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## TEJU COLE'S 'BLIND SPOT:' WHAT'S MISSING WHEN WE LOOK AT THE WORLD?

By Amy Ta, July 26, 2017



Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole, known for the novels “Open City” and “Every Day is for the Thief,” has a new book out called “Blind Spot.”

It features hundreds of images — spanning from Lagos to Berlin to Brooklyn — with essays on what’s visible and invisible in the photos.

For Cole, sight is both metaphorical and literal. A few years ago, he began to lose sight in one eye. His doctor told him it was “big blind spot syndrome.” While he’s regained his sight, the experience changed his perception.

“It helped me focus in on what had already been one of my big concerns as a writer and a photographer, which is a question of what are we missing when we look at the world, when we regard our environment?”

He adds, “We never really completely know what’s at stake, what’s going on, what histories are embedded in the terrain we’re engaging with. ... I also remember that each human society is fundamentally formed by conflict. Conflict that is later invisibilized in the self-presentation of the place. And very often, conflict that is not even over yet.”

“Blind Spot” features many photos of Switzerland. For Cole, violence is hidden in the country’s legendary neutrality. He says that until the 19th century, Switzerland ran on a farming economy, and even burned witches during the Medieval era. Today, Switzerland is known for manufacturing weapons, pharmaceuticals, optic devices. “Those are some of the forms of embedded violence that sustain the neutrality and the wealth of a place like Switzerland.”

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Switzerland is, of course, known for mountains. Cole says everything he saw in the country had an image of a mountain. “When I actually went up into a mountain and took a picture of the mountain, it didn’t look like a picture of a mountain. It looked as though I had taken a picture of a picture of a mountain. ... This is part of what creates the atmosphere of my pictures — that even their reality gets thrown into reality. Was I really there, or am I just taking a picture of a picture?”

Cole sees cars as representatives, shadows of people. “When you look at a parking lot, almost each car represents each person. And in a funny kind of way, to be American is to be independent, have your own car from the time you’re 16,” he says. “And the classic American death is a car crash.”

There aren’t many photos of people in Cole’s book. The few that are included are seen only from behind.

But there’s a boy in Brazzaville, the capital of Republic of the Congo, who appears twice. In the first photo, his face is completely shadowed.

When the boy reappears at the end of the book, his face is visible. Cole writes, “With slightly altered settings, I could now see his face, his eyes. Darkness is not empty. It is information at rest.”

Cole tells Press Play, “The boy is a black boy. He’s dark skinned. So the idea of darkness becomes not just a question of optical value, it becomes a question of skin color, it becomes a question of race. But it also becomes a question of history, what we consider to be a dark history.”