

# The “I” in Tribe is Silent

by Mary Chen

It rained in New York this morning. As I pushed open my residence hall’s heavy door and stepped onto the almost empty sidewalk, I felt the instant chill of cold air: fresh, crisp, and familiar. It carried me back to Seattle, with its overcast sky and just the right combination of density and moisture. The one or two pedestrians on the street carried umbrellas; I smiled triumphantly. *Weaklings! We in the Pacific Northwest would never. We.* I paused, struck by a pang of realization. I used *we*, a collective pronoun, to describe a community I had been a part of for merely five years, staking my claim to a place I could hardly call a permanent home.

A few minutes of walking carried me to the revolving doors of NYU’s Bobst Library. Inside, I heard two girls chatting in Chinese. I longed to approach them and join in, then scoffed at myself for wanting to do so for the sole reason that the three of us shared a language. I dismissed the idea and settled in to study, but my mind would not comply, returning again to New York’s Beijing-like skyscrapers and all that they represent: where is my home and with whom do I belong?

In Teju Cole’s novel *Open City*, his characters confront similar questions. These questions materialize by way of the protagonist, Julius, a half-Nigerian, half-German psychiatrist completing his medical residency in New York. One afternoon, Julius wanders into the American Folk Art Museum and finds himself entranced by John Brewster’s portraits of children. When he walks out of the museum into the pouring rain, he struggles to hail a cab, finding one only after ten long minutes. Physically exhausted and still absorbed by the paintings, Julius neglects to greet the driver or recite his address. When his address finally “filter[s] its way back to [him, he gives] it to

the cabdriver and [says] to him: So, how are you doing, my brother?" (Cole 40). This belated greeting does not make up for the perceived slight. "Not good, not good at all," the driver admonishes Julius resentfully, "you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I'm African just like you" (40). Based on his perception of Julius, the cab driver feels the same urge I felt in Bobst: he assumes a connection found in their shared identity as Africans is both natural and immediate. With such a connection established, he believes that Julius is obliged to acknowledge him immediately as a "brother." Therefore, he takes Julius's absentmindedness as a betrayal of the pre-written script for their social interaction. Julius, on the other hand, thinking the man's demand irritating and absurd, refuses to reconfirm this connection because he is "in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on [him]" (40). Through this clash between the cab driver's demand for solidarity and Julius's unwillingness to perform such surface-level social obligations, Cole brings to light the people's varied reactions to being gathered under the wings of a tribal identity. For some, this shared identification is the foundation on which social interaction depends, while for others it becomes a burden.

Julius's interaction with the cab driver urges an investigation into what happens when different perceptions of our identity come into conflict. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio provides a possible answer in her book, *The Undocumented Americans*, which documents the trauma 9/11 inflicted upon the undocumented immigrants who were employed as cleanup workers at Ground Zero. To clear the two hundred thousand pounds of debris, "the city hired contractors – Americans, Anglo, white" (32). In turn, those contractors hired subcontractors, "many of them bilingual Latinx people with the golden ticket of American citizenship who could present themselves as friendly faces to other immigrants" (32). Assuming they had a shared Latinx identity, many undocumented workers believed that the subcontractors who hired them would look out for their best interests, while in reality, Villavicencio notes, "melanin and accents are ineffective binding substances" (36). The white contractors relied upon what Villavicencio labels "a

plantation model . . . exploiting whatever sense of community that might exist among Latinx people” (36). Under this model, the subcontractors provided the workers with inadequate protection, and most workers fell ill after the cleanup as a result. These subcontractors thus formed troubling alliances based on two competing facets of their identities: one based on ethnicity, which secured the trust of the undocumented workers; the other stemming from American citizenship, which granted them access to a greater level of security and power than their undocumented counterparts.

The hierarchies that exist within minority groups, as demonstrated by the power relations between the subcontractors and the undocumented laborers, also divide Julius and the cab driver. Julius is a highly-educated, soon-to-be psychiatrist, a person of much higher socioeconomic rank than the cab driver, who, quite tellingly, Cole leaves unnamed. This system of hierarchical division encompasses more than citizenship and socioeconomic status, however. In spite of my desire to remain tethered to my Chinese identity, I also find myself on a higher rung of the dominant culture’s social ladder. Two years ago, standing in line at Costco, I witnessed a confrontation between a cashier and a Chinese woman. The woman was trying to get her visa photo taken, but her broken English left her unable to communicate her needs. The cashier, with frequent grunts and arched eyebrows, could not have been more impatient. When I intervened on the woman’s behalf, translating her Chinese into fluent English with ease, his attitude completely transformed. While I could and did – at least in the cashier’s eyes – pass as American, the woman remained foreign to him. It seems, then, that the conflicting attitudes toward identity that emerge in Cole’s *Open City* are hardly a matter of choice. The freedom to disassociate from one’s tribe and its social obligations seems only to be available to those who can integrate more easily into the dominant group, as in the cases of Julius, the subcontractors, and myself.

While some possess a certain degree of choice when it comes to identifying with one’s tribe, *Open City* also presents us with the seeming inescapability of one’s identity. While

traveling in Belgium in search of his grandmother, Julius encounters two Moroccan men, telephone shop owner Khalil and his employee Farouq. The conversation between the three men turns toward American interference in the Middle East. America's power to define good and evil in the region disgusts Farouq and Khalil, who, in an explosive moment, announces his sympathy for Hamas, Hezbollah, and even Al-Qaeda: "I understand why they did it" (120). Julius reacts strongly, as anyone with a US-centric perspective likely would, accusing Khalil of extremism. Internally, however, his rage is a performance of social obligation—he actually feels "more sorrow and less anger" (120). He chooses to adhere to his identity as an American nonetheless, because "in the game, if it was a game, [he] was meant to be the outraged American" (120).

This discussion between the three men is a carefully choreographed clash between two cultural spheres built and maintained by stereotyping, with each pigeonholing the other based upon "how [we] think [you] think" (120). Julius's inability to cast off his allegiance to America raises the question: can anyone truly dissociate from a prominent aspect of their identity? Such an escape appears hopeless as long as the "game" upon which our social lives depend continues to demand certain behaviors in line with one's tribe.

I, for one, could not resist the urge I first had in the library after all.

In an elevator en route to class, I learned that five seconds are all it takes to make a friend. In the space of the first second the elevator doors slid open and Mandarin rushed into my ears.

"Are you Chinese?"

I froze, for a moment, at this immediate, accurate classification—had I forgotten my mask and exposed my face? Three seconds. A rush of giddiness released me from my rigidity and I nodded eagerly. That was ample encouragement. In the fifth and final

second, an open WeChat scanner and an expectant smile were extended toward me. I felt for my phone in my pocket reflexively, my fingers hesitant for a split second. There I was, face to face with a stranger about whom I knew nothing except that we shared a language spoken by 1.4 billion and now a university attended by more than 50,000. Her offer of solidarity resembled that of the cab driver in Cole's *Open City*, yet I felt none of Julius's reluctance. My tribal identities were pulling me under their wings toward her, irresistible like gravity. I pulled out my phone.

Later, in our conversation on WeChat, my new friend seemed dissatisfied that most of her classmates were not Chinese. I started typing: "Non-Chinese friends are fun too! You shouldn't –." *Pause*. Seized by a feeling of guilt, I deleted the draft, watching the cursor swallow up my unsent words.

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## Works Cited

Cole, Teju. *Open City: A Novel*. Random House, 2011.

Villavicencio, Karla Cornejo. *The Undocumented Americans*. One World, 2020.