem Flusser believed that critics of photography should always ask the question, "How far have photographers succeeded in subordinating the camera's program to their own intentions, and by what means?" and, conversely, "How far has the camera succeeded in redirecting

photographers' intentions back to the interests of the camera's program, and by what means?" (in Emerling, 2012: 193). The lens flare, removed in order to subordinate the camera to Cole's intentions in *Blind Spot*, is allowed to remain in *Fernweh* – a book in which Cole moves his project into new levels of obliquity and ambiguity that require his audience to ponder the camera's mediative capabilities.

Reflections are alluded to textually rather than visually in one of the pairings entitled 'Sao Paulo,' when Cole details an interaction with an interviewer who "asked a question that was like the sudden realization that a mirrored wall has been double-sided all along." He continues,

> She asked, though these are not her exact words: Isn't all the work part of a single piece? She asked, like someone patiently unlocking, with a pin, a pair of handcuffs: Aren't all the photographs and texts, the fragments and experiments, even the things you say into a microphone, even the things you don't say, aren't they all installments toward a unified project?
>
> (2017: 126)

There is a sense of the artist hiding in plain sight here. Cole would not have included such a trenchant observation unless, surely, he wanted the reader to perceive his work in the same vein as his interlocutor. But what *is* "the problem," and how does the accompanying image of Sao Paulo connect us to it? The image is of a cityscape of high-rise buildings, or varying designs, heights, and colours. The image is taken from a considerable height above the other buildings, of which many are at least ten storeys high. Towards the further reach of the photograph, a pair of buildings whose horizontal rainbow stripes in primary colours are reminiscent of Lego bricks bring a ludic quality to the image. Closer examination of the picture brings to light flurries of human activity that are initially imperceptible: a bustling street in the centre of the image with canopies suggestive of outdoor dining and, to the right, dozens more people gathered on a green rooftop.

Figure 10 Sao Paulo, *Blind Spot*, 127

Cole has spoken of his interest in Italo Calvino's idea of 'continuous cities' and writes in 'Passages North,' an essay in *Black Paper* on Oslo that

> All cities are continuations of other cities. Virtually all of them are subject to the same neoliberal arrangements, so that whether or not the water supply is good or the electrical grid is reliable, you'll still find Burger King and the Body Shop and H&M and IKEA. In each city, as I wander around, there are moments of a certain self-forgetfulness. Where am I? Is this São Paulo or Lagos? Is this Copenhagen or Oslo? Is this Chicago, Stavanger, Milan, Auckland? The languages are dialects, the neighbourhoods profiles plucked from a common kaleidoscope.
>
> (2021: 232)

Cast in this light, we must ask how much this flattening out of social, economic, and cultural topographies (as Cole sees it, at least) is "the problem" to which he alludes, and in what ways acts of 'remembrance' can reclaim a city's sense of uniqueness. If cities are continuous, why visit them at all? This ambivalence to travel and global topographies is an ongoing theme of his work, visited in many of his essays..

Cole's photograph of Sao Paulo is given much greater context when we are aware that it was part of his prolonged attempt to recreate a famous photograph entitled 'Men on Rooftop' – made in Sao Paulo in 1960 by the Swiss photographer René Burri. Cole describes this attempt in his essay 'Shadows in Sao Paulo,' in his 2016 collection *Known and Strange Things* wherein he encounters a surprising amount of difficulty in finding the exact spot where Burri took his photograph, before eventually discovering that the problem lay in the fact that the lenses he was using were not nearly as long as Burri's had been, and that the image he admired thus had far more forced perspective than necessary (2016: 316-7). Cole reflects that "[t]he photographic image is a fiction created by a combination of lenses, cameras, films, pixels, color (or by its absence), time of day, season" (317). In this way, his attempts to understand Burri's photograph reach their natural limits: "in discovering all that can be known about a work of art, what cannot be known is honored even more. We come right up to the edge, and can go no farther" (318). Here, again, is the central message of thoughtful collaboration and remembrance that the radiating narratives of Cole's work evince. Cole's recreation of Burri's famous photograph and the method he used to achieve it once again involve a compression of temporal and spatial boundaries in the vein of Benjamin's *Eingedenken*. How foreclosed is history to us when we have means of understanding its documentation and the process whereby it enters the mainstream – becoming, first, established fact, and then a part of our mythology?

Cole's interviewer continues:

> You're still circling the problem now, she said, obsessed, she said, and approaching it in other ways. You will probably always be returning to it, she said, making herself comfortable within the folds of my brain. But it is the same problem, she said, though she didn't directly say what the problem was, or with what degree of success or failure I had approached it so far.

Blind Spot continually probes the obscure and the overlooked in an attempt to merge the ethical and aesthetic planes of art by forcing the viewer to confront the limits of their seeing. Cole emphasises the pressing urgency of seeing ourselves as being connected to our insignificant ancestors by recognising that we are continuous citizens of the continuous city – a theme begun in his peripatetic urban novels *Every*

Day is for the Thief and *Open City*, and further developed in his subsequent critical writing and photography

Forced Displacement

Cole has shown a deep concern throughout his career for the figure of the migrant in all its forms – be it the alienated narrators of *Every Day is For the Thief* and *Open City*, his reflections on James Baldwin in his essay 'Black Body', or his deeply emotive contributions to *Human Archipelago* (more on which below). In Blind Spot, the form of the image-text is key to his intervention on the ongoing "migrant crisis" – a euphemistic media-driven term that is given to a catastrophe of forced displacement that is part of a continuum with ancient origins, but whose modern triggers can be pinpointed to the end of the Second World War.This crisis is a frequent touchpoint throughout *Blind Spot*, but is most explicitly confronted in the image-text entitled 'Pozzallo,' where Cole's sole sentence baldly states

> We recover earrings, headphones, money (euros and dollars), family photographs, bracelets (Jesus loves me), shoes, handwritten letters, mobile phones, SIM cards, passports, and watches from the bodies of the drowned.
>
> (2017: 288)

Pozzallo is a small port in Italy that, in recent years, has become a frequent landing point for refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean from North Africa in hazardous, inhumane, and terrifying circumstances. Many do not arrive alive, as Cole's text alludes, and their personal effects become some of the only traces of their existence. The sparse and stark details that Cole lists in a detached, affectless tone invite the reader to insert their own emotions. The items, visualized, operate outside of linear time to project to both the past and the future.

The accompanying photograph is, even though it contains no human figures, perhaps the least oblique photograph in *Blind Spot* and the most overtly emotional. Between two worn and rusted boats lie multiple life jackets along with a stray bracelet, a golden foil blanket, shoe, and sodden items of clothing. This is a socially-oriented picture, as documentarian in nature as it is artistic. Cole has spoken of his intent to be humanistic, rather than political in *Blind Spot*. But he would also be aware, as per Ariella Azoulay, that "the power of this opposition – political/not political- is so extensive that all who use it, whether those who seek to uphold it or those who seek

to disrupt it, acquiesce in the lines of demarcation that it produces" (2012: 5). There is, if we follow Azoulay's conclusions, no genuine separation of the political and aesthetic realms; and so it is for Cole. In another work, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay argues persuasively that the power relations by which we ascribe meaning to photographs mean that even the stateless are granted citizenry. In *Human Archipelago* - a collaboration with photographer Fazal Sheikh where Cole provides text to accompany Sheikh's image of migrants and refugees - Cole signs this 'contract,' and personalizes it when he writes

> Following Ariella Azoulay, I consider citizens as all persons who are subject to a sovereign's authority, and citizenship as the obligations that citizens who are recognized as citizens bear towards citizens who are not recognized as citizens
>
> (2018:132)

Cole's photographs in *Blind Spot* rarely depict human figures and, when they do, these tend to be obscured or distant, and thus anonymised. The ongoing migrant crisis has been well documented by photographers who largely capture images of the migrants themselves, picturing them as victims or villains, depending on their own ideology or that of their publications. *Human Archipelago* combines Sheikh's gentle and luminous portraits with short texts that Cole terms "an archive of reading and communication around the idea of hospitality, migration, and kinship" (2019: 247).

This particular image lands at a curious intersection of the documentary and the artistic photograph. The viewer can interpret the meaning of life jacket, golden foil and the solitary shoe - most likely due to their experience as a consumer of news. Yet it is a superficial, fleeting encounter that they are likely to have with this imagery, and the impulse to empathise by considering the image on the multifaceted narratives that emanate from it is denied by the broadcaster's swift soundbite from a politician before a smooth transition to the next item of news. When the human tragedy is explicitly seen, it is almost invariably through the image of a dead child. Such images shock and discomfort the audience, as they are intended to. *Paris Match* magazine was once sold with the slogan "the weight of words, the shock of photos" (Sontag, 2003: 18) – a recognition of the affective power of images and an overt declaration of the commercial potential in causing shock. In *Regarding the*

Pain of Others, Susan Sontag critiques the depiction of war and suffering in photography. She identifies a highly racialised tendency in photojournalism:

> Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries old practice of exhibiting exotic- that is, colonized- human beings…the exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; For the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen not someone like us who also sees.
>
> (2003: 63)

Cole's photograph evades this tendency by removing the body from the photograph and playing upon the metonymic association between lifejackets and the refugee crisis that has developed over the last seven years. Analysis suggests that lifejackets have been a device often used in the media to ameliorate images of refugees and suggest that help is at hand. The image was a well-established one, if not quite a cliché, by the time of *Blind Spot* 's publication in 2017.

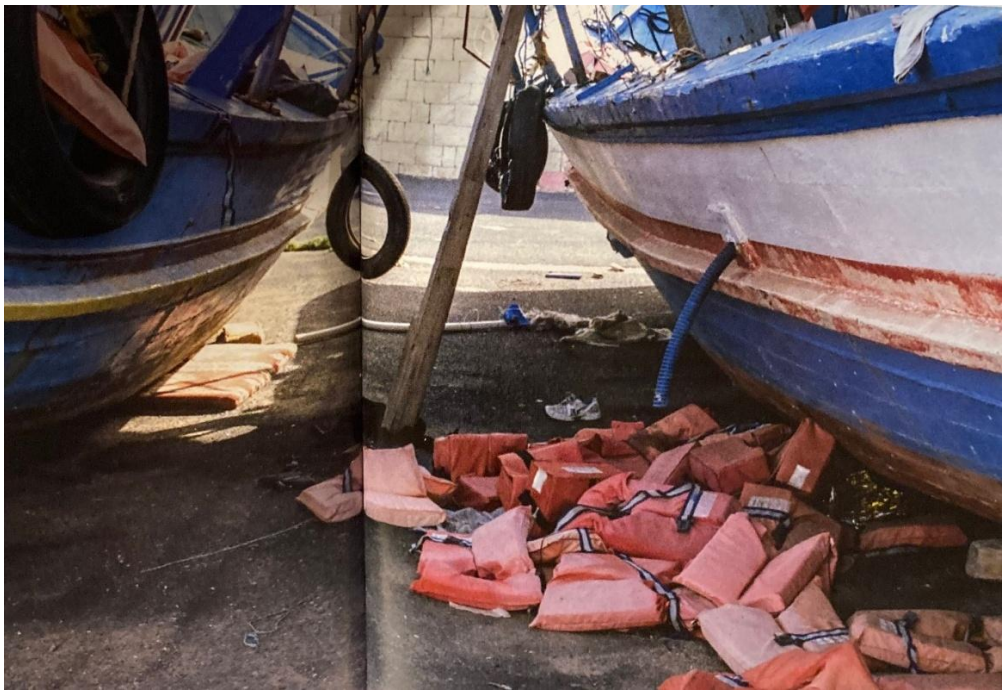


Figure 11 Pozzallo, Blind Spot, 288-289

In this thesis I treat Ariella Azoulay's belief that the political and the aesthetic are inseparable as an axiom. For Azoulay, 'political' is an adjective that describes "a space of relations between those who are exposed to one another in public," and, therefore, "Every image, including images whose contents are explicitly political, also exists in the aesthetic plane" (2012: 52). In her 2019 work *Potential History – Unlearning Imperialism*, Azoulay argues that photography, museums, and the discipline of history itself require urgent de-imperialisation. She proposes a methodology to engage with archival materials that refuses to reduce them to the status of mere historical artifacts. She suggests that we see in these objects the potential for fostering nonimperial meaning. This allows us to regain autonomy, as

> Commanding time, space and difference consolidates the imperial condition under which regime-made disaster is the form of political regimes (2019: 62).

Differential rule means that some groups get certain privileges and protection from the disaster, while others have their victimhood preserved, entering them into what Azoulay refers to as "archival acceptability" – a position where they come to be associated with victimhood in the long term, and understood through this framework.

Lebanon is a country still very much in the grip of a regime-made disaster. The suffering of its people has reached a state of "archival acceptability," whereby its socio-political volatility is taken as a given and tragedies are treated as inevitable by western media and governments, and, accordingly, by the public.[7] Cole's Lebanese image-texts should be understood as a response to regime-made disaster and those who suffer or profit from it, and those who establish archival acceptability. As such, I take his approach to Lebanon to be in line with Azoulay's idea of potential history. She takes standard history to be an imperial discipline that seeks to create plausible narratives based on the notion of linear progress in time, where worlds are "shredded violently into legible pieces to compose historical narratives." Potential history, then, is an "onto-epistemic refusal to recognize as irreversible" the damage that imperial violence creates and a stance that "refuses to inhabit the position of the historian who arrives after this violence has been "made part of the sealed past, dissociated in

[7] In Ireland we see this expressed in its basest form every Hallowe'en when a common response to the noise of fireworks is to say, "It sounds like Beirut out there." This is sometimes updated to Baghdad, or Basra.

time and space from where we are" (286). As such, we acknowledge the violence that has taken place but recognise that it forms part of a continuum. This violent continuum bears its own radiating narratives that are most sharply depicted in Lebanon, a country that clearly fascinates Cole and stimulates his project of depicting a past that refuses to be foreclosed and that can be brought out of obscurity.

In an image of the Beirut cityscape several modern apartment blocks are captured, with the scaffolding on top of the block on the left suggestive of ongoing construction. It is the centre of the photo, though, that first draws the eye, where a structure is under demolition. The right-hand side is still largely intact, but the remainder of the building slopes sharply down to the left, to a pile of rubble. The picture conveys the sense that other buildings may have recently been demolished - furthered by the sight of construction workers in action. Closest to the photographer, two men converse and, to their right, a large and surprisingly intact concrete slab (most likely from a wall) bears street art. This is a small detail in a photograph with a wide aspect, and it is not possible to work out precisely what is seen in the spray-painted image. Street art occupies an ambiguous place in Lebanese law and exists both as an anti-authoritarian statement and with the consent of the governing bodies. The presence of a clenched fist may well suggest a message of political defiance or propaganda in some form, in keeping with Cole's various images of walls made in Lebanon.

Destruction, renewal, and the enigmatic fragments left behind provide the starting point for Cole's accompanying text, which begins:

> At the National Museum in Beirut, as in any museum of archaeology, there are shards, sculptures, and plinths eroded by the centuries. Marble is hard, but not invulnerable. But at this museum are also ancient mosaics with very recent damage: mosaics shattered by artillery fire during the civil war.
>
> (134)

The shadow of Lebanon's civil war looms over many of Cole's Lebanese image-texts, as he seeks to connect past and present conflicts. In the museum, Cole is drawn to a Phoenician altar or tribune from the 4th century BCE, carved in a Hellenistic style. Graceful dancers are depicted on its frieze, but their faces have been destroyed.

Deliberately, Cole believes. But before he expands on this, an enigmatic line draws our attention to the contemporary situation:

> In his speech, Nasrallah addresses and does not address Badreddine's death in Syria. We fill in the gaps from what is not said (134).

Cole's use of the pronoun 'we' is ambiguous, but compels the reader to find out what he is alluding to, if they don't know. Mustafa Badreddine was a military leader of Hezbollah, killed in a bomb attack in Syria in May of 2016, around the time when Cole made this photograph. There is a widespread belief that his death may have been ordered by Hasan Nasrallah – a rival leader of Hezbollah. Addressing Badreddine's death, Nasrallah stated that Hezbollah "would soon announce conclusions about the perpetrators." (Barnard and Chan, 2016).

The mystery of who or what has defaced the images of the dancers is confronted by Cole, who believes it was likely an early Christian action against the cult of Eshmun, but is ultimately left open, as his text concludes: "The collection is also what is not there. Museum of wounds." (134)

Figure 12 Beirut, Blind Spot, 135

This is characteristic of the tone of obscurity and opacity that Cole establishes throughout his book, and of the power of the unseen and unknowable. Is he alluding to the erasure of landscape in memory when he juxtaposes this dense and allusive

text with an image that sits elliptically beside it? This question may be answered through the image-text 'Baalbek,' when ruins and their place in public memory are confronted in a different way. The town of Baalbek lies only a few miles from the Syrian border and has become a stronghold for Hezbollah in recent years. Cole, upon visiting, is offered a Hezbollah shirt by a local salesman, and hears stories of how every village in the area has lost at least twenty men to ISIS. Cole worries that the ruins that the town is famous for will suffer the same damage that Palmyra in Syria suffered. We are reminded of the transitory nature of landscapes, the memories that they bear and the ways in which imperial power attempts and fails to delimit our memory:

> Baalbek, even ruined, was pure visual rhythm, was strict ritual and orderly worship diagrammed in stone. The cult of Ba'al, the temple of Jupiter, the Byzantine basilica, the mosque: the massive sacred site had been perpetually overwritten. Gods had killed gods here, and had in their turn been killed by other gods.
>
> (142)

Cole's accompanying photograph is deceptively simple - a shot of the ruins of Baalbek with a pale blue sky behind them. The series of columns in the centre of the photo are the most enticing element, but are eclipsed by the larger, plainer brick walls to either side. Closer again, an enclosing wall, built of a similar stone, but more recent, and seemingly fully intact. Vegetation grows over the foreground walls and crowds out the building to the left. Completing the image of a site that has "been perpetually overwritten," a modern paved road and pavement run parallel to the wall. As such, it appears likely that five distinct time periods are represented in this picture, each one a necessary and distinctive component of it – but none of them dominant. Empires rise and fall, including the ones of our own time. Writing of this visit to Baalbek in his later essay collection, *Black Paper*, Cole describes walking through "a palimpsest of ruins" (2021: 67) – an image that sheds light on his thought process when creating the images that would go into *Blind Spot*, and an analogy that fits with the thrust of the book.

Cole's use in this image-text of the final stanza of 'Baalbeck' by the Lebanese poet Nadia Tueni is also highly significant, as in her 1980 documentary *Whispers* she

follows a similar trajectory to Cole through Lebanon, and deals with the same intersections of commerce and hospitality. The closing lines, “Its language luminous, its gestures architectural, Baalbeck is a gift from the world of measures” (2017: 142) allow us a sense of a place that exists out of time, where the land and the stones give us the radiating narratives of this palimpsestic place. Moreover, it brings us back to Azoulay. Potential history, as she defines it, “is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonized peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics,” that leads to “a rejection of imperialism’s conceptual apparatus altogether” (2020: 54)

Figure 13 Baalbek, Blind Spot, 149

Such a rejection is also a key constituent to Cole’s overarching project, captured here through the tension and conversation created by the hybridity of image-texts. There is rarely anything overtly political in Cole’s images – insofar as they do not directly depict suffering, opulence, or power. It is only by thinking alongside them and engaging with the texts that we find something topical or ‘political.’ He writes in ‘Treasure Beach’ of how poetry can be the “secret channel” or “link that allows different kinds of excellence to understand one another,” despite its meaning in English having become “debased and sometimes taken to mean the mere communication of sentiment” (110). So important is poetry as conceptualised in this way to Cole’s creative process that he claims that “When I make a work, no matter how small, only its poetic possibility interests me, those moments in which it escapes

into some new being" (110). In this sense, Cole demands a form of patience and hermeneutic curiosity of his audience that is redolent of that required by the reader of poetry – the willingness to sometimes forego immediate comprehension and clarity in favour of a slower unfolding of meaning.

In 'Milan,' Cole pairs an image of vegetation pressed against a window pane with a description of the destruction of the city by British bombers in 1943 and an anecdote about "the landscape of inner complexity" that we should presume for each person we encounter. In a paragraph that acts as a meta-commentary on *Blind Spot*, Cole writes:

> When we look at a small scene of inanimate or vegetal objects, and these objects appear to be striving or under pressure, we don't literally see the emotional landscape of individuals within the city, nor do we see something that is definitely typical of this city rather than that city. We do not see the strain, the raw wounds, the inner fires still burning, or the scars. What we do see, with luck, is something that can work by analogy, as in the work of the poets.
>
> (156)

This is one of many instances where *Blind Spot* becomes a distinctive, innovative, hybrid piece of art by not only merging image and text, but by Cole acting as critic-practitioner, using his own photography to comment on photography's capabilities.

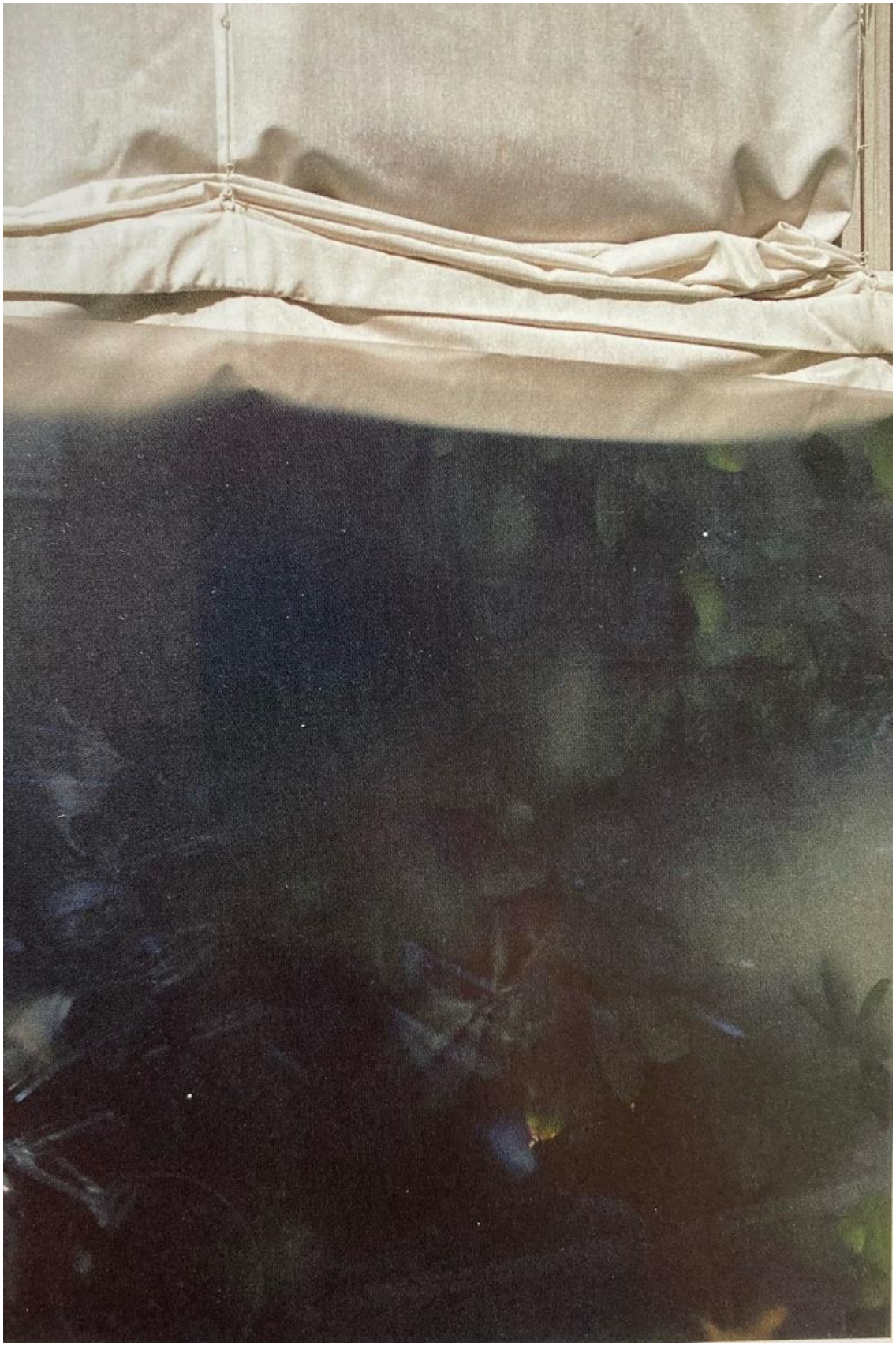


Figure 14 Milan, Blind Spot, 157

In another Beirut image-text, Cole quotes Emily Dickinson's 'The Poets light but lamps' in full; an analogy of poets as lamplighters – people who create a perpetual light to outlast them. In quoting the poem in its entirety, he alerts us to his intent to act as poet and work through analogy. The uncapturable and the ultimate futility of written expression are specifically what Cole wants to illuminate, and it is another Dickinson poem, 'The Tint I cannot know – is best' that Cole uses to represent this. He writes of his certain knowledge that "what is seen is greater than what the camera can capture of it, what is known is finer than writing can touch." (163)

Figure 15 Beirut, Blind Spot, 164

We sense Cole's consideration of the limits of seeing – his camera can, like Dickinson's lamplighters, illuminate our understanding. But the camera, and his pen, can only do so much. In the fifteen balconies of his image, we can see a certain amount, and presume a lot more, but ultimately know very little. Cole and his camera could have been invasive and could have sought to document – giving us a narrative of squalor and suffering. Instead, all we can do with these figures, obscured, and kept at a distance, is presume lives of inner complexity for them – or what Cole terms 'emotional landscapes.' This, too, is an expression of potential history, which, Azoulay tells us, "is the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world." (2019: 57)

Such care for our common word is sharply examined by Cole in a further Beirut image where he confronts a pernicious working practice in Lebanon. '*Kafala*' is a labour system that operates in many Middle Eastern countries whereby foreign workers are given a working visa, provided they have a sponsor. It gives almost total control over their lives to private companies or citizens. Abuse is widespread. The most extreme cases have been reported in the Gulf, rather than Lebanon – most notoriously in Qatar, where workers from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka building stadia for the 2022 World Cup were subjected to dangerous working conditions that have resulted in the deaths of more than 6,500 workers. In Lebanon, approximately 30-40% of the population is wealthy enough to afford to employ workers in this way. In this image-text, Cole confronts the treatment of Ethiopian kafala workers – who make up a large proportion of domestic workers in Lebanon. They are often hired as nannies because they are Christian and English-speaking. Cole describes their lives of mute servitude, briefly punctuated by their visits to semi-secret nightclubs in less salubrious parts of Beirut, and their days off on Sunday when "you can see them on the streets, their spirits shining from having attended church, the condition of servitude briefly lifted" (84). It is only in recent times that such workers have even been allowed a day off, due to a reform of the system that makes it somewhat easier to report abuses.

The picture is printed over two pages. The effect of this is important, as when turning the page we first see the side of the mannequin's face with no eye – a very literal rendering of the Blind Spot. The image, staring out past reflections on a shop window, is stark and confrontational, analogous to corrupted ideals, domestic abuse,

and the absurdity of beauty standards. Around the time that *Blind Spot* was made, and prior to the worst fighting in the Syrian war, plastic surgery tourism was estimated to be worth over 1 billion dollars a year to the Lebanese economy. Cole's porcelain white mannequin is given new light when we compare it to an image from a CNN report on the kafala system.

This mannequin is not intended to uphold any beauty norms, but to model a domestic worker's uniform. Notice the difference in skin tones, the othering and class differentialism that therefore occur. In this deprived and suffering country, what are we to make of the degrading practice of kafala? The image and text combine to ask who is now complicit in acceptable suffering. Among the new rights that Ariella Azoulay proposes is "the right not to be a perpetrator" (2019: 419), implying the potential for future circumstances where pain and mistreatment cease to be generational and inherited systems of exploitative practices are abandoned.

Figure 16 Beirut, Blind Spot, 85-86

Figure 17 From CNN.com

In this chapter I have analysed the image-texts in *Blind Spot* through the lens of Walter Benjamin's 'Eingedenken' – finding in his photographic techniques a means of commemorating the dead by refusing to delineate past and present. It is, instead, an insertion of 'now time' into linear 'empty time.' This has echoes in Ariella Azoulay's 'Potential History,' which proposes that the concept of history as linear and compartmentalised is an imperial one that should be rejected. Cole's consciousness of the ethics around intrusion into what he terms the "emotional landscapes" of individuals situates him as a willing signatory of Azoulay's 'civil contract of photography.' As such, his work functions as a rebuke to those who document exploitatively or use the camera to wield imperial power.

How, then, does this connect to Cole's own term, "radiating narratives"? The term is an evocative, poetic one that runs the risk of sounding nebulous. His use of it is clarified somewhat when we consider that Cole's work is part of a single project – as signposted in his cityscape image-text in Sao Paulo, where he quotes an interviewer who has picked up on the overarching strands of his intermedial work. The writing and the photograph gesture towards his previous publications, *Open City* and *Known and Strange Things* as a means of confirming this. The phrase "radiating narratives

itself" was first used by Cole when discussing *Fernweh*, the follow-up to *Blind Spot*, but feels apposite to the earlier book, and to his entire body of work. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cole published a short story called 'City of Pain' – a fable about a mythical but familiar city struck down by a virus. Within a few months he would rename it 'Radia' – a more characteristically oblique name than the original, a reference to the motifs of astrology and astronomy that the story is peppered with, and to the final image of a city that resembles "a crown with radiating spokes" when viewed from the air (2020: Web, n.p.).

We see the most direct pairing of the obscurity/radiation dichotomy that recurs throughout *Blind Spot* in two images of a boy in Brazzaville, Congo that are only differentiated by levels of light exposure in the development process, but published three hundred pages apart – one near the start of the book and one close to the end. "Darkness is not empty," writes Cole beside the unobscured version, "it is information at rest" (322). This phrase recurs, unchanged, in the title essay of Cole's 2021 collection, *Black Paper* – a fragmentary meditation on the meanings of 'blackness' and 'darkness' as concepts. Black paper is another name for the sheet used to make to make a carbon copy on a blank page. "Black transported the meaning," (2021: 253) writes Cole, in a lexical image that works as a photo negative of "radiating narratives," but not its opposite. *Blind Spot* embodies both Azoulay and Benjamin's ideas around time and memory in its ability to radiate into both the past and future of Cole's work, establishing an aesthetic of uncertainty – a means of destabilising our perspectives, undermining our long-held beliefs, and forcing us to re-examine our ways of looking.

Figure 18 Brazzaville, Blind Spot, 22

Figure 19 Brazzaville, Blind Spot, 322

Obscurity

Etymology, and the deeper significance of words, often play an important role in Cole's work, as seen precisely at the midway point of *Blind Spot* through his unpacking of the term 'obscurity':

> Obscure is an adjective first attested in English around 1400. It means "dark," or figuratively, either "morally unenlightened" or "gloomy." It comes from the Old French "obscure" or "oscur," which means "dark," "clouded," "gloomy," "dim," or "not clear," and is attested in the twelfth century. The French term is directly from the Latin "obscurus," which means "dark," "dusky," "shady," or, figuratively "unknown," "unintelligible," "hard to discern," or "from insignificant ancestors." The word's roots are from "ob," "over," and "-scurus,""covered."
>
> (2017: 164)

The word, as we see, has deep nuance and implications. Images of things hidden or covered over characterise *Blind Spot*, as we see veils, curtains, distortions through glass, shadows, and coverings throughout the book – not least of which is the image of a carousel horse in Rome that accompanies Cole's definition of 'obscurity.'

Plastic sheeting clings to the horse, creating a sense of constraint and confinement. The image is among the widest presented in the book, taking up all of its allotted space on the recto and intruding significantly into the verso. The text is thus forced into a narrow column that sporadically forces a run-on line where a single word is split over two lines. Typographically, this is known as a "bad break" – a concept that is mirrored in the image by a jagged tear in the plastic sheeting to the right of the horse. In a book where Cole persistently asks his reader to forensically examine the linguistic and visual cues he provides; this is unlikely to be a coincidence. What, or who, has been badly broken?

It is evident that attempts have been made to patch up this tear. Sellotape is just about holding together the rip at the top but gives way to an ever-widening gap between the sides of the sheet, with one large strip of tape hanging redundantly all the way to the bottom of the picture. Dark space lies in the visible gap, drawing the viewer's eye towards it. We wonder how the rip occurred, why it needed to be repaired, what force had refused to let the gap stay closed and what lies in the dark

space. Later in *Blind Spot,* Cole will note “darkness is not empty, it is information at rest” (2017: 154).

If the reader is inclined to delve into the etymology of the word ‘carousel’ they will discover that it has its roots in a French word for the training games that Turkish and Arabian horsemen played in preparation for the Crusades, where they rode in circles and threw clay balls to each other (Barron, 1983). This adds a new charge to the seemingly benign and childlike image of the carousel horse, its body clouded by the translucent tarpaulin. Put aside and out of use in Rome, the centre of past and present empires, we might take pause to consider the radiating narrative of the horse, who our “insignificant ancestors” really are, and what we can salvage from their obscurity.

Figure 20 Rome, Blind Spot, 163-164

One of the ways in which *Blind Spot* rewards repeated readings is in the constant drawing and re-drawing of thematic and visual links between the image-text pairings. The Crusades connect us to an early pairing in *Blind Spot*, entitled ‘Tripoli.’ This refers not to the capital of Libya, but to Tripoli in Lebanon, and is one of fourteen pairings in the book made in that country. Tripoli is Lebanon’s second city,

a major port, and the site of repeated invasions. It has, at various points in its 2,700 year history, been controlled by the Phoenicians, the Seleucids, the Romans, the Mamluks, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, the Syrians, the Egyptians, the British, the French, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, the Syrians again, and finally, the modern state of Lebanon as we know it today (Britannica, 2020, web). Do we need to know this history to understand Cole's photograph? It helps, and he knows that it takes the reader a relatively short time to discover it. It is not, though, to Tripoli's violently contested past that Cole's text initially alludes, but to a Dutch artist:

> The date to remember is 1654. He paints *The Goldfinch* that year. The color harmonies are cool, the wall is full of subtle character as a face. His life is like a brief and beautiful bridge. He studies with Rembrandt in Amsterdam. He teaches Vermeer in Delft.
>
> (2017: 20)

The image is of a caged bird. The photographer is most likely at street level with the cage high on an external wall, perhaps a foot above head height. The bird sits on a small perch inside the cage, which is equipped with feeding boxes and a water bottle. The bird, grey with a darker head and tailfeathers, save for a flash of gold on its underside, may well draw our mind to Fabritius' goldfinch, if we are familiar with the painting. The bird gazes upwards, not acknowledging Cole or his audience. Yet it is the wall to which the cage is fixed that provides the greatest character in this image. Its paint is flaky, scraped, and the plaster is worn through to bare cement in patches, with deep scratches in the bottom third of the picture. Some of these scratches bear the traces of names, words and symbols, others suggest forceful attempts at the removal of something. The left half of the picture shows multiple vestiges of long-removed posters and flyers. Fragments of Arabic letters and words add an enigmatic quality and radiate messages. In a city like Tripoli many walls precede and outlast the people who live inside and outside of them, and bear the scars of what has been. They are sites of incarceration, protection, coercion, propaganda, declarations of love and defiance. Look closely, Cole suggests, and you may see all of these.

Figure 21 Tripoli, Blind Spot, 20

His text continues with a line that draws the reader to Tripoli's contested history of subjugation and its status as a modern, Muslim city.

> I am walking in the narrow alley between the castle of the Crusaders and the busy souk. There are children wild in the alley. There is a bird on the wall. It is him, Carel Fabritius. The bird suggests it (though this bird is a bulbul) but it is the wall that confirms it.
>
> (2017:20)

Carel Fabritius was a Dutch painter whose most famous work, *The Goldfinch*, was the subject of renewed interest after the publication of Donna Tartt's novel of the same name in 2013, which uses the painting as both a plot point and a cover image. Fabritius had been a student of Rembrandt in Delft, in The Netherlands, but is

thought to have been the only one of Rembrandt's students to have developed his own style, rather than working in the vein of his master. Rembrandt's images were characterised by dark, shadowy backgrounds and chiaroscuro, whereas Fabritius moved away from the Renaissance focus on iconography, using lighter colour harmonies to create more luminous backgrounds and draw the viewers' eyes to the technical aspects of a picture.

The bird, here a white-spectacled bulbul, is the initial reminder of the painting for Cole, and he makes the creature itself synonymous with Fabritius – suggesting that the artist leaves a part of themselves within their work. The wall behind the goldfinch, as in Cole's photograph, has a multitude of shades and is painted in a technique suggestive of scratching and scraping. The wall adds character and mystery to both images, and a sense of human presence and vulnerability to them. However, Fabritius was to die at a very young age, with much of his work lost with him, as Cole writes:

> Suddenly the gunpowder depot explodes. Fabritius is killed, and most of his paintings are lost to history. But all is not lost. The bridge has been built and it has been crossed, the bridge from shadow into light. He is not yet thirty-three years old.
>
> (2017: 20)

The eternal nature of art is only one element of what Cole is referencing. The legacy of Fabritius is the foregrounding of a new way of looking – of considering the quotidian as part of the numinous quality of art, not merely a backdrop to the spectacular and the iconic. Fabritius is a bridge from Rembrandt to Johannes Vermeer – a master of light and shade and an artist who brought a new way of seeing the world and finding the beauty in the ordinary.

This, Cole's text suggests, is a bridge from shadow into light that we all cross – and in doing so we salvage the obscure. What is obscure must be brought to light, seen, and thought about. The dusky and hidden, the covered-over, our "insignificant ancestors." The "radiating narratives" that Cole speaks of are the stories that emerge through sensitive and attentive looking at landscapes, spectacular and banal. Photographs of these places can preserve details and visual information that we might easily overlook, forcing us to view them with time and care. In this way,

photography serves as an act of remembrance that connects past, present and future by seeking to bring the obscure (that which we don't immediately see, or think of) to light, and working, as Cole later puts it, "by analogy, as in the work of the poets" (156) to fill in gaps of verifiable knowledge.

Cole's background in art history often influences his work in tangible and expected ways, wherein his knowledge of artists informs his choice of visual subjects, as well as his commentary around them. But it is in his more abstruse visual references that deeper and more complex narratives emerge from his photography. In an essay entitled 'The Atlas of Affect,' in his collection *Known and Strange Things*, Cole discusses several artists and scholars who have chosen to work with troves of curated images to show how certain shapes, gestures, and patterns appear in work across millennia. These include Aby Warburg (1866-1929), who collected a library of images that became the 'Mnemosyne Atlas' – an attempt to track the *"betwegtes Leben"* (animated life) of classical images from antiquity. Cole's description of Warburg's affective style of sequencing could also stand as a description of his work in *Blind Spot*: "There is a satisfaction for the eye in wordlessly accounting for the link between one image and the one that follows it" (2016: 192), although, as the next chapter will show, Cole's visual work since *Blind Spot* has pushed the boundaries of mediation even further in the wordless linkage that it requires of the audience.

Cole explores the animated life of another classical image in another Lebanese pairing, 'Btouratij'. He alludes to the ways in which religion and customs dictate the rules as he sets the scene for his image:

> We were a few miles from Tripoli, which is dry, so we stopped by a café to get our last glass of wine. The woman who owned the place was from Iraq, and the café was decorated with postcards and images of Iraq's ancient history.
>
> (2017: 30)

Cole, facing and seemingly intimately near to the images on the wall, has used the light coming from his left side to illuminate the texture of the wall's plastering and the shine of its pristine cream gloss paint. We see nothing of the time-worn character of the wall in Tripoli. Instead, it is the images tenderly placed on the wall that speak to us – images of patriotic pride posted by an exile. We see faith and history represented in an image of a mosque door, perhaps that of the Al-Madrasah

Al-Mustansiriya mosque in Baghdad. We see commerce through the image of old Iraqi silver dinar coins, with bronze or copper ones shining above them. In the lowest positioned of the three images, through a detail of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 'The Great Tower of Babel,' a representation of mythology. The myth of Babel is one of human co-operation apparently threatening the will of God, leading humankind to being condemned to a lifetime of dispersal and linguistic confusion.

Cole continues, "She brought us white wine. The sun was so bright outside that the road was almost white." The Iraqi woman shows hospitality to the strangers in an obscure part of Lebanon, and her narrative radiates. We do not need to see her to understand something of who she is and what she may have experienced. In the light gleaming on a modest, but immaculately painted wall punctuated with images that speak to us from the past, we can discern much about displacement, love, and precarity. Cole continues,

> Babel, famous for its tower, became Babylon, in Iraq. On the wall in a café in North Lebanon, Bruegel speaks for Iraq. Bruegel: he painted many things that cannot be painted.
>
> (2017: 30)

Babylon was to become the most powerful and wealthy city in the ancient Near East for centuries, and would become the home of several of the empires that would, at one stage or another, occupy Tripoli and, by extension, whatever habitation stood in the surrounding areas. Btouratij stands less than 10 kilometres outside Tripoli today. What sense of power or agency might this grant the Iraqi woman? What are we to make of her (and our) insignificant ancestors, and how are we to conceive of the politics of diaspora and displacement?

The final sentence of Cole's Btouratij text is a reference to Abraham Ortelius, a scholar who was a contemporary of the painter. He recognised the philosophical aspect of Bruegel's art when he wrote, "Our Bruegel paints many things that cannot be painted…There is often more thinking than painting in his works" (Jones, 2003, n.p). Cole returns to this quotation at a later stage in *Blind Spot*, and in doing so is drawing our attention to the thoughtful intent behind his own work. The subtlety and ambiguity behind Cole's work is an attempt to make it a more collaborative process with the audience. We bring our own knowledge and experience to the images.

Understanding of where they are made and the history of that place will inform our comprehension of the image-texts to differing degrees, and may stimulate some readers towards research that better illuminates their understanding. There is more thinking than spectacle in these quiet images, but their success requires that it be ours, alongside Cole's.

A narrative radiates through what we might term 'inter-images' – intertextual images within the photograph Cole has made. A postcard on a wall is easily overlooked despite the intent the agent has in placing it there, and the meaning, both personal and universal, that they may wish for it to convey. Here, as at many other points in the book, Cole wishes for us to examine our own blind spots. These image-texts require that we sit with them. Writing some years later, in his second essay collection, *Black Paper: Writing in Dark Times*, Cole summarises the central idea of Edward Said's *Orientalism* as "a plea to reject stereotypes and to accept the irreducible complexity of the other" (2021: 74). Through a very different approach, *Blind Spot* has the same purpose – creating an aesthetic of uncertainty through image-text complexity that serves as an entreaty not to overlook the tender and complex inner lives of those we encounter only fleetingly, or encounter only through objects.

Figure 22 Btouratij, Blind Spot, 30-31

Chapter Four

Against Immediacy: Cole's photobooks as mediation of the uncertain present

> Amid crisis, alienation, and stratification, immediacy feels right: urgent, engaging, homogenizing. But this is pharmakon: remedy and poison in one.
>
> Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*

Treating the literary critic Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy, or the Style of Too-Late Capitalism* as a diagnosis of our ongoing cultural moment, I argue in this chapter that Cole's photobooks are an aesthetic response to socio-political chaos and the sense of permanent upheaval that Kornbluh terms 'omnicrisis.' I consider the arguments put forth by Kornbluh around 'immediacy' as the signature style of twenty-first century cultural production and propose that Cole's allegorical and reflective photobooks, each working in a slightly diverging mode, function as the antithesis of the thin and thoughtless mass-produced body of work that comprises much of what Kornbluh describes. Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty therefore becomes a component of an urgently-required reclamation of the right to think carefully about all facets of life and to properly mediate our defining problems and injustices.

In *Immediacy, or the Style of Too-Late Capitalism*, Kornbluh uses the titular echoes of Fredric Jameson's influential 1984 essay 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' to propose 'immediacy' as the new "master category for making sense of twenty-first century cultural production" (2024: 6). Immediacy is a fecund term around which to base a work of literary criticism, as its etymological and philosophical roots give it various implications, as does the evolution of its use in everyday speech. In philosophy, the term was first conceptualised by Martin Buber, who used it to refer to the directness of connection between Man and God, without the need for human mediation (by, say, a priest). "Simple immediacy and togetherness," Buber believes," is the most effective form of action. More powerful and more holy than all writing is the presence of a man who is simply and directly there" (1947: 13).

This positive connotation was reshaped by John Tomlinson in 2007's *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*, where he responded to the growing sense of an

accelerated pace of life created by the rapid rise of the Internet's presence in daily life. For Tomlinson, 'immediacy' has multivalent appeal and "connotes, firstly, ideas of a culture of instantaneity – a culture accustomed to rapid delivery, ubiquitous availability and the instant gratification of desires." Secondly, and more in line with Buber, it implies " a sense of directness, of *cultural proximity*" that is drawn from the Latin root of 'immediatus,' meaning 'not separated' – therefore suggesting "not just an acceleration in culture, but a distinct quality to *cultural experience*." Thirdly and finally, Tomlinson argues that his "deployment of the term involves a clear implication of the crucial significance of *the media* in modern culture" (2007: 74).

Social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson built on Tomlinson's concept in 2019 with *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*, wherein he argued that

> Social photography, more than fast, enters into the logic of immediacy. This liquid photography better affords a kind of speaking and hearing with images. The accelerated pace at which an image is not just made but also received allows a novel type of photographic communication that is faster, more globally understood, and more expressive than words (23).

This emphasis on reception is key to Jurgenson's definition. The speed of transmission, interaction and response to images posted on social media differentiates their reception from that of photographs in a magazine, book, or gallery. Much as the images are unmediated in their dissemination, it is in the immediate response of comments and reposts that their significations are revealed. It is to Jurgenson, her Verso Books stablemate, that Anna Kornbluh's conceptualisation of 'immediacy' bears the greatest similarity, but it nods, also, to Buber's and Tomlinson's definitions.:

> In the eminent tradition of aesthetic theory, "mediation" means the active process of relating – making sense and making meaning by inlaying into medium; making riddles that merge extremes; making available in language and image and rhythm the super-valent abstractions otherwise available to our sensuous perception – like "justice" or "value." Now, this middling falters.
>
> (2024: 12)

Kornbluh's critique of immediacy as the dominant aesthetic mode of our time is ultimately a Marxist approach that treats cultural production as an activity enacted

on the world, rather than merely disclosing it. The ideas of Raymond Williams are influential on Kornbluh, as are those of Jacques Lacan, seen in her suggestion that the contemporary media landscape traps us in a "reflective one-to-one chamber" wherein

> reality-hungry immediacy egos ultimately disavow subjectivity itself, evacuating the dynamic of subject, the throwing under the bar of symbolization, in a castration denialism ensuring there is no otherness, least of all in ourselves. Instead of opaque subjects and enigmatic others, limits and contradictions, the immediacy imaginary posits only self-commanded human resources, a vital reservoir of affective flow and identity property (58)

We also see here, although unattributed, the influence of David Shields' concept of 'reality hunger' – as discussed in my previous chapter. Kornbluh's suspicion of immediacy extends to the literary practice of autofiction, and of what she sees as a contemporary trend of blurring the lines of the real and the fictional. Cole, as I have argued, can certainly be read as a practitioner of autofiction and has explicitly rejected the strict delineation between fiction and non-fiction. In Kornbluh's eyes he is therefore complicit in perpetuating the hegemony of immediacy. Autofiction, antifiction, and antigenre are, for Kornbluh, a three-headed beast that leads fiction away from its greatest strength as the most reliable mediator of life under what she calls "too-late capitalism," and a world in chaos that has developed art forms to match:

> If past crises like global war or nuclear annihilation yielded mediums and media shaped by fracture and fragmentation, rupture and disorientation, the metastasizing crises of the twenty-first century seem to beget something else: total absorption, the loss of mediation itself. In this way does immediacy offer itself in response to raging omnicrisis while taking too much of its logic from the flames.
>
> (22)

In terms of literature, she argues that the move back towards first-person narration with an inherent ambiguity around its degree of fictionality represents, "an overarching mutation, a gutting of objectivity, an event of epic proportions for which serious explanation is due" (68). Kornbluh's positioning of autofiction and its first-

person fellow deviants under the umbrella of 'immediacy' is intelligible, insofar as it is a category that can be presented in a style that feels modish and underdeveloped. However, her analysis fails to consider autofiction's potential for self-reflexive commentary on the fiction market itself, of the author's strange and discomforting way of life within that market, and of the reader's participation and self-awareness of themselves as consumers of fiction that seeks to ameliorate life in the omnicrisis. As such, dismissal of autofiction's validity as a form that mediates the contemporary condition is to entirely disregard its ability, even by simply existing as an identifiable entity, of commenting on cultural production and consumption in the most devastating terms, and of being comprehensible to a broad readership while doing so.

Kornbluh's book is by no means simply a takedown of perceived lowbrow art, or a snobbish attack on popular culture. Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* could hardly be viewed as a bestselling phenomenon, but the critical garlanding that came with its modest commercial success does not spare it Kornbluh's ire. She accuses Nelson of "genre melt" and "immediatist intimacies" that emerge through her deeply self-reflexive autotheoretical approach, which both celebrates theory as a means of mediating our lives and rejects it. Kornbluh summarises the philosophical affect of *The Argonauts* thus:

> Insufficient words, inadequate theories, unspeakable intensities, outmoded genres – so many refrains against mediation, toward immediacy (72).

Kornbluh's approach to Nelson's work and its use of theory as an overt structuring device is of particular relevance here as this thesis had its origins in a Master's dissertation I wrote in 2020 that compared Nelson's explicit use of theory in *The Argonauts* with Cole's far more implicit usage of theorists such as Kwame Appiah and Michel Serres in *Open City*. In writing it, I found myself very much in agreement with Jackie Stacey's précis of the experience of reading *The Argonauts*:

> *The Argonauts* extends Nelson's interest in the messiness of our affective responses to each other to the dynamics of authorship and readership. The book generates in the reader the thrill (and threat) of feeling that one's reactions have already been read and yet are never fully foreclosed. This experience of readership is one of being gently tripped up yet not fully falling,

> or of feeling trapped somewhere but noticing the door has been left slightly ajar. It is seductive (hard to resist) and flattering (we are keen to live up to its demands). We imagine ourselves to be co-habiting with the shifting and uncertain ground of ethical and political affiliations formed in the particularities of these lives (2018: 206).

Stacey's is an appraisal of Nelson's work that recognises its inherently self-mediating qualities that require the reader to reflect on their own responses, lived experiences, and personal engagement with the theories (largely queer and gender) with which Nelson has such an ambivalent relationship. It is difficult to say whether Kornbluh does not ascertain these qualities, or whether she simply chooses to ascribe little value to them. *Immediacy*, since its publication in February 2024, has not met with unanimously positive views, but it has undeniably struck a chord in literary studies. The boldness of Kornbluh's intervention lies in the decision to unabashedly diagnose immediacy as a problem, rather than a benign socio-cultural condition. Art criticism and aesthetic appreciation matters, as Kornbluh sees it, and unmediated messages deny us the opportunity to hone these skills.

By examining Cole's work through the lens of immediacy in this chapter, I probe the techniques behind his mediation of his work and consider whether there is an immediatist, unmediated aspect to it that is indicative of the problem Kornbluh diagnoses, or whether there is a complex, layered process of mediation that occurs between Cole and his audience that renders his work more antidotal than symptomatic. What animates Kornbluh's text, and makes it such a generative talking point for scholars of contemporary literature, is its very visceral sense of there being so much at stake. Immediacy, the argument goes, is costing us our ability to think critically, our recognition of nuance, our capacity for empathy, alongside our skill in creative expression and personal articulacy. It is, ultimately, putting the quality and cogency of future cultural production under immense risk.

The question I pose in the chapter is, if we take Kornbluh's diagnosis of immediacy as the style of too-late capitalism (and thus, the contemporary era in which Cole is working) to be correct, then how do we see this style manifest in Cole's work? Is it reified or resisted, or both? And, as a corollary of this, how does it influence and shape his aesthetic of uncertainty? To what extent is immediacy a constituent of, or referent for, the aesthetic of uncertainty? Where Kornbluh bemoans immediacy as a

destructive, corrosive force in cultural production, I argue here that Cole's overall body of work is paradigmatic of how immediacy can be harnessed into new, self-reflexive art forms. This chapter focuses on Cole's more image-based work and investigates how he uses and subverts immediacy in aesthetic terms.

Human Archipelago

Human Archipelago was published in 2019 by Steidl. It is a collaboration featuring images by acclaimed photographer, Fazal Sheikh, an American with Kenyan, Indian and Pakistani roots, and words by Teju Cole. Sheikh's images are a curated selection of intimate portraits of displaced people, landscapes, nature photography, and more abstract imagery. They represent a summary of the concerns reflected in his photographic work throughout his career, which has always intersected with questions of forced displacement, land justice, and the climate crisis. These are matched with words by Cole, which comprise a blend of original writing and quotations that he terms "an archive of reading and communication around the idea of hospitality, migration and kinship…indebted to a host of voices" (247). Cole's approach to combining text and image might best be defined as the text being complementary, rather than supplementary, as it is in *Blind Spot*. Each of Sheikh's photographs is capable of standing alone and transmitting meaning without explanation or contextualisation, but the text adds a new dimension to the image which, in turn, gives new nuance and resonance to the text. There is a symbiotic, mutually strengthening relationship between word and photograph that rewards the reader who recognises Cole's references, for which citations are only provided at the end of the book. *Human Archipelago* can be encountered with no supplementary information regarding either text or image, and the onus is placed on the reader to check the details of Cole's intertextual references and the locations and subjects of Sheikh's images in the book's index. The level of mediation is left to the reader's discretion, but this could not be described as entirely unmediated, or an exemplar of immediacy, in Kornbluh's conceptualisation. She argues that

> The style of immediacy precludes art, literature, video, and theory from convoking collectives and from catalyzing representation itself as a medium of collectivity. Mediations are composites of language, composites of images, compositions of meaning, composed ideas – that produce something more than immediate experience. It is this putting into medium and generating of

the middle that responds to crisis, instead of perpetuating its intrinsic immersions and extremes.

(2024: 175)

The ethos of composites and compositions as a means of representation and response to crisis lies at the heart of Cole and Sheikh's collaboration, meaning that *Human Archipelago* feels very much like the product of an uncertain world in the throes of an omnicrisis. The book is a Byzantine work to analyse because Cole's self-awareness as a photographer and photography critic means that the text is already offering a meta-analysis of the photobook as an entity, and of the affordances of photography and its social functions. The now-standard critical approach of examining a book through a theoretical lens is rendered more complicated when the text is already filled with theory. This is a pattern across Cole's work, where his academic background in art history means his words and references often anticipate the theoretical lens through which they might be discussed.

Figure 23 Human Archipelago, 116-7

Human Archipelago can thus function as an instructive and rewarding text for those interested in photography as a practice, and for those who enter into conversations on the philosophical and ethical questions around forced displacement. In effect, the text provides the audience with its own rules of engagement. Whereas the average photobook is entirely open to the reader's interpretation of it, here the text provides certain guidelines on what John Berger, an early mentor of Cole and twice referenced in *Human Archipelago*, termed 'ways of seeing'. In his book of the same name, Berger argues that

> Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also on our own way of seeing (1977: 10).

Human Archipelago is, amongst others things, a tribute to Berger's contemplative-yet-accessible ruminations on visual art, and Cole's own treatise on ways of seeing. In an emblematic early passage, Cole moves from a quote from Shakespeare's Sonnet 65 to a meditation on the power of photography:

> How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?
>
> One of the functions of images is to re-enchant the ordinary. This is why our ancestors entered into the darkness of caves and with black pigment painted black images on black walls. The sudden brightness of a torch, and the image blazing to life. Through photography, the meaning of the moon can be held in trust until the arrival of the one who sees it. (2019: 14)

Figure 24 Human Archipelago, 15

Human Archipelago sets forth the aspiration of photography re-enchanting the ordinary by it being reimagined and repurposed as a tool of connection, rather than spectacle. Cole's observation here is paired with Sheikh's image of a light shining in pitch darkness taken while walking at night in India, but it is his portraits that dominate *Human Archipelago* and that reach most directly for the audience's empathy. Visual theorist David Campany believes that

> The portrait photograph, perhaps now more than ever, functions as both a frustrated promise of revelation (of interior life) and as a form of cultural currency that signifies and circulates without need of such revelation (Campany and Wolokau-Wanambwa, 2022: 22).

This is apt when considering *Human Archipelago*, as Sheikh's portraits allow an emotional connection between viewer, photographer and subject, without forcing those in front of the camera to reveal too much of themselves. Each portrait affords dignity and honesty in equal measure. Above all, the subjects are allowed to retain privacy, with many of the pictured choosing to face away from the camera. Visual and comparative literature scholar Gil Z. Hochberg argues that

while seeing (and being seen) commonly ensures political empowerment, these positions may in fact function as oppressive forces. Political transformation and empowerment…are dependent on opacity, the ability to disappear, blindness, failed vision, and invisibility at least as much as they are on visibility, being visible, or having access to the gaze (2015: 7).

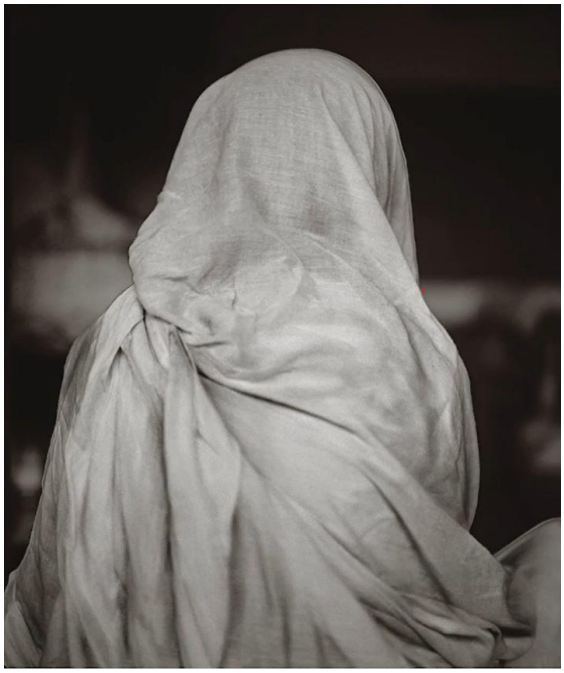


Figure 25 Human Archipelago, 11

Figure 26 Human Archipelago, 27

Figure 27 Human Archipelago, 49

Sheikh's portraits, whether they include faces or the backs of heads, never frame their subjects as victims and invite careful consideration in a way that the short, sharp shock of news photography does not. In *Blind Spot*, a 2015 image-text work where Cole combines writing with his own photographs, he claims that

> Photography is good at showing neither political detail nor political sweep…but this difficulty does not prevent news photography from making claims, nor does it keep those claims from being accepted (2015: 212).

This belief is in line with Susan Sontag, who in *Regarding the Pain of Others* identified a highly-racialized tendency in photojournalism:

> Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic – that is, colonized human beings…The exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees (63).

Fazal Sheikh has stated that he will sometimes spend weeks or even months in a location before he takes a single portrait photograph, gaining the trust and understanding of anyone whose image he captures, as portraiture is "an act of

mutual engagement" wherein "a subject of a photograph can confront me as a viewer, and you as a viewer" (2019). His work reminds us that photographs are always an encounter between people, of which the viewer is one. Sheikh's portraits vary in perspective and framing. They occasionally move intimately close to the subject, but at other times broaden the view to include the kind of details that give the image what Roland Barthes terms its 'punctum' – the element of the photograph that pierces or wounds the viewer. This is subjective, of course, and there can be more than one punctum. In the final image of the book, a portrait of two young men in a refugee camp for unaccompanied minors in Kenya, there is a disconcerting contrast between the direct, almost confrontational, gaze of the man on the left and the far more vacant expression of the man on the right.

Figure 28 Human Archipelago, 235

The punctum of this image, for this viewer, is the missing button on the man on the left's cardigan, just above his skull-patterned pants. These clothes were most likely donated somewhere in the Global North. Clothes given to charity shops and thrift stores in wealthier countries that don't sell eventually make their way to the Global South where they are sold cheaply in markets, before the most unloved and unwanted items make their way to orphanages and refugee camps, where they are

distributed. Vulnerability comes from the Latin, *vulnus*, meaning 'wound.' The young men in the image have forged a style of their own from these items, but the missing button from what appears to be a woman's sleeveless woollen cardigan adds the vulnerability that the subject's intense expression is attempting to mask.

What we get in such images is the re-enchanting of the ordinary that emerges from what sociologist Michel Agier terms 'banal cosmopolitanism' - the condition of transnational encounter that happens at the border and at the camp. This, for Agier, is the more typical state of cosmopolitanism that many endure today, far-removed from the celebratory vision of unimpaired mobility and cultural exchange depicted by thinkers such as Kwame Appiah. For Agier,

> If the refugee camp is indeed the hardened form of a spatial and temporal 'border' between citizenships and localities that have been lost and are not yet refound, it is also the test of a little cosmopolitan world. And its occupants end up accustoming themselves to this, by necessity, as they are not sure of finding elsewhere a feeling of locality and a relation of citizenship (65-66).

It is worth considering the history of photography as a tool of domination to fully understand the liberatory and subversive stance that artists like Sheikh and Cole have taken. As photography scholar Gil Pasternak outlines in his essay, 'Politics and Photography' (2020: 214-221), photography as a process was purchased from Louis Daguerre in 1839 by the French government, which was keen to assert its technical, scientific, and artistic superiority over the competing British and Ottoman Empires. The 'daguerreotype,' as it had become known, was then 'gifted' to the world as a display of French largesse. Photography, then, was intrinsically connected to politics and politicians from its earliest stages. Official portraits became an essential means of courting public opinion for leaders such as Napoleon III and Queen Victoria, who used photography as a means of disseminating images of themselves as figures of wisdom and benevolence. President Abraham Lincoln, too, used multiple portraits to engender popularity. Status aside, the subjects of such photographs were obliged to be almost entirely immobilised while their portraits were committed to daguerreotype, lest they feel an urge to twitch, laugh, or scratch during the five or ten minutes of necessary plate exposure. To deal with this, photographers developed clamps to lock the photographic subject into position. This rendered them, in Fredric

Jameson's words, "mechanically integrated and neutralized…part of the technology of the medium" (1991: 73).

Upon Lincoln's death, photography took on a new role. The photographs of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, and his accomplices were used on wanted posters that led to Booth's death and his accomplices' swift capture in 1865. This was amongst the first uses of photography as a means of capturing criminals and certainly the first to visually depict individuals as enemies of the state. Lincoln's portrait photographer was given exclusive access to photograph the men in captivity and then their execution. With this, photography became a key part of the state's apparatus of punishment and deterrence.

Around the time of the First World War, many nations began to require a photograph on passports, as anxieties around illegal migration grew. Photographs permitted movement, but were just as likely to prohibit it. As Pasternak puts it:

> Whether used to announce their sovereignty, target perceived agitators, control borders, or to absorb individuals into ideological frameworks, photographs assist politicians and governments to shape people's lives at the same time as they keep them estranged from the people and the lives affected (2020: 221).

The visual theorist and documentarian Ariella Azoulay has devoted her career to examining the links between photography and imperialist conquest, and found that they are inextricable. She argues for a "civil contract of photography" in her book of the same name (2008) wherein we recognise the encounter that takes place between photographer, subject, and audience. This deconstructs photography's 'single creator' tradition and raises ethical implications of this around power and responsibility to each other.

Accompanying an image of three Somali women in a refugee camp in Kenya, Cole writes

> Following Ariella Azoulay, I consider citizens as all persons who are subject to a sovereign's authority, and citizenship as the obligations that citizens who are recognized as citizens bear towards citizens who are not recognized as citizens (2019: 132).

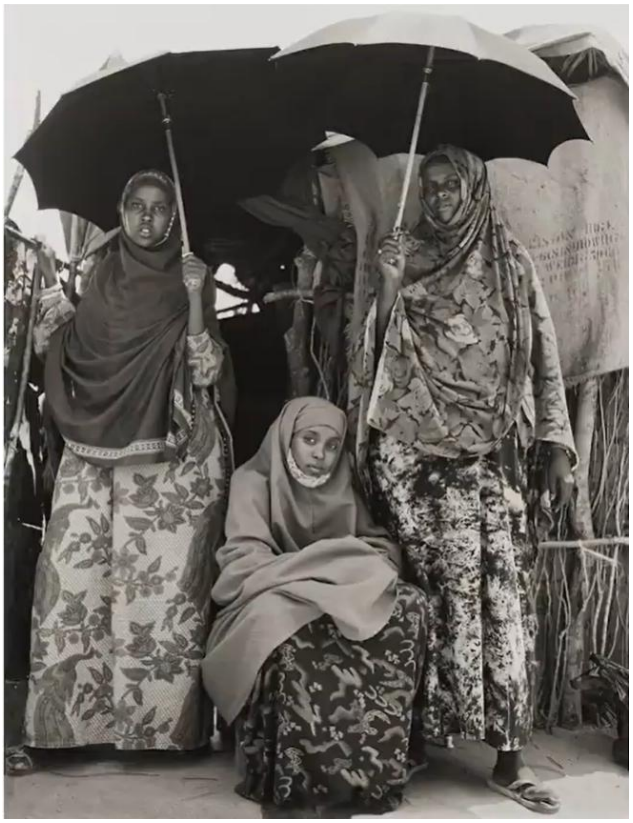


Figure 29 Human Archipelago, 133

Kinship, reciprocity and hospitality are the recurring themes of *Human Archipelago*, summed up in Cole's next inscription:

> "Who is my neighbour? Who is kin to me" (135)

Forced displacement is a concept that can demand profound acts of imagination on the part of many people. The 'force' that creates the displacement is so multivalent that comprehending it requires either an existing base of knowledge of various geopolitical and internecine conflicts, or a level of intellectual curiosity and willingness to learn more about them. Wars are, broadly speaking, things that even those living in the most materially-comfortable and politically-stable states believe they can understand. Religious and political persecution, mistreatment on the basis of caste or sexuality, surveillance, false imprisonment, enslavement, trafficking, state-assisted land theft, property and livelihood destruction, climate catastrophe, and famine are just some of the other factors that force people from their ancestral homelands, and each of these have multiple sub-categories of their own. Political actions and shifts in the past decades have not been indicative of an increase in sympathy or support for those who have been forcibly displaced, or of any wide

public inclination to know more about the factors behind it. *Human Archipelago* offers a perspective 'from below' in terms of how the gaze of the displaced is seen and how we consider our complicity. Cole writes:

> But why do they have to suffer? Why do they have to be unhoused, removed, turned refugees a second time for no good reason? The only reason being that it pleases certain people to be cruel, and to feel the pressure of their boot on someone else's neck.
>
> What is watching all this cruelty going to do to those not directly in its path? What does watching torture over an extended period eventually do to you, even when you're not the torturer or the tortured? Why do you think you can stay clean? (145)

One way that *Human Archipelago* reifies the realities of forced displacement is by depicting the places left behind. Accompanying an image of Lifta, a ruined Palestinian village near Jerusalem, Cole writes of how "Stones can speak of time" and how "Through building, we make semi-permanent marks on the face of the earth" (22). Sheikh's image is haunting, capturing a certain resilience to the hillside buildings, even as trees grow from their roofs and walls. We see bountiful evidence of human activity and then, suddenly, none. Archaeological work in Lifta shows evidence of Hebrew, Roman, Crusader, Ottoman and Arab settlement. It was almost entirely depopulated after attacks by Israeli forces in 1947 forced residents to flee, who were then forbidden to return. It is sometimes known as the Palestinian Pompeii, as though a natural disaster had brought about its end.

Figure 30 Human Archipelago, 23

Sheikh's next image is of Ruheiba in the Negev desert - a key site on the Incense Route that linked Petra in modern-day Jordan to Gaza City. Sheikh takes an aerial view of the village – distant enough to give full perspective of the scale and patterns of what must once have been a significant settlement. Sheikh's minimal image description notes that the village is now encircled by a military live fire training zone. Beside the image, Cole writes

> The layers of stone resemble leaves of a book.
>
> A landscape is like a trompe -l'œil painting of a landscape (24).

Figure 31 Human Archipelago, 25

Looking closely at ruins has the power to bring the viewer in contact with people long rendered invisible, and to blur time. Barthes described cameras as “clocks for seeing” (15), with an ability to capture sounds and memories. In 2024, viewing ruins takes on new potency, and we are left wondering what invisibility and erasure we will yet encounter.

Photobooks appeal to a much smaller market segment than literature does, and tend to be prohibitively expensive. *Human Archipelago* has, though, been made available in its entirety on Instagram, where each image is posted individually with the accompanying text below as a caption, and read aloud by either Cole or Sheikh. It is, in this way, true to the ideal of re-enchanting the ordinary by asserting the visibility of those on the margins, and challenging dominant aesthetics by reinforcing commitment to achieving a compassionate global community. Cole’s use of social media sites like Twitter and Instagram as part of his creative output is complicated by the fact that these media are rarely taken seriously by cultural critics, as their documentary nature means they are discussed more within the realms of media studies and social sciences.

Roland Barthes argues that “Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks” (200: 38). Cole and Sheikh’s book is pensive throughout and asks the reader for their time and thoughtfulness. Their project is highly aspirational but also deeply sincere, as illustrated by their willingness to share the book’s contents to as wide an audience as possible, free of charge.

Perhaps the most striking sequence of photos and accompanying mediation is a sequence of eight images that Cole introduces by reflecting on photography’s increased affective potential through accumulation:

> A single spectacular image has its satisfactions. It is a self-contained thing, and part of its force comes from that self-containedness. It functions like a haiku. It is an image in a hurry, though it disguises that hurry somewhat.
>
> Something else happens with images intended for a series. These images are like individual sentences in an essay. The essay as a whole is obviously what matters, and spectacular individual sentences can go against the grain of the whole essay, unbalancing its intention. The images destined to be part of a

book might embed tensions between each other more complex than what is feasible even in an essay (29).

There follows four pairs of portraits, each of a Palestinian and an Israeli born in the same year, either 1948, 1972, 1999 or 2012. Each of these years mark moments of escalated violence and conflict between the two territories. The audience is invited to note the similarity of gesture and expression between each pair and to consider whether the 'tension' that we feel between each pairing is really the subjects', or our own, and to ponder what has become ordinary. It is only by leafing through to the book's index that one learns that the Israeli is on the left side of each image and the Palestinian on the right.

Figure 32 Human Archipelago, 30 and 31

Figure 33 Human Archipelago, 32 and 33

Figure 34 Human Archipelago, 34 and 35

Figure 35 Human Archipelago, 36 and 37

A relevant point of comparison to *Human Archipelago* is Edward Said and Jean Mohr's collaborative work, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, published in 1985. Here, Swiss photographer Mohr's photographs of daily life for Palestinians (at home and in exile) is paired with writing by Said. In a book-length essay of four chapter and a postscript, the Palestinian academic discusses the history and subjugation of his compatriots, weaving polemic and philosophy together in his signature fashion. He integrates his family history, lived experience, and his hopes for Palestine's future into the narrative, reminding the reader that the political is personal. The text's relationship to Mohr's images is often descriptive and documentarian: here is a photograph and here is who what it depicts. This is most affecting when Said speaks directly to a portrait. Writing of a Mrs. Farraj, living in exile in Amman, Jordan, Said begins:

> Here is another face of a woman spun out with the familiarities of years, concealing a lifetime of episodes, splendidly recorded by a listening photographer. It is a face, I thought when I first saw it, of our life at home (84)

Tonally, this modest and measured commentary on a photograph can be seen to have influenced Cole's approach in *Human Archipelago*. Said is a figure whose work has been explicitly and effusively acknowledged by Cole, not least in his essay, 'A Quartet for Edward Said,' in his 2020 collection *Black Paper*. Cole fetes Said for his musicality, and his understanding of 'lateness' as a way of thinking about art, politics, and life itself. Above all, though, Cole appreciates his sense of place, and of his

identity. “Palestine never let Edward Said go, and Edward Said never let Palestine go,” writes Cole. “His longing for Jerusalem, where he was born, and for Gaza, and the West Bank, and the ’48, and all of Palestine, was the engine for all his work” (2021: 65).

In contrast to Sheikh’s style, Mohr can be seen to have not only the instinct for what Henri Cartier-Bresson termed “the decisive moment” in street photography, but also the ability to make is subjects drop their guard and smile. The relationship between Said’s text and Mohr’s photographs is also notably different to that between Cole’s and Sheikh’s. Where Said mediates directly and expansively between image and text, Cole favours allusion most often, and, even when providing meta-commentary on the adjacent photographs, retains a reserved, cipher-like style. The reader is asked to do more work in relating Cole’s text to Sheikh’s elegant but guarded portraits. Said’s mediation is in the classic style, the one of which Kornbluh approves, whereas Cole’s words are often only obliquely connected to Sheikh’s images and the mediation of the intertextual references has to be sought out at the end of the book. In this sense, Cole distinguishes himself as an instigator of self-mediation. The seemingly-immediatist nature of Cole's laconic companion texts to Fazal Sheikh's photographs in *Human Archipelago* provide an opportunity for the reader to fill in their gaps of knowledge and salve their uncertainty by thinking about photography's presence in our lives and how we choose to look, and refuse to look, at the world's injustices and how we represent them. Far from being unmediated, the book is a treatise on mediation and the responsibility that we bear to others. In this context, Cole's exhortation to his audience to “describe the problem properly," quoted in full in my introductory chapter, is a plea against thoughtless and uninformed consumption of current affairs media.

Fernweh

Fernweh could be classified as Cole’s first photobook, in the purest sense of the word. It was published by the specialist photography press, MACK Books, in a clothbound edition with large, A4/foolscap sized pages on high-quality paper with state-of-the-art printers. As such, the images are published with a sharpness and fidelity that indicates the esteem in which Cole’s photography has come to be held. Many of the pictures, which were all made in Switzerland, are either the same photographs or from the same camera roll as those we see in *Blind Spot* (my chapter

on *Blind Spot* contains a brief discussion of the similarities and divergences between some of the scenes the two books share). Switzerland attracts Cole's fascination throughout his work, in line with the sense of ambivalence that the title, *Fernweh*, creates. The German word roughly translates as 'far-sickness' and suggests a longing to be elsewhere without the implication of the desire for novelty and adventure that its frivolous cousin, wanderlust, suggests. In this sense it is akin to the sentiment conveyed by both *Every Day is for the Thief* and 'Water Has No Enemy.' Indeed, it was an image from *Fernweh* that *Granta Magazine* chose to adorn the cover of an issue titled, after a line by poet Elizabeth Bishop, 'Should We Have Stayed at Home?' – devoted to the exploration of various discomforts and ecological quandaries around the activities of travel and tourism. Tourism ties us back to Sarah Brouillette's parallel, mentioned in the previous chapter, between the market reader and "the ignorant and obnoxious tourist" (2017: 21), who exists as a correlate of the ethical challenges around postcolonial analysis. In *Fernweh*, the audience is confronted with their presence in the world as tourists.

Cole first discussed Switzerland at length in 'Black Body,' the opening essay of his 2016 collection *Known and Strange Things*, in which he reflects upon the experience of James Baldwin as he lived for a period of time the Swiss Alpine village of Leukerbad. In his essay, 'Stranger in the Village,' originally published in 1953, Baldwin surmised that he was most likely the first Black man that the vast majority of the villagers had ever seen (2017: 163). This granted Baldwin, as Cole sees it, "a way to think about white supremacy from its first principles" (2016: 12). Cole uses Baldwin's experience to relate to the continued othering that occurs when a Black person travels in predominantly white countries and of experiencing a profound sense of difference and vulnerability through one's body. In an interview, Cole claimed that

> one of the things that makes James Baldwin so valuable to so many of us is that he writes with a kind of immediacy. His sensations are not mediated by bullshit. He writes it as he feels it, and he writes it well… to go down to the root of the word immediacy, to try to communicate with the viewer or the reader in a way that is not mediated but it really does feel like they got up in the middle of the night to read this and they could feel the words pulsing in their own head (Naimon, 2021: n.p.).

Cole, speaking several years before the publication of Kornbluh's book, does not use 'immediacy' as any kind of a pejorative, but as praise for what he sees as a valuable way of communicating directly with his reader, where the act of writing with a lack of mediation is what gives his writing the potency to achieve an affective sense of urgency.

In another essay, 'Far Away from Here,' Cole recalls a writing residency he undertook in Zurich, while probing the question of what it means to feel 'far' from somewhere and how we calibrate the points of 'here'/'there' and 'near'/'far' that exist psychologically as much as on a map or the surface of the earth. This essay laid the groundwork for *Fernweh* in its consideration of the role of tourism in our understanding of Switzerland and, conversely, our understanding of ourselves. He discusses the "tart and direct" Baedeker travel guides (2016: 226), first published in the 1860s, and the "almost microscopic precision with which each itinerary, town, museum, mountain range and hike is described" (227). The uniform habits of mass tourism and the contour-levelling forces of commerce mean, as Cole sees it, that much of the world "is more uniform than most photo essays acknowledge, and that a lot of travel photography relies on an easy essentialism" in order to distinguish itself (227). Citing Italo Calvino's idea of 'continuous cities', of the world as one massive city with no discernible beginning or end, Cole outlines what he sees as a photographic challenge:

> What is then interesting is to find, in that continuity, the less obvious differences of texture: the signs, markings, the assemblages, the things hiding in plain sight in each cityscape, or landscape. (227)

The aesthetic experience of reading *Fernweh* - if 'read' is the appropriate verb - is paramount. The book is beautifully and elegantly presented with a heavy, cloth-bound cover and high quality paper, but the photographs within are non-conformist and a pointed rebuke to the stereotypical view of Switzerland. Standard images of spectacular Swiss mountains and lakes are so commonplace that our eye briefly deceives us into seeing the below image as being taken through a window, before it resolves itself and we realise that it is a meta-photograph, a photograph of a photograph – in this case one that is printed as a decal on a wardrobe in a hotel room. Cole, as photographer, has likely placed his back to the window and has chosen to document one of the methods through which the tourism industry aims to

mediate and manipulate their visitors' experience, a version of propaganda familiar to anyone who has travelled through an airport and experienced the sensory bombardment of imagery from its most spectacular (and, inevitably, well-visited) locations. Aesthetically, Cole's picture leads to a disconcerting adjustment of perception that can be experienced as either pay-off or let-down.

Figure 36 Fernweh, n.p.

The fact that the image might flicker past as a spectacular window view, only to rapidly resolve itself as a simulacrum on close examination, is a challenge to the viewer in terms of the affect they seek from images of travel.

Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty here, as across his intermedial body of work, engages the reader by requiring them to actively make decisions about what they are encountering and how they choose to parse it. Where his use of images in *Every Day is for the Thief* acted as provocations, and in *Blind Spot* as excavations, in *Fernweh* they are subversions. Subversions of postcard-prettiness, of presuppositions around Switzerland, and of touristic conventions.

Fernweh presents various analytical and interpretive challenges. It is a large photobook whose images are spread capaciously across the book's unnumbered pages, with no images printed on the verso, allowing the reader to feel as though they are in a white-walled gallery, less inclined to rush and less overwhelmed by visual data than they would be had the images been printed on each page. In terms of production, it is a huge leap in quality from *Blind Spot*, which is smaller and presented on glossy paper

that does not render the photographs to the same sharpness or depth of field as those in *Fernweh*. This qualitative leap is due to a decision on Cole's part to work with the German company MACK Books, who specialise in photography books, with production values that reflect their status as pieces of art, rather than mass-produced texts, as Cole's novels and essay collections are. *Fernweh* was priced at around €40 upon release, and remaining copies of its only print run to date now sell for €205.

Unlike *Blind Spot*, the versos of *Fernweh* do not contain related text, save for the occasional enigmatic fragment every few pages, such as "many lost their footing," "the nunnery has been converted into a prison," and "abrupt abyss." In some cases, the text is split by several inches of white space, or continues onto the recto, below the image. Only a short endnote reveals the provenance of these lexical fragments, which are adapted from one of the aforementioned Baedeker guides from 1872. The images are oblique and figureless, gesturing towards human presence through material artefacts, rather than overtly depicting it.

Figure 37 Fernweh, n.p.

Cole has spoken of how the process of creating *Fernweh* was his way of "starting to think about how you make sense of something that has already been, in a way, discursively concluded, already from the 19th Century" and of considering how "as a travelling African, to grapple once again with this question of who has the right to

make a subject of what?" (Alagiah, 2020; n.p.). The discomforting and uncanny effect achieved through the merging of contemporary and contrarian imagery of Switzerland with snippets of an archaic text from a context of white imperial privilege gives *Fernweh* an efficacy in taking Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty into a new dimension. Here, the intelligibility of the photograph is under question and the audience confronts their reality hunger in a new way.

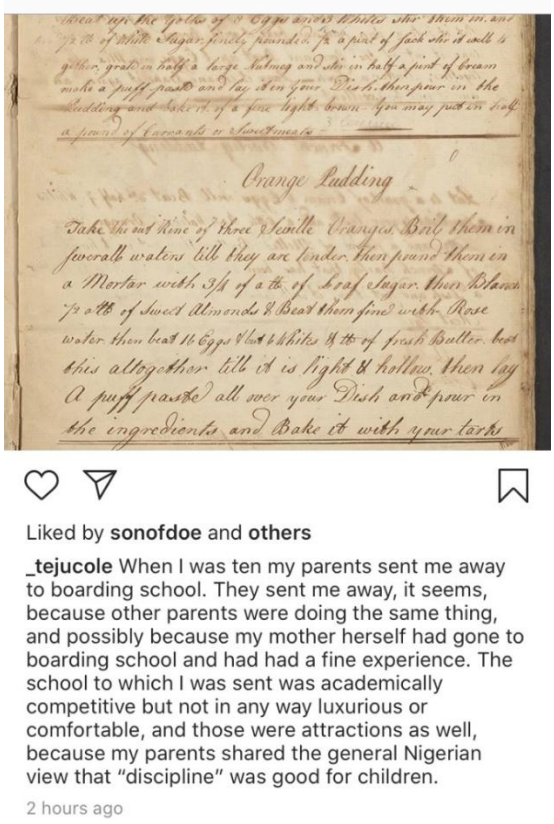
Golden Apple of the Sun

As with *Fernweh, Golden Apple of the Sun* does not cohere immediately or easily. This begins with its title, a reference to the final line of WB Yeats' poem, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus,' Published by MACK in 2021, the book contains a series of still life photographs that Cole made in his kitchen between September 28th and November 3rd, 2020 (the date of the US presidential election in which Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump). Pre-election tension was a factor in Cole's creation of the project, as was the sense of stasis, frustration, and low-level anxiety brought about by repeated lengthy lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. The series of pictures are initially presented without content or explanation, save for the date and time each photograph was made. These are the only text provided, until the final thirty pages of the book, where a longform essay, printed on brown paper with wide margins that occasionally contains images of work by other artists that Cole makes reference to, particularly seventeenth century Dutch still life painting:

> Some of the pictures that emerge have a lot in common with arranged pictures by painters or other photographers, including some of the pretty work ones sees in magazines, but more interesting to me are those I would never have taken had I been allowed to place a lemon over here, a knife over there. By constraining my own intentionality, I have a better chance of arriving at those photographs that are just a little bit wrong, or those that are just barely right. The commitment to chance operations is what opens the way to a true diaristic feeling because, rather than asking what I can do to manually organize the given into a picturesque scene, I shift the question to what the kitchen looks like right now, asking that question day in, day out, attempting to find out if a photograph that interests me is possible in those conditions (2021: 110).

Photography books do not typically come with such an erudite description of the photographer's method. The overall effect of *Golden Apple of the Sun* is cumulative and gradual. This, though, was not the case in the work's first iteration on Instagram, where each image was posted on the day it was taken during from late-September to early-November of 2020, accompanied by a relatively lengthy caption that gave a more instant sense of what Cole was trying to achieve. An image on Instagram is easily missed or ignored amidst the infinite scroll enabled and encouraged on this medium, but a caption provides a certain amount of context that invites the reader to pause for a moment and, potentially, view the image more carefully than they might otherwise have.

Hermeneutically, it is essential to consider the book's origins on Instagram, in terms of image-text combination, and Cole's testing of the limits of Instagram's capabilities as a form for presenting either. Where the essay that accompanies the images lies separated from them in the printed photobook, and sits as a slightly daunting block of text, the same essay is divided into smaller chunks on Instagram. Delivering the image and text in this way, at least one post every day with a caption for a month, broke Cole's project into digestible segments and gave it a diaristic feel. The text mediated the image in terms of both digital experience and reader response. On Instagram, it is highly plausible that a reader might look at an image for only one or two seconds, but a large block of words may mean that the physical action of scrolling quickly through infinite images slows to a halt. In an ephemeral space like Instagram, text, when provided, is presumed an accompaniment to the image and an aid to interpreting it. Take, for instance, Cole's two opening posts in this sequence:



Orange Pudding

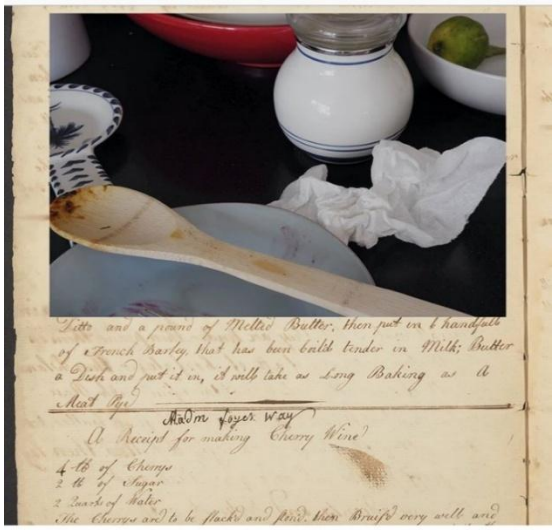
Take the out Rine of three Seville Oranges. Boil them in
severall waters till they are tender. then pound them in
a Mortar with 3/4 of a lb. of Loaf Sugar. then Blanch
1/2 a lb of Sweet Almonds & Beat them fine with Rose
water then beat 11 Eggs & the Whites & lb of fresh Butter. beat
this altogether till it is light & hollow. Then lay
A puff paste all over your Dish and pour in
the ingredients and Bake it with your tarts

Liked by **sonofdoe** and **others**

_tejucole When I was ten my parents sent me away to boarding school. They sent me away, it seems, because other parents were doing the same thing, and possibly because my mother herself had gone to boarding school and had had a fine experience. The school to which I was sent was academically competitive but not in any way luxurious or comfortable, and those were attractions as well, because my parents shared the general Nigerian view that "discipline" was good for children.

2 hours ago

Figure 38 Instagram, now deleted



Liked by **xinho** and **others**

_tejucole I arrived at the school for the 1985/86 school session, during an economic crisis under the Babangida dictatorship. The boarding school, which was spartan at the best of times, became almost ascetic that year. Food was undersupplied. Lunch and dinner were limited to a torturous rotation of three items: eba, rice, or beans. The portions were always small.

Figure 39 Instagram, now deleted

Food, and its far-reaching residues and resonances, are established as themes from this first piece of writing, even as the reader is uncertain as to the point or function of the image, which, even in instances of a carefully-curated feed, likely differs wildly from the dominant aesthetic. Marshall McLuhan argued, long before the advent of the Internet, that "by continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms" (1967: 46) – essentially forming part of the technology. In a statement that has echoes of both McLuhan's and Kornbluh's ideas, visual theorist WJT Mitchell suggests that

> New media have made communication seem more transparent, immediate and rational than ever before, at the same they have enmeshed us in labyrinths of new images, objects, tribal identities, and ritual practices (2005: 26).

In short, our servitude to digital technologies and enmeshment in the complex logics and hierarchies of social media means that we receive their information as instructions that mediate our responses and expectations. Cole's audience, from these initial posts, is alerted to the beginnings of a new creative project, on entirely indeterminate scale, duration, or purpose. If we briefly flash-forward to the project's finished, physical object – the printed, clothbound edition of *Golden Apple of the Sun* – the reader's experience is vastly different. Here, we have a physical object whose material qualities and pricing are indicative of how it is intended to be received: as a serious photographic, literary and artistic achievement. Within a few seconds we know roughly how many images are contained within, how many pages of text there are to be read, and roughly how long it might take to read them. As discussed in my previous chapter, paratexts such as title, cover design, and the promotional materials and reviews that may have contributed to the reader holding the book in their hands are all affordances granted by the traditional process of book publishing.

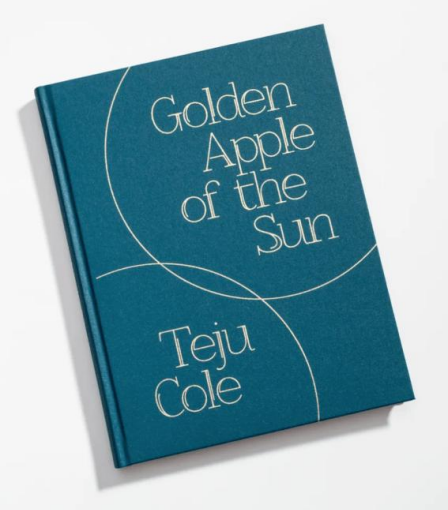


Figure 40-43 The cover, page spread and essay layout of Golden Apple of the Sun.

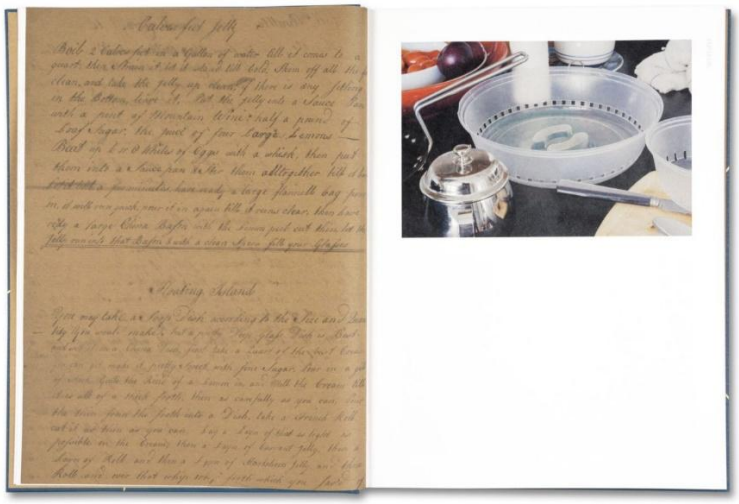


Figure 41 see above

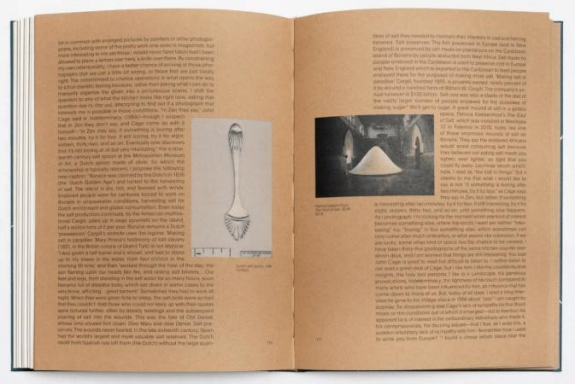


Figure 42 see above

Figure 43 see above

An entirely different set of affordances was available to anyone who encountered the book's digital genesis, chief amongst which was a sense of uncertainty. Returning to the initial iteration of the project on Instagram, it is important to emphasise how incongruously a still life image sits amongst the platform's standard fare of faces, animals, spectacular landscapes, rapidly-cut and brightly-coloured short videos, and concise, coercive advertisements. Every follower of Cole's Instagram account will have had a unique encounter with these images, insofar as they will have appeared in a singular sequence dictated by which other accounts they follow, along with complex and bounteous algorithmic factors weighted by engagement, demographics, connectedness, search history, shopping habits, the content of their own previous posts, number of followers, news events, along with other elements of near-infinite intersections and variations. The image is mediated, but in a manner that is entirely automated and commercially-driven and, often, overwhelming.

In contrast to this, Cole's lengthy captions, which were later collected to form the accompanying essay in *Golden Apple of the Sun*, at times muse upon the still life tradition to which they belong, and the work of photographers such as Chris Killip, Jan Groover and Laura Letinsky, whose work has influenced Cole's. The images are mediated to the viewer through the traditions and lineage in which Cole situates them, and then through his reflections on these traditions. The effect is gently didactic, the author functioning as a Dutch still life docent. Cole's writing on the topic carries the sureness of his knowledge from a PhD in Netherlandish art but is pitched to be accessible to both his Instagram and art book audience, whose precise overlap is difficult to ascertain:

> Any depicted food has inside it, somewhere, a whisper of death. Dutch still life paintings are understood to be representations of vanitas. The skull is a

> memento mori. The hourglass says your time is going. The goblet at the table's edge, the silver tray at the table's edge, the uneasy feeling from that off-center placement, is a reminder that things can topple over at any moment. But the food is not only there to remind you that fine eating will cease, that life is a banquet that will someday end. The food is itself encrypted with loss and corruptibility. The food is dying before your eyes. By the time you see the painting, the food is long gone (2021: 104).

The Latin word 'vanitas,' as with its English equivalent, 'vanity,' carries with it the dual meaning of conceitedness, as well as the implication of futility. But, aside from meditating on the inevitable end of life's banquets, Cole's text returns over and over again to those who suffer(ed) and die(d) for the production of food for those in wealthier nations – a message that may or may not have been intended by seventeenth century Dutch painters, but which we can easily glean from thoughtful consideration of the paintings today. Julia Hochstrasser, a scholar of Dutch art, describes the "obdurate silence" through which Dutch still life painting "delivers the goods as if by magic," never divulging the "mechanisms…and the disturbing truths about the various objects they picture" (2007: 9, 274).

The essence of Cole's message to his audience, mediated through the visual echoes of Dutch still life in the images, and in the text, is that food carries dark and disturbing histories that are often ignored, leaving us enmeshed in narratives of oppression and extractivism. Consideration of commodity foodstuffs such as sugar and salt is woven into the writer's thoughts on other artists and artworks, always seeking to connect everything, and to make the throughlines from colonialism to contemporary capitalism clear and incontrovertible. Cole writes:

> Bonaire was claimed by the Dutch in 1636 (the "Dutch Golden Age") and turned to the production of salt. The island is dry, hot, and favored with winds. Enslaved people were for centuries forced to work on Bonaire in unspeakable conditions making salt for Dutch enrichment and global consumption. Even today the salt production continues, by the American multinational Cargill, piled up in large pyramids on the island, half a million tons of it per year. Bonaire remains a Dutch possession. Cargill's website uses the tagline: "Making salt in paradise." (2021: 110)

Cole quotes the testimony of Mary Prince, an enslaved woman who worked in salt harvesting on Bonaire, one of many people who were forced to work all night, suffering salt boils and sadistic beatings when they failed to meet quotas, followed by pouring of salt into their wounds. He continues:

> This was the fate of Old Daniel, whose limp slowed him down. Dear Mary and dear Daniel. Salt preserves. The wounds never healed. In the late sixteenth century, Spain had the world's largest and most valuable salt reserves. The Dutch revolt from Spanish rule left them (the Dutch) without the large quantities of salt they needed to maintain their interests in cod and herring fisheries. Salt preserves. The fish preserved in Europe (and in New England by the ancestors of my neighbors here) is preserved by salt made on slave plantations on the Caribbean island of Bonaire by people abducted from West Africa. Salt made by people enslaved in the Caribbean is used to preserve cod in Europe and New England which is exported to the Caribbean to feed people enslaved there for the purposes of making more salt. "Making salt in paradise." Cargill, founded 1865, is privately owned, 90% of it by around a hundred heirs of William W. Cargill. The company's annual turnover is $120 billion. Salt cod was also a staple of the diet of the vastly larger number of people enslaved for the purposes of making sugar. We'll get to sugar (110-111).

In taking a staple of the European art world and repurposing it as way of probing the racist and exploitative origins of the wealth of the USA's richest family, Cole also invites his audience to pay close attention to art and to consider their positionality in relation to food and inherited wealth. This is an essay that continually reminds the audience of our entanglement in practices that we know to be shameful, harmful, unethical, but also inescapable. In such a world, immediacy and the cultural artefacts that it produces soothe our sense of guilt and complicity by, very often, allowing us to bypass our consciences. Kornbluh believes that

> The ideology of immediacy holds a kernel of truth: that we are fastened to appalling circumstances from which we cannot take distance, neither contemplative not agential, every single thing a catastrophe riveting our attention…The more dehumanizing the world becomes, the more gross the failures of human society…the more tightly immediacy cinches…Immediacy's abdication of art evinces this crisis (2024: 20).

In his book-length essay, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons*, the poet and memoirist Mark Doty writes of the experience of viewing Dutch still lifes that

> we want things to wash us clean, we crave the plainness of the unmediated…In this sense, still life is refuge, consolation, place of quiet. The world becomes bearable, apprehensible because so many elements have been subtracted from it these paintings fill me with the pleasure of being bound to the material, implicated, part of a community of attention giving. That is what we do with sight, give it out, give it and give it away, in order to be filled (2001: 53-4).

Doty's book exists as an intertext by being referenced admiringly in *Golden Apple*, and its influence on Cole's essay and, indeed, his way of seeing, is writ large. Doty's use of "the plainness of the unmediated" to describe an attracting force when we encounter art runs counter to Kornbluh's conception of art as inherently mediative:

> Artistic mediation – representation in excess of messaging, creativity in excess of use, giving sensuous form to the unexpressed – has always been a fundamental human activity…before what is now called "behavioral modernity," there was already abstract mediation – underlining that art is not epiphenomenal to life. Immediacy's evacuation of mediation eclipses this essential dimension of human being – an extinguishing hard not to interpret as a response to the imminent threat of human extinction.

Cole's essay, offering concise, trenchant mediation of artworks by Jean-Siméon Chardin, Willem Claesz Heda, Juriaen van Streeck, Patricia Kaersenhout, Johannes Torrentius, Laura Letinsky, Giogio Morandi, and Jan Groover, artists ranging from 1614 to the present day, suggests a recognition that art is not always intrinsically self-mediating. In doing so it offers the hope that deeper engagement with art, aided by gentle interpretation, provides meaningful insight into ways of thinking about the ephemerality of life, and our interactions with everyday objects.

Pharmakon

In January of 2024, only months after the publication of *Tremor*, his first new novel since *Open City*, Cole returned to photography with *Pharmakon* – published by photography specialists MACK Books, as were *Fernweh* and *Golden Apple of the*

Sun. The book's title comes from a Greek word that can mean poison or remedy,[8] its ambiguity posing the question as to whether Cole has set out to be provocative or ameliorative in this work. In a new departure, Cole ventured into the territory of the short story to accompany his images, his first time publishing in this genre. Short stories, arguably, exist in their own category in both academia and literary publishing. They are viewed as self-contained objects, and are often taught individually rather than in the context of the published collection in which they may appear. This is logical, as they often appear as solitary entities in literary journals, magazines, and websites, along with edited anthologies. Prior to the book's publication, a selection of the stories from *Pharmakon* were featured in *The New Yorker*, alongside several of Cole's accompanying photographs. The deep-seated practice of selling stories to newspapers, magazines and periodicals has often meant that the form is taken less seriously in literary criticism than the novel. Australian literature scholar Nicholas Birns suggests that the short story has often been "laden with the taint of commerce" (2015: 25) and that its "sense of radical immediacy in tension with the discipline needed to compose in such an exacting frame" has turned many writers off using it as their principal literary outlet (26). The short story as form has, in other words, been perceived as simultaneously immediatist and excessively-demanding in terms of composition. Cole's only previous dabbling in the form lay in his popular 'Small Fates' series on Twitter between 2011 and 2013, an homage to the 'fait divers' tradition in French literature wherein he took news reports from Nigerian newspapers and condensed them into micro, tweet-length (under 140 characters) stories. Cole's concision and flat delivery of these stories gave them a wry humour that gained him a wider audience. In analysing these stories, Ella Mingazova notes how their "textual density…slows down the rapid and distracted form of reading usually associated with digital media," (2018: 144) in much the same manner as I have noted that Cole's image-texts in his early iteration of *Golden Apple of the Sun* disrupted the typical experience of scrolling Instagram.

[8] This double meaning is also mentioned in the Kornbluh quote used as the epigraph to this chapter. Both books were published within weeks of each other, so this is most likely a coincidence.

Figure 44 X, posts now deleted

While attending to the affordances and malleability of the short story form adds necessary context and aids our understanding of Cole's recognition of the form as a mode of rapid transmission and affect akin to that of photography, reading *Pharmakon* as simply a collection of short stories would be reductive. The book foregrounds Cole's photographs in both quantity and presentation, with the stories appearing intermittently and in relatively small print, between sequences of up to ten photographs, each with at least a page to themselves. While some of the stories were published in *The New Yorker*, this was ultimately a means of promotion for the book, along with achieving a level of dissemination and readership that could not realistically be hoped for through publication of a book sold only in physical form as a high-end photography book with an emphasis on haptic quality through its faux-leather cover, at a retail cost of €50.

The below images are part of a sequence of seven photographs that precede the first story, 'Swimming in Lake Oso' - a visceral and shocking story whose opening paragraph places it, and the book as a whole, squarely in the context of forced displacement:

> Beyond the circle was a clearing. Beyond the clearing, the forest began. Our group had a plan: when the bus came the next morning, that would be the moment to make a break for it. Some of us would be captured. Some might

even be killed. But not all of us could be captured or killed: some would reach the trees, and our plan was made in recognition of that hope (2024: np).

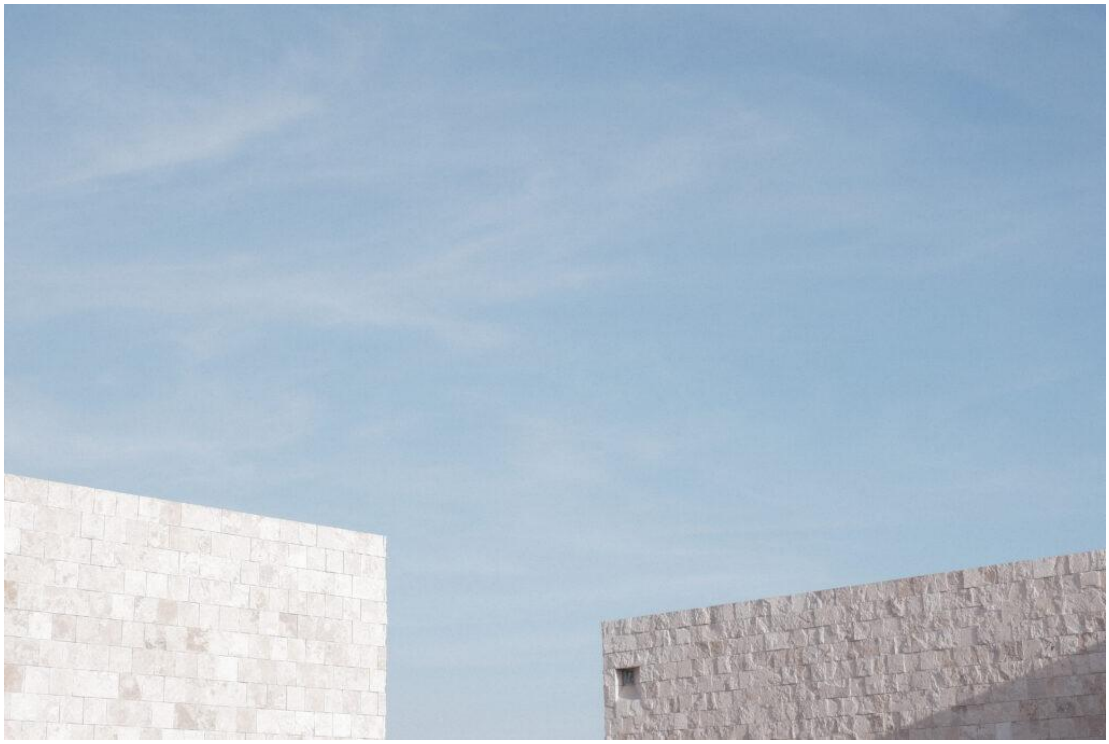


Figure 45 Pharmakon, n.p.

Figure 46 Pharmakon, n.p.

The photographs build a tense mood characterised by both repetition and interruption, each image speaking back to the one before it in tone, palette, and composition. White and grey walls that almost match the wispy clouds in the pale blue sky intervene to refuse the sense of liberty that an open, stretching sky could provide (Fig. 45). An image of a deep blue sea topped by another promising sky is quickly revealed to be a simulacrum, punctured by screw holes and misaligned on either side with panels that should have carried on the illusion (Fig. 46). What we see here is human presence depicted through its absence, continuing a theme from *Fernweh*, but gaining a new and more sinister valency with the accompanying text.

As the fleeing migrant protagonist of the first story fails to escape and falls into suffering, we learn that the story's title refers to a memory:

> I got tangled in barbed wire. The world stopped. My body filled with pain. I remembered an afternoon when I was a little girl, nine years old, the afternoon of my deepest happiness. Swimming in Lake Oso.
>
> My arms were fire. My face was striped with blood. And someone saying, Don't move, you'll only make it worse (np).

As is so often the case with Cole's textual references and allusions, some quick research can shed new light on a story and change our perspective. Lake Oso lies in Orange County in southern California and is synonymous with a scout camp. The protagonist's happy childhood memory therefore indicates that they are an American who grew up with a certain level of privilege, who is now trying to flee the USA, very possibly to Mexico, which lies around 300 kilometres south. Expectations are thus subverted and the uneasy tone established by the opening sequence of photographs is amplified for those aware of Lake Oso, or inclined to accept the author's invitation to interaction.

The short story form is one that allows uncertainty to flourish, and it is therefore somewhat surprising that Cole took this long to work in the medium. He has said that he wished the stories in *Pharmakon* to be "open-ended and intense" and that he sees domination, and the structuring presence of master-and servant relationships in the world to be a more prevailing theme than the apparent constant presence of migration in the stories. The brevity of the short story form, he argues, is ideal for these themes, "Because, if you say too much about them, the effect is ruined. The door to other meanings snaps shut…They are not allegories, which have a hidden and "correct" meaning…Like the stories, the photographs are suggestive and have a kind of fabular air" (Treisman, 2023: np).

Inculcating a sense of uncertainty in his reader is, again, the preferred outcome for Cole, and is achieved here through a pared-back, modest style of narration that points the reader in various directions but declines to guide them towards answers or definitive interpretations. In terms of immediacy, and the unmediated approach that Kornbluh discerns in much contemporary cultural production, the slow reading style that Cole's work begs of his audience means that mediation is achieved through

aesthetic rather than narrative means. Pharmakon's etymology from the word for both poison and remedy is reified in how the soothing, ameliorative quality of many of the images meets the astringent, disconcerting properties of the stories, which are fragmentary and allusive - pointing to a tone, rather than a theme, of displacement and domination. Uncertainty is shared between characters and readers, despite the potential for the short story to be immediatist in nature. The stories, augmented by the presence of photographs that serve to complicate, rather than clarify, both their tone and meaning, are enigmatic and refuse to surrender their meaning, even after slow and careful reading.

Writing in 2005, the visual theorist WJT Mitchell, in responding to what he felt were a series of fallacies around what is commonly-understood to be 'visual culture,' argued that the concept is not a separable, discrete entity, but something woven into the fabric of everyday life, and called for new modes of interpretation that place our parsing of images within experience, context and tradition:

> Visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated. It is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves…The political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comforts of iconoclasm (343).

This is a statement that seems to anticipate both Cole's aesthetic project and Kornbluh's concerns, nearly two decades beforehand. The various explorations of ways of seeing across the works examined in this chapter show the seriousness with which Cole approaches the task of mediating our representations of an ever-changing, uncertain world. Kornbluh believes that the omnicrisis is leading to the imminent death of this world, but that "immediacy poorly midwives the new world's struggle to be born" (2024: 175). Three years earlier, in responding to Rita Felski's *Hooked: Art and Attachment,* an intervention into the so-called 'method wars' that raged, particularly in North American universities, over literary criticism and approaches to teaching it, Kornbluh argued that

> aesthetic criticism relays the critic's experience of engaging with an object, encouraging others to engage with it as well as producing an additional aesthetic experience of engaging with the engagement; propagating

> experiences, we cultivate sensibility rather than ideas. In extraordinary times, however, when simultaneously everything is aesthetic experience *and* aesthetic experience is starkly maldistributed—when the multi-decade institutional and economic restructuring of creative labor, professional writing, and education has terribly constrained who makes art, who makes ideas, and who has access to the conditions for their making and making anew—in these extraordinary times, the questions clamor for different answers.
>
> (2021: n.p.)

The significance of Cole's artistic achievement is that his texts are not only conveyed with a singular and distinctive aesthetic across media, but that they simultaneously function as an argument for this particular kind of artistic statement – one which many novelists do not, or cannot attempt.

In the following chapter, I analyse Cole's 2023 novel, *Tremor*, a work that can easily be interpreted as autofictional, due to its protagonist's overt commonalities with Cole. The novel, not least through its partial location in Harvard University, has much to say about the process of engaging with art, the cultivation of sensibility over ideas, and the stark maldistribution of aesthetic experience.

Chapter Five

‘Blue World’: Black Pragmatism and the Blues in Tremor

> Jazz is not just music, it’s a way of life, it’s a way of being, a way of thinking. I think that the Negro in America is jazz. Everything he does—the slang he uses, the way he talks, his jargon, the new inventive phrases we make up to describe things—all that to me is jazz just as much as the music we play. Jazz is not just music. It’s the definition of the Afro-American black.
>
> *-Nina Simone*

This chapter considers Cole’s 2024 novel, *Tremor*, through the dual lens of black pragmatism and the blues. The novel, set in late 2019 or early 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, is suffused with a sense of uncertainty around what the future holds and the question of how to live an ethical and flourishing life in the face of oppressive and unsettling forces. *Tremor*, in its structure and content, is more akin to a blues album than a conventional novel, insofar as it is driven by rhythm and tone, rather than plot or character. In this chapter I undertake close readings of several distinct episodes of *Tremor*, examining their tone, rhythm and preoccupations, showing how its effectiveness as a novel lies in its shifting styles and narrative voices, as well as its repetitions, intertextual tributes, variations on a theme, and, above all else, how it meets an understanding of the blues as a series of lyrical renderings of personal catastrophe. The work of jazz musician John Coltrane is invoked in the first and final chapters, his album *Blue World* providing a titular echo of the novel’s tone and preoccupations. In this chapter I examine how Cole invokes the blues not merely in an intertextual sense as a musical accompaniment to the novel’s events, but as a tonal and affective evocation of a mindset, and a mode of living. In discussing the blues as a motif for the novel I consider it not simply as a musical style that encapsulates sadness, as the clichéd interpretation goes, but as one that reflects defiance in the face of difficulty through the joy and energy drawn from community and camaraderie. I explore how Cole’s novel follows in a tradition of black artists and intellectuals who found in the blues a means of thinking through black American history and cultural traditions, and the potential of their integrations

into everyday practices. In doing so, I show how *Tremor* adds another strand to Cole's intermedial aesthetic of uncertainty through its incorporation of the ethos of the blues and the philosophy of black pragmatism as a means of confronting the question of how to live a flourishing life in the face of historical and ongoing struggle and uncertainty.

While Cole's previous novels were driven by character and tone as much as a guiding storyline, *Tremor* is his least plot-oriented fictional work to date. The novel ostensibly follows Tunde, a Nigerian American writer, photographer and academic who teaches photography in Harvard University and lives with his wife in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Tunde has multiple artistic interests, a meditative approach to life's difficulties, and an abiding love of music – particularly that of John Coltrane. Tunde travels to various global locations, and is invited to deliver talks in prestigious locations, one of which is interrupted by a brief episode of sight loss. In this sense, the narrative perspective for the majority of the novel is an autofictional version of Teju Cole, who shares all of the above biographical details. The writer and critic Kate Zambreno believes that

> the term *autofiction* suggests slipperiness, an estrangement of the I-narrator, who may or may not have the same name as the author, so that the space of the work can become a space of freedom.
>
> (2021: 84)

Tunde, certainly, is a strange and slippery presence in *Tremor*, rarely entirely open about how he feels and often, as with the narrators of Cole's first two novels, inclined to mediate his thoughts and concerns through ekphrastic encounters with art, literature, and music, as well as enigmatic fragments of memory. Episodes that centre on Tunde's perspective switch between the first and third person voice, a technique that means the reader is alternately kept at arm's length and drawn closer. We learn at an early stage that Tunde has had at least one previous relationship with a man, but that he is now married to a woman (43). He and his wife, Sadako, suffer tensions between them whose origin is never made clear, but that leads to some periods of estrangement that appear to be resolved by the end of the novel, with neither angry nor reconciliatory conversation between them featuring in the narrative. Sadako is sporadically given the first person narrator's voice, but not in the

cause of solving enigmas around their relationship. The narrator, when it is Tunde, occasionally addresses his thoughts to an unknown 'you,' whose name and precise relationship to Tunde is never revealed, nor is it clear whether the addressee in these segments is always the same person. The technique, tone, and content of these segments bear similarities to Cole's brief essay, 'A Letter to John Berger,' published in 2021 in *Black Paper*, in which he directly addresses the recently-deceased author and art critic, whose influence and friendship with Cole has been well-documented and discussed by the younger man. One senses, certainly that the recipients of these messages may well be people close to the narrator (and, by extension, Cole) who have died, as they recall experiences and correspondences that often centre around music or art.

In the sixth chapter of the novel the narrative style shifts abruptly and we are given twenty-two portraits of the lives of individual citizens of Lagos, each told in the first person from a different character's perspective, many of whom bear an apparent connection to Tunde. These broaden the novel's perspective immensely and are a reminder that Tunde's privileged position is one that always skirts on the edges of precarity, and that his is a complex, conflicted identity that brings together the chaos and frenetic nature of Lagos, with his calmer, more philosophical lifestyle as a faculty member of Harvard University.

The literary conventions that *Tremor* both upholds and subverts are manifold. Much of the novel is essayistic in style and content, but occasionally ruptured in a manner of which only fiction is capable. The novel's fifth chapter, nodding towards South African novelist JM Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), is comprised entirely of a lecture delivered by Tunde in Boston's Museum of Fine Art that contains the paratextual thresholds of acknowledgements, expression of gratitude, and prefatory notes that would generally be omitted from a printed essay (2023: 93). This ensures that we picture a man delivering a speech with a mixture of professional confidence and personal trepidation, as well as the entire script. The speech, largely focused on JMW Turner's well-known painting, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, is disrupted by a momentary loss of vision that Tunde experiences and immediately acknowledges to his audience (203), before continuing with his presentation. In this way, novelistic conventions are observed by the text never fully abandoning the reader's sense of sharing in the life of a

protagonist who could experience any manner of strange and unsettling events at any time. Episodes that present themselves as non-fictional, personal essays are sabotaged through fictive disruptions and switches of focus or perspective.

Cole has described the novel as his most joyous yet, but one which he also hopes will "leave a bruise" (2023b, n.p) on the reader, in language that evokes Barthes' idea of the wounding, piercing *punctum* of photography. There is much in the novel that is indeed bruising, but it is narrated with a lightness of touch hitherto only seen in some of Cole's non-fiction writing, and a sense of levity and vivacity as a means of resistance. Reviewing the novel upon its release, I described *Tremor* as being guided by an "ethos of effervescent pragmatism," (Clarke, 2023, n.p), by which I meant that Cole's tendency towards examining some of the darker elements of human behaviour is here balanced, far more than in *Open City* and *Every Day is for the Thief*, by an appreciation of the brighter moments in life, and the things that make it worth living – an approach that is equal parts pragmatism and *joie de vivre*. Pragmatism, as a philosophy, eschews the concept of certainty and instead analyses language to ascertain its value as a means of changing our realities. It is a distinctly American philosophical tradition, emphasising the role of ideas and experience in forming knowledge, that initially emerged through the ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), who held that a concept's meaning lies in its practical consequences. For Peirce, the abstract quality of 'truth' could be overcome through rigorous scientific method coupled with the measurement of its results.

Its leading exponent, the American philosopher John Dewey, constructed his form of pragmatism on the hypothesis that "thinking" and "acting" are two words for the same undertaking: negotiating our way through life's experiences while acknowledging its ultimate contingency. In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey wrote that a happier life could be achieved by giving up the search for certitude and accepting that the sum of our knowledge is ultimately hypothetical and inherently revisable. For Dewey,

> exaltation of pure intellect and its activity above practical affairs is fundamentally connected with the quest for a certainty which shall be absolute and unshakeable. The distinctive characteristic of practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the uncertainty which attends it. Of it we are compelled to say: Act, but act at your peril. Judgment and belief

> regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious probability. Through thought, however, it has seemed that men might escape from the perils of uncertainty. (1929: 6)

Dewey's philosophy did not specifically refer to the experience of black Americans, although this experience has, from its very beginnings - which we might logically trace to the Middle Passage from various African coastal ports to the nascent USA - been traumatic, violent, and uncertain. The development of blues and jazz as distinctive musical idioms is rooted in the history of enslaved people developing working rhythms and songs that functioned as acts of protest and defiance against cruel and oppressive conditions. In his highly influential book, *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray argues that, when it comes to the blues,

> The main thing, whatever the form, is resistance if not hostility…For what is ultimately at stake is morale, which is to say the will to persevere, the disposition to persist and perhaps prevail; and what must be avoided by all means is a failure of nerve. (2017: 9)

For Murray, the blues is a state of mind that is given expression through music that carries overtones of pathos, metaphysical and existential pain, but also frivolity, in ways that carry a form of "immediate political significance and applicability" that goes beyond narratives of suffering and exploitation (68). He expands on this by saying that

> The political implication is inherent in the attitude toward experience that generates the blues-music counterstatement in the first place. It is the disposition to persevere (based on a tragic, or, better still, an epic sense of life) that blues music at its best not only embodies but stylizes, extends, elaborates, and refines into art. (68)

It might be helpful at this juncture to clarify precisely what differentiates the blues from jazz music, but it would ultimately be a forced and disingenuous distinction. Although blues predates jazz as an identifiable musical genre, the terms are now often used interchangeably, with 'jazz' frequently serving as an umbrella term under which blues sits, along with related categories such as hard bop, bebop, swing, cool, and modal jazz. What is notable, though, is that blues has tended to be treated by music critics, scholars, and historians as a distinctly black American form of music,

with roots firmly in early African-American creative expression. The blues idiom is, for Murray, "neither negative nor sentimental," but simply reflective of black Americans' "disposition to encounter obstacle after obstacle as a matter of course" (254). Murray also objects to the suggestion, once common in scholarly accounts of the blues, that the music had its roots in African musical traditions that were transported and transplanted to the USA though the cultural memory of enslaved people:

> It is far more accurate to say that some of the most distinctive *elements* of blues music were derived from the music of some of the West African ancestors of U.S. Negroes than it is to imply, however obliquely, that the blues idiom itself ever existed anywhere on the continent of Africa. Nor should it be forgotten that elements quite as essential and no more dispensable were derived from the music of some of the European ancestors of U.S. Negroes.
>
> The point, however, is that the blues idiom, whatever the source or sources of its components, is native to the United States. It is a synthesis of African and European elements, the product of an Afro-American sensibility in an American mainland situation. There is no evidence, for example, that an African musical sensibility interacting with an Italian, German, French, British, or Hungarian musical sensibility results in anything like blues music (63).

The blues, in other words, should be understood as a distinctly American phenomenon that reflects the particular history of struggle that black Americans have experienced, rather than being indicative of a transported tradition from Africa, despite undoubtedly carrying certain inflections of African music. *Tremor*'s central chapters take place in Bamako, capital of Mali, and in Lagos, Nigeria, where Tunde/Cole has deep family roots. These chapters make frequent reference to the local music of these cities, bringing the reader towards what Tunde finds to be both familiar and strange, and energise the narrative at a point where Tunde's ekphrastic musings on art, colours, and history may have begun to weigh heavily on the reader. These musical forms are, though, differentiated from the blues, a musical form that Cole repeatedly draws the reader's attention toward through his invocation of John Coltrane, a saxophonist and masterful practitioner and innovator of the blues mode. Returning for a moment to the jazz/blues dichotomy, or complete lack thereof, I have

found in my research that renowned musicians such as Coltrane, Miles Davis, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Ma Rainey, Nina Simone, and countless others are frequently categorised, curated, anthologised, taught, and critiqued as part of the blues and/or jazz tradition as and when suits. There is, however, no great need to delineate and force a binary between the categories when commercial imperatives are not given their usual precedence. Scope exists for research to establish whether there is a level of racial bias (conscious or otherwise) to the marketing decisions made around categorisation.

Philosopher Eddie S. Glaude Jr. argues in his 2007 work *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* that the music and mindset of the blues provides a way of reinvigorating Dewey's form of pragmatism and giving it new relevance for black Americans. Building on Albert Murray's contention that the blues are "a statement about perseverance and about resilience and thus also about the maintenance of equilibrium despite precarious circumstances" (2017: 251), Glaude argues that pragmatism, when attentive to the darker dimensions of human living (what we often speak of as the blues), can address many of the conceptual problems that plague contemporary African American political life," binding pragmatism and politics as it affects black Americans in ways that are "mutually beneficial" (2007: x). In short, the blues must be treated as a mode of experience and a means of dealing with life's difficulties, moving beyond the conceiving of it purely as a musical idiom and instead wedding it to Deweyan pragmatism. For Glaude, "Pragmatism must reckon with the blues or remain a stale academic exercise" (2007: x). He acknowledges the failure of Dewey and his immediate successors in pragmatist thinking to engage philosophically with the problem of white supremacy and its consequences (3), but traces a line of Deweyan pragmatist thought within the work of influential black American thinkers such as WEB Du Bois (1868-1963), Alain Locke (1885-1954), and Charles S. Johnson (1893-1956), along with writers of the Harlem Renaissance (2-5). In this way, Glaude believes, pragmatism "has been colored a deep shade of blue" (5). Glaude treats it as his task to elucidate an already-existing tradition and formalise it for the betterment of black Americans.

The philosopher and public intellectual Cornel West, who ran as a candidate in the 2024 US presidential election, believes that pragmatism operates as the philosophy of democracy, by centering the needs of the average human being. He argues that

pragmatism requires "public testing and open evaluation of consequences" through "a set of social practices geared toward achieving and warranting knowledge, a perennial process of dialogue" that ultimately "yields no absolute certainty" (2022: 7). West's version of pragmatism is also informed by the blues ethos, but even more so by the Black Christian tradition that "imbues Afro-American thinking with the sobriety of tragedy, the struggle for freedom, and the spirit of hope" (6). The political implications of this mode of thought are more explicitly referenced by West in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* when he writes that "Tragic thought is not confined solely to the plight of the individual; it also applies to social experiences of resistance, revolution, societal reconstruction" (1989: 228).

Teju Cole, in a piece reacting to the political turmoil of the first Trump presidency, wrote in an essay entitled 'Resist, Refuse,' originally published online in the *New York Times* in 2018, of how the "sacred word" of 'resistance,' "has been made banal, its intensity dulled…in the voices of those who set the public tone." In a sequence of rhetorical questions he asks

> How are we to inhabit the principle behind the word "resistance" when the meaning of the word itself has changed so much?
>
> Refuse a resistance excised of courage? Refuse the conventional arena and take the fight elsewhere? Refuse to eat with the enemy, refuse to feed the enemy? Refuse to participate in the logic of the crisis, refuse to be reactive to its provocations? Refuse to forget last year's offenses and last month's and last week's? Refuse the news cycle, refuse commentary? Refuse to place newsworthiness above human solidarity? Refuse to be intimidated by pragmatism?
>
> (2018: n.p)

Cole's use of 'pragmatism' here appears to be pejorative in tone, all the more so in the updated version of the essay in 2021's *Black Paper*, in which all question marks are removed from this paragraph and the interrogative statements are now phrased as imperatives (215). Pragmatism, in this context, appears to refer to a form of political centrism and relativistic appeasement of opponents, more than the philosophical movement, but this remains somewhat ambiguous, as is Cole's wont. In analysing *Tremor* as a work imbued with the philosophy of Black pragmatism I am not seeking

to locate Cole squarely as a pragmatist in the tradition of Dewey, Glaude, or West, but to argue that it is a work whose narrative strategies and overall aesthetic are undeniably driven by the mode of the blues as both a mindset and a musical idiom.

Music also has a narrative and tonal function in both of Cole's previous novels, *Every Day is for the Thief*, and *Open City*. The role that it plays in the overall affect of *Open City*, in particular, has been noted by various scholars. Pieter Vermeulen (2014) reads the novel as a fugue, an idea that Birgit Neumann and Yvonne Kappel develop further by arguing that "the novel's contrapuntal structure reveals the disjunctions, latencies, and elisions within hegemonic orders of knowledge and destabilize established notions of community, memory, and cosmopolitanism." (2019: 31). Madhu Krishnan notes how the character of Julius illustrates the "Manichean divisions" in colonialism seen through his rejection of Nigerian music, or his memories of it (2015: 688), in the process making a salient point about how Cole uses his protagonists' dislikes to distinguish the subtle-but-significant differences between his own identity and that of his narrators. Josh Epstein (2019) notes the bookending of the novel to the music of Gustav Mahler and argues that Cole's work shares what Adorno terms "The traumatic tone in Mahler's music, a subjective moment of brokenness" (in Epstein, 2019, 414). As such, Epstein believes that "Engaging with Mahler's music, and the cultural dilemmas that it embodies, opens up the critical potential of the novel's form, folding Mahler's dialectics into Cole's intricately elliptical and contrapuntal narrative" (414). In such insightful commentary are located tangible and practicable hermeneutic approaches to Cole's fictional work, and the techniques through which music vivifies and enriches his narrative strategies.

The 'contrapuntality' noted in some of this scholarship owes its origins as a concept to the work of Edward Said, who first used the term in reference to music in his 1983 essay, 'The Music Itself: Glenn Gould's Contrapuntal Vision.' For Said,

> the essence of counterpoint is simultaneity of voices, preternatural control of resources, apparently endless inventiveness. In counterpoint a melody is always in the process of being repeated by one or another voice: the result is horizontal, rather than vertical, music. Any series of notes is thus capable of an infinite set of transformations, as the series (or melody or subject) is taken

> up first by one voice then by another, the voices always continuing to sound against, as well as with, all the others. (2008: 5)

Said's particular musical passion was for classical music, with his most noted music-based essays being on the pianist Glenn Gould, whose interpretations of Bach's 'Goldberg Variations' were a source of fascination to Said, and an expansion of Theodor Adorno's concept of 'late style' that remains highly influential in cultural theory. In his tribute essay, 'A Quartet for Edward Said,' in *Black Paper* (2021), Cole outlines Said's profound influence on his own career, and writes

> I love Edward Said's idea, drawn from his comparative study of literature, that difference is not about hierarchies but about the possibility of contrapuntal lines. Difference, at its best, interweaves and creates new harmonies. (74)

Cole, as we have seen in the chapters on *Open City* and *Every Day is for the Thief*, has had to write in the context of certain market expectations that weigh on any young, migrant writer. This is especially the case when he is positioned, either by those marketing his books or those critically evaluating them, as an African writer, bringing an outsider's perspective to the USA and Europe. Such market positioning has tended to place an emphasis on the Nigerian half of his identity. Cole, despite an upbringing in Nigeria, is an American passport-holder through his birth there, and has lived the majority of his life in the USA. When read as a black American writer, rather than an African one, Cole becomes an inextricable part of a tradition that the writer and critic Larry Neal would conceptualise as a 'Black aesthetic' throughout his writings in the 1970s. This is an aesthetic that confronts a history of enslavement, prejudice, and the gradual eking out of rights and a nominal sense of equality for black people in the USA, encompassing all forms of literature, as well as music, performance, and visual art. For Neal, the Black aesthetic was one that developed in tandem with the nascent political force of Black Power. As he puts it,

> A main tenet of Black power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms. The Black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics. The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas – one Black, one white. The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. (2024: 87-88)

Among those who Neal identifies as key to the creation of a Black aesthetic are Richard Wright, author of the highly influential novel *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Power* (1954), the first known usage of the term, and James Baldwin, writer of novels that map black American experience, such as *Sonny's Blues* (1957) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), along with incendiary, polemical essays such as 'The Fire Next Time." Neal also cites his friend and colleague LeRoi Jones, otherwise known as Amiri Baraka, whose plays about contemporary American life gave marginalised young black Americans the chance to see themselves represented on stage. Neal's work paid insufficient attention to the black women artists of his time, but he does include Zora Neale Hurston's *And Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as an exemplar of "the blues aesthetic" in how it "confronts the most intimate and brutal aspects of a personal catastrophe and renders them lyrically" (Neal, 2024: 159). This understanding of the blues, Neal acknowledges, is indebted to Ralph Ellison, another cornerstone of the black aesthetic as the writer of the seminal *Invisible Man* (1952). Ellison's unnamed black protagonist in his novel expresses the hope that the "transitional" vernacular and sartorial style of bebop (a form of blues music) culture could provide the momentum for a new Harlem revolution. The sharply dressed bebop hipsters he sees are, unbeknownst to themselves, in their language full of "country glamour," "the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious…stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it." (Ellison, 1995: 441)

In his writing on jazz, blues, black cultural practice and revolutionary politics, Ellison's non-fictional work was often aligned with John Dewey's contention that philosophy that was charged,

> consciously or unconsciously, by the strivings of men to achieve democracy will construe liberty as meaning a universe in which there is a real uncertainty and contingency…incomplete and in the making…made this way or that according as men judge, prize, love and labor…[Democracy is] a genuine field of novelty, of real and unpredictable increments to existence, a field for experimentation and invention. (Quoted in Muyumba, 2007: 29)

This "field for experimentation and invention" has, in the past four decades, been the subject of academic scrutiny that has shed ever-increasing light on the connections

between pragmatist thought, the blues, and the leading lights of black American writing. In literary studies, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1988 work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* opened a door to music-based literary analysis by exploring the folkloric origins of the black American vernacular linguistic practice of "signifyin'" as a means of boasting or goading in African-American musical traditions and merging it with Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic concept of "signified" and "signifier" to function "as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition" (1998: 903). Gates gives particular attention to pastiche as a form of signifying, and focuses on how the interplay between texts by authors such as Wright, Ellison, and Neale Hurston follows in the signifying tradition as a method of encoding admiration for the others' work. More recently, the practice of reading literature through the lens of the blues was reinvigorated through Walton M. Muyumba's *The Shadow and the Act* (2009), in which he examines how, jazz, blues, and pragmatism interrelate through examination of how black American writers such as Baldwin, Ellison, and Baraka used their writing on music to express pragmatist analyses of American culture and how it would benefit from absorbing certain black cultural practices into the mainstream.

In their 2017 article, 'Teju Cole and Ralph Ellison's Aesthetics of Invisibility,' Sam Reese and Alexandra Kingston-Reese examine how Ellison's novel and Cole's *Open City* share the use of invisibility as an aesthetic strategy that draws on various artistic practices, "both formally and experientially" to evoke young black men as disregarded to the point of disappearance (104). While Teju Cole should certainly be understood within the signifying tradition and black aesthetic of Ellison, Wright, Neale Hurston, and many others, it is arguable that he has self-positioned himself most specifically in the lineage of James Baldwin. In the previous chapter I discussed how Cole reread and offered an update to Baldwin's essay, 'Stranger in the Village' with 'Black Body' (2016: 3-16), in which he reflected on the ongoing precarity and sense of disposability of black American lives. *Tremor* follows in this vein by becoming Cole's most sustained attempt at giving rhythm and lyrics to the range of experience that a black person in the USA and elsewhere might go through. Some of this is shown through the experiences of his autofictional persona, Tunde, some through the relaying of history, such as that of the serial killer Samuel Little and the women he murdered (36-39), the enslaved women who were held in Harvard Square

by a dean of the university (214), and the captives thrown off the slave ship Zong, as depicted in JMW Turner's painting (994-98).

Ralph Ellison confused much of his audience, including contemporary black writers he expected to understand, when he claimed that *Invisible Man* (1952) was a blues piece. "I tell them," he wrote in a 1952 letter to Albert Murray, "I told Langston Hughes in fact, that it's the blues, but nobody seems to understand what I mean" (Murray & Callaghan, 2000: 31). Murray, who later described his own novel *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974) as a "jam session," and who was Ellison's favoured discussant in all matters musical, grasped Ellison's notion keenly (21), although it is interesting that Hughes, as a poet, was perplexed by the idea of blues musicality being sustained across a novel.

Larry Neal, through his reading of Ralph Ellison, conceptualises the blues as a series of lyrical renderings of personal catastrophe (159). Baldwin, relishing the esoteric nature of the blues as narrative transmission, claimed that

> It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear (2017: 25).

The blues is thus a coded means of expression and self-narration for black people in the USA, one which hides in plain sight under white America's veil of "protective sentimentality." Baldwin's assertion was made, not in discussing blues music, but in leading into a reflection on Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and its legacy in American fiction, in a piece entitled 'Many Thousands Gone', published in 1951. Baldwin, then, was pioneering a mode of literary criticism that would go on to be expounded by Larry Neal, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison, among others. Surveying the scene in 2010, Jeffrey B. Ferguson noted that

> current blues aesthetic criticism tends to reference the blues as a general sensibility or as an abstract 'matrix' of values, concepts, and emotions that define black American cultural practice in general and ground black American literature in the world-making philosophy, linguistic practices, and musical traditions of ordinary blacks. Instead of actual blues songs, or their varied histories, blues aesthetic critics typically cite the general qualities of the

> music- its general formal features, its emphasis on non-linearity, improvisation, loss, chance, turns of fate, and stories without sure conclusions - when characterizing how black American literary texts employ it as a foundation for expression. (700)

The non-specificity of blues aesthetic criticism that Ferguson correctly observes has logical, practical decision-making at its heart. The blues is a wide, sprawling canon of music, and for all its recorded and preserved output, there are also lost, obscure, or poorly-recorded songs. It is also a music of live performance and improvisation, with many of the great performances of the likes of Miles Davis, Bessie Smith, John Coltrane, etc. living on only through written descriptions, word-of-mouth, and folk memory. To discuss literature through reference to specific songs from a genre that was often difficult to access (although the proliferation of services such as Spotify and YouTube has made this easier), would be alienating to many readers of literary criticism, as well as requiring a breadth of musical knowledge that few literary critics possess. Or, in turn, a breadth of literary knowledge that few musicologists possess. In assessing how blues music guides the rhythms, ethos and pathos of *Tremor*, I make no claims to expertise on the blues, but locate my argument within my understanding of the scholarship of those who do possess such knowledge, particularly Albert Murray Jr. Such an approach also allows for an audience unfamiliar with the more technical aspects of blues and jazz musicianship and its accompanying terminology.

Tremor begins with the following passage:

> The leaves are glossy and dark and from the dying blooms rises a fragrance that might be jasmine. He sets up the tripod and begins to focus the camera. He has pressed the shutter twice when an aggressive voice calls out from the house on the right. This isn't the first time this kind of thing has happened to him but still he is startled. He takes on a friendly tone and says he is an artist, just photographing a hedge. You can't do that here, the voice says, this is private property. The muscles of his back are tense. He folds the tripod, stows the camera in its bag, and walks away. (Cole, 2023: 3)

As openings go, this is one that is relatively low in volume, and minor in key. Blues pieces often begin in this way: an almost imperceptible percussive shuffle and a

melancholic line softly picked out by saxophone or trumpet. They announce themselves quietly through sonic acknowledgment of life's difficulties and disparities, before developing the opening line into a refrain and building the song instrumentally. Tunde, the barely-disguised autofictional stand-in for Teju Cole, announces himself as receptive to life's sensorial pleasures with his description of glossy leaves and the rising scent of a jasmine-like fragrance. But his aesthetic reverie is brought to a swift halt by a neighbour who is suspicious of and threatened by his presence – a black man lingering on the street and pointing a camera towards his property. Tunde treats this act of racism with weary resignation, feeling the physical signs of fury, but choosing simply to walk away. A reader with even a vague awareness of race relations in the USA understands the potential consequences of a black man on the street refusing to move on when ordered by a white (we are given to assume) property-owner. In 'Black Body,' Cole writes that "The news of the day (old news, but raw as a fresh wound) is that black American life is disposable from the point of view of policing, sentencing, economic policy, and countless terrifying forms of disregard" (2016: 16). In responding to Baldwin's depiction of anti-black racism in the 1950s, Cole raises the question of what has materially changed.

Tremor is, amongst other things, an expansion of the project of elucidating the experience of the disregarded, and restoring them to visibility. Albert Murray, in exploring the blues as a philosophy of life, argues that "It is the disposition to persevere (based on a tragic, or better still, an epic sense of life) that blues music at its best not only embodies but stylizes, extends, elaborates, and refines" (2017: 68). For Murray, "such is the ambiguity of artistic statement that there is no need to choose between the personal implication and the social, except as the occasion requires" (68). Murray's words could function as a credo for Cole's approach to *Tremor*.

In working to the rhythms of a blues piece, *Tremor* unfolds gently and sombrely, reflecting in successive passages on death, racism, and atrocity before picking up to a subtly-syncopated beat that moves deceptively quickly. Tunde's recurring reflections on past loves and his passages that speak to an enigmatic 'you' mirror the blues' tendency to call back earlier passages and riffs at unpredictable and unexpected times. The term "worrying the line" refers, in blues parlance, to the practice of repeating refrains and musical passages with alterations and elaborations. These may

take the form of tonal and pitch shifts, changes of tempo, or interruptions such as shouts or cries (Gussow, 2018, n.p.). In this way, something that has started to feel familiar to the audience is defamiliarized, and rendered uncertain. In *Tremor*, the line is often worried through the narrative's lithe movement between timeframes and perspectives, wherein a fragmentary memory might be reinvigorated at any time.

In the opening chapter the narrative moves, seemingly apropos of nothing, from a meditation of the loss of colleagues and of Harvard's singular traditions and language used to mark these deaths, through to a reflection on the colour violet, "not the violet of medieval bishops and university professors but rather the violet of darkest African skin," (2023: 4-5) and the colour used by various artists, most particularly Chris Ofili, in "whose *Mary Magdalene* is a violet so deep it could drown the eyes and in whose *Raising of Lazarus* there is a violet so base it could raise the dead" (6). The topic appears to be abandoned, only for Cole to thread a deft line through the buying of antiques in rural Maine and the violence of white colonisers' seizing of Native American land, through to the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, wherein an enslaved woman called Tituba, "likely of Taino or Carib origin who was described by her neighbours simply as "Indian"" (16) was coerced into confessing to being a witch. *Tremor*'s opening chapter closes with an effective and disturbing worrying of the violet line:

> But the man who had enslaved her in Barbados, and in whose home she had lived in Salem, the Puritan minister Reverend Samuel Parris—he too had been trained at Harvard—now sold her off into a further and likely more brutal slavery. After that second sale Tituba, who had been forced to leave her toddler daughter in the Parris household, disappeared from the historical record. When Reverend Parris died twenty-eight years later in 1720 Tituba's daughter was bequeathed to his son Samuel Parris, Jr. and from that moment nothing further is known of the girl except for her name as written in the will of the old man: *Violet*. (16-17)

Here, an apparent diversion in the narrative, a directionless riff, becomes a motif that is called back with renewed potency, worried and revived. Chapter one of *Tremor* serves to notify the reader of how past and present combine to form a stifling, oppressive way of life for black Americans, filled with everyday threat, exoticisation, erasure, and the enormous weight of history. The 'tremor' of the title is

never explained, and the word is not used in the text, but it offers multivalent possibilities. A tremor of excitement, or anticipation. A sense of threat, or impending danger – linked to either the novel's setting in the months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (which is given no overt foreshadowing), or to quotidian black life. A sense of disturbance of something previously stable, seen in the marital difficulties that Tunde and Sadako experience, Equally plausible is Cole's signature move of etymological dexterity, with the shared Latin root of *tremere* ('to tremble') between tremor and the musical term 'tremolo' – a technique frequently used in blues music where a rapid repetition of a note, an alteration between notes, or an oscillation in volume is used to create a trembling effect.

Tremor's fourth chapter opens from the perspective of Tunde's wife, Sadako, one of several brief interludes when she becomes the novel's focal point. A description of her study includes a photograph of John Coltrane (61), for whom we learn that Sadako and Tunde have a "shared reverence" (64). Sadako's interludes are characterised by a slower, more gradual pace than that of the majority of the novel, providing a perspective that feels very much aligned with that of Tunde, but less overwhelmed by the weight of history, and more inclined to a lens that is trained first on what is personal and close at hand, before gradually broadening to the universal.

Sadako's own rich catalogue of musical interests and connections is recounted gently, before the significant remainder of the chapter follows Tunde through his love of multifarious artists and styles of music, most specifically through mention of a wide range of artists from Mali, as Tunde travels to Bamako and is enraptured by the musical performances he sees there, whilst also recalling the genesis of his love for Malian music and its presence and inspiration at important junctures in his life. The musicians mentioned include the well-known Malian artists Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté, as well as many less globally-famous ones. Many of these artists appear on a Spotify playlist called 'In Bamako' that Cole put together in late-2019, roughly around the period when *Tremor* is set. Cole has curated numerous playlists of music on the streaming platform, and evidently approaches the practice as a branch of his creative output – they are attempts to capture the mood of uncertain times, and of experimentation in the sequencing of musical genres and audio textures.

While the musicians listed in *Tremor*'s Bamako chapter are discussed with reverence, the proliferation of names listed is indicative not just of a knowledgeable enthusiast, but of someone for whom music is a daily and essential form of sustenance. Tunde "feels a compulsion to listen to Djelimady Tounkara" (74), finds Diao Kouyate's version of a Mandinka standard to be "painfully beautiful" and stays awake digging for other versions on YouTube, an activity that leads to an epiphany that is tonally and affectively emblematic of the novel as a whole:

> These names, these voices fill his heart: to be here in Mali and be in real time with something towards which he has been drawn for so long is a joy so intense that his heart feels melancholy at it. He listens to the deeply concentrated version of the song the revered Guinean singer Mahawa Kouyaté recorded in the early 1980s and it is in the mists of her incantation that sleep comes to him. (74-5)

The evocation of a joy so intense that it causes melancholy animates the novel and is guided, whichever form of music or other artform is under discussion, by the ethos of the blues. Much of *Tremor* is preoccupied with the struggles of life: racism, health problems, death, relationship problems, wealth inequality and the human tendency towards domination of others. There is not a page that does not dwell on at least one of these themes, usually through Tunde's eyes. His time in Mali, amongst music he loves, brings out his pragmatic side, in the Deweyan sense, when Tunde later reflects that "There'll be time in life enough for grief but in Bamako last year I dared believe I was happy, not only at seeing the music live but also at experiencing it in its native habitat among people who knew the meaning of the words being sung" (208). This is counterbalanced by his abiding sense that behind his life of privilege and warm reception as a guest of honour in the places to which he travels,

> There is another reality, the personal one. And then there's the secret one that is as dark as the blood beating in my veins, a cold river flowing undetected far from view, a place of uncertainty and premonition. Something is moving there that does not need me for its movement and that is taking me where I cannot imagine. A darkness to which the eyes can never become adjusted. (230)

Dancing to the music of Les Diplomates at a bar in Bamako, Tunde recalls "other nights of desire and satiation" and reflects that "Something exists in spite of

everything else we know to be true of the world. Life is hopeless but it is not serious. We have to have danced while we could and, later, to have danced again in the telling" (210). Dancing in the telling and the experience of life as a sequence of ever-recurring obstacles to be overcome is precisely the meaning of the blues that Glaude, Murray, Baldwin, Ellison, and Neal all emphasised throughout their careers: a spirit of defiance through practical action and the acceptance of uncertainty. In attending to the darker dimensions of humanity, the blues make, as Murray sees it

> a statement about the complexities inherent in the human situation and about improvising or experimenting or riffing or otherwise playing with (or even gambling with) such possibilities as are also inherent in the obstacles, the disjunctures, and the jeopardy. (2017: 251)

The blues aesthetic achieved in *Tremor* chimes with Murray's (and, consequently, Glaude's) belief that the blues are also "a statement about perseverance and about resilience and thus also about the maintenance of equilibrium despite precarious circumstances and about achieving elegance in the very process of coping with the rudiments of subsistence" (251). Tunde's pragmatic reflections occur after two chapters set in Lagos, one of which consists of multiple vignettes, each told in the first person by a different narrator, that portray the realities of life in Lagos, painting a portrait of a city riven with tensions and precarity, but also one that is charged with vivacious energy. The opening episode, told from the perspective of Nestor, a driver for a criminal boss, offers an immediate callback to Cole's earlier work through reference to Fela Kuti's song, 'Water No Get Enemy,' the highlife song that provides the titular inspiration and the tonal and rhythmic impetus for Cole's *Granta* essay, 'Water Has No Enemy,' discussed in a previous chapter. Nestor's apparent fear of his boss, expressed even as he insists how much he appreciates having a job, indicates the level of financial uncertainty that many Lagosians have to navigate, and the presence of overt, menacing criminality in many facets of everyday life. Bemused and alienated by his boss ordering him to turn up the aforementioned Fela Kuti song, Nestor reflects that

> When I hear it I want to tell him to come to Ifako Agege where I live, where we line up for water from the borehole at the baale's house and pay five hundred naira for two jerry cans of water. Every day fights break out on that long line of jerry cans and buckets. I have a younger brother who hasn't walked

> normally since some thugs beat him up on the water line two years ago. And sometimes when there is no electricity and the baale doesn't want to pump with his generator there is no water at all. The whole neighborhood goes without. I don't even think the government knows we exist. Meanwhile at his own house my boss opens the tap and water comes out. Water is not *his* enemy. Please I am not saying this to complain. I'm sure you understand. (119)

Nestor's story, as with that of all twenty-two narrators, reads as conversational and confessional, as though Cole has based these stories on either recorded interviews, or keenly-remembered interactions. Prior to the publication of *Tremor*, Cole had spoken in several interviews of being engaged in the writing of a book set in Lagos. This chapter, and the seventh, an account of Lagos written in the style of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (Lazzari, 2024: 12) give the city a central place in the novel. As in *Open City* and *Every Day is for the Thief*, Lagos stands as an imposing megalopolis that both attracts and repels the book's central figure. This time, though, the narrative strategy of recounting experience from a polyphony of voices allows a depiction freed from the exiled ambivalence of Tunde, *Open City*'s Julius, and *Every Day*'s semi-fictionalised narrator. The voices ring true in a manner that suggests many of the accounts are based on recordings, or keenly-transcribed conversations that Cole had. Other stories make mention of family members who appear in various sections from Tunde's perspective, and one appears to be from his sister, Kehinde's, viewpoint.

In his Lagos-based chapters, particularly the series of vignettes, Cole shows how our lives are entangled, fraught with risk, contingent, precarious, but also driven by one another's energy, and everyday pleasures. The intertextuality that characterises Cole's body of work across genres and media is brought to its loudest crescendo in *Tremor*, with the contrapuntal polyphony of Lagosian voices serving as intertexts to each other – a means of interpreting and achieving mutual comprehension through unfolding connections and resonances. The dizzying riffs, improvisations and worried lines of chapter six provide essential new impetus to Cole's novel, affording its minor characters – as in *Open City* – both moral authority and affective potency.

In *Tremor*'s eighth and final chapter, Tunde offers a meditation of the music of John Coltrane, an artist whom Cole has often cited as a creative touchstone:

> The studio is calm this morning. Hana and I work quietly on sequencing for an exhibition. As we work we are listening to *Blue World* the 1964 recording by the John Coltrane Quartet that was rescued from the vaults and commercially released last year. When I listen to Coltrane and when I think of listening to him I remember one of the central glimmering facts of his life: that both his grandfathers were preachers in the AME Zion Church. The keening so evident in his playing sounds like an outflow of that heritage received from two black men preaching the Word of God in North Carolina in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Coltrane enfolded into his sheets of sound the eloquence of the AME Zion Church but also the wilder and weirder dissonances of Holiness practices. His choices are musically driven but in his spirit is a consistent preference for ecstasy over entertainment. Every note he plays is air from his body, every song on these albums a transcript of his breath. (211)

Coltrane's *Blue World* was released in 2019, meaning the narrative reference to "last year" locates *Tremor* in 2020. Cole has spoken in interviews of why he chose to set the novel in the months before the COVID-19 outbreak brought the world to a standstill through lockdowns, health measures, and limited travel opportunities. This period of time, he felt, would be "vulnerable to disappearance." The pandemic brought about a period of uncertainty that was arguably entirely unprecedented in its global scale and its profound effects upon the vast majority of the world's population. By capturing the period that immediately preceded it, Cole asserts that life is always a struggle for a great many people, and that uncertainty can be rendered bearable only through acceptance of its vagaries. The "glimmering facts" of Coltrane's grandparents being preachers in the American Methodist Episcopal Zion church hold their significance in this tradition connecting Coltrane directly to early campaigners for the abolition of slavery, including the one of its founders, William Hamilton, the son of the abolitionist Alexander Hamilton. Coltrane's life was intrinsically connected to the USA's history of slavery, as Tunde observes:

> No fewer than twenty people were enslaved by Abner Coltrane in North Carolina at the beginning of the Civil War. Some of the enslaved were related to each other, some like Andrew and Mary Ann Coltrane were married to each other, but most were unrelated. Family separation was the norm under slavery and kinship was precarious. According to a judicial charge in January 1861 in

> Asheboro, North Carolina, Abner Coltrane maltreated one of his bondsmen, Alfred Coltrane. The charge accused Abner of creating a public nuisance and described an ordeal for Alfred who for an unknown offense was whipped and beaten for three hours on a public street in "an unusual, cruel, inhuman, barbarous and shocking manner." We don't know what happened later that night when the numerous black Coltranes got back to their quarters. Perhaps Alfred's serious wounds were tended by the others. Possibly those who cared for him included Andrew and Mary Ann, the great-grandparents of John Coltrane.
>
> (214)

In drawing an overt connection between slavery and one of the finest practitioners of the blues in this way, Cole reminds us that, as Baldwin puts it, "The story of the negro in America is the story of America…it is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty" (2017: 25). In telling this story, Cole harnesses Coltrane's music, above all else, as an intertext that is intrinsic to his narrative. *Blue World* as an album shares structural similarities with Cole's novel, consisting of eight tracks, as *Tremor* has eight chapters. The opening and closing tracks, *Naima (take 1)* and *Naima (take 2)* are versions of a track named for Coltrane's first wife, which he had previously recorded for other albums, and that has become something of a blues standard. As *Naima* provides a recurring theme, and the entry and exit points for *Blue World*, so Sadako and Tunde's relationship bookends *Tremor*. The couple's return to stability and a feeling of mutual understanding is alluded to through a brief intertextual reference: Not long after Tunde's internal monologue recounts his experience of first losing his sight while reading Virginia Woolf's diaries (225), a further passage recounted from Sadako's point of view begins with the line "I'll buy the flowers myself" when preparing for a party the couple are hosting, an homage to the striking opening line of Woolf's 1925 novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Shared appreciation of music and art translates, for Tunde and Sadako, to something approaching shared consciousness. Near the novel's end, with Sadako's perspective in focus again, she is enraptured by a musical epiphany:

> In the lees of the party Rae brings out a small bag and out of the bag a recorder. They begin to play it and a hush falls over the room. They are standing in front of the cabinet on which the wooden ci wara we bought in

> Wells is displayed. Lucas's children tiptoe downstairs and peer around the stairwell. I can't tell if Rae is improvising or if they are playing a set tune but the playing is focused, natural, elegiac, with sustained notes. They seem to be playing in Phrygian mode and in one section there are ostinato figures that sound Andalusian or like a muezzin's call. Then the tune finds its way to a beautiful melody that is so disguised and unexpected that it takes me a moment to identify it. "Naima." (236-237)

Sadako's observation of Rae playing in the Phrygian mode is a technical detail that draws our attention to both the universality and specificity of music. The Phrygian mode has ancient origins that evolved through medieval times as church music and has settled in its modern form into a diatonic scale that utilises a subtle blend of suspended and flattened major notes played over a dominant minor scale (Powers, 2001, n.p.). To the listener's ear this creates music that feels ambiguous in tone, shifting almost imperceptibly between the warmer sensations of major notes and the cooler, more meditative tones of the minor key. As Coltrane's first take on Naima guides Cole's chapter through its tentative initial probing of life's challenges and uncertainties, the song's second take ushers in a state of affairs in the final chapter that is, if not resolved, then calmer and more robust, accepting and embracing of uncertainty. As Rae, an emblematically non-binary character who appears at several key moments of the novel without speaking, conjures the music of Sadako and Tunde's mutual hero from an apparent sequence of riffs and improvisations, a calm descends on the house and on the novel.

This episode provides something of a resolution to the tension and "sourness" that divide Sadako and Tunde through periods of the novel, and Sadako, like Naima, becomes the through line that is invoked, developed, and worried throughout the novel. More subtly, it serves as a gentle refutation of Tunde's somewhat solipsistic epiphany during his musical reverie in Bamako, while away from his wife, that music "shields him, he knows he is defended by it as a private protection" (70) puts him "in contact with his ancestors," as an "ancestral truth…(in) the way the cells in his body respond when certain music enters him. Everything he would like to say about his experience of the world is encapsulated in certain songs." These songs are "not known to most people around him" (71) and Tunde worries that no-one will know what music to play at his funeral as "even Sadako, were she to survive him, would

have only a general idea of the intensity of his identification with certain sounds, and surely the reverse must be true" (71-72). Conversely, in closing the Bamako chapter with Ali Farka Touré's lyric of "Honey does not only taste good in one mouth" (89) the reader is steered away from Tunde's individualised bombast and closer to Sadako's more open-handed form of subjectivity, which sets the tone for the novel's gentle fade-out.

Having finally achieved the late-night, long-exposure photograph of a hedge that he was denied in the novel's opening episode, and an aborted second attempt influenced by "a strong feeling of uneasiness" (195), Tunde experiences an attack of vertigo that causes him anxiety but that subsides as he falls asleep holding Sadako's hand, and listening to her heartbeat, bringing the novel to an end. Future difficulties are foreshadowed, despite the narrative circling back to a question posed in the chapter: "When and where were you happiest?" (188-9, 239). In Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* he argues that in idealising the world, we may experience

> moments of intense emotional appreciation when, through a happy conjunction of the state of the self and of the surrounding world, the beauty and harmony of existence is disclosed in experiences which are the immediate consummation of all for which we long. Then there is an idealization through actions that are directed by thought, such as are manifested in the works of fine art and in all human relations perfected by loving care. (1929: 302)

It is through these moments that we set "the measure of our ideas of possibilities that are to be realized by intelligent endeavor," although, Dewey warns, "its objects depend upon fortune and are insecure" (302). Happiness, as it is depicted in *Tremor*, is always fleeting and always contingent, subject to good fortune and an openness to seize opportunities for camaraderie, aesthetic experience, and intimacy. Music is not merely a source of revelry and consolation, but a portal to a more intense, profound, and meaningful experience of the world – as likely to inspire sorrow and uncertainty as joy. In an essay called 'Pictures in the Aftermath,' published in 2021, Cole writes of how current news events mean that it is increasingly easy to imagine a disaster befalling us, and that it is "this expectation of solidity, this notion that things are probably going to be fine, that I sense falling away from me again," a sense that grows rather than dissipates when he listens to Maher's Ninth Symphony, along with other music:

> listening to anything that touches on the sublime makes me apprehensive, whether it's Coltrane, Björk, or even the loaded silence that wakes me up in the middle of the night. (2021: 93)

Coltrane's music, for the most part, did not contain lyrics, but one of his most noted works, the suite *A Love Supreme*, closes its first section with those three words sung gently but insistently over and over again – an unexpected conclusion that suddenly vocalises a four note refrain of swelling brass that propels an otherwise wordless piece. In *Human Archipelago*, Cole pairs Fazal Sheikh's portrait of an elderly Somali woman holding her grandson in a refugee camp in Kenya with a text that simply repeats the words 'a love supreme' five times (2019: 110). Those unfamiliar with the song are invited to discover it, and those who know it are guided into nodding their head to the memory of its melody and the hypnotic repetition of the phrase, which can feel darkly ironic in the context of the treatment and confinement of the forcibly displaced, or powerfully optimistic.

Cole's invocation of the blues, and of the many artists mentioned across his work, is a strategy to add a layer of meaning to his work that evades easy interpretation. In a time when media forms have made such things affordable and straightforward, it is now not uncommon for writers or publishers to offer music playlists or 'soundtracks' to accompany their novels. These may include songs that are suggestive of the theme or tone of the story, songs that inspired the author while writing, or, in the case of Cole's curated Spotify playlist for *Tremor*, music that is mentioned in the novel. Books, unlike films, do not have a set running time, and any music to accompany a reading experience is therefore, inevitably, asynchronous with the novel. Coltrane's *Blue World*, despite its unquestionable centrality to the novel and apparent structural influence, is not a soundtrack to *Tremor*, but a structuring intertext whose inclusion is indicative of Cole's attention to the minutiae of perception, and a literary attempt to capture the rhythms and affect of music on the page.

Some years before he wrote *Tremor*, Cole stated that "literature, which is always sent to some reader in the future, will have to renegotiate its mode of participation in human experience" (2016:91). *Tremor* marks Cole's most-pronounced attempt to date to renegotiate fiction's participation in human experience, by immersing his novel in the formal qualities of the blues and the ethos of black pragmatism. The complex weaving of themes, preoccupations, fears, passions and joys into refrains,

repeated and worried lines, and crescendos all while holding firm to Cole's belief that "a good novel shouldn't have a point" and pointing towards a pragmatic approach to life within the tradition of his black aesthetic forebears is central to the literary achievement of *Tremor* and the expansion of Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty to a fully philosophical realm.

Conclusion

> *Granted, there is no way for a literary scholar, these days, to engage in strenuous aesthetic appreciation without sounding goofily anachronistic, so call the effort what you will.*
>
> -Mark McGurl, *The Program Era*, 2009: 409

In early 2025, two separate, but related, magazine pieces were published that shone significant light on contemporary cultural production. In an article for *n+1* magazine, Will Tavlin considered the foundation and rapid rise of the streaming platform Netflix, and examined its apparent tendency to produce high budget feature films that it barely promotes and yet claims have been seen by millions of viewers, despite these films entirely failing to register on the public consciousness by any reliable measure (i.e. they are not widely discussed on social media, they are not recommended by friends or family, they are not widely reviewed by professional or amateur critics, they are not nominated for awards, they are not discussed in schools, colleges, or workplaces).

The findings of the piece are that Netflix is investing huge sums of money in creating content that doesn't distract their viewers from their phones or laptops. Writers are instructed to ensure that someone who is engaged in household tasks or looking at another screen is still able to follow the plot - essentially an inversion of the creative writing dictum of "show, don't tell." What this creates is hundreds of hours of viewing designed for continuous partial attention - so bland, linear, and lacking in nuance that there is no apparent need to switch it off, but to simply let it become a kind of moving wallpaper - a simulacrum of entertainment intended to accompany daily life, rather than comment upon it or enrich it. Rather than the problem of immediacy that Anna Kornbluh diagnoses, a form of saturated mediation occurs, wherein every attempt is made to ensure no interpretive responsibility or effort is placed upon the audience. In doing so, the entertainment industry rids itself of the inherent financial risk and uncertainty involved in film and television production. “Netflix’s greatest innovation,” Tavlin writes “was that it found a way around this uncertainty: it provided a platform in which there are no failures, where everything works” (2025: n.p).

In an excerpt of her book, *Mood Machine: The Rise of Spotify and the Costs of the Perfect Playlist* published in *Harper's Magazine*, Liz Pelly investigates her hunch that the music streaming platform, Spotify, through which much of the world listens to music, is home to ever-proliferating numbers of 'ghost artists.' These are performers whose names are attached to one or more songs of enormous popularity, despite not appearing to exist in real life, with no online presence outside of Spotify, a vague and unconvincing biography, and no record of ever having performed live. Pelly discovers that Spotify increasingly hires lesser-known musicians to create music to a specific genre template. Musicians are given a set fee and their music is then attributed to a fake name with a concocted biography, blended into playlists including real and established artists that cater to a specific mood, occasion, or activity, such as 'weekend in Paris,' 'Sunday Brunch,' 'Morning workout,' or 'Midweek evening retail jazz.' This is a consequence of Spotify's listener data revealing that much of its audience search for a specific music mood, rather than by specific artist or song.

The advantage of ghost artists for a company like Spotify is that it enables them to forego any type of per-listen payment to these artists and therefore to retain greater profit. It is inevitable that this music will soon be created for platforms such as Spotify by generative A.I. , if this is not already the case. Literature too, is not immune to the kind of' ingrained audience passivity that incentivize a corporate emphasis on quantity over quality. As Netflix and Spotify cater to a general demand for films and music to occupy our time, both Amazon and Kobo offer monthly subscription services that provide thousands of books for one all-inclusive monthly fee. This leads to a scenario wherein series are produced and provided almost as fast as they can be read by audiences by now thoroughly accustomed to the "you liked that, now try this" brand of algorithmic recommendation.

In *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*, Mark McGurl investigates the impact that the online retailer, Amazon, a company of such scale that 'giant' feels an inadequate descriptor, has had upon literature. He argues that the existence of the Amazon Unlimited e-book subscription service

> Points to an aspiration for serial plenitude over singular encounters in the reader's relation to literature; to literature as a service somewhat like internet service or some other "always on" utility.

(2021: 50)

In such an environment, where does an intermedial artist like Cole, who is staunchly resistant to classification, fit in? Throughout this thesis I have argued that what unifies Cole's disparate work across media and genres is its common aesthetic of uncertainty. A strand of this uncertainty, as discussed in the chapter on *Every Day is for the Thief*, is his consciously ambiguous straddling of the line between autobiography and fiction. This autofictional tension also animates the reading experience of Cole's other two novels, *Open City* and *Tremor*, in terms of how their protagonists are perceived. Perception being the key component of aesthetics, I have considered the extent to which Cole mediates photography, both his own and that of others. In *Blind Spot*, when an interviewer suggests to Cole that his work is all part of one project, constantly "circling the problem," he expresses frustration at not knowing what constitutes the problem. In *Human Archipelago*, he implores the reader to "describe the problem properly" (2018: 95). The 'problem' now appears to be situated in the area of forced displacement, and in the human cruelty that causes it. The problem, perhaps, is that of certainty. It is the certainty of our right to domination of other people, and of swathes of land, that causes wars, genocides, and humanitarian catastrophes.

The single project and unified whole that Cole's interlocutor in Brazil mentions in *Blind Spot* (if 'she' was not just a narrative device for Cole to draw the reader's attention to a long-term aesthetic strategy) is, to an audience open to such things, confirmed by his subsequent work. Cole, without being oblique or opaque simply for the sake of it, uses narrative ambiguity, image-text relational tension, poetic allusion, visual subversion, philosophical doubt, musical resonance, and political provocation in the service of his aesthetic of uncertainty. This is not, I hope to have made clear, an aesthetic project in the sense of achieving an agreed-upon standard of beauty, but one with the emphasis firmly on *aesthetic*'s etymological roots in perception. We perceive uncertainty throughout Cole's work in different senses of the word, and it is no accident. What matters, of course, in the academic - critical world of outlining the stakes, is what we do with our uncertainty and, indeed, whether we allow it to take hold. Reading the work of Pelly on Spotify, Tavlin on Netflix and McGurl on Amazon, what becomes clear is that market expectations and desires are now subject to an unprecedented, sustained, and insidious level of manipulation that easily reaches

beyond the consumer realm and into the (a)political, by ensuring that our distribution of the sensible, as Jacques Rancière would put it, is delimited and mediated.

Cole's work is not the product of an uncertain hand, but a sure one, confident in its assertion of the aesthetic of uncertainty, a perceived sensation that provokes and produces. In his carefully hewn prose and meticulously composed and sequenced photographs, Cole indicates no doubt in his craft. The doubt is the reader's, as they question the recall of Julius in *Open City*, confront the generic indeterminacy of *Blind Spot* and mediate their way through the apparent immediacy of *Golden Apple of the Sun* or *Pharmakon*. Before concluding, I will consider what two of Cole's essays teach us about his stance as an artist and public intellectual whose mindset and beliefs place him at odds with the aesthetic of certainty created by the liberal status quo of many of his contemporaries.

In the wake of the attacks in Paris of 7 January 2015, in which twelve employees of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were killed by al-Qaeda members, there was widespread support for the magazine, including in all areas of public life and in the arts. Cole was one of a group of six writers[9] who went against the grain in their response and commentary on the matter, publicly withdrawing from a PEN America event honouring *Charlie Hebdo* with a freedom of expression courage award. This attracted the opprobrium of other high-profile writers, most notably Salman Rushdie, who took to Twitter to label them "6 pussies…six Authors in Search of a bit of Character" (sic) who were "horribly wrong." Most damningly, in a follow-up letter to PEN America, Rushdie described the writers as the "fellow travellers" of "fanatical Islam" (Flood and Yuhas, 2015).

Cole's broad objection to the feting of *Charlie Hebdo* is that freedom of speech does not automatically imply freedom to incite racial hatred. In a *New Yorker* essay on the topic, 'Unmournable Bodies,' he began with a parable about a sixteenth century Italian miller, Menocchio, who was tried for heresy and burned at the stake after his views on creation and life after death fell foul of the Roman Inquisition. Cole cites this story as evidence of Western society's pride in its tradition of scepticism and rationalism being far less deep-rooted than many imagine. The West, he writes,

[9] Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Francine Prose, Rachel Kushner, and Taiye Selasi were the others.

> is a variegated space, in which both freedom of thought and tightly regulated speech exist, and in which disavowals of deadly violence happen at the same time as clandestine torture. But, at moments when Western societies consider themselves under attack, the discourse is quickly dominated by an ahistorical fantasy of long-suffering serenity and fortitude in the face of provocation.
>
> (2015: n.p.)

Having begun with a parable, Cole swiftly moves to the business of elucidating the history of Western suppression of freedom of thought, and the modes it adopted in the American context. Turning, then, to the murder of twelve people affiliated with *Charlie Hebdo*, Cole, writing only a few days after the massacre, bucked the trend of unconditional support for the magazine and its tradition of offending religious sensibilities (epitomised by the popular hashtag #jesuischarlie) by suggesting that it disproportionately targeted Muslim people, and had become increasingly focussed on offending non-white members of the public:

> This week's events took place against the backdrop of France's ugly colonial history, its sizable Muslim population, and the suppression, in the name of secularism, of some Islamic cultural expressions, such as the hijab. Blacks have hardly had it easier in *Charlie Hebdo*: one of the magazine's cartoons depicts the Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira, who is of Guianese origin, as a monkey (naturally, the defense is that a violently racist image was being used to satirize racism); another portrays Obama with the black-Sambo imagery familiar from Jim Crow-era illustrations.

The loss of *liberté* that the shooting was widely purported to have brought about is shown by Cole to be a fiction born out of Euro-American exceptionalism and naked Islamophobia:

> The killings in Paris were an appalling offense to human life and dignity. The enormity of these crimes will shock us all for a long time. But the suggestion that violence by self-proclaimed Jihadists is the only threat to liberty in Western societies ignores other, often more immediate and intimate, dangers. The U.S., the U.K., and France approach statecraft in different ways, but they are allies in a certain vision of the world, and one important thing they share is an expectation of proper respect for Western secular religion. Heresies

> against state power are monitored and punished. People have been arrested for making anti-military or anti-police comments on social media in the U.K. Mass surveillance has had a chilling effect on journalism and on the practice of the law in the U.S. Meanwhile, the armed forces and intelligence agencies in these countries demand, and generally receive, unwavering support from their citizens. When they commit torture or war crimes, no matter how illegal or depraved, there is little expectation of a full accounting or of the prosecution of the parties responsible.
>
> (2015: n.p.)

'Unmournable Bodies' established Cole not only as a writer unafraid to challenge liberal certainties around who is entitled to freedom of speech, but also to be seen as biting the hand that feeds. Rushdie's response to the six writers who boycotted the PEN event, in its puerile and misogynistic language, betrayed his sense of alarm at there being an enemy within. This, it would seem, was no way for writers who had been accepted into the high echelons of the Anglophone literary world to behave. The strand that this adds to Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty is the sense that he is prepared, as an artist and an intellectual, to chafe against expectations regarding his mindset and political inclinations.

Writing in 2021, literary critic Maria Lauret describes 'Unmournable Bodies' as a "culture-critical intervention in public discourse" that fulfils the responsibility of the public intellectual to unsettle power and unthinking societal consensus, "not through preaching or teaching, but by way of thoughtful, precision-engineered prose that asks new questions at the same time as it yields new insights" (2021: 409-410). Lauret believes that Cole's "commitment to the aesthetic forms an integral part of his political stance as a public intellectual, rather than working in opposition to it." (2021: 410). Lauret's point is a significant one in how it draws attention to Cole's use of aesthetics as his primary mode of political expression, rendering the aesthetic always entirely inseparable from the ethical. "Unmournable Bodies," though, serves as a reminder that while Cole has remained observant of his dictum that "A good novel shouldn't have a point," he has tended to use the essay form to launch more direct attacks on the targets of his ire. Cole's 2016 collection, *Known and Strange Things*, has not been the explicit focus of a chapter or sub-section of this thesis, although it has provided helpful context and commentary at various junctures. In a

wide-ranging collection of essays, many of which were previously published in prestigious outlets such as *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, Cole sporadically chooses to direct his words towards very specific points. In 'Bad Laws,' he examines how the Israeli judicial system uses archaic legacies of Ottoman land laws to create a veneer of legality over forced repossession of Palestinian houses in the Sheikh Jarrah district of Jerusalem (2016: 281-287), and in 'A Reader's War' he notes the failure of the much-touted edificatory impact of reading on our personal ethics and empathy in the case of President Barack Obama (254-261).

Theodor Adorno saw the essay as a written form that is fully immersed in the ongoing processes of social life by eschewing the false comfort of first principles and remaining open-ended (1991: 3-23). Nowhere is this better seen in Cole's work than in 'Unnamed Lake' – one of the few essays in *Known and Strange Things* that had not been previously published elsewhere. The essay recounts Cole's experience of a restless, sleepless night and the seemingly disconnected thoughts and historical events he dwells upon, stitched together by recurring references to the extinct thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger) and the anxieties of being a deconstructionist recounted by Jacques Derrida in an interview Cole habitually watches on YouTube when he can't sleep. The essay's fragmentary nature makes it an uneasy, dreamlike reading experience, entirely unpredictable in its direction despite the dual base layers of Derrida and the thylacine.

'Unnamed Lake' provides a condensed form of the sensation of reading Cole's later novel, *Tremor*, in how it weaves tragedies not only into the fabric of everyday life, but into the practice of everyday thinking. The existence and prevalence of genocides, dictatorships, mass deaths, and extinctions are matters which, when dwelt upon at any length, provoke intense uncertainty and raise questions about human nature and the existence of cruelty that are universal and unanswerable. Very much in keeping with Cole's ethos and aesthetic, 'Unnamed Lake' is an essay that does not seek to make a point, but is immersive and gently provocative. Cole's quotations from Derrida are a faithful rendering of the English translation of his answers on the YouTube video in question, and cover the whole interview. When Derrida talks of his concern at his deconstruction of certain standard ideas being received as an attack, he claims that he sometimes wakes and

> in a sort of half-sleep, all of a sudden I'm terrified by what I'm doing. And I tell myself, you're crazy to write this! You're crazy to attack such and such a thing! You're crazy to criticize such and such a person. You're crazy to contest such an authority, be it textual, institutional, or personal.
>
> (2016: 99)

The philosopher, here, serves as a proxy for Cole, a substitute for how he feels about antagonising those who have gone before him, perhaps with greater reputations, or claims to moral authority. In using Derrida as his proxy, Cole alludes to his own uncertainty as an artist and as a public intellectual - not a description that he has encouraged, but one that seems to fit. In the context of 'Unmournable Bodies' and the opprobrium of respected high-profile figures like Salman Rushdie that Cole's misgivings around the weaponisation of free speech attracted, Cole's shadowing, in an essay published one year later, of Derrida's anxiety around who he might offend with his public deconstructions gains new piquancy. Through his tour of Derrida's uncertainties and Cole's own reflections on extinction, the indigenous Australian concept of the Dreaming, the Nigerian dictatorship of Sani Abacha, the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany and more, we are given a snapshot of the sense of living in extraordinary times where concept of truth and moral certainty begin to dissolve.

Around the mid-point of the essay, Cole writes

> There is a quality of listening in the dead of the night (the "dead" of the night) that is perhaps not conducive to writing or interpretation, but that heightens the possibilities of what can be heard, or that might lead one to believe that there is an unnamed lake underneath all reality, and that there are places where the ground, insufficiently firm, can suddenly plunge one through into the subterranean truth of things.
>
> (99)

Although one of his lesser known essays, 'Unnamed Lake' is emblematic of Cole's artistic ethos and entire body of work in its flowing movement between intertextual references and historical events, and its artful use of another persona (this time Derrida) to speak for the writer's own innermost concerns. Cole's aesthetic of uncertainty is marked by his desire to plunge through to "the subterranean truth of things," in whatever means he can.

In the chapter on *Open City* I provided close readings of several of the narrator's encounters with strangers, considering these through the lens of Sara Ahmed's ontological category of 'the stranger' as a source of fear. I argued that it is through the novel's minor characters that we see Cole's true understanding of cosmopolitanism, in banal, border-bound, thwarted forms, rather than the Appiah-inflected 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' practiced by the mobile and amoral Julius. This was the first of four books, along with *Every Day is for the Thief*, *Blind Spot*, and *Known and Strange Things*, that Cole terms his "quartet on the limits of vision" (2016: n.p.) and, as such, the keystone to developing his aesthetic of uncertainty. A shocking and ambiguous ending to *Open City* marked Cole out as a writer of conviction and formal daring, willing to alienate his reader to make an ethical point that goes against the liberal grain, in this instance the belief that aesthetic experience, intercultural encounters, and high cultural tastes are morally formative. The uncertainty created by Cole through the gradual exposure of his protagonist's insincerity and self-deception has the uncomfortable consequence of making the reader feel implicated in Julius's ethical failings, drawn into his cosmopolitan posturing and limits of seeing.

Of Cole's novels to date, *Open City* has had by far the most scholarly attention paid to it. This has helped to uncover the many intertextual layers to the novel, and the theoretical and cultural influences embedded in it. My contribution has been to switch the exegetical focus to the minor characters, showing how the illuminating detail and context that Cole provides for these characters' backgrounds is entirely missed by Julius, a man of many blind spots. The reader is granted the opportunity to see more clearly than the narrator, and is invited to do research that will enrich their reading of the novel. The nuances provided by names, locations and cultural references are rewarding to the committed reader of Cole's work, but may leave them uncertain as to whether they have found and parsed them all. I hope that my contribution to research on *Open City* is to have highlighted the fruitfulness of reading this generative and provocative novel through the characters and context around Julius, rather than merely through him.

In my discussion of *Blind Spot*, I probed the ethical dimensions of uncertainty by considering the philosophical and etymological meaning behind the book's motif of blindness and its cognates, such as opacity and obscurity. The book, I argue, is an

invitation to consider what we overlook and occlude in our daily lives, from the wide sweep of history written in the things we see and the places where we live, down to the minuscule details, gestures, and shapes that we see on quotidian objects. The book is not prescriptive, but the reader may glean the implication that broadening our ways of seeing is a route toward a more considerate, and thus ethical, way of living. Photography as a medium is under scrutiny by Cole in *Blind Spot*, as it is in all his work. The camera's origin - and continued use - as a tool of imperialism is alluded to frequently by the texts that accompany each image, and it is for this reason that I read the book primarily through the ideas of Ariella Azoulay, an innovative visual theorist for whom Cole has expressed admiration, and whose influence can be seen in his own critical work on photography. The ideas of Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and David Campany also inform my reading of Cole's photography, as do those of WJT Mitchell and Vilem Flusser. What separates Cole from these theorists, though, is his status as a critic-practitioner. I show that *Blind Spot* is, aside from being a photography book, a work of visual theory wherein the critic uses his own work to elucidate his ideas.

Alongside his declaration that "a good novel shouldn't have a point," Cole has also stated that" a good photograph" should shock the viewer "like a pinprick," so that it "reminds you in a small, sharp way that you're alive right now" (Vikaas, 2013, n.p.). Cole's willingness to be somewhat prescriptive as to what attributes a "good" novel or photograph should have comes across as professional instinct rather than any kind of boastfulness. His career as an academic has grown in tandem with his reputation as an artist, and he currently works as Professor of Creative writing in Harvard, having previously taught at Bard College and served as the photography critic for the *New York Times* from 2015 to 2019.

In the fourth chapter I used Anna Kornbluh's work on 'immediacy' as a cultural symptom of our precarious and threatening times as a lens to consider four of Cole's more unconventionally-mediated pieces of work. Kornbluh's book on the topic is recent, and Cole is not one of the stated targets of her ire, although he easily could have been, particularly with regard to the works I covered in this chapter. Kornbluh finds immediacy to be fragmented and fractured, indicative of a hurried and chaotic cultural mood that begs for a more thoughtful and mediated approach, as new collective forms of opposition to rising fascism begin to organise. I argue that Cole's

work is frequently a catalyst for the audience's uncertainty to be harnessed in service of self-mediation. Mediation is approached differently in *Golden Apple of the Sun*, where still life images of Cole's kitchen counter are contextualised through a dense and far-reaching block of unbroken text that guides the reader through the history of food production as an extractive colonial practice, and of the still life as a means of thinking about life, death, and vanity.

In writing about Cole's 2023 novel, *Tremor*, I take the view that the novel is deeply influenced by both the ethics and aesthetics of jazz and blues music and, consequently, the uncertainty that is intrinsic to these art forms and also the philosophy of Black Pragmatism. *Tremor*, I argue, bears the tonal and formal qualities of blues music, and shares the structures and rhythms of John Coltrane's 'Blue World' album in particularly. Without explicit confirmation from the author (which I have consciously not sought, out of respect for his creative health) this is somewhat of a speculative reading into what would be a complex and innovative attempt at achieving cross-medial, musical-literary homologies. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the novel follows in an aesthetic tradition established by Cole's black American forebears, such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. Larry Neal writes scathingly that "What the western white man calls an "aesthetic" is fundamentally a dry assembly of dead ideas based on a dead people; a people whose ideas have been found meaningless in light of contemporary history" (2024: 114). Neal was writing in 1968, but his words feel equally pertinent in 2025. He continues, "We need new values, new ways of living. We need a new system of moral and philosophical thought" (114). Cole's novel, in keeping with his oeuvre, is an attempt to instigate new systems of thought. Through his aesthetic of uncertainty, Cole audience is consistently and repeated invited, inveigled, and induced into asking questions of what they see, how it is mediated to them, and reconsidering old certainties.

Looking towards future research, this thesis points towards two paths. In the field of Teju Cole studies, I hope to have made the case that he is such an avowedly intermedial artist that to approach his work in either written or visual form with an awareness of his output in only one of these fields is to be under-equipped, to have missing data. Uncertainty and its cognate terms provide a robust and productive heuristic for thinking through a body of work that seeks to sustain its audience's

attention through patient, nuanced creative practice embedded in multiple artistic and aesthetic traditions and innovative forms of intertextual, self-guided mediation.

Teju Cole will, undoubtedly, continue to produce work in various fields at a prolific rate. At the time of writing, a series of lectures on contemporary poetry that he delivered in Oxford in late-2024 is being prepared for publication in 2026. He continues to challenge the flickering immediacy of Instagram with his trialling of new work there, and will likely publish further fictional and photographic work, while continuing to test their boundaries. Cole studies will require further sustained attention to his work of the type that has already brought brilliant, enriching analysis of his move from a great many scholars. There is space for many more visual and media studies scholars to bring their skills to bear on Cole's photography. My research over the past four years has connected me to the vast network of influences behind Cole's work, and the maximalism with which I have approached it is a product of an undimmed enthusiasm for his work, but also an abiding sense of uncertainty over the possibility of an academic career that will enable me to further research Cole, or any artist. It would be unwise to assume a viable future in the university, such as it is today, but it is my fervent hope that my research may be of use to future students and researchers who have the privilege to spend time engaging carefully with Cole's work. The message of this thesis is to do so as exhaustively and immersively as possible. Describe the problem properly.

In a broader sense, I hope this thesis showcases approaches to textual analysis that borrow from practices of visual criticism, and vice versa. Slow and granular attention to detail goes against the grain of the flurried way we now encounter words and images, but the multifaceted aesthetic of uncertainty created across Cole's work has the effect of requiring the reader to re-think their ways of seeing. The inextricability of ethics from aesthetics, as Cole sees it, means that we are all involved in the project of describing the problem properly. The goal of fostering aesthetic sensitivity, of which I see this thesis as a modest part, requires literary and visual scholars to be cognisant of how we read texts and images now, and how a deceleration of visual and textual overwhelm will reveal new audiences equipped with intermedial ways of thinking who are open to guided, careful forms of reading and aesthetic appreciation that require us to embrace uncertainty.

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