

Writing (as) Refusal

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BOOK REVIEWED: Teju Cole, *Black Paper: Writing in Dark Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Questions of what constitutes a practice of refusal, particularly for Black people, have been greatly interrogated by scholars and thinkers in recent years. My first encounter with these lines of inquiry came through reading the work of Tina Campt, whose formative essay, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal” (2019), and groundbreaking book, *Listening to Images* (2017), take up these questions rigorously and audaciously.¹ In both, Campt explores the ways that for her and members of “The Practicing Refusal Collective” she helped found with fellow scholar and writer Saidiya Hartman in 2015, refusal became a critical analytic through which to index some of the strategies Black people have developed and deployed to rebuff those constitutive or definitional norms and arrangements that refuse Blackness itself, particularly within the visual field. Campt observes that she and other members of the collective came to understand refusal “as a generative and capacious rubric for theorizing everyday practices of struggle often obscured by an emphasis on collective acts of resistance.”² They further came to understand it as way to name “the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory ... [and] to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles.” Refusal and resistance are notably not synonymous in this formulation. Refusal offers a more forceful repudiation of the world *as it is*.

The idea of refusal as praxis powerfully resonates across several of the chapters in Teju Cole’s insightful new book, *Black Paper: Writing in Dark Times*. Published in 2021 in the wake of the election of former Delaware senator and vice president Joseph R. Biden, Jr. as the forty-sixth president of the United States, but written primarily during the chaos and cruelty of the Trump years, the book’s twenty-six essays each evidence Cole’s penetrating curiosity and boundless intellect. The theme of refusal becomes especially salient in the last of the book’s five parts, which is aptly titled “In a Dark Time.” In the essay that opens the section, “A Time for Refusal,”

Cole turns to Eugene Ionesco's 1959 avant-garde drama, *Rhinoceros*, to make clear the necessity of honing practices of refusal to respond to what he cites as the "epidemic of 'rhinocertis'" that Trump's candidacy and ultimate electoral victory ushered in across the country during the waning days of the "Age of Obama."

In the essay, Cole recounts the brutal beating of Guillermo Rodriguez by two brothers, Scott and Steven Leader, while he was sleeping near a train station in Boston in August 2016. The Leader siblings attacked Rodriguez with a metal pipe, causing severe bodily injury. They also hurled racist epithets and urinated on the man, while repeating the anti-immigrant rhetoric that had become popular amongst Trump supporters. Like he would do many times during his run for the presidency, Trump equivocated when asked to condemn the racist attack carried out in his name. Instead, he offered tongue-in-cheek remarks about how "passionate" his supporters were. Trump's actions were unsurprising. What was surprising was the quickness with which people across various sectors in the nation came to normalize his recklessness. Evil, Cole reflects, "settles into everyday life when people are unable or unwilling to recognize it." If processes and practices of capitulation are legion, refusal becomes a vital way to reject the seductions of an insidious, ever-evolving normalcy.

Cole further contemplates the necessity of refusal and resistance in a subsequent essay entitled "Resist, Refuse." He again finds inspiration in the work of an avant-garde playwright—this time Samuel Beckett, whose postwar writing, Cole observes, evinces a "nearness to death" that bespeaks the dangers of his involvement with the French Resistance and his narrow escape from Nazi-occupied France in the early 1940s. Cole juxtaposes the French Resistance with the "Resistance" that emerged in the aftermath of Trump's rise to power to draw attention to the ways ideas of resistance can so easily be coopted and rendered "unexceptional." He makes the case for "a resistance made of refusals," before going on to provide a litany of ways that honing a practice of refusal can keep us more aware of and attuned to efforts to deplete resistance of any real meaning or force. Included in this list are the refusal of nostalgia, the refusal of laughing along, and the refusal of placing the topical above human connection and mutuality.

Themes of refusal and resistance are expressed much more subtly in the essays that sharpen focus on the visual arts. Art has been a preoccupation of Cole's since before his days as a graduate student in art history. Not surprisingly, these essays demonstrate best his commitments to developing close reading practices that at once bring fresh perspective to his objects of analysis while also drawing attention to broader themes concerning history, culture, and identity. Take, for example, the essay that launches part three of the book, "Gossamer World: On Santu Mofokeng." Using the South African-born Mofokeng's 1986 photograph *The Drumming, Johannesburg-Soweto Line* as a point of departure, Cole contemplates the ways an engagement with shadow served as a potent means for the artist to offer

“knowledge of a more secret sort” about Black life, dignity, and humanity under and in the wake of apartheid.

Cole’s turn to the work of visual artists in two essays, “Shadow Cabinet: On Kerry James Marshall” and “Nighted Color: On Lorna Simpson,” activates additional conversations about the relationships between shadow, race, resistance, and refusal. It is here that Cole makes most conspicuous his aspirations to be as precise as possible in both his thinking and writing. Marshall’s efforts to draw Blackness out of the shadows of art historical discourse provides Cole the necessary space to wrestle and reckon with the density and significance of Blackness both aesthetically and socio-culturally. Cole further finds “gestures of what cannot be seen” in Simpson’s work. Looking closely at her *9 Props* (1995), a project that saw the artist create nine portraits of objects inspired by artifacts captured in images taken by African American photographer James Van Der Zee throughout the twentieth century, Cole invites us to think about the many meanings that emerge when we consider the multilayered process Simpson undertook to produce the works. “A strong appeal of Simpson’s work is that she has always embraced the inherent complexity of Blackness, her own Blackness as well as the Blackness that runs ineluctably through American history,” Cole declares. No doubt, what is striking about Cole’s own explorations of the visual arts in *Black Paper* are the ways they too evidence his own beliefs in the complexity of Blackness.

Notably, even while Blackness is not explicitly named or explored across all of the book’s essays, the sense of possibility—and refusal—that it indexes reverberates throughout Cole’s prose. Since publishing his debut novel, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, in 2007, Cole has distinguished himself as one of the most elegant and perceptive writers of our time. His critical range and intellectual reach are on full display in *Black Paper*. With the book, Cole powerfully examples the ways that sharp, urgent, and beautiful writing, too, can be a form of refusal.

NOTES

1. Tina Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal,” *Women & Performance* 29, no. 1 (2019): 79–87; Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

2. Campt, “Black Visuality,” 80.

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