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TEJU COLE TALKS AT NOTRE DAME ABOUT THE LIMITS OF
LANGUAGE

By Becky Malewitz, March 18, 2018



In a 2017 interview with The Guardian, Teju Cole compared his camera to an invisibility cloak.

“When you are in a situation, especially a situation that you’re not familiar with or people are not familiar with you, the camera can give a kind of reason, an apologia, for you being there,” he says in a phone interview from Brooklyn, N.Y., where currently lives. “People see you with the camera, they might say, ‘Oh, what are you doing with that camera?’ Or they might be like, ‘Oh, that person has a camera. They are clearly a tourist,’ and you don’t have to answer any questions and they don’t have to keep asking questions about you. ... So, like, a camera, it becomes a kind of excuse for actually being in a place.”

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Cole, who is a writer, photographer and art historian, says there is usually a camera in his life somewhere, “if only just the one in my pocket for my cellphone.”

Also the photo critic for the New York Times Magazine, Cole will give a lecture Thursday titled “Inarticulacy: Language at the Limits” at the University of Notre Dame’s Eck Center Auditorium, followed by a book signing.

“Largely I’m interested in how much can be said about the stories we’re telling. ... I’m always interested in what we’re missing and how much can be said and the desire never to overstate or exaggerate,” he says. “So I think my real subject is those limits, and I’m very interested in uncertainty, in hesitation and people who (have) things they need to say but can’t quite say it easily just because they are aware of how much we don’t know. That’s what I really mean by inarticulacy, that it’s actually a kind of ethical responsibility not to say more than you can probably say with the evidence you have.”

When asked about how inarticulacy has affected the current political climate in the United States, Cole says he believes the opposite to be true, people are too certain about their stances.

“There are people who have over-asserted their positions without necessarily having evidence for it,” he says. “So I think that definitely has affected our political situation in the country, that’s for sure, and, of course, I think we’re facing now a kind of crisis in the public sphere where we have this idea that whether something is true or not, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a question of what goes viral and how much you can insist on your own reality.”

Cole sees Twitter as one of the places where people can insist on their own reality, which is why even though he currently has more than 265,000 Twitter followers, the writer has not posted to the social networking site since 2014.

“People were like, ‘Why did you leave?’ That was in 2014; now in 2018, everyone is like, ‘Oh, Twitter is toxic. I wish I could leave,’ but they are addicted to it,” he says. “I think it’s obvious that Twitter is a place where anyone can say anything and I don’t think we really realize how serious a thing that is when anyone can say anything. That it could really, really have huge consequences for people’s well-being, but in aggregate, it comes to have very serious consequences for our democracy, as well, because it means there are a lot of aggressions, there’s a lot of falsehoods, there’s a lot of unverified information in the world. I’m glad I left when I did, really. I’m sorry to say I’m no longer a big fan of Twitter. I had seen it as an experimental place to do various kinds of work but not anymore.”

Born in Kalamazoo to Nigerian parents, Cole, who is the oldest of four children, grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, before returning to the United States at 17 to go to college. He received his bachelor’s degree from Kalamazoo College in 1996. After dropping out of medical school at the University of Michigan, he went to London to study at the School of Oriental and African Studies before pursuing a doctorate at Columbia University. He is currently the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College.

He has published a pair of novels, “Everyday Is for the Thief” in 2007 and “Open City” in 2012, as well as a collection of essays titled “Known and Strange Things.” His most recent publication, “Punto d’ombra,” or “Blind Spot” in English, is a collection of his photographic work and writings.

The owner of nine cameras in various formats, Cole talks about photography in the digital age of iPhones and Instagram.

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"I always like to ask audiences, I'll say, 'Show of hands, how many people are photographers?'" he says. "It will be like 10 percent of the people in the room, and then I'll say, 'How many people here have a cellphone on them right now?' It will be everybody in the room. It's like, so everybody's a photographer, you know. ... I don't think that's such a terrible thing. I don't think it's to be bemoaned. It just means that more and more people are participating in this art form. Therefore, we need more expansive, more inclusive and also more precise ways of talking about what it is."