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Narrating the Transmodern Fracture in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* (Teju Cole, 2007/2014) as exemplary of the transmodern turn in literature and, specifically, of what Rosa María Rodríguez Magda has termed "narratives of fracture" (2019). It explores the theoretical shift ushered in by Transmodernity and the repercussions this may have for texts like Cole's –literary works that address the shortcomings of the Eurocentric world-system and scrutinize the implications of globalization for paramodern cultures– using Enrique Dussel's terminology (2012). By focusing on the text's approach to genre and intermediality, conflicted narrative voice, and depiction of transnational fluxes, I seek to chart the ways in which the narrative exposes and undermines Western epistemic domination, while pushing new ways of seeing and thinking aligned with the transmodern paradigm.

KEYWORDS: Transmodernity; postmillennial literature; travelogue; narratives of fracture; Teju Cole; *Every Day Is for the Thief*; globalization; transnational networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teju Cole's second published book, *Open City* (2011), established him as a renowned author belonging to a new, exciting wave of African writers with an internationalist bent (Lee, 2014). However, Cole's debut *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007/2014) already contained a handful of distinctive elements that would be further developed in *Open City*: namely, the cosmopolitan narrator-*flâneur*, his erudite yet Eurocentric views on events that prove global in their reach, and the partial and unreliable nature of his account. *Every Day Is for the Thief* follows an unnamed male character traveling from the US to visit his native Lagos for the first time in

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fifteen years. His prolonged absence has turned him into a stranger; the novella chronicles a voyage of return marked by emotional detachment and alienation from the place he insists on rediscovering. The narrator's liminal position, as simultaneously an insider and an outsider, epitomizes "a subject position that is always on the move, in the making, thriving on routes and in-between-ness rather than on roots and fixity" (Neumann & Rippl, 2020, p. 204). This state of perpetual in-betweenness places him in a context where the Westernized mindset he has interiorized is simply not enough to account for the realities he encounters in Nigeria. In its depiction of an increasingly globalized world where "no one becomes the permanent center or persistent periphery" (Martín Alcoff, 2012, p. 63), the narrative illustrates the paradigm shift known as Transmodernity. This paper examines *Every Day Is for the Thief* as an example of transmodern text, paying special attention to features such as generic experimentation, narrative voice, and the exploration of rhizomatic global networks and identities. It contends that the novella articulates its critique of the epistemic violence of Western erudition (Lauret, 2021, p. 420) by assuming the shape of a "narrative of fracture" that charts new ways of seeing and being in the wake of globalization.

2. THE TRANSMODERN PARADIGM

Transmodernity has been used as an "umbrella term that connotes the emerging socio-cultural, economic, political and philosophical shift" (Ateljevic, 2013, p. 201) ushered in by globalization[i]. Overall, it signals the overcoming of postmodernity, but also the need to rethink the frameworks through which we interpret reality. After a long period of having been purposefully left "outside of modernity" (Dussel, 2012, p. 49), we are now witnessing the amalgamation of so-called peripheral cultures with Western ones as a direct consequence of globalization. Both Transmodernity and globalization are closely related, yet the former "seeks a conceptual escape from the modern world-system through the transcendence of the Western epistemic" (Kuecker, 2014, p. 163). The transmodern aims to foster "provisional meta-narratives of global history that can illuminate local conditions and relations"; by foregrounding "how our representations of local practices or knowledges may be constituted through imperial sign systems", the transmodern paradigm seeks to go beyond Eurocentric modernity (Martín Alcoff, 2012, p. 65). The transmodern synthesis does not follow a linear projection, but instead "transcends modernity in that it takes us trans, i.e., through, modernity into another state of being" (Ateljevic, 2013, pp. 202–203).

Although there are several approaches to Transmodernity, all of them concur that our knowledge systems can no longer account for the challenges posed by the current state of (global) affairs. Common through-lines include the overcoming of (post)modernity, the synthesis and hybridization of cultures in contact, and a permanent destabilization of a world-system organized around Eurocentric categories. Still, these are by no means part of a wider,

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all-encompassing definition[ii]. Some of the theorists who have fleshed out the concept include Argentinean thinker Enrique Dussel, Spanish philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, and British-Pakistani scholar Ziauddin Sardar, among others. Rodríguez Magda maintains she coined the term in 1987 to signal the emergence of a new Grand Narrative after the purported end of Grand Narratives announced by postmodernity (2004, p. 7). With the advent of globalization comes a "constant presence of flux and connectivity", which, in turn, "forms an emerging process of Totality that, rather than hierarchical or pyramidal, follows a network-like model devoid of clear organization or any hegemonic center" (Rodríguez Magda, 2008). However, this reconstruction of another "process of Totality" diverges from modernity, insofar as it lacks a clear sense of "linear progress towards emancipation" (Rodríguez Magda, 2004, p. 4). Instead, it is characterized by a plethora of developments occurring simultaneously at different locations, in tune with concepts like the glocal (Robertson, 2012)[iii]. Marc Luyckx Ghisi sees in this process the emergence of "a planetary vision" of interconnectedness, "which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community" (n.d., as cited in Ateljevic, 2013, p. 203).

Other theorists have spearheaded a vision of the transmodern understood as a move towards the dismantlement of Eurocentric hierarchies inaugurated by modernity. Considering that "cultures do not, and have never, existed in isolation" (Sardar, 2021, p. 64), Ziauddin Sardar (2022) regards Transmodernity as "an effort to go beyond modernity and postmodernity" combining "the life-enhancing aspects of tradition and the best aspects of modernity" in a synthesis that would foster "a new way of looking at things" (as cited in Atlas, 2022, para. 30). Whereas modernity implies "a general homogenisation of institutions and basic experiences in a temporal, historical mode", it manifests differently depending on the space wherein it emerges (Robertson, 2012, p. 193). Namely, in the New World, modernity "developed as the result of the wiping-out of existing institutional conditions and many people"; in Africa, it was "largely imposed by colonisation or imperialism", and in East Asia, modernity "arose as a response to a threatening external challenge" (Therborn, n.d., as cited in Robertson, 2012, p. 193). These unequal circumstances establish a fundamentally asymmetrical relation between the Western "core" from which modernity originally emanates and the rest of so-called peripheral cultures, whose idiosyncrasies were displaced, or replaced, by Eurocentric modernity. This pattern of epistemic subsumption denounced by Enrique Dussel can be traced back to the Enlightenment, a period which saw attempts to "liberate Europeans from the tyranny of religion and monarchies while simultaneously enslaving and colonizing" (Ngũgĩ, 2018, p. 165). If "*European* modernity constitutes all other cultures as its *periphery*", Dussel states, then Latin America, Africa, or Asia play no real role in it (2012, p. 33; italics in original), because their respective cultures were subsumed under the Grand Narratives born out of modernity[iv]. The transmodern project identifies this imbalance and strives to establish multicultural dialogues that would correct these existing asymmetries (see Dussel, 2012).

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Thus, Transmodernity seeks to counter the Eurocentric "metanarrative of modernity" with another "that claims an even larger reach than the modern" (Martín Alcoff, 2012, p. 61), reconstructing "the concept of 'Modernity' from an 'exterior' […] *global* perspective" (Dussel, 2012, p. 37; italics in original). The proposed paradigm reunites (post)modern Western cultures with "para-modern" cultures "situated 'beyond' […] the structures valorized by modern European/North American culture" (Dussel, 2012, p. 43), namely, cultures that simultaneously predate, and coexist with, modernity[v]. The transmodern metanarrative seeks to incorporate "the role of its Other in its formation", retelling "the story of world history without a centered formation either in Europe or anywhere", while resisting the fetishization of the local (Martín Alcoff, 2012, p. 63). Transmodernity possesses its own ontology (Kuecker, 2014), based on "the lived condition of highly marginalized, exploited, and repressed peoples" whose way of "being human" transcends "the modern world-system and generates its own ways of seeing and thinking" (p. 163). However, any attempts at reformulating a world-system outside the confines of Eurocentric categories must retain awareness of the challenges posed by the homogenizing impulse of globalization: "Transmodernity is not the new happy Grand Narrative of a globalized world that finally achieves harmonious unification, in opposition to the old nefarious acts of blindness, plunderings, and dominations" (Rodríguez Magda, 2019, pp. 24–25). The complexities of abandoning the Eurocentric world-system, including its conception of knowledge as a subsumptive practice, function as the backdrop against which Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007/2014) stages its narrative of return.

3. A TRANSMODERN TRAVELOGUE? GENRE IN *EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF*

Transmodernity goes beyond binary oppositions used to categorize the world around us, which stem from the hierarchies set in place by imperial enterprises. Genre-wise, these purportedly civilizing actions found an apt vehicle of transmission in travel writing, specifically through the travelogue form. Mary Louise Pratt draws attention to the emergence of "Europe's 'planetary consciousness'" (1992, p. 15), one of the main traits of modernity, as a result of expeditions to measure, categorize, and quantify the world according to the latest notions of scientific progress. In this juncture, travel writing becomes a vehicle for both colonialism and the development of a subsumptive episteme (Pratt, 1992, p. 29). Travel writing continued to formulate "discourses of difference and contributed to the politics of colonial expansion" during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century (Edwards & Graulund, 2010, pp. 1–2). Cole's literary debut exemplifies a shift in travel writing which "challenge[s] Eurocentric understandings of the genre" (Edwards & Graulund, 2010, p. 2). The novella "inhabits an in-between state that disrupts pre-established genre formations and clear-cut divisions between a colonial and a postcolonial world" (Kappel, 2017, p. 71); specifically, its

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subversion of the travelogue genre takes cues from the transmodern shift in its presentation of other ways of seeing.

Every Day Is for the Thief is formed by a collage of narrative snippets devoid of a linear plot or a coherent narrative, complemented by a series of photographs equally disjoined from the text (Neumann & Rippl, 2020, p. 203). The novella oscillates between reproducing the conventions of the travelogue and undermining them, without losing sight of "the epistemological violence inherent in the genre's history" (Kappel, 2017, p. 68, p. 70). However, the amalgamation of genres and blend of fact and fiction all affect the reception of the text as *only* a travelogue. Despite its brevity, the novella emerges as an "intermedial portrait", which combines fictional autobiography, essay writing, autoethnography, and diary (Neumann & Rippl, 2020, p. 203; Rippl, 2018, pp. 472–473). Moreover, the text playfully muddles the boundaries between narrator and author, casting doubt as to whether this is a work of autofiction. As Gabriele Rippl summarizes, "both are middle-class New York City dwellers of Nigerian descent, who spent their childhood in Lagos, and both have an in-between Nigerian-American identity" (2018, p. 473). Other details reinforce this connection, such as the narrator's fantasies of becoming a renowned international writer like Michael Oondatje or Vikram Seth (Cole, 2014, p. 66) –the same authors Cole used to read at the time he was working on the novella (Rippl, 2018, p. 472). Cole himself has declared *Every Day Is for the Thief* is a work of fiction, or rather he notes that it has been classified as such because it contains elements that are "made-up" but finds the distinction between fiction and non-fiction flimsy and artificial (2016, pp. 79–80).

Regarding the visual aspect of the novella, Cole has expressed his predilection for including images whose connections to the text are imprecise (Rippl, 2018, p. 472), a choice that subverts traditional travelogue practices of illustrating exotic locations through visual means as well as textual description. The result is a compendium of loosely connected renderings that, rather than offering "systematic descriptions of the urban space", capture "random glimpses" of life in Lagos (Rippl, 2018, p. 473). The 19 black-and-white images interspersed in the narrative contribute to "fragmenting the text and disrupting its flow and continuity" (Rippl, 2018, p. 474). In addition to interrupting the narrative flow, these photographs "blur the link between text and photo and often disconnect the photos from the text", leaving readers to "make sense of the word–image relationship" (Rippl, 2018, p. 475) without providing any clues to interpret their connection other than their position within the book. In particular, the subversion of "genre-oriented expectations of readers" likewise serves the purpose of "disturb[ing] the orientalism" that is often encountered in travelogues: "His is not a traditional ethnographic use of the camera in Africa, serving systematic and accurate mappings, meticulous stock-taking and archiving, the measuring and mastering of 'natives' and putting them on display" (Rippl, 2018, p. 481). While the narrator often displays entitled and elitist attitudes, "resembl[ing] that of the colonial traveler" fixated on "captur[ing] the alterity of cultures by subordinating it to familiar concepts and established norms" (Neumann

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& Rippl, 2020, p. 205), Cole's use of intermediality accentuates the discrepancies between the narrator's colonial-influenced mindset and the novella's undermining of exoticizing strategies used in colonial travelogues, leaving readers to grapple with this apparent incongruity: "Cole resists staging Africa in an exoticising way; by employing certain formal and aesthetic means such as hazy, blurry surfaces, the photographs cannot serve onlookers as projection screens for their own orientalist fantasies" (Rippl, 2018, p. 481). The unstable, non-linear connection between images and text illustrates a transmodern impulse to represent reality, while avoiding reductionist or fetishizing portrayals of local life.

The purported objectivity of the travelogue and essay-like elements of the book is tainted by the narrator's feelings of alienation and inadequacy at not being able to really know Lagos. If the Eurocentric world-system episteme operates by erasing difference as a prerequisite for assimilation, as Dussel denounces, then the narrator emerges as an agent of that same episteme –but his attempts at acquiring knowledge result in imprecise, fragmented vignettes that destabilize any univocal interpretations of reality. He is swamped by information he nonetheless tries to register and organize into topics like "family, education, religion, the transatlantic slave trade, poverty, corruption, mismanagement, unreliable civil services, public transport, crime and communal violence, evangelism, and other cultural practices" (Rippl, 2018, pp. 473–474). Still, these topics are not explored in depth and resemble impressionistic fragments, in tune with the novella's origins as a series of blog entries.

The narrator's alienation is exacerbated by his assumption that knowledge is a subsumptive practice, that is, something to be mastered or acquired. His excursions around Lagos are motivated by the "desire to know that life" (Cole, 2014, p. 35) that eludes him. Nevertheless, his attempts at rekindling this long-lost connection –doing things such as taking the *danfo* to go to the market, like he used to do as a schoolboy– are incomprehensible to others and interpreted as signs of eccentricity (Cole, 2014, p. 34). He tries performing an identity that will allow him (or so he thinks) to blend in without raising suspicion: "My shoulders are dropped back, my face is tensed, my eyes narrowed" (Cole, 2014, p. 37). However, when he eventually arrives at the market, he is quickly mistaken for an *oyinbo*, a foreigner: "What subtle tells of dress or body language have, again, given me away? This kind of thing didn't happen when I lived here" (Cole, 2014, pp. 57–58). The scene illustrates the narrator's belief that knowledge is like an object within his reach that can be acquired through wandering about the city, as if by osmosis: he only needs to repeat some patterns and follow certain guidelines to unblock access to it. Throughout the novella, he is adamant that there is some hidden essence emanating from Lagos that he can tap into, something that would shed light on "what it was I longed for all those times I longed for home" (Cole, 2014, p. 35). Nevertheless, the city remains inapprehensible, dissipating into the constant accrual of disconnected scenes and images.

It is worth noting that the fragmentariness, mixture of genres, shifting tone (from objectivity to irony and even satire), and difficulties in bridging the gap between (experienced) reality and (assimilated) knowledge, are all elements that could be classified as postmodern.

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However, the novella's epistemological proposal suggests *some* form of knowledge is possible. Rodríguez Magda observes that the transmodern impulse not only assimilates the postmodern criticism toward essentialism and Grand Narratives, but it also aims to transcend the epistemic solipsism that can result from these tenets (2008). *Every Day Is for the Thief* exemplifies this vision through its awareness that getting to know Lagos is impossible in an essentialist sense; still, it presents a version of knowledge based on accrual and simultaneous multiplicity – including the accrual of generic conventions and their subversion. In sum, knowledge in the novella is presented as unstable, formed by myriad, contradictory snippets without a pre-fixated or inherent meaning, and highly dependent on reader reception and interpretation. The kaleidoscopic portrayal of Lagos is formally mirrored in the novella by an equally kaleidoscopic approach to generic conventions and intermediality.

4. NARRATING THE FRACTURE: *EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF* AS A "NARRATIVE OF THE LIMIT"

Even if globalization is hailed as the new Grand Narrative, it "harbours in its bosom a palpable contradiction: […] it establishes totalizing networks based on the market and cyber-technology; but […] it generates spaces of exclusion, in the exterior of geopolitical blocks, and within societies" (Rodríguez Magda, 2019, p. 26). In an attempt to categorize transmodern texts addressing these problematics, Rodríguez Magda provides a twofold distinction between "narratives of the celebration" and what she calls "narratives of the limit" or "narratives of fracture" (2019, p. 26). The latter refers to a set of texts that "[struggle] to think what has not been conceptualized yet" (Rodríguez Magda, 2019, p. 21). Narratives of fracture strive to contest traditional genre (and gender) boundaries and ontological frameworks, as well as to explore spiritualism, empathy, and different kinds of hybridity (Yebra-Pertusa & Aliaga-Lavrijsen, 2019, p. 9), against the backdrop of globalization. They differ from narratives of the celebration, or those that foreground "the festive aspect of our techno-euphoric society" from a hegemonic standpoint (Rodríguez Magda, 2019, p. 21, p. 26). Even though *Every Day Is for the Thief* displays elements found in narratives of the celebration, it ultimately reveals itself as a narrative of fracture, as it sheds light on the mechanisms of exclusion that accompany, and sometimes predate, globalization; moreover, it exposes the inadequacy of the Western episteme –embodied by the narrator– to fully account for these modes of existing at the margins.

Having spent so much time abroad, the narrator feels that he has taken into himself "some of the assumptions of life in a Western democracy […] and in that sense [he has] returned a stranger" (Cole, 2014, p. 17). From this liminal position he "perceives his home country with Western eyes, drawing on Western concepts to make sense of Nigeria's present situation" (Kappel, 2017, p. 72). However, he insists on filtering his experiences through that prism. "I encounter three clear instances of official corruption within forty-five minutes of leaving the

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airport", he states, matter-of-factly, upon arrival (Cole, 2014, p. 17). He notices a chiasm between himself and others in the extent to which these situations have become normalized: "No one else seems to worry as I do" (Cole, 2014, p. 17). He does acknowledge his privilege, being able to see these practices as deviant: "I feel that my worrying about it is *a luxury that few can afford*. For many Nigerians, the giving and receiving of bribes […] is a way of getting things done" (Cole, 2014, p. 17; italics mine). Throughout the text, he switches back and forth between admiration, rejection, understanding, critical reproach, and occasional empathy. These stances are nonetheless conveyed in a way that suggests he is "strangely unaffected by his surroundings" (Neumann & Rippl, 2020, p. 204). At times, however, emotions rupture the seeming detachment and reveal a deeper state of turmoil:

> There is no end of fascinations. […] I see a nobility of spirit that is rare in the world. But also, there is too much sorrow, not only of the dramatic kind but also in the way that difficult economic circumstances wear people down, eroding them, preying on their weaknesses […] until they are shadows of their best selves. […] I decide that I love my own tranquility too much to muck about in other people's troubles. I am not going to move back to Lagos. No way. I don't care if there are a million untold stories, I don't care if that, too, is a contribution to the atmosphere of surrender.
>
> I am going to move back to Lagos. I must. (Cole, 2014, p. 69)

Cole's novella captures the narrator's inner contradictions at an individual level, but also works on a collective level to chart globalization and its "unstable reticular interconnectedness" (Yebra-Pertusa & Aliaga-Lavrijsen, 2019, p. 8). As a narrative of fracture, it looks beyond the optimistic outlook of narratives of the celebration to test their limits. Despite this, at times, *Every Day Is for the Thief* praises positive aspects of globalization, like the surge of interconnectivity. For instance, the narrator is thrilled that places like the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) will make things "more egalitarian": "The MUSON School already represents a great leap forward: nothing of this kind was available when I was a high school student" (Cole, 2014, p. 86). Even though he feels alien in Lagos, places like these revive his will to live in the country again (Cole, 2014, p. 86). The celebratory tone in noting these triumphs of the Nigerian cultural scene recalls the positive aspects of a transmodern North-South dialogue: "it is vital […] to have a meaningful forum for interacting with the world. So that Molière's work can appear onstage in Lagos, as Soyinka's appears in London. *So that what people in one part of the world think of as uniquely theirs takes its rightful place as a part of universal culture*" (Cole, 2014, p. 87; italics mine). The cosmopolitan impulse here takes the form of an integrative transmodern dialogue, in which paramodern cultures of the Global South occupy their place alongside (post)modern Western cultures.

Yet this celebration has an underside. Transfixed by his own optimism, the narrator praises the MUSON School as "a place for genuine music enthusiasts" and not "just a

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playground for the rich and well connected", oblivious to the fact that the cars in the parking lot ("Lexus, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Audi") suggest otherwise (Cole, 2014, p. 82). The narrator wishes for an integration in the global circuits of cultural industries even at the expense of the majority: "serious musical instruction in Lagos is available only to the wealthiest and most dedicated Nigerians […] [but] it is better than nothing" (Cole, 2014, p. 86). The same idea is expressed during his visit to a bookstore and music store called Jazzhole; upon inspecting the price tags in books and records, he concludes that these are "high […] certainly beyond the reach of most Nigerians […]. And better at these high prices than not at all" (Cole, 2014, pp. 130–31). In the end, these institutions replicate those in Europe and the United States, erasing the alleged glocal flavor under a homogenizing, Westernized vision of high- and low-brow cultural divides.

The narrator exemplifies an elitist understanding of intellectual activities in a cultural landscape characterized by a scarcity of means and options. His erudition is seemingly connected to his class status (as an educated member of the Lagosian upper-middle class) as well as to his cosmopolitan position[vi]. This type of expatriate values cultural endeavors that fit the mold of their Westernized education, something the novella repeatedly underscores through erudite commentaries that are as inane as condescending. For example, the narrator is exhilarated when he finds a woman reading Michael Oondatje in the *danfo*, a scene he deems "incongruous": "Of course, Nigerians read. […] But an adult reading a challenging work of literary fiction on Lagos public transportation: that's a sight rare as hen's teeth" (Cole, 2014, pp. 41–42). As in the case of the music school and the bookstore, the narrator acknowledges that the possibility of fostering "literary habits" is out of reach for the majority, but this realization does not prevent him from looking down on the actual reading habits of "the very few of the so-called literate" (Cole, 2014, p. 42). Only the forms of knowledge that conform to Eurocentric standards are overtly praised and celebrated, which subtly denounces global circuits of culture as restricted to the upper classes –the same that tend to replicate colonial modes of thinking.

This reductionist vision of culture signals a wider rift between the narrator as an "othered cosmopolitan stranger" (Suárez Rodríguez, 2020) and the realities faced by most of the population. Early on, he concedes that "[t]he informal economy is the livelihood of many Lagosians. But corruption, in the form of piracy or of graft, also means that most people remain on the margins" (Cole, 2014, p. 19). However, he proceeds to (seemingly) ignore his own statement, and later insists that the greed of Nigerians has ruined the country. He denounces the fact that "[t]he systems that could lift the majority out of poverty are undercut at every turn" because "everyone takes a shortcut": "nothing works and, for this reason, the only way to get anything done is to take another shortcut" (Cole, 2014, p. 19). The narrator thus draws connections between individual action and the national ethos of "*idea l'a need*", or the notion that when something "is good enough, there's no need to get bogged down in details" (Cole, 2014, p. 137). This diagnosis coexists in the novella with the input received by friends and

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relatives, who repeatedly explain how most people earn insufficient salaries and seek alternatives to complete their income (Cole, 2014, p. 18): "[E]ven those whose profession or education gives them an income well above the average" find themselves "looking to get out" (Cole, 2014, p 92). Albeit an expatriate himself, the narrator does not seem to empathize with the impulse of self-preservation that pushes people to choose between hustling or emigration. Arguably, he is apt at spotting greed in the behavior of others but fails to recognize that same drive within him.

The notion of "*idea l'a need*" is reminiscent of the "'other knowledges' generated by the lived experiences of the oppressed" (Kuecker, 2014, p. 164), which lead to a transmodern ontology. These other knowledges take "three key forms" and derive from "the reality of being post-colonial […][,] the everyday life struggles of marginalized peoples […] [and] legacy knowledge, those precolonial epistemologies and cosmologies" (Kuecker, 2014, p. 164) that have survived the "colonization of the imagination", in Aníbal Quijano's words (as cited in Kuecker, 2014, p. 163). The latter manifests through the acceptance of the modern world-system's episteme (Kuecker, 2014, p. 164) and systematically denies legitimacy to any forms of knowledge that deviate from the standards set by Eurocentric modernity. One of the clearest examples of how "other knowledges" operate in the novella appears during the narrator's encounter with the yahoo yahoo, a passage which exposes the entwinement of greed, elitism, and intellectual activities outside Western-sanctioned channels. The yahoo boys are young men who engage in a type of Internet fraud known as "419" (Cole, 2014, p. 25), otherwise known as the "Nigerian prince" scam. The cost of browsing for an hour is affordable enough that Internet cafes are full to the brim with young men, composing messages that lead "their reader down fanciful paths" (Cole, 2014, p. 28). Despite his "initial frisson" –"I have stumbled onto the origin of the world-famous digital flotsam. I feel as though I have discovered the source of the Nile or the Niger"– the narrator feels his excitement wane, only to be "replaced by irritation" (Cole, 2014, p. 26). His first impulse is to condemn the practice, insofar as it is an illegal activity, denouncing yahoo boys as taking advantage of others for their own (economic) benefit; in engaging with transnational fraud, they "[mangle] what little good name their country still has" (Cole, 2014, p. 27). From the perspective of someone who has embraced the "assumptions of life in a Western democracy", there is nothing positive to say about the criminal yahoo yahoo, so he settles the matter declaring that "[t]he engine for this industry is greed" (Cole, 2014, p. 28). They simply embody another iteration of corruption, combined with a make-do attitude.

Still, the narrator cannot help but admire the scammers: "I realize Lagos is a city of Scheherazades. The stories unfold in ever more fanciful iterations and, as in the myth, those who tell the best stories are richly rewarded" (Cole, 2014, p. 27). Katherine Hallemeier astutely observes that the narrator's views "encourage the reader to question [his] authority" but likewise expose "his own vulnerabilities […] [as] the narrator might share the greed he attributes to the 'yahoo boys'" (2014, p. 247). The narrator wishes he, too, could write

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"enterprising samples of narrative fiction" (Cole, 2014, p. 27), by drawing from the country's rich reservoir of stories. In this regard, he reproduces the stance of a colonial Western traveler writing about Africa, thereby revealing that his in-between position is fundamentally shaped by the Eurocentric episteme he has interiorized: "The narratives fly at me from all directions. […] All I have to do is prod gently, and people open up. […] It is an appalling way to conduct a society, yes, but I suddenly feel a vague pity for all those writers who have to ply their trade from sleepy American suburbs" (Cole, 2014, pp. 64–65). This attitude suggests a calculated detachment from the realities of people in Nigeria, whose lives are relevant only insofar as they can be shaped into a novel for the international literary market –not unlike the 419 scam victims, reduced to being the means towards an end. There is a hint of recognition in the narrator's reference to the original yahoos in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, "uncouth creatures […] too close to humans for Gulliver's liking" (Cole, 2014, p. 28); their Lagosian counterparts are, perhaps, too close to the narrator for his own liking.

The main difference between the yahoo boys and the narrator, then, is their perceived status: whereas the former regards himself as a "humanist" (Cole, 2014, p. 66), the scammers simply wish to access easy money "so they can live large and impress their mates on campus" (Cole, 2014, p. 27). Of course, this status is granted by the narrator himself, who discerns between his own noble impulses to create art within the established channels of Western knowledge and the yahoo boys' illicit motivations to earn a living by scamming gullible foreigners they contact on the Internet. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan erudite is unable to prove his humanist credentials through creative endeavors, whilst the scammers manage to write unencumbered by the same daily setbacks the narrator finds unbearable: "There is a disconnect between the wealth of stories available here and the rarity of creative refuge. […] Writing is difficult, reading impossible" (Cole, 2014, p. 68). The text thus "suggests that the narrator's readiness to condemn the college students stems from an awareness that they are able to produce stories in Lagos, while he is not" (Hallemeier, 2014, p. 247). The 419 letters, it could be argued, are truly transnational fiction, insofar as they allow yahoo boys to "negotiate perceived cultural differences", even though their authors "lack the institutional and economic privilege of Cole's narrators" (Hallemeier, 2014, p. 247). Nevertheless, neither the scammers nor their production conforms to the narrator's expectations of cosmopolitan literacy[vii].

The yahoo boys epitomize a type of "other knowledge" born out of necessity – specifically, from the everyday life struggles of people facing the dire socio-economic circumstances of life in Nigeria– that is partly admired, partly rejected by the narrator as representative of Western knowledge. In this regard, I agree with Cordula Lemke that Cole's narrator "draws a dividing line between Nigeria as a developing country and himself as a representative of Western civilization": "In the manner typical of a budding colonialist, he passes a clear value judgement: Nigerians are morally indifferent, […] violent, uneducated and unbearably proud while he features as a highly educated person with the force of moral superiority on his side. He is a sophisticated, urban cosmopolitan who is full of generous advice

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for an allegedly underdeveloped Lagos" (2020, p. 80). Nevertheless, the text manages to lead readers to focus on the shortcomings of the narrator, rather than those of Lagos (Lemke, 2020, p. 82). In achieving this effect, it undermines his discourse, and, thereby, the authority of the Western episteme he represents.

5. TRANSMODERN NETWORKS

Every Day Is for the Thief presents the city of Lagos as a rhizome-like entity that sprawls beyond physical and temporal constraints, a juncture where the modern meets the paramodern –and, through the narrator, the postmodern. It is the synthesis of these coexisting layers which yields a transmodern result. Some of these transnational fluxes exemplify a type of "planetary interconnectedness and mutuality" that unsettles rigid center-periphery dichotomies (Ateljevic, 2013, p. 204). Examples include *tokunbo* or imported goods, the proliferation of Internet cafés, "symbolic of a connection to goings-on in the larger world" (Cole, 2014, p. 24), and the bureaucratic labyrinth that is the Nigerian consulate in New York (Cole, 2014, pp. 3–8). Regarding the latter, it is significant that a travelogue chronicling a trip to Lagos does not start there, but across the Atlantic, hinting at the inescapable global policing of bodies in motion. In all cases, these networks indicate an increasing connection between Nigeria and the rest of the world in the wake of globalization. Nevertheless, other fluxes are avowedly problematic, including the "legacy of foreign rule [still] visible" in the cityscape (Cole, 2014, p. 71), and the environmental exploitation of the oil industry in the Niger Delta. The narrator is ambivalent in his assessment of these forms of plundering. Whereas he seems cognizant of the country's turbulent colonial and postcolonial history, he overlooks most forms of contemporary exploitation. Upon meeting a Scottish man who is planning to work on the Niger Delta rigs, he simply comments that "he'll earn well here" even if "[h]e is not Europe's finest" (Cole, 2014, p. 10). The oil industry is mentioned again in passing, as the narrator's friend Rotimi notes that "[t]o be a big pawpaw in Nigeria now, you'd better have a job in telecommunications. Or better still, in the oil industry" (Cole, 2014, p. 92). No further comments are reported on environmental destruction or the grasp neocolonialism still maintains in the country.

Furthermore, Cole's novella maps the participation of Nigeria in transnational networks that predate, as well as coexist with, globalization as we know it. The clearest example featured in the book is the historical connection of Lagos to New York, New Orleans, and Rio de Janeiro through the Atlantic slave trade (Cole, 2016, p. 82). As he witnesses a junction "dense with rapidly moving human bodies", the narrator suddenly makes "a heavy and unexpected connection" between Lagos and New Orleans, united by "the chain of corpses stretching across the Atlantic Ocean" (Cole, 2014, p. 112). He argues that New Orleans's role as the "largest market for human chattel in the New World […] is a secret only because no one wants to know about it" (Cole, 2014, p. 112). There is yet "another secret" in the history of the Middle Passage:

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of all the ports along the West African shore, "none […] was busier than Lagos" (Cole, 2014, p. 113); yet this history is simply "missing": "There is no monument to the great wound" (Cole, 2014, p. 114). Even though the role of Nigeria in the Atlantic slave trade cannot be understood without considering the interference of the British Empire, the narrator insists on denouncing the complicity of Nigerians in the trade, once again bringing up the issue of greed: "The fratricidal Yoruba wars of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries were a great boost to the transatlantic traffic in human beings. […] Some of these intertribal wars were waged for the express purpose of supplying slaves to traders. At thirty-five British pounds for each healthy adult male, it was a lucrative business" (Cole, 2014, p. 113). This fratricidal violence, motivated by the entanglement in Western-driven forms of plundering, reverberates to this day. However, its origins have, for the most part, been erased from the territory, in an exercise of institutional rewriting: "Why is history uncontested here?" the narrator wonders; "Where are the contradictory voices?" (Cole, 2014, p. 117).

It is worth noting that these musings hark back to the narrator's reaction during his visit to the National Museum. The building, dedicated to history and politics, features a meager display, consisting of only "a series of wall plaques featuring texts about Nigerian history and photographs […]. There are no artifacts, and no documents" (Cole, 2014, p. 78). The only mention of the Atlantic slave trade describes it as an "obnoxious practice": "And that is the depth of it. […] This underwhelming text was doubtless written by a colonial officer […] but someone else keeps it hanging there, year after year, as an official Nigerian response to slavery" (Cole, 2014, pp. 78–79). The narrator is flabbergasted: "I don't know how to make sense of what I am looking at" (Cole, 2014, p. 79) –quite literally, comprehensive knowledge is impossible under the rigid, univocal framework of the Western episteme, which is to say, the framework of colonial rule. This is further complicated by his emotional attachment to the museum, exacerbated after years abroad: "All people who are far from home have something they hold on to. For me, it was the museum and the meaning I had invested in its collection" (Cole, 2014, p. 72).

Elsewhere I have referred to the narrator's struggle with alienation and feelings of inadequacy; here he is situated face to face with the imperialist, Eurocentric world-system that remains uncontested –the same that has fostered the cultural and intellectual developments he cherishes so much. The question, "Where are the contradictory voices?", is a tragic one, insofar as the narrator does not seem fully aware of his own complicity in reproducing the same mindset that prevents the palimpsestic rewriting of history he perceives as necessary. By introducing this paradox, the novella puts forward the need to incorporate those voices cast aside by the official discourse, depicted here as a mere continuation of the colonial system in another guise. In this regard, the novella falls under the transmodern umbrella, not because it offers a solution to this conundrum, but insofar as it brings to light the need for "multicultural communication or dialogue" outside the confines of (post)modernity (Dussel, 2012, p. 48), tacitly acknowledging the need to incorporate "other knowledges" into the uncontested

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mainstream. Even though *Every Day Is for the Thief* does not grant closure to its main character's quest for knowledge and identity, the ending offers a glimpse of acceptance: wandering around the city, the narrator knows himself to be in "[a] labyrinth, not a maze", because "[a] labyrinth's winding paths lead, finally, to the meaningful center" (Cole, 2014, p. 159). Despite the fractured reality he has encountered and chronicled in his journey, and despite the alienation he has felt in doing so, the narrator's comment indicates his will to keep searching for meaning, even if it eludes him. This impulse to go beyond and into the unknown is fundamentally transmodern.

Cole's fiction is a particularly interesting case of transmodern literature because its most distinguishable elements (e.g., generic subversion and hybridity, identities characterized by cosmopolitan rootlessness and in-betweenness, the relevance of intermediality, the notion of palimpsest, the narrator-*flâneur*…) all predate the transmodern shift, and are assimilable to categories like the modern, the postmodern, or the postcolonial. It is perhaps too early to discern unmistakably transmodern elements in literary manifestations grouped under this umbrella. However, reading Cole as transmodern fiction validates the impression that we have collectively crossed from (post)modernity into some new, imprecise state. Despite its limited length, *Every Day Is for the Thief* manages to condense all sorts of themes, genres, and formal games into its labyrinthine exploration of old and new modes of being, drawing attention to the relevance of relationality and border-crossing in this new paradigm. Specifically, Dussel's and Kuecker's branch of Transmodernity is particularly apt at illuminating Cole's interest for charting networks that extend beyond temporal and spatial constraints; moreover, it provides noteworthy insights for a better understanding of Cole's exploration of multicultural dialogue. The latter adopts a decidedly transmodern shape in its depiction of North-South dialogues as fundamentally flawed and asymmetrical, leading to dead ends and miscommunication (as showcased in Cole's second novel, *Open City*). Still, there is an insistence that they cannot be discarded altogether and require us to collectively work towards finding common ground.

Overall, *Every Day Is for the Thief* pushes new understandings of what it means to be a subject navigating diverse identities, ranging from the local to the global, but still constrained by the limits of a modern world-system on the brink of disappearing. Its formal experimentation mirrors the narrator's conflicting affiliations as a cosmopolitan stranger through its fluctuation between several genres and modes. Its treatment of fracture as an inherent condition of the new Grand Narrative that is globalization allows for a nuanced representation of both its positive aspects and the dangers posed by its mechanisms of exclusion. Likewise, the text places readers in front of those same mechanisms of exclusion via the narrator, a complex figure whose condescending attitudes and detachment from the socio-economic realities of his country serves to articulate a critique against the limitations of Eurocentric modernity and its world-system episteme. The novella thus constitutes the much-needed transmodern, palimpsestic rewriting of Lagos, which its narrator reclaims.

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NOTES

[i] The translation of the original Spanish term "Transmodernidad", used by both Enrique Dussel and Rosa Mª Rodríguez Magda, is sometimes translated as "Transmodernism" when referring to the former and "Transmodernity" when referring to the latter. I use "Transmodernity" as it seems to be the more widespread option of the two.

[ii] For an overview of the main tendencies within the transmodern paradigm, see Ateljevic (2013) and Yebra-Pertusa & Aliaga-Lavrijsen (2019).

[iii] Instead of conceiving of "global" and "local" as polar opposites, Robertson (2012) explains that the portmanteau "glocal" illustrates how globalization has contributed to "the simultaneity and the inter-penetration of […] the universal and the particular" (p. 196). This form of locality is sometimes exported and consumed by increasingly globalized markets. For an in-depth genealogy of the term and its implications, see Robertson.

[iv] The notion of modernity is a major point of contention preventing a unified definition of Transmodernity. Following Jürgen Habermas, Rodríguez Magda declares that "[t]he construct of modernity rests on the stones of the Enlightenment and the mortar of industrialization" (2008), dismissing readings that equate "Modernity with colonialism" (2019, p. 24). By contrast, Dussel and others conceive of modernity as the enforcing of Eurocentric epistemic solipsism: "modernity, colonialism, the world-system, and capitalism were all simultaneous and mutually-constitutive aspects of the same reality" (2012, p. 38) –a reality that is inaugurated by the discovery and subsequent conquest of America in 1492. More specifically, Dussel discriminates between the origins of modernity and the moment where Europe did effectively become the "core" of the world-system. Whereas he situates the origins of modernity in the synchronous appearance of colonialism, the seeds of imperialism, and capitalism (not unlike Cedric Robinson does in *Black Marxism*, 1983), Dussel also claims that Europe did not begin to "function as the 'center' of the world market" until the advent of "the industrial revolution" on the socio-economic plane and "the phenomenon of the Enlightenment" on the cultural plane: "Modern Europe became the 'center' after it was already 'modern'" (2012, p. 41).

[v] Paramodern cultures are not equivalent to peripheral cultures, although both concepts sometimes overlap. Examples of paramodern cultures that have gained relevance in the wake of globalization are those from Eastern Asia: China's soaring economy, as well as Korea or Japan's blooming entertainment industries and cultural exports, epitomize the integration of non-Eurocentric paramodern cultures with Western ones.

[vi] Even though the narrator does not acknowledge this himself, there are multiple signs scattered throughout the text that he comes from a somewhat wealthy background: his family has employees such as a driver, live in a big house with its own electricity generator, and can manage to buy imported goods in bulk, among other tell-tale signs.

[vii] This encounter between the Westernized cosmopolitan and its Global South counterpart is more thoroughly developed in Teju Cole's second novel, *Open City* (2011), where the protagonist, a psychiatrist and *flâneur* named Julius, befriends Farouq, an autodidact Moroccan immigrant who runs an internet shop.

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