

On Being a Black Writer, and a Writer who is Black

Jeffrey Boakye

My last book, *Black, Listed: Black British Culture Explored*, contains the word 'black' a total of 1,750 times. In a manuscript of 99,000 words, that constitutes 1.8 per cent. Two of these blacks are in the title alone. To put that into perspective, if you removed 1.8 per cent of the population of England and Wales who, according to the 2011 census, identify as black African, you'd be getting rid of every black African person in those countries within the UK.

My first book, *Hold Tight: Black Masculinity, Millennials, and the Meaning of Grime* was a 'witty and perceptive, confident and charming' exploration of grime music (not my words, but who am I to argue with the critics?). The first page begins with the word 'black'. 'Black music' to be precise. The book also has the word 'black' in its subtitle, and features a whole chapter devoted to a song called 'Black' and another about a song called 'Black Boys' (I was once one of those too).

My skin is not black. It's dark brown, full of a substance with the chemical formula $C_{18}H_{10}N_2O_4$ and more commonly known as melanin, derived from the Ancient Greek *melas* or *melan*, meaning 'black' or 'dark'. I have been born into an era where, due to an unfortunate combination of ongoing Social Darwinism, racism and laziness, my skin, and by extension my whole self, are labelled 'black'.

It's safe to say that in all of this, if you add it all up, I can be described as a black writer. But I also happen to be a writer who is black. And that curious distinction pushes open the door to a much bigger question and a much wider debate: what's the difference? It's not a new question; it's

actually one that reaches back generations, having been wrestled with by heavyweights of black literature such as the poet Langston Hughes. 'Negro Artists and the Racial Mountain', Hughes's 1926 essay, is a landmark in the intellectual exploration of these tensions, within the context of African-American aesthetics and politics in the Harlem Renaissance.

A century after the Harlem Renaissance, a question of definition still remains. What defines the constitution of the entity/brand/persona known as 'Jeffrey Boakye'? I've not always been a black writer. Up until fairly recently, I have been all sorts of things: a boy, a man, a father, a teacher, a rollerblader, a student, a reader, a wearer of oversized baggy jeans – often while rollerblading – you name it. Some of these things – defined by my racial identity, whereby my minority status (I was born and raised in a predominantly white country with a single-digit percentage black population) – are given a particular, sociological relevance: being a black boy, or a black man, or a black teacher, for instance. Particular to me, perhaps; for others, race is not an issue.

Anyway, now, in my 38th lap of the sun, I find myself being defined as a black writer. And it's going quite well at the moment, thanks for asking. I get invited to stuff. I have articles published in mainstream newspapers. I get asked to contribute to things, like this, for instance. People sometimes even pay money to hear me speak about things I've written. If you google me, you'll see pictures of my face and my books, as opposed to the faces and books of random people who happen to share my name. Even the algorithms are on my side.

I also find myself in a network of non-white writers who, not long ago, you might have seen filed under the 'Black Interest' section of your local bookshop. Were this network to be depicted visually, it would resemble a cat's cradle of interconnected overlaps, with a big black fist jutting proudly through the middle – all of them panelling and interviewing and reviewing

and book launching and endorsement-quote-offering and retweeting away like some twenty-first-century literary black brat pack. Or Brit pack. Or black lit pack.

I'm aware that I'm romanticising here, that this all sounds like some kind of glorious renaissance, a blooming of black consciousness in a fully liberal spring; that contemporary black writers are a force to be reckoned with, with our own gravitational pull, able to steer the conversation and shift the centre.

But this isn't the case. Writers of colour remain a startlingly small minority in UK publishing and the few of us who do make it into the mainstream are invariably characterised by our blackness.¹ Yes, efforts are being made to redress the imbalance, not least by imprints such as Dialogue Books, led by Sharmaine Lovegrove, or independents such as Crystal Mahey-Morgan's OWN IT!, both of which champion diversity. Nonetheless, publishing is still overwhelmingly white (with nine white writers to every black one according to a 2017 survey from the consultancy bookcareers.com), typically middle class, and, like every other institution in the UK, hampered by structural 'isms' that go in the opposite direction of fair representation. This is not me being provocative, by the way; this is a statement of plain fact. In this environment, writers who are not white find ourselves, whether we like it or not, politically positioned as infantry in the fight for diversity. Our stories become odes to persecution and prejudice, our words become incendiary and intense. And, all the while, our narratives of experiences from the margins remain exactly that: marginalised.

My existence in publishing is inextricably linked to my ethnicity. I am defined along political lines, which puts an ideological slant on my creative expression. It's an empowering kind of insecurity. Or an insecure kind of empowerment. I find myself rooted in an identity that has been historically

1. www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/06/uk-publishing-industry-remains-90-white-survey-finds

denigrated. Yet I find ballast in blackness.

Every book published, every article written feels like another corner turned in the labyrinthine exploration of black identity that has become my adult life. Maybe I've developed some variant of Stockholm syndrome but I don't actually mind being defined by the pigmentation of my skin. I've become quite protective of it – so much so that I can often be found tweeting into the wind about my identity as a black person living among white people. If you didn't like that metaphor, here's another: I've adopted the elephant in the room... and set it to work writing books with black in the title. The alternative would be to ignore it completely, but in the churning seas of white supremacy, that feels like it would be naive to the point of negligence.

The big problem here is that there's no room for error. If you dare to cough in a crowded room and tell your white hosts what you have to say about the decor, you'd better be accurate. There's equally a risk in the other direction, namely, the danger of alienating your black peers by accidentally, incompetently, or wilfully appealing to dominant whiteness over black solidarity. Political blackness has to be researched, studied and learned, just like any other qualification. Get it wrong and at best you end up looking like a fool; at worst, you become the villain. Consider Trevor Phillips, former head of the Commission for Racial Equality, who is seemingly under a permanent cloud of suspicion of having defected to the wrong side. Kehinde Andrews, professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City University, criticises Phillips' work on race as 'offensive and simplistically inaccurate', existing to fuel racist agendas in a way 'that only a black person could get away with'.²

Elsewhere, there's Kanye West, the pop icon, who went from being

2. Kehinde Andrews, 'Beware the Uncle Tom' <https://make-it-plain.org/2019/03/15/beware-the-uncle-tom/>

a darling of the Chicago 'conscious' hip hop scene to being lambasted by fans across the globe. His crime? Endorsing Donald Trump, wearing a Make America Great Again (MAGA) cap and making a televised throwaway comment that gave the impression he considered that 400 years of slavery was 'a choice' for those who were subjected to it.

I'm hovering dangerously close to a 'three-lane theory' here (with apologies to Murs of Hip Hop DX):

That race is a political game.

That this game can be played with varying degrees of skill.

That black people who fail to play this game will risk annihilation at either end of the seesaw.

For black writers, the risks of being politically black are obscured by our melanin. It's assumed that we are politically black simply because we are pigmentally black. Think about it. Imagine if a white person decided to write about the nuances of black experience from a black perspective. Sharp intakes of breath would be required. What I do is equally scary; it just doesn't seem so because I look the part.

Tokenistic blackness is far easier. You can be a token black figure without any preparation or prior reading whatsoever. The qualification required to be a token black is simply having black skin. Before I really got into identity politics, as a rollerblading teenager, I was often a token black figure, not realising the weight of responsibility I carried.

You could argue that by choosing to be a black writer, rather than a writer who happens to be black, I'm making life hard for myself. I was recently accused of 'playing the race card'. It was online, naturally, in a conversation about structural racism and unconscious bias in education. I was calling for action to educate educators on their unspoken prejudices. It was a conver-

sation sparked by the British government's decision to implement a nationwide school closure and cancel GCSE and A level exams in the summer of 2020, in response to the coronavirus outbreak. Grades, it was announced, would be decided by existing teachers – opening the door to the kind of bias that historically affects black students detrimentally, given the evidence of systemic under-prediction by teachers of grades for black and minority and poorer candidates.

By stating these facts I was, according to my tweeting antagonist, 'playing the race card'. But the thing is, as I patiently and condescendingly explained to my online accuser, the race card is not something you can play so much as something you get trapped in, like the bad guys at the end of Superman II, spinning aimlessly through space and time. Aficionados of Superman will tell you that this is the Phantom Zone, a two-dimensional prison from which no-one can hear you scream.

Too heavy a metaphor? Perhaps. But race, blackness as the antithesis to the default, dominant whiteness, does feel like a trap; an ideological shackle that one is born into and from which one can never really escape. I wonder if writing about it is simply tightening the snare. It's happening right now. I think.

So, is there a difference between a black writer and a writer who happens to be black? The answer sits somewhere along a figure eight infinity loop. A writer explores and expresses their identity through words, and if this identity is that of a racialised Other, then these words become a manifestation of that very identity. Even if you try to ignore it, race is ever present. But, crucially, this doesn't have to be a limitation. I've found that being marginalised has helped me to see not only the bigger picture, but also the frame, and the painter of the picture, too. My blackness gives me

this wider perspective. Perhaps, in conclusion, it's a redefinition of 'black writer' that would be most useful: not simply a writer who is black, but a person whose status allows them to view the situation from a vantage point that a mainstream, 'white writer' can't reach: that place beyond the margins.

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Jeffrey Boakye is a writer, teacher and music enthusiast originally from Brixton, London. He has a particular interest in issues surrounding education, race and popular culture. Jeffrey has taught English in London secondary schools and sixth-form colleges since 2007, previously working in journalism and copywriting, after graduating with a degree in English Literature.

His first book, *Hold Tight: Black Masculinity, Millennials and the Meaning of Grime*, is recognised as one of the first seminal books about grime music, published by Influx Press in 2017. *Black, Listed: Black British Culture Explored* is his second major book, published under Dialogue Books in 2018. He is also the co-author of *What is Masculinity? Why Does it Matter? And Other Big Questions*. He has contributed articles and comment pieces to publications including the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times* and the Royal Society of Arts Journal. After moving from London in 2018, Jeffrey now lives in East Yorkshire with his wife and two sons.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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