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Pieter Vermeulen^a

^a University of Leuven

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Pieter Vermeulen

Reading alongside the market: affect and mobility in contemporary American migrant fiction

How can we read contemporary fiction in the age of its real subsumption under capital? How can we avoid explaining it as just one more commodity? This presentation explores these questions by returning to the proximity between neoliberalism and biopolitics in Foucault's 1978–1979 lectures, and by describing the tension between contemporary literature and neoliberal biopolitics as a relation of *reciprocal saturation*: while the market has colonised all but the most marginal fields of culture, the market has in its turn adopted markedly literary strategies, of which the mobilisation of affect and the manipulation of potentiality are the two most important. Neither a form of surface reading nor of interpretation, the reading alongside the market that I propose reads for contemporary fiction's engagement with affect and potentiality, in order to trace the minimal difference between its textual performance and its biopolitical solicitation. I illustrate this approach through a brief reading of Teju Cole's *Open City* and a more extensive discussion of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*.

Keywords

Affect; American literature; biopolitics; Teju Cole; contemporary literature; Mengestu; Dinaw; neoliberalism; potentiality

migration has a cost. What is the function of this cost? It is to obtain an improvement of status, of remuneration, and so on, that is to say, it is an investment. (Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*)¹

1. Interpretation against the market

After the closure of the world market, is there still anything that distinguishes literary works from other commodities? If artistic autonomy was still an organising ambition for modernist literature, recent critical interrogations of that ambition testify to the difficulty of extending it as a viable option into the present, when the literary field seems to have been fully saturated by the market.² One way to understand the difference between modernism and the contemporary is to code it, as Nicholas Brown does, as a shift from literature's *formal* subsumption to its *real* subsumption under capital: if modernist literature was already drawn into a capitalist economy (a situation Marx called 'formal subsumption'), it is only more recently that the production process itself is altered and 'oriented toward exchange' rather than towards the creation of a meaningful work.³ Under conditions of 'real subsumption', the writer is not primarily concerned with creating a significant work, but rather produces literature in the full knowledge that its value will be decided in the market. If traditionally the work was seen as 'an object whose use (or purpose or meaning) is normatively inscribed in the object itself' by its maker, it is now an object that merely 'seeks to provoke interest in its beholder', and to trigger in that beholder a readiness to spend.⁴ Works of literature, then, descend to the position of mere commodities as they increasingly shed their status as meaningful works. When only the market matters, the distinction between meaning and exchange value collapses.

In this essay, I am interested in exploring the methodological consequences of the tensions between meaning and the market that animate contemporary literature. After all, if the closure of the market reshapes the conditions under which literature is being produced, it necessarily also affects the way we *read* literature. I first sketch out Nicholas Brown's take on this issue, only to go on to supplement Brown's account with a different conception of neoliberalism, which I understand as a form of biopolitics. This difference allows me to shift Brown's double emphasis on *autonomy* and *interpretation* towards a consideration of *imbrication* and *reading* – the two key terms in an approach that I call a 'reading alongside

the market', as opposed to the 'interpretation against the market' that I find in Brown's work. I elaborate that approach in a reading of two contemporary novels of migration: Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) and Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007). By reading these novels' imbrication with the biopolitical powers that (almost) saturate contemporary migrant lives, I locate the significance of contemporary works of literature not in their assertion of their specious autonomy from the market, but rather in their singular inflections, distortions, and refractions of socioeconomic forces. It is by intensifying literary works' imbrication with the market that we can gauge their distinctiveness.

For Brown, the realisation that the meaning of a work is no longer inscribed in it by its author, but is rather decided by its effects on its potential readers and buyers, signals the end of interpretation as a viable project. As only the object's 'exchangeability' matters, the question of meaning is 'entirely subordinated to more or less informed guesses about other people's desires'; and if some works still display a specious consistency, this consistency does not automatically qualify as a meaning, as 'what looks like meaning is only an appeal to a market niche'. As 'the form the object takes is determined elsewhere than where it is made, namely on the market', interpretation no longer makes sense. The salient feature of a work is then 'simply what can be said about the appropriation of commodities', and that, Brown notes, is a 'sociological question', not an interpretive one.⁵

Still, Brown leaves room for one kind of work that still allows for interpretation. Even if interpreting fully commodified artworks is pointless, works that proclaim their resistance to the domination of exchange value can still be meaningfully interpreted; after all, '[i]f a work of art is not (or not only) a commodity, then it makes entirely good sense to approach it with interpretive tools, since it is intended to mean something'.⁶ Claiming to be more than mere commodities acquiring value on the market, works that assert their autonomy make it possible for the project of interpretation to continue. And as the thing threatening to render interpretation meaningless is the closure of the market, the claim to autonomy from the market, far from only enabling interpretation, also has a genuinely political meaning: 'A plausible claim to autonomy is in fact the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the dictates of the market'.⁷ Within the horizon of neoliberal depoliticisation, the claim to literary autonomy and its interpretation preserve the hope of a return to genuine political contestation. That this position makes something as momentous as the hope for political change depend on something as fragile as a declaration of artistic intent is one reason why I will develop a different account of neoliberal reading in the rest of this essay.

Brown's politics of autonomy is one way of responding to literature's real subsumption under capital. While modernist literature could still be regarded both in terms of its meaning and of its effects in the market, contemporary literature can only assert its meaning by declaring itself autonomous from the domination of exchange value. In order for the projects of interpretation and politics to remain possible, Brown *radicalises* the opposition between autonomous literature and the market; his politicised approach is, in a sense, a kind of *interpretation against the market*. This is a critical practice that disengages literature from the socioeconomic forces that, on Brown's own account, saturate the literary field; it dispenses with a consideration of how the work itself engages the socioeconomic conditions in which it emerges. In the rest of this essay, I pursue an approach that trains its eye precisely on the specific ways in which contemporary fictions negotiate their necessary participation in the market. In order to identify the domains on which these negotiations take place – those of affect and potentiality – I consider neoliberalism as a form of biopolitics. This makes it possible to read these fictions' imbrication with market forces without surrendering their meaningfulness; indeed, as the world market constitutes the horizon within which contemporary fictions operate, it is their particular way of participating in the market that defines their significance.

2. Neoliberalism as biopolitics: reading alongside the market

So how, exactly, does the market capture the literary work? How do we understand the relations between literature and the market, other than as a unidirectional process of commodification? One way to arrive at a denser understanding of the juncture of culture, power, and economics is by recalling the affinities between neoliberalism and biopolitics. These (theoretical) affinities were already intuited before the (historical) triumph of neoliberalism in Michel Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, his Collège de France lectures from 1978–1979 devoted to analyses of German and American neoliberalism. Foucault's analyses of neoliberalism emerge in the context of his investigations of biopolitics and technologies of the self in the last decade of his life. This contiguity underlines that neoliberalism is, among many other things, a massive reorganisation of life: a redefinition of human life as 'human capital' to be 'formed and accumulated' and of human individuals as 'abilities-machines' to be improved and invested in.⁸ As Jeffrey Nealon has argued in his book *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, since the time of Foucault's analyses in the late 1970s, biopolitics has ever more intensely targeted people's vital capacities, and it has increasingly eroded the distinctions between those zones where

disciplinary power used to operate (the focus of much of Foucault's work before the mid-1970s) and other life-zones to the extent that the difference between them has become obsolete; undertaking an ever more capacious colonisation of people's affects and vital capacities, it has come to infiltrate places where it previously did not travel – into questions of health, lifestyle, leisure, and office culture.⁹ Biopolitics, in its neoliberal mutation, is not primarily a matter of racism and fascism (the rubrics under which Foucault introduces the term 'biopolitics' in his 1975–1976 lectures, and which he explicitly rejects in 1978–1979),¹⁰ but rather an encompassing and insidious saturation of everyday life – a mundane process of what Philip Mirowski has called 'everyday neoliberalism'.¹¹ The biopolitical angle makes visible how contemporary life has been supersaturated by a market that has begun to extract monetary value from previously restricted fields in a way that makes an account of literature, as one such previously restricted field, in terms of its specious 'semi-autonomy' or its spurious powers to 'slow down' or 'interrupt' market forces less than convincing.¹² This confirms Jeffrey Nealon's contention that 'the general line of reasoning concerning the uselessness and/or semi-autonomy of literature is all but exhausted'.¹³ What is needed, then, is a different account of literary significance that factors in its biopolitical solicitation.

Locating neoliberalism in its biopolitical horizon puts pressure on the wishful notion that literature can serve as an escape from the market. While a biopolitical approach confirms Brown's thesis of 'the real intensification of capital penetration into heretofore "cultural" zones of experience',¹⁴ it casts this process as not only an economic development, but also as a shift in the management of life. The biopolitical perspective adds a crucial twist to our understanding of the neoliberal colonisation of experience: it shows that the morphing of power into biopolitics not only means that literature and culture have become saturated by the market, but also that the extension and intensification of the forces of the market, in their attempt to reinforce their grasp of the modalities of lived experience, rely on a massive mobilisation of potentialities and affects. As Nealon has underlined, the biopolitical perspective reveals a close affinity between the strategic repertoire of neoliberalism, on the one hand, and literature, which has long codified and manipulated affects and capitalised on the tensions between the actual and the possible. For Nealon, neoliberal economics is 'cultural to the core';¹⁵ long before the economy morphed into the manipulation of symbols, the trafficking in information, the embrace of undecidability as risk, and the mining of affect, these elements already populated the field of the literary. Recall that already in Jameson's 'Post-modernism' essay, we read that 'the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture', far from eradicating culture, coincides with 'a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm'.¹⁶ The current expansion

of biopolitics is then, for Nealon, ‘an intensification and mutation within postmodernism’ as Jameson diagnosed it;¹⁷ it emphasises the intricate connections between late capitalism and its cultural logic. If the market has begun to manage affect and enlist potentiality, then, it not only subsumes, but also relies on, the literary.

Adding this biopolitical twist to our understanding of neoliberalism opens methodological possibilities that need not rely on declarations of autonomy – a requirement that would remove the vast majority of contemporary literary works from critical view. Instead of a fully saturated world market from which literature and interpretation can only escape by asserting their autonomy, we get two reciprocal – if not symmetrical – processes of saturation: the subsumption of the literary under capital, which in its turn operates through the adoption of a repertoire that is constitutive of the once restricted field of the literary. For better or for worse, this locates the study of contemporary literature at a crucial place for interrogating the complex connections between culture and the market. The approach I pursue in this essay reads the ways in which contemporary literature refracts, remediates, recirculates, and filters the socioeconomic forces that afflict it; it locates the salience of literature not in ‘its *distance from dominant culture*’, but in its ‘*imbriation with contemporary socioeconomic forces*’.¹⁸

The two fictions I discuss may initially seem to be manufactured to cater for a very particular market niche in what Sarah Brouillette has identified as ‘the expanding global market for English-language literary texts’.¹⁹ Both *Open City* (2011) and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) fit the template of literary migrant fiction: they duly document the realities of transcontinental migration and exile; their style is overtly literary and sophisticated, their mood melancholy; their narrators are, like their authors, displaced Africans in the contemporary USA, and this overlap has been exploited by branding these works and their authors through ‘their ostensible attachment to specific locations’.²⁰ While both novels invite consumption as moving tales of migration and exile, they both go on to frustrate the expectation of a significant emotional experience. Instead of providing the emotive transport that their genre and their peritexts promise, they generate an intractable affective force that undercuts readers’ identification with their protagonists, even if such identification is a crucial generic feature of migrant fiction. These novels, in other words, unleash particular affective dynamics that, while they are generated through their imbrication with the rhythms of the market, cannot simply be synchronised with those rhythms. Of course, there is no guarantee that those unruly dynamics will *not* be recuperated by the market; still, these moments of misalignment are elements that the critical approach that I propose aims to describe.

Taking my cue from Timothy Bewes, I call such a reading that attends to the (ultimately incomplete) biopolitical saturation of contemporary fiction a reading ‘*alongside* the novel’ as well as a reading ‘*alongside* the market’.²¹ Such a mode of reading is attentive to the ways in which the ‘event of reading’ inevitably unsettles the expectations – produced in the market and mobilised by, among other things, peritexts and author branding – that frame that event.²² It demonstrates the limits of the market by training its eye on a reading event that momentarily escapes pre-programming. Through its attention to ‘the moment of the reading itself’²³ and its reluctance to assume the label of interpretation (instead of reading), this method may initially seem to have a lot in common with the approach Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have influentially promoted as ‘surface reading’. But if like Best and Marcus, this reading strategy brackets the protocols of ‘deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion’,²⁴ it does not for all that simply surrender to the ‘pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy’ of the textual surface:²⁵ indeed, it is only interested in affects and potentiality to the extent that these emerge in the gap between biopolitical mobilisation and textual event.²⁶ In that sense, attention to the event of reading fundamentally relies on a particular understanding of the market – and more specifically, of its biopolitical inflection. This biopolitical perspective, far from serving up the textual surface as a self-sufficient presence, positions the textual surface in a market that can never contain it without generating frictions, overlaps, and distortions to which a reading alongside the market attends. This approach amounts to what Carolyn Lesjak, in her critique of Best and Marcus, calls ‘reading surfaces [...] as never identical to themselves in their “thereness”, and always found within and constitutive of complex spatial relations, both seen and not seen [...] all of which requires a more rather than less expansive reading practice’.²⁷ So neither an *interpretation against the market*, nor a *surface reading with the market*, but a *reading alongside the market* that attends to elements that escape capture by either the market or the intentions of the author; a reading that, in Timothy Bewes’ words, targets the ‘residue of intentionless’ in texts that point to the limits of the powers of markets and producers to pre-programme human experience.²⁸

Of course, the market is famously adept at repurposing and recalibrating gestures of friction and dissent. What I call reading alongside the market is, then, no celebration of the spurious subversive potential of literature; nor does it understand the role of literary criticism in heroic terms as a sublimated form of political activism. Rather, and more modestly, it aims to attune critical practice to the sites where literary works interact and overlap with the market, as it assumes that a better understanding of these elements are crucial for a more adequate appreciation

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of literature's forms and functions in an age of real subsumption; as a critical practice, reading alongside the market makes no (political) claims beyond such understanding and appreciation. My aim is to *read* the complexities and surprises generated by literature's saturation by the market, and to suspend judgement about whether particular texts are hegemonic or resistant, subdued or subversive. In this way, I want to avoid the moralism of the 'bipolar analytic framework' that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have detected in critical practices that read every text as, in their memorable words, 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic'.²⁹ In the rest of this essay, I am less interested in telling the subversive from the hegemonic tendencies in the works I describe than in understanding the fluctuations from resistance to accommodation and from recuperation to hesitation as the marks of these works' participation in the market. The market is a flexible and pluriform dynamic that, precisely because of its shapshifting potential, can almost fully saturate the contemporary literary field. Under these conditions, there is nothing that keeps novels from being, in a sense, 'fully subversive, fully hegemonic'. What remains to be read is the specific ways in which they are.

3. Affect and potentiality: Teju Cole

If neoliberal biopolitics primarily targets people's *affects* and *potentiality*, literature's imbrication with the market can be read along these two dimensions, and not just in terms of its thematic meanings. This is not to say that contemporary migrant fiction does not also engage socioeconomic realities on a thematic level: figuring contemporary patterns of migration, interrogating the celebration of mobility in the name of cosmopolitanism, and addressing the promises of upward mobility that often underwrite global movement, contemporary migrant fiction is invariably *about* different forms of mobility. As I have shown in more detail elsewhere,³⁰ while Teju Cole's *Open City* marshalls all these thematic concerns and appears to present itself as an exemplary sophisticated and melancholy migrant novel, which is how it has overwhelmingly been received, it subtly declines cosmopolitan agendas on the levels of affect and potentiality; indeed, its concern with different forms of mobility is cut across by an unruly and intractable affective dynamic that cannot be synchronised with the other movements it traces.

Open City is rigorously tied to the perspective of Julius, its Nigerian American narrator. It combines an investment in cultural difference and high culture with a markedly melancholic tenor, and it is especially this combination that seems to make it a perfect fit for the niche of the literary migrant novel. The novel's multiple concerns are strung together by two

organising devices: first, Julius' compulsive habit of walking the streets and travelling the public transport systems of New York and Brussels, which generates a number of intense aesthetic experiences as well as a series of encounters with a whole catalogue of storytellers; and second, Julius' memories, which connect the narrative present and the stories of Julius' interlocutors to his and his family's Nigerian and German pasts. On the face of it, Julius is an exemplary cosmopolitan, performing multiple gestures of detachment and re-attachment. As the critical reception of the book has not failed to point out, Julius appears as an early twenty-first-century update of the figure of the *flâneur*, an aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them, and who exemplifies a cosmopolitan ethos that thrives on intercultural curiosity and on the virtues of the aesthetic.³¹

On this common reading, Cole's *flâneur* simply does what cosmopolitanism always does: give a human face to nonhuman processes of globalisation.³² Yet at the same time that it transcodes globalisation as human experience, the novel also subverts this isomorphic mapping by making Julius, the human centre of the book, unavailable as a site for empathetic identification. In the event of reading the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that, even if *Open City* continues to string together intense descriptions of aesthetic experiences and the multidirectional interactions between memories of global suffering, these experiences fail to register in the mind of Julius, through which the whole novel is filtered, in even a minimally transformative way. Take, for instance, a passage near the beginning of the novel, in which Julius visits a record store that is about to go out of business, and muses that music stores should be 'silent spaces', as loud music 'spoiled the pleasure of thinking about other music'. Yet this time Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* allows him to 'enter the strange hues of its world', 'a stronger, surer mood', a 'trance'. This rapture is carried over to all of Julius' activities in the following days; in a quintessentially modernist valorisation of the redemptive intensities of sense-perception, '[t]here was some new intensity in even the most ordinary things ... as if the precision of the orchestral texture had been transferred to the world of visible things'.³³

While meticulously crafted descriptions of aesthetic experience such as these may seem to establish the paradigm for successful performances of the cosmopolitan imagination, they never trigger cosmopolitan connections in Julius' life or mind. Julius carries this heightened experience out of the store into an aestheticised version of daily life when he notes that '[i]t simply wasn't possible to enter the music fully, not in that public place'.³⁴ He leaves the store, takes the train, and spends the train ride fully disconnected from 'the crowds' filling that train. The chapter ends with a conversation with his next-door neighbour, in

which he learns that the latter's wife died five months before, a revelation that makes him realise that he 'had noticed neither her absence nor the change . . . in his spirit'. Music, like the novel, offers no guarantees for cosmopolitan contact: 'I had known nothing in the weeks when her husband mourned, nothing when I had nodded to him in greeting with headphones in my ears.'³⁵ While the reader may initially be tempted to read Julius' dissociation as the 'productive alienation' and the disinterested detachment that is proper to the cosmopolitan figure of the *flâneur*,³⁶ the event of reading morphs from a frustrated occasion for empathetic cross-cultural identification to a protracted exposure to the unavailability of such emotional deliverance. *Open City*, in other words, refuses to offer the kind of gratifying and cathartic emotive transports that circumscribe the niche of literary migrant fiction in the global marketplace.

A reading *alongside* the novel notes how the event of reading *Open City* takes shape as a prolonged failure to deliver an anticipated emotion. Crucially, this 'suspension of clearly identified emotions' does *not* lead to an outright *absence* of emotion, but to a less comfortable and less tractable affective dynamics 'taking place outside of sensory and emotional codification'.³⁷ Sianne Ngai has called this affect that emerges precisely when an expected emotion fails to materialise 'a second order feeling': it is 'a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about what one is feeling [. . .] the dysphoric affect of affective disorientation – of being lost on one's own "cognitive map" of available affects'.³⁸ This affective dynamic is less easily captured, defined, or synchronised with the other rhythms of the novel's development; it constitutes an emotive movement that cuts across the narrative trajectories it encounters in the event of reading. In that way, it assures that the reading event escapes emotional pre-programming; and even if this in no way amounts to a declaration of autonomy, it does point to the limits of the powers of the market to calculate, programme, and thus commodify human experience. As neoliberal biopolitics amounts to a mobilisation of affect, as I have argued, the event of reading *Open City* points to the persistence of literature's potential to *demobilise* affect and turn it against attempts to codify it.

Literature's treatment of affect is intricately connected to its concern with potentiality, which provides a second biopolitical hinge between literature and the market. Neoliberal biopolitics overwhelmingly casts human capacities and faculties in terms of potentiality – as what Paolo Virno calls the '*potential to produce*'.³⁹ In this sense, biopolitics amounts to a process of managing people's potentialities in order to maximise the value to be extracted from them; it is an endeavour 'to absorb people's lives and labor power more fully'.⁴⁰ In a recent book devoted to the relations between literature's experimental force and potentiality, Alex

Houen has shown that the singular affective force of literature is intimately related to its ability to shape worlds of possibility – its power to pronounce ‘its literary suspension from both the author and the real world’.⁴¹ Because it has a licence to cut across habitual protocols through which potentiality is cultivated only to be actualised as value, it holds a ‘real affective potency’ that empowers it to ‘extend the range of a person’s capacities for thinking and feeling’ beyond the scenarios ratified by neoliberalism.⁴² This updates a point I made before: to the extent that biopolitics relies on procedures, such as the animation of potentiality, that we might as well call literary, literature can engage those procedures in ways that the market cannot directly capture.

Open City draws on potentiality in at least two ways, both of which differ from customary scenarios for actualising vital powers. First, and as I already noted, it refuses to repay the reader’s emotional investment in its protagonist, even as its opening pages strongly invite such an investment. In this way, it allows the reader to experience how affective potential can remain unemployed, and thus be something else than a resource to be transformed into value. Second, it also frustrates the expectations of upward mobility that typically accrue to stories of immigration,⁴³ as Julius, in spite of his compulsive mobility, refuses to develop either emotionally or socially in any meaningful way. His career as a psychiatrist only advances as he joins a private practice at the very end of the novel, immediately after a scene that has revealed him to be (probably) a rapist, and conclusively made him unavailable for readerly empathy.⁴⁴ The novel’s minimal plot only satisfies the expectations of social mobility, in other words, when it has assured that this satisfaction can no longer register as a significant emotional experience, but instead morphs into the awkward ‘second-order feeling’ besetting emotive disorientation that I discussed above.

Julius begins the novel as a restless walker, as a *flâneur* whose mobility seems to testify to an infinite curiosity, freedom, and possibility. Yet near the end of the novel, his restless mobility, his intermittent amnesia (notably, about his sexual assault on a friend’s sister), and his emotional dissociation congeal into a decidedly less glamorous condition: the novel powerfully suggests that Julius is not so much a *flâneur* as a *fugueur*. The *fugueur* is a shadowy figure from the history of psychiatry, who emerged in the late nineteenth century as a direct counterfigure to the *flâneur*.⁴⁵ While the latter celebrated the powers of mobility and curiosity, the *fugueur* was a traumatised, compulsive walker whose journey was ‘less a voyage of self-discovery than an attempt to eliminate self’.⁴⁶ What begins as a celebration of cosmopolitan and migratory possibility is gradually revealed as a pathological condition of compulsive restlessness; the expectation that potentiality will be actualised makes way for a frustrating

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assertion of impotence. If *Open City* appears to present itself as a melancholy migrant fiction, its deployment of affect and potentiality makes it impossible for the event of reading to be contained by the slot that the global literary market has provided for it.

4. Mobility and the mobilisation of potentiality: Dinaw Mengestu

In her study of the resurgence of the political novel in the early twenty-first century, Caren Irr notes that *Open City* and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* participate in an ongoing mutation of African-migration fiction. Like other such works, both novels turn 'away from themes of cultural loss and traumatic history', and instead elect to 'map the restless psychology of newly mobile contemporary subjects'.⁴⁷ Like *Open City*, Mengestu's novel cuts across the conventions of the literary migrant novel; it shows how different forms of restlessness and mobility fail to map onto each other, and how the friction between these movements generate a tractless affect that cannot be slotted as a readily recognised emotional experience. The novel is narrated by Sepha Stephanos, an Ethiopian migrant who runs a small shop on Logan Circle in Washington, DC. Set in 1997, the novel shows how migration is first of all an experience of being stuck in a place that is not home: Sepha is 'stuck living on the sidelines'⁴⁸ in the position of a witness (or, as Irr underlines, referring to one of Sepha's main pastimes, of a reader)⁴⁹ who can only observe, not participate in, the gentrification of the neighbourhood, and who will only be able to move when he is forced to by an eviction notice. In a novel obsessed with modulations of pace, migration materialises as a compulsive rhythm of doomed inertia and forced mobility that Sepha is initially powerless to influence. The novel portrays the dissociation between market fluctuations, personal trajectories, and patterns of migration; as I will show, it complicates the opposition between the reality of 'stagnant [...] immigrant melancholia'⁵⁰ and the potential of upward mobility by figuring a dynamic that cuts across these categories, as well as across the differences between free and compulsive movement.⁵¹ In this way, the event of reading the novel resists codification as an instance of immigrant melancholia.

The chorus of critical voices reprinted on the back cover and on the first pages of the book gives a good idea of the generic expectations that frame the event of reading. It clearly positions the book in a recognisable niche (the same one where we encounter *Open City*) by dutifully repeating a limited set of generic markers: the book belongs to a 'special group of American voices' produced by global migration; it excels at 'giving voice' to (or even 'sing[ing]') 'the immigrant experience'; it depicts that experience accurately (the characters are 'well observed' thanks to Mengestu's

‘plausible depiction’ of them); and because of these aesthetic choices, it manages to promote intercultural connection, as it traces the ‘fallout of cross-cultural incuriosity’; it ‘moves the conversation forward’ and cracks ‘open the dusty window that often separates us’, thus giving shape to ‘meaningful human connection’. If we understand ‘genre’, with Lauren Berlant, as ‘an aesthetic structure of affective expectation’,⁵² these characterisations set up the ethical and emotive expectations that the novel will amply confirm in its first half, before it will go on to explore an unexpected new track in its second half.

The novel’s very first paragraph, which introduces us to its main setting (the narrator’s Washington grocery store) and three of its main characters, immediately upstages this procedure of slotting people and experiences: we learn that the three African immigrants met each other working as valets at the Capital Hotel, and it was there ‘that Kenneth became Ken the Kenyan and Joseph, Joe from Congo’ (p. 1).⁵³ As for Sepha, being skinny in the 1980s was enough for Americans to (correctly) identify him as Ethiopian. Living on the fringe of society, these three immigrants have adopted the idea that blending in is a process of persistent repetition: Ken has ‘come to believe that American men are so successful because they say the same thing over and over again’ (p. 2). Belonging, then, is a matter of endless repetitions of the same, and a failure to abide by these unwritten rules confirms one’s marginality. After an awkward dinner with Judith, a white professor with whom he strikes up a tenuous friendship when she comes to live in the neighbourhood, Sepha berates himself for his romantic expectations: it is ‘a case of mistaken identity’, a foolish attempt to ‘recast’ himself as a different ‘type of man’ (p. 80). This logic of strict codification ultimately marks the definitive end of the tentative approaches between Sepha and Judith, as the black inhabitants of the square are united by the wave of evictions that threatens them and Judith’s house is set on fire by one victim of these evictions. On a thematic level, then, the novel underlines the pervasiveness and the destructiveness of the logic of categorical codification. By resisting that logic on the (biopolitical) level of affect, it indirectly identifies it as a biopolitical procedure.

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears dramatises the false promises of freedom and upward mobility. Sepha duly invests ‘two thousand dollars of borrowed money [...] with the idea that perhaps [his] store could become a deli, a restaurant’ and therefore a source of personal pride (p. 3). Kenneth most enthusiastically embodies the conviction that ‘[y]ou can’t stay still, man. You have to move on. That’s the way the world works’ (p. 190). Yet the way the world works is not the way it works for those living in that world: the novel’s plot underlines that Sepha’s individual fate intersects with larger socioeconomic fluctuations

in a seemingly random way. Initially, the arrival of Judith and the white middle-class she represents seems to herald a rising tide that will float all boats (pp. 16–17); in reality, it soon leads to the eviction of most of his regular customers. In contrast, Sepha notes that his shop has never been more successful than in the days when it was still frequented by prostitutes and their customers (p. 38). The store again attracts large crowds in the immediate aftermath of the first evictions and the subsequent incidents that signal the end of the illusion of shared material progress (p. 193). The novel offers no structural parallel between larger socioeconomic trends and personal profit, which puts pressure on the idea that there is a significant relation between investment and reward, and on the ideology of upward mobility that this meritocratic idea sustains. As a chastened Sepha remarks near the end of the novel: ‘I knew that there were patterns to life, but what I had never understood until then was how insignificant a role we played in creating them’ (p. 194).

If the novel addresses biopolitical patterns of thinking, feeling, and moving on a thematic level, it decisively intervenes in them in its staging of *potentiality* and *affect*. Confronted with the capture of potentiality into a restricted set of scenarios for actualisation, Sepha notes how the incomprehensible intersections of diverse dynamics, far from merely spreading confusion, also end up extending the range of the possible. Against the background of the stasis that marks migrant life, the swift renovation of Judith’s house seems ‘something that bordered on the miraculous’, undercutting Sepha’s expectation ‘for the things that are dead or dying to remain so’ (p. 209). In its first half, the novel mournfully assesses Sepha’s exclusion from these untapped potentialities. It describes immigrants like him as lacking both substance and freedom: ‘Somnambulists, all of us [...] we wake to sleep and sleep to wake’ (p. 35). Someone like Judith, in contrast, has both substance and the liberty to move: ‘[p]art fugitive, part adventurer’ (p. 81), she feels yet weighed down by the solidity of her property (p. 23) and the burden of the masses of furniture she has inherited. If Sepha needs to cling to the illusion that endless repetition will end up synchronising his movements to the pace of social change (p. 68) – the way Judith’s daughter manages to ‘time[...] her sips to match her mother’s’ (p. 112) – Judith has the cultural and economic capital to keep moving, and to avoid the repetition of having to say ‘the same thing over and over to students who stayed the same age’ (p. 54) by leaving her teaching job. In the first half of the novel, then, potentiality only pertains to the *haves*, and is rigorously denied to the *have nots*; this neat distinction maps onto that between self-directed movement and compulsive movement or stasis. It is only in the second half of the novel that a potentiality that here still strikes Sepha as near-miraculous will be explored

through a mode of mobility that is, as we will see, neither compulsive nor controlled.

The first half of the novel prepares for this different mode of mobility and potentiality through intermittent modulations of pace and agency that demobilise the habituated rhythms that initially constrain migrant life. Already at the beginning of the novel, the possibility of moving outside of ratified rhythms is marked as site of uncertainty and (as yet unrecognised) potentiality. On being asked whether he even cares about the profitability of his store, Sepha 'shook [his] head, not knowing how to explain [...] that there were no one-word responses or common phrases that [he] could turn to for an answer' (p. 4). This version of potentiality is neither a matter of firm decisions nor of structural change. The pace of change is neither consistent nor immediate – it 'wasn't gradual, or rapid, but somewhere in between' (p. 23); individuals are not self-contained 'decision units' (to adopt Chicago School economist Gary Becker's term), as visitors to the store are often described as choreographies of movement consisting of, for instance, a 'crowd of children' filling 'the store with their outsize presence' and then disintegrating into 'discrete clumps of twos and threes' (p. 39). In another instance of defamiliarising movement, Sepha recalls how back in Ethiopia, from the isolation of his father's car, people on the bus appeared as 'a small, chaotic world orbit[ing] around the city' (p. 166), while he later takes a bus to 'lock[...] [him]self into the same fate with dozens of people' (p. 167); observing an inexorably slow older black woman, he wonders 'if the world slows down to match her understanding of it' (p. 219). The novel is punctuated by such formulations and passages through which it tries to undo the antinomies of stasis and decisive action and to decompose sovereign individuality into movement.

The novel only really taps into new potentialities when this concern with a mode of mobility that is neither compulsive nor speciously individual becomes the narrative's main organising feature. Sepha finally breaks the destructive rhythm of his shopkeeping when he one day walks out of his shop and magnetically shadows two random tourists who show up in the store, only to abandon them after a while and to travel on. The narrator's casual defection not only suspends his investment in the dream of upward mobility, it importantly also occurs without a conscious decision on his side – without, that is, a strong affirmation of agency, but rather with an almost indifferent sabotaging of his potential for worldly success (p. 73). The lack of a determinate plan of action is underlined by the novel's use of the present tense, which forces readers to share the narrator's lack of foresight for the rest of the novel. The novel had earlier suggested that the idea that 'there's a purpose, or even a real decision that turns everything in one direction'

is an illusion (p. 55); the day Sepha wakes up with 'a firm resolution' to finally get his act together, he is cut short when he finds the eviction notice on his doorstep (pp. 65–6). Finding himself outside his store, Sepha for the first time experiences mobility *with* freedom, and precisely at the moment when the protocols of upward mobility are suspended; Sepha will return to the store imagining 'that it belongs to someone else' (p. 218). In its very last paragraph, the novel seems to imagine a position of suspension – moments 'when we are neither coming nor going' (p. 228) – as the point from which the whole novel has been generated. This is one way in which the novel reconfigures the relations between potentiality and actuality: it situates the literary work as an effect of a temporary suspension of regulated patterns of mobility that is achieved by literary means. Narrated from an underdetermined position, the novel's second half infuses the events and memories it recounts with an open-ended potentiality that those in its first half were lacking.

The novel tends to charge figures of suspension with a sense of power or powerlessness (pp. 37, 92) from its title onward. The book's title, in which what appears to be 'suspended' is inverted into a higher-order 'bearing', refers to a line from Dante's *Commedia*, which describes the poet's vision when he is finally leaving hell (pp. 99–100). Sepha's friend Joseph reads the line as 'a metaphor for Africa' (p. 100), and for a very long time tries to rewrite it as an evocation of the history of the Congo (pp. 169–71), with bathetic results. The attempt to forge a productive relation between the memory of Africa and the present is an abiding concern for the novel. Initially, the three friends indulge in the 'built-in nostalgic quality' (p. 7) afforded by an old map of Africa, to which they connect through touch and anthropomorphisation (when 'Africa's hanging dour head looks like a woman's head wrapped in a shawl' [p. 7]). They have developed a game in which they match African dictators with countries and coups. These memories overshadow present potentialities – they 'supplant the present with their own incorrigible truth' (p. 60), and keep the three immigrants from developing a more energising encounter between past and present: 'Coups, child soldiers, famines were all a part of the same package of unending grief that we picked our way through in order to avoid our own frustrations and disappointments in life' (p. 222).

Sepha's wandering in the novel's second half activates a more enabling interaction between memory and the now. The novel moves back and forth between the account of Sepha's relationship with Judith, on the one hand, and memories of Ethiopia, on the other. These latter are triggered by Sepha's visit – again, not preceded by a definite decision – to the apartment of his uncle, where he lived upon arriving in the States. Here, he

remembers his earlier memories of the atrocities he witnessed in Ethiopia – most notably, the killing of his father. These memories regain a marked vividness ('I saw the corpses [...] I saw my father's face' [p. 119]), and soon explode into the present tense (p. 127), until Sepha even addresses his dead father (p. 176), which initiates a mode of transport that is different from the stale dominance of the past that holds the characters in its grip until Sepha sets out on his walk. As I underlined, the novel refers to the uncanny effect of dead things coming to life again (when it registers Sepha's reaction to the renovation of Judith's house), as well as to the nostalgic powers of the past to haunt and ultimately disable the present; it is Sepha's unwilling wandering that unlocks these potentials, robs them of their destructive force, and mobilises them while normal narrative protocols are suspended (p. 147), and while Sepha graduates from being the novel's melancholic centre of identification to an entirely more ambivalent and open-ended affective force.

This altered relation to the past also sediments in the changed geography of the novel; increasingly, experiences of Washington and memories of Addis overlap; a motorcade on Logan Square makes it seem 'as if time has been temporarily suspended' (p. 92), and the novel capitalises on that suspension to compare it to earlier displays of imperial power in Ethiopia; a painted portrait of Frederick Douglass bears a striking resemblance to pictures of Haile Selassie (p. 176); a park in Addis looks 'just like Logan Circle does from a distance' (p. 216). Crucially, the powers of distant vision afforded by Sepha's wandering inaugurate relations between present and past that are *not* simply mutually exclusive, but open-ended and full of potential; the regained power to 'clearly' see the past spills over into the narrator's power to finally see his store for what it is (p. 174). This is the difference between a destructive submission to the past and what Michael Rothberg has influentially called multidirectional memory, which is subject to 'ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing' between different pasts and presents, and which in that way makes room for 'complex acts of solidarity' rather than for the affirmation of ready-made emotions and identifications.⁵⁴

The shift that takes place in the novel's organisation can be described as a movement from narrative to the drama of an open-ended present tense narration that makes room for the unexplored and the unexpected. This movement opens up potentialities that were foreclosed by the biopolitical vectors of mobility that the novel initially seems to affirm. Finding himself in his uncle's apartment, Sepha realises that it is the lack of 'narrative' that creates new potentialities – the lack of a 'grand narrative' that he 'could spread out and read for signs and clues as to what to expect next. It seems to have run out' (p. 147), abandoning him to unexpected potentialities that he encounters *in* his narration. These two temporalities resemble

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nothing so much as what Fredric Jameson has recently identified as ‘the two chronological end points of realism’: on the one hand, narrative, or the *récit*, ‘whose events are already over and done with before the telling of it can begin’, and on the other, its dissolution ‘in the literary representation of affect’.⁵⁵ Jameson associates the latter with the overt presence of a narrator, or what he calls ‘impulses of scenic elaboration’ that culminate in a ‘scenic present’.⁵⁶ This present is the stage for the unleashing of affect, which Jameson describes as ‘free-floating and independent’ and resistant to codification.⁵⁷ *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* stages this shift from narrative to the scene of narration as a way of demobilising codified emotions and conscripted potentialities and of discharging an unruly affective dynamic. The novel operates at the site where movements of migration, celebrations of cosmopolitan mobility, and ideologies of upward mobility congeal into the emotive expectations that define the genre of the literary migrant novel. The event of reading Mengestu’s novel is an encounter with its near-total saturation by the market. To the extent that this event *sidesteps* the expectations that its participation in the market generates, reading the event of reading is also a reading *alongside* the market.

A reading *alongside* the market can trace the minimal difference between the event of reading and its biopolitical solicitation. To the extent that the novel refracts and distorts the forms of mobility that it engages, it asserts its irreducibility to the logic of the market; in the same gestures, it provides evidence that the market cannot saturate contemporary lives without generating a remainder that escapes its logic. Such a sounding of the limits of the market is not nearly as heroic as the affirmation of autonomy that, for some, counts as the only properly political counter to the claims of the market. Yet as I have been suggesting, while the market can simply decide to remain deaf to the call of autonomy, it cannot afford to remain indifferent to the dimensions of affect and potentiality on which it relies.

University of Leuven

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Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 230.

- 2 See especially Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Walter Benn Michaels, 'The Death of a Beautiful Woman: Christopher Nolan's Idea of Form', *Electronic Book Review* (2007), n.p. www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/detective [Date accessed: 12 September 2014]; and Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 3 Nicholas Brown, 'Close Reading and the Market', in Emilio Sauri and Mathias Nilges (eds), *Literary Materialisms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 145–65, pp. 154–5.
- 4 Nicholas Brown, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption under Capital', *Nonsite* (2012), n.p. <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital> [Date accessed: 12 December 2014]
- 5 *Ibid.*, n.p.
- 6 Nicholas Brown, 'Response', *Nonsite* (2011), n.p. <http://nonsite.org/issues/issue-2/responses-to-neoliberal-aesthetics> [Date accessed: 12 December 2014]. See also Brown, 'Close Reading and the Market', p. 152.
- 7 Brown, 'Close Reading and the Market', p. 159.
- 8 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 227–9.
- 9 Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications since 1984* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 10 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 228–9.
- 11 Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso Books, 2013), p. 89.
- 12 Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 152–4.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 14 Nicholas Brown, 'One, Two, Many Ends of Literature', *Mediations*, 24.2 (2009), pp. 90–101, p. 98.
- 15 Nealon, *Post-postmodernism*, p. 183.
- 16 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 48.
- 17 Nealon, *Post-postmodernism*, p. ix.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 19 Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3 and pp. 54–6.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 21 Timothy Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism', *Differences*, 21.3 (2010), pp. 1–33, p. 4. 'Reading alongside the novel' is Bewes' phrase; 'reading alongside the market' is mine.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), pp. 1–21, p. 2.
- 25 Susan Sontag qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 10.

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- 26 For a congenial discussion of surface reading as a neoliberal reading practice, see Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins, 'Introduction: Genres of Neoliberalism', *Social Text*, 31.2 (2013), pp. 1–17, pp. 8–10.
- 27 Carolyn Lesjak, 'Reading Dialectically', *Criticism*, 55.2 (2013), pp. 233–77, p. 251.
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- 30 Pieter Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.1 (2014), pp. 40–57.
- 31 See Giles Foden, review of Teju Cole, *Open City*, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review> [Date accessed: 18 December 2014], n.p.; Claire Messud, 'The Secret Sharer', review of Teju Cole, *Open City*, *New York Review of Books*, 14 July 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jul/14/secret-sharer/> [Date accessed: 18 December 2014], n.p.; and James Wood, 'The Arrival of Enigmas', review of Teju Cole, *Open City*, *New Yorker*, 28 February 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas> [Date accessed: 18 December 2014], n.p.
- 32 Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 19.
- 33 Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), pp. 16–8. I analyse this passage and other ones in more detail in Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory'.
- 34 Cole, *Open City*, p. 17.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 36 Wood, 'Arrival of Enigmas', n.p.
- 37 Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Organic Shrapnel: Affect and Aesthetics in September 11 Fiction', *American Literature*, 83.1 (2011), pp. 153–74, pp. 162–3.
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- 39 Paolo Virno qtd. in Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–2.
- 43 See Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 128.
- 44 Cole, *Open City*, pp. 243–7.
- 45 See Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory', pp. 52–6.
- 46 Ian Hacking, *Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), p. 30.

- 47 Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 50.
- 48 Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (New York: Riverheads Books, 2007), p. 23.
- 49 Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel*, pp. 51–2.
- 50 Ibid., p. 50.
- 51 For the argument that neoliberalism does not so much abolish as generate a form of ‘suffering agency’ that enforces action and decision-making, see Jane Elliott, ‘Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain’, *Social Text*, 31.2 (2013), pp. 83–101.
- 52 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 4.
- 53 The parenthetical page references are to Mengestu, *Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*.
- 54 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3 and p. 11.
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- 56 Ibid., p. 11.
- 57 Ibid., p. 36.