

# By Design: What The Label Says

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Let me start by inviting you to imagine: what would people who work campaign for Greenpeace be called if the organisation was formed in Samoa, by a Trinidadian and a Malaysian, and all its footsoldiers were people of colour? Would they be called progressive activists or obstinate primitives? Or imagine what the public profile of Human Rights Watch would be if it were a coalition of elders from the continent of Africa, travelling the world to identify violations of human rights as defined by them.

Now, I'm not saying these are bad organisations – they both do important work and I largely support what they do, but they are *ironic* organisations. They are essentially Western organisations set up to undo the wrongs set in motion by a Western approach to existing in the world. Inherent in their existence is the power to label, to define, to correct.

I can speak for Ghana, where I'm from, and state that before rubber and cocoa plantations and, specifically, before commercial logging, triggered and established (often against local protests) by European and colonial officials, we didn't have a deforestation problem. Of course, with diminishing forests, animals go to, the environment changes... And what do Greenpeace do?

And on human rights, let's look at child labour critically. Child *responsibility* has been a feature of almost every society in the world, but child labour is an urban phenomenon – it is a by-product of questing capitalism. It was at its worst when Spanish, English, Portuguese and Dutch captains were trying to “man” ships to conquer new worlds. I could go on, but you get me?!

The thing that we often fail to realise, the perspective that we are rarely encouraged to consider, is that environmental damage and the abuse of human rights is BY DESIGN.

When I say by design, I don't mean that a bunch of men (because it *was* men) sat down and said, “let's destroy the environment and exploit people.” No, they sat and decided, that if they wanted more chocolate it was OK to cut wawa trees that take over a decade to mature and replace them with cocoa trees that take three years to fruit. They decided that they wanted their labour at a low cost; they decided that they needed tables and paper to plot their way around the world – and ships to travel – so they would cut trees. But privilege (some of which was justified by the Bible that was used to knock on the door: “Let them have dominion... over all the earth”) meant that they didn't stop to

consider the *full picture* of the plan – the design. They didn't stop to consider the picture that includes what we have been taught to euphemistically call “side effects”, “human cost”, “collateral damage”.

This is what Audre Lorde alludes to in an anecdote in her essay, *Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*. She recalls wheeling her two-year old daughter on a shopping cart, going past a little white girl (not much older) who points at Audre Lorde's daughter and cries out, “Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!”

That sense of privilege the little girl has, that entitlement to label is a seed that can not be uprooted. It will infect her relationship with the world eternally, it will shape how she instinctively judges quality, appropriateness, style etc. It will make her a particular kind of gatekeeper, if she becomes one, *unless* she consciously fights it. But *consciousness* is hard work and most of the privileged are unwilling to do the work.

What's even sadder about the anecdote is that the little white girl's mother shushes her, but does not correct her. That means the entrenched privilege gets a head-start over the consciousness – and what she actually learns is you can't be *heard* saying (or thinking like) that so you're better off hiding it... Which means that other people who might have corrected her after that, won't even get to because they won't *hear* her. So *baby maid* and *maid* become part of her emotional and critical vocabulary for black people.

The saddest thing about that anecdote is that it happens – still. My baby cousin's wife, Rita (a good Benin woman from Nigeria), was recently at the doctor's: their son J goes to play with a white boy; the boy turns and says “I don't play with Black people”; his mother says, “don't say that” and *pulls him away* – no apology to Rita, no correction. I'll spare you the analysis, but you get me?!

That's what I mean by *by design*. We may call these things side-effects and find labels for them: global warming, environmental degradation, lack of cultural awareness, goofy Boris... by it's by design.

If we consider culture, it's the same thing: cultural production in the West doesn't lack diversity by accident – it lacks it by design.

There is a reason why the author of *Silas Marner* called herself George Eliot – she was working to beat the design. That design also underlies Achebe's problem with Joseph Conrad. Almost nobody will say that Conrad wasn't a skilled storyteller, but at no point in his work set in Africa do you not get the sense that he feels superior. You can't write about Africa, be a white supremacist and not expect to be called out. You can't be a transwoman,

uphold patriarchy, support Trump and not expect to get called out. Yes, write your books; yes, be yourself, *but*, yes, expect to be called out.

So, yes, the UK literature industry is classist, racist and sexist – and part of that design is a lack of diversity. Part of that design is the cringe-worthy jacket copy that many writers of colour get, because the industry has to pat itself on the back for every drop of diversity it allows in its ocean of white middle-upper class manly goodness. Part of that design is editorial approaches that seek to distil and limit what Asian, woman, queer, black, and working class experiences are. Part of that design is *I-don't-know-how-we-would-sell-this-book-because-we-don't-have-anything-like-it* – without ever asking the author they would sell it and without acknowledging how good it is before thinking about the hypothetical white male public who might not understand it (but how will we ever know if we don't give them a chance.) You get me?!

Let me give a couple of simple examples from my own experiences.

My novel *Tail of the Blue Bird* was tossed from publisher to publisher – some wanted me to *Westernise* (what does that even mean?) it more, others pushed their own editors back because “we don't know how to sell it.” In the end it was bought by Ellah Allfrey and Random House published it (after she had left). The Random House jacket copy focused on the *Africanness* of the book, the “clash” of old and new; my French publisher, Éditions Zulma, on the other hand admitted they had never had a book like it before, but decided that *that* would be how they sold it. They foregrounded voice and language, marketed it as a book of ideas, compelling philosophy on power – something universal rather than “African”. Guess which edition sold more, won more prizes, is being studied in universities? Considering that it was released five years after the UK edition it's even more remarkable that the French edition (in an almost equally-sized market) has sold more.

The point is, something as fundamental as jacket copy, when loaded with the labels and presumptions of privilege can transform the fortunes of a book, can transform the trajectory of a writer's career.

If you read the jacket copy I wrote for Warsan Shire's *teaching my mother how to give birth*, you will find that at no point did I mention she was Somali or she was a woman. The jacket copy is about the *work* and I was well-versed enough in the literature of the margins not to simply hail the work as revolutionary, but to root it in a heritage that includes Nawal El Saadawi, Tayeb Salih and Rumi. That's what diversity gives you.

So, in acknowledging that the lack of diversity is by design, we have to ask ourselves if these bright, new diversity schemes are not akin to taking medication for blood pressure but gorging on saturated fats – treating the symptoms, but ignoring the causes.

Let me take it back to where it begins, beyond Audre Lorde's anecdote, to how this design (the larger societal design) affects the very output of creatives from the margins. I used to do a lot of work in UK schools; I was one of the few male writers in the early 2000s who would happily go into primary schools to run workshops (I used to help out in my mother's crèche in my *child responsibility* days – and I'm from a family of teachers).

On more than one occasion, I heard little girls and boys explaining things to newly arrived kids in Gujarati or Yoruba and some classmates twittering. But, let some kid come in speaking Italian or Spanish... Even the teacher would pipe up and say “oh, you speak Italian – that's so cool.” Now, I'm sure the teachers didn't mean harm. They were probably just showing off their ability to recognise certain European languages, but which one of those children do you think is more likely to abandon the language of their household, to disdain their parents, to lose a music that – if they became a writer later – might fuel the engine of their production?

And the impact is beyond language. As Seamus Heaney said in a 2009 interview with Robert McCrum (for the *Guardian*): “Your language has a lot to do with your confidence, your sense of place and authority”. Now, consider that idea in the context of the common complaint from mainstream gatekeepers; “we don't get enough submissions from women, working class, queer, BAME etc. etc.” Well, you can't have an entire system, an entire design dedicated to suppressing their language and self-expression and expect them to have *confidence*, a sense of *their place*, and *authority* to submit! And when they do submit – knowing you as well as all oppressed groups know their oppressors – they will pre-format the submission to your tastes: *you* are impoverished; *they* are suppressed, strait-jacketed in cliché; the *entire world* is impoverished.

(I should mention that in those schools, I was the one who intervened to remind the twitterers that the people they were laughing at had an entire language in addition to English – a gift that they didn't seem to have)

I could go on about these structural tools of inclusion – these *who-are-you-literary-heroes?* which really means *how-are-you-like-us?*... This grand design of anti-diversity, which has its roots firmly in the academy – that creates canons; that “teaches” us how to read literature; that was first peopled by upper and middle class white men who were the

first patrons of writers who interested and entertained *them*, who set up the first formal publishing establishments... like... you get me?!

But let's talk about *redesign*.

I'm a writer, but I'm proudest of the work I've done as a facilitator – as founder/co-founder and curator of: Borders Open Mike, aromapoetry, Outdooring (where writers read from as yet unreleased work), African Writers' Evening, Full Flavour, Caribbean Literary Salon, African Book Market, Bringing the House Down (an international poetry showcase that brought spoken word to this very space, the Albany, in October 2003), Spoken Soul (a music-based showcase where poets responded to soul songs in new, commissioned pieces), the 100 Slam, African Book Festival, The Tell Tales Experience (a tour of short stories read to a live soundtrack). If some of these concepts sound similar to things happening now, it's because that's how inspiration works.

I am prouder still of the work I do as an editor and publisher, although it exhausts me and breaks my heart daily – because I am not enough. I would have quit flipped eye publishing eight years ago if it weren't for my two guardian angels, my co-editors Niall O'Sullivan and Jacob Sam-La Rose, who joined me then, who work for almost nothing, who edit for love. We are part of a wave of alternate gatekeepers, but we are not enough.

Yes, redesign is gatekeeper level stuff, it's investment level stuff. It's Richelieu Dennis – a Liberian – who sold Sundial Brands to buy Essence magazine, it's Bare Lit, it's Verna Wilkins, it's Cassava Republic, it's Shonda Rimes, it's Edward Enninful, it's the Good Journal, it's Amma Asante, it's Dean Ricketts, it's Oprah Winfrey, it's Four Hubs, it's Digitalback Books, it's Nate Moore, it's Ava DuVernay... and if you haven't heard their names before they are even more important.

Gatekeeping is also exhausting stuff. I know two editors who have left reputable publishing houses here in the UK soon after not getting backing to acquire work that I either wrote or edited. I won't speculate that those were the sole reasons they left (they both went to the USA – I wonder why...), but I'm trying to illustrate that just getting to the editorial table, to the boardroom, is sometimes not enough – capital and ownership is important.

For example, before the Poetry Book Society (PBS) had their Arts Council funding pulled and were taken over by Inpress, I used to serve on their board. Because it's essentially a book club, members get whatever books are bundled with their membership – and the organisation claimed to give members the BEST NEW POETRY. However, they were – to my mind – often sending out the best new books by old, established poets. The

most exciting stuff coming through was in the pamphlet selections – working class, BAME, lesbian... all the labels – but they weren't sending those out. They were ticking the diversity box without actually *enabling* diversity.

In the end, I had to leave because no matter how often I raised it, it got buried. PBS remained a club of guaranteed sales for a select number of authors, whose book release dates were curiously well-staggered so as not to clash too often.

We need more gatekeepers.

*And* we need established organisations – *if* they are going to claim diversity – to actually commit and enable it from within – not just special prizes, but editors, marketers... It must certainly make a difference that Kayo Chingonyi's *Kumukanda* was edited by Parisa Ebrahimi and that Candice Carty-Williams is part of the team working on publicity for the book. The Albany, right here, is known for spoken word, but it is because Gavin Barlow and his team stuck to their guns, stayed the course to build audiences, to build a community right here. And Gavin certainly knows about fighting for an idea. He was one of the founders of Queer Up North. Now, I'm a northerner and that's no easy thing!

The truth is, for many creatives from the margins, we hold on to our authentic, non-clichéd, non-labelled voices at a price.

Some of us are willing to pay it, some of us get lucky, some of us just want to get paid so we do the dance. I do not judge the dancers; I say we need more people who might say to the dancers, “it's OK, you can drop the mask now!”

It's no coincidence that it took five years for media people (including friends of mine. I have lots of white friends!) to want to look at Warsan Shire's *teaching my mother how to give birth* – it's by design. It's no coincidence that some authors' books take almost a year to place even though they have never written a book that hasn't made a profit – it's by design. It's no coincidence that one of my mentors – Courttia Newland – is not labelled as one of the giants of his generation of writers – it is. by. Design.

Redesign is gatekeeping, but it is also commerce; where the profit goes, the grand plan will eventually follow – that's the sad truth. So part of the solution is understanding the design and camouflaging the redesign:

- if the design created canons, the *redesign* must too (academics, we need you)
- if the design taught people how to read, the *redesign* must too (cultural theorists, social commentators and reviewers, we need you)

- if the design was propped up by patrons of a particular mental demographic, then the *redesign* needs patrons of alternate demographics (readers, we need you to buy strategically. You are the commerce; show the world what interests you, what entertains you. Ignore their 100 books you must read list – did they birth you to tell you what you *must* read?)
- if the design set up formal publishing establishments, then the *redesign* needs big dreamers!

The redesign must happen by design – and it will be the equivalent of replacing the tools in the master's box; it will be like leaving the master's house ostensibly intact, but forever changed.

I think it's called... we should call it *interior* design, because the change must happen within.

You get me?!

Since I've used an anecdote from her, let me depart from my usual quote heroes – James Baldwin and Kwame Nkrumah – and end with a quote from Audre Lorde:

*Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.*

That's *your* power – every single one of you, every human. Don't let the labels distract you. Don't dampen your difference to slide in. Yes, your power will scare the establishment, but they will have to learn to live with it, they will have to learn to read the potential in it. You are powerful by design.

Thank you.