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ENGL 012- Literary Cities

Presentation Outline

*Open City* by Teju Cole

Part I, Death is a perfection of the eye

**Teju Cole**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8Qf0Iohtos>

2:08- Where did *Open City* come from?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7cIBhKV4Wg>

* Writer, art historian, photographer
* Born in the US in 1975 to Nigerian parents, raised in Nigeria

**Narrative Structure**

* Julius narrates the novel, injecting his person opinions/reflections on the places and people he meets. He is also a psychiatrist – how does this affect his interpretations?
* Book has an intimate, intellectual quality reminiscent of *Humboldt’s Gift/Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* that is also vaguely sociopolitical
* In what ways is the narrative structure a commentary on the condition of modern life/human interactions in the city?
* “We have for too long been taught that the sight of a man speaking to himself is a sign of eccentricity or madness; we are no longer at all habituated to our own voices, except in conversation or from within the safety of a shouting crowd” (5)
* “I was one of those people, the overinterpreters. This was part of my suspicion that there was a mood in the society that pushed people more toward snap judgments and unexamined opinions, an unscientific mood…” (28)
* “I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself” (70)
* How accurate are his portrayals of others and himself?
  + We are led to believe he is deeply empathetic and caring in part because his narration bleeds in/out of the stories others tell him
  + But he is estranged from his mother- why?

**The City as a character**

* Julius dedicates his walks to observing the city because he is interested in capturing its character
* “Each neighborhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight” (7)
* The people in the city are often portrayed as a unitary mass
* “The sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange…all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified” (7)
* Hostility & solitude in the North East winter
* “I was touched not only at the passage of these fixtures in my mental landscape but also at the swiftness and dispassion with which the market swallowed even the most resilient enterprises” (19)

**Solitude, insufficiency of human relationships, “false intimacy”**

* Novel frequently features similar theme of city/modern life- inability to connect with the lives happening around oneself despite sharing intimate space
* Seth/Carla are Julius’ neighbors but Julius isn’t aware Carla is dead
  + “That was the worst of it. I had noticed neither her absence nor the change… in his spirit. It was not possible, even then, to go knock on his door and embrace him, or to speak with him at length. It would have been **false intimacy**” (21)
* “Looking out across a river on a day of heavy rain… she couldn’t be sure whether the activity on the opposite bank had anything to do with her, or whether, in fact there was any activity there at all” (27)
* “The doors closed behind me and, this assortment of inwardly focused city types still swirling in my mind, I found myself all alone on the platform” (45)
* Gaps between lovers, members of same race, generations etc.

**Nature of Diversity in America/New York City, Race**

* Incredibly different kinds of people from all parts of the world
* Yet walking through the city reveals that the people are heavily segregated among different segments of the cities. Each borough has its own style of dress/culture/social codes
  + “”In the Harlem night, there were no whites” (18)
  + Page 45
  + The Welcomers group, detention center (63)
  + Brussels calling log – page 112
  + How well integrated is NYC/America really? Is the segregation tribal/familial or is it a physical manifestation of marginalization?
* “Convention of the good white man in Africa. Africa was always waiting, a substrate for the white man’s will, a backdrop for his activities” (29)
* Stereotypes/profiling & aggression: “Are you a gangster mister? Are you a gangster? They both flashed gang signs, or their idea of gang signs” (32)
* Race and over-familiarity… Is race enough to create true brotherhood/human bonds with others?
  + “Hey I’m African just like you, why you do this? …I wasn’t sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me” (40)
  + page 53- Kenneth
  + page 64- supposed family between countries
* In what ways does Julius himself embody the racial character and tensions of America?
  + Consider: Julius himself is mixed race, physically characterizing the racial conflict taking place in America/New York City in navigating the otherness that occurs in multicultural spaces

**Time as a continuum, blending of Past/Present**

* In relationship to race/cultural heritage: “It’s a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past” (27).
* “The commuters with me marched along…I felt conspicuous, the only person among the crowd who stopped to look out from the overpass at the site. Everyone else went straight ahead, and nothing separated them, nothing separated us, from the people who had worked directly across the street on the day of disaster” (58)
* “Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories” (59)
* International backgrounds figure prominently… the characters are always returning to their homeland/people from the homeland emotionally/physically
  + Julius discusses the Yoruba/ Nigerian myths and customs frequently
  + Saidu from the detention center retells coming to America (up to 70)
  + Haitian bootblack (71)
  + “Years later, long after we became estranged, I tried to image the details of that life. It was an entire vanished world of people, experiences, sensations, desires, a world that , in some odd way, I was the unaware continuation of.”
  + Annette Maillotte (90)
* “That afternoon, during which I flitted in and out of myself, when time became elastic and voices cut out of the past into the present, the heart of the city was gripped by what seemed to be a commotion from an earlier time” (74)
* What do you make of the meandering/shifting time in the novel? How does it relate politically to the history of the spaces it discusses? How does it relate to the alienation the characters feel from each other?

**Role of Art, unveiling blindness**

* Art takes place in privacy, away from the public space & allows individuals to experience a deeper connection to themselves/others
* “I liked the murmur of the announcers…it wasn’t at all difficult to draw the comparison between myself, in my sparse apartment, and the radio host in his or her booth, during what must have been the middle of the night somewhere in Europe” (5)
* “It simply wasn’t possible to enter the music fully, not in that public place” (17)
* “Young men in hooded sweatshirts, the denizens of an informal economy, passed messages and small nylon-wrapped packages to each other, enacting a *choreography* opaque to all but themselves” (18)
* Internet radio, international music
* “As I contemplated the silent world before me, I thought of the many romantic ideas attached to blindness. Ideas of unusual sensitivity and genius were evoked by the names of Milton…” (37)
  + poet on persecution 43, art illuminates on our current times
* *Camera Lucida* (Barthes)
  + “In a deeply personal discussion of the lasting emotional effect of certain photographs, Barthes considers photography as asymbolic, irreducible to the codes of language or culture, acting on the body as much as on the mind. The book develops the twin concepts of *studium* and *punctum*: *studio* denoting the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, *punctum* denoting the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it.” (Wikipedia)
  + In what ways does this novel attempt to capture New York City in the style of Barthes’ photography?

**Politics of immigration, racial discrimination**

* Julius opens the novel discussing his fascination with migrating birds (natural immigration)
  + “I doubted in some part of myself whether these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies and tireless little hearts, really did exist. So amazed was I by them that I couldn’t trust my memory when they weren’t there” (4)
* Background stories of characters often feature turmoil of war
  + Annette Maillotte (90)
  + Saidu (up to 70)
  + Is America truly a sanctuary for the immigrant?
* Brussels, racial tension
  + “Of course, it’s not that way anymore, she went on, now it is ninety-five percent Walloon and other French speakers, one percent Flemish, and four percent Arab and African” (96) + (98)
  + Reverse racism (98- 99), up to 2006
* Farouq
  + Malcolm X vs. Martin Luther King Jr. (105)
  + The victimized Other: “There’s always the expectation that the victimized Other is the one that covers the distance, that has the noble ideas” (105)
  + “What Farouq got on the trams wasn’t a quick suspicious glance. It was a simmering, barely contained fear” (106)
  + “I strongly believe this, that people can live together and I want to understand how that can happen. It happens here, on this small scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale” (113)
  + 114- melting pot, multiculturalism commentary
* “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 greater than rage itself” (107)
* Monolithic identity vs. Diversity