Assembling a Cosmopolitan Self through Words and Images: Teju Cole’s Transcendent Navigation of the Diasporic Experience

If you were to ask Teju Cole where he is from, he would certainly tell you. But he might also add, in response, that your question was uninteresting. More interesting, he might say, is the catalog of places he has been to, the places that now hover in his mind, a cluster of memories trailing behind him into each new place that he goes. A novelist, essayist, photographer, and immigrant, Cole uses words and images to give artful expression to ideas that often surround the immigrant experience, those of displacement and emplacement, the fragmented self, places as palimpsests, and multiple concurrent realities, among many others. Evident in Cole’s work is an attempt to approximate cosmopolitanism, that is, to create the sense that both he and his audience are citizens of the world, not simply beings tethered to single places, times, or stories. Yet beneath this conception of a community of perpetual wanderers is an important recognition of the impossibility of escaping one’s obligation to the past. Cole’s photographs and written commentaries astutely engage with this dynamic, offering up a realm that both transcends the boundaries of reality as well as reminds the viewer of his unique place in the continuous chain of history.

Teju Cole was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, raised in Lagos, Nigeria, schooled in Michigan, London, and New York, and now resides in Brooklyn, though frequent travels have rendered hotel rooms informal second residences. The search for home enters into much of Cole’s work. His 2007 novel Every Day Is for the Thief, for instance, is a story that Cole has said is less about the contemporary Nigerian social and political climate than it is “about a little soul trying to find a place to rest.”1 Though Cole has made clear the distinction between himself and the story’s narrator, it might be argued that Cole, like the wandering narrator—and perhaps like all persons displaced from their origins—seeks to find his home in the world, an endeavor

particularly evident in his photographic corpus. Cole’s approach to the feat is one characterized by wandering; rather than set his sights on a potential home and try to elbow himself into it, Cole drifts, explores, tests, records. He has written about home as being “where life is” as well as “where you go to die.”

Such a flexible definition leaves open anywhere and everywhere as the possible locus of home, conferring Cole with the daunting task of making sense of the whole world. Photography functions as the tool by which he can carry out a “visual annotation of the world.” With each photograph, he makes comprehensible the vastness that is his global surrounds so that he might use the components from the places that he has digested to assemble within himself a sort of patchwork home.

Cole’s tactic of allowing many places to enter him in bits resembles that professed by Aleksandar Hemon, another immigrant, writer, and friend of Cole’s. Hemon describes his native Sarajevo and his current home of Chicago as, after a time, coalescing within him and becoming a new hybrid home: “The two places had now combined to form a complicated internal landscape, a space where I could wander and feel at home, and in which stories could be generated.” Cole’s photography projects create a similar sort of intricate internal space. His camera empowers him to transform an impersonal landscape into a personal one, and his written commentaries allow for further internalization of the places he encounters.

This notion of the intermingling of various landscapes finds expression in a photographic project that Cole showed in 2013 in Goa and Ithaca titled “Who’s Got the Address?” The exhibition consisted of a series of paired photographs identified by the city in which they were taken. Cole sifted through his personal archive of photographs, amassed over eight years and with images numbering in the thousands, selecting thirty in which he saw threads of aesthetic continuity. For example, an image of a figure in black standing on a street in Lagos finds its analog in a photo of a similarly black bedecked figure on a ski trail in New York. The profile of

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a woman reflected in the window of a bus in Nogales, Arizona echoes the face of a younger woman seen in a mirror in New York. The white wooden cross rising out of the ground in Sasabe, Mexico has a twin in the corner of a street scene from Margao, India.

**Figure 1.** São Paulo – Palouse. From “Who’s Got the Address?” (2013).

Cole states that the organizing principle for the project was “the idea that each image is connected in some mysterious way to another image taken in another place at another time,” describing his work as that of “reunit[ing] [the photographs] with their mystical doubles.” Such a comment reveals the absence of an overtly political agenda. It is not Cole’s goal to pit two cultures against each other or to indicate a hierarchy of experiences; his intention is simpler and less aggressive, aimed at allowing various points of access to something fundamental that underlies the human experience. Take, for example, a pair of photographs taken in São Paulo, Brazil and Palouse, Washington (Fig. 1). Both show roads, seen from vantage points that create similarly raking diagonals across the composition. The São Paulo iteration is congested with traffic; artificial lights line the ceiling of a tunnel, flashing off the windows of the shiny, unmoving cars. The road in Palouse is nearly unpeopled; the last rays of a setting sun illuminate an open sky. Taking the place of the Volkswagen van from the Brazilian photo is a tranquil barn-like structure, now a few paces ahead. By juxtaposing these images, Cole does not intend to make a comment about the virtue of the idyllic countryside as opposed to the city with its tangle

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of issues related to overpopulation. He seems rather to observe that so much of life occurs in the spaces of transition depicted in each photo, the linearity of the paths being the motif that links the two. Being human, whether you are under ground in South America or under the stars in the American Northwest, means that you are moving on a continuum, if not from one place to another than from one moment to the next. That Cole found in his body of work these two photos, “mystical doubles” in their similarity of aspect, is revelatory of the mysterious coincidence that undergirds our existence. The pairing seems to suggest that the people in the cars, though not pictured, might not have life experiences so radically different after all, even in spite of the vast difference in their geographical circumstances. Cole’s identity as a migrant makes this message all the more meaningful, for he is embodied evidence that a link can exist between two disparate places, Nigeria and America.

Figure 2. New York – Rome. From “Who’s Got the Address?” (2013).

Though less politically argumentative than simply observational and expository, the “Who’s Got the Address?” project should not be discounted as easy viewing art. The pleasing symmetry of the pairs certainly strikes the viewer first. Yet the photographs offer far more than just the satisfaction of recognizing a form repeated with slight alteration. Cole invites the viewer to linger over his images, to use the continuity as a safe base from which one might venture out in search of the dissimilarities and complications inherent in the pairs. Amitava Kumar, another immigrant writer who provided illuminating ekphrastic captions for the exhibition, highlights
Cole’s “commitment to complicate the act of seeing.”⁶ Cole declines to feed us pre-digested images, rendering his message more nuanced than a straightforward assertion that all people mystically possess twins on the other side of the world. In one pair of photographs (Fig. 2), taken in New York and Rome from what feels like the sidewalk, the dark silhouette of a woman grows from the bottom of each frame. In New York, the woman wears a hijab, her face blurred as the camera focuses on the red lips of an advertisement behind her. In Rome, a nun’s habit replaces the hijab, and the woman’s features are similarly obscured to the viewer. Cole obliges his viewers to do the work of the camera, to un-blur the image in their minds. Moreover, by leaving the women unfocused, he puts the viewer in the strange position of having to survey the background, often overlooked in its typically secondary position, at the cost of dismissing the identities of real individuals who have similarly remained unseen historically. It is almost as if in these photos Cole forces us to look with the eye of an immigrant; as a foreigner on new soil might, we gather our bearings by first scanning what is stable in the scene—the walls of buildings, parked cars, poles rooted in the ground, stationary buses—letting the people whir by unidentified, unimportant as they are to our sense of place given their fleetingness. Yet the figures occupy no small space in the photographs’ composition; unable to be ignored, their presence asks us to consider whether we ought actually to pay attention to the people, rather than the things, in unfamiliar landscapes.

“Who’s Got the Address?” exemplifies the capacity for Cole’s work both to please and to challenge, helping to parse apart places like Jaipur, Rome, and New York without treacherously oversimplifying them. The title too contributes to this stimulating sense of paradox, asking a question that both is and is not answered in the exhibition’s content. Cole suggests that somehow everyone everywhere is moving toward the address. But what is that address that everyone seems to have? Can there be only one that is the same for all? In their half-digestibility, the paired photographs work their way lastingly into the viewer’s internal landscape. Amitava Kumar

relates them to “magical poems that leave brief traces of light on the fingers of a reader who is now alone in the middle of the night.” Cole succeeds in stringing together multiple places, mapping them on to one another, and offering the merged layers to be taken up, pulled apart, and assimilated by his viewers into their own experience.

While “Who’s Got the Address?” took the typical form of an exhibition fixed in space and featuring a set number of photographs, Cole’s other work is far from limited to the strictures of the often problematic gallery space. Most recently, he has taken to publishing his photography on Instagram, using a series of hashtags to group them by project and often pairing the images with lyrical, meditative captions that retain the high caliber of his longer prose work. Instagram seems an especially appropriate platform for the dissemination of Cole’s work given his interest in fostering a sort of global citizenship, both for himself and for his audience, through his work. An Instagram post can instantly reach people in places as disparate as Zürich and Boston, which contrasts greatly with the narrow audience of a gallery exhibition and even with the relatively small readership of the printed novel—Cole’s Everyday is for the Thief was limited to readers in Nigeria for its first seven years in print. With the expansive viewership that Instagram allows, Cole unites people from around the globe with his posts, his images becoming the host of a global community that lies outside the rift of geographical reality. He marvels at “the collective miracle of what is made and what is seen across distances,” recognizing in the transmission of art across time and space a logic-defying capacity to connect individuals and ideas that would otherwise remain remote from one another.

On the use of a different social media platform, Twitter, Cole has commented that although “most see it as a sort of ephemeral and unworthy venue,” he recognizes that “that’s where the people are, so bring the literature to them right where they are.” Reaching a large

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7 Ibid.
8 It was shown in Goa and Ithaca before Guernica Magazine published the photographs and Kumar’s text online.
9 Teju Cole. (@_tejucole). “But how could I tell them what really needed saying, that it was a miracle that these pictures I had made in Tivoli…” 28 Apr. 2016. Instagram.
audience so directly seems also to possess tinges of subversion. Cole wrests artistic authority from the film photographers, gallery owners, and art critics who ordinarily dictate taste in the institutional photographic world. Instagram is thus a way to undermine the hegemony of these “studiedly old fogeys”\textsuperscript{11} whose conservative preference for film photography denies access to a global viewership.

In addition to multiplying his number of viewers Instagram also permits an increased volume of publication. That is, posting several photos a day, Cole can show his followers nearly twenty new photos in a week, outshining his “Who’s Got the Address?” exhibition which, with thirty photos for one month, would have presented new material at the rate of only eight photos per week. This expanded body of fresh work changes the relationship between artist and audience. No longer does the artist stand on a lofty pedestal rationing his sacred images to the masses only when he deems them worthy; rather, he invites them into his archive and brings them with him on his travels, making them privy to experimental work that lacks the formality of the carefully selected photo hanging on the gallery wall. Indeed, Cole has observed that “Instagram can be an extra studio,”\textsuperscript{12} one that the photographer willfully opens up to the eyes of thousands. This sort of inching back of the curtain over the creative process, and the immediacy with which it occurs, renders his followers intimate acquaintances with whom he can strengthen a rapport over time. Cole likens Instagram to “a conversation that unfolds gradually, over weeks and months.”\textsuperscript{13} He agrees with Stephen Shore, another active Instagram user, who observes that “the conversation you have with a friend you speak with every day is different from one that you have with a friend you speak with once a month or once a year,” which means that the daily interaction of Instagram “can have the taste of the more intimate, perhaps seemingly trivial daily conversation.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Cole, “Serious Play.”
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Stephen Shore quoted in Cole, “Serious Play.”
Figure 3. A series of photographs of a Zürich hotel room posted within the same week in July of 2015, each with a caption addressing a different theme.

With the pressure off to deliver the one-time astonishment of a masterpiece, the photographer may present variations on the ordinary, building up the same sense of wonder with the added aid of time. Cole might, for instance, post a sequence of photographs of the very same hotel room (Fig. 3), a subject that would feel tedious in the gallery in such numbers but that comes alive on Instagram, that simulates the three nights that Cole spent in the room, that reminds us that it is the mundane moments and not the single spectacular events around which real life revolves. This notion of essentially engaging in small talk with an audience challenges the authority of a single grand discourse as the only vehicle for serving truth. Given the immigrant’s inherent position on the outside of the master narrative, it makes sense that Cole would identify with this mode of distribution. We might view his Instagram page, with its upwards of 1,100 posts, as an assemblage of fragments, of heterogeneous truths that resound through virtual space amassing a power that rivals that of the grand narrative so often spouted by those in positions of dominance. Instagram can thus give voice to marginalized people, marginalized subjects.

Cole fiercely champions the worthiness of seemingly trivial subject matter, warning of the danger of the monumental, iconic picture that seethes with the deceitfulness of perfection. He is especially vocal about his admiration for Indian photographer Raghubir Singh whose
photographs, Cole writes, are “charged with life: not only beautiful experiences or painful scenes but also those in-between moments of drift that make up most of our days.”

Cole channels Singh’s “democratic eye” into his own work on Instagram. Scrolling through his feed, we might describe his aesthetic as that of a sharp-eyed street photographer; keen is he to narrow in on the details that the artistic eye is often wont to pass over. He gives primacy to the misaligned corners of framed paintings, to the barren concrete of roof deck, to the wasteland of an empty parking lot, the backside of a truck, a tree shrouded in plastic, a rusted ladder leaning against a wall, a mound of dirty snow, a tangle of dried brush, wilted flower petals scattered on a mosaic stone floor. He invites oddity and casualness into his photographs, welcoming “a messiness that reminds us of the life happening outside the frame as well as within it,” an achievement he identifies in the work of Singh, as well as American photographer Helen Levitt and French Impressionist painter Edgar Degas.

His imperfect subject matter, presented as it is in pieces, offers a more truthful picture of reality, a reality that is never as tidy as a pretty picture claims it to be. His work tends toward the quiet yet the truthful, reacting against the fantasy that more dazzling photographs engulf viewers in. “The more photographs shock,” he says, “the more difficult it is for them to be pinned to their local context, and the more easily they are indexed to our mental library of generic images.” It is in the local, the specific, the gritty, where life occurs, and any effort to transmute it or to shave it down into a clean, coherent, simple message is false, and even totalitarian.

With many of his photographs, Cole urges us to veer off the main boulevard and venture down forgotten side streets. In the caption of one post—the photograph depicting a strip of sidewalk bordered by a raised bed of shrubs and a rust red wall, locale unidentified—he announces, “I like where nothing happens.” The “nothing” implies, of course, just the opposite.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
The spaces disregarded for their unspectacular aspect actually contain more life than we have been conditioned to see in them. This ability to recognize the latent complexity of a landscape might again tie back to the idea of an immigrant way of seeing. The very outsider-ness of a migrant, his strangeness to the dominant culture of the place in which he now finds himself, affords him a critical bird’s-eye view. It is from such a position, it appears, that Cole produces his work, noticing the unnoticed and valuing the mundane in a way that reveals a more complete sense of sight.

The immigrant way of seeing also entails, as previously discussed, strong identification with fragmentation. While Cole takes advantage of Instagram as a platform that demands the dissemination of his work in particles rather than as a finished product, the content of his photographs also often reflects the idea of fragments of the self. In one post that comments largely on Cole’s determination to undermine the picture mired in pleasant decorativeness, Cole presents a band of cosmetics loitering on a windowsill (Fig. 4). He identifies the cluster superficially as “the things that go with me from place to place, my personal caravan”; on another level, though, he proposes that it is “a selfie of sorts.” With such an admission, he acknowledges the great degree to which our identities are grounded in objects. Scraps of material, everyday things, he points out, might essentially contain our lives. He expresses this sentiment in a longer essay, declaring, “objects are reservoirs of specific personal experience, filled with the hours of some person’s life.”

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20 Here I borrow from sociologist Georg Simmel’s notion of “the stranger” as a social type, developed in his 1908 book Soziologe. The Stranger is characterized by a simultaneous proximity to and distance from the social group in which he has settled, permitting him a certain degree of freedom and critical insight.


22 Cole, “Object Lesson.”
collections of fragments, inciting each of us to ask, what bits and pieces might my own “selfie” include?

The notion of the fragmented self is one that resonates in the work of many other immigrant creatives. Cole finds kin especially in Bosnian-born writer Aleksandar Hemon whose novel *Nowhere Man* addresses the theme both in its structure and content. In an interview, Hemon traces the idea back to the experience of immigration. With his move to Chicago, he reveals, he “kissed my unified, monolithic self good-bye,” realizing that his foreignness left him open to such variable interpretation by the people he encountered that he felt himself splitting up into multiple selves. Though Cole’s immigration experience might not have been identical to Hemon’s, it seems likely that he would be able to identify with this necessity to accept, as an immigrant, the impossibility of a single, fully cohered self.

Hemon and Cole have not only accepted the reality of their various selves, but they have in their own ways embraced it as well. Hemon, who asserts that “fragments are always the order of the day” and believes that “there never was an original unity,” proclaims that “living in a fragmented world doesn’t bother me, as long as fragments get to hang out together a bit every once in a while.” His fiction is the playground in which he allows the fragments to interact, producing interesting sounds as they bump up against one another. Cole has similarly professed his comfort with fragments, citing inspiration from another immigrant writer: “Michael Ondaatje's work taught me how to be at home in fragments, and how to think about a big story in carefully curated vignettes.” Cole’s statement reveals a less aggressive approach, perhaps, than Hemon’s. He seems to wield a more conscious hand in organizing the pieces, “curating” rather than throwing them together to “hang out.” Yet it still appears that Cole, like Hemon, doubts the existence of some larger force that will neatly tie everything together in the end. Neither do either writers believe that it is the role of the artist to impose the transcendental order with his

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24 Ibid.
work. Cole has said that he does not view art “as a way of convincing people, it's just a way of testifying to your presence in the world.”26 As we have seen with his photography, Cole does not aim to assert a single truth or stitch together an order; rather, he asks us to jump with him from fragment to fragment, finding our own meaning and testifying to our own unique existences in the effort of navigating the moving parts.

On a macro level, Cole navigates these fragments in large part through travel. Just as his Instagram photos seem to place him in the family of the street photographer, so too do they betray a heavy dose of the travel photographer. Many, though importantly not all, of his photos Cole captions with the name of the city in which he took them, from Lisbon to Portland, Lagos to Palm Beach, the symphony of place names corroborating Cole’s status as a world traveler. The idea of spreading oneself across a globe that is ever in flux seems to call out to him more than the rootedness of a static homeland.

One of Cole’s Instagram projects, “#_fernweh,” epitomizes this notion that drifting might form a sense of home in itself. The project originated from a six-month residency in Switzerland in 2014 during which time Cole had planned to write extensively about Nigeria but found rather that the Swiss landscape beckoned for him and his camera lens. Yet “#_fernweh” is far more than a lineup of postcard-perfect views of the photogenic Swiss Alps; in his typical fashion, Cole tackles the subject from the less conventional angles, taking interest not only in the mountain peaks but also in signs, maps, globes, mirrors, and reproductions of mountains on posters (Fig. 5). He explains the guiding principle of his effort in an essay for The New York Times Magazine’s “Voyages” issue, revealing the source of his inspiration that guides his work not only on this project but also on many others:

I like Italo Calvino’s idea of “continuous cities,” as described in the novel “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.27

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26 Cole, Interview Magazine.
As the traveler moving in this continuum of places, Cole sees it his task to pick out the details that make a place uniquely what it is. Seeking out the “differences of texture” allows Cole to grab on to something in each foreign yet familiar landscape, to carve out a space for himself in each place.

Figure 5. An assortment of images from the “#_fernweh” project that evoke a sense of longing to place oneself in an elsewhere. Dated (from top left to bottom right): March 31; April 3; April 6; April 7; April 4; April 8, 2016.

The name of the project reveals something of Cole’s philosophy toward the idea of home. *Fernweh* is a German word that Cole translates to mean “a longing to be away from home, a desire to be in faraway places.” As the opposite of *heimweh*—“nostalgia” or “homesickness”—*fernweh* is like wanderlust, a recoiling from the prospect of remaining mired in the ossified memory of home. In the caption to a photograph of a drizzly residential scene—are we in Switzerland? Germany? Nigeria? Wherever the place, it is likely not the location in which Cole currently stands as he uploads the image—Cole meditates about “the particular pleasure of

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28 Ibid.
always wanting to be there without wanting to be there always. The permanence of desire freed from the desire for permanence.”²⁹ It is the idea of stability rather than the stability itself that appeals to Cole, for he relishes the freedom of the untethered wanderer. In another post, Cole tells of not wanting to settle in Switzerland, revealing “When I’m not there, I long for it, but what I long for is the feeling of being an outsider there and, soon after, the feeling of leaving again so I can continue to long for it.”³⁰ The accompanying image depicts a poster of the Swiss Alps hanging on the white wall of a domestic interior, and we can imagine Cole, or even ourselves, standing in the room, staring at the picture, and willing ourselves onto the top of those peaks where we might indulge in Switzerland and “the awayness of it, the estrangement that one could count on.”³¹ Cole’s is a different breed of nostalgia, a longing to return not to the fixed place but rather to the ever-changing elsewhere.

Ha Jin, another immigrant writer, offers an explanation for Cole’s desire to be elsewhere, citing wanderlust as a common affliction of the exile. Using as an example Odysseus’s restlessness after returning to Ithaca, Jin observes that Odysseus’s “wanderlust suggests that his restored home is no longer a place where he will feel at peace.”³² Cole’s urge to travel, then, is tacit recognition that he can never return to his original homeland. After being away from home, upon return, the exile “realizes that the essence of his life lies elsewhere—in the twenty years of his wanderings.”³³ Living in his diasporic state, Cole, like Odysseus, understands that his life cannot be contained by one single home, that he has actually deposited parts of himself in each place that he has visited, shattering the notion of the monolithic homeland where one will feel completely at peace. Taiye Selasi, a London-born writer of Ghanaian and Nigerian blood who now lives in several places around the world, advocates an attitude that Cole and Jin would certainly support. She proposes the idea of the “multi-local,” urging us to conceive of identity as

³⁰ Teju Cole (@_tejucole), “She said to me: Europe is getting worse…” 6 Apr. 2016. Instagram.
³¹ Cole, “Far Away From Here.”
³³ Ibid., 72.
a set of experiences that occur within local contexts rather than as being tied to the arbitrary nation in which we were born.³⁴ Cole’s “#_fernweh” project, dripping as it is with pieces of the local, embodies Selasi’s idea. In fact, Cole’s entire Instagram feed is physical corroboration of his myriad local experiences, a testament to his multi-layered identity.

*Fernweh* and the longing to wander is a feeling that yet another immigrant writer Pico Iyer shares with Cole. Iyer, who was born in Britain of Indian parents and who now lives in California, has navigated his diasporic identity similarly to Cole, actively inviting foreignness into his life and seeking out the freedom of awayness. Iyer admits, “Foreignness became not just my second home, but my theme, my fascination, a way of looking at every place as many locals could not.”³⁵ For Iyer, the feeling of never quite belonging, of living in a state of perpetual leave-taking, is a boon that grants him enhanced acuity. That Iyer identifies with Cole’s propensity to be elsewhere and to feel estranged proves that Cole’s cosmopolitanism as a means of transcending the immigrant condition is a strategy on the rise in the twenty-first century.

Yet, such a lack of geographical rootedness does not render Cole completely released from the ties of place. While his Instagram work might initially give him the appearance of the world traveler obliged to no one and nowhere, a closer look reveals Cole’s concern with the imprints that places leave on people and that people leave on them. The concept of the continuous city, while enabling free movement within, also implies the impossibility of absolute departure. No matter where the wanderer goes, he will always see mementos of other places in each new landscape as the past, not just his but that of other visitors too, accompanies him on his travels. Cole describes the narrator of his 2011 novel *Open City* as being particularly “hypersensitive to the eraser marks that are present in the landscape of the city [New York],”³⁶ a description that applies to Cole himself as his photographic work makes evident. In one

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³⁴ Taiye Selasi, “Don’t ask me where I’m from, ask where I’m local,” TEDGlobal, Rio de Janeiro, 7 Oct. 2014.
Figure 6 (above) & Figure 7 (below). Two Instagram posts addressing the idea of place as palimpsest, published April 10, 2016 and December 14, 2015, respectively.
Instagram post (Fig. 6), for instance, an image depicts a basketball court in Lausanne, empty but for the netted overlay of shadows from nearby trees. The accompanying caption reads as a micro-story: beginning by watching children grow into themselves while they play on the court, it imagines a future in which a stranger comes across the space and feels lingering the shadows of the children now grown. The viewer peering at the shade-dappled court becomes that stranger, and the children come alive before our eyes, skirting across the pavement as Cole brilliantly, through narrative, merges all of the experiences, disparate in time yet overlapping in space.

In another post (Fig. 7), Cole does not just envision but actually captures the evidence of another person’s engagement with a space. Words scrawled on a wall and arranged on a cardboard sign in Lagos testify to someone else’s activity in the very space that the photographer, Cole, and now, virtually, the viewer, occupies. For the caption Cole has selected a quote from Michel de Certeau that beautifully and precisely gives words to the idea underlying the previous post, that places are accretions of the experiences had in them, containing stories in reserve to which the present occupant has only partial access. Cole offers a version of the story latent in the writing on the wall, giving voice to the ghost inhabiting his space. Yet the photograph seems still to retain its mystery. Cole charges us with recognizing that though these many pasts exist in one space, they resist complete excavation, a fact that guarantees their endurance.

Just as people haunt places, so too can the places haunt people. Immigrants in particular seem to possess a keen awareness of the multiple pasts they carry on their backs from place to place. In a conversation with Cole, Aleksandar Hemon confessed that, as a diasporic person, he has found the act of leaving places easy; leaving the history of the place is far more challenging, for, as he says, “it follows (or leads) you like a shadow. That kind of history is in your body.”

Cole agreed, professing that Nigeria haunts him. He has echoed the sentiment with other places too, notably in an Instagram post from February. The photograph is of a hazy skyline—Mexico City on a drizzly December day—taken through the window of a hotel room, the bed’s white

linen visible as a faint reflection, the glare from the glass producing the illusion of a doubled, even tripled, skyline. In the accompanying text, Cole meditates on the several versions of Mexico he has experienced, in Brooklyn, Dallas, Santa Fe, and in the stories of his unnamed addressee. Finally in Mexico City, he realizes he was “full of prior Mexicos, the Mexicos of my heart chorusing the visible Mexico of the city.” Cole thus attests to the possibility of internalizing a place, in fact several places, carrying them with him in his very body as Hemon had indicated. That he allows his many past Mexicos to mingle with the current one shows crucially his acceptance that the past, though always present, is not a destination to which he may return; forward is the only viable direction of travel. Ha Jin phrases it aptly: “no matter where we go, we cannot shed our past completely—so we must strive to use parts of our past to facilitate our journeys.”

As a forward-venturing global citizen, Cole extends his vision of cosmopolitanism beyond himself to his larger audience. We have seen how he unites people through his Instagram images, but perhaps an even better example of him constructing a virtual community can be found on Twitter. An active Twitter user prior to 2014, Cole’s most legendary project, “The Time of the Game,” put the limits of time and space to the ultimate test. In July of 2014 Cole asked his Twitter followers to posts photos of their television screens as they watched the soccer matches during the World Cup, labeling them with where they were in the world and what minute of the game—the 4th, the 119th, etc.— their photograph depicted. With the help of an information designer and an artist-developer, Cole

![Figure 8. A still from “The Time of the Game” (2014)](image)

39 Jin, 86.
created a moving collage of overlapping photographs centering around the glow of the TV screens (Fig. 8). This active mapping of people’s lives onto one another created a sort of utopic public space of simultaneous existence that transcended the boundaries of time zone, nation, and language. The images, the details of which often provided insight into the unique lives of their photographers, once melded together resulted in the attenuation of difference. “The football,” Cole said, “becomes the pretext for total equality among its spectators.”40 Using the democratic tools of social media and cell phone cameras, Cole managed to bring to life a “continuous city,” this time composed of World Cup watchers.

Another of Cole’s Twitter projects, “Small Fates,” similarly concerns the dismantling of borders though it approaches the task from the opposite end. The project, which Cole expanded between 2011 and 2013, takes the form of a collection of Tweets that each pithily encapsulates an often grim event in an individual’s life. For example:

@tejucole, June 7, 2011: “With a razor blade, Sikiru, of Ijebu Ode, who was tired of life, separated himself from his male organ. But death eluded him.”
@tejucole, June 9, 2011: “Cholera, a bus crash, and terrorists, have killed 30, 21, and 10, in Adamawa, Ondo, and Borno, respectively.”
@tejucole, Aug. 22, 2011: “Even if one does not believe in ghosts, 2,700 of them continue to draw salaries from the Imo State payroll.”

The idea comes from the French fait divers, a literary form that takes the shape of compressed newspaper reportage, usually with ironic spins. Cole’s iteration features biting, precisely crafted snippets of Nigerian news. In this way Cole succeeds in, as one writer puts it, “making Lagos’ nobodies famous.”41 Unlike with “The Time of the Game,” no images are involved, and, rather than glue together disparate individuals’ experiences, Cole now insists on the isolated individuality of the stories. And, far from the cheery optimism of a world held together by soccer, these new fragments possess a disturbing darkness. Yet, Cole’s intention to tear down the boundaries set arbitrarily by the nation seems to apply for this project just as much, as he connects the marginalized stories of average Nigerians to the larger discourses coursing through

41 Pearce, “Death by Twitter.”
the world. Preserving each as a self-contained narrative challenges once more the traditional hegemony of the single story, instead defending the existence of myriad truths. The bleak, disturbing quality of the Small Fates aids Cole in delivering his message, jolting his audience into attention. On photography he has said, “A good photograph is like a pinprick. It draws blood, it quickens, it’s uncomfortable, and it reminds you in a small sharp way that you’re alive right now.” The same might be said for a good story, its sharpness all the more crucial when it amounts only to 140 characters or less.

We have thus seen the particular magic of Teju Cole, a maker who resists the restrictions of labels and who wields words and images as tools of provocation in his efforts to embody and encourage global citizenship. With an exhibition of paired images, with dollops of work dispensed daily through Instagram, with a crowdsourced video collage, and with small fates given a large audience, Cole urges us to overcome our differences in time and space to recognize that we are many in this world, to testify to each other’s existence. In his photography and his writing, he creates a space that we all might share as we engage intimately with his ideas about continuous and overlapping places, fragmented selves, the value of the mundane and the marginalized truths that rival the power of the master narrative, places that both contain and leave traces, the stretching of identity across time and space, and the transcendence of boundaries. With his camera and his pen, he parses apart the landscape around him, taking it up into himself so that wherever he goes he will be both original and reflection, chartering new territory and navigating a slightly altered identity yet never really leaving the past behind. From his work, we see that Cole’s way of coping with diaspora has not been to burrow himself into a stably bounded territory but rather to actively seek out displacement, for displacement gives him the power to be in multiple places at once, much like poetry, photography, and art.

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42 Cole, “Teju Cole: ‘A Good Photograph is Like a Pinprick.’”
43 In an interview with Aaron Bady for African Writers in a New World (19 Jan. 2015) Cole says, “But, really, I don’t care what I’m called: African, African-American, American-African, black American, Nigerian American, Nigerian, American, Yoruba. My writing has European antecedents, Indian influences, Icelandic fantasies, Brazilian aspirations. Labels are really a game we play with whomever happens to be sitting at the table with us.”
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