

## TEJU COLE: 'MY CAMERA IS LIKE AN INVISIBILITY CLOAK. IT MAKES ME MORE FREE'

By Sean O'Hagan, June 25, 2017



In April, 2011, Teju Cole woke up in his room in a writer's colony in upstate New York to find that he could not see clearly. He was taken to the small town of Hudson nearby, where an ophthalmologist advised him to see a specialist in Manhattan. Walking to the train station, Cole became aware that his sight was deteriorating dramatically.

"Darkness encroached by degrees," he later wrote, "and, in the afternoon sun, I could hardly see out of my right eye, and not at all out of the left. I had become almost totally blind." He stumbled onwards somehow making it back to Manhattan that evening. A few days later, he was diagnosed with papillophlebitis, a temporary and sometimes recurring condition caused by blood vessels bursting behind the retina. It is more commonly known as big blind spot syndrome.

If there is a personal touchstone for this kind of cross-fertilisation, it is surely the late John Berger. The final piece in Cole's 2016 essay collection, *Known and Strange Things*, is a description of that traumatic occurrence. It is called *Blind Spot*. Next month, his first book of photographs is published. It is also called *Blind Spot*. Why, I ask him, did he reprise that title for a book that is, in essence, about a sustained way of seeing? "Well, there is some dark humour in the title that people who have read the essay will hopefully pick up on," he says, "but, as I write in the afterword, there is also the fact that the act of looking is limited. We only see a small part of what we are looking at, so there is a constant blind spot even with the kind of attentive looking that photography entails. There are many resonances in that title – how difficult it is to see clearly, how difficult it is to tell a dream, how difficult it is to make pictures that are new in some way."

How well Cole succeeds in all of this is difficult to say, not because his images aren't strong – they are in a detached and rigorously formal-to-the-point-of-deadpan way that was pioneered by the likes of Stephen Shore in the 1970s – but because *Blind Spot* is not simply a book of photographs. Instead, each image is accompanied by a corresponding passage of prose. The book unfolds – and succeeds – as a deftly choreographed dance of words and pictures, with Cole's characteristically allusive style of writing here condensed to what he calls "fragments". Sometimes, but not often, the words refer directly to what is in the picture, but more often the photographs are conceptual starting points for musings on his now-familiar obsessions: memory, myth, culture, politics, race and dreams.

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The associations, though, are often not entirely clear. A photograph of a telegraph pole on a deserted street in Selma, Alabama prompts a memory of a dream Cole had about crossing a street but never arriving at the other side, which, in turn, calls up a quotation on consciousness and time by the French phenomenological philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A street portrait of the back of a blond woman in New York City (see below), redolent of the work of Joel Meyerowitz, is matched with a fragment from Greek mythology concerning the painter Timanthes's mysterious portrait of the grieving, veiled Agamemnon. This is, for want of a better phrase, quintessentially Cole-ian.

"I see it as a unified story," he explains, "but one in which each fragment of prose is dense in the way that a poem is dense. There are thematic breadcrumbs scattered throughout the text, but, yes, it is oblique. It's not meant to be obvious, but a more psychologically resonant series of fragments that detonate on some deeper level."

He talks me through a photograph of a ship's foghorn, white with a gold rim, resplendent against a backdrop of Lake Brienz in Switzerland, the mountains rising out of the sea in the background amid glowering clouds. The fragment reads: "I opened my eyes, What lay before me looked like the sound of the alphorn at the beginning of the final movement of Brahms's First Symphony. This was the sound, this was the sound I saw."

It is one of the briefest passages in the book, Cole elaborates, but it is alongside one of the most important images. "It has the private density of poetry and an emotional charge for me. Brahms is one of my favourite composers. When I hear that passage, I think of epiphany and happiness. Brahms spent a little time in Switzerland learning the alphorn, which gave him the idea for the fanfare in his first symphony. All I have described you could find out through a Google search of 'Brahms', 'alphorn' and 'Switzerland'. These are not truly private allusions, just densely packed, implicit rather than explicit. That's how the words and pictures work – they go beyond themselves in a way."

Taken alongside his fiction and his essays, which range from the reflective to the polemical, as well as the photography column he writes for the New York Times, *Blind Spot* further enhances Cole's already burnished reputation. He is a writer for our times, prodigious, wide-ranging and supremely confident in his reach. In *Known and Strange Things*, to give just a few examples, he discourses passionately on race in America, explores the poetics of Saul Leiter's pioneering colour photographs and, in two consecutive essays, lauds VS Naipaul, the elegant writer, and nails VS Naipaul, the dreadful old reactionary.

If there is a personal touchstone for this kind of cross-fertilisation, it is surely the late John Berger, one of his heroes, though Berger, as I remind him, never took photographs. "I actually asked John why photography was not part of his practice," Cole says, "In his case, to photograph a subject was to foreclose some part of what he could write about it. He saw it as an interference in his writing faculties. I don't think like that about it. In fact, for me, taking a photograph of something often induces further thoughts on it."

In the flesh, Cole is both charming and intense. When I met him briefly last summer at a party in Manhattan thrown in his honour by his editors at the New York Times, he was warm and inclusive, but, even in casual conversation, there is a palpable alertness about him that intrigues. He seems acutely conscious, too, of his own place in the intellectual firmament. In *Known and Strange Things*, he revealed that his antidote to insomnia was to "rise from my bed and watch Jacques Derrida talk". In his deftly elegant takedown of Naipaul, there is also the distinct suggestion that a literary baton is being passed from the older master to the heir apparent.

Cole's precocious literary talent must surely have been honed in childhood. Born in Michigan, he was taken back to Nigeria as a child by his parents when they had completed their studies. His upbringing, he says, was solidly middle-class and aspirational. His father worked in middle management and his mother was a school teacher; both instilled in him the notion that "the child had to do better in education than their peers". When he travelled to America in the early 90s to commence his own college education, he felt he was returning home. "For sure, I had conflict and a certain nervousness, but not the kind that comes from thinking of oneself as an immigrant. I had a sense of my rights as an American. There was a period of adjustment – there still is – but the feeling I have sometimes of being lost in the world is more to do with my own personality than America."

Cole studied art and art history at Kalamazoo College, Michigan – "a good liberal college with the kind of leafy campus you get in American campus novels" – and later tried and failed to apply himself to a degree in medicine, in part to appease his parents. That failure haunted him for a while and, he says, he suffered from a bout of depression around that time. "I had no money, no time to read or go to concerts and I felt starved of that. Plus, I was very cold in Michigan and isolated. For two years, I was struggling to do well when I was used to doing well. I do not want to dwell on it but, for a time, I was phenomenally not myself. All the things you hear about depression were there."

He later pursued a doctorate in art history at Columbia, but, by then, as he puts it, "the Open City engine had begun to rev up". Having successfully published his first book, the novella *Every Day Is for the Thief*, in 2007 with the small imprint Cassava Republic in Nigeria, Cole had no great expectations for his first publication in the US, *Open City*, which he had written while studying. "In truth, I thought it would vanish, but it somehow chimed with the mood in America at the time."

Published in 2011, 10 years on from 9/11, when, as Cole puts it, "people were thinking about what had happened in a quieter, more reflective way", the book was hailed as a small masterpiece of diaristic observation and reflection in which the Nigerian-American protagonist lets his thoughts flow as if in rhythm with his daily walks around the neighbourhoods of New York.

In *Open City*, his descriptions of his New York evince a keen, roving attentiveness reminiscent of the city's great street photographers: Garry Winogrand, Meyerowitz and Leiter are presences in his prose alongside the more often cited Berger and WG Sebald. Cole, as he is keen to point out, has been taking photographs longer than he has been writing fiction. In *Every Day Is for the Thief*, the text is punctuated by Cole's black-and-white photographs evoking the swaggering, chaotic thrust of Lagos, his childhood home.

In both novels, Cole's writing style recalls Christopher Isherwood's celebrated description of his own prose: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed."

Cole cites the great experimental film-maker Chris Marker as perhaps the crucial influence in his novels. "In his great film, *Sans Soleil*, Marker moves between zooming out and watching the flow of life and zooming in to look at the pattern of the details of everyday experience. He is not telling you one thing about a place, but allowing it all to come in and making the connections visible. He is a major influence on *Open City* and even more on *Blind Spot*, where the subject itself is that kind of interconnectedness."

In many ways, then, *Blind Spot* continues in the vein of Teju Cole's fiction. This time around, though, he is the peripatetic narrator on an altogether more epic global journey through cities in which he is often a lone stranger. The experience of travel – by air as well as wandering alone on land – is central here. Since the success of *Open City*, Cole has travelled

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extensively – to literary festivals, teaching programmes, writer’s residencies and promotional events. As the novelist Siri Hustvedt puts it in her introduction: “Teju Cole really gets around.” Thus, each photograph and fragment of prose is grounded in a specific location: Auckland, Basel, Chicago, Lagos, Nairobi, New York, Paris and so forth. “In each place I have travelled,” he writes, “I have used my camera as an extension of my memory.”

Even if Trump goes, that ideology has taken hold... It’s gotten very serious and very wearying to the soul and spirit. The images, and the reflections that follow from them, are also a way of fixing moments that might otherwise be lost in the sheer overload of global memories he has stored in his head in a relatively short time. “Certain experiences became more vivid as I was walking around and thinking about what I was photographing,” he elaborates. “In central Bali, for instance, there was an afternoon that has survived very clearly and vividly in my memory but also in the false memory of the photographs I took that day. They are stilled moments, fragments from a much bigger experience, a film that could only have been captured with a camera attached to my head.”

Given that he takes his camera with him wherever he goes, how visible a presence is he when he shoots on the street? He laughs, anticipating the underlying thrust of my question. “Well, a solitary black tourist is not a common sight in Switzerland or Kathmandu or northern Italy or even in upstate New York,” he says, ruefully, “so, I am already a little strange. But, there is a way in which having the camera makes me more free. It is a kind of invisibility cloak, especially when you are on a strange street far from home. But, oddly enough, I was more free in Kathmandu than in Lagos. The first assumption everywhere is, ‘there is a black tourist’ – but, in Nigeria, that question becomes more complex. There is more suspicion.”

How about America, though? Has he felt more suspicion there of late as a lone black man with a camera? “That’s a different sort of complication,” he says, sighing. “There is the now common national security type of jitteriness that attends a bearded man of vaguely foreign appearance with a camera – ‘Is he planning something?’ But, my own attitude is different in America. I know my rights. Whether I am in Palm Beach or Selma, I am also at home.”

I ask him if he truly feels at home in Trump’s America. He pauses for perhaps the first time in the interview. “No. I don’t feel at home in the United States right now and that is an uncomfortable feeling. I watched Fox News recently and I realised that they are on an oppositional war footing constantly. It was depressing, but also instructive insofar as it convinced me that there is something incredibly robust at the sub-Trump level. Even if he goes, that ideology has taken hold in a mesmerising way. It may endure because the right have become incredibly emboldened. I’ve been here for 25 years now, but this is new information to me. It’s gotten very serious and very wearying to the soul and spirit. Like many people, since the election, I’ve gone from astonishment and disbelief to resignation and back to disbelief again.”

Blind Spot, though, only hints at the political anger that has fired some of his writing in the past – his polemic against the philanthropy of the rich and privileged, *The White Savior Industrial Complex*, is required reading: a time bomb that explodes with little warning amid the otherwise measured prose of *Known and Strange Things*. (He is a constant presence on Instagram, where his new, more politically attuned series, *Black Paper*, is a tantalising work-in-progress.) But the density and complexity of *Blind Spot* is also, he insists, a protest against the relentless, deadening noise of populism and demagoguery.

“One of the responses to all that is to do the work I do. My essays are not political in the main, but they are trying to advance a humanist argument. Likewise, my photographs are complex, but I hope, rewarding. If you spend time with them, I hope their nuances and formal rhythms will reveal themselves. This is the book I most wanted to make at this

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moment and I want every single page to be in opposition to that reductive, simplistic, un-analytical view of the world. This is a time for protest and activism for sure, but it is also a time for subtlety, ambiguity and complexity.”