

# Things come together: a conversation with Teju Cole

By Anne Gregory

Teju Cole, Nigerian-American writer, photographer, and art historian is prominent among the “new wave of African writers”.<sup>1</sup> His novel, *Open City*, won the PEN/Hemingway Award. His novella, *Everyday is for the Thief*, published in Nigeria and the US, received praise from Salman Rushdie. Cole is the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College, lectures extensively, and maintains a provocative presence on Twitter.

**AG: Teju, thank you for talking with Afrikadaa. Let's start with something to set the tone for discussing your work.**

TC I can begin with a quotation by the late African American poet, Audre Lorde. It says: “Caring for myself is not self indulgence. It is self-preservation. And that is an act of political warfare.” Audre Lorde was certainly writing from outside the larger social and cultural mainstream. She was a black lesbian poet. What was so resonant about

these words to me is the fact that one's acts of self-preservation are not always understood or taken seriously. We are constantly being asked why race has to be part of the conversation or why gender has to be part of the conversation?

This is a gap that is immensely difficult to bridge. The one between the outsider who thinks do we really have to bring up those difficult conversations and the person who is experiencing it from the inside and thinks actually we do have to bring up those conversations because in the absence of that conversation my experience of the world gets completely erased. That is a pretty good frame for thinking about the kind of work I try to do. AG That brings to mind this passage by Frantz Fanon: “Our history takes place in obscurity and the sun I carry with me must lighten every corner.”

TC Absolutely. Fanon becomes one of those essential thinkers and writers. That particular quote is one that is vital to me. It's interesting just how much

artistic energy has to be spent reiterating fundamentals. Almost as if you have to go back and prepare the ground on which you place your work.

So that's right, you carry the sun with you, illuminating your own way forward.

**AG: When it comes to publishing your work you have many options, from literary magazines like *Granta* to big league publications like the *New Yorker*, yet you chose to publish the short story *Hafiz* on Twitter. Why?**

TC On one hand, I was published in traditional venues. It doesn't get more traditional than having a novel published by Random House and then reviewed by the NY Times. It's straight forward, the way it's done for the writer who gets their work out there. One way of telling that story is to say I had that happen to me. Then I parleyed that into things like writing on Twitter.

But the other story, the deeper and truer story, is that I was actually taking online

seriously for publication before I ever published anything in print. Once the online interaction became real, I never doubted it as a way to reach audiences. It came very naturally to me. I simply wrote the story, took it through its twelve drafts as best as I could, then I put it online.

I thought, why not spend that energy on writing really good and present it to twelve of my friends or to twenty readers? That was actually the early strategy. Writing for a very small audience, but a steady one and a serious one, an audience of good writers. I began to create the body of work so that when I did have the opportunity to present work to a publisher, I actually had something to show. Online is where the audience is. It is where your work can be seen. And it is where it has a chance to make an impact.

**AG: Was there a seminal moment in your development as a writer – something or someone that helped propel you along your path?**

TC In *Open City*, about half way through the book, Chapter 10. I had already sold the book and written *Everyday is for the Thief* – I was sort of well on my way, but I had not published a book in the US yet. I was definitely having the ongoing conversation with myself about whether I had a writing ability, whether I had talent, or whether it was all just smoke. I remember the day I wrote the tenth chapter of *Open City* and I showed it to one good friend. We're talking about a chapter that is

only seven pages long.

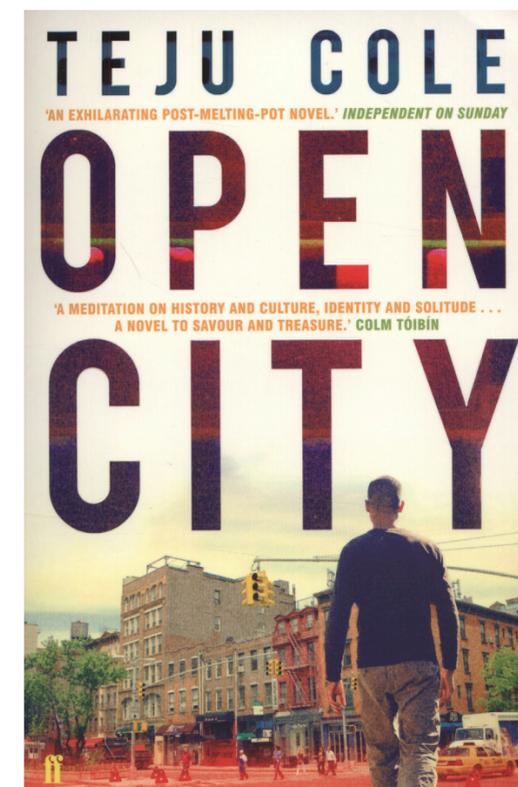
**AG: It's about drinking, or not drinking, a bottle of coke.**

TC Exactly. She read it and wrote back to me and said you've got it; you've arrived now. Something clicked in my head that what I'm saying has not been said in quite the same way. That vote of confidence was not a big review or a prize, but it helped me push forward in the book. It marked the moment when I felt myself transitioning from being an ordinary citizen of the Republic of Letters into somebody who was actually participating in producing the material, into someone who was doing literature.

All said and done, I feel very fortunate. But none of that whole long history changes anything when I sit down at my desk, facing an empty document. I still have to create a coherent sentence.

**AG: In *Everyday Is For The Thief* the emotional level is almost visceral – it's like a love story about Lagos. However, *Open City*, set in New York, is more intellectual. There is an emotional distance. What accounts for the difference?**

TC I'll speak about the difference between the two narrators, because that's what it really comes down to. There are two narrators whom I've drawn close to each other and then at a slightly greater distance from myself – close to me, but not me. *Everyday Is For The Thief* was about a guy exploring the experience of return-



<sup>1</sup> Lee, Felicia R. (2014, June 29). New Wave of African Writers with an International Bent. New York Times.



From the left to the right : Jerusalem 2014. Photo credit Teju Cole

ing [to Lagos] in a more raw way. It is clearly about a disenchanting love for a city. In *Open City*, there was a different kind of agenda at work. *Open City* is about mourning. It's more like shell shock. I wanted to maintain that mood all through the book. I wanted it to be kind of uncomfortable to read. You are immersed inside this world. There are a lot of beautiful things in it, but at the same time it is not fun to be with someone who is mourning. Then towards the end of the book we also realize that not only has he been mourning but he has also been the source of a certain grief to others. So the emotional register I was exploring in the books was different.

**AG : You often reference books in your fiction. One you mention in *Open City* is *Cosmopolitanism*. Does its idea of universal plus difference reflect on a theme in the novel ?**

TC First, I have a certain interest in realism -- a realism that has the texture of contemporary life. I notice a lot of novels leave out the books that people are

reading and the films they are watching. It always seems that characters are too busy dealing with big stuff to actually read books and watch movies and do all the things that we do in our lives. So I always try to include that texture into my fiction. Just regular things like names of books and names of authors. Sometimes I invent the name of a book or a film or a writer. For example, in *Open City* one important book cited was one called *The Monster of Amsterdam*, which was written by Julius's patient. It's totally plausible -- an academic book about early New York history -- except that it doesn't exist. Though it has occurred to me that I might now go back and attempt to write such a book. As far as *Cosmopolitanism* goes, I just thought of all those books in general as creating an alternative shape of the story being told inside *Open City* itself. There is Gaston Bachelard, Tahar Benjelloun, Peter Altenberg and Kwame Anthony Appiah -- almost as if they are dots that you can trace together and get an outline of what is in the book. There are other motifs that recur in the novel -- passages about birds, and passages about music.

It's like when you are printing something you need cartridges of different colored inks. Each of those thematic points is like different colored ink so that if you printed with just one ink you would get a vague outline of the picture. But if you print with all the inks together, that's when you get a fully fleshed out picture. *Cosmopolitanism* itself hits at the main concerns of the book. But most of the book, politically, does not attempt to come to a conclusion. It does not give instructions about how to think. This is a book that is shrouded in doubt. It's not in the business of giving a political agenda.

**AG : You are a photographer as well as a writer. Does one discipline influence the other ?**

TC I find a lot of the photography I'm doing these days does try to catch what is illusive. There is a feeling in my photographs that might be described as poetic -- something seen from the corner of your eye that is kind of blurred. On the other hand, my writing is very descriptive, listing the facts of a situa-

tion in which there is not a lot happening in terms of big events. I'm not a war photographer or a wedding photographer or a portraitist. It's observation about very small things.

**AG : What seems especially relevant to you at this point in time ?**

TC What feels important to me at this moment right now is that all the work we are doing, all the discourse, all our arguments, all our efforts to make the world better -- everything can be looked at from the point of view of having been finished already. In other words, a hundred years from now none of us is going to be remembered. We will be in somebody's distant past.

I don't find this depressing. I find it kind of a relief because we get so caught up in thinking whatever is going on right now is the most important thing in the history of the universe. And it simply is not.



Teju Cole photo credit: Retha Ferguson