

ZZ PACKER'S DRINKING COFFEE ELSEWHERE: A SERIOUS ATTEMPT AT REPRESENTING THE DIVERSITY OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE^{1 2}

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Abstract: Racial and ethnic minority writers have only rarely paid any attention to the in-group diversity that one habitually finds in sociological surveys and statistics that classify results according to racial categories. ZZ Packer's collection of short stories *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003) presents us with a set of mostly African-American female characters who, despite sharing the overt difference of their skin color, reveal a much wider range of "otherness" or alterity as they have to grapple with the boundaries that age, class, education, religion or family background mark out for them. The aim of this article is to show how Packer succeeds in transcending many of the age-old archetypes often used to analyze characters in texts by black women writers—e.g., the conjurer, the fallen woman, the freedom-fighter, etc.

Keywords: African-American literature, short story, ZZ Packer, social categories, diversity, archetypes and stereotypes.

Título en español: *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* de ZZ Packer: Un intento de representar con rigor la diversidad de la experiencia afroamericana

Resumen: Los escritores pertenecientes a distintas minorías étnicas solo prestan atención en contadas ocasiones a la enorme diversidad que se observa en las estadísticas y estudios sociológicos dentro de cada grupo. La recopilación de relatos *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003) de ZZ Packer nos muestra las experiencias de jóvenes afro-americanas que, además de compartir el rasgo distintivo del color de su piel, tienen que luchar también con las barreras impuestas por otros tipos de "alteridad" ligada a su edad, clase social, educación o religión. El objetivo principal de este artículo es demostrar que la autora consigue trascender en sus relatos los ya clásicos arquetipos que se utilizan para estudiar a los personajes femeninos en este tipo de ficción, tales como el de la hechicera, la mujer descarriada, la activista, etc.

Palabras clave: Literatura afro-americana, relato corto, ZZ Packer, categorías sociales, diversidad, arquetipos y estereotipos.

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The themes, hypotheses, and images used to explicate the experiences of Black women have not been significantly altered in the past forty years. As a result of the stagnant nature of the literature in this area, the beginning student might hastily yet erroneously conclude that the story of Black women in America is one which is uninteresting and outworn. Therefore, there is no point in delving for more insight into the dynamics of this situation.

Patricia B. Scott, "Debunking Sapphire"

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*

INTRODUCTION

One of the major difficulties faced by writers of color in North America is to find new narrative forms that successfully resist and subvert the thematic patterns and archetypes that have historically gained centrality in a heavily racialized society. At the same time, this difficulty is further complicated by the countless instances of ethnic forgetting and denial that have managed to erase almost completely entire human groups from history and culture. For this reason, according to some scholars, most minority writers have considered it to be their responsibility to let those suppressed memories of the past give shape to their narrative structures—invisibility, suspension, emergence, etc.—and to preserve the key images of men and women who underwent those trying experiences (Cf. SINGH 1994: 19-25). There is little doubt that this process of revisiting and revising the past carries significant advantages for underprivileged groups, since it contributes decisively to helping them gain control over their present lives and their future. Nevertheless, one also needs to admit that two serious handicaps may come hand in hand with this obsessively revisionist exercise. To begin with, as Patricia Scott notes in the first epigraph above, it may straitjacket whole human groups and narrative situations into a handful of easily recognizable archetypes and patterns outside which their existence does not seem to have much significance (SCOTT 1982: 86). On the other hand, this exercise also tends to raise a number of expectations in the reader—ethnic or otherwise—that may make their plots look predictable, if not utterly boring. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the first aims that theorists of African-American, Native or Chicano literature should set for themselves is to classify the "canonical works" in each tradition as belonging to particular sub-genres (e.g., slave narratives, oral storytelling, trickster tales) and to label their heroes and heroines as either submerged, suspended, assimilated or emergent individuals (See WASHINGTON 1982: 212-15).

Henry L. Gates and other well-known critics have claimed that there is no doubt that this self-conscious exercise of historical (re)cognition should help future writers to find a voice that does justice to their often-forgotten cultural heritage and also responds to the aesthetic and ethical concerns of contemporary readers (GATES 1992: 22-31). While broadly agreeing with this opinion, I still contend in this article that there are some dangers to be considered in writing under the shadow of traditions that, often unwarily, have perpetuated

a number of narrative patterns and ethnic archetypes of limited relevance to the present-day writer. Rather than dwelling upon the undesirable effects that the above-mentioned process has had on the fiction of some recent minority authors, I have decided to focus on a young African-American woman writer, ZZ Packer, whose debut stories represent a clear departure from what most scholars would consider of as the main “sine-qua-nons” in Black literature to date. In line with some of the arguments held by theorists such as Thomas Sowell or Werner Sollors (1994; 1986), Packer seems to be more interested in how race and ethnicity intersect with other social roles and categorizations to define individual identities.³ This broader conceptualization of individual and collective identities will, I hope, make even more evident the type of potential that are being wasted simply because writers submit to assumptions inherited from the past and fail to bring into narrative new dimensions that are playing a key part in determining the future of the race.

1. AFRICAN-AMERICAN ISSUES AND BEYOND

When asked in an interview for *identitytheory.com* how she would describe herself as a writer, Packer complained that she did not feel comfortable at all with the idea of being identified as a black writer who writes solely for a black audience. And she added that people wrongly assume that this is the case because they tend to think that race will inevitably 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.” (BIRNBAUM 2003)

In spite of this claim for a kind of fiction that pays closer attention to aspects that are shared by all human beings—falling in love, feeling confused, etc.—, it would be inaccurate to say that Packer's first short story collection, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003), is not centrally concerned with race relations. To start with, most of her main characters and narrators are young African-American women living in the real world, where skin color still carries much weight regarding what is perceived as “normal” and “legitimate” and what is not. In the closing story of the collection, for example, the protagonist is a black girl, Doris Yates, who finds herself caught between the highly religious community she belongs to and the white world she comes into contact with through her schooling at Central High and her mother's work as a maid for a Jewish family. At the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1962, this is not the easiest place to be and some of Doris's conversations with her two white friends, Olivia and Alice, are fraught with the kind of uneasiness and tensions that were becoming widespread in American society:

³ Sollors and Sowell have been arguing, for over two decades now, that ethnic belonging is not just a question of descent but is also dependent on the individual's wish and willingness to belong. Drifting away from primordialist and essentialist conceptions of ethnicity and race, they have advocated for a constructivist conception that gives paramount importance to the individual's free will and aspirations.

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?" (253-54)

Exchanges such as this and expository passages, which certainly dig deep into the assumptions and prejudices frequently held by racialized mentalities in the South of the United States and elsewhere, are quite recurrent in Packer's collection. But, on the other hand, what seems less conventional is that her incursions into this topic are very rarely unaccompanied by other important considerations regarding the characters involved—such as issues of social class, sexual orientation, religious belief or level of education—which need to be closely examined before any definite judgment can be passed on their views and comments. In this regard, Householder noted in a review of the collection that, although the book may be classified under the category of African-American literature due to its main 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" (HOUSEHOLDER 2004). This is obviously the case of the protagonist of "Doris is Coming," who has to struggle against the complacency of her community and the narrow-mindedness of her pastor in order to be able to take a stance concerning the Civil Rights rallies taking place in other parts of the country. As mentioned earlier on, Doris's "crusade" is by no means easy because she has to get rid of the ballast of her impoverished family, her own self-image as "a good girl in a smart class" at school, and a neighborhood that offers little prospects of improving the lives of African-Americans and new immigrants. Notice, for instance, Doris's thoughts regarding her neighbor, the old Lithuanian Stutz, who owns a store of "Fine Appliances and Televisions," and who, like her, is aware of the limited horizons that their social milieu offers them:

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 we hear today the catchphrase "diversity management", the first idea that comes to our minds is that of a society compounding several ethnic or nationality groups that need to find ways to accommodate their cultural and identity differences in order to share peacefully some contended social 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 among them (See BANTING y KYMLICKA 2008). However, two important difficulties have become clear in these last two decades in attempts to conceptualizing multicultural societies in this way. On the one hand, it is quite evident that those different groups should *not* be conceived as homogeneous wholes, with all their members sharing the same values and beliefs or pursuing some common goals. On the other hand, hoping to find formulas and solutions that would be equally useful for all the individuals in a particular group seems now quite pointless, since each of them has gone through experiences and developed feelings that are rarely comparable to those of others. Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* reflects a worldview that seems to be more aware of the in-group heterogeneity that one finds in sociological surveys and census statistics representing the divisions across ethnic lines (Cf. PORTÉS y RUMBAUT 2001). Not in vain, the reader meets a highly diverse array of characters in her stories, ranging from inner-city dwellers and African-American church ladies to teachers of English, scholarship girls, and a group of once-idealistic expatriates stuck jobless in Japan.⁴ While it is a fact that many of these characters are young African-American women "who have more than a few tough decisions to make or lessons to learn" (SCHNEIDER 2003), they often interact with individuals belonging to other races, social ranks, age groups, nationalities, religions or sexual orientations.

It is little wonder, then, that given the complexity of these interactions, many of Packer's heroines are invaded by a feeling of anxiety and frustration when they find that they cannot be very satisfied with the outcomes of their generally brave behavior. As Toni Fitzgerald has explained, "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" (FITZGERALD 2004). But even those dreams of escaping from their present circumstances take such multifarious forms in their highly diverse environs that it would be impossible, as I suggested above, to think of general solutions that would be equally effective in untangling their individual dilemmas.

⁴ This high degree of diversity in the type of characters that Packer incorporates into her fiction was one of the aspects of the collection that reviewers most often underlined and thought particularly praiseworthy. See, for instance, Householder (2003) or Isaacson (2004).

Consider, 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 always have things her own way and who rejects the assistance offered by her classmates and counselors. The kind of dark and sarcastic humor that she uses as a strategy to set herself apart from the others gets her into trouble—even with the Dean of her school—more than once throughout the narrative. At one point in the story, however, there seems to be hope for Dina when she befriends and has a short-lived romance with a Canadian student, Heidi, with whom she works as a dishwasher for some time at the Saybrook Dining Hall. One winter night, after closing time, they decide to stay behind 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)

Dina associates the confusion she experiences about her feelings toward her friend with her inability to decide whether she has always been fond of women, but when Heidi's mother is diagnosed with terminal cancer and Dina says something inappropriate and mean again, it becomes apparent that her real problem lies deeper in her nature. In fact, although she would find it difficult to admit it, her dysfunction is not related solely either to her race or her sexual orientation. It is probably her "tiresome shrink," Dr. Raeburn, who comes closer to the mark when he accuses her of pretending that she is not affected by others' problems—and that she is insensitive to them—in order not to get emotionally involved:

"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 bewildered at first by the psychiatrist's unexpected reassessment of the case, s/he is likely to look back on everything s/he has read about the protagonist throughout the story and begin to realize that Dina's life has always been packed with evasion and lies that have driven away the people she truly loved. In the last couple of paragraphs of the story, she goes back in her mind to an episode in her adolescence when she had not allowed a kind boy "wearing nice shoes" to help her with her groceries and to walk her home, since she did not want him to see where she lived. Dina ends up wishing that in some 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" (146-47).

Yet, it is unclear whether this reflection signifies that she has learned the lesson from her past—and more recent—mistakes or it is just another evasion from the kind of pressures that her disadvantaged family background, outstanding intelligence, and uncertain sexual orientation keep putting on her.

2. IN-GROUP HETEROGENEITY AND SHORT-STORY FORM

Like Dina, the majority of the other characters in Packer's short fiction cannot be quite sure of which specific layer(s) of their identity leads them into the distressing situations that they are faced 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, whose “holy” life is infiltrated by God himself, speaking through an old blues musician, 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 in the case of the girls in a Scout troop at Camp Crescendo near Atlanta in “Brownies”. Nevertheless, these obsessions and the kind of behavior they occasion are further complicated in Packer's stories by other identity elements that will eventually redistribute our attention among a whole range of obscure forces that make the denouements of the tales fairly unpredictable. As David Abrams has remarked in a review of the book, “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” (ABRAMS 2003).⁵ Such a moment of epiphany occurs, for example, in “Brownies” when the “racialized counterattack” that the narrator, “Snot” (Laurel), 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 of Brownie Troop 909 admits that some of their “*delayed learners*” may have used the N word, it is clear that, if they did so, it was as a result of their echolalic condition—i.e., their tendency to repeat whatever word they hear, like an echo, even if they do not know its meaning. 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” (25). It could logically be argued that “Brownies” is a moral tale about the unexpected and ironic consequences of some sort of “reverse racism.” Still, in Isaacson's opinion, “what makes this story memorable is the fact that ZZ Packer cares for all of her characters, adult and adolescent, white and black, and has the shrewdness to

⁵ The surprise endings and unexpected twists that the stories take in the closing stages has also been an element frequently highlighted by commentators as endowing her fiction with a special kind of wit and wisdom. Some of them have compared her with the masters in the use of these techniques: O'Henry, Joyce, and O'Connor.

tell us a very intriguing story making us feel the uniqueness of each character before we generalize and discuss its moral" (ISAACSON 2004). Indeed, one of the major achievements of Packer's collection is that each of the stories resists the kind of easy interpretation and integration into a tradition that we are used to in much African-American fiction. The stories display such a wide spectrum of themes, narrative entanglements, and idiosyncratic personalities that "they disturb us in a peculiar, a distinctive and distinctly non-novelistic way" (HANSON 1989: 24).

One might argue that the reason for the open quality and apparent ambiguity in *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* derives directly from the very conciseness of the form of the short story. Still, readers soon realize that those qualities are intimately connected with the kind of power that words and details acquire in short pieces in which they become pregnant with connotations that transcend the mimetic and explanatory function that they usually serve in longer works of fiction. According to Abrams, this is precisely the feature that most clearly distinguishes Packer's writing as, in order to fully appreciate the impact of the stories' denouements, we must pay attention to the antecedents that have brought the characters to face their tough decisions:

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.*" (ABRAMS 2003)

Concision and precision serve perfectly the author's two fundamental aims: to represent the richness and diversity of her characters' existence in all their complexity and to stir the reader's response by including some incomplete structures that entice us to look for new meanings. Clare Hanson claims that "ellisions and gaps within a text offer special occasions for the workings of the reader's imagination, offer space for the work of that image-making faculty which would otherwise lie dormant: the reader's desire is thus allowed, or rather invited, to enter the text" (HANSON 1989: 25). Stories such as "Our Lady of Peace," in which a new schoolteacher snaps on her drive home after she realizes that she had failed to give adequate support and advice to one of her students, or "The Ant of the Self," in which a teenage debate-team champion picks his father up from prison, for the thousandth time, and feels compelled to drive him to Washington D.C. to the Million Man March in 1995, only to see how their relationship degenerates even further, are illuminating examples of the mesmerizing power of Packer's writing, which is at its best when her firm grasp on each of her characters' psyches becomes evident.⁶ Here is the debate champ reflecting on a fight he had with his foolish father:

[...] I tell myself that it's good that Ray Bivens Jr. and I fought. Most people think that you find something that matters, something that's worth fighting for, and if necessary you fight. But it must be the fighting, I tell myself, that decides what matters, even

⁶ Although it is a fact that Packer seems to be especially fond of catching the moments of anxiety and despondency in her characters' minds, there are also brighter passages in which we are briefly permitted to see what their hopes and dreams are.

if you're left on the sidewalk to discover that what you thought mattered means nothing after all. (114)

"Geese" is in all likelihood the story in which we see issues of race almost totally displaced by more general human concerns—solidarity, hunger, homesickness or sexual relations—that, in a way, permit the writer to deal with emotions and affections in a more vivid manner. In this story, we follow the downward spiral of a group of international young people who find themselves stranded in Japan and unexpectedly unable to find the jobs that will allow them to supply their most basic needs. The protagonist, Dina, an African-American girl, came to the country "in the hopes of making a pile of money" (210), only to discover that the insular nation—which she had believed to be full of ceremony, delicacy, and "loveliness" (211)—is not so different from the harsh environment that she had experienced during her growing-up years in Baltimore. Eventually, Dina is driven to starvation, violence, 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 in the collection, this one also closes on a drolly sardonic note *à la* Flannery O'Connor, as the protagonist recalls how outrageous the kind of move that she has just made by becoming a sex worker 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)

In stories such as "Geese" and "Speaking in Tongues," in which a 14-year-old girl runs away from her stern great-aunt only to receive a rougher kind of "parenting" from some hustlers in Atlanta, there is something comic-pathetic in these characters' inability to understand the sharp—yet often ambiguous—spiritual message that their experiences send to them. Owing sometimes to their overconfidence and other times to their innocence, they fail to see how their assumptions and ideals are totally at odds with the new contexts into which their adventures bring them. But, of course, the moral ideas to be deduced from these compact narratives are primarily targeted at the reader, and not so much at the characters themselves.

3. CLOSING REMARKS

In her collection of short stories *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, ZZ Packer manages to put together a work of fiction that transcends and challenges most of the paradigms used so far to study the narrative plots and characterization in texts by Black women writers (See WASHINGTON 1982: 212-16). She succeeds in doing so by keeping a strong grip on the

reality of contemporary young African-American people in urban contexts, and by using productively the short-story form in order to make the readers, alternatively, reprobate some of their actions and sympathize with their difficult circumstances. In Gerald Kennedy's opinion, these collections by minority writers have the added value of coming to "affirm the ongoing sense of community," although it is also true that their attachment to particular localities is growing precarious in our increasingly globalized world (KENNEDY 1995: xiv). Furthermore, the short-story form serves very well the author's purposes in the sense that she is able to represent in her narrators' crisp and sometimes fiery voices the full force of their individualism, anxieties, ambitions, and, quite frequently, their overwhelming disappointments.

Jean Thompson remarked 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, black experience" (THOMPSON 2003). Like Toni C. Bambara or James A. McPherson had done in their stories in the last decades of the 20th century, Packer brings into her fiction such a variety of voices and life stories that the reader is led to doubt that s/he can easily apply her/his earlier knowledge to the analysis of these poignant and highly moving tales. We are compelled 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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