

Teju Cole, *Punto d'Ombra*

Francesca Giommi

(Università degli Studi di Padova, Italia)

Teju Cole is a writer, art historian, and photographer. He is the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College and photography critic of *The New York Times Magazine*. He was born in the US in 1975 to Nigerian parents, and raised in Nigeria. He currently lives in Brooklyn. He is the author of two books, a novella, *Every Day is for the Thief*, named book of the year by *The New York Times*, *The Globe* and *Mail*, NPR (National Public Radio), and *The Telegraph*, and a novel, *Open City*, which also featured on numerous book-of-the-year lists, and won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award for Fiction, the Rosenthal Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Internationaler Literaturpreis. Teju Cole has contributed to *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Brick*, and several other magazines. His forthcoming *Known and Strange Things*, is a collection of essays on literature, art, travel, and politics.

His photography has been exhibited in India, Iceland, and the US, published in a number of journals, and was the subject of a solo exhibition in Milan in the spring of 2016 with the title of *Punto d'Ombra*.¹ The catalogue was recently published by Contrasto. The English edition, *Blind Spot*, will be published by Random House in April 2017. We asked him a few questions on the occasion of a reading held by the author during the Festival delle Letterature in June 2016, soon after the publication of this innovative collection of images and texts.

F.G.: *Punto d'ombra* is your new book that mixes literature and photography. Is your model a writer like Sebald? What is the writing process of telling a story through images and words?

T.C.: I don't think of Sebald so much as a model for this work. I'm closer to documentary filmmakers who combine images with memoir and philosophical speculation, such as Chris Marker, who made *Sans Soleil* and *La Jetée*. I also really enjoy Louis Malle's humane and personal approach to documentary. The process is to think of the project

1 Cole, Teju (2016). *Punto d'ombra*. Trad. di Gioia Guerzoni. Milano: Contrasto. Trad. di: *Blind Spot* (c.s.).

as an 'open work', in the sense that I gather many things in the course of my life and travels, and then later figure out how they might relate to each other. I might be in Indonesia and have a certain thought, and when I develop my film from Indonesia, I might find that this thought – which I deepen and refine by writing it down – connects with one of the photographs. Or I might develop the film, and find a photograph that tells me something I didn't know, leading to words I had not preconceived. It's always an organic process. I can't plan it all ahead of time, nor would I wish to. And also, I like Italo Calvino's idea of 'continuous cities', as described in *Invisible Cities*. He suggests that there is actually just one big, continuous city that does not begin or end: 'only the name of the airport changes'. What is then interesting is to find, in that continuity, the less-obvious differences of texture: the signs, the markings, the assemblages, the things hiding in plain sight in each cityscape or landscape.

F.G.: In what way does your writing affect your activity as a photographer and vice versa? Which came or comes first now?

T.C.: They arrived in my life almost simultaneously, about a dozen years ago. I found the voice I wanted to use in my writings at the same time I began to use a camera for more than just family shots. And they have developed together, so that *Open City* is haunted by photographs (though it contains none) and all my photographs look as though they had an articulable thought, a thought that could be written down, hidden inside them.

F.G.: In *Open City*, and elsewhere, your novel(s) seem(s) to defy or at least to challenge and redefine the conventional structure of storytelling. Is it intentional and to what extent? Do you have any particular model for this?

T.C.: Not really. I mean, I was influenced by James Joyce's *Dubliners* in the language, and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in the way thoughts move freely. But, for the most part, I just wanted to tell this story of one man's interior experience in the way it had to be told. I think the work is a little experimental, but not at all as experimental as works like *Ulysses* or *A Man Without Qualities*. The modernist project kind of stalled, and most novels of our time are extremely conventional. Only by those standards is *Open City* innovative.

F.G.: Your narrator is an 'unreliable narrator'. Is it a limit of consciousness or does it allow him (and you) a greater freedom of individual and artistic expression?

T.C.: I wanted to make a work that was close to life, where we remember things imperfectly and are not always our best selves. I wanted the possibility of disappointment to be part of the work.

F.G.: In *Every Day is for the Thief* an unnamed hero returns to his native Lagos after many years in America. Why is he unnamed? Is that you or an allegory of the contemporary migrant? Or are you trying to buy as much freedom and space as possible by evading categorisation?

T.C.: Precisely. Some of it is me, much of it is not. Freedom is all that matters. When you are reading, I want you to forget about the technique and just be absorbed in the flow of the thoughts and observations, so that it really does feel like a visit to Lagos.

F.G.: Which are your influences, literary and non-literary?

T.C.: Michael Ondaatje, Anne Carson, Johannes Brahms, John Coltrane, Luigi Ghirri, Lee Friedlander, Federico Fellini, John Berger, Michel Serres. My grandmother.

F.G.: How did your life change after the publication of *Open City* and then after *Every Day is for the Thief*?

T.C.: *Open City* gave me the tremendous privilege of doing what I enjoy for a living. It told me it's OK to go your own way, and be creative, and be a bit difficult. *Every Day is for the Thief* doubled that advantage. Without the reception those books had, I might not have had the courage to try something as experimental as *Punto d'Ombra*.

