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# Another View: I'm a black writer by choice and by experience

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**Some seek to avoid the label 'African writer'**



I WANT to talk about blackness from my perspective and experience as a writer. My first ever personal presence at a specifically black writers' conference was at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, way back in 1962.

I was a student, a beginner. The majority of writers I had read and studied were white Europeans. I liked some and loathed others, was inspired by some, revolted by others, but in the same way that they were European writers, I wanted to be an African, a black writer.

I was startled when some writers said they didn't want the label "African". They were writers, period.

Later, after publishing my first novel, *Weep Not Child*, I would find myself having to respond to the question or its various shadings: do you see yourself as an African writer or just a writer? When I came to see how African writing was often critiqued as lesser than or "good enough considering", or that it was anthropology, not literature, I began to understand why some people would want to disclaim the label "black" or "African", their way of clamouring to be judged by the same aesthetic criteria as any other writers.

But there are moments when I want to stand on roof top, tear off my clothes, and proclaim: "I am a black writer", holding a banner with the words: "I write primarily in an African language, Gikuyu; what of my fiction you now read in English is largely translation from the Gikuyu original." There are other moments when, even if I wanted to be just a writer, I am reminded of the fact of blackness: my blackness as a black writer.

For me, the two moments came together in 2006 when Pantheon released the US edition of my novel, *Wizard of the Crow*. Some critics have called it a global epic. I was very proud of the book. I had spent almost 10 years writing it in Gikuyu and eventually translating it into English.

On November 10 2006, the book tour took me to Vitale Hotel in San Francisco. It was the hour between breakfast and lunch when I took a newspaper from reception and sat on the terrace of the hotel's restaurant, enjoying the view of the harbour front.

I raised my head to find a suited gentleman, who I assumed to be the manager, addressing me: "This is for hotel guests." I was about to explain that I was a guest when it crossed my mind to ask: "How do you know that I am not a guest?"

As if to say it was not necessary to prove the obvious, he did not respond to the question, but continued reiterating the same fact in an increasingly peremptory tone.

The tension rose. Curious, I said: "You have not even sought to know if I am staying at the hotel." This seemed to rile him even more: it was not necessary. The place was for guests of the hotel. I had to leave. "Let's go to reception," was all I said. He strode ahead of me, furious, determined. When he saw the horror on the face of the hotel manager, he was abject and sorry.

The CEO of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, the parent company of the hotel, published a public apology, \$450 worth of space, and agreed to conduct diversity re-education of his employees. He called me at my place in Irvine, South California, to apologise. In addition, he paid \$5000 to a grass-roots organisation for anti-racist activism in the Bay area.

Why, then, am I telling this story on the occasion of Africa Day, a time which seems a far cry from the colonial days of my birth and upbringing?

I was born and came of age in colonial Kenya, where everything was contested in terms of black and white. Even the memory of place was a battlefield. My experience growing up in a colonial settler society had taught me to sense the racist type by their gait, their gesture, their word, their sneer or tone of voice.

The San Franciscan gentleman never came across as an obvious racist, the fire-breathing, nigger-calling type, seeking any opportunity to hurl an insult, the kind that assumes that every black person collects food at dump sites, or food stamps in the case of the US. He did not once utter a word or make a gesture that was overtly racist.

But he had something far deeper and more frightening: certainty, a certainty arising from a profile of blackness embedded somewhere in his mental makeup, absolute certainty that I could not have been a guest.

Later that evening, in another hotel to which I had moved, I thought more about the absolute certainty: I found myself trembling. It dawned on me that if the man had a gun, he probably would have shot me with the same certainty and would no doubt have proclaimed to the world afterwards that he was not a racist, even citing, as evidence, a couple of black friends.

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