

# ‘Following’ Teju Cole’s ‘Black Portraitures’

## On Zigzagging Between (Digital) Literature, Photography, Art History, Music and Much More...

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**Abstract** In this chapter, I will explore ‘black portraitures’ in Teju Cole’s writings, photos, and art history lessons, while ‘following’ his journeying – geographic, literary, photographic, digital – in both his photo essays and criticism *Known and Strange Things* (2016), *Blind Spot* (2016), in his novel *Open City* (2011) and his latest essay collection *Black Paper* (2021). I intend to study his poetics, his aesthetics and his ethical stance, particularly in relation to his re-formulation of postcolonial paradigms. Intersecting trajectories with works by Caryl Phillips (*The European Tribe*, 1987) and by Johny Pitts (*Afropean. Notes from Black Europe*, 2019) will also be considered.

**Keywords** Teju Cole. Black portraitures. New media. Postcolonial theory. Black intellectuals.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Switzerland: the Gaze. Black Portraitures in the Eyes of the Beholder. – 3 Gazing/Glancing with Teju Cole, the Photographer and Art Critic. – 4 Brussels: ‘Orientalism’. Black Portraitures by Teju Cole, the Novelist. – 5 Conclusions: Opacity.

### 1 Introduction

Teju Cole is a well-known Nigerian-American intellectual, novelist, photographer, and photography critic. In his various writings, he has elaborated a diverse spectrum of portraits of intellectuals, writers, musicians, even common people and passers-by, by which to rewrite

postcolonial paradigms. What is particularly interesting in his 'black portraits' is his stereoscopic vision of Europe and of the United States, maintaining the perspective of a cosmopolitan American citizen, which allows his lessons to resonate with all those who work in the field of Postcolonial Studies in Europe.

In this specific context I will explore portraits of black subjects in Teju Cole's writings, photos, and 'art history lessons', and I will try 'to follow' and retrace his journeying - geographic, literary, and photographic. In particular, I refer to his photo-essays in *Known and Strange Things* (2016a), *Blind Spot* (2016b), and to his novel *Open City* (2011). To close the circle, I will take into consideration his latest collection of essays *Black Paper* (2021) for its metafictional discourse on Cole's own fiction writing. I shall also avail myself of highlighting intersecting trajectories that are set forth in the works and ideas of Caryl Phillips and of 'Afropean' artist Johny Pitts, who might be considered the European counterpart of Cole, with whom he shares many a trait, not least his enthusiasm in creating a new digital citizenship. Both authors have seen their fame enhanced by 'participatory media', or 'citizen media' - such as, for instance, the cooperative twitter project of short story writing, initiated by Cole - that have boosted their celebrity and allowed wider circulation to their printed works.

The purpose of my contribution, however, rests primarily with a study of Cole's poetics, his aesthetics and his ethical stance as these emerge through postcolonial representational patterns. A further objective will be an investigation into his portraits of black fellow writers, intellectuals, musicians, and painters, as well as his self-representations, and their impact on the European mind.

I used 'to follow', in inverted commas, for Teju Cole is a fan/citizen of the new media: he made experiments with twitterature, which Mark Stein also defines as "porous textuality" and "literary translocations" (Stein 2017, 143), blogging, and all possible platforms toward sharing images and chatting with intellectuals (Concilio 2016, 227-31), friends and the audience at large. One interesting example, among many others, is the exchange between Teju Cole and Amitava Kumar "Who's got the address?", on *Guernica Magazine* (2013, n.p.). To follow Teju Cole, not on the social media ("On Instagram, those who see what you have seen are called followers. The word has an eerie sound" Cole 2016b, 206), but as a scholar means, looking for intellectual and ethical models and for new modes of citizenship.

## 2 **Switzerland: the Gaze. Black Portraits in the Eyes of the Beholder**

In 1952 Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks*, one of the milestones in postcolonial theory. The Martiniquan psychiatrist who was then living and working in France, elaborated his diagnosis of a society affected by racism, by iconically describing 'a type of gaze' that produced the alienation of the Other. In a well-known passage of his clinical study, he observed the reaction of a child at the sight of a black man:

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. [...] 'Look! A Negro!' It was a passing sting. I attempted a smile. 'Look! A Negro!' Absolutely. I was beginning to enjoy myself. 'Look! A Negro!' The circle was gradually getting smaller. I was really enjoying myself. 'Maman, look, a Negro; I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. (Fanon [1952] 1967, En. transl., 112)

In this passage, Frantz Fanon used the personal pronouns "we" and "I". He was inquiring into a very specific and particular case in which he was personally involved, as a Caribbean citizen and intellectual, in France. That "I", both autobiographical and fictional, is the focus of the gaze under scrutiny here.

This same iconic urban scene was transcribed into a London novel by the Trinidadian novelist Sam Selvon just a few years later, in 1956, in the novel *The Lonely Londoners*:

[...] under the big clock in Piccadilly Tube Station. [...]. 'Mummy, look at that black man!' A little child, holding on to the mother hand, look up at Sir Galahad. 'You mustn't say that, dear!' The mother chide the child. But Galahad skin like rubber at this stage, he bend down and pat the child cheek, and the child cower and shrink and begin to cry. 'What a sweet child!' Galahad say, putting on the old English accent, 'What's your name?' (Selvon 2006, 76)

In the novel, the episode is narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator, yet, when the narrator switches to free indirect speech, he reports how Galahad, one of the protagonists, also uses the first-person plural pronoun "we", including himself in this whites-vs-blacks type of gaze.

This same paradigm of 'the gaze' has been employed by Teju Cole in more recent years with a different purpose and a new lesson to

teach. Cole's collection of essays, *Known and Strange Things* (2016), starts with a piece of prose entitled *Black Body* (Cole 2016a, 3-16). This essay introduces a 'we' which includes the narrator. Teju Cole himself tells of his journey to Switzerland. More precisely, he visited the village of Leuk on "August 2, 2014: it was James Baldwin's birthday", he specifies (3). Indeed, Teju Cole is stepping in Baldwin's steps. Baldwin went to Leukerbad in 1951. Those were the years when Frantz Fanon was theorizing 'the otherness' of the black man in the heart of European capital cities.

As Cole narrates, Baldwin took refuge in a chalet belonging to his lover Lucien Happersberger's family. There he wrote his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Most importantly, he wrote an essay entitled *Stranger in the Village*, which appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953. As Teju Cole writes, "It recounts the experience of being black in an all-white village" (4). The pretext for this narrative was in fact, according to Cole, "to look at the American racial situation in the 1950s" (4). Re-visiting Switzerland with Baldwin's books in his bag and very much in his mind (actually, reading *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955), Teju Cole feels he is putting himself in Baldwin's shoes:

I call New York home even when not living there; and feel myself in all places, from New York City to rural Switzerland, the custodian of a black body, and have to find the language for all of what that means to me and to the people who look at me. The ancestor had briefly taken possession of the descendant. It was a moment of identification. In that Swiss village in the days that followed, that moment guided me. (5)

Being there, in Switzerland, sixty years later, allows Teju Cole the possibility to revise not only Baldwin's own experience, but also Fanon's theories: "From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came", Baldwin wrote (5). But the village has changed considerably since his visit, more than sixty years before. Cole writes:

They've seen blacks now; I wasn't a remarkable sight. There were a few glances at the hotel when I was checking in, and in the fine restaurant just up the road; there are always glances. There are glances in Zürich, where I spent the summer, and there are glances in New York City, which has been my home for fourteen years. There are glances all over Europe and in India. And everywhere I go outside Africa. The test is how long the glances last, whether they become stares, with what intent they occur, whether they contain any degree of hostility or mockery, and to what extent connections, money, or mode of dress shield me in these situations. To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at

especially. (The children shout *Neger! Neger!* as I walk along the streets). Leukerbad has changed, but in which way? (6)

Teju Cole describes people taking notice of his presence in terms of 'glances'. A much more unobtrusive form of gaze. He clearly distinguishes between 'glances' and 'stares', also noticing how racial attitudes have rather left room to classist assessments of tourists. If Baldwin's experience confirmed Fanon's perception and description, back in the 1950s, as synthesized in the sentence quoted by Cole and reproduced above, Teju Cole's experience is quite different nowadays. In the new millennium, children will be indoors playing games with new gadgets and, thanks to the new media, they are connected with the wide world. This shows how the new media give the younger generations a new global citizenship. Cole acknowledges that

Maybe some xenophobia, or racism is part of their lives; but part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake, and Meek Mill, the music I hear pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday Night. (6)

Thus, Teju Cole becomes conscious of a double time scale: the 1950s when Baldwin was an exception in Switzerland bringing along Jazz and Blues music in order to maintain a connection with the Harlem world where he came from, and the 2010s, when the world has become globalized and everything has changed:

At dinner, at a pizzeria, a table of British tourists stared at me. But the waitress was part black, and at the hotel one of the staff members at the spa was an older black man. "People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them", Baldwin wrote. [...] And perhaps more interesting than my not being the only black person in the village is the plain fact that many of the people I saw were also foreigners. This was the biggest change of all. (7)

That small village in the Alps was a provincial and parochial place when Baldwin set foot in it as first black man ever visiting. Nowadays, it is a well-known thermal tourist station, full of people coming from all over the world. Moreover, something else has changed, as far as culture is concerned. When Baldwin referred to the Swiss villagers, he claimed they were - more or less consciously - related to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Racine, in a way he was not, for if he looked back at his own past, he saw himself "in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive" (9). Cole disagrees and distances himself from this vision. Cole cannot believe Baldwin was serious when he ranked the Blues below Bach and Beethoven, although Cole is ready to admit that "there was a certain narrowness in received ideas of black culture in the 1950s" (9).

Nowadays, "there has [not only] been enough black cultural achievement from which to compile an all-star team" (9), but African history, too, has become more available than it was in 1953, also thanks to scholarly works. "We know better now", declares Cole. And he adds:

There's no world in which I would surrender the intimidating beauty of Yoruba-language poetry, for, say, Shakespeare's sonnets, or one in which I'd prefer chamber orchestras playing baroque music to the koras of Mali. I'm happy to own all of it. This carefree confidence is, in part, the gift of time. [...] This is where I part ways with Baldwin. I disagree not with his particular sorrow but with the self-abnegation that pinned him to it. Bach, so profoundly human, is my heritage. I am not an interloper when I look at a Rembrandt portrait. I care for them more than some white people do, just as some white people care more for African art than I do. I can oppose white supremacy and still rejoice in Gothic architecture. (10)

Moreover, while proclaiming himself American, he is also ready to share undimmed fury against any form of racism. Cole is not blind to white supremacism in the United States, to black bodies being prejudged, to the claims of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. He concludes his essay on bitter notes:

This fantasy of the disposability of black life is a constant in American history. It takes a while to understand that this disposability continues. [...] American racism has many moving parts, and has had enough centuries in which to evolve an impressive camouflage. [...] like misogyny, it is atmospheric. You don't see it at first. But understanding comes. [...] 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. [...] we can't even get started on the question of reparations. Baldwin wrote "Stranger in the Village" more than sixty years ago. Now what? (16)

In spite of these closing remarks, which go back - full circle - to Baldwin's attitude in the face of racism both in Europe and in America, Teju Cole has a new and different lesson to teach us, European scholars, intellectuals, educators and teachers in Postcolonial Studies. Teju Cole, like Baldwin before him, stepped into the heart of Europe to look back at the United States, as if through an inverted telescope - the lens of Fanon's theories - thus observing racist practices from a different, more detached point of view. In the heart of Europe, Eurocentrism seems to have left room for a more open and inclusive society, where the Fanonian 'gaze' has been replaced by less insist-

ent 'glances'; where a black man claims affiliation to both Bach and Coltrane, as a common global cultural background and feels at home in Alpine Switzerland.

In his novel, *Open City*, Cole stresses once again his protagonist's hybrid affiliation to both black and white culture:

Almost everyone, as almost always at such concerts, was white. It is something I can't help noticing: I notice it each time, and try to see past it. [...] Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question. (Cole 2011, 252)

This means that the whole world can change. Baldwin is the *trait-d'union* among three artists, who create a new European or 'Afropean' intergenerational genealogy: Cole, Pitts and Phillips. Johny Pitts explicitly declares his affiliation with Caryl Phillips and Linton Kwesi Johnson:

My generation does have it easier because of the boundaries broken down by the work of Caryl and Linton, but there is a certain disjuncture between all those writers who came of age and collaborated in the 1980s and young black Britons today. It's as though all that great knowledge work was done and then not passed down as coherently as it might have been to the next generation. (Pitts 2017, 43)

Caryl Phillips, a well-known Caribbean-British novelist, dramatist and academic, born in 1958 and now living in the United States, met Baldwin ("Dinner at Jimmy's" 1987, 39-44). He also made a documentary on the artist (Phillips 2022, n.p.), and then befriended him towards the end of Baldwin's career:

I had been sitting having lunch in a restaurant in St. Paul de Vence with the American writer, James Baldwin. *La Colombe d'Or* is the sort of place where people spend more time looking at each other than at the menu. Baldwin being a local resident and possessing a very distinctive face, was clearly an object of some attention. (Phillips 1987, 19-20)

Apparently, Richard Wright's and James Baldwin's way of "defamiliarizing Europe" is similar to what Caryl Phillips does in his travelogue, *The European Tribe* (1987), which is also the inspiring source of Pitt's *Afropean. Notes from Black Europe* (2019).

Consequently, it would be possible to compare Cole's fictional journey in the heart of Europe to Johny Pitts's own real journey, *Afro-*

pean, a journey as a backpacker the author made in search of Black Europe. Pitts' photographic and literary journeying might be interpreted as the latest incursion into the debate on 'Afropolitanism' (Concilio 2018, 35-6), to use a neologism coined by Taiye Selasi in her essay *Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)*, published in 2005, and by Achille Mbembe in his essay *Afropolitanism*, published in 2007. Johny Pitts alludes to unhyphenated identity in this context (Pitts 2018, 1), but also uses the term Afropean to indicate a sociological, if not anthropological survey of the state of the art, so to speak, of Black Europe. Thus, his project has a wide scope, which mirrors his far and wide travelling all across the continent.

In my opinion Cole's project is however totally different from Pitts'. The latter's purpose *a priori* is to accomplish a socio-cultural mapping of multicultural Europe following the example of Caryl Phillips, whom he first met in Belgium (Pitts 2017, 37). Teju Cole, on the other hand, draws from his casual photographs taken around the world as well as from his incursions in Europe to *a posteriori* re-elaborate and renovate specific postcolonial paradigms, such as that of the Fanonian 'gaze'. What I mean is, more precisely, that Cole consciously reformulates and updates Fanon's lesson, while as a rule he is never afraid of using the term postcolonial, thus circumscribing his own position among postcolonial scholars. A final consideration brings me to claim that both Teju Cole's lessons in postcolonial theory and Johny Pitts' mapping of Black Europe have acquired strength, popularity and wider circulation also thanks to these two authors being celebrities of the new media, or 'citizen media' and thanks to the fact that they are themselves 'digital citizens' - so to speak, as stated by Johny Pitts: "I'm working towards a multiculturalism 2.0" (2019, n.p.).

### 3 Gazing/Glancing with Teju Cole, the Photographer and Art Critic

In keeping with the relevance of 'the gaze' in Cole's poetics, it is worth noting that to look at, to gaze, to glimpse, to observe, to see, to watch are all verbs that are enormously meaningful to Teju Cole. He writes: "To look is to see only a fraction of what one is looking at. Even in the most vigilant eye, there is a blind spot. What is missing?" (Cole 2016, 325). As a photographer and an art critic, Teju Cole is lucidly aware of the multiple implications the gaze involves. His portraits are not neutral, they are intertwined with art history, literature, musical traditions. This technique and wider cultural scope also characterize Pitts' writings and his autobiographical journey and reportage, only, he most frequently refers to pop music and street art forms, such as the (banished) graffiti by Fista in his hometown, Sheffield (Pitts 2019, 24-5).



As an interlude and after mentioning the literary portrait of Baldwin, I would quote one more among Teju Cole's portraits of black subjects, this time a photo-poetic one, from the collection *Blind Spot*, entitled *Brazzaville, February 2013*. The photograph focusses on a black child hanging onto the red railings of a boat, holding his gloved hands on it. The photo is framed as if from the outside, from the side of the turbulent waters of the River Congo. The boy wears a white shirt and black working gloves. A text accompanies the image as a sort of long narrative caption. Cole's travel journal is indeed a combination of 'textimages', not differently from what Mitchell describes as photo essays (Mitchell 1986; 1994). Cole writes:

I am intrigued by the continuity of places, by the singing line that connects them all. This singing line I have responded to in this book in the form of a lyric essay that combines photography and text. (Cole 2016b, 324)

In the caption Cole alludes to the boy as a Christ-like figure, holding onto a cross and wearing a white shroud, as an angel and then as Saint Christopher transporting Christ to the other bank. "The child moves among metaphors", he writes, evidently thinking of religious iconography in art history. But the instant the photo is taken, the child has lowered his head and his eyes disappear. The child has a face but not a gaze (22). At a later stage, at the end of the collection, Cole reproduces the same chapter and image, but with a different narrative/caption: a new scan of the photograph reveals different colours and the eyes of the boy reappear. "Darkness is not empty", notices Cole, it is latent information (322). This time, the boy with his large eyes is compared to a sculpted Mangaaka, a juridical, magical, and spiritual sentinel, which/who was believed to protect Congolese inland villages from white invaders and cultural capitulation, with its white metallic eyes and iron irises. Here, the boy has a double vision: he looks outward, a sentinel on the lookout, but he is also looking inside himself (322).

On this second occasion, Teju Cole leaves aside Judeo-Christian iconology, to turn to specific African iconology and art, referring to colonial times in Congo, when villages were surrendering to European influences. In an effort to react to this crisis of civilization, the Mangaaka were made bigger and more statuesque. Thus, it is clear that, in order to understand Cole's 'portraits', one must 'follow' Teju Cole - literally, step by step, - zig-zagging, as if walking over stepping stones, through his photographs, captions, narratives, aesthetic, poetical, and ethical visions. Or, as he says "photography, literature, music, travel, politics" (Cole 2016a, xiv), as a mode of "working in a new genre - a genre I was developing myself - the rhythm of text and image" (Paulson 2022, n.p.). Not differently, Siri Hustvedt writes

about her own experience in reading Teju Cole: "I follow a meandering, not a straight path, one that branches into many paths, paths that then cross and recross over the course of my journey through the book" (Hustvedt 2016b, xi).

#### **4 Brussels: 'Orientalism'. Black Portraits by Teju Cole, the Novelist**

In his novel *Open City* (2011), Teju Cole's narrator is a young black man, Julius, of half Nigerian, half German origins, who lives and works in New York as a psychiatrist. The temptation to see in this choice an homage to Frantz Fanon is quite irresistible. Thus, one of the elements which help the reader to avoid identifying the narrator with the author is that Julius is a modern *flâneur*, whose never-ending walks across New York city streets and parks unveil the multifarious strata and most secret history of the North-American metropolis. Since the novel is an homage to the city of New York, the flight of the protagonist to Brussels, to the heart of Europe, might strike readers as surprising. It must be said, however, that Teju Cole has travelled often to Germany, Belgium and Austria for his scholarly studies as art historian (Cole 2016b, 228), and in this sense Julius might function as a sort of alter ego, although, as suggested, the identification should not be overrated. Why Brussels, then? This is also the question a fellow passenger asks the protagonist on the plane from New York to Brussels (Cole 2011, 93). To this, Julius answers he wants to look for his old grandmother, his Oma, whose traces he had lost.

As Teju Cole followed the steps of James Baldwin to a small village in Switzerland, in the same way, Julius somehow follows the steps of Joseph Conrad to explore and put to the test another landmark of postcolonial history. In Brussels, Julius visits the Parc du Cinquantenaire in a passage that deserves being quoted:

It was covered in fog, but this made the scale of the monuments seem even bigger. The already gigantic arcades shot up vertiginously and lost their heads in faint white veils [...] The parc, built by a heartless king, was also of inhuman scale. [...] Under the arcade was a bronze plaque displaying in relief the portraits of the first five Belgian kings: Leopold I, Leopold II, Albert I, Leopold III, and Baudouin, and beneath it an inscription that read: HOMMAGE A LA DYNASTIE LA BELGIQUE ET LE CONGO, RECONNAISSANTS, MDCCCXXXI. (Cole 2011, 100)

The monuments here described celebrate Belgian colonial history with colossal monumentality, to the point that tourists visiting the place look dwarfed by the architectural structure of the white arches

that stand majestically in the park. They were built in 1880 by Leopold II to celebrate Belgian independence. Ironically enough, Leopold II was responsible for the colonization of Congo. And this was exactly the matter in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899):

I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire, and make no end of coin by trade". (Conrad [1899] 2007, 11)

Conrad knew all that first hand, for he travelled along the river Congo in a boat called *Roi des Belges* in 1890. About Conrad's novel Teju Cole writes in *Natives on the Boat* (2016a, 17-24):

*Heart of Darkness* was written when rapacious extraction of African resources by European adventure was gospel truth - as it still is. The book helped create the questions that occupy us till this day. What does it mean to write about others? More pressingly, who are the articulate "we"? In *Heart of Darkness*, the natives - the niggers, as they are called in the book, the word falling each time like a lance - speak only twice, once to express enthusiasm for cannibalism, then later, to bring the barely articulate report "Mistah Kurtz, he dead". Otherwise, these niggers, these savages, are little more than shadows and violence, either pressed into dumb service on the boat, or launching dumb, grieved, uncomprehending, and deadly attacks on it from the shore. Not only is this primitive, subhuman Africa incoherent to any African, it is incoherent to any right-thinking non-African, too. A hundred years ago, it was taken as the commonplace truth; it wasn't outside the mainstream of European opinions about Africans. But we have all moved on. Those things are in the past. Are they not? (21)

In this comment, Teju Cole nonchalantly rephrases Chinua Achebe's famous critical evaluation of Conrad's work. The pretext is a visit to Vidia Naipaul in a panoramic room in New York City somehow doubled by a boat-like rooftop location in London. It is undoubtedly thanks to Achebe, and to Cole now, but also to Naipaul, and to post-colonial writers and intellectuals more in general, if we have 'moved on'. The same location in London hosted - among others - both Caryl Phillips and Johny Pitts' project *A Bend in the River*,<sup>1</sup> both 'em-

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1 <http://abendintheriver.artangel.org.uk/>.

barked', so to speak, in the attempt to look at a variety of multicultural London views, through genealogies of Black writers, from V.S. Naipaul to Sam Selvon, bridging the two through images of the city in T.S. Eliot's lines in *The Waste Land*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Hauthal 2019, 3-4).

And yet, Achebe's lesson is worth revisiting, as ironically hinted at in the rhetorical question asked in the passage quoted above, and Cole's lesson resonates from New York, to London, to Brussels.

Conrad made Marlow travel from Britain to the heart of colonial Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Brussels was one of the colonial capitals of the time, a city pivoting around trade, money and an overseas empire. Teju Cole makes Julius, a German-Nigerian New Yorker, travel from New York City to the same European capital in the new millennium. Their descriptions of the monumentality of the city slightly overlap: "a broad-headed horse stood by a carriage - I stood under the arcade", says Julius; "imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar", says Marlow (Conrad [1899] 2007, 11).

Brussels has changed since Conrad's time. From being the centre of an empire in Africa, it has now become the centre of the European Union's main institutions. It has maintained its supremacy and its character as a financial, political and commercial centre:

It is easy to have the wrong idea about Brussels. One thinks of it as a technocrats' city, and because it was so central to the formation of the European Union, the assumption is that it is a new city, built, or at least expanded, expressly for that purpose. Brussels is old - a peculiar European oldness, which is manifested in stone. (Cole 2011, 97)

It is exactly that oldness that allows for the *trait-d'union* between Marlow and Julius, the colonial and the postcolonial subject. On the plane which brought Julius there, an elderly woman told him that "Brussels is colour blind in a way the U.S. is not" (89). This is the lesson Teju Cole wants us and Julius to put to the test. Like Switzerland, Belgium too has changed. It has become more hospitable and it has evolved into a postcolonial capital:

now it is ninety-five per cent Walloon and other French speakers, one per cent Flemish, and four percent Arab and African. (96)

There were many people, many more than I had seen in other European cities, who gave the impression of having just arrived from a sun-suffused elsewhere. [...] Islam, in its conservative form, was on constant view, though it was not clear to me why this should be so: Belgium had not had a strong colonial relationship with any

country in North Africa. But this was the European reality now, in which borders were flexible. There was a palpable psychological pressure in the city. (98)

The last remark in this passage brings back the Fanonian sensitivity to psychological tensions in multi-ethnic societies. Julius is well-aware that the right wing is encouraging racist beliefs that tend to target Arabs and Muslims for petty violence in the city: a fact that, seemingly contradicts the assumption about its colour-blindness. But it is evident that things change rapidly in this big city, according to the moment, and that political parties swing with the currents and the climate of the specific moment.

Most interestingly, Julius meets a student in an Internet Café and starts with him an engaging conversation on 'orientalism'. Farouq is the name of the student, he comes from Tétouan, in Morocco. While working as a cashier, he is intent on reading a novel in English. In order to start a conversation, Julius says he has just finished a novel by Tahar Ben Jelloun. Julius' reference to Ben Jelloun is more a provocation than a convinced engagement in anti-racist or anti-orientalist discourses. Julius' disengagement is a quality that Mark Stein, among others, has pointed out: "Julius typically does not engage personally, but rather in an abstract, impersonal way" (Stein 2017, 148).

Farouq knows the writer, acknowledges Ben Jelloun has a reputation, but soon slips into criticizing him for offering the western audience an orientalist and exoticized version of Morocco, while also representing the 'poeticity' of the exiled intellectual abroad (Cole 2011, 104). Julius claims he liked the novel *Corruption* by Ben Jelloun, but Farouq insists that there are other writers, less known and writing in the local languages, who represent the reality of the country better; for instance, and as an alternative, he mentions Mohamed Choukri's novel *For Bread Alone*. However, the book is known as a controversial translation by Paul Bowles: not from the original Arabic, but from oral conversations between the authors partly in French and in English.

On his part, Farouq is reading an essay on Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, and claims he admires Edward Said, the Palestinian scholar, author, among other things, of the well-known post-colonial milestone *Orientalism*. Thus, in this climactic central passage in the novel, in Brussels - of all places - Fanon meets Said, so to speak, via Ben Jelloun and Benjamin, all of them being intellectual exiles. Thus, a Nigerian and a Moroccan discuss postcolonial issues - 'the victimized Other' - in the very place where Conrad's Marlow symbolically embarked on his colonial exploration of the river Congo. Farouq also admires Malcolm X, from a philosophical point of view, for he was more radical than Martin Luther King.

When alone, Julius the psychiatrist, in the shoes of Fanon, so to speak, analyses the situation:

What Farouq got on the trams wasn't a quick suspicious glance. It was a simmering barely contained fear. The classic anti-immigrant view, which saw them as enemies competing for scarce resources, was converging with a renewed fear of Islam. [...] It occurred to me, too, that I was in a situation not so radically different from Farouq's. (Cole 2011, 106)

Julius, with his analytical mind, examines the social and political situation in Brussels, which is "shared the world over", he claims. Cheap violence and xenophobia in the name of a monolithic identity are like a huge wave advancing over Europe. Julius's analysis of the existing social tension towards the Islamic community proves correct and Teju Cole sounds predictive, too, for Brussels was the theatre of a terrorist attack on March 22, 2016. By then, the Islamic population accounted for 25.5% in Brussels, against 12% of London Muslims, for instance.

Farouq has a friend named Khalil whom he wants to introduce to Julius. So, the three of them meet and go to a sort of pub on a Saturday night. Before that encounter, Julius immerses himself in the reading of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, by now a classic and a cult of photographic semiotic theory. They discuss political philosophy and "portrayals" (Cole 2011, 119):

The American blacks [...] They are victims of the same portrayals as we are, Farouq said. Khalil agreed with him. The same portrayal, I said, but that's how power is, the one who has the power controls the portrayal. They nodded. (Cole 2022, 119)

This analysis of 'the portrayal' and of who has the power to portray whom, reminds one of Salman Rushdie's famous passage in *Satanic Verses* claiming that "They have the power of description", by which he meant that the British, or the West, the media and their propaganda have the power to turn the immigrants into monsters, to dehumanize them. The conversation with Julius then slips to Al Qaeda and the Twin Towers' attack, which the two Arab men do not openly condemn, while they express their concern about the Palestinian situation. The real question of our times, they say.

They then discuss Sharia, religion, discrimination of Muslims in the United States; finally, Farouq reveals that his dream was to go to Europe to study and in Brussels he wanted to pursue an MA in "critical theory": "I wanted to be the next Edward Said!" and therefore he studied comparative literature in order to gain access to societal critique, then wrote a thesis on Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. The thesis was rejected on the basis of plagiarism. Yet, Farouq is convinced that the reason for that rejection was racism in the wake of 9/11 events. The committee had met on September 20, 2001 and had possibly been influenced by "everything happening in the head-

lines" (Cole 2011, 128). Thus, the dream of completing his PhD, nurtured by political philosophy and critical theory, vanished when he was 25, in Europe. Farouq resorted to his second choice, a degree in Translation Studies at the University of Liège - indeed, one of the European institutions with a qualified reputation in postcolonial and Caribbean studies.

With this type of 'portraiture', Teju Cole possibly meant to warn us Europeans about a smouldering new generation of 'hungry young men', - those from the Parisian *banlieues*, as well as those from Brussels peripheries - all disillusioned by Europe and its promises ("Europe was a dream. Not just a dream, it was the dream: it represented the freedom of thought", Cole 2011, 122). Europe, at the very heart of its constitution and institution, is not able - or no longer able - to confirm its asset of being colour blind in a way North America is not.

The homage to Edward Said becomes clearer in Teju Cole's *Black Paper* (2021) where he writes a chapter dedicated to Said and to Beethoven, in a metanarrative comment on his fiction writing in *Open City: "A Quartet for Edward Said"* (2021, 60-74). When Julius/Fanon met Farouq/Said, Teju Cole reflects:

I think back to where my mind was when I wrote this passage. "I wanted to be the next Edward Said!" Where had that come from? I hadn't given the line to my difficult and occasionally unlikeable narrator. I had given it to Farouq, a second character, a young man with whom I felt more sympathetic. So, was it that I wanted to be the next Edward Said myself? [...] Writing fiction often contains an element of self-hypnosis, of flying in the dark. [...] What I wanted to set down was the idea that Edward Said - what he wrote and who he was - was a kind of navigational help, [...]. We were not supposed to become him [...]. The idea was to be in communication with his intuitions, and through them find our own way through the night. (70-1)

Johny Pitts, too, visits the *banlieues* in the context of a systematic and even more predictable tour of Europe's Black quarters, with François Maspéro's *Roissy Express* ready at hand

in which the writer, along with photographer Anaïk Frantz, journeyed into the no-man's-land of Paris's suburbs and eloquently depicted the tensions bubbling in the *banlieues*, prophesying that the margins of French society were about to explode. (Pitts 2017, 65)

Pitts, too, quotes Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Aimé Césaire and postcolonial scholars in a constant erudite dialogue between the academic intellectuals of the past and the gaze from the street of his own generation of youths. Yet, Cole uses casual snapshots, tak-

en all over the world in various countries as a pre-text for what I defined his up-dated postcolonial lessons. Whereas Pitt displays a well-planned research project meant to put to the fore the Black presence and the Black culture of Europe, with sparse black and white photos to document it.

More importantly, Pitts visits Brussels as Teju Cole had done, reminiscent of the mass murder of Congolese under the reign of King Leopold II. In Brussels Johnny Pitts is the victim of two Moroccan pickpockets, not differently from Cole's protagonist, Julius, who falls victim to two youngsters who beat him savagely. Pitts visits a neighbourhood in Brussels called Matongé, where he goes to a concert by Marie Daulne, a Congolese-Belgian vocalist who blends Pygmy melodies into a wider international musical tradition:

Her *raison d'être* was to sing her culture into existence by working within African traditions that had almost been lost to colonialism, and to translate and transmit them in tandem with her adoptive European culture, refusing to allow hegemony to creep in. (Pitts 2019, 95)

The disco-club is also a mix of people, a true 'Afropea'. Similarly, the Art Gallery he visits – *Galerie Lumières d'Afriques* – hosts the works of Mufuki Mukuna, a Belgian artist of African descent who "was trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and sees his art as Belgian in style but personal in content" (88). Finally, the African Restaurant *Soleil d'Afrique* also shows people of various ethnicities enjoying their dinner. This, too, is a true and realized 'Afropea' (101). A place of multiple allegiances, or, as Mark Stein writes, an example of "translocation and porosity" (Stein 2017, 148), this is also a place for a new kind of citizenship.

## 5 Conclusions: Opacity

When Teju Cole discusses photography and the civil rights movement in *A True Picture of Black Skin* (Cole 2016a, 144-51), he once again shows how 'portraits' tell both visible and invisible stories.

One such image left me short of breath the first time I saw it. It's of a young woman whose face is at once relaxed and intense. She is apparently in bright sunshine, but both her face and the rest of the picture give off a feeling of modulated darkness; we can see her beautiful features, but they are underlit somehow. (144)

In this essay Teju Cole describes a photograph by Roy DeCarava, entitled *Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington D.C., 1963*. Soon,



his essay turns into a lesson on the history of photography, including its material history. With admiration, Cole defines DeCarava as "one of the most intriguing and poetic of American photographers" (145). Cole admires both the photographer's choice of subjects and his technique:

DeCarava took photographs of white people tenderly but seldom. Black life was his greater love and steadier commitment. With his camera he tried to think through the peculiar challenge of shooting black subjects at a time when appearance, in both senses (the way black people looked and the very presence of black people), was under question. (145-6)

The photograph under scrutiny here is technically a masterpiece, according to Teju Cole, although he never uses hyperbolic statements and manages to persuade and convince by force of argumentation. Teju Cole highlights how difficult it was to take pictures of black people when films' standards were tested and calibrated on white skin. Even the best brands, such as Kodak, for instance, failed in terms of film quality and inclusiveness, advertising for instance Shirley cards, "so named after the white model who was featured on them and whose whiteness was marked on the cards as normal" (146).

DeCarava worked through these limitations:

the chiaroscuro effects came from technical choices: a combination of exposure manipulation, darkroom virtuosity, and occasionally printing on soft paper".

According to Cole, DeCarava pushed the white towards the grey, "specifically as a photographer of black skin" (147). He never tried to brighten blackness, he rather managed to darken it further. "What is dark is neither blank nor empty" (147), writes Cole to explain DeCarava's achievements but also echoing the description of the picture he took at Brazzaville, on the River Congo, when he defined the invisible gaze of the black child as not empty, but latent.

DeCarava reminds Teju Cole of the anti-colonial Martiniquan-French philosopher Édouard Glissant. In particular, Cole here refers to the concept of opacity: "a right to not have to be understood on others' terms". Glissant's idea of defending

the opacity, obscurity and inscrutability of Caribbean blacks and other marginalized peoples holds true for Carava, too. (148)

"Keeping faith with the power of shadows" (149) or "playing in the dark" (147), to quote Tony Morrison, is an uncompromising way to portray black subjects, within a postcolonial framework of referenc-

es, all of which Teju Cole purposefully embeds in his writings. Fanon, Said, Glissant are not dated references, but rather scholars whose teachings Cole revives and revises, flashing them in front of our eyes as lighthouses, while projecting the history of photography and the history of black civil rights movements from the origins to nowadays' *Black Lives Matter*.

Cole's portraits are eye-openers to us in Europe: a mirror for our unmotivated fears, prejudices, or blindness – "We, all of us, are prone to these debilitating forms of blindness" (Hustvedt 2016b, x; xv) – but told from the point of view of a scholar whose vision as a photographer, creative writer, intellectual and critic has been possibly sharpened by a visual defect, a temporary 'blind spot' (Cole 2016b, 80; 2011, 239), which gives us, too, a different angle of vision from where to observe our reality: not the invisible, that is the symbolic, the allusive, or elusive, but the visible, that is blackness itself. Thus, in the end, Cole's literary and critical works evolve, revolve, and involve his aesthetic lessons. Cole concludes his essay with the following words:

It is as if the world, in its careless way, had been saying, 'You people are simply too dark,' and these artists, intent on obliterating this absurd way of thinking, had quietly responded, 'But you have no idea how dark we yet may be, nor what that darkness may contain.' (Cole 2016a, 115)

Teju Cole always shows us a third way: in a culture that tends to value black people for their abilities to jump, dance or otherwise entertain, or devalue them as disposable lives, there are always images and words that show in the first place not what is invisible, but what is visible, or, simply, that black lives and black bodies matter.

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