

Notes on Fostering Activism: Bringing Our Voices to the Page, Stage, and Screen

By Racialicious Special Correspondent Latoya Peterson

(Originally published on Racialicious, 1/11/08)

The Notes on Fostering Activism series is designed to open up dialogue regarding community action, activism, patterns of thought, and overlapping issues within various causes and communities. Some posts will deal with race, but some will not. All are encouraged to share their experiences - both here, and experiences in other social, cultural, or political communities.



In writing and researching the Cashmere Mafia piece, I ran across an article from Newsday (originally from the LA Times) titled ["Diversity Issue Dogs Creators of New TV Shows."](#)

Written late last year, it appears that most of the story is still accurate:

HOLLYWOOD - Race relations are taking a starring role in several new culturally tinged series this fall. Fox's "K-Ville," ABC's "Cavemen," CBS' "Cane" and The CW's "Aliens in America" and "Life Is Wild" couldn't be more different in incorporating cultural flavor. "Cane"

examines the criminal dealings of a loving Cuban family, while "Aliens in America" is a satirical look at the prejudice that greets the arrival of a Pakistani student in a small town. "Life Is Wild" follows a white family that moves to Africa.

And "Cavemen" has been labeled by network president Stephen McPherson and ABC's marketing department as a funny commentary about race relations with a "new minority group." In one respect, the new shows are different from series already on the air, such as "Grey's Anatomy," that take place in a "color-blind" world, in that they will confront race, cultural pride and conflict directly.

But with all five shows, it's not a person of color who will be steering that vision - as with much of network television, the series have white male show runners.

Show runners, like writers and producers, help to shape the final product we see hitting our screens every week. While the scribes for the show may have one idea for the direction and casting of the show,

the show runners and lead producers also have input and sway and tend to make changes with impunity. Getting a perspective on race on television from one of them would be fascinating, right?

Unfortunately, the resounding answer from all the studio people in the the know will be a brusque “no comment:”

With the exception of Fox's “K-Ville,” the forces behind all of the shows, particularly ABC, CBS and their affiliated studios, declined to address race in the new shows and forbade producers from answering questions.

“There’s just no upside for us to participate in that discussion,” said one executive. Another suggested that issues of creative control, ego and racial sensitivities made the topic more delicate.

After continued prodding, the writer reached Jonathan Lisco (creator of the New Orleans based cop drama *K-ville*) and Kim Myers (director of diversity for the Writers Guild of America, West). Both were willing to delve into the sticky subject of how race plays out behind the scenes.

Does the absence of minority show runners on the new programs dilute the cultural truth in characters and stories?

“Good writers can always transcend their backgrounds, but we always believe that there’s an authenticity that comes into play when writers who have diverse backgrounds are writing those characters of diverse backgrounds,” said Kim Myers, director of diversity for the Writers Guild of America, West.

Lisco, who is white, said he understood the dilemma. “I get this question all the time,” he said. “Most of the time I’m writing about the human experience, and the race issue is not seminal to the story. When it is, I approach it with great respect.” He added that there are black members of his writing staff - one a writer’s assistant - who provide valuable input on story lines dealing with race.

Myers added that there most likely is a dearth of qualified minority show runners because of a lack of opportunities. Writers of color may be placed on shows as a “diversity” hire but encounter hurdles as they attempt to move up the ranks. A Writers Guild study released earlier this year found that, despite some advances by women and minority writers, white male scribes disproportionately dominate film and TV jobs in Hollywood. Minority writers accounted for fewer than 10 percent of employed television writers from 1999 to 2005.

I am glad that Myers actually told the truth about her industry - there is a lack of opportunities, not a lack of talent. It is important to make this distinction.

Unfortunately, the perception is that minority writers can only write “ethnic” plot lines, whereas white writers are seen as writing to the human experience. Unless a minority writer can prove they can “write

white” they are generally shut out of writing for most mainstream shows. They then build up a resume of writing credits that tend to focus on minority perspectives - which continues the cycle of being overlooked for higher profile positions.

So how can we solve this problem?

While this is a large issue to tackle, I want to start by breaking it down into three steps: exploring, understanding, and taking action. This post will deal with exploration.

For the commenters who are **media consumers**:

What decisions influence the shows you watch, the books you purchase, and the movies you pay to watch in the theatre? What kind of films do you look for? What kind of characters do you relate to? How do you feel about how your race/ethnicity is depicted on screen?

For the commenters who **create** scripts, screenplays, novels or any other type of fiction:

What kind of worlds do you create? Are your worlds monoracial? Do your characters interact with people of a different race? Do you find it difficult to write about other races or ethnicities in a way that feels authentic?