The Controversy of White Authors Writing With Black Characters:
From One Author to Another; To Write or Not To Write?

We read. We write. We are authors. Everything that we write on paper; we write down to tell stories, to document. We tell past stories about ourselves, about our families, about our histories. We tell imaginative stories about what our futures might look like. All of this writing comes from some kind of memory. Some kind of *spark*. *Passion*. Maybe we find it in our history books. Maybe we find it in pictures. It's something all of us writers do. We observe. We listen. We write. So what happens when we write to tell someone else's story? Someone different than ourselves? We study. We observe. We listen. We write. Then what happens? We criticize.

It's a healthy thing; constructive criticism. Most of us learn a little about ourselves, and our writing, when we receive it. We take the criticism as a suggestion. Not as a permanent change that we *have* to make. But what happens when the criticism is constantly in the media, in essays? What happens when it becomes a big controversy? We retrieve. We stop writing in fear of offending someone. Or we fear that maybe our writing just wasn't good enough.

One of the most recent controversy's in the media about writing comes from the portrayal of black characters by white authors. *The Help,* written by Kathryn Stockett, a white author, tells the story of black maids in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The book topped the charts as a *New York Time's* Bestseller. It moved up even faster when it became a top selling movie in 2011. However, it then quickly became a lawsuit. Ableen Cooper quickly asserted that Stockett's character, Aibleen, was a direct, what she believes to be an, incorrect depiction of herself. Cooper is still currently a maid for a relative of Stockett, and said that she was approached years ago about being a character in the novel. In which she replied with, "no." The fact that she believes she was depicted incorrectly in the novel leads me to my main point;

should white authors be able to write black stories? And my answer to this is, yes. Everyone should be able to write what they want to write, but I can see where there might be some controversy in the way that white authors depict black dialect, and black characters. It can be hurtful to someone displayed in a way that they necessarily don't see themselves.

In his essay entitled "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" (1933), Sterling A. Brown lists seven distinct character types that define the African American presence in American literature: The contended Slave, The Wretched Freeman, The Comic Negro, The Brute Negro, The Tragic Mulatto, The Local Color, and The Exotic Primitive. In his essay he also insists that the political and social circumstances of race relations and history made it easier for authors to present comfort with the Other rather than truth about the Other;

> A detailed evaluation of each of these [character types] is impracticable because of limitations of space. It can be said, however, that all of these stereotypes are marked either by exaggeration or omissions; that they all agree is stressing the Negro's divergence from an Anglo-Saxon norm to the flattery of the latter; they could all be used, as they probably are, as justification of racial proscription; they all illustrate dangerous specious generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view—which is itself generally dictated by the despite to perpetuate a stereotype. All of these stereotypes are abundantly to be found in American literature, and are generally accepted as contributions to true racial understanding (180).

I am not surprised that Mr. Brown feels this way. We often see these types of characters in our books, and in our television shows. Mark Twain uses Jim as the "contended slave" in his book, *The Adventures as Huckleberry Finn.* And Stockett uses a combination of these characteristics on her black characters, like the "comic negro" and the "exotic primitive" in her novel. Minny Jackson can definitely be seen as a "comic negro" in her forms of speech depicted by Stockett. For example, when Celia Rae Foote tells Minny she's afraid the house is too much for her to clean, Minny can't believe it. She tells us, "I look down at hundred-and-sixty-five pound, five-foot-zero self practically bustin' out of this uniform" (64). She says, "Too much for me?" (64).

She's silly, yet charming. But by her dialect, and taking on that "comic negro," do the readers get a misconstrued perception of the character? Do we assume that all African-Americans talk this way?

Alain Locke argues in his essay "The New Negro" that contemporary authors, and the public, have this misconstrued perception of African Americans;

> [F]or generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem (4).

Locke urges his contemporaries to start to create a "new negro." To rid the social stereotypes. I do not believe that he was just urging African-American authors to break the social standard of the characters, but I believe he was urging every writer to break the social standard. And what better way to do that than to have a white writer break into the system to create new writings?

There are a lot of different ways to go about this linguistically. Writing with a black character can be as simple as figuring out exactly how the vernacular works. There are plenty of books and research available on the characteristics of black dialect. I understand that the slang may not be perfect, but I know that African American Vernacular English (AAVE) carries very detailed examples of the language. For example, in AAVE we often find the loss of the final conants, especially sonorants; po(or), and sto(re). Linguists have also found that in AAVE there are the use of double negatives; I ain't got no money, the loss of –ng; somethin', nothin'. There is also no use of the linking verb 'to be' or generalization of one to form for it. There is an emphasis on aspect rather than tense: He workin' vs. He be workin'. And the voiced *th* sound becomes d: dis, dey, and dat. After learning these few rules I decided to take a stab at working

with my own pieces of AAVE. I believe that anyone can really write with any character they want, as long as they are conscious of the sensitivity, and are willing to do the research.

With my own piece of AAVE writing I decided to do my own research on if a white writer could accurately portray the dialect. I gave three examples of the use of black dialect to a twelfth grade English classroom, and had them pick which one they thought was a more accurate portrayal of black dialect in terms of black characters. The options included dialect from Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, and my own piece of sample writing. The following is the data that I collected;

> Out of 89 students who took the survey 32 identified themselves as white, 54 African-American, and 3 Hispanic. All of the ages were either 17 or 18. 51 students identified themselves as female, and 38 as male. Besides the age aspect, I thought that I had a pretty good spread as far as the topic was concerned since the class was pretty evenly spaced as far as race goes.

> I then split my findings into six different categories; Black Males, Black Females, White Males, White Females, Hispanic Males, and Hispanic Females. What I found is that there were only two markings for Option 1(The Help), one mark by a Hispanic female, the other by and African-American male. Option 2 (Their Eyes Were Watching God) had 52 markings; 41 black, 19 white, and 2 Hispanic. And option 3(My own sample of writing, using the linguistic approaches stated above) had 35 markings; 12 black, and 13 white.

That means between my writing, and Hurston's writing, we only had about a 15 student split between us. I wondered if I had a bigger sample size if the number would be closer. Statistics tell me it is possible, but regardless, I saw this as a success. I proved to myself that I could be successful at portraying the language, and the characters, being a white writer.

I worked very hard to study the language, and take care not to be offensive, and stereotypical. I know from personal experience that portraying someone's dialect incorrectly can be hurtful. I went from having a thick southern accent, to extensive speech therapy classes, to having a true northerner's accent. I understand the sensitivity, and wanted to make sure that I did

my characters justice by not sticking to the stereotypical "negro." I wanted to create the "new negro" as Locke stated in his essay, and I believe that I proved to myself and to other writers that it is possible, and should be done.

So should white authors write with black characters? Yes. And black authors should write with white characters. Even with the racial controversy, we should not be confined in our writing, but we should be sensitive. We should be aware of our audiences. We need to study. We need to observe. We need to listen. We need to write. We are authors of all colors telling stories of all colors.

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