

Short-Story Form and Diversity Management in ZZ Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

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Abstract

Historically, ethnic minority writers have only rarely shown much concern with the intra-group diversity that one frequently finds in sociological surveys and statistics which classify results according to ethnic categories. ZZ Packer's collection of short stories *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003) presents us with a set of African-American characters who, despite sharing the surface difference of their skin color, display a much wider range of "otherness" as they have to struggle with the limitations that their age, appearance, religion or family background mark out for them. While it is true that most of Packer's protagonists —generally young girls— are outsiders who develop all sorts of coping strategies to deal with the pain that expectations and prejudices inflict on them, it is also apparent that their grievances originate from variegated causes. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Packer succeeds in producing a work of fiction that transcends most of the paradigms so-far used to analyze characters in texts by black women —*i.e.* suspended/ assimilated/ emergent woman or invisible/ feminist/ womanist heroine—. She manages to do so by having such a strong grip on reality that we, the readers, cannot help but sympathize with young individuals pushed by circumstances into making very difficult decisions.

A well-written short story has more of a kick than many full-length novels. Exemplifying such, and resonating with the rhythm and history of America's Deep South, are the stories collected in ZZ Packer's debut.

Diana Evans, Review in
The Independent

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This use of multiple voices, although not entirely unknown elsewhere in literature, becomes in American ethnic writing a means of creating community as part of the dialectics between the past and the present in moving toward the future.

Amritjit Singh,
Memory, Narrative, and Identity

For American writers of color, one of the major problems is to find narrative forms that effectively resist and subvert the stereotypes that have developed in a heavily racialized society. Of course, this problem is further complicated by the countless instances of ethnic denial and forgetting that have come little short of erasing these communities completely out of history and culture. It is for this reason that, as some scholars (see Singh, 1994: 19-25) have noted, many ethnic writers have chosen to let those suppressed memories of the past give shape to their narrative forms and strategies. The advantages of this process of revisiting and revising the past are clear, since it contributes decisively to gaining control over one's present life. However, there are also two serious handicaps to this relentless revisionist exercise: first, it may straitjacket whole groups of human beings into a handful of recognizable archetypes outside which their existence does not seem to bear much significance and, secondly, it tends to raise a number of expectations in the reader —ethnic or otherwise— that quite often make their plots mechanical, if not utterly predictable. It is not surprising in this regard that one of the first tasks that theorists of African-American, Native or Chicano literature take upon themselves is to classify the “canonical” texts in each tradition as belonging to particular genres and to group their heroes as either invisible/submerged, isolated/suspended, collective or emergent. As Gates (1992: 22-31) and other critics have claimed, there is no question that this self-conscious exercise of historical (re)cognition should help future writers to find a voice which both does justice to their cultural heritage and satisfies the ethical and aesthetic needs of their reading public. While agreeing broadly with this opinion, I contend in this

paper that there are dangers to be found in writing under the shadow of traditions which, often unwarily, have perpetuated a number of narrative patterns and ethnic stereotypes that are of little use to the present-day writer. Instead of showing the undesirable effects that the above-mentioned process has had on the fiction written by some recent ethnic authors, I have decided to focus on a young African-American woman writer, ZZ Packer, whose early stories represent a clear departure from what anyone could well consider some of the *sine-qua-nons* in Black literature so far. This, I hope, will make even more conspicuous the type of potentials that are being wasted simply by submitting to assumptions inherited from the past and by failing to bring into narrative new forces which are playing a key role in determining the future of the race.

In an interview for *identitytheory.com* with Robert Birnbaum (2003), Packer complained that she does not feel comfortable with the idea of being identified as a black writer who writes solely for a black reading public. She adds that people often assume that this is so because they tend to think that race will surface in all contexts:

[...] It is a horrible thing when it does because it means that the racists have won and have convinced people that it should erupt in everyday. When I am writing these stories, I am really concentrating on the characters and what are their circumstances and motivations and what do they want.

Despite this claim for a fiction that pays closer attention to aspects which are common to all human beings, it would be inaccurate—and untrue—to say that Packer's first short-story collection, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003), is not centrally concerned with race issues. To start with, most of her main characters and narrators are African-Americans living in the real world where skin color still carries important implications about what is "normal" and "legitimate" and what is not. Notice, for example, this brief conversation between black girl Doris Yates, the protagonist of the closing story in the collection, and her two white friends Olivia and Alice:

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They drove from St. Matthews to Germantown, covering the city. When they got to Newburg, Alice let out a long sigh. "I bought my dress for the Winter Dance," she said, turning to Livia. "It's a long satin sheath with roses on either side of the straps. The straps are that minty green color everyone's wearing, but the rest is one long flesh-colored sheath. Mama would die if she saw it, but what's bought is bought."

"Flesh colored?" Doris said.

"I know! Scandalous!"

"You mean, the color of your flesh?" Doris said.

"Well, who else's would it be?" Alice looked to Livia as if searching for a sane opinion.

"You mean *your* flesh color. And Livia's and Mr. Fott's. Not mine."

Alice stared at Doris. "For the love of heaven, it's just a word."

Livia said, "But why use the word if it's not accurate? It's simply not the color of everyone's flesh."

"Well, how should I say it? What should I say when describing it? Say, 'Oh, I bought a dress the color of everybody else's skin except Doris's'?"

"I'm not the only one."

"I could say it was a flesh-colored dress and everyone would know what I was talking about. Everyone would know exactly what I was talking about."

"I'm sure they would, Alice," Livia said. She laughed, high and free. "*Everyone* would."

Alice pinched her fingers together, as though holding a grain of salt. "It's those little things, Doris. Why do your people concentrate on all those little, itty-bitty things?" (253-254)

Dialogues such as this and expository passages, which do certainly dig deep into the kind of assumptions and prejudices often held by racialized mentalities in the South of the US and elsewhere, are

fairly common in Packer's collection. What seems new, on the other hand, is that her incursions into the topic are only rarely unaccompanied by other considerations about the characters involved—such as questions of class, sexual maturity, religious belief or level of education—which need to be kept in mind before passing any definite judgment on their positions and comments. Thus, Householder (2004) in a review for *Knot Magazine* observed that, although the book may be rightly classified as African-American literature due to its strong focus on the experiences of black people, “race may be only a surface difference in stories that pulse with a range of otherness, from age to religion to appearance.” This is clearly the case of the protagonist of “Doris is Coming,” who has to struggle against the complacency of her community and her religious pastor in order to be able to take a stance concerning the Civil Rights rallies in other areas of the country. Doris's “crusade” is by no means easy because she has to overcome the hurdles of her impoverished family, her own image as “a good girl in a smart class” and a neighborhood that offers little prospects of improving the lives of the African-Americans and new migrants which populate it:

It was true. Sister Forrester still kept chickens in her yard, and her brothers' friend Juny Monroe got every boy a mile around to play stickball in the street. The games lasted for hours. She could understand how, surrounded by televisions all day, one would be able to see the rest of the world was different from Fourth Street, prettier, more certain, full of laughter and dresses and men who wore hats not only when they went to church but when they went to work in offices and banks too. (261)

Generally, when one hears the catchphrase “diversity management”, the first image that comes to mind is that of a society compounding several ethnic or national groups that need to find ways to negotiate their cultural and identity differences in order to share some contended social and institutional spaces. Much of the literature dealing with this topic has centered on the type of rights and responsibilities that these human contingents should be given to reduce the possibility of upsetting the frequently unstable balance existing

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among them. Recently, however, two important difficulties have become evident in conceptualizing multicultural societies in this way. On the one hand, there is little question now that those different groups should *not* be conceived as uniform, with all their members sharing the same values and beliefs or pursuing similar goals. On the other hand, the idea of striving to find formulas or solutions that would be equally valid for all the individuals in a given group seems pointless, since each of them accumulates experiences and feelings that are rarely comparable to each other's.

Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* exhibits a worldview that seems to be much more aware of the intra-group heterogeneity that one finds in sociological surveys and statistics that take divisions across ethnic lines into account. Not in vain, the reader meets in her stories an unusually diverse array of characters ranging from inner-city dwellers and African-American church ladies, to teachers of English, scholarship girls, and a weird group of young expatriates stuck jobless in Japan. While it is a fact that many of these characters are African-American women "who have more than a few tough decisions to make or lessons to learn" (Schneider, 2003), they often interact with persons belonging to other races, social ranks, nationalities, religious denominations or sexual orientations. No wonder, then, that given the complexity of these interactions, many of her heroines are invaded by a kind of bewilderment when they discover that they cannot be much satisfied with the outcomes of their brave behaviors. In Toni Fitzgerald's (2004) words, "Packer's very real, fairly troubled protagonists share the feeling of being out of place in their current environs, with dreams of something perhaps bigger and definitely better". But even those dreams of escaping from their present circumstances take such multifarious shapes that it would be impossible, as I noted above, to think of general solutions that would be effective in untangling their individual dilemmas.

Take, for instance, the tribulations of Dina in the title story of the collection. She is an honor-roll student at Yale who believes she can have things her own way, without the assistance of her classmates and counselors. The kind of dark and sardonic humor that she uses to set herself apart from the others gets her into trouble more than once. At one point in the story, though, there seems to be hope for Dina when she befriends and has a short-lived love affair with a Canadian student,

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Heidi, with whom she works for a while at the Saybrook dining hall as dishwasher. One winter night, after closing time, they decide to shower together in the dish room of the empty dining-hall:

I think I began to love Heidi that night in the dish room, but who is to say that I hadn't begun to love her the first time I met her? I sprayed her and sprayed her, and she turned over like a large beautiful dolphin, lolling about under the sun. (138)

Although Dina associates the confusion she feels with her inability to decide whether she has been fond of women all along, when Heidi's mother is diagnosed with cancer and Dina says something mean and inappropriate again, it becomes evident that her real problem lies much deeper in her nature. It is probably her "tiresome" psychiatrist, Dr. Raeburn, who comes closer to the mark when he accuses her of constantly making cruel and hurting comments that she does not really mean in order to alienate others:

"You're pretending," Dr. Raeburn said, not sage or professional, but a little shocked by the discovery, as if I'd been trying to hide a pack of his cigarettes behind my back.

"I'm pretending?" I shook my head. "All those years of psych grad," I said. "And to tell me *that*?"

"What I mean is that you construct stories about yourself and dish them out—one for you, one for you—" Here he re-enacted this process, showing me handing out lies as if they were apples.

"Pretending. I believe the professional name for it might be denial," I said. "Are you calling me gay?"

He pursed his lips noncommittally, then finally said, "No, Dina. I don't think you're gay." (143)

Although the reader feels a bit disoriented initially by the conviction of the doctor's reassessment, we look back on everything we have read about the protagonist in the story and begin to realize that her life has always been plagued with lies and evasions that have driven

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away the people she truly loved. In the last couple of paragraphs of the story, Dina ends up wishing that in a future time “you always have a chance to catch the groceries before they fall; your words can always be rewound and erased, rewritten and revised” (146-147). Yet, it is unclear whether this reflection signifies that she has learned a lesson from her past mistakes or it is just another evasion from the kind of pressures that her failed family background, sexual difference, and significant intelligence keep imposing on her.

Like Dina, most of the other characters in Packer’s short fiction cannot be sure which layer of their identity is causing them to fall into the distressing and oppressive conditions that they have to learn to cope with. In some instances, we partly come to see that their grievances may be connected with their obsession with religious righteousness—as is the case of Sister Clareese Mitchell in “Every Tongue Shall Confess”—or with the idea of taking revenge on the “Caucasian” race for the verbal abuses that black Americans have historically suffered—as do the girls in a Brownie troop at Camp Crescendo near Atlanta in “Brownies”. Nevertheless, these obsessions and the reactions they trigger are further complicated in Packer’s stories by other components that will eventually redistribute our attention among a whole range of obscure forces which make the dénouements of the tales fairly unpredictable. David Abrams (2003) has remarked that “In each story, startling revelations lie in wait for us, crouching in the pages ahead, waiting for the well-timed moment to leap out at us, claws extended”. Such a moment of revelation happens, for example, in “Brownies” when the “racialized counterattack” that the protagonist and her friends have planned to inflict on a group of white girls—by accusing them of having called one of them “nigger”—backfires on them as they realize that their intended victims are mentally retarded:

That was to be expected, that they’d deny the whole thing. What I hadn’t expected was *the voice* in which the denial was said. The girl sounded as though her tongue were caught in her mouth. “That’s a BAD word!” the girl continued. “We don’t say BAD words!” (23)

Although the white counselor admits that some of their “*delayed learners*” may have used the N word, it is clear that they did so as a result of their echolalic condition, *i.e.*, their tendency to repeat whichever word they hear, like an echo. Mrs. Margolin, the black troop’s counselor, promises that her girls are going to apologize for the incident and “when their parents find out, everyone a them will be on punishment”. One could argue that “Brownies” is a moral tale about the unexpected and ironic consequences of some sort of “reverse racism”. Still, in David Isaacson’s (2004) opinion, “What makes this story memorable is the fact that Z.Z. Packer cares for all of her characters, adult and adolescent, white and black, and has the shrewdness to tell us a very intriguing story making us feel the uniqueness of each character before we generalize and discuss its moral”. Indeed, one of the major achievements of Packer’s collection is that each of the chapters resists the kind of easy interpretation and integration that we are accustomed to in much African-American fiction and “they disturb us in a peculiar, a distinctive and distinctly non-novelistic way” (Hanson, 1989: 24).

It could be argued that the reason for the open quality and apparent ambivalence in *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* derives directly from the very brevity of the form of the short story. Nevertheless, the reader comes to realize that these qualities are intimately related to the kind of power that words and “images” are given in short pieces in which they become pregnant with connotations that generally transcend their mimetic and explicatory function. According to Abrams (2003), this is precisely the feature that most clearly distinguishes this writer’s work:

Nothing is wasted in a ZZ Packer story; every word relentlessly moves the reader forward to climaxes that sometimes leave us dangling in mid-air and sometimes bring us crashing down with, in the case of “Our Lady of Peace,” three final, devastating words: “C’mon. *Make me.*”

Concision and precision serve perfectly the author’s two fundamental aims: to represent the richness and variety of her characters’ lives in all their complexity and to stir the reader’s imagination by using elliptical structures which compel us to look for

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new meanings. In “Geese,” for instance, we follow the accelerated downfall of a group of international young people, who find themselves stranded in Japan, unable to find jobs that will allow them to supply for their most basic needs. The protagonist, an African-American girl, came to the country with “the all-knowing arrogance of youth” (233), only to discover that the loveliness that she had associated with the exotic place is not all that different from the harsh conditions that she had experienced during her growing-up years in Baltimore. Eventually, she is driven to hunger and prostitution, but still she fails to see the irony in her unwise decision to travel to a foreign land for rather vague and never well-thought-out reasons: “[...] a feeling, a nebulous fluffy thing that had started in her chest, spread over her heart like a fog” (211). Like some of the other stories, “Geese” also closes on a drolly sardonic note *à la* Flannery O’Connor as the protagonist recalls how outrageous the kind of step that she had taken recently would have seemed to her only a few years before:

The book told of kamikaze pilots, flying off to their suicide missions. How each scrap-metal plane and each rickety engine could barely stand the pressures of altitude, how each plane was allotted just enough fuel for its one-way trip. The pilots had made a pledge to the emperor, and they’d kept their promises. She remembered how she’d marveled when she’d read it, amazed that anyone would do such a thing; how—in the all-knowing arrogance of youth—she’d been certain that given the same circumstances, she would have done something different. (233)

There is something seriocomic about these characters’ inability to understand the sharp —yet often ambiguous— spiritual message that their stories send. But this moral message is there primarily for the reader to grasp, of course.

In her collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, ZZ Packer succeeds in producing a work of fiction that transcends and enlarges most of the paradigms used so far to study plots and characters in texts by Black women —*e.g.*, suspended/ assimilated/ emergent (see Washington,

1982: 108-117). She manages to do so by keeping a strong grip on the reality of contemporary African-American people and by using productively the short-story form in order to make the readers sympathize with their tough circumstances. As Kennedy (1995: xiv) has explained in regard to these collections by ethnic writers, they “often affirm the ongoing sense of community”, in spite of their more precarious attachment to particular localities. Furthermore, this form serves very well the author’s purposes in the sense that she can represent in her narrators’ sharp and sometimes fiery voices the full force of their individualism, anxieties, ambitions, and, quite frequently, their overwhelming disappointments. Jean Thompson (2003) wrote in *The New York Times* that “Packer’s prose supplies plenty of the edge and energy that we expect from contemporary fiction. The people in the eight stories here form a constellation of young, [mostly] black experience”. As Toni C. Bambara or James A. McPherson have done before, Packer brings into her fiction such a variety of voices and life stories that the reader is discouraged from believing that s/he can easily apply her/his earlier knowledge to the analysis of these poignant and highly moving tales. We are compelled, instead, to invent a new grammar and vocabulary to deal with narratives that often challenge our expectations of what being different really means.

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