

Research Article

“If Anything, It Intensified Them”: Social Atomism in *Open City*

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Abstract

This article explores social atomism in Teju Cole’s *Open City* through the lens of Georg Simmel’s urban sociology. Julius, the novel’s Nigerian-German narrator, emerges as a quintessential figure of emotional detachment shaped by the conditions of modern metropolitan life. The novel’s depiction of New York City—fractured by architectural disjointedness, socio-economic disparity, and pervasive anonymity—constructs a spatial environment that nurtures isolation and withdrawal. These urban conditions directly shape Julius’s psychological reserve and solitary disposition. Social atomism in *Open City* is reflected across three dimensions of Julius’s life: his inability to confront his past, seen most starkly in his emotional withdrawal from Moji’s accusation and his erasure of personal memory; his alienation in public spaces, expressed through his aimless urban wanderings and psychological detachment from the crowds around him; and his distant or failed interpersonal relationships, including his estrangement from family, his disconnection from his lover, university professor, neighbor, and his inability to sustain solidarity with members of his own ethnic community. Though he occasionally reaches toward connection through memory, conversation, or gestures of empathy, these attempts are consistently undermined by the blasé attitude and emotional reserve that Simmel identifies as core to urban modernity. Julius’s detachment ultimately underscores a broader vision of city life, where fleeting solidarities prove inadequate to counter the isolating pressures of the metropolis. *Open City* thus offers a portrait of urban existence defined by disconnection, where individuals, like Julius, drift alone among the social atoms of the city.

Keywords

Teju Cole, Social Atomism, Blasé Attitude, Reserve, Isolation

1. Introduction

Teju Cole’s 2011 novel *Open City*, with its vivid portrayal of post-9/11 urban and immigrant life in New York, has garnered both critical acclaim and sustained scholarly attention. Much of this scholarship focuses on the protagonist Julius’s experience of the city, often through the lenses of cosmopolitanism and flânerie. Earlier studies by Vermeulen, Hallemeier, and others critique Julius’s cosmopolitanism as narrow and individualistic, arguing that his engagement with highbrow cultural figures

such as Mahler and Joyce fails to generate meaningful global or social change [16, 6]. Similarly, Krishnan, Hartwiger, and Wood interpret Julius’s solitary walks through New York as emblematic of flâneurial practice—acts of urban observation that reveal the city’s layered histories while simultaneously concealing his underlying alienation [10, 7, 19]. Varvogli adds that Julius’s flânerie “convey[s] the image of a post-racial subject,” but that “his perceived social status does not exempt

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him from racism,” exposing the fragility of his cosmopolitan detachment [15]. More recent scholarship extends these insights by situating Julius’s mobility within broader geopolitical and racial contexts. Ba and Soto argue that post-9/11 cosmopolitanism is undermined by racialized surveillance and securitization, which constrain Julius’s experience of the city’s so-called “openness” [1]. DiMatteo interprets Julius’s urban wanderings as a national allegory, revealing repressed histories embedded in the cityscape [3]. Trendel frames Julius as a Black transcultural flâneur, whose mobility cultivates a nomadic mode of consciousness [14].

Despite these insightful interpretations of the protagonist’s urban experience of alienation and wanderings in *Open City*, they tend to underemphasize the sociological forces that shape Julius’s isolation. To address this gap, this article turns to Georg Simmel’s concept of social atomism as a critical framework. Adopting a literary-sociological approach, it employs close textual analysis of *Open City* through the lens of Georg Simmel’s urban theory to explore how social atomism manifests in the novel.

Simmel’s theory of social atomism is one of the most influential sociological frameworks for understanding urban disconnection. In his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel describes the modern city as a psychological environment that fosters detachment, reserve, and a rationalized mode of interaction. Overwhelmed by stimuli, the urban subject becomes indifferent—what Simmel famously terms the “blasé attitude.” He writes, “There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as has the blasé attitude” [11]. This emotional distance, while protective of individual autonomy, weakens communal bonds. As Deena and Michael Weinstein observe, metropolitan dwellers “enforce a distance between each other that allows them to conduct their segmental and transitory affairs, and to preserve their unique inwardness” [18]. This observation reinforces Simmel’s view of the modern city as composed of self-contained individuals, an idea later echoed by Andrew Heywood, who describes urban life as tending toward “a collection of self-interested and largely self-sufficient individuals, operating as separate atoms” [8].

Framing *Open City* through Simmel’s theory, this article argues that Julius’s isolation is not merely a product of cultural alienation or failed cosmopolitan engagement, but a manifestation of deeper structural forces embedded in urban life. Julius’s detachment unfolds across three dimensions: his psychological disconnection from his own past, his alienation in public spaces, and his fractured interpersonal relationships. The analysis shows how New York’s fragmented architecture, social anonymity, and economic inequality intensify his isolation, reinforcing Simmel’s vision of the metropolis as a space of atomized, rationalized existence. Although Julius occasionally seeks connection through memory, reflection, or fleeting encounters, these efforts consistently falter, exposing the limits of solidarity in a city shaped by social atomism.

2. Spatial Contexts for Social Atomism in *Open City*

New York, the “open city” of the novel, serves as the primary stage for Julius’s wanderings and a space where social atomism flourishes. The narrator portrays the city as an environment that fosters disconnection, aligning with Simmel’s vision of urban life as a domain of detached, self-reliant individuals. Three key elements—its fragmented architecture, pervasive anonymity, and social-economic diversity—construct New York as a public space primed for social atomism, laying the groundwork for Julius’s socially atomized movements through the city.

To begin with, the city’s architecture and layout create a disjointed spatial context that nurtures detachment. As the narrator observes, “Each neighborhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight: the bright lights and shuttered shops, the housing projects and luxury hotels, the fire escapes and city parks” [2]. These abstract shapes render New York unrelated to the real city, emphasizing a fragmented urban expanse that lacks cohesion. Such disconnection exerts a psychological toll, distancing residents from one another. By presenting the city as a collection of unrelated entities, the narrator establishes a public arena where individuals operate as isolated ‘atoms,’ mirroring Simmel’s theory of urban reserve. This Simmelian lens reframes *Open City*’s New York as a space that undermines cosmopolitan ideals, complementing Ba and Soto’s focus on racialized constraints.

The anonymity of New York amplifies this atomistic public space, intensifying isolation amid bustling crowds. The narrator depicts crowds of shoppers and workers, moving alongside tourists and young men in hooded sweatshirts, their paths overlapping yet devoid of meaningful interaction. A fleeting glimpse of black women buying glass bowls from a falafel vendor underscores the transactional nature of these brief, superficial encounters that reflect Simmel’s notion of detached urban reserve. In this busy environment, individuals coexist without forging communal bonds, their anonymity reinforcing a sense of solitude. This spatial dynamic transforms New York’s streets into a theater of social atomism, where the sheer volume of people paradoxically deepens each person’s isolation, providing a stark backdrop for disconnected lives.

Moreover, New York’s social and economic fragments further solidify it as a spatial arena for social atomism, starkly illustrated by the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty the narrator encounters. Around Columbus Circle, the narrator describes an economic transformation marked by the most expensive commercial and residential addresses in the city, including the Time Warner Center, and a Sunday Market featuring vendors selling “tailored shirts, designer suits, jewelry, appliances for the gourmet cook, handmade leather accessories, and imported decorative items” at prices catering to

affluent clients [2]. This shift toward commercial wealth suggests a spatial enclave for the rich, where high-value real estate and luxury goods signal a customer base with disposable income, pushing out older, less prosperous establishments.

In contrast, the city, alongside these affluent enclaves, harbors countless thousands of New Yorkers in social isolation and fatigue, including homeless individuals sleeping on subway grates, pushing shopping carts, or huddled under cardboard shelters in parks. Julius notes the long line of immigrants, and street vendors in his neighborhood selling self-published books and tourist tchotchkes from Africa on sidewalks, hinting at precarious livelihoods. Encounters with debilitated homeless people enduring hardship further underscore poverty's pervasive presence. These fragments—opulent hubs like Columbus Circle alongside marginalized lives—depict a city of disconnected entities, where economic disparities reinforce physical and emotional distance. The affluent retreat into exclusive spaces of wealth, while the poor inhabit the margins, both navigating the same urban expanse yet rarely intersecting meaningfully. This polarized depiction of New York, where economic divisions reinforce isolation and individuals inhabit distinct, rarely intersecting social worlds within the same urban space, echoes Simmel's ideas of social atomism, which emphasize economic disparities as a key factor in urban fragmentation.

Collectively, New York's fragmented spaces—its disjointed architecture, anonymous crowds, and socio-economic divides—create a powerful context that nurtures social atomism and shapes Julius's detachment. The city's streets, rich with activity yet barren of deep communal ties, amplify the psychological distance Simmel attributes to metropolitan life, casting Julius as a solitary figure adrift in a metropolis designed for disconnection.

3. Social Atomism Embodied in Julius's Isolation in Open City

Simmel argues that the individual can be understood as a unit of experience. For Simmel, in exploring social atomism, isolation emerges when this experiential unit exists without meaningful interaction or context with other such units. He writes, "For the unit denoted by the concept 'individual'...is not an object of cognition at all, but only of experience" [12], suggesting that urban dwellers process the city's fragment, such as its disjointed neighborhoods and socio-economic disparities, through subjective detachment rather than shared understanding. This resonates with the psychological experience of intense isolation even amidst a crowd, suggesting that the feeling of being a separate, disconnected "atom" is not solely a product of physical solitude but rather stems from a lack of significant and meaningful connection. Simmel's conception of the individual as a unit of experience, not cognition, explains why Julius remains isolated despite New York's bustling urban environment. This atomized existence

manifests vividly in Julius's detachment from his past, his alienation in public spaces, and his fractured interpersonal relationships.

3.1. Julius's Isolation from His Own Past

Julius's encounter with Moji, a woman tied to his Nigerian childhood, exposes the profound psychological and moral detachment that characterizes his relationship to his past. Moji, the sister of a boy Julius attended military school with in Nigeria, recognizes him instantly during a chance meeting in a New York grocery store. Julius, however, fails to recognize her until she states her name. This initial disconnect—his failure to recognize a figure from his formative years—echoes Simmel's notion of the blasé attitude, pointing to a more ingrained, habitual detachment that aligns with the emotional reserve fostered by modern urban life. Although their renewed acquaintance briefly seems to foster connection through picnics with friends and a party hosted by Moji's boyfriend, these interactions remain superficial. They mirror the fleeting, transactional relationships Simmel associates with metropolitan existence, where sustained emotional engagement is rare.

The illusion of reconnection collapses when, the morning after the party, Moji confronts Julius with a devastating revelation: as teenagers in Nigeria, he raped her. She accuses him of having remained indifferent ever since, refusing to acknowledge her pain or take responsibility. Now, she demands that he finally face what happened. Julius's response is marked by silence and emotional withdrawal. He neither denies nor addresses the accusation. Instead, he retreats inward, embodying what Simmel calls reserve—the protective emotional distance urban individuals often adopt to shield themselves from overwhelming demands. This silence, a calculated retreat into Simmel's urban reserve, shields Julius from the metropolis's relentless emotional demands, deepening his atomistic solitude. While Gonzalez sees Julius's failure to recall his role in Moji's trauma as a limit of cosmopolitan empathy [5], this article interprets it through Simmel's blasé attitude, suggesting that urban reserve structurally inhibits such reckoning. His failure to respond reflects not only a lack of empathy toward Moji but a deeper disconnection from his own memory, guilt, and moral accountability. He remains emotionally opaque, and the narrative offers no reconciliation or moment of reckoning. Von Gleich notes that Julius employs "narrative strategies designed to distract from his own past" [17], suggesting his silence and detachment are deliberate acts of avoidance. This insight recasts his atomism as not only an emotional condition but also a deliberate evasion of accountability, forming the foundation of the social atomism that defines his existence.

This encounter with Moji illustrates that Julius's atomism is not merely a product of his environment in New York but also rooted in longstanding patterns of emotional distancing. Even a shared cultural background and deeply entwined

personal history cannot pierce the psychological barriers he has erected. His temporal isolation is thus marked by a deliberate severing from the continuity of personal experience sustained through his refusal to narrate or reckon with the past. Von Gleich notes that Julius employs “narrative strategies designed to distract from his own past” [17], suggesting his silence and detachment are deliberate acts of avoidance. This insight recasts his atomism as not only an emotional condition but also a deliberate evasion of accountability. This detachment from memory and responsibility forms the foundation of the social atomism that defines his existence.

3.2. Julius’s Isolation in Public Spaces

While Julius’s emotional reserve is rooted in his detachment from the past, it is equally reinforced by his experiences in the present. Nowhere is this more evident than in his engagement, or lack thereof, with the urban environment of New York. New York, one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, serves as the backdrop for *Open City*, where Julius, the protagonist and narrator, exists as an atom within its vast social landscape. Born to a Nigerian father and a German mother, Julius left Nigeria for New York to attend university, seeking distance from his cold and distant relationship with his mother. After graduating, he remained in New York, working as a resident psychiatrist at a mental health clinic.

For Julius, New York offers the opportunity for direct encounters with others and fosters a fundamentally cosmopolitan mindset, which is often associated with interconnectedness. He reflects, “I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories” [2]. Yet, having left his original cultural community, he becomes a drifting, disconnected figure—a floating atom. In this most globally interconnected city, he experiences both the freedom of atomization and the loneliness, detachment, and indifference inherent in modern urban life. Julius frequently leaves the confines of the mental health clinic to wander aimlessly through New York’s streets. His motivations for these walks remain somewhat ambiguous. Initially, he describes them as aimless, but later acknowledges that they serve to break the monotony of his evenings, which he otherwise spends reading or oscillating between dreams and reality. He finds solace in walking, believing it alleviates the intense mental strain of his work. Reflecting on the emotional function of his walks, Julius describes how they gradually became a therapeutic routine for him, to the point that he could no longer remember what life had been like before he began walking regularly.

In New York’s vast, fluid urban space, Julius moves through a wide range of public settings yet remains psychologically detached, existing in a state of isolation and atomization. In the opening chapter, he notes how “walking through busy parts of town” exposes him to thousands of faces, yet “the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them” [2].

This blasé indifference reflects his numbness to the city’s bustle. His aimless wanderings, like a seven-mile trek to Houston Street that leaves him in disorienting fatigue, reveal his isolation as a physical and mental retreat. Later, too exhausted to sleep, he lies awake, rehearsing in the dark the numerous incidents and sights” encountered, a ritual underscoring his reserve—processing stimuli without connection. Seeking refuge, he finds solace in an alley, which is “no one’s preferred route,” feeling strangely comforted to find myself alone, a stark testament to his atomized comfort in solitude over communal engagement.

Even as Julius navigates deeply populated public spaces, his sense of loneliness and atomization only deepens. He describes his experience of being crowded among strangers on the subway: “Above-ground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified” [2]. He remains a calm and detached observer, watching large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers, a sight perpetually strange to him. Commuting on public transportation does not foster a sense of connection for Julius; instead, it amplifies his isolation. Julius’s psychological distance also surfaces in his relationship to language and sound within the urban space. As Feleki notes, “Julius seems more enamored with the musicality of the sounds... rather than with the potential of the word to mean. This linguistic incomprehension seems to be granting Julius the freedom he needs to make sense of the world rather than hinder it” [4]. This preference for aesthetic experience over communicative clarity reflects a broader tendency toward emotional detachment and symbolic rather than interpersonal connection.

Similar feeling of alienation is felt when, one morning, he steps into a public space bustling with activity and realizes it is the day of the New York Marathon, highlighting his disconnection from the city’s communal life. Wood suggests that the city in the novel is “open,” “but perhaps only in a negative way: full of people bumping their hard solitude off one another” [19]. Lacking meaningful interpersonal relationships and personal emotional attachments, Julius experiences an ever-deepening isolation from society in public places.

3.3. Julius’ Isolation in Interpersonal Relationships

The atomized detachment, pervasive in Julius’s public wanderings, extends into the private realm of his interpersonal relationships, where even his role as a healer fails to bridge the gulf. Julius is a psychiatry fellow whose work demands connectedness and compassion. However, Julius not only maintains a psychological distance from strangers but also exhibits an increasingly atomized state in his interactions with family, lover, neighbour, professor, and members of his own ethnic group.

After his father dies of illness when he was a teenager, his relationship with his mother grows distant, though he never reveals the reasons for their estrangement. One of his motivations for attending university in the United States is to escape this cold mother-son relationship. After graduating, he chooses not to return to Nigeria, instead remaining in America to work. His most cherished familial memories are of his childhood years spent with his grandmother, who traveled from Germany to care for him in Nigeria. However, due to the strained relationship between his mother and grandmother, he now does not even know if his grandmother is still alive.

Julius has a girlfriend, Nadège, but he rarely speaks of her. Readers only learn that she shares African heritage and lives in San Francisco, far from New York. Their relationship is marked not only by geographical separation but also by emotional distance. The only significant moment of connection occurs when Julius calls Nadège to share the news of his mentor, Professor Saito's, passing. However, she responds with unexpected detachment, revealing that she is engaged to someone else and asking him not to contact her again.

Professor Saito is Julius's former English literature teacher from college. Since Julius's father dies when he is on the verge of adulthood at fourteen, Professor Saito, to some extent, fills the emotional void left by the absence of paternal love, becoming a father figure in his life. Julius often feels the urge to confide in him but ultimately restrains himself, adopting the reserved attitude toward emotions that Simmel describes as characteristic of modern urbanites: "I told him a little about my walks, and wanted to tell him more but didn't have quite the right purchase on what it was I was trying to say about the solitary territory my mind had been crisscrossing. So I told him about one of my recent cases" [2]. Julius's interactions with Professor Saito exemplify the emotional exchanges characteristic of an atomized society, where individuals, like isolated atoms, long for connection yet struggle to form deeper bonds.

Julius's atomized existence extends beyond his family, lover, and professor to the neighbors who share his immediate physical space, epitomized by his interactions, or more precisely, his absence of interaction with Seth, the man living next door. This detachment, rooted in the urban isolation Simmel describes, reveals how even proximity fails to bridge the emotional and social gulf between individuals in the modern metropolis. In one instance, Julius recounts returning to his apartment building with shopping bags and encountering Seth, who holds the door for him. Though residing in the apartment right next to each other, Julius sees Seth once a month and his wife, Carla, only twice since they move in. Julius admits that he did not know Seth well, hardly at all, in fact, and even had to pause momentarily to recall his name. When Seth reveals that Carla died of a heart attack months earlier, a fact Julius entirely misses despite living next door, he is shocked by his own obliviousness. He recalls how, during the weeks of Seth's mourning, he had greeted him

while wearing headphones and done laundry alongside him without sensing any emotional change. This obliviousness underscores the profound isolation that defines Julius's existence, even within the intimate confines of shared space. Julius's fleeting gesture of placing a hand on Seth's shoulder feels inadequate, and he acknowledges that pursuing deeper connection "would have been false intimacy" [2], highlighting the reserve that keeps him a solitary atom even in shared spaces.

This pattern persists in a later encounter, months after Seth's disclosure, when Julius sees him dragging mattresses infested with bedbugs to the curb with the building superintendent's help. Seth explains that the mattresses have been invaded by bedbugs, and asks if Julius has noticed them, prompting a belated realization about a friend's similar struggle before leaving New York. Yet, their exchange remains cursory, and Julius's thoughts drift to his friend's departure rather than engaging with Seth's present struggle. This moment reinforces his detachment, as his physical closeness to Seth contrasts with an emotional distance that mirrors Simmel's depiction of urban interactions as transactional and superficial. Julius's failure to connect, even with a neighbor facing tangible hardship, exemplifies social atomism's erosion of communal bonds. His isolation is not just spatial, amid New York's fragmented landscape, but relational, as he navigates the city as a self-contained unit, untouched by the lives unfolding mere feet away. Together, these encounters with Seth illustrate how Julius's atomism permeates even the most proximate physical relationships, casting him as an observer adrift in a sea of solitary figures, each encased in their own private sphere.

Julius extends his detachment to peers of his own ethnicity, further entrenching his atomized existence within New York's fragmented urban landscape. This isolation reflects Simmel's notion of the modern individual as a solitary unit, where personal freedom erodes ties to cultural origins. At a museum, Kenneth, a security guard who identifies Julius's African descent by his skin tone, greets him warmly and attempts a conversation about African culture. Julius, however, rebuffs this overture, guarding his individuality against what he perceives as encroachment on his autonomy. In a taxi, an African driver chastises him for his aloofness: "Not good, not good at all... the way you came into my car without saying hello... I'm African just like you, why you do this?" [2]. Julius remains unmoved, steadfast in his resistance to those who try to lay claims on him. His reserve, as Simmel describes, preserving a detached self amid fleeting encounters. This detachment aligns with Johansen's view of *Open City* as a territorialized diaspora, where urban fragmentation severs cultural ties [9], and echoes von Gleich's observation of Julius's "constant flight from [his] personal past" [17]. Such transient exchanges, through Simmel's lens, limit Julius to superficial bonds, reinforcing his atomistic drift. In addition, Triandis's concept of individualism—defined as a cultural orientation in which personal goals take precedence over group goals and individuals are encour-

aged to act independently [13]—further illustrates Julius’s prioritization of autonomy over collectivist ethnic ties, complementing Simmel’s notion of emotional reserve. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that Julius navigates shared heritage not as part of a collective, but as a solitary atom, shaped by both psychological disposition and the isolating conditions of urban life.

While Julius is read as emblematic of urban detachment, this portrayal alone does not capture the complexity of his character. His pervasive emotional reserve coexists with moments of curiosity, moral ambiguity, and intellectual sensitivity. He frequently engages in philosophical reflection, immerses himself in literature and music, and demonstrates a sustained—if inconsistent—interest in understanding others. These traits point to a layered inner life shaped not only by the alienation of city life but also by personal trauma, diasporic displacement, and ethical uncertainty. His detachment emerges less as a fixed sociological condition than as a coping mechanism, suggesting an individual negotiating guilt, memory, and selfhood in a fragmented world. By foregrounding this tension between structural forces and personal agency, *Open City* offers a more nuanced portrait of Julius—one that resists reductive interpretations and enriches the Simmelian reading of social atomism.

4. Conclusions

This article has explored how *Open City* portrays Julius’s isolation as a product of both his personal disposition and the structural conditions of modern urban life, through the lens of Simmel’s theory of social atomism. However, this is not to suggest that Julius is entirely devoid of a desire for connection. Throughout *Open City*, Julius exhibits some efforts to forge connections with his past and present, and even acknowledges the value of meaningful human bonds, yet these gestures falter against the pervasive force of social atomism. His wanderings to historical sites, such as the remnants of New Amsterdam or the African Burial Ground, reveal a tentative reach toward the past. Reflecting on these colonial legacies, he seeks “the line that connected me to my own part in these stories” [2], as if tracing New York’s buried histories might anchor his drifting identity. Yet, these solitary pilgrimages, which are marked by intellectual curiosity rather than communal engagement, underscore his isolation, aligning with Simmel’s view of the individual as a detached unit of experience, processing the world without bridging to others.

Conversely, Julius’s encounter with Farouq, a Moroccan student working in a Brussels internet café, embodies an ideal of connection he cannot attain. Farouq articulates a dual vision: a practical pursuit of translation between Arabic, English, and French, and a deeper project to understand how people can live together on a global scale. Observing interactions among the café’s diverse patrons from different countries in the world, he notes, “It happens here, on this small

scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale”, adding, “It’s a test case of what I believe; people can live together but still keep their own values intact” [2]. As Hallemeier observes, Farouq’s ability to engage a linguistically diverse group in meaningful dialogue “throws into relief the limits of Julius’ elite intellectualism” [6], which confines him to detached observation rather than active participation. Momentarily stirred, Julius finds himself admiring Farouq’s idealism and, despite his usual reserve, feels a sense of trust in it. Yet this trust proves fleeting. As Farouq drains his glass, Julius reflects that there is a powerful, restless intelligence in him that, despite its promise, seems ultimately destined to remain unfulfilled and constrained by circumstance. Though stirred by Farouq’s vision of cosmopolitan solidarity, Julius ultimately retreats into skepticism, dismissing such connection as unattainable—further reinforcing his retreat into social atomism.

However, these efforts and aspirations to reach out to somebody without seeking immediate reciprocity collapse under atomism’s weight. Simmel’s metropolis, with its sensory overload and fragmented spaces, nurtures Julius’s blasé indifference and reserve, rendering him a solitary atom adrift in New York’s vastness, unable to overcome the isolation that defines his existence. In this way, *Open City* captures social atomism, a profound and perhaps inevitable consequence of urban life, wherein individuals cultivate reserve, detachment, and a focus on personal autonomy to manage the relentless stimuli and intricate complexities of contemporary metropolitan environment.

Author Contributions

Hui Lyu is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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