

TEJU COLE EXPLORES HOW WE SEE THE WORLD IN “BLIND SPOT”

By Jennifer Krasinski, June 13, 2017



“I am intrigued by the continuity of places,” writes the award-winning author Teju Cole in his newest book, *Blind Spot*, “by the singing line that connects them all.” Over the past few years, Cole traveled the world, taking pictures in the disparate cities he visited — Nuremberg, Btourtij, London, Vancouver, Tivoli, Selma — in search of visual traces that could thread them together across both space and time. “I’ve always been hypersensitive to the way that the past interrupts the present,” he says. “Not only in the history-books kind of way, but also on the vernacular, day-to-day level.”

Born in America, raised in Nigeria, and now living in Brooklyn, Cole trained for a time to become an art historian, until fiction and photography gave him other means for grappling with and expressing how the past preserves itself in the present. Like his novels, *Open City* and *Every Day Is for the Thief*, and his collection of essays, *Known and Strange Things*, *Blind Spot* (Random House, \$40) continues Cole’s inquiry into what he calls “the limits of vision,” the excavation of what we cannot see from what we can. For this book, he assembled more than 150 photographs, which he paired with texts as succinct and enigmatic as shards from an archaeological site. *Blind Spot* is many things at once: both memoir and map of the world, both essay on photography and elegy for the lost arts of looking and seeing. Cole and I recently talked about his book and the moral necessity of unanswerable questions.

You’ve described *Blind Spot* as a “lyric essay,” and some readers may find it a complex text, asking of their time and mind in an unexpected way.

There’s an important political aspect to this book for me, because this is a moment in which I want to insist on complexity. Right now, the conversations in the public sphere are not, to say the least, being driven by people with complex minds or motives. In my own small way, I want to defend complexity, which feels like a moral responsibility at this moment. The book isn’t speaking about the ongoing political issues of the day, but it is definitely speaking to them. Some of the most profound questions of the day, it seems to me, are “Who do we wish to be?” and “How intent and scrupulous are we about seeing?” How do we assess what we’re looking at?

In a way, the book isn't meant to be read so much as explored, navigated.

A reader might not initially be sure how the texts link to each other, but I say, "Keep reading." I don't promise that I will tie everything up neatly, but I promise that every single entry belongs in the book. Everything stitches together. Everything connects.

Doesn't that put an awful lot of pressure on the reader?

This was one of the great joys of my novel *Open City* for me: Once it got to the place in its life where people reread it, they got so much that they did not get the first time. They saw what I had hidden in there to communicate with things that show up later in the book. And this book is very much the same way. I was conscious of the fact that it was tightly woven, but I hope people do the book the honor of reading it. And I hope that people do it the honor of rereading it. Because that second experience — once you have a feeling for the arc of it, that there are things that are foreshadowing other things that will show up — it's a very elusive kind of thing.

In the book, the acts of photographing and walking are almost inseparable.

One of the important aspects of this project is that it announces itself as a project about blindness and seeing, but then as you read it you realize that it's actually about a constellation of many different things, and one of the most important of those is walking. *Open City* was about history and the city, and how we get that history through walking. But in this book, even more than in *Open City*, I talk about walking a lot. I insist on this physicality because a photograph doesn't just happen. Somebody has to look at something, and in order to look at it, they have to travel to that place.

When you travel, when you're walking around a city, is it your intention to discover the city, or to discover the photograph of the city?

For *Blind Spot*, I went out in order to hunt for something that belongs to it. Let's say I'm invited to Barcelona to give a talk, and I get an extra half-day. I'm not going out with my camera in order to discover the history of Barcelona, which I can get from a book and which the streets themselves will not tell me in formal terms. When I walk out and wander around for three hours in Barcelona, or in a city I know like Lagos or New York, what I'm hoping for is to find some images, some photographs, and/or some fragment of narrative that are actually part of what I sometimes think of as "the continuous city."

What do you mean by that?

When I'm out and about in New York, I'm always thinking about the fact that this city was built by other people — now long dead — for their own uses, and we live in their built environment, like hermit crabs who take over somebody else's shell. For me, it's not even that this city is full of ghosts — it is, but it's more that the infrastructure was literally made by other people, and they're all dead. New York in 1917 looked a lot like this. Prospect Park was there, Grand Army Plaza was there. And all those people who built that city are dead. And that is interesting to be around. I live in a row house that was probably built in the 1890s. That means people lived here, died here, had babies in here. And fifty years from now, these buildings will probably still be here.

You borrow a beautiful sentence from Sojourner Truth — "I sell the shadow to support the substance" — to seed the idea that photography is "shadow work," which is a lovely paradox since most people think of photography as a medium of light. It's interesting because photography is light passing over a photosensitive surface to create a negative, but you don't get that without passing through shadow first. If you think of photography as something that's giving us a kind of secret history of what has been seen by the camera, then the process of photography is by definition a kind of secret history. All

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has to happen in darkness. The aperture has to let some light in and then be shut. The image is created and retained in darkness, and that element of mystery really, really attracts me.

The final sentence of *Blind Spot* is: “What is missing?” After writing the book, do you have a better sense of what’s missing?

One of the narratives I tell in the book is about having been very religious, and then having drifted away from that. The days of being religious for me were characterized above all by a kind of certainty about how the world worked. After that came doubt and contingency, and that’s where I live now. I have my ethical commitments, but fundamentally I live in the conditions of doubt and contingency. This is what makes me a societal critic. It also makes me skeptical of the things that I might think I’m sure about. So to the question “What is missing?” I answer: I don’t know. I really don’t know.

But at least you’re looking. Not everyone explores these questions so deeply, or across so many different disciplines.

I think I have, temperamentally, a serious approach to the arts I practice. I try to write well. I try to read people who write well, in order to try to figure out what works. I’m sort of a nerd about the craft of it. I take the same approach to photography. I try to read a lot. I’ve taken some master classes. Nevertheless, these are simply my tools, and maybe in the future I’ll still be obsessed with these questions but using different tools. Maybe painting or filmmaking. Maybe I’ll learn music. But what’s underneath is a certain personal relationship to history. I’ve always had this notion that places retain traces of the things that have happened in them. That there’s always some kind of trace.