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TEJU COLE: 'WE ARE LIVING IN A WORLD THAT IS CONSTRUCTED FOR WHITENESS'

By Anita Sethi, July 1, 2017



Teju Cole's new book, *Blind Spot*, is a powerful juxtaposition of photography and text which doesn't feature many human faces. There are no pictures of himself, though as he explains it's not that he leaves himself out but is more artful about how he's in. Cole describes his latest book as "another reiteration – perhaps the most explicit so far – of my long-term concern with the limits of vision" – a theme he's engagingly explored in his novels *Open City* and *Every Day is for the Thief*, and essays. In *Blind Spot* we encounter striking streetscapes, seascapes and also mindscapes. The title partly alludes to Cole's own experience of an eye condition called papillophlebitis. "I went completely blind for a day and a half or so – that's alarming enough and then I had laser surgery. It was caused by blood vessels exploding on my retina", Cole tells me. "I went completely blind for a day and a half or so. It was caused by blood vessels exploding on my retina" "But what I identified is that over the years my attitude to photography also changed – a kind of new intensity entered my relationship with looking at things. "After my brush with blindness, sight became much more focused, more precious for me. I would look at a watering-can in the sun and have an epiphany with it. I became this weird, slightly mystical person – I'd walk down the street and think this is amazing, this light pouring over everything, and the photos reflect that".

The photographs find beauty in the banal and carry a closely observed intensity, casting the quotidian in a new light. It's not only literal but metaphorical blind spots that the book explores. As Siri Hustvedt puts it in her excellent foreword, "debilitating forms of blindness" : "We are prone to cultural biases... sexism and racism are born of skewed perceptions, of overvaluing masculinity and whiteness". I ask Cole about such skewed societal perceptions: "For me it has a lot to do with being a black dude in the world – I'm already in this space where I'm not assumed to be the centre. Those of us who have an ethnicity other than white are living in a world constructed for whiteness. It's like being a left-hander and suddenly you think why's this doorknob not convenient? "The experience of cultural spaces and politics for a person of colour, a queer person, a woman is different – the world is not really properly designed for you. You become much more aware of subjective ways of looking at the world. So there's a way that the limits of vision are much more apparent to me as a person of colour".

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In Cole's fascinating essay "A True Picture of Black Skin" he discusses how cameras and the mechanical tools of photography have made it difficult to photograph black skin. "If you say to someone that photographic technology is racist because historically it has favoured white skin, it sounds like one of those things that you do not say at a dinner party because they will think, 'oh my god here they come again with their obsession with race.'" But then, continues Cole, you have to explain that film stock was calibrated with a white woman's skin. Hewlett Packard cameras had a problem where they couldn't read black faces, he adds. "What is seeing? What is inside the looking person and what is outside him?" – Hustvedt asks. Representation is at the heart of seeing and there are still arguments about whether we see "an internally generated representation of the world" or see the world directly.

"It's an interesting time to raise those questions as we're at a moment where the status of truth is under interrogation", says Cole. The word 'truth' is currently contentious and so is 'real' – there are two pictures of a black boy in the Congo; in one his eyes are obscured in darkness, in the second Cole rescans the film to reveal his eyes and bring out the reality of the person. "It's literally an eye-opening moment that ends the book. One of the central ideas of the book is that darkness is not empty, it's information at rest". The book features photographs from a vast array of places – from London to Lagos, from Berlin to Bombay – and although Cole is a frequent traveller, feted at festivals worldwide, he always tries to "get off the beaten path". I mention an image of Capri, "the apparition of a shining fleet on the Mediterranean" which made him recall Edna O'Brien saying: "We know about these beautiful waters that have death in them". Travel for many is not a privilege but a necessity: "Absolutely. In the past two or three years my travel especially in Europe has been deeply affected by the migrant crisis. The sense that I'm travelling comfortably in privileged circumstances, arriving in places I don't know particularly well and being welcomed as an honoured guest and all around me are young black people who are the very opposite of being welcomed, they're viewed as a threat.

"This staggering inequality for me is nothing more than a mere accident of birth. There are moments throughout the book where I return to the question of migration". Set in high relief against place is a panorama of pain, both personal and historical. At an unexpected moment in the book Cole relives the pain of having a hole cauterised in his retina, "an intense pain, not bitter like a knife, but sour like darkness". We discuss pain, and Cole describes "a dull pain all through your body and that's for sure what the pain of the present moment politically feels like". What unifies the book is "the singing line that connects places" and to explain Cole breaks into song before continuing: "imagine a singing line that's moving through the fragments – that's my approach to fragments, imagining that something's flowing through them, a feeling of continuity between them". Here is a book which brilliantly elucidates both our differences and our sameness.