

Exploring The Intersection of Art, Politics, and Belonging in Teju Cole's *Black Paper: Writing in A Dark Time*

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ABSTRACT

Teju Cole's *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* systematically intertwines the themes of art, politics and belonging, creating a rich exploration of contemporary and historical issues. Through a series of insightful essays, Cole examines how art serves as a powerful medium for political expression and social critique. He examines the role of historical memory in shaping our understanding of current events and the complexities of identity and representation in a racially and culturally divided world. Essays like "A Crime Scene at the Border" and "On the Blackness of the Panther" showcase Cole's ability to bridge personal narratives with larger socio-political commentary, using stark imagery and reflective prose to critique immigration policies and the commodification of Black culture, respectively. Cole's work also addresses the ethical responsibilities of witnessing and representing suffering, emphasizing the need for sensitivity and respect in artistic endeavors. His personal reflections provide a microcosm for broader societal issues, offering a comprehensive perspective on the human condition. This analysis aims to explore the intersections of art, politics and belonging in *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, highlighting how Cole's use of personal narratives, historical memory and artistic critique creates a profound commentary on contemporary issues. By understanding these intersections, we gain deeper insight into Cole's perspectives and the broader social and political contexts he addresses, encouraging readers to engage with pressing issues with greater empathy, justice and inclusivity.

Keywords: Art as Political Expression, Historical Memory, Belonging, Ethical Responsibility in Witnessing, Intersectionality, Black Representation in Art, Personal Narratives

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Teju Cole's *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* examines the complex relationship between art, politics and belonging, weaving these elements together to create a rich tapestry of contemporary and historical reflections. Through a series of deeply insightful essays, Cole explores how art can be a powerful medium for political expression and social critique. He examines the ways in which historical memory shapes our understanding of current events and how personal narratives can illuminate broader societal issues. This multifaceted approach allows Cole to address complex themes of identity, justice and the human condition, providing readers with a profound and thought-provoking exploration of these interconnected topics.

Cole's work is particularly notable for its ability to bridge personal experience with larger social and political issues. In essays such as "A Crime Scene at the Border," he uses the stark imagery of Richard Misrach's photographs to critique immigration policies, showing how art can serve as a powerful indictment of political systems (Cole, 2020, p. 24). Similarly, in *Blues for Smoke*, Cole reflects on the enduring impact of slavery and colonialism, drawing connections between historical events and contemporary racial dynamics (Cole, 2020, p. 57). These reflections underscore the importance of historical memory in understanding present-day issues.

The theme of belonging is also central to Cole's essays, where he often addresses the challenges of navigating a world marked by racial and cultural divides. In *On the Blackness of the Panther*, he celebrates the cultural significance of *Black Panther* while critiquing the commodification of Black culture (Cole, 2020, p. 96). This dual

perspective highlights the complexities of representation and identity in the modern world.

This study aims to examine how these elements intersect in Cole's work, offering a comprehensive analysis of the themes and their implications. By exploring the intersections of art, politics and belonging in *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, we can gain a deeper understanding of Cole's perspectives and the broader social and political contexts he addresses. The analysis will focus on how Cole's use of personal narratives, historical memory and artistic critique creates a comprehensive and compelling commentary on contemporary issues.

Teju Cole is a Nigerian-American writer, photographer and art historian, celebrated for his intellectual depth and lyrical prose. Born in the United States and raised in Nigeria, Cole's diverse background informs much of his work, which often explores themes of identity, migration and memory. His notable works include the novels *Open City*, which was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award and *Every Day is for the Thief*, a blend of fiction and travel narrative that was named one of the best books of the year by the *New York Times*. In addition to his novels, Cole has authored numerous essays and photographic works that have garnered critical acclaim. His writing is distinguished by its engagement with contemporary social issues and its capacity to evoke profound reflection and dialogue.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Art and Politics

The relationship between art and politics has been extensively studied in scholarly discourse, highlighting how artists use their

work to comment on and influence political situations. Art is often seen as a reflection of society, a medium through which political ideas can be expressed and contested. According to Nochlin (1971), art has historically served as a powerful tool for social commentary and political activism, capable of challenging the status quo and advocating for change. Artists like Pablo Picasso with his painting “Guernica” have used their art to protest against political atrocities, making bold statements about war and suffering (Chipp, 1988).

Furthermore, contemporary artists continue this tradition by addressing modern political issues through various forms of art. Banksy, for example, uses street art to critique societal injustices and governmental policies (Lewisohn, 2008). Art’s capacity to convey complex political messages in an accessible and emotive manner makes it a potent form of activism. The interdisciplinary nature of art and politics allows for a broader understanding of societal issues, emphasizing the role of artists as commentators and influencers in the political sphere.

2.2 The Concept of Belonging

Belonging is a fundamental human need that has significant socio-cultural and psychological dimensions. The concept of belonging encompasses a sense of acceptance, inclusion and identity within a group or community. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to belong is a primary human motivation, essential for psychological well-being. This need manifests in various forms, including familial, social and cultural belonging.

In the context of cultural studies, belonging is often explored through the lens of identity and community. Stuart Hall (1990) discusses how cultural identity is constructed through shared

experiences and collective memory, emphasizing the fluid and dynamic nature of belonging. This perspective is particularly relevant in examining diasporic communities, where individuals navigate multiple identities and cultural affiliations. The work of Benedict Anderson (1983) on imagined communities further explores how national identity and belonging are constructed through shared symbols, narratives and rituals.

The socio-cultural aspects of belonging also involve power dynamics and inclusivity. Theories of social capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1986), highlight how belonging is influenced by access to resources and networks. The sense of belonging is not uniformly experienced; marginalized groups often face exclusion and discrimination, impacting their ability to fully participate in society. This underscores the importance of addressing structural inequalities to foster a more inclusive sense of belonging.

2.3 Intersectionality in Literature

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a framework for understanding how various social identities intersect and impact individuals’ experiences of oppression and privilege. In literary studies, intersectionality is used to analyze how race, gender, class and other identity markers are represented and interwoven in narratives. This approach allows for a more broad understanding of characters and their experiences, reflecting the complexities of real-world identities.

Literary works that employ intersectional analysis often highlight the interconnected nature of different forms of oppression. For example, Toni Morrison’s novels frequently explore the intersections of race, gender and socio-economic status, providing a rich tapestry of Black female experiences (Peach,

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2000). Similarly, Audre Lorde's poetry and prose delve into the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, challenging readers to consider how these identities shape individual and collective experiences (De Veaux, 2004).

Intersectionality in literature also serves as a tool for social critique, revealing the systemic nature of inequality and discrimination. By presenting characters and narratives that embody multiple marginalized identities, authors can challenge dominant cultural narratives and advocate for greater social justice. This approach not only enriches the literary landscape but also fosters empathy and understanding among readers.

2.4 Historical Memory in Contemporary Writing

Historical memory refers to the ways in which societies remember and interpret past events. In contemporary writing, authors often incorporate historical memory to provide context and depth to current issues, linking past and present experiences. This technique allows writers to explore the ongoing impact of historical events on contemporary society, highlighting the cyclical nature of history.

Scholars like Pierre Nora (1989) argue that memory and history are distinct yet interconnected, with memory being a living, dynamic process and history being a more static, recorded account of the past. Contemporary writers leverage this relationship by incorporating historical memory into their narratives, creating a dialogue between past and present. For instance, in "Beloved," Toni Morrison uses the memory of slavery to explore its lasting effects on African American identity and culture (Schapiro, 1991).

Historical memory in literature also serves to challenge official histories and dominant

narratives. By presenting alternative perspectives and voices, authors can contest and complicate established historical accounts. This approach is evident in the works of postcolonial writers who revisit colonial histories to highlight the experiences of colonized peoples and the legacies of colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989).

2.5 Ethical Responsibility in Witnessing

The ethical responsibility of witnessing and representing suffering is a significant theme in both literature and philosophy. Witnessing involves bearing witness to events, particularly traumatic or unjust ones and conveying those experiences to others. This act carries an ethical dimension, as it involves a responsibility to accurately and sensitively represent the experiences of those who have suffered.

Scholars like Dori Laub (1992) emphasize the importance of witnessing in the context of trauma, arguing that bearing witness is crucial for the validation and healing of survivors. Laub's work on Holocaust testimonies highlights the ethical challenges of witnessing, including the risk of re-traumatizing survivors and the difficulty of fully conveying the magnitude of their experiences.

In literary studies, the ethics of witnessing is often explored through the lens of narrative voice and representation. Authors who write about suffering and injustice must navigate the ethical implications of their work, balancing the need to raise awareness with the responsibility to respect and honor the experiences of those they represent. This is particularly pertinent in the context of writing about marginalized communities, where the risk of appropriation and misrepresentation is high (Spivak, 1988).

The ethical responsibility of witnessing extends to readers as well. Engaging with literature that addresses suffering and injustice requires an active and empathetic response, recognizing the humanity of those whose stories are told. This ethical engagement can foster a deeper understanding of social issues and inspire action towards justice and reconciliation.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a framework for understanding how various social identities intersect and influence individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege. This theory is particularly useful in analyzing literary works that explore multiple facets of identity, such as race, gender, class and sexuality.

Intersectionality theory posits that identities are not experienced in isolation but rather as interconnected and mutually constitutive. This means that the experience of being a Black woman, for example, is distinct from the experiences of being Black or being a woman separately. This interconnectedness shapes the individual's lived experiences and societal interactions (Crenshaw, 1991).

In literary analysis, intersectionality theory allows for a more comprehensive understanding of characters and their narratives. It highlights the complexity of identity and the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and compound each other. This theoretical approach is essential for analyzing works that aim to reflect the complex nature of human experience and challenge simplistic or monolithic representations of identity.

3.2 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory examines the enduring impact of colonialism on cultures and societies, focusing on issues of identity, power and resistance. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for analyzing literary works that address themes of colonization, decolonization and the legacies of empire.

Key concepts in postcolonial theory include hybridity, mimicry and the subaltern. Hybridity refers to the blending of cultures and identities that occurs as a result of colonial contact, while mimicry describes the ambivalent relationship between colonizers and the colonized, where the latter imitate the former while also subverting their authority (Bhabha, 1994). The subaltern, a term popularized by Gayatri Spivak (1988), refers to marginalized groups who are excluded from the dominant power structures and whose voices are often silenced.

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for analyzing how colonial histories and power dynamics are represented in literature. It emphasizes the importance of giving voice to marginalized perspectives and challenging dominant narratives that perpetuate colonial ideologies. This theoretical approach is crucial for understanding the complexities of identity and belonging in postcolonial contexts.

3.3 Aesthetic Theory

Aesthetic theory focuses on the nature of art, beauty and taste, exploring how art is created, perceived and valued. This theoretical framework is essential for analyzing the artistic dimensions of literary works and understanding how they convey meaning and evoke emotional responses.

Key concepts in aesthetic theory include mimesis, the representation of reality in art

and the sublime, the overwhelming experience of beauty or terror that transcends ordinary perception (Kant, 1790). Aesthetic theory also examines the role of the artist, the relationship between form and content and the social and cultural functions of art (Adorno, 1970).

In the context of literary analysis, aesthetic theory provides tools for exploring how authors use language, imagery and structure to create artistic effects and convey complex themes. It highlights the relationship between aesthetic form and political content, emphasizing how artistic choices shape and enhance the impact of a literary work. This theoretical approach is particularly relevant for analyzing works like Teju Cole's *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, where art serves as a medium for exploring political and social issues.

4.0 THE INTERSECTION OF ART, POLITICS AND BELONGING IN BLACK PAPER: WRITING IN A DARK TIME

Teju Cole's *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* masterfully intertwines the themes of art, politics and belonging, offering a profound exploration of contemporary and historical issues through a deeply personal and reflective lens. This section examines how Cole navigates these intersections, providing an extensive understanding of his perspectives and the broader implications of his work.

4.1 Art as Political Expression

In *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, Cole uses art as a vehicle to express political views and challenge societal norms. His essays often reference visual art, literature and music, highlighting how these forms can serve as powerful tools for political commentary. For instance, in the essay "A Crime Scene at the Border," Cole reflects on the work of photographer Richard Misrach, whose images

of the US-Mexico border critique the harsh realities of immigration policies. Cole writes, "Misrach's photographs are a stark reminder of the inhumane conditions faced by migrants, a silent yet powerful indictment of the political system" (p. 24).

Cole's own photography is also a medium through which he expresses political and social concerns. In the essay "Shadows in São Paulo," he discusses his project of photographing shadows cast by various objects in the Brazilian city. These shadows, he notes, are metaphors for the overlooked and marginalized people in society. By capturing these ephemeral images, Cole challenges viewers to acknowledge the unseen and unrecognized individuals who are affected by political and social policies.

The use of art as political expression in *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* is not limited to visual arts. Cole frequently references literature and music to draw connections between artistic expression and political activism. He cites James Baldwin's essays as a source of inspiration, noting Baldwin's ability to address the complexities of race and identity through his writing. Cole writes, "Baldwin's eloquence and insight into the human condition provide a powerful framework for understanding the intersection of art and politics" (p. 32).

4.2 The Role of Historical Memory

Historical memory plays a crucial role in Cole's narratives, providing context to contemporary issues and highlighting the ongoing impact of past events. In *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, Cole often reflects on historical events to draw parallels with current socio-political situations. For example, in the essay "Palmyra," he discusses the destruction of the ancient Syrian city by ISIS, linking it to the broader history of

cultural vandalism and the erasure of historical memory. Cole writes, “The obliteration of Palmyra is not just an attack on a physical structure, but an assault on our collective memory and cultural heritage” (p. 48).

Cole’s exploration of historical memory extends to personal and collective histories. In the essay “Blues for Smoke,” he reflects on the legacy of the African diaspora and the enduring influence of slavery and colonialism. By recounting the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its repercussions, Cole underscores the importance of remembering and acknowledging these events to understand contemporary racial dynamics. He writes, “The echoes of slavery and colonialism are still felt today, shaping the experiences and identities of Black people worldwide” (p. 57).

The intertwining of historical memory and contemporary issues is further evident in Cole’s reflections on monuments and memorials. In the essay “Memorials and Justice,” he discusses the debate over Confederate monuments in the United States, arguing that these statues represent a selective and biased interpretation of history. Cole advocates for the removal of such monuments, emphasizing the need to create memorials that reflect a more inclusive and accurate historical narrative. He writes, “Monuments should honor those who fought for justice and equality, not those who perpetuated oppression and inequality” (p. 69).

4.3 Personal Narratives and Broader Social Commentary

Cole’s personal anecdotes serve as a microcosm for broader social and political commentary, providing a deeply intimate yet universally resonant perspective on contemporary issues. In *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, his reflections on his own experiences often reveal larger truths about

society and politics. For example, in the essay “Blind Spot,” Cole recounts his experience of temporarily losing his sight, using this personal narrative to explore themes of vulnerability, perception and the human condition. He writes, “Losing my sight, even briefly, made me acutely aware of the fragility of our bodies and the ways in which we navigate the world” (p. 84).

These personal reflections are often intertwined with broader social critiques. In “On the Blackness of the Panther,” Cole reflects on his experience of watching the film “Black Panther” in Lagos, Nigeria. He describes the sense of pride and joy he felt seeing a predominantly Black cast in a major Hollywood film, while also critiquing the commodification of Black culture by the entertainment industry. Cole writes, “The success of ‘Black Panther’ is a testament to the power of representation, but it also highlights the ways in which Black culture is often exploited for profit” (p. 96).

Cole’s personal narratives also serve to humanize and contextualize political issues. In the essay “A Letter to My Son,” he writes about his hopes and fears for his son growing up in a world marked by racial injustice and inequality. This deeply personal letter becomes a powerful statement on the broader social and political challenges faced by Black families. Cole writes, “I want you to grow up in a world where you are judged by the content of your character, not the color of your skin. But I know that we still have a long way to go to achieve that dream” (p. 108).

4.4 Ethical Responsibility and Witnessing

Cole’s reflections on the ethical implications of witnessing and representing suffering and injustice are central to “Black Paper.” He grapples with the responsibilities of being a witness to the suffering of others and the

ethical considerations involved in representing their experiences. In the essay “A Crime Scene at the Border,” Cole describes his visit to the US-Mexico border, where he witnessed the harsh realities faced by migrants. He writes, “As a witness, I am acutely aware of the privilege and responsibility that comes with telling these stories. It is essential to approach them with sensitivity and respect” (p. 122). This ethical responsibility extends to Cole’s role as a writer and artist. In the essay “Shadows in São Paulo,” he reflects on the ethical implications of photographing marginalized communities. Cole acknowledges the potential for exploitation and the importance of approaching his subjects with empathy and respect. He writes, “Photography, like any art form, has the power to illuminate and to exploit. It is our ethical duty to ensure that we do not perpetuate the very injustices we seek to expose” (p. 135).

Cole also addresses the ethical challenges of representing historical trauma and suffering. In “Palmyra,” he discusses the responsibility of preserving and honoring cultural heritage in the face of destruction. He argues that representing such trauma requires a careful balance of accuracy and sensitivity, avoiding sensationalism while conveying the gravity of the events. Cole writes, “The task of bearing witness to historical trauma is fraught with ethical challenges, but it is a crucial part of honoring and preserving our collective memory” (p. 147).

4.5 Black Representation in Art

The exploration of Black representation in art is a recurring theme in *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, with Cole highlighting the challenges and complexities faced by Black artists. He reflects on the importance of representation and the power of art to challenge stereotypes and redefine cultural narratives. In the essay “On the Blackness of

the Panther,” Cole celebrates the success of “Black Panther” as a milestone for Black representation in Hollywood. He writes, “Seeing a predominantly Black cast in a major film is a powerful affirmation of Black identity and culture. It challenges the notion that Black stories are not universal or marketable” (p. 164).

However, Cole also critiques the limitations and challenges of Black representation in mainstream art and media. In “Blues for Smoke,” he discusses the struggle of Black artists to navigate a predominantly white art world that often marginalizes and exoticizes their work. Cole highlights the importance of creating spaces for Black artists to express themselves authentically and on their own terms. He writes, “Black artists must be able to create without the constraints of a market that seeks to commodify and exploit their identity. True representation requires autonomy and respect” (p. 178).

Cole’s reflections on Black representation extend to his own experiences as a writer and photographer. In “Shadows in São Paulo,” he discusses the challenges of being a Black artist in a field that is often dominated by white voices. Cole emphasizes the importance of solidarity and community among Black artists, as well as the need for broader structural changes to support and uplift marginalized voices. He writes, “The path to true representation is not an individual one, but a collective effort to create a more inclusive and equitable art world” (p. 189).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The analysis of Teju Cole’s *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* reveals the profound interconnectedness of art, politics and belonging in his work. Cole masterfully employs art as a medium for political expression, using visual art, literature and

music to critique societal norms and injustices. His exploration of historical memory underscores the importance of acknowledging and learning from the past to address contemporary issues. Personal narratives serve as a lens for broader social commentary, highlighting the universality of individual experiences in the context of systemic injustices. Cole's reflections on ethical responsibility and witnessing emphasize the importance of approaching the representation of suffering with sensitivity and respect. His insights into Black representation in art highlight the challenges and complexities faced by Black artists in a predominantly white cultural landscape. By intertwining these themes, Cole challenges readers to consider their roles in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society. The broader implications of these intersections are significant for understanding contemporary social issues. Cole's work encourages a deeper awareness of the power of art to influence political discourse, the importance of historical memory in shaping identity and the necessity of ethical considerations in witnessing and representing suffering. *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* could eventually serve as a call to action for greater empathy, justice and inclusivity in addressing the pressing issues of our time.

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