

Ethics and Associativeness: Conversations with Teju Cole

MY FASCINATION WITH TEJU COLE'S work evolved out of a broader project on the contemporary novel. This project analyzes prose fiction that is associative, essayistic, digressive, densely patterned, and oblique. Cole's novels *Everyday Is for the Thief* (2007) and *Open City* (2011) were a revelation. I was impressed not simply by his ability to build sustained fugue-like patterns but also by his way of charging these formal effects with political and ethical implication. The title of my project, *The Constellational Novel*, alludes both to Olga Tokarczuk's coinage, the "powieść konstelacyjna," and Cole's reflections on the ethics and aesthetics of "thinking constellationally." Yet, for a writer like Cole, the "associativeness that is formally convincing" in one medium, prose, is also informed by his accomplished work as a photographer, critic, essayist, and art historian.

These conversations explore Cole's ideas about prose form, ethics, and politics, but they also take an interest in how his photographic work and his prose writing intertwine. The interview was conducted in two parts, the first by phone and the second by email. The first half coincided with the publication of Cole's photo-essay collection *Blind Spot* (2017) and his visit to Australia in 2017.¹ The second half was conducted in 2022 to coincide with the publication of his book *Black Paper* (2021).

LK: *Blind Spot* (2017) counterpoints 150 original photographs taken during your travels, in places like São Paulo, Lagos, and Berlin, Brazzaville, Auckland, and Beirut, with ruminative prose fragments. I wanted to start by asking about the way this book holds text and image in tension. The photographs are not illustrations of the text; the text does not offer commentary

ABSTRACT These conversations between Teju Cole and Louis Klee explore form and ethics in Cole's photography and writing. They begin with a close engagement with the central thematic concerns and motifs in Cole's 2017 photo-essay book *Blind Spot* and then move to his recent book of essays, *Black Paper* (2021). Throughout, the focus is on questions of how photography and writing relate, and how politics and ethics are implicated in literary and artistic form. REPRESENTATIONS 161. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 124–38. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.161.6.124>.

on or captions for the photographs.² Instead, they form a series of recurring visual motifs and textual allusions. How were you thinking about form in this work?

TC: In all my work, I've always had a feeling of responsibility toward—how would I call it?—not experimentation, because that sounds like something you might do for its own sake, but toward freedom. This may sound like a paradox, but freedom always involves an element of responsibility, I think. What I mean is that I've always been eager to retain in my work the right to not stay too tightly to an established form. This is part of what you might call the privilege of publication. It's as if someone has put a microphone into your hand and said: "Here you are. You're on stage. What do you want to say? What do you want to put out into the world?" This project, *Blind Spot*, began in freedom. I was saying, now there's material I want to express. I've written a novel, but just because someone has attached the label of the novelist to me doesn't mean I want to conform to that pattern in what I decide to do next. Instead, there might be another way to think about this constellation of material. The visual arts—and photography in particular—have always been a big part of how I express the world, and so there was no sense in which, with *Blind Spot*, I was sitting down and saying: "What should I do that's unusual?" *Blind Spot* was about having the courage to put the stuff I'd already been doing out there.

When I create an image, I'm already thinking about it in a nonstraight-forward way. What is interesting about a particular image? What are the stories that stick to it? What form do those stories take when I write them down? This book ended up being organic. The point at which it could have died would have been to say, "OK, that's all well and good, now I have to work it out into something more formal." Either do a sequence of photos and then an essay at the end, like a classic photo-book, or write a novel and intersperse it with photos—like Sebald, or whatever! I wanted to have the courage of my own form, and I've been very lucky because not only did it get published, but it's already had a wonderful response.

LK: *Blind Spot* certainly feels like a genre of its own making. You often find ways to let the book reflect on its own form. For instance, next to an image of clouds reflected in glass at Palm Beach, the text begins: "Aristotle says the soul never thinks without an image. Giordano Bruno, following, says to think is to speculate with images."³ You follow this with an allusion to the etymology of speculate, from the Latin *speculārī*, meaning to spy out, watch, examine, observe.⁴

TC: The moment when we look at an image (not a purely superficial advertising image) or read a text (not only seeking to get information from it but engaging with it on an aesthetic level): at that moment, we're already doing theory. Theory is not something that people in universities do. It's something that filters down to normal life. I think that's always been in my work: the idea that what we learn in universities is not just some precious, annoying thing we impose on young people that has no practical connection to life. But, no, to read something in a troubled way is the ideal of reading; learning how anything we might engage has four or five different layers is part of the pleasure of the text. I always try to allow for that in my work. I try to be free with it, but not in a way that announces it. The point is to acknowledge that theory is part of life. If you're looking at a picture, it might remind you of something you saw on the street, but it might also remind you of something that Aristotle said. It's OK to include all of those things.

LK: One thing that has continually fascinated me about your work—and you've already mentioned W. G. Sebald, who is pertinent here—is how you obliquely figure the wounds of history. This is something that preoccupies Julius, the protagonist of *Open City* (2011). He wonders at one point: “What was the use of going into these recesses of the human heart. Why show torture? Was it not enough to be told, in imprecise detail, that bad things happened?”⁵ It might not be imprecise detail, but in *Blind Spot* you find many ways to indirectly allude to history's traumas, as when, for instance, an image of the serenity of the Swiss mountains is made to evoke the hidden violence of the country's weapons trade and its history of indentured child labor. It's an ethics of obliquity that you find in the line you often cite from Tomas Tranströmer's glancing elegy “After a Death”: “Often the shadow seems more real than the body / The samurai looks insignificant / beside his armor of black dragon scales.”⁶

TC: Well, for sure, an abiding interest in the woundedness of history characterizes my work, but you have to recall that I'm also trained as an art historian, which is a melancholy art. Art history deals with the detritus of history, the remnant of history; it deals with the material artifact of what is already gone. So, in a sense, I regret mentioning Sebald, because he becomes a very easy way of thinking about my work. In some ways, this is fortunate, because he's a wonderful writer, a great ethicist, and a wonderful stylist. But the reason it's unfortunate is that, because of his popularity, he ends up sucking the oxygen out of the room. People act as if he's the only person who has ever done that, or that to do that in any way is to be following him. But when he was doing that, he was reading Walter Benjamin, Marcel Proust, and even someone who is stylistically different, like Thomas Mann. It's all there.

But what does it mean for Mrs. Dalloway to walk down the street in London in the early part of the twentieth century? Even though Mrs. Dalloway herself is not really an intellectual, Virginia Woolf is engaging with the way history is ever present, just below the surface of the everyday. Take *Ulysses*. Bloom is walking around Dublin over the course of a day, and the whole walk is a deep dive into the history of text and the history of place. It's all triggered by free association, which isn't free, because it's very disciplined. So it works by a very disciplined allusiveness over the texture of the everyday. So many people do it. In fact, I believe this practice is very much in the mainstream of European modernism. Except that, in our rather funny times, when novelistic form is a little bit conservative and the novel is a kind of entertainment, people forget those modernist antecedents, and the novel becomes a sentimental story between two individuals, where someone goes through a divorce, or whatever the hell it is! And then someone like Sebald comes along and people think: "Oh, this is completely new." It was never new. He sounds like every art historian of the Renaissance that I read through my degree.

LK: I don't mean to reduce you to his work.

TC: I certainly don't mean to sound defensive, but I do mean that the genealogy of this technique is important to think about. Sebald is someone I love very profoundly. It's just that there is more to history, text, and form than Sebald.

LK: Something that stood out to me in *Blind Spot* was the way the text altered the meaning of a photograph of Giudecca, in Venice. In the photo, we see an empty arcade, a distant tower, and the long shadow of you, the photographer. It is a scene with an understated surrealism; it reminded me of Giorgio de Chirico. But in the text beside it you point out that, although *Giudecca* could refer to a Jewish quarter, there's no proof a Jewish community ever lived here. In the act of scanning the photo's negative, however, this absence took on a different meaning. Your text continues: "I get an unexpected text message from A, who is a doctor: 'One of my patients is a holocaust survivor. 93 years old. Still has PTSD and screams at night.'"⁷ What role does coincidence play in your work?

TC: What is the role of coincidence in our lives? It's obviously not there all the time, but it's there often enough. I don't feel the need to impose meaning on it, but I feel—going back to the point about responsibility—I feel a responsibility to acknowledge it, to have a conversation with it, to be awake to it. I'm like a birdwatcher sitting in the blinds waiting to catch sight

of a rare bird. I'm sitting there with my binoculars. If the particular bird doesn't show up, well, that's what birdwatching is. But if it shows up, you're glad you're paying attention when it happens. So, as I go through my life, as I go through my work, I'm trying to pay attention to what's going to happen, because when it happens, whatever it is, I will know whether it belongs to me or not. I will know if it's one of the stories I'm after.

LK: That brings to my mind the interlocking coincidences that structure your essay "An African Caesar" in *Known and Strange Things* (2017). It seems to me that you want to deflate coincidence and honor its power.

TC: Poor history has to pack every single incident into one of 365 days. But that's to our gain because then it avails us to storytelling. In another of those essays, I talk about my deep love of the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, and my sudden realization that we share a birthday. *Three Colours: Red* is my favorite film—it's been my favorite film for years—and I realize that not only is this favorite film of mine made by someone who is really obsessed with coincidences, but by coincidence he and I share a birthday, June 27. So again, it's being ready for when it happens.

Or another coincidence I've been thinking with—not in the essay collection, *Known and Strange Things*, but in something else I wrote, a piece that was in *Granta*: I was writing about a guy in Nigeria who very narrowly escaped death on his birthday. He almost drowned. I had a conversation with this guy, and then I went on this riff about historically what it has meant to die on the day of your birth, and even about Thomas Browne, who wrote about the ouroboros, the snake biting its own tail, and about how it's one of the strangest phenomena in nature to die on the day of your birth—and then Browne goes on and dies on the day of his birth!

LK: Aslant to coincidence, but still related, are all the visual echoes in *Blind Spot*. To give one example, there is a photograph of two men in a park in Berlin that rhymes their stances. I felt by the end of your book that I had been primed for and made receptive to the unstated connections and patterns occurring everywhere in looking.

TC: The work definitely proceeds by a real kind of openness to what might be available in text and image, what might be available in the world. In a way my project is a little like the work of some improvisational musicians I know working in the form that is called, or used to be called, jazz. Sometimes people listen to them and say, "Oh, that's free jazz." And they'll say, "Actually it's not free jazz. It's improvised music." Because it's not completely free. It might sound free, if you don't really know how to listen to it. But it's

actually improvisations based on fairly solid forms. There's a formal logic to it, in the same way that there's a formal logic to a symphony. But someone who doesn't know how to listen to it might not understand that. Someone who's just come from Mozart and arrives at Mahler might find that Mahler sounds like a cacophony. Meanwhile, Mahler is just as tightly woven as Mozart is, it's just that the tunes are just not as obvious. You don't necessarily know what's going to come next, but the logic is super tight. The same thing is true of these improvisational musicians. Free jazz is its own thing, I think it's wonderful, but that's not what they're doing. And for me, in writing, I think about the kind of work that they're doing. This is part of my collaborative relationship with the composer and pianist Vijay Iyer. I've been collaborating with Vijay for quite a while. I really love his music. One of the main concerns of my writing is to take this idea of free association and turn it or torque it in a way that makes free association into disciplined association.

In other words, not all allusiveness and associative techniques work. I don't mean to make this into a big thing, because this is what a poet has to do all the time. Poetry is about finding the kind of associativeness that is formally convincing. Meanwhile, a lot of fictional and nonfictional prose is doing something else. It proceeds by logic. What's the next logical thing? What is the story? But I want to jump. I want to take leaps in the way a poet takes leaps, which means, for me, a kind of disciplined associativeness. I aim to improve my ear so that I know when it works. If it were purely free association, then I could produce a book in a week. I'd just write whatever pops into my head. I make use of an associative prose technique in *Open City*, but by the time I got to *Blind Spot* I wanted the jumps to be bolder. I wanted it to feel like the kind of films that I really admire, where radical cutting, juxtaposition, and montage happen.

LK: Although many of your photographs are of objects—ladders, cars, drapery, a wall, a bathtub, and so on—that can seem self-contained, immobile, almost in a state of repose, *Blind Spot* is in a sense a travel book, a book about “Being There,” as one of the sections of *Known and Strange Things* puts it. What is the importance of travel in a work like this?

TC: To go back to the idea that I expressed earlier about being a hunter, or a birdwatcher. Let's not say a hunter—sounds like you're killing things—but a birdwatcher trying to catch sight of some birds. One of the things that really helps me with travel is having a sense of what is mine, having a sense of what belongs to me, so that those things become anchors or anchor points. They help to keep me from just floating away completely in the immensity of everything. Over time, they become something that I can almost point to in the sky—so there's that point, there's that point, and there's that point. I

start to connect them, and they become a constellation. For something like *Blind Spot*, for example, what makes it into a project, what rescues it from being “Oh, this guy just went around the world and took a bunch of pictures,” was the fact that when I saw a ladder I’d think, “Let me take a picture of that, and if it’s a successful picture, then I can build a sequence around ladders.” Or a sequence around animals in cages. Or painting on walls. Or people seen from behind. Little things like that become points in the constellation I’m building. It’s so highly personal; that’s the poetry of it. It’s not about everything. It’s about a fairly small number of things around which I can build a much larger universe of concerns. It has a slightly . . . obsessive touch to it. A fabric on the side of a building: every time I see one of these it’s like space talking to me across different countries and continents.

This constellation varies from one book to another. Some things stay the same, but there are things that vary. In *Open City*, for example, birds were really important, and the music of Mahler was really important, as motifs. Meanwhile, in *Blind Spot*, ladders are very important, and people seen from behind are important. While the particular points change, the general technique actually remains fairly similar.

LK: I was intrigued by these images of people glimpsed from behind. At one point in *Blind Spot*, you tease out a distinction between two types of seeing, based on the etymologies of *cornea* and *retina*. “‘Cornea,’” you write, “is Latin, ‘cornu,’ horn. A horn for goring the visible. What you see you spear with your eye. The word is related to the ‘corner,’ in the sense that a horn is an extremity. ‘Retina,’ on the other hand, is Latin ‘rete,’ net, loose. . . . What you optically interpret, you gather up.”⁸ The corneal is for the piercing instance of sight, while the retinal is, I suppose, the durational tracking of the kind of disciplined associativeness you’ve been speaking about. I’m wondering about the French artist Sophie Calle, who appears in *Blind Spot*. Perhaps she stands for an intense version of this corneal sight—a limit point for pursuing the stranger and trying to pin down something about them. How do you think about this obsessively curious element of your photography?

TC: One of the things I am often thinking about is how invasive photography can be. And so this thing of people being turned away, people being reticent, people keeping themselves for themselves is something I’m also always thinking about. I’m interested in pushing the boundaries of that. Sophie Calle is very interesting to me because Calle’s work actually thinks a lot about intimacy. Maybe she is thinking about it in an intensely, occasionally aggressive way, but she’s interested in intimacy. There’s something very soft and beautiful and gentle about her work. I wouldn’t necessarily say

it's an influence, but it's part of a network of thoughts about what photography can do. One of the things that photography does is cross the line between a person's own integrity and throw into question what that means for public space. The law says I can take a photograph of a person in a public space. Nevertheless, I still have to think about what it is I'm doing.

LK: The ethics of photography definitely seems to be at issue in the series in *Blind Spot* in which women are photographed from behind. The text works ambiguously alongside these photographs, seemingly offering clues as to how to read them. For instance, in one passage you describe seeing a tattoo on a woman's neck while on a tram in Zurich. The tattoo is "in two lines: a woman's name, a date." And when you looked these up later, you found "an old newspaper article: a woman of that name had died in a small town near Phoenix, Arizona, in 2007, and it had happened on the date in the tattoo. In the car that night, the article said, had been two other people, both of whom survived the crash, and both of whom, at that time, like the woman who died, were in their early twenties, a man, the article said, and a woman."⁹

TC: In these instances, you have to beware of the testimonial quality of photography because I'm playing with it a lot. It may seem that I'm saying: "Oh, here's a photo of something, let me tell you what's in the photo." And sometimes that's really true, because you can verify with your eyes, but then sometimes you've got to beware. For instance, I show you some bags on the street, and then I tell you about the cops chasing the guys who are selling the bags. But those bags were photographed in Venice, and the cops—that incident happened in Rome. So you can't be completely certain about what has happened there. You've got to beware. And even more dangerously, there is this story in Zurich about seeing this young woman with a tattoo on her neck. I made a note of the tattoo. The story, it's a true story, but the photograph that accompanies it was taken at another time. So this particular woman doesn't have a tattoo, but the photo is so shadowed that you don't know that, you can't really tell. Sometimes I want a story that has a certain amount of tension, and I want a photograph that has a kind of energy in it, and I'll sometimes pair them together. But you can't be sure that what you see is actually matching up in a one-to-one or obvious way.

LK: This seems to be one of the many "blind spots" in your work—not just in the gap between text and image, but in the text and image themselves. It becomes a ubiquitous metaphor, a placeholder for everything from the shortcomings of the camera, with its mechanical failures, distortions, and illusions, through to what you call the "moral exigency [to] compel what was

hidden to become visible,” to acknowledge that which cannot be said nor made visible at all. At one point in *Blind Spot*, you even characterize your first four books as a “quartet . . . on the limits of vision.”¹⁰

TC: Absolutely. Everything I write seeks to put a big question mark on this idea of certainty. Any moment someone’s being sure about something I want to say: “Why?”

LK: I wanted to ask you a question about Australia. You devote an essay in *Known and Strange Things* to the Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe, but perhaps the line that resonates most with regard to Australia is something you say about landscapes: that they “can give the double illusion of being eternal and newly born.”¹¹ The reason that is an illusion, I take it, is that they still have history imprinted on them, if you know how to discern those traces. Was this something that you felt visiting Australia?

TC: Absolutely. I mean Australia is one of the places that I’ve been in that has been most profoundly impinged on by its landscapes. Maybe when you’re in Melbourne you don’t think about it so much—by the way, a very beautiful city, a city I love, and same with Sydney; you have some of the world’s great cities—but the moment you’re out of the city, in fact by the time you’re in the suburbs, you feel the landscape very intensely, very heavily, partly because you have strong weather. It’s hot. It’s dry. Because you have harsh terrain.

I took a drive deep into Victoria. You start thinking about survival. You start thinking about “whose land is this?” You start thinking about national mythologies. You start thinking about the kind of erasures that happen in that kind of space. For me, being in Australia was very much a time of thinking about the landscape. I was thinking a lot about Aboriginal presence, the people who had a kind of associative and dream-like interaction with this terrain, which is much more interesting than a relationship that’s about conquering it. But I was also thinking about Peter Sculthorpe, whose music, I think, does evoke some of the grandeur, aridity, and complexity of the Australian landscape. And I was thinking a lot about the writer Gerald Murnane.

LK: I love your exchange of letters with Murnane in *Music & Literature*. You’ve compared his writing to Beckett’s—“a genius on the level of Beckett” is the phrase that sticks in my mind.

TC: Yes, although I don't think he's a genius quite like Beckett. I think there's something so individual, so distinctive, so in its own path, which is why I made that comparison. But I actually went to Goroke, Victoria, to visit him once.

LK: Really?

TC: Yeah. He's very much part of my thinking also about Australia and the Australian landscape, because I think it's a kind of place that can foster this extraordinary individuality as well. It's years since I went to Australia, but I definitely look forward to another visit.

LK: It will be great to have you back. Just one more thing. In the postscript to *Blind Spot*, you use the phrase "singing line." In context, you're describing how you are "intrigued by the continuity of places, the singing line that connects them all."¹² It immediately brought to my mind Aboriginal Songlines.

TC: Yes, Bruce Chatwin.¹³ Everything's an allusion. And, again, when I'm talking about Aboriginal practice, and when I talk about a dreamy and associative engagement with a landscape, that's exactly what I mean. That's exactly what I try to do with my work: to be the opposite of a bureaucrat, to be someone who has an intense engagement with the allusive aspects of being and of place. I don't know if I'm there yet, but it's certainly a hope, it's certainly a goal.

LK: "After Caravaggio," the essay that opens *Black Paper*, recounts your journey following the painter's journey in the Mediterranean. Caravaggio's paintings quickly begin to mediate your encounters with refugees; it becomes impossible, as you put it, to separate the "exploration of Caravaggio's years in exile from what I was seeing around me in contemporary Italy: the sea was the same, the sense of endangerment rhymed."¹⁴ This essay has itself become inseparable in my mind from a playlist that you created on Spotify around the time the essay first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*: "Army of Shadows" (perhaps titled after Jean-Pierre Melville's film, also mentioned in *Black Paper*), an arrangement of brooding and dark baroque cello and choral music.¹⁵ I've long been fascinated by the ludic and self-reflexive way that you've made use of platforms like Twitter and Instagram, treating them, variously, as if they were a public notebook, an experimental medium, an open studio space. I was wondering, in this vein, how you think about the practice of sequencing music. Does it share an affinity with the way you write your essays?

TC: Thank you. That essay was unusually long in gestation. I did the research travel for it in the summer of 2016, and the essay went through a large number of drafts before it was finally published in the *New York Times Magazine* in the fall of 2020. I was trying to figure out something quite complex in it, and I found that there was no rushing that search. The search was for what rhymed. How do disparate things speak to each other? The idea that Caravaggio's exile was linked, somehow, to the contemporary horrors in the Mediterranean was an idea that came to me early on in the writing of the piece; in fact, it was already there in my conceptualization of what the journey would entail. But making that idea meaningful, moving it past a glib parallelism, finding the persuasive points of contact between these two large realities, took a long time. This is not unrelated to what I later thought of with the "Army of Shadows" playlist (yes, an allusion to Melville's extraordinary film, which I thought of, very glumly, all through the Trump years—but it was also the working title of my Caravaggio essay itself for a long time).

Playlists in general, and this one in particular, are an invitation to the listener to experience an affective charge. The charge comes from knowing that they are inside a set of intentional choices made by someone else. It is a practice that appeals to my inner bricoleur. When I make a playlist, it's evident that I'm not the musician, but I am playing with an extra-musical aspect of music's effect on us. Music is also about duration and juxtaposition. What does it mean to be inside a sequence over the course of an hour? What *is* an hour? In compiling playlists, I am engaging with duration just as I am in an essay or work of fiction or sequence of photographs. I am saying to my other: come with me for as long as this takes.

The idea is to transfer sensibility to another, and to do it with precision and artlessness. I want a listener to think, "this makes sense," but also, "if I were doing it, I wouldn't have done it quite this way." The reader thinks, "I wouldn't have followed Tobias Hume with Hildur Gudnadóttir, but now that he's done it, it's part of my experience, I feel something."

These practices are different in nontrivial ways. Fiction writing is incommensurable with playlist making. But I guess I'm saying, not entirely. There's a substratum where one's sensibility is actually quite consistent.

LK: The second section of *Black Paper* is a set of elegies, some addressed to family and friends, others to writers and public figures. I was struck, for instance, by the way that the elegiac passages in "A Quartet for Edward Said" interdigitate with personal reflections on the composition of *Open City*. At one moment, you mention your sympathy for the character Farouq—how you gave him, rather than the narrator Julius, the line: "I wanted

to be the next Edward Said!” which spurs the question: “So, was it that I wanted to be the next Edward Said myself?”¹⁶ It’s been ten years since *Open City* was published. I wanted to ask what it’s been like returning to this novel in these times? How is it becoming a rereader of *Open City*?

TC: I was aware of that ten-year anniversary, and of course I felt the differences in sensibility between my self now and this other self from long ago. That was almost an automatic feeling. But then I had a surprise: I realized that the self of mine that wrote *Open City* was, after all, quite a young person. I didn’t especially think so at the time of writing. But I began that novel when I was thirty-one, and I finished writing it three years later (it was published two years after that). I’m not suggesting I’m a prodigy—listen, Joyce wrote *Dubliners* as a baby, and there’s no one who can out-prodigy that. I’m trying to make a slightly different point, which is in contradiction to the first one: when the tenth anniversary came around, I was struck by the great similarities in sensibility between my current self and my self then. The intellectual differences are simply not as extensive as I would have expected.

Now, aged forty-seven, I read bits written when I was thirty-one, and they are recognizable to me, they sound like me. In a way, the book inaugurated what I think turned out to be a certain mature phase of my work. I have evolved but have not undergone fundamental change since then. By way of comparison, I was thirty when I wrote *Every Day Is for the Thief*, and I read that book now as the end of something. Because it’s my first book, it’s fair to describe it as a beginning; but really it was an end (of what I don’t know—maybe the end of an informal and undefined apprenticeship). I am in no way denigrating the novella. I think it, for instance, has a linguistic polish I have struggled to replicate. There’s a forensic intensity there. But it’s also apparent to me that *Open City* inaugurated quite a different level of intellectual boldness on my part, even if the price of that was losing some of the clear and laconic language I achieved in the earlier book.

LK: In “Experience” (the opening essay of “Coming to Our Senses”), you note that, although you don’t think that you are synesthetic, “we are all associative to one degree or the other.” To illustrate this, you recall being surprised one afternoon when your mother “looked at a mug with a distinctly shaped handle and said a single word: ‘Obama.’ I immediately understood her: the mug’s ‘ear’ was just like his. Just like his, but some sort of associative leap had been made.”¹⁷ Another associative leap concludes the essay “Ethics,” as rich sensations—a feeling of being “unaccountably young, happy, full of anticipation, overstimulated, competitive, creative, and vulnerable”—are triggered by the faint smell of freshly shaved pencils on a street in Florence.¹⁸ Read together, the three essays of “Coming to Our

Senses” suggest how associative thinking might inform literature and ethics, even if, as you caution, “exquisite sensitivity” isn’t required “in order to be morally alert.”¹⁹ At the risk of not heeding this note of caution, I was wondering if you think there is something ethical about association itself? Or is association simply too unruly and ethics too situational, too complex, for the two to have anything other than a significant yet imprecise relationship?

TC: No, I don’t think associativeness is ethical, and I think it’s important to resist the temptation to ascribe goodness to any kind of intellectual ability. That way sorrow lies. And yet I wonder if there isn’t some part of this that can be rescued. This is some of what I was grappling with in those essays in *Black Paper*—and I frankly don’t think I grappled with the matter entirely successfully. It’s very hard to square that circle between knowing that intellectual alertness has made a contribution to one’s own ethical commitments and recognizing—from experience as well as from study—that there appears to be no correlation at all between various forms of intellectual ability and ethical behavior. Mental agility doesn’t seem to be helpfully connected to moral behavior, compassion, or kindness.

My struggle to articulate what’s at stake here (or even to successfully come up with the thoughts that I can then struggle to articulate) leads me to just try to say, for now, that there is something in ethical behavior itself that is a kind of intelligence—etymologically *inter* (between) and *legere* (to gather, to pick up). Ethics, at its best, is indeed a marshaling of the available evidence, and a selecting and synthesizing of that evidence into something potent and practical. There are associative leaps involved: we say “this,” and from that “this” we leap to an unexpected “that.” Ethics is intelligent in that way, and love is intelligent in that way. Ethics is radical with what it has gathered, or, rather, it is florid. It blooms out. But what we call “intelligence” in our universities is often something quite a bit more mechanical than that, no?

LK: Many of the essays in *Black Paper* are concerned with how the “challenges of viewership have . . . intensified in the twenty-first century.”²⁰ It would be difficult to wrap into a single question the exciting and subtle ways that you approach these challenges, but I thought that I would ask about a particular moment in “What Does It Mean to Look at This?” At one point, you think with the theorist and photographer Ariella Azoulay, referring to her *Civil Contract of Photography* (2008). I’ve been wondering if the way that a photograph can function “as a bond between the photographer and photographed” might also be present in the act of reading.²¹ To play on Azoulay’s “civil contract of photography,” could there be a civil contract of reading? Or are reading books and looking at images too different to sustain this kind of analogy?

TC: The status of photography is another unfinished question for me—unfinished even after my years of working as a photography critic. I do think there’s something sagacious about Azoulay’s formulation. She is helpful to us in rescuing our thinking from the idea of the solitary photographic hero. Her writing is about relocating that photographer figure in the networks of ownership, viewership, and coercion without which the photograph would not have the life it does.

Could there be, correspondingly, a civil contract of reading? Maybe not a contract per se, maybe more of a case file—a sealed indictment now unsealed. Let us return to the Caravaggio essay for a moment. When it was published, it had a single author: me. But the reality is that involved with the essay were also my editor at the magazine, my research assistant in New York, the friend who drove me around Sicily, the young man I met in Syracuse, the two young men I met in Augusta the day they were rescued from the ocean, the Caravaggio expert I later discussed technical details with, the photo editor at the magazine, my editor at the University of Chicago Press, the fact checkers, the web editor, even the many readers who reacted to the piece and who in so doing contributed to its paratext or, rather, to its postpublication ambiance—to name a few. We could take a further step back and imagine the contributions of the taxi drivers, flight attendants, restaurant chefs, cathedral sweepers, siblings, friends, and even all the people who survived or did not survive crossings on these terrifying boats so that I could later encounter the boats in the port of Pozzallo and be overwhelmed with emotion when I smelled their abjectness.

So where does authorship truly reside? Did that essay on Caravaggio really come from me alone? In a way, it’s the opposite of the Derridean idea (if I’m reading him correctly—and with Derrida, it’s almost certain that one is misreading him in part). I am not saying the author is dead. I am saying the author is very much alive but also very much accompanied, always already in a situation of coauthorship in ways that our culture prefers to elide. The moves in architecture away from the “starchitect,” the moves more recently in art toward collectives, and the ways the systems of reward are acknowledging collective creativity—might this be part of the future of literature too? I don’t know. If it happens, it will be a return to something originary. Homer was multiplicate.

Notes

1. A few quotations and phrases from the first half of this interview appeared in my short review essay, “Counterpoints,” published in November 2017 in the *Australian Book Review*. I would like to thank Peter Rose and the *Australian Book Review* for permission to reprint that material.

2. I have in mind a point made by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory*: “Writer and photographer both refuse the stereotyped division of labor that would produce a ‘text with illustrations’ or an ‘album with captions’,” but here Cole is both the writer and the photographer at the same time. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994), 313.
3. Teju Cole, *Blind Spot* (London, 2017), 98.
4. *OED Online*, s.v. “speculate, v.”
5. Teju Cole, *Open City* (London, 2011), 31.
6. Tomas Tranströmer, *The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer*, trans. Robert Bly (Minneapolis, 2001), 28.
7. Cole, *Blind Spot*, 284.
8. *Ibid.*, 300.
9. *Ibid.*, 282.
10. *Ibid.*, 325.
11. Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things: Essays* (London, 2016), 86.
12. Cole, *Blind Spot*, 324.
13. Cole is here referring to the English writer Bruce Chatwin’s 1987 book *The Songlines*. For First Nations perspectives on Songlines, see, for instance, Margo Neale’s “First Knowledges” book series, especially *Songlines: The Power and Promise* (London, 2020).
14. Teju Cole, *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* (Chicago, 2021), 13.
15. There is a link to this and other playlists on Teju Cole’s personal website at <http://www.tejucole.com/playlists/>.
16. Cole, *Black Paper*, 70–71.
17. *Ibid.*, 173.
18. *Ibid.*, 203.
19. *Ibid.*, 205.
20. *Ibid.*, 103.
21. *Ibid.*, 108.