

The experience of homecoming in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*: An investigation into the *othered* "cosmopolitan stranger"

Ángela Suárez Rodríguez*

University of Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain

***Email:** suarezrangel@uniovi.es

Starting from the premise that the homecomer is, like the stranger, a subject in a position of displacement and dislocation, this article examines the homecoming experience narrated in Teju Cole's novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* in order to delve into the figure of the *othered* "cosmopolitan stranger". It thus brings into dialogue the debate about the nature of "Afropolitanism" and the emerging postcolonial approach to this new category of "stranger". The protagonist's experience in various sites in Lagos shows him negotiating a conflicting sense of belonging and unfamiliarity that finds expression in the recurrent spatial oppositions throughout the text. Importantly, his responses to the urban fragments explore the idea that cosmopolitan strangers are endowed with a "subjective objectivity". However, rather than offering a privileged stance that allows him to see things more clearly, his status as an *othered* cosmopolitan stranger reveals to him his lasting condition of strangeness.

Keywords: homecomer; cosmopolitan stranger; strangeness; Afropolitanism; Teju Cole; *Every Day Is for the Thief*

Teju Cole's novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* ([2007] 2014) recounts the homecoming experience after 15 years in exile of a Nigerian man from Lagos, a mixed-race psychiatry student who is currently living in New York City. This short novel was published by Cassava Republic Press in Nigeria in 2007, before being reissued in 2014 by Faber and Faber in the UK and Random House in the US. It was then named book of the year by, among others, the *New York Times* and the *The Telegraph*, and was shortlisted for the PEN/Open Book Award. Nevertheless, little critical attention has been paid to Cole's narrative, even though it was published shortly after British-Ghanaian writer Taiye Selasi

(2005) popularized the term “Afropolitanism” – a phenomenon that finds expression in Cole’s unnamed protagonist. Afropolitanism was certainly a topic of discussion at the time of the work’s reissue. However, most critical interest in Cole has been focused on *Open City* (Cole 2011), his PEN/Hemingway Award winning novel, which has many thematic and tonal similarities to *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

Like Julius in *Open City*, who wanders the streets of New York and Brussels, the protagonist of *Every Day* moves through the urban landscape of Lagos by public transport and on foot. For this reason, he has reminded some academics and reviewers of the 19th-century figure of the *flâneur*. In fact, besides contributing to the literal mapping of the city, Cole’s own black-and-white photographs depicting scenes of everyday Lagosian life reinforce the sense of the narrator as a tourist-*flâneur*. However, by examining his homecoming experience, this article seeks to move away from this interpretation in order to delve from a postcolonial perspective into the new category of the “cosmopolitan stranger”.

Esperança Bielsa’s essay (2016) “Redefining the Stranger in a Cosmopolitan Context” provides the premise for the development of a postcolonial theory of the “cosmopolitan stranger” (52): the idea that the homecomer is, like the stranger, a subject in a position of displacement and dislocation. The current article aims to investigate the distinctive features of the *othered* “cosmopolitan stranger” within the framework of the new African diaspora. More specifically, the interpretation of Cole’s protagonist in *Every Day Is for the Thief* as a “cosmopolitan stranger”, a type that will be described below in detail, necessarily engages with the debate about Afropolitanism. Following the narrative’s own structure, a focus on the man’s movement around Lagos, and particularly on his existence in different sites of the city, reveals his process of negotiating a conflicting sense of belonging and unfamiliarity – one that is highlighted by the recurrent

spatial oppositions established throughout the story. In addition, his responses to the urban fragments that he chooses to visit in turn can be seen in the light of Vince Marotta's (2010, 2017) idea that the new cosmopolitan strangers are endowed with a "subjective objectivity". However, rather than offering a privileged stance that allows the protagonist to see things more clearly, as traditionally contended in the theory of the stranger (Simmel 1908; Bauman 1988, 1995), this in-between position reveals to him his lasting condition of strangeness – that he is not only a stranger in diaspora but now also in his place of origin. As an *othered* cosmopolitan stranger, Cole's protagonist's existence is marked by a simultaneous sense of familiarity and otherness in the different spaces that he might be expected to inhabit as "home".

Contemporary Afrodiasporic narrative: Afropolitanism and the image of return

In contrast to earlier generations of African writers, who generally practised literary nationalism and anti-colonialism (Habila 2019), contemporary authors of African descent, especially those in diaspora, deal with additional themes, such as "travel, exile [and] the meaning of home" (159). Since many of them inhabit transnational spaces where they embrace multiple identities while to a varying degree maintaining ties with their places of origin, their literary works do not focus exclusively on African national issues. They usually portray the recent migration flows from Africa to western metropolitan spaces, and the lived experience of first and second-generation immigrants there. In this regard, drawing on Marsha Meskimmon's aesthetic pedestrianism, Isabel Carrera-Suárez (2015) contends that these texts, rather than presenting the detached modernist *flâneur* celebrated by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, or even Michel de Certeau's resistant walker, create pedestrians who are "engaged both physically and emotionally"

with the space they inhabit (857). Carrera-Suárez thus draws attention to the constraints faced by these street walkers she specifically calls “postcolonial, post-diasporic pedestrians”, who are usually embodied by contemporary black immigrant writers in the west themselves (855).

More recently, Afrodiasporic fiction has marked “a subtle shift in focus”, as borne out by the recurrence of “stories concerning the *return* to Africa”, which highlight “the importance of the continent as the originary point of departure” for contemporary Afrodiasporians (Rushton 2017, 46; emphasis in the original). Interestingly, Amy Rushton notes that this new thematic priority “chimes with the emergence of the term ‘Afropolitanism’” (46), popularized by Taiye Selasi (2005) in her article “Bye-Bye Babar”. Deriving her neologism from the idea of “cosmopolitanism”, Selasi presents it as a conceptual tool for referring to members of the most recent generation of culturally hybrid, internationally mobile and highly educated Afrodiasporians settled in different cities across the globe. She also makes it clear that these “Africans of the world”, rather than being, in conventional parlance, “citizens of the world”, are “multilocal” – at home in different parts of the Global North, while at the same time having a special bond with at least one place in Africa.

As part of contemporary Afrodiasporic literature, the Afropolitan narrative distinguishes itself, among other aspects, through the articulation of an identity discourse marked by an “experience of being acutely transient and always-already mobile” around the new global cities (Knudsen and Rahbek 2017, 118). However, despite the embodied transnationalism represented by the culturally hybrid and multilocal subjectivities of their protagonists, these stories are evidence that the image of return continues to be a distinctive feature of the literature written by those of African descent (Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo 2016, 8). The uneasy quest for a sense of self and belonging usually

comes together with “an exploration of an alternative ontology of return to Africa”, in the sense that the desire to reconnect with the place of origin intermingles with an insecure stance towards this territory as a potential destination (Durán-Almarza, Kabir, and Rodríguez González 2017, 109). Traditional renderings of home and diaspora are therefore challenged (109). More precisely, the main difference from earlier literary portrayals of a return to Africa “through the prism of mythical reconnection with a shared past and the attainment of identitarian certainty” is that Afropolitan novels include a narrative of “self-reflexivity and a foregrounding of the anxiety of the returnee” (Fasselt 2019, 77), which “complicate[s] ‘the idea of Africa’” instead of essentializing it (Valentin-Yves Mudimbe quoted in Fasselt 2019, 77).

Carrera-Suárez observes of the term “Afropolitanism” that although “[t]he removal of the prefix cosmo- and insertion of Afro- can be read as a contradiction of the very essence of cosmopolitanism”, still generally associated with the Euro-American identity (2018, 22), the Afropolitan position “highlights the changing subjects of cosmopolitanism in today’s reality” (23). This is the case, she notes, even if Afropolitans are “not free of anxieties” – primarily those associated with “the issues of returning to Africa and of social privilege” (23). Here Carrera-Suárez is alluding to the shift in emphasis of 21st-century discussions of neo-cosmopolitanism, which have moved beyond the traditional critique of cosmopolitanism as an elitist mode of being, a condition of existence detached from national or local roots, and now tending to prioritize those cosmopolitanisms that emerge from specific historical and cultural contexts, and from various marginalized subject positions. This, she argues, entails recognising how the figures of the cosmopolitan and the stranger intermingle, as can be seen in contemporary postcolonial literature, such as the Afropolitan narrative, and theories such as that of the “cosmopolitan stranger” (13).

The cosmopolitan stranger from a postcolonial approach

The stranger has been the object of recurrent attention in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and cultural and literary studies, especially now that the “cosmopolitan stranger” is claimed to be the paradigmatic figure of the Global Age (Rumford 2013, 17). The affinities between the cosmopolitan subject and the stranger have been explored by sociologist Vince Marotta (2010), who contends that both social forms have the ability “to transcend ‘standpoint epistemologies’” due to their “flexibility, reflexivity and mobility” (118). Georg Simmel ([1908] 1950), in his pioneering conceptualization of the “stranger” in his essay “The Stranger”, had already highlighted an ambiguous position of physical closeness and social remoteness as the distinctive feature of this type. Such peculiar positionality in relation to the receiving group, Simmel contended, confers on the stranger an in-between aesthetic consciousness or “subjective objectivity” which he calls “bird’s eye view”, referring to a privileged interpretative perspective that implies “being both remote and near, detached and involved, indifferent and concerned”, and is inconsistent with localized and situated forms of knowledge (Marotta 2010, 109). Similarly, philosopher of modernity Zygmunt Bauman (1988, 1995), the most prolific theorist of the contemporary stranger, also stressed this vantage point as a major characteristic of the stranger. For him, as for Simmel, they are an “in-between” and ambivalent being, neither friend nor enemy, an insider-outsider who destabilizes identities and traditional binary thinking by making social, cultural, and even physical boundaries problematic (Carrera Suárez 2018, 18). Marotta hence emphasizes the importance of this classical theory to an understanding of modern society (2017, 30). Despite current trends towards the “universalization” of strangeness, strangers seem to remain the same figures as always, perceived generally to be those who do not belong.

As an example of the aforementioned “universalizing” approach, political sociologist Chris Rumford argues that “cosmopolitan strangers” are defined mainly by their ability to negotiate the “restricted spaces” of globalization in order to promote new forms of social solidarity and connect with distant others (2013, 121). His proposal has been criticized by Marotta, who considers that, even if the renewed discourse of the stranger has led to a “rethinking and reassessment of cross-cultural encounters and the emergence of a cross-cultural mode of thought”, it has in turn, “also underplayed the incommensurability of cultures and the ‘prejudices’” embedded in cosmopolitan ethics (2010, 120). Specifically, Marotta stresses that the blend between cosmopolitanism and strangeness “relies on a view of the other as passive” (120), whose otherness “becomes a source of empowerment and enlightenment for the cosmopolitan” (118). Therefore, although “the cosmopolitan stranger can be closely associated with the stranger’s ability to be both distant and close, to be subjective and objective”, they cannot be unproblematically assumed to be neutral towards the “other” (118).

For her part, Esperança Bielsa argues that the present force of the discourse of the “cosmopolitan stranger” does not only stem from the controversial “universality of strangerhood” in the current situation of globalization, “but also from the lived experience of homecoming” of contemporary migrants (2016, 63). She thus endorses recent approaches to homecoming that see it as “a movement that implies dislocation and displacement”, rather than “as a return to one’s origins”, and which therefore expose the similarity between the figures of the homecomer and the stranger (Bielsa, Casellas and Verger 2014, 64). Moreover, she follows Heinz Bude and Jörg Dürrschmidt’s (2010) understanding of homesickness as “a future-directed urge of ‘belonging to’ a specific context with its attached commitments and responsibilities”, as opposed to the feeling of nostalgia, which is a “backwards-directed ‘longing for’ bygone times and situations”

(quoted in Bielsa 2016, 66). Drawing on these insights, Bielsa then claims that Frantz Fanon's approach to "the native intellectual", a returnee figure, is "the best model for a new theorisation of the cosmopolitan stranger" from a postcolonial perspective (67). Such a theorisation would explore the lived experience of the *othered* cosmopolitan stranger, generally disregarded in the debate about this new category, and respond to the aforementioned "calls for a critical cosmopolitanism that emphasises postwesternisation and multiperspectivalism" (63). Furthermore, it would contribute to the study of the scarcely theorized experience of return migrants in their "readaptation in the home country", which usually involves a "reflective experience of belongingness" (Cassarino 2008, 102). As noted by Sara Ahmed (2000), this process of reflection is largely "about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way by that which appears as familiar" (91), so that the emotional connotations projected onto the space of home are problematized and become ambiguous. The homcomer enters an existential state of living in between a sense of belonging and unfamiliarity, which ultimately implies an experience of being a stranger everywhere.

A homecoming to Lagos by an *othered* cosmopolitan stranger

Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* opens with the narrator on his way to the consulate to renew his passport in order to travel home and see if he wants to stay there. The office is located in a skyscraper in Manhattan, and contrary to the high standard of service that the image of the building might suggest, the man enters a "windowless room" that evokes a feeling of oppression and anxiety (Cole [2007] 2014, 4). This feeling is exacerbated when he notes that the large number of people in this confined space are mostly Nigerians who possess or want to obtain an American passport in order to escape the dire

socioeconomic condition in their country (4). The narrator gradually realizes this situation during his stay in Lagos.

The man arrives at Lagos International Airport in the second chapter. Despite “its shoddy white paint and endless rows of small windows” (Cole [2007] 2014, 9), giving a sensation of abandonment and imprisonment respectively, he feels “the ecstasy of arrival, the irrational sense that all will now be well” because one is at home (10). His return visit thus seems to be the result of a certain homesickness – a need to get back to the place of origin due to challenges of belonging in exile that is typical of diasporic consciousness, even in his privileged status as an Afropolitan. However, it is noteworthy that, as soon as he leaves the plane, the protagonist is disturbed by the reality he encounters.

Anthropologist Marc Augé considers the spaces inhabited by the traveller, such as the airport, as “the real non-places of supermodernity” ([1992] 1995, 96), which “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” because, he argues, none of these make sense within their borders (77). Although his interpretation has been widely used for the critical reading of these spaces, the experience of Cole’s narrator at Lagos International Airport questions, above all, Augé’s view that history is meaningless within their limits. For one cannot ignore that this place bears the name of a political and military leader, Murtala Muhammed, who was Head of State of Nigeria from 1975 to 1976. Muhammed is still “widely regarded as a dogged corruption fighter who took fearless steps against official graft” (Ekott 2017, n.p.). It is thus ironic that this is the first place where the narrator encounters such fraudulent conduct in Lagos. Before reaching the outside, he is accosted by an official who presses him for a bribe. “What have you brought me for Christmas?” (Cole [2007] 2014, 11), the man asks the protagonist once he learns he is a student in New York.

The narrator's slow immersion into Lagosian life starts with his car journey from the airport to the city, enjoying the company of his Aunt Folake. His lack of knowledge of the socio-political situation in the country becomes evident, as he is shocked when they "encounter three clear instances of official corruption within forty-five minutes of leaving the airport" (Cole [2007] 2014, 16). In particular, he is alarmed by the widespread indifference towards the abuse of power of authority, although he soon realizes that his concern is "a luxury that few can afford" in this society (17). A cosmopolitan stance, simultaneously judgmental and sympathetic, is thus noticeable in his critical understanding of his own privileged positionality, not only because he belongs to the upper-middle class in the city, but mainly because, as a returnee with an American passport, he can re-emigrate and escape this reality whenever he wants. More precisely, such ambivalent social evaluation becomes evident as he recognizes that, in contrast to him, many Lagosians live off the informal economy, unaware of the fact that this widens the social divide that locks them into their marginal status (19). His reflexivity and, more specifically, his ability to notice these implications from a rather detached, objective perspective, from the interior of his car, further stresses his cosmopolitan condition and, in turn, reveals his position as a stranger. As argued by Marotta, it is precisely this status of outsider which "encourages a critical and 'objective' stance" towards "one's own culture" (2010, 109). In fact, following Bielsa's interpretation of the figure of the stranger, the protagonist may be more precisely read as a cosmopolitan stranger, or rather as an *othered* cosmopolitan stranger, since such "a reflexive approach" to his community, which could "be put to work towards cosmopolitan social change" (Bielsa 2016, 63), is the result of his existential condition as an Afrodiasporian.

The man is depicted as a sentient subject of the city in his attempt to reinhabit its space, aware of himself breathing its air again (Cole [2007] 2014, 17). Though he finds

the social climate altered, the fact that he is acquainted with the environment is apparent when he says that the “white smoke and ocher dust” are “as familiar as [his] own breath” (17). Especially notable is his realization that it is he himself, rather than the city, that has actually changed during these years, primarily as a result of his adopting “the assumptions of life in a Western democracy” related to legality and progress (17). In so doing, he acknowledges, he has become “a stranger” (17), which implies that his sense of strangeness and disorientation in his home city is largely the result of his acculturation elsewhere. Moreover, the fact that he is aware of his changed status in this community shows that a return home is a turning point in the migration experience of contemporary Afrodiasporians and, above all, in their subjectivation processes.

The feeling of strangeness that invades the narrator because of his unfamiliarity with the environment is stressed when he arrives at his aunt’s and uncle’s house and the electricity goes off. “For those who live here”, he says, “this sudden deprivation is no surprise” (Cole [2007] 2014, 19). However, he is no longer used to this and therefore spends a sleepless night, “tracing the shadows that flicker tirelessly on the concrete walls” (19). The house is depicted almost as a disturbing place for the man, one which revives “old ghosts” (19), thus proving the power of place to evoke memories. No further information is given about his past at this point; instead, the house is unexpectedly described as “this great house in Africa” (22). As noted by Nigerian author Helon Habila, “[u]nlike most narratives of return, in which the place returned to, now seen through adult eyes, appears shrunken”, it is noteworthy that “here it appears larger” (2014, n.p.). “It is as though I have shrunk in the years”, says the narrator (Cole [2007] 2014, 23). In this way, and in contrast to his previous exaltation of the west in terms of morality and advancement, he places life in Nigeria in a higher position than life in England and the US by comparing this house to the “cramped English flats and American apartments” in

which he had lived (23). Interestingly, with their confined space, these places seem to epitomize the “limitations” that the man suggests he has endured abroad (23), in contrast to his sensation of spaciousness, of absence of restrictions, in this house. His comment on the impression that here “proper size is restored” could even be interpreted as suggesting his sudden consciousness that he has regained his place of belonging (23).

The picture of the man sipping his morning tea as he contemplates the city from the back porch of the house brings out his westernized lifestyle (Cole [2007] 2014, 21). More importantly, it reveals a certain colonial attitude to the landscape, which is especially noticeable in the opposition established between the urban area and the gorge:

The view used to amaze me [...] and while I was away my thoughts would periodically wander over to it. The gorge is now far from pristine. Trees have been cut down, and traces of land have been carved out for houses. Ugly buildings in various stages of completion now loom out of it. Clinging to the houses like barnacles are white satellite television dishes. Farther away is a half-built evangelical megachurch. It is a losing battle for the forest. [...] the gorge can still look primeval, can still conform to a certain idea of Africa: no gasoline fumes, no gleaming skyscrapers, no six-lane highways. Africa as bush and thicket. (22)

The man’s words about his past abroad signal once more homesickness, which he used to alleviate by reviving memories of the Lagosian landscape. However, the same scene, or rather one that is similar, now appears to lead to disillusionment about the contradictory effects and unfulfilled promises of the process of urban westernization. From a position similar to that of Michel de Certeau’s (2010) voyeur, who observes the city from the top of a skyscraper, “lifted out of the city’s grasp” (111), the narrator realizes that the natural environment has been damaged by massive building and housing construction, which is in fact only partly completed. The city thus has a run-down appearance. Satellite dishes

are still ubiquitous as a sign of the global distribution of technological goods and an expression of the new forms of power of the west over Africa. Furthermore, it is significant that, in contrast to his laments over the cruelty meted out to nature as a result of neo-colonialist modernization, the protagonist uses the nature-culture binary typical of colonial discourse in describing the topography. Accordingly, he adopts a colonial attitude as he associates Africa with the bush, a wild area of land, and the west with technological advancement and progress. Nevertheless, at the same time, the protagonist appropriates the dualism by opposing the primeval gorge, a space of calm and tranquillity, to the polluted, accelerated area of skyscrapers and highways. As an in-between subject, a stranger in his own community, the narrator hence problematizes this traditional binary thinking.

The narrator, as an insider-outsider, oscillates between two opposite identities in Lagos, this is evident when he insists on going to the city centre by bus, as he used to do when he was a student. Though there is an undeniable connection between the man and the city, for this is his native place, his uncle considers he can no longer be aware of the Lagosian reality after his years of absence – especially the dangers of a Lagos bus journey (Cole [2007] 2014, 33). Geographer Helen F. Wilson (2017) argues that, although many people regard it as a “necessary” and “unremarkable” part of everyday routine, a bus is an important space of encounter that smooths over social differences, such as class, among its occupants (119). Indeed, regarding his relatives’ rejection to his taking the *danfo*, as Lagosians call the yellow buses operating in the city, the narrator notes that “[i]t is about keeping the lines of privilege taut” and “avoid[ing] being ‘one of the masses’”, although there is also a safety factor (Cole [2007] 2014, 34). Danfos are, after all, among the most dangerous places in Lagos, popularly considered to be “death traps” (33), due to the absence of security measures in preparation for and during use (Agbiboa 2016, 944).

Moreover, the atmosphere inside them is usually one of fear, given the high possibility of assault from violent extortionists on the road (947). The narrator's relatives mention "practitioners of black magic" and "thieves" (Cole [2007] 2014, 33), for whom their nephew would certainly be a target due to his distinctive foreignness. His westernized air is compounded, as he himself knows, by his light complexion as the son of a white woman. Moreover, his digital camera renders him more as a tourist than a returnee.

As he eventually approaches the danfo, the narrator's uneasiness in his awareness that he may be easily recognized as an outsider is signalled by his bodily performance. "His shoulders are dropped back, [his] face is tensed, [his] eyes narrowed" (Cole [2007] 2014, 37), in order to avoid any aggression on account of his visible difference. "The trick", he says, "is to present an outward attitude of alertness, while keeping a calm and observant mood within", along with "the will to be violent" if required (37). In a sense, his manner is reminiscent of Fanon's strategic native intellectual, a modern voice in his native country, where he ultimately uses his aggressiveness to serve his own interests (Fanon [1961] 2004, 22). Especially interesting is the fact that he proudly stresses the difference between himself, as a person who looks forward to delving deeply into city life, and his relatives, who try to avoid this at all cost, because of what he partly interprets as the arrogance that a privileged status carries with it. His own air of superiority is nevertheless revealed as he sees a woman reading a book by Michael Ondaatje some rows ahead of him on the bus. Excited by his discovery, this time the man separates himself from the rest of passengers except for the woman, with whom he shares intellectual interests. Although he is attracted to her, it is noteworthy that he does not speak to her – one more sign of his cosmopolitan detachment from the reality around him.

The man devotes his time in the bus to reflecting on the presence of a reader of Ondaatje in such a place. "It is incongruous", he thinks (Cole [2007] 2014, 41), thus

uncovering his actual perception of the danfo as a means of transport for those of lower social and educational status. By extension, the fact that he still regards the danfo as the best place from which to appreciate the “energies of Lagos life”, loosely implies that he sees Lagosians as uncultured (35). A paradox arises, nevertheless, as he admits he considers the danfo as the best place “to make an inquiry into what it was [he] longed for” (35), which once again highlights his mixed feelings about the city. His claim to intellectual superiority over the Lagosian population conflicts with his homesickness.

The purpose of the narrator’s journey to the city is to visit a market. Interestingly, he says this is something one does “to participate in the world” (Cole [2007] 2014, 57), which is reminiscent of the traditional Yoruba proverb “The world is a marketplace; heaven is home”. The phrase captures the idea that “we leave heaven, our home, to embark on journey into the world, a marketplace” (Otero 2010, 1). In particular, the comparison in the first part of the proverb lies on a conception of a West African market as a place “where almost any kind of transaction may occur” (1). As noted by Solimar Otero, “the key component” of such a marketplace “is the negotiation of the value of something through verbal barter” (1), which is precisely what the man in *Every Day Is for the Thief* does in his wandering around the stalls. Special attention should be paid to his negotiation with a seller of carved masks, which shows how the trader’s perception of him as a stranger is only maintained until he starts speaking Yoruba (Cole [2007] 2014, 58). The narrator shows his irritation as he realizes that this misrecognition did not happen to him when he passed through this same market as a student (58). In fact, it is as if his visit to this place was designed to help him better understand his new condition in the city, one in which familiarity and otherness intersect. “Everyone is [h]ere not merely to buy or sell”, he says, but because this is the way to “know of the existence of others” and “of your own existence” (57). By wondering whether it is his “dress or body language”

that betrays him (58), the man thus acknowledges further signs, in addition to his light complexion, of his strangeness in the eyes of others which are the result of his acculturation into western ways.

As the narrator walks out of the market and enters the chaotic motion of the city, he recalls an occurrence from his childhood where a boy had been violently beaten and then burned alive in the same place. The man remembers being quite “unimpressed” when confronted with this familiar procedure for punishing theft (Cole [2007] 2014, 62). In an important sense, the same lack of emotion is evident this time when he comes to the location where a similar public execution had occurred a few weeks earlier. His only concern is to find the danfo in order to continue his urban exploration. An ambivalence hence arises as the narrator naturalizes the execution as one more expression of disarray in the city, reacting as someone who is used to these incidents, or rather as a tourist, unaware of the true situation and anxious about getting lost in its streets. Indeed, the photographs that frame this chapter twelve, which show the site of the assassination from different angles and highlight the protagonist’s distancing from the city, contribute to the rendition of the man as a tourist who objectifies the alien culture with his camera. More precisely, his attitude reminds us of the voyeuristic *flâneur* described by Susan Sontag ([1977] 2005) as a photographer who “[gazes] on other people’s reality with curiosity, with detachment [...] reconnoitring, stalking, cruising [an] urban inferno” that he finds “picturesque” (43). This individual “discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes” (43), as does Cole’s protagonist when he encounters conflicting urban fragments.

The man also explores some institutional places such as the Nigerian National Museum, located in “the heart of old Lagos”, where the colonial legacy is evident in the architecture (Cole [2007] 2014, 72). Indeed, considering Michel Foucault’s (1986)

conception of museums as “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time”, which, he asserts, are “proper to western culture” (26), the very presence of this museum in the city could be read as a further sign of the colonial legacy. However, such an interpretation of the National Museum as a heterotopia becomes problematic when one considers the way in which the narrator describes it. Rather than being seen as a space where there is a fluidity between past, present and future, this place is characterized by a certain temporal stagnation and emptiness, as evidenced by the exhibition in the last room visited by the man. The information on the wall plaques is “sycophantic, inaccurate, uncritical, and desperately outdated” (Cole [2007] 2014, 79), he says, although he does not make this judgement without regret, for this place had been “a memorial touchstone” for him while in exile (72). He had idealized it as the cradle of “Nigerian cultural patrimony” (72), only to find a mildewed space with cramped galleries where “the artefacts are caked in dust and under dirty plastic screens” (73). However, his disappointment is primarily due to the lack of content (73), an implicit allusion to the colonial and postcolonial plunder of Nigerian art in order to expose it in the west.

Special attention should be paid to the spatial contrast created when the narrator recalls his visits to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the British Museum in London and the Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin, where he portrays himself as a cosmopolitan subject, mobile and erudite. The man remembers these museums mainly for their “outstanding documentation that set the works in the proper cultural context” (Cole [2007] 2014, 74). A paradox arises as he admits that his desire to see Nigerian “art at its best” had been created by their collections (74). Even though he misrecognizes his feelings as nostalgia, he is hence rendered, more specifically, as the kind of cosmopolitan subject described by Ulf Hannerz (1990): one who fosters an intellectual interest in, and appreciation for, alien cultures “as works of art” (quoted in Marotta 2010, 112).

The narrator next decides to visit the Musical Society, in search of a comforting place after his discouraging experience at the museum. This is the conservatory in the Musical Society building, which he compares to the Juilliard School and the New England Conservatory in the US because of the quality of its programme (Cole [2007] 2014, 83). He considers this place as “a meaningful forum for interacting with the world” – one which highlights the cultural worth of the country and, hence, revives his desire to return home (87). The spatial contrast created at this point between the National Museum and the Musical Society shows his conflicted attachment to Lagos. He is once again reminiscent of “the native intellectual”, who is “steeped in Western culture and set on proving the existence of his own culture” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 150). The issue is, however, that the aspects of Nigerian society he values are generally those that most strongly meet his westernized tastes.

A similar spatial opposition appears as the man continues his wandering through the city, entering first a bookshop and then the Jazzhole, a combination of music and book shop. The bookshop, he notes, used to be “the leading bookseller” in Lagos when he was a schoolboy (Cole [2007] 2014, 115). However, the familiar is now looked at with new eyes – adult eyes that have seen a lot of the world and, therefore, perceive that “the books available for sale [here] are restricted to a few categories” (116). The man realizes that in this place, just as in the museum, history is “uncontested” due to the absence of certain voices (117). In contrast, the Jazzhole is described as “an inspired and congenial setting”, whose “presentation is outstanding, as well done as many a Western bookshop” (130). The comparison is reminiscent of his perception of the conservatory, which had also reminded him of western cultural spaces. Its “cool and quiet interior” opposes the deafening noise outside and makes it seem an almost Zenlike space (130). More specifically, this “spot of sun” in the city (130), as the man describes the shop due to the

cultural richness and diversity of its catalogue, is presented as a space of hope, or rather as evidence that Lagos can again become a place where he feels that he belongs.

The narrator's anxiety concerning belonging is particularly evident when he staggers between the thoughts "I am not going to move back to Lagos" and, in the same paragraph, "I am going to move back to Lagos" (Cole [2007] 2014, 69). The former sentiment is the result of his experience in places such as the National Museum and the bookshop, whereas the latter stems from his discovery of the conservatory and the Jazzhole. The feeling of hope is nevertheless diminished by the prevalent climate of hostility in the city, which eventually gives him no option but to escape. Interestingly, his decision to return to exile reinforces the idea that, as cosmopolitan strangers, contemporary Afrodiasporians in a condition of free mobility exhibit "a greater degree of strangeness than the stranger as traditionally understood" (Rumford 2013, 105). This is largely because their experience no longer conforms to Simmel's view that the stranger is someone "who comes today and stays tomorrow" (1950, 402). More importantly, they are constantly struggling with a homeless sensation that stresses their distinctiveness as *othered* cosmopolitan strangers. As the plane is about to take off for New York, the narrator realizes that "[t]he word "home" sits in [his] mouth like foreign food" (Cole [2007] 2014, 156), suggesting that it is not that he can no longer recognize Lagos in such terms, but rather that he cannot associate this word with any particular place.

Conclusions: Homecoming and the cosmopolitan stranger

This article has examined the homecoming experience narrated in Teju Cole's novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* to explore the category of the "cosmopolitan stranger" within the framework of the new African diaspora. More specifically, the discussion has brought into conversation the debate about Afropolitanism and the postcolonial approaches to the

“cosmopolitan stranger” that are still under development. The focus on the protagonist’s movement around Lagos in his attempt to reinhabit his home city, and particularly on his experience of some of its urban fragments, provides insights into the significance of spatial descriptions in contemporary Afrodiasporic literature. The textual rendering of the city has significance beyond its mere physical portrayal since it serves as a prism through which to inquire into the narrator’s position of insider-outsider in his place of origin. The recurrent spatial oppositions established throughout the story illustrate the man’s subsequent sense of simultaneously belonging to and being unfamiliar with the city.

The narrator’s emotional ambiguity highlights the impact of his condition as a cosmopolitan stranger on his perception of Lagos. It also supports Vince Marotta’s idea that this new “stranger” category is endowed with a “subjective objectivity” (2010). Although generally a critical, detached stance is most prominent in his portrayal of Lagos, the repeated references to his homesickness demonstrate that the protagonist has the ability to be both distant and close, objective and subjective, with regard to his home society, where he oscillates between identities as an insider-outsider. As a cosmopolitan stranger, he also enjoys a mobility that allows him to re-emigrate and reveals to him that his existence is marked by a ubiquitous sense of unbelonging, of being a stranger in every place he might inhabit as “home”. As an *othered* cosmopolitan stranger, his existence is marked by an ambivalent feeling towards his place of origin and, most of all, by an anxiety for belonging.

Notes on contributor

Ángela Suárez Rodríguez is a PhD candidate in Gender and Diversity at the University of Oviedo, Spain. Her research is funded by a “Severo Ochoa” fellowship, granted by the Principality of Asturias, and examines contemporary Anglophone Afrodiasporic narrative of female authorship. For the purpose of reconceptualizing the idea of “stranger”, her dissertation explores the migration experiences represented in a selection African literature from the perspective of the “affective

turn” in postcolonial and gender urban theory. She is a member of the Research Group “Intersections: Contemporary Literatures, Cultures and Theories” at the University of Oviedo.

Funding

This work was supported by the Spanish National R&D Programme, project RTI2018-097186-B-I00 (STRANGERS), financed by MCIU/AEI/FEDER, EU, and by the R&D Programme of the Principality of Asturias, through the Research Group INTERSECTIONS (grant number GRUPIN IDI/2018/000167).

References

- Agbibo, Daniel E. 2016. “‘No Condition IS Permanent’: Informal Transport Workers and Labour Precarity in Africa’s Largest City.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40 (5): 936–957. doi:10.1111/1468-2427.12440.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2000. “Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement.” In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, by Sara Ahmed, 77–94. London: Routledge.
- Augé, Marc. [1992] 1995. “From Places to Non-Places”. In *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, by Marc Augé, translated by John How, 5–115. London: Verso.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1988–1989. “Strangers: The Social Construction of Universality and Particularity.” *Telos* 78: 7–42. doi: 10.3817/1288078007.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1995. “Making and Unmaking of Strangers.” *Thesis Eleven* 43: 1–16. doi:10.1177/072551369504300102.
- Bielsa, Esperança, ed. 2016. “Redefining the Stranger in a Cosmopolitan Context.” In *Cosmopolitanism and Translation: Investigations into the Experience of the Foreign*, 52–77. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bielsa, Esperança, Antònia Casellas, and Antoni Verger. 2014. “Homecoming as Displacement: An Analysis from the Perspective of Returning Social Scientists.” *Current Sociology* 62 (1): 63–80. doi:10.1177/0011392113517122.

- Bude, Heinz, and Jörg Dürrschmidt. 2010. "What's Wrong with Globalization?: Contra 'Flow Speak' – Towards an Existential Turn in the Theory of Globalization." *European Journal of Social Theory* 13 (4): 481–500. doi:10.1177/1368431010382761.
- Carrera-Suárez, Isabel. 2015. "The Stranger Flâneuse and the Aesthetics of Pedestrianism." *Interventions* 17 (6): 853–865. doi:10.1080/1369801X.2014.998259.
- Carrera-Suárez, Isabel. 2018. "Cosmopolitan Strangers in the Lettered City: Reading World Writing." In *Broadening Horizons: A Peak Panorama of English Studies in Spain*, edited by María Beatriz Hernández, Manuel Brito, and Tomás Monterrey, 13–29. La Laguna: Publishing Service of the University of La Laguna.
- Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. 2008. "The Conditions of Modern Return Migrants: Editorial Introduction." *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 10 (2): 95–105. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/resources/periodicals/diversities/past-issues/vol-10-no-2-2008/the-conditions-of-modern-return-migrants-editorial-introduction/>.
- Cole, Teju. [2007] 2014. *Every Day Is for the Thief*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Cousins, Helen, and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, eds. 2016. "Leaving Home/Returning Home: Migration and Contemporary African Literature." In *African Literature Today. Diaspora and Returns in Fiction* 34, 1–11. Suffolk: James Currey.
- De Certeau, Michel. 2010. "The Practice of Everyday Life." In *The Blackwell City Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, 111–118. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Durán-Almarza, Emilia María, Ananya Kabir, and Carla Rodríguez González. 2017. "Introduction: Debating the Afropolitan." *European Journal of English Studies* 21 (2): 107–114. doi:10.1080/13825577.2017.1344471.
- Ekott, Ini. 2017. "EXCLUSIVE: Inside America's Damning Verdict on Murtala Muhammed, Obasanjo after 1975 Coup." *Premium Times*, January 27. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/221658-exclusive-inside-americas-damning-verdict-murtala-muhammed-obasanjo-1975-coup.html>
- Fanon, Frantz. [1961] 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Fasselt, Rebecca. 2019. "Decolonising the Afropolitan: Intra-African Migrations in Post-2000 Literature." In *The Routledge Handbook of African Literature*, edited by Moradewun Adejunmobi and Carli Coetzee, 75–91. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22–27. doi:10.2307/464648.
- Habila, Helon. 2014. "Every Day Is for the Thief Review – Return to Lagos." *The Guardian*, April 25. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/25/every-day-is-for-the-thief-teju-cole-review>
- Habila, Helon. 2019. "The Future of African Literature." *Journal of the African Literature Association* 13 (1): 153–162. doi:10.1080/21674736.2019.1594898.
- Knudsen, Eva Rask, and Ulla Rahbek. 2017. "An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics? Afropolitan Style and Tropes in Recent Diasporic African Fiction." *European Journal of English Studies* 21 (2): 115–128. doi:10.1080/13825577.2017.1344473.

- Marotta, Vince. 2010. "The Cosmopolitan Stranger." In *Questioning Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Stan van Hooft and Wim Vandekerckhove, 105–120. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Marotta, Vince. 2017. *Theories of the Stranger: Debates on Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Cross-Cultural Encounters*. New York: Routledge.
- Otero, Solimar, ed. 2010. "Introduction." In *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World*, 1–22. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Rumford, Chris. 2013. *The Globalization of Strangeness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rushton, Amy. 2017. "No Place like Home: The Anxiety of Return in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*." *Etudes anglaises* 70 (1): 45–62. https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-etudes-anglaises-2017-1-page-45.htm?try_download=1&contenu=resume.
- Selasi, Taiye. 2015. "Bye-Bye Babar." *The LIP Magazine*, March 3. <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>
- Simmel, Georg. [1908] 1950. "The Stranger." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited and with an introduction by Kurt H. Wolff, 402–408. London: Free Press.
- Sontag, Susan. [1977] 2005. "Melancholy Objects." In *On Photography*, by Susan Sontag, 39–65. New York: RosettaBooks.
- Wilson, Helen. 2017. "Encounter." In *Urban Theory: New Critical Perspectives*, edited by Mark Jayne and Kevin Ward, 109–121. London: Routledge.