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Through the eyes of the other: an analysis of the representations of blackness in South African youth novels by white writers from 1976 to 2006

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Abstract

The portrayal of blackness in South African youth literature written by white writers from 1976 until 2006 is the primary focus of this thesis. The manner in which blackness is perceived by the other and the ways in which these perceptions are conveyed within literature for the youth have, for decades, served the dual function of interpreting the other, while providing the white reader with a sanitized voyeuristic view of black reality during and after apartheid. South Africa's political history informs a significant part of the ways in which black characters have been portrayed within the literature that is produced in the country.

The argument that is presented in this study is that stereotypes about black people have become an established mode of representation informing the ways in which black characters are portrayed in a majority of the novels analysed herein. Looking at the historical functionality of stereotyping and its role in the formulation of race some of the more common stereotypes of blackness that are part of the South African literary canon will be delineated. Stereotypes of black servitude, sexuality (male and female), superstition, exceptionality, political and intellectual ineptitude, dependency and a proclivity for music and dance are replete in the majority of the novels that will be discussed.

This thesis also looks at the ways in which the contemporary understandings of the concept of race have been constructed and manipulated in accordance with the dictates of the dominant group. Analysing the construction and formation of race this thesis assesses the ways in which race has been made a function of our processes of self-identification and social engagement. However, the definitional parameters of group identities are continually morphing to reflect the mobility of contemporary society and this is reflected in the new sites of identity formation and prejudice, such as culture and religion.

Edward Said's seminal work entitled *Orientalism* (2003) explores the ways in which the other is not only portrayed by the dominant group, but also the ways in which they are interpreted and constructed. Informed by Said's *Orientalism*, this thesis introduces Bantuism as a discursive regime for the elucidation of the construction of blackness within a South(ern) Africa(n) context.

Bantuism assesses the particular nature of the experience of apartheid within a historical and geographical context that particularised South Africa's oppression, and analyses how youth fiction has been affected and influenced by Bantuism.

One of the main arguments is that Bantuism not only encourages the construction of race and the other, but enables the appropriation of the voice of the other thus vesting knowledge, and therefore, power with the dominant group. Concomitant to the appropriation of the voice of the other is the usurping of their history and systems of knowledge and the simultaneous transfer of said knowledge and power. In light of the silencing of the other that is a feature of oppression, this thesis explores whether or not white writers can and/or should write in a black voice. Given that most white writers have no first-hand experience of oppression in conjunction with a largely prejudicial perception of the other predicated on their upbringing within an oppressive society most white writers are not able to write in a black voice.

The depictions of blackness within South African youth literature have not substantially changed over time. Many white South African writers continue to portray blacks either as stereotypes or as characters that provide a platform for the white character to vicariously experience oppression and inform the white readers of their understandings of blackness based on their observations. There remains very little substantive change in South African youth literature to reflect the significant changes that have taken place in the political arena between the years 1976 and 2006.