White whales, bedbugs, and the quest for truth: Demystifying the role of Julius in Teju Cole’s *Open City* through comparison with Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*  

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**Abstract:** Narrators from *Moby Dick* and *Open City* both search for truth by looking beyond conventional geographical, political, and social boundaries. They critically examine the external world, leading to postcolonial truths concerning malevolence of American or Western imperialism. Despite key similarities in perspective, narrators differ in how the external world reflects individual identity. In *Open City*, evil is not just an external concept. It is subconsciously embedded within the mind of the narrator himself. Julius denies committing a brutal rape, which reveals that he is creating his own reality, just as colonial powers “whitewash” acts of exploitation. Creation of an immoral narrator ultimately reveals that external evils are the manifestation of internal processes, which are deeply embedded in the psyche of all human beings. Ultimately, the narrator of *Open City* reveals modern views of global identity development, where interpretation and validation of the external world is an internal and subjective psychological process.

**Subjects:** Postmodernism of Cultural Theory; Race & Ethnicity; Literature  

**Keywords:** Open City; Teju Cole; Moby Dick; Herman Melville; identity; globalization; nationalism

1. Introduction  
In the novel entitled *Open City*, a narrator named Julius wonders around the ancient wall which hems in Trinity Church, perceiving that “the air was cold and smelled of the sea” (Cole, 2012, p. 49). As he wanders about this picturesque location, he begins to reflect on the historical foundations of the site, writing that:

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**PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT**  
This study compares two novels from radically different historical periods, both of which reveal postcolonial processes associated with Western imperialism. Although the works reveal similarities, which include a struggle on the part of a male narrator to understand the world, only the contemporary novel looks beyond geographical, political, and social boundaries to expose transnational processes of identity formation. Instead of seeking validation from the external world, the transnational narrator seeks to form an identity through internal and subjective psychological processes of creation.
Trinity Church was chartered in the waning years of the seventeenth century; seafarers in general and whalers in particular had set out on their outbound journeys with the blessings of its congregation. It was to the same church that they returned, if they had been blessed with a safe and prosperous voyage, to give thanks for journeying mercies. (Cole, 2012, p. 49)

Accounts of seafaring, congregations, and blessed voyages highlight the novel’s overall tone, which explores spiritual and socioeconomic issues in the edifices of New York City. Within the passage, we are compelled to consider religious values that guide postcolonial America during the industrial revolution. We are also compelled to examine spirituality through the eyes of Antony de Hoogs, a Dutch settler of the 17th century. He describes a “snow-white” fish with a metaphysical power, writing that “Only God knows what it means. But it is certain, that I and most of all the inhabitants watched it with great amazement. On the same evening that the fish appeared before us, we had the first thunder and lightning of the year” (Cole, 2012, p. 50).

Embedded within postcolonial descriptions, we can see spiritual links between God, whales, and the white settlers of New York. These links are then systematically deconstructed as the novel progresses. In later accounts of whales, for example, sightings become more materialistic than spiritual, as a stranded whale is “plundered for its oil” and “left to stink up the beach” (Cole, 2012, p. 50). Through realistic accounts of exploitation, we see a change in the perception of man, who plunders objects of great power for a petty profit. The positive nature of white whales is also called into question, as a new sighting becomes “more ominous than usual” because the animal is albino (Cole, 2012, p. 50).

Through the musings of Julius, readers become keenly aware that ethical boundaries of traditional post-colonial systems are often blurred, thereby suggesting the presence of evil amidst good. Prosperity, which is symbolized by the memorialized engravings of “The whale of Berckhey,” is ultimately the result of exploitation. The whale is treated as “an object of commercial value and, when that was exhausted, scientific curiosity” (Cole, 2012, p. 51). Such activity illustrates how resources can be used and abused, as well as masked by beautiful engravings or scientific achievements that hide an inherent malevolence. The whale of Berckhey symbolizes the nature of post-colonial systems, which destroy local cultures and resources for profit, only to “whitewash” historical narratives that depict the incident as beautiful or divine. Cultural exploitation or subjugation is further highlighted by the narrator’s walk at Trinity Church, which leaves him out in the brisk marine air with “no place in which to pray” (Cole, 2012, p. 51). As a Nigerian, Julius is symbolically locked out of a white hegemonic system that ensures prosperity.

Establishing religious, spiritual and racial truths through observation, only to refute these certainties later in the narrative, is a recurrent theme of Open City. It is the juxtaposition of truth with fallacy which makes the story’s purpose difficult to ascertain. Through wanderings and incessant rumination, Julius appears to be a flâneur, one who “walks around not doing anything in particular but watching people and society” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). As he walks about New York City, he seems compelled to minutely examine the environment, along with associated historical and geographical links in time and space. Although wanderings may seem like “superfluous lecture, in a novel full of superfluous lectures,” some scholars point out that the process of description and deconstruction illustrates an underlying profound lesson about life (Epstein, 2019, p. 413). There may indeed be some lesson embedded in the descriptions of Julius, yet discovery remains elusive. Because Julius describes ethical issues in a dispassionate way, in the tradition of a true flaneur, opinions of both the author and narrator remain hidden. Concerning this issue, Haensell (2021) suggests that “thematic complexity and ostensibly motiveless protagonist and story not only resist a totalizing interpretation, but also prompt remarkably varied reader responses” (p. 332). According to this proposition, Julius is merely a narrative device to describe the external world, which represents the real object of discovery. Relying on the contention that Julius is “motiveless,” the novel’s content is thought to have no concrete meaning, unless otherwise assigned by the reader. While an intriguing idea, this morally relativistic view does little to
explain the connection between disjointed accounts of people, places, and things. It also fails to clarify motivations behind the seemingly enigmatic behaviors of the narrator.

In addition to style of narration, Neumann and Kappel (2019) suggest that the novel shows “how intermedial relations between literature and music are linked to the novel’s exploration of transcultural histories of violence” (p. 31). They further assert that these musical undertones show “frictions that resist and undermine the structural coherence of the text and gesture toward something nonlinear” (p. 31). Like Neumann and Kappel, Epstein (2019) explains the novel’s overall meaning through music, suggesting that:

Mahler reads as a double for Julius’s open-bordered cosmopolitanism. One might observe, too, the spiraling, back-and-forth character of Julius’s Mahler lesson, which starts in the composition of Das Lied and the memory of “last things,” moves back to Mahler’s dismissal from the Opera, back again to the death of his daughter, and then forward into his move to New York. Julius’s attendance at the concert takes on a similar spiraling quality: we are told that “yesterday afternoon” he was alerted to the Mahler series, and that tonight’s concert is sold out, before detailing the prior night’s performance of the Ninth. (p. 413)

While musical patterns reveal some aspects of violence and exploitation in an open-bordered cosmopolitanism, they do not adequately explain all of the diverse scenes and observations, many of which have nothing to do with music. In reality, the depiction of music reveals a larger, more prevalent style of prose, where social, spatial, racial, and temporal boundaries are all deliberately blurred to reveal a larger, more interconnected world.

As in the case of both narration and music, other explanations for Julius and his unique method of inquiry center around some kind of external, cosmopolitan view of existence. Some scholars focus upon postcolonial systems when explaining the main purpose of the novel. Ba and Soto, for example, use the “Open City” of Brussels, as well as post 9–11 New York City, to reveal how seemingly global and free cultural contexts are subject to limitations. Regarding Brussels, the city was declared to be unarmed and defenseless so that attack could be avoided during World War II. While the openness and freedom associated with this city appears to be liberating, it also maintains colonial institutions and spaces that oppress marginalized groups. Contrary to the “metaphor of openness,” postcolonial spaces are set up to “barricade the Western metropolis against a perceived Other” (Ba & Soto, 2021, p. 298). Other scholars further elaborate upon this postcolonial purpose, drawing on the historic work of Said’s (1979) Orientalism to identify how geographies of colonialism control marginalized groups. According to Krishnan (2015), for example, “Cole’s novel produces a reading of postcolonial spatiality as a continuation of the abstract formations of colonial space” (p. 675).

Rather than examining postcolonial systems in isolation, some scholars acknowledge the influence of Julius, who filters descriptions through his own perceptive lens. Some scholars view Julius as a biased figure who looks at New York from an African perspective. Fongang (2017) asserts, for example, that Julius captures “African migrants’ subjectivity and positionality in contested metropolises of the West,” revealing diasporic figures in a transitional state which is “in-between socio-cultural, economic, political, and ideological contradictions” (p. 138). Other research suggests that complex narration and interpretation of the environment is actually a rejection, stating that Julius “interrogates rather than affirms an aesthetic cosmopolitan program” that is replete with injustice and inequality (Vermeulen, 2013, p. 39). Whether approbation or disapprobation, each theory reveals an external, cosmopolitan purpose for the novel. As with other theories based upon flaneur-like narration, music, or postcolonialism, meaning is hypothesized to come primarily from external descriptions of the world. While such theories shed some light on important elements of the narrative, they fall short in revealing a salient life lesson which can edify the reader. A disjointed external description of cosmopolitanism does not clearly represent a life lesson in itself, nor does it clearly explain enigmatic behaviors of the narrator, who often acts
contrary to societal expectations. Without clear explanation of the narrator’s motivations, readers may be left confused about purpose and meaning of the text.

2. Construction through deconstruction: Julius, Ishmael, and the Whale
Injustice and cosmopolitanism are indeed a message that the author wishes to convey, yet these theories are quite vague as a means of linking all the strange accounts of people and places into one coherent work. Only Julius is central to disjointed descriptions of the external world, suggesting that he may be a key element to understanding the novel. Aghoghovwia (2020) echoes this claim, suggesting that the external world serves merely as a catalyst for exposing “the nature of the character-narrator” (p. 21). According to this idea, external descriptions have an auxiliary role, highlighting meaning which is embedded deep within the narrator’s psyche. Essentially, Julius, as the only ubiquitous element of a constantly shifting narrative, symbolizes the importance of internal psychological processes, which may transcend fleeting accounts of people, places, or things.

Because Julius’ is the only character or object that is central to the story, further examination of his motivations may serve to explain seemingly enigmatic descriptions of the external world. Like the figurative white whale of Moby Dick, we get a sense that Julius is searching for some kind of specific truth, which lies beneath a veneer of the exterior world. This search is affirmed as Julius describes Moby Dick in relation to whales. While looking at Trinity Church, he is reminded of one of its parishioners, Herman Melville, who “came down the Hudson and settled in Manhattan” to “write his magnum opus on an albino Leviathan” (Cole, 2012, p. 51). It is at this time that the quest of Julius appears linked to a pursuit of metaphysical truth. Just as the narrator of Moby Dick seeks to understand underlying truths about his ship, the sea, and the great whale Moby Dick, Julius struggles to understand enigmatic and hidden truths extant in his external world.

Julius, in Open City, and Ishmael, in Moby Dick, reveal similarities in how they evaluate their world. Both narrators participate little in society, choosing to describe what they see in vivid detail. They take a distant view, wondering about each scene as a flaneur. For Ishmael, he is a mere passenger on the Pequod, a ship which allows him to peer into one microcosm of 19th century American society. On this ship, we see a rigid hierarchy of control based on Anglo-Saxon officers. The ship is headed by Ahab, who is depicted to be a Quaker. Like Julius, Ishmael recognizes a spiritual component to American society that drives behavior. We also see pagans of Native American, African, and Polynesian descent who eat “democratically” (Melville, 2002, p. 130), revealing divergence from the cultural, social, and political institutions in which Melville was born. The most notable depiction of the American system is the ship itself. The Pequod houses its crew strictly based on rank, which mirrors socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic differences of the United States. Like Julius, Ishmael tries to deconstruct this system by illustrating the crew’s feast on a whale, which has been moored alongside the ship. As the narrator describes “valiant butchers” who carve their whale meat, he likens them to the sharks below who “with their jewel-hilted mouths, are quarrelsomey carving away under the table at the dead meat” (Melville, 2002, p. 237). Such juxtaposition effectively deconstructs the man-made social norms to which the crew adhere. The narrator goes on to state that “though, were you to turn the whole affair upside down, it would still be pretty much the same thing” (Melville, 2002, p. 237).

Like Ishmael, Julius examines contemporary society through evaluation of the external environment. In Open City, Parc du Cinquantenaire serves as a microcosm of the West, which can be used to explore aspects of Western imperialism. Teju Cole (2012) writes:

I went to Parc du Cinquantenaire. It was covered in fog, but this made the scale of the monuments seem even bigger. The already gigantic arcades shot up vertiginously and lost their heads in the white veils, and the rows of trees before and beyond them, rigid as sentries, stretched to eternity. (p. 100)
Like descriptions of the Pequod and its crew, the park signifies a heartless natural environment that does not care what happens to the individual. Parc du Cinquantenaire becomes a symbolic representation of an oppressive aristocratic regime. This perspective is exemplified by the narrator’s description of the park, which was “built by a heartless king” (Cole, 2012, p. 100). Since it was built by King Leopold, it represents an underlying system of oppression that leaves the victimized helpless. The aristocratic underpinnings of Western society are repeated in the novel, evinced by a description of New York City which states, “The artifacts on display, most from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—weather vanes, ornaments, quilts, paintings—evoked the agrarian life of the new American country as well as the half-remembered traditions of the old European ones. It was the art of a country that had an aristocracy but did not have the patronage of courts: a simple, open-faced, and awkward art” (Cole, 2012, p. 36). Like the Pequod, symbols of European or American power pervade descriptions of the external environment, inviting us to question their validity. Just as Ahab and white officers control the Pequod, Anglo-Saxon aristocratic traditions control microcosms explored in Open City.

Both narrators also seek truth through observing unique individuals that behave in unexpected ways. For Ishmael, his interest in a South Pacific Islander named Queequeg serves as a prime example. As Queequeg kneels to his idol-god Yojo, Ishmael receives an epiphany, declaring that “beginning with the rise and progress of the primitive religions, and coming down to the various religions of the present time … all these Lents, Ramadans, and prolonged ham-squatting in cold, cheerless rooms were stark nonsense; bad for health; useless for the soul” (Melville, 2002, p. 82). As this example illustrates, it is through Queequeg that Ishmael realizes the nature of religion. He begins to explore any arbitrary religious act, including those of Christianity, through the examination of peculiar paganistic rituals. Queequeg also appears to represent someone that Ishmael wants to be, a man who is free from cultural traditions that preclude enlightenment.

Like Ishmael, Julius’ interest is peaked by an unusual figure who is culturally and philosophically different from himself. He expresses true interest in Dr. Mailotte, who begins her relationship by saying “Well, I know a great many Nigerians, and I really should tell you this, many of them are arrogant” (Cole, 2012, p. 88). Embedded in honesty that would seem rude to other individuals of Nigerian heritage, the narrator sees truth. As in the case of Queequeg, difference leads to a greater understanding of the world. Peculiar behavior leads to introspection as common societal norms are violated. Julius writes that “I was struck by her manner of talking, the unapologetic directness of it, the risk of alienating the person she was talking to. She was at an age, I supposed, at which she had long ceased to care what other people thought” (Cole, 2012, p. 88). Through this passage, Julius reveals a fascination with Dr Mailotte’s avoidance of common social pleasantries, which ultimately results in an exchange of true feelings. The narrator even goes out of his way to ask about the doctor’s two children, a rare example of genuine interest in another person (Cole, 2012, p. 93). As in the case of Dr Mailotte, a North African employee who works at an internet café, named Farouq, surprises Julius through disagreement about the cultural significance of novels. It is through these experiences that the purpose of Open City is further clarified. Rather than being a novel about the negative effects of postcolonialism, it was written to expose the complex dynamic and diversity of African migrants who live in a Eurocentric world. Concerning this issue, Von Gleich (2021) writes that “Through its nuanced negotiation of the diversity of Black communities and their histories in New York City, the novel questions any monolithic notions of the African diaspora, solidarity, and racialized and gendered identities” (p. 14). Ultimately, it is difference rather than monolithic cultural conceptions of propriety that the narrator seeks to understand, explaining why Dr. Mailotte and Farouq are so prominently featured in Open City.

Through observation and rumination, narrators of Open City and Moby Dick discover truths embedded in the edifices and individuals they see around them. It is this obsession with the external world that reveals intent, to access the real which lies under a veil of social propriety. Although searches embedded in the external world reveal some process of discovery related to intent, they do not fully explain the motivation for such an obsession. To understand this, we must
look inward, toward the internal psychological processes that are used to create meaning. Whereas the external environment is rooted in a real world that must obey physical laws, narrators can transcend space through internal thought experiments. They cross physical boundaries through storytelling, ultimately revealing some kind of hidden truth. It is no wonder that authors like Bezanson (1953) state that Moby Dick “is not so much about Ahab or the White Whale as it is about Ishmael … it is he who is the real center of meaning and the defining force of the novel” (p. 36). Only one individual in the story is able to critically observe his environment, leading to a new understanding of self, as well as the physical and metaphysical world that he inhabits. The role of Ishmael parallels that of Julius, who is the binding force which interprets meaning embedded in the world he sees around him.

Similarity between the two narrators may explain more about the purpose of Julius, as well as the motivations for enigmatic behavior. As in the case of Ishmael, who simultaneously constructs and deconstructs “meaning by demonstrating that things (‘in complex subjects’) never come simply or singly” (Edwards, 2006, p. 1), Julius reveals flaws in our conceptions of the world, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the environment. Both narrators reveal a new postmodern world with ethical diversity and nihilism, where nothing has meaning. At the same time, such an interpretation is overly simplistic. Concerning the novel Moby Dick, Lee (2014) points out the following:

[Scholars] Fail to discuss how the story addresses one of the most pivotal themes of Melville’s entire works: the validity of the selfhood in grasping and representing truth. Throughout his literary career, Melville struggled with how a human being can transcend the boundary of the selfhood and reach an understanding of reality inaccessible to sensory experience. (p. 159)

Instead of removing meaning through deconstruction, deliberately blurred boundaries between binary oppositions represent an “architectural metaphor for self-construction,” which is explicitly used “to contrast the idea of a centered construction with that of a building of mere pieces jumbled together” (Gemes, 2001, p. 338). It is the search for an underlying metaphysical existence that unifies deconstructions, defining both narrators. Whereas theorists have erroneously argued that the purpose of Open City lies in deconstruction of external factors, truth is actually gleaned from the conflicting moral and philosophical beliefs embedded in actions of narrator. This parallels the narrator of Moby Dick (Larson, 1995), who reveals truth through building a heightened understanding of self. It is the construction of a new self through deconstruction of the external world that exemplifies the true purpose of both novels.

3. Different worlds for separate identities
Both narrators’ use observation of the external environment to deconstruct their world and build a new identity. While the process of external inquiry is similar, descriptions of the external environment are very different. Ishmael’s world consists of an enclosed American system, which is symbolized by the confines of a whaling ship. The rigid status hierarchy and nearly autocratic control by a white hegemonic system represents iniquity that Ishmael systematically deconstructs. As the lone survivor after the destruction of the ship, he is also the only crew member who is allowed to transcend the American system. Even the highly skilled pagans slowly drown as they sink in the boat, victims of an American socioeconomic system that oppresses them.

Throughout Moby Dick, it is the whale that becomes a symbol of beauty and greatness, as well as an implicit model for self-development. Through viewing the whale in minute detail, Ishmael recognizes that the spout is “glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon” it. In the mingling of vapor between the real and the symbolic world (heaven), Ishmael recognizes a spiritual power amid the physical world. He also recognizes that this divine spark leads to a nobler identity. This perspective is confirmed by the following statement: “Doubts of all things earthly; and intuitions of some things heavenly: this combination makes neither believer nor
infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (Melville, 2002, p. 293). Just as the narrator breaks real and symbolic boundaries by escaping the ship, he recognizes that beauty and greatness is achieved through moving beyond the visible physical world. Ishmael acknowledges that truth comes from “deep divers” who may bridge different worlds, emerging with a more holistic understanding of life. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, who Melville believes has the rare ability to reveal truth through narrative (Melville, 1987), the whale links physical and metaphysical concepts by swimming through the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic.

In the novel Open City, the world that is deconstructed differs considerably from that of Moby Dick. Instead of being highly regimented and confined, it reveals a broad array of locations that span the globe. Scenes in the novel constantly shift from cities like New York, Lagos, and Brussels. Such shifts between American, African, and European continents are further complicated by temporal shifts. One minute, readers are looking at Trinity Church in New York; the next, they are observing life of the Dutch settlers in 1647. Julius also has salient flashbacks about his upbringing in Nigeria. Through the narrator’s mind, we are able to transcend national, geographic and temporal borders, promoting our understanding of today’s interconnected, global system. In addition to a more cosmopolitan scope of observation, the narrator appears attuned to dark and ominous concepts. He recognizes colonial systems that underlie various places and people across the globe. Unlike Ishmael, who finds a mystic power in studying the whale and its crew, Julius also sees socioeconomic iniquity, slavery, injustice, and moral decay in almost every scene he encounters.

Unlike Ishmael, who reveals positive conceptions of the whale and external world, Julius possesses a pessimistic worldview, which adds to the negativity of his self-concept. Whereas Ishmael attributes an almost transcendental power to the whale, which he seems to wholly accept, Julius uses the whale as an omen of inclement weather or symbol of exploitation by colonial powers. Negative depictions match Julius’ outlook of the external world, which is perceived to be dark, ominous, and filled with injustice. In addition to descriptions of the physical world, Julius behaves negatively, disregarding the feelings or needs of others. This perspective is exemplified by the narrator’s interaction with Professor Saito, who is abandoned as he dies of cancer. Regarding this undesirable behavior, some research suggests that Julius “can best be understood not as a flâneur, fugueur, or model cosmopolitan, but, instead, as a parasite” (Clark, 2018, p. 181). Being a negative force in the novel, the narrator is thought to be analogous to bedbugs; “the touch-driven irritations of the bedbugs that infest his mentor’s Manhattan apartment” are thought to parallel his treatment of other people in the story, in which they are “quickly mined for their stories and discarded” (Clark, 2018, p. 181).

The theory of bedbugs does indeed expose the malevolent side of Julius, who cares little for those around him, yet it does little to explain what drives the negative behavior. Through characterization as a parasite, his role in creating meaning from that which he observes is also minimized. Like theories painting Julius as a flâneur, fugueur, or cosmopolitan aficionado, emphasis on influences or characteristics of the external world mask the importance of internal, psychological processes. Later in the novel, mysteries behind Julius’ negative self-concept appear to be explained. The negativity that the narrator perceives within the environment appears to be a projection of inner self. Julius writes that we “are not the villains of our own stories” and “are never less than heroic” (Cole, 2012, p. 243). It is at this point that we realize the true significance of the narrator, who creates his own conception of self, despite possessing immoral qualities. From this characterization of self, we learn that inequities of culture, politics, gender, or race are components the mind, which hide our ability to overcome difficulty in the external world. This internal limitation and “mask” of propriety is further revealed by Moji, who confronts Julius about a rape he committed. It is at this point that “Julius is implicated not only as a witness and victim but also as a perpetrator” (Von Gleich, 2021, p. 1).

Despite committing an atrocious act of evil, Julius’ state of denial allows him to maintain an idealized notion of self. This behavior is reminiscent of an interview with rapists in South Africa, in
which the offenders “were unrepentant and laughing uncomfortably; and in the first programme they were sharing anecdotes” (Gqola, 2015, p. 2). Like Julius, the rapists nonchalantly dismiss the brutality and severity of the crime, even going so far as to admit that they would rape again. Gqola (2015) points out that this behavior is not just related to gender but is firmly connected to both race and power. Concerning this perspective, Kgalemg and Setume (2016) write that “both rape and race are categories of oppression, violence and subjugation. We, therefore, should not conceptualise race and rape in isolation but consider both categories as dependent on one another” (pp. 312–313). Because rape is tied to both power and oppression, it can be compared to the atrocities committed by postcolonial powers. In this way, Julius’ denial is used to reflect a larger pattern of violence and abuse. Like the atrocities perpetrated by colonial or postcolonial powers, which morph acts of evil into a new reality depicting the perpetrator as good, Julius uses his power to justify and dismiss brutal acts of violence.

While Julius and Ishmael parallel each other in their external interpretation of the environment, signs of internal cognitive development differ considerably, which leads to very different interpretations of the world. Unlike Ishmael, we are given a glimpse of an unreliable narrator in Julius, who forgets the violent trauma he perpetrates on a defenseless woman. Through this single event, we realize that it is not the social, political, and economic injustices of the external environment that we should fear, but the internal evils that are responsible for their manifestation. External edifices and human behavior are ultimately the expression of an internal evil nature that all humans may possess.

4. Nationalism and the development of a new global identity

Both narrators are similar in their deconstruction of the external environment, which ultimately reveals a search for truth beyond common geographical, political, and social boundaries. At the same time, there are unique differences in the deconstruction, which reveal the changing identity of individuals raised in the 21st century. For Ishmael, the external world is a nationalist one. Anderson (2006) describes the concept of nationalism through the following changes:

The slow, uneven decline of these interlinked certainties, first in Western Europe, later elsewhere, under the impact of economic change, ‘discoveries’ (social and scientific), and the development of increasingly rapid communication, drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history. No surprise then that the search was on, so to speak for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together. (p. 36)

In Moby Dick, the ship and its crew exemplifies this new and “arbitrary” community which Anderson defines as nationalism. The fraternity of men from diverse religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds are linked by the confines of a ship, as well as the pursuit of a whale. The ship and whaling industry is further representative of social and scientific movements in the United States. Whereas the crew represents new social behaviors of a growing nation, technology used to capture whales represents an industrial and economic revolution. As review of the ship and crew reveal, Moby Dick parallels nationalist ideals as envisioned by Anderson. Therefore, Ishmael represents a means to explain national, American concerns, which leads to an effective postcolonial deconstruction of social, political, and economic concerns in the United States. Truth is an external force, embodied by the whale, which lies outside national boundaries, which are delineated by the ship. In the case of Ishmael, his critical view of social and religious issues remain purely external. Through examination of the Pequod and its crew, hierarchical and religious values are exposed and confounded. In using the Pequod, a more representative container for U.S. nationalism is established, which is based upon physical boundaries rather than religious or aristocratic concepts.

According to Anderson’s analysis, narration designed to cultivate nationalist ideals must transcend the individual, thereby cultivating a sense of “meanwhile,” an idea that other individuals are operating in a shared space and time. Ishmael explains the Pequod and crew in ways that promote this assumption, further supporting Anderson’s belief in one overall “Imagined Community.” In the
case of Julius, however, this sense of community or identification with a particular political, social, or cultural order is distinctly absent. Our sense of space and time is confused as the narrator’s mind wanders to different times and locations. There is a lack of any external location to anchor the novel and its characters. Through making the external world incoherent, a new point is exemplified. Truth is established through an internal process of self-development in which encounters with the external world are carefully evaluated and individualized. Our ideas of culture, politics, and society also mold the reality around us. As such, the narrator of Open City does not just glean truth from the environment. He actively creates it. In its negativity, the environment itself serves as a projection of subconscious evil within the psyche of the narrator.

The ability to transcend both time and space is also different in Open City, which gives the novel an updated global character. This development of a new cosmopolitan identity parallels developments in film. In the article “Fictions of the Global,” Rita Barnard (2009) reveals that the film Babel depicts the growth of a more complex worldview through obfuscation of time and space. In the movie, scenes are only loosely linked based upon global issues like tourism, immigration, and terrorism. The only definitive link is to a single commodity, the gun. This gun “given by a wealthy Japanese businessman to a Moroccan hunting guide, ends up being involved in the accidental shooting of an American tourist by a young Berber goatherder, an incident whose ramifications are felt in various ways in the film’s various locations” (Barnard, 2009, p. 208).

Like the gun, which links scenes together on a global level, Julius serves as a transnational object, which is used to challenge traditional notions of space and time established by nationalistic ideals. Through emphasis of the narrator’s mind, focus is taken away from national, state, or tribal affiliations that would localize space. Just as notions of physical location are deconstructed by Julius, boundaries in time are deliberately muddled. In the tradition of Derrida, aspects of both time and space are deconstructed to erode any localized notions of social affiliation. Through this technique, readers are forced to confront their own individuality in a global world. Functionally, the reader of Open City can acknowledge that both space and time is limited to the immediate environment one inhabits. A national or tribal affiliation is negated simply because the perspective is localized to the individual’s surroundings; the reader no longer feels a need for spatial or temporal connections, which are required when social groups become smaller, localized, and close-knit.

5. Conclusion
While similar in many ways, Julius does differ from Ishmael. Whereas Ishmael presents a postcolonial criticism of American norms, Julius is a transnational object, representing the confused boundaries between time and space within our modern global society. It is through the immoral act of Julius that we learn about the main theme of the novel, which explains the seemingly “superfluous” lectures of social, racial, or economic injustice imbued within the structures or characters he meets. Evil, in the form of violence and oppression, is a global phenomenon. Although latent, each individual possesses a potential to use power to discriminate, exploit, and victimize others. It is this power that is manifest in external structures. Through the observations of Julius, we are compelled to reflect on a universal evil that may lurk deep inside of all of us.

Both Moby Dick and Open City have narrators that critically examine the world, leading to a postcolonial deconstruction of American or Western imperialism. Only Open City, however, reveals an evil embedded within the mind of the narrator. After learning from a friend’s sister about a brutal rape, we not only become cognizant of an inherent evil, but are given the sense that Julius’ quest for understanding power, exploitation, and victimization within the external world is really an internal process. Julius exemplifies a trauma victim who is unable to remember his own transgression. Instead, his evil deeds become manifest through the subconscious recognition of evils throughout the external world. Just as rape is a brutal enforcement of power, Open City’s symbolic whale refers to an obsession with power and exploitation, which is manifest in the mind.
The difference between Julius and his counterpart, Ishmael, is a significant one, which may ultimately define the global novel that has emerged in the 21st century.

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**Ethics statement**

This study did not include human subjects or animals. Therefore, this section is not applicable.

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