

ORALITY AND OTHER SOUTHERN ASPECTS IN ZZ PACKER'S SHORT STORIES

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“Maybe stories are my time and place, Mom. You know. My time and place to say things I need to say...

The entire affair's symbolic. Heavy with meaning not weight. You know. Like metaphors. Like words interchanged as if they have no weight or too much weight, as if words are never required to bear more than they can stand. As if words, when we're finished mucking with them, go back to just being words” (John Edgar Wideman’s “Weight,” 2000).

John Edgar Wideman’s 2001 awarded short story “Weight” narrates the suffering that writing entails, linking the death of a mother to the act of creation.⁷⁴ For other Afro-American authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, James Alan McPherson, Nikki Giovanni, as well as for Morrison, Wright or Wideman, the act of writing surpasses its mere communicative purpose to get to a more complete, substantial and meaningful “mode” whose true goal is the espousing of their racial, social, political and religious causes.⁷⁵

For instance, Cade Bambara’s stories show writing as an essential way “to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me,” “to make revolution irresistible” and to confront the experiences of Afro-American

⁷⁴ The story called “Weight,” published in *Callaboo* and written by John Edgar Wideman won the first prize in the O. Henry Awards for short stories in year 2000.

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes in his first book *Writing Degree Zero (Le Degré Zero de L'Écriture)* sets up before his turn towards Marxism the different modes of writing/“l’écriture:” writing as revolution, writing as healing, and writing as pain.

women, for example, in *The Salt Eaters* (1980)⁷⁶. In addition, playwright Alice Childress defines writing as “an act of defiance” (1984:111).⁷⁷ Alice Walker masterly portrays those Afro-American women in her collections *In Love and Trouble* (1974) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1982). In her “womanist” universe, she reflects the creative process of writing as a kind of suffering, a kind of violent act whose function, again, is to prepare the eyes of the people for the tragedies of the modern world as it can happen in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998). In the same way, James Baldwin, as radical as Walker, uses writing as a tool to harangue Black people in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). And furthermore, Maya Angelou's autobiographical writings represent the personal and the racial entwined in an expositive function.

Indeed, those authors' endeavour is to spread not only their literary message but also their moral and social legacy to the heart of the people and their minds; a message truly meant to endure. They tend to achieve this aim by two different methods that sometimes converge: first, by means of a quite sharp and frequent violent narration filled with realism, focussing not only on the words but also on the tone of the speech; and second, as ZZ Packer definitely does, by unearthing and strengthening the oral component of the short story. In the last decade, ZZ Packer, whose understated writing focuses more on the personal and on the individual as a picture of what happens in her community and not so much on the activist form of demand, uses writing to research on people's behaviour, on the nature of our acts and on our permanent fragility.

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere (2003),⁷⁸ the acclaimed eight-story collection by the Afro-American writer ZZ Packer (b. 1973), has been defined as “the old-time religion of story telling.”⁷⁹ Race, religion, history, autobiography and irony are significant aspects in Packer's writings and inherent to the aspect of orality that is being emphasized on with this research. However, it is precisely that aspect of “telling” which is the most relevant for us and one of Mrs. Packer's most distinctive characteristics in her writings. Packer's works attain their highest level if they are told; they recuperate the “old-time” “spirit” of telling. Her stories are to be told rather than to be read; something which from a 21st

⁷⁶ In the following line the meaning of stories refers not only to the short narratives of the writers mentioned but also their novels.

⁷⁷ Childress' opinion, as well as some other opinions from Afro-American women writers in this research, appeared in the book *Black Women Writers: 1950-1980*, compiled and edited by Mari Evans in 1984. Future references to the edition of Evans' book and the writer's statements will be given numerically together with the year of publication. In the case of Childress' sentence (1984:111).

⁷⁸ *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003). Subsequent references to this edition will be given in parenthesis.

⁷⁹ Jean Thompson in *The New York Review of Books*, 16th of March, 2003 (late ed.):7.

century perspective makes Packer's literature surprisingly unusual, fresh, modern and even original. This is why in the present paper we shall be analysing the characteristics of this revisited oral component in Packer's short stories as well as how the issues exposed are provoked by the direct influence of that "orality," which, at the same time, correspond to the issue of the whole southern tradition.

The oral component of the short story that is inherent in its essence and tradition is, according to Professor Charles E. May (1995:1) "the primal task." Throughout its history, this oral element was its distinctive feature from the very beginning, while in what we can call the modern short story, the oral mode tends to perform a secondary role.⁸⁰ The reason for the change in this perspective was the rising importance of the text and the never-ending advancement of the new technologies. At this point, we can recall Edgar Allan Poe's consideration on the short story extent half way through 19th century when he stated the necessity of a story to be read "at one sitting" (1977:552) for the sake of the unity of impression, statement that we understand as an intimate, individual and personal process involving mainly reader and text, which surely means reading rather than telling.

Nowadays, ZZ Packer recovers with her writings the "telling" part of the short story tradition, and in a fast and direct language she tells the reader touchable stories which show common people situations and whose main goal is to illustrate something beyond an activist position or a violent defence of the damages of the past and, simultaneously, "to elicit emotions from the reader." Her idea is to enter the reader's mind through feelings instead of activism. In our opinion, Packer, as Morrison, tries to incorporate into her fiction elements that "are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well" (1984:341). This idea from Morrison's speech is taken further away by Packer. Therefore, somehow, Packer is a qualified representative of what Walter Ong called "second orality," which means orality in a text culture after the primary orality without the existence of written language. Although it is obvious that we live in a text culture, she takes sides for telling rather than for reading; she becomes "the hunter" image that Brooks and Warren used to illustrate the beginning of fiction in *Understanding Fiction*. ZZ Packer becomes the image of a "relieved" hunter telling the rest of the clan about "the events of the hunt,"

⁸⁰ For a definition of the modern short story and its consequences, see Allen's *The Modern Short Story in English* (1982).

and further on, his knowledge, the history of the clan or the future necessities of the group, although centuries later.⁸¹

From our point of view, for ZZ Packer *writing is telling*, which, after all, is one of the major aspects of storytelling. The striking oral mode in Packer's stories transforms the triad writer-play-reader into a distinctive one: speaker-tale-listener; she is the speaker and she really writes as she speaks, the tales are her own words and the reader is the listener present in a face to face exercise. This much closer relationship enhances communication, closeness, intimacy and predisposition for mutual understanding. This trustworthy experience between writer and reader opens up a wide field for the appearance of several features in the writer's universe. Because of this proximity, because of this personal reunion, her literature comprises human experiences expressed and narrated outspokenly with quite a straightforward language and a characteristic high degree of irony.

Her direct and sometimes satirical stories are about individuals fighting in all directions: in "Brownies" young black girls confront a peculiar group of white girls at Camp Crescendo. In "Our lady of Peace," the problem of a new teacher teaching in quite an odd and complicated place. She is so extenuated, that she feels unable to keep on. In a story full of symbolism, she tries to rule the class and the students in a never-ending fight for power. In "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere," the title story, we find the fight again between a white and a black girl trying to make sense of their relationship. In "The Ant of the Self" the fight is between a getting-out-of-jail- father and his son, who had picked him up from jail and how this road-movie ends in a demonstration in Washington in order to sell birds. Undoubtedly, the human relationships cover a larger part of Packer's stories, all of which are heavily laden with irony and show an excellent taste in the choice of characters.

Of all those compiled stories, "Every Tongue Shall Confess" is surely the most evident example of that immediacy and that spoken feature (which obviously becomes more indisputable if you hear the story in the voice of the author). The starting point of the story shows an Afro-American choir-singer girl attending a mass service in her congregation. Her story, as all Packer's are, is a story of fight, fight for and against. In this case, it is a fight against a situation, against a tradition, against oneself, against male-chauvinism but, most of all, a fight against oblivion, against being alone. This time the fight does not involve white people but the authority of the priest of her church. Despite its

⁸¹ As a starting point to their book, and to their first chapter "Intentions and Elements of fictions," Warren and Brooks recreate the birth of fiction when the cave men "recounted the events of the hunt; he recounted the past history of the tribe; he narrated the deeds of heroes and men cunning; he told of marvels; he struggled the myths to explain the world and fate; he glorified himself in daydreams converted to narrative"(1979:1).

drama, the irony covers the opening of the story when the narrator makes the reader aware of Clareese Mitchell's "monthly womanly troubles." The direct language, the drawn out sentences, the absence of full stops and the constant repetitions of elements, especially, the constant repetition of the long name of the Congregation, together with the irony and the drama mentioned before, make up a story more to be told than to be read, as can be seen in the following quotation:

"AS PASTOR EVERETT MADE the announcements that began the service, Clareese Mitchell stood with her choir members, knowing that once again she had to Persevere, put on the Strong Armor of God, the Breastplate of Righteousness, but she was having her monthly womanly troubles and all she wanted to do was the curse the Brothers' Church Council of Greater Christ Emmanuel Pentecostal Church of the Fire Baptised, who'd decided that the seminar had to wear *white* every Missionary Sunday, which was, of course, the day of the month when her womanly troubles were always at absolute worst! And to think that the Brothers' Church Council of Greater Christ Emmanuel Pentecostal Church of the Fire Baptised had been the first place she'd looked for guidance and companionship nearly ten years ago when her Aunt Alma had fallen ill. And why not? They were God-fearing, churchgoing men... (2003:32-33).

Packer's stories are full of oral elements that reach their real and most complete meaning when told. Throughout the story there are words like *white*, which in exclamations and in italics make the written words somehow pronounced. Sentences like, "She would never forget-never, never, never- the day he came to the hospital where she worked" (2003:33) or "He'd said he was concerned about her spiritual well-being-Liar!"(2003:33), improve the sense and significance of the story if being told. Apart from the previous notes on the orality of the text, there is another formal aspect which provides evidence on this matter: a great amount of verbs of diction and reported language, as it definitely happens, for example, in stories by Eudora Welty, mainly in her outstanding "Why I live at the P.O." (1941).⁸² If we think of "Why I live at the P.O.," we will see how this feature is widely used as in the following quotation:

"Uncle Rondo!" I says. "I didn't know who that was! Where are you going?"

"Sister," he says, "get out of my way, I'm poisoned."

"If you're poisoned stay away from Papa-Daddy," I says. "Keep out of the hammock. Papa-Daddy will certainly beat you on the head if you come within forty miles of him. He thinks I deliberately said he ought to cut off his

⁸² Many stories take advantage of the traditional use of the reported language and the verbs of diction. We would like also to mention here Ernest J.Gaines' story "The Sky is Grey" as another remarkable use of the mentioned elements.

beard after he got me the P.O., and I've told him and told him and told him, and he acts like he just don't hear me. Papa-Daddy must of gone stone deaf.' "He picked a fine day to do it then," says Uncle Rondo, and before you could say "Jack Robinson" flew out in the yard (1998:59).

Verbs of diction, constant reported language, italicised words and expressions, apart from the insisting satiric element, together with a quite redundant and "participatory" language are the main features for ZZ Packer to reach the perfection in the oral element of her short stories. Furthermore, the previously mentioned proximity given by this oral component, carries with it confidence and understanding, providing the perfect atmosphere for confiding, and therefore, for a more intimate version of the writer-speaker/reader-listener phenomenon. The first moment of this new confiding quality brings about the appearance of stories which involve the writer's self, her autobiography. However, regarding autobiography and experience, we think it is relevant to note that even though ZZ Packer was born in Chicago and her stories are set in different places of the United States where she has lived or, at least, she has travelled to, we note from the very first lines southern reminiscences in her literature.⁸³ There are several aspects in her writings that distil the scent of the south, not only in her descriptions, in the construction of her characters but also in the topics she works on. It may seem strange to admit that a native from Chicago could be considered a southern writer, but this is precisely such a case. First, as it is known at the beginning of what it is called southern or regionalist literature the writer was supposed to have been born there as one of the requirements. However, there are many examples of writers who have been included into this group and who were not born in the region, for example, Mark Twain (1835-1910). He was not born in the south (Missouri did not belong during the Civil War) but he may be considered a southern writer after his extraordinary pieces on the area, especially the magnificent *Life in the Mississippi* (1893) or *Huckleberry Finn* (1894). And, according to William Andrews in the preface to his study on the American South, "what makes a southerner these days, and by implication what would qualify as southern literature in this post-modern era, is less a matter of birth or origin or even lived experience, than of liberate affiliation, attitude and that elusive quality known today as "voice" (Andrews 1997:xvi).

Talking about experience, voice and attitude, we find Maya Angelou's digression on childhood, experience and place in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. She says that the answer to the question of what makes a Southern town different from the rest is

⁸³ In fact, Mrs. Packer admitted to us that her life in the south was "both professionally and personally relevant for her" in conversations that took place last October 2004.

the experience shared between the unknowing majority (it) and the knowing minority (you). All of unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town and answered there. Heroes and bogey men, values and dislikes, are first encountered and labelled in that early environment. In later years they change faces, places and maybe races, tactics, intensities and goals, but beneath those penetrable masks they wear forever the stocking-capped faces of childhood. (1984:19)

If there is one literary tradition where the oral component has been kept as a treasure through the centuries, that is the southern one. Their particular history, the social characteristics of the region, the slavery and the blues determined the stories to be told and transferred from generation to generation, from parents to sons. They would start by telling about their suffering and their living experiences, which is, in other words, the very core of all their drama, and they would continue telling stories meant to be understood as moral examples. Because of these innate features of the south, a very personal and intimate connection to place and time, the social aspect, the race, the religion, autobiography and a special taste and inertia for oral storytelling are indivisible matters knitted together. Toni Morrison emphasizes on this aspect when she says that "If anything I do in the way of writing novels or whatever I write, isn't about the village or the community or about you, that isn't about anything"(1984:339). And this is particularly true about Packer's literature, which she makes obvious by means of a sophisticated narrative technique. This technique illustrates two other relevant facets: attitude and experience. Indeed, Packer's contribution to this regionalist literature is all about "Voice," "Experience," and a deeply rooted connection to the "Place." She grew up in the South and from the age of six to eleven she lived in places such as Atlanta or Louisville. The fact of defining Packer's stories as "southern" emphasizes this literary tradition that favours and involves: "an ear for the cadences of oral storytelling" that has "traditionally been cited as the signature of a southern writer" (Andrews 1997:xvii).

The representation of all these classical and traditional elements of the south are illustrated in the story called "Brownies." The story really reminds one of the first episodes of *I Know why the caged bird sings*.⁸⁴ There are similar elements of fighting and enmity in both stories. In "Brownies," we can primarily feel the confrontation of various worlds, another "fight" we mentioned before: Black against whites, sane against insane, husband against wife, religious against not religious. The plot of the story has its starting point in misunderstandings. In a camping site, a group of black girls are in a fighting

⁸⁴ We refer here to the passage when young Maya accounts the way her grandma dealt with the powhitetrash children and the feeling they provoked when coming to the store and nearby (1984: 26-32).

mood towards a group of whites who behaved oddly towards them. One of the Brownies, the Black group of young girls, heard that someone of the Troop 909, the white girls, had called them “niggers” and that was enough for a whole strategy for revenge. Meanwhile, a waterfall of southern topics invade the lines of the story. First, religion, when in the Brownies group they are led to sing religious songs and to pray and, furthermore, we are told that, for the group leader, to be the leader was like a gift of God. Then, revenge; it is not possible for the Brownies to let the white girls go ahead without a punishment and they organize a kind of secret meeting to organize the plan. Obviously, race — “Nobody” Octavia said “call us niggers” (2003:5)— ; such a statement is what is present from the very first lines, this kind of confrontation or fight in order to gain space and authority, and why not, power. And finally, the sense of place —Camp Crescendo, a camping site in the south— and black/white confrontation elements, again, that make this story a good example of a southern story in the most classical Flannery O’Connor tradition, including, as it could not fail to do, the moral aspect: nothing is like it seems and you have to be careful when judging others.

Although the south invades the atmosphere in ZZ Packer’s stories, her settings vary as her characters move and the action progresses; the action goes from Baltimore to Indiana to Chicago or to New Orleans, they travel as the author and the characters do. Her stories escape from the cotton fields and the industrialized world and move to a camp or a church, places which seem isolated from the rest of the world; they cannot be considered as typical and traditional southern places, although they contain stories and characters that exemplify and develop southern topics. However, PLACE, as a literary concept, certainly plays a fundamental, defining and explanatory role in the theory of Eudora Welty. But in the stories of ZZ Packer it merely plays a secondary role. As the setting is changeable, we talk of it in the sense of COMMUNITY and RACE more than in the sense of LOCAL REGIONAL AREAS. In her chosen place, the author talks about race, identity, religion, and human issues which have always been southern and universal human concerns. These are the two most important points in Packer’s stories: identity and human relationships and their interconnexions, mainly among the blacks in conflict or communion with the whites. Topics which show what Bradley said about Alice Walker “the struggle of black women against both racism and the violence of patriarchal society.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ David Bradley. "Alice Walker: Telling the Black Woman's Story." *New York Times Magazine*. 8 January 1984:25-37.

Time is quite a remarkable feature in Packer's stories. In most of Packer's stories the aspect of time and its function is not what could be considered strictly "lineal." It might be in the sense that all of them follow an organized system with a few flashbacks. However, we could define this relevant characteristic in the writer's narrative as "sequential." The narration develops in perfectly set sequences which are evident and form part of the formal structure that divides and organizes the events into episodes or stages. The best example is the story called "Every tongue shall confess" in which we are witnesses, spectators and attendants to a mass. The formal structure of the story is conceived following the different parts of the homily, from the greetings, to the liturgy, to the testimony service, on to the sermon, up to the farewell of the parishioners, while in the process of skipping back and forth through the different parts of the religious service, character and action unfold in parallel to the mass with the help of the previously mentioned flashbacks, which, indeed, provide the intra-history of the tale. In the same way, the relationship between a father and a son takes stages as their travel takes them from a state prison to Washington D.C. in "The Ant of the Self." They started their trip from Louisville, Kentucky to Indiana. They stopped at Jasper and then more than 700 miles to get to Washington D.C. The time of the story is organized by the stages the story takes; somehow it is organized like those cycling tours from one city to another, and then, the next day to another. This sequential or stage vision of time becomes a truly symbolic action due to the fact that the relationship between father and son evolves as the trip goes on. Their feelings and interests grow and change as fast as the car moves through the country roads. Every stage of the way provides a new phenomenon in this peculiar way of understanding human nature.

As it has been said, oral story telling, as a natural way of southern communication, is a major aspect in Packer's stories. This feature provokes the subsequent appearance of other major themes such as the mentioned autobiography, race, religion or history. We believe, as many writers and critics do, that every writer finally writes, tells, about what he knows best. We believe that the most habitual, the most common issue is oneself. Autobiography, in our opinion, and as we stated in *Ficción y Realidad en la Obra de Truman Capote* (2003), it is not a matter of names and exact days, it deals with a life experience of a writer, in this case, with references to people we once met, a place we visited or a story that happened to a friend or something we witnessed and attracted our attention, etc... We understand autobiography as any character, any situation, any anecdote, any fact, any thing that, in a way, belongs to the life of the writer.

Professor Selwyn R. Cudjoe mentions that "Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American

literary pursuits” (1984:6). We think that autobiography is a natural process for every writer, especially for those southern writers who, really, to get their aim, must be tellers of the best they know about, their life, their race or their religion and we think this is precisely what invades Packer’s stories and what somehow she recognizes first, when in the last quotation she mentions that one way or another she lies behind the story and secondly, when she says referring to the title story that “I was working with these characters who I knew intimately- which is not to say that there are people like that, or I am one of the characters and somebody else is another character or anything like that- but this particular states that I was just incredibly close to. I think it’s really hard to write anything that’s close to you, in that- and that sort of closeness has nothing to do with autobiography or how autobiographical it is.”⁸⁶

It is not our aim to research which parts of Packer’s narrative can or cannot be considered as autobiographical. However, it is necessary to mention that autobiography understood as described previously is definitely present in her stories as a natural, consequent and necessary exercise of confiding what that oral storytelling embraces. The coincidences of place where she lived or visited, the coincidences, as she recognizes, of the personality of the characters, the closeness to the reality in the situation and in the thought and ideas expressed are just some samples of the pieces which will eventually form the jigsaw of Packer’s life. For these reasons, as a domino effect, the acceptance of the previously studied “orality,” the acceptance of her southern essence together with the acceptance of her existence behind characters and stories provoke the appearance of topics like race and religion, in a double sense: first, as general topics of a community and second, as the result of the very personal, individual and intimate experience of a writer.

“Should whites write about blacks?” “Of course I feel you should write about anybody you want to write about, I couldn’t care less who you write about. But what very often happens is that, when you’re writing about a culture that’s not your own, you may hit large areas of it, but there are so many areas that you miss.”⁸⁷

In this sense, in a recent interview Mrs. Packer insisted on this point when saying that “the stories are definitely going to be influenced by the fact that I am black. I mean those stories wouldn’t have been written if I had been white.”

⁸⁶ From a radio interview with Michael Schirrefs on April, 3rd, 2005 in the programme *Books and Writing* on Radio National, Australia.

⁸⁷ Roger Sutton in “Threads in Our Cultural Fabric” *School Library Journal* 40:6 (1994):26.

However, as she explained later, she exclusively “concentrates on the characters and what are the circumstances and motivation and what do they what.”⁸⁸

Formally and practically, the reader knows what to expect in Packer's stories right at the very beginning when she quotes Alex Haley in *Roots* (1976) in the following way: “Join me in the hope that this story of our people can help to alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners” (719). Haley's quotation inevitably reminds us of Zora Neale Hurston when she cries “people, my people” and we acknowledge the importance and the relevance of such a quotation in that there is a link, a parallelism between “this story of our people” and what we can call “these stories of Packer's people.” Just before the beginning of the stories we cannot be blind about the main theme in Packer's universe and that is to construct a kind of “general story” on the actual, modern situation of Afro-American people, especially, on the current situation of Afro-American women in the United States of America. What the reader finds in the lines of the book *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* is a catalogue of how hard life is for Packer's people, that is, young girls in Brownies, teenagers in “Speaking in Tongues,” youngsters about to be adults in “The Ant of the Self,” students and teachers burdens in “Our lady of Peace,” men and women, adults and some ill in “Every Tongue shall confess,” etc...Packer belongs to that new generation of storytellers who try, as Malcolm Bradbury (1992:393) says, “to deal with the present and rewrite the meanings of the past.”

These characters and these stories are grounded on the traditional burdens of the south and the black community, that is, man power, racism, the different, the grotesque, the religious, the moral, the learning, teaching and preaching. Her stories reminds us of Terry McMillan's study of the interrelation of black people as in *A Dollar More*, and also reminds us of Maya Angelou's sacrifices and autobiographical features in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. However, and although she feels some “kind of motherhood from Alice Walker” in the sense of writing about the racist problems of black women, she refuses to pull off all the rage and violence that Walker examines in, for example, *The Color Purple*, or in a different way in the shocking *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Her stories deal with the daily troubles of the Black population, especially women; they talk of real down to earth people who have their place in History.

Although she venerates the works of Toni Morrison, her stories do not talk of magic realism, which may appear in Morrison's or Walker's stories. Packer's

⁸⁸ Interview with Roger Birnbaum in April 2003 and appeared online on Identitytheory.com.

stories represent a map of the present situation of racism and, at the same time, male aggression in every day life in the context of the twenty first century, for instance, as it happens in “Speaking in tongues” when a young girl leaves her community in order to seek for her mother in Atlanta. After a series of mishaps, the girl is molested by a man called Dezi. The girl’s trip more than a trip for hope is a trip to inferno. Not only she has to live in a Whites world but also she has to stand the pressure of her own race-men.

Race is there from the first to the last story like a permanent character and the landscape where the stories get their whole meaning. Race understood as community is in her writing, as well. However, it is noticeable the change in the treatment of this topic in her literary universe. Packer’s race live together with the white community: she complains that we are living in a white world and that black people has a mechanism of defence living in that white world but she never gets black and white in conflict, they confront them but they never make them fight in fact as we can see in the title story, at the end, they need each other to get an ideal sense of the world. In “Brownies,” for example, the narrator/author says that “When you lived in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: real and existing but rarely seen or thought about” (2003:5). In the lines following the last quotation, there is a nice description of Atlanta, it reminds and somehow enriches the one made in *A man in full* by Tom Wolfe. Once an again the fact of young ladies or a commentator/narrator /author living in Atlanta makes the perspective of the text at least, personal, if not biographical.

It is in the same story, “Brownies,” the writer marks the boundaries of their blackness come with the celebration of Langston Hughes Day a respected and admired icons of black culture. But these symptoms of positive culture representation do not stop, do not avoid, the feeling of revenge growing in their veins. In fact, one of the characters, Arnetta, one of the brownies, insists and infuriates the rest of the group saying, “We can’t let them go away with that. We can’t let them get away with calling us niggers. I say we teach them a lesson.” Like in a war film they prepare strategy and they decide to pull their plan off in the toilet, whose description by the way is excellent. “We were, it seemed, inside a whale, viewing the ribs of the roof of its mouth.”(2003:14).

Provided that ZZ Packer is definitely behind the descriptions of her characters, and that somehow her autobiography appears in her stories, the very fact of religion cannot be eluded. She was born, as she recalls in *Lost in Religion*, in “a family of evangelical tradition” (her mother was a black evangelical Christian). She grew up as most Southerners under the “powerful” influence of religion. She insists on the relevance of this point in an interview to

Lynnee Gore when she admitted that “(her) grandmother and (her) mother grew up in the church, so it couldn’t help but be a powerful influence. I became a witness as well as a participant. I admire churches that understand that people need to first exist and not be impoverished, instead of preaching fire and brimstone.”⁸⁹ It is therefore not strange to note that her stories are full with religious significance and together they make a portrait of evangelical America.

Flannery O’Connor and the American critic Alfred Kazin talked largely in their criticism of the relevant joint between religion and the south. In this sense, the latter considered religion not only a way of life but also, and most importantly, “the most traditional form of southern community.” Thus, this connexion we are talking about is permanently present in Packer’s stories. The church where Packer’s characters live is really “the one place where blacks could actually feel human,” like the mentioned Clareese Mitchell, who went to church not to feel alone, to find “guidance and companionship” and supposedly to feel better. At the same time, the church where Packer’s characters live is “a place of healing where people lick their wounds.” However, all these positive aspects of living in a church has in the stories a kind of drawback and that is the solid hierarchical unavoidable system close to authoritarianism as shown in the same “Every Tongue shall confess” in the figure of Pastor Everett, whose influence and leadership goes further than the morally acceptable to become a sinner.

However, her characters need of this church and attend to it, like this Clarisse that attends Sunday Service as usual, or like Tia and Marcelle, the two friends, discuss after Sunday schools, as taken from Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*, and while waiting for Morning service to start and in a very symbolic way one of these girls escapes and looks for a mother, not for a father, or when Lynnea enters in “Our lady of Peace.” Symbolism is part of this way of communicating religion in the words of Packer. It is quite ironic to talk to God by mobile phone. It is said that it is positive to speak to God, to pray, that the moment or the place is irrelevant, that the most positive thing to be done is to communicate with him. In “Every tongue shall confess,” which is a song and which is another way of communication, the sermon is about mobile phones and if God phone’s us, It is said that the representation of God can be notorious in many ways but not very frequently it has been affirmed that God could use the mobile phone in order to communicate with us, which means something quite important: God is like one of us, and if he wants to communicate in the twenty first century, he is not going to come from a flame or whatever, he will do it directly like from human to human.

⁸⁹ Words from an interview with Lynnee Gore appeared in the *Black Issues Book Review Online* in the March-April number, 2003.

Packer's comparisons and metaphors are quite strong and meaningful and relevant in order to understand her ideas. We cannot forget at this point, how in *Brownies* there is a song which says that without God "life is like doughnuts, it has a hole." In the writer's words: "I'm drawn to mentally flawed characters and intrigued by the notion of what a person internalises, and how a person doesn't see one's position in the larger world. Like Baldwin, much of that comes from a double consciousness being raised African American in the church, as well as within the larger community of America."⁹⁰

Talking about America and History, Packer does not, at least, initially take History as the core of her short stories (she does not even make a reference to social movements of the past if we except in "The Ant of the Self") and does not directly blame slavery for the oppression that her characters must feel: characters that feel the constriction and isolation of race from white men and women, and that at the same time, feel the pressure of male-chauvinism from black men and fatherhood. All the drama that we could sense in Packer's narrative is not strange to the funny side of it. The more dramatic the situation is the funnier, it may seem. History really takes a part in "The Ant of the Self" with the story of a father and a son and the million person march, the leader like Farrakhan are behind and movements like the Black Panthers are the setting for this story that symbolises that past part that Malcolm Bradbury talked before about.

ZZ Packer, in conclusion, in her stories calls us readers to join her on a trip that needs faith and understanding and truth. She calls us to be her ears and her confidants and, in doing so, listen and learn from her experience and that of her characters about the human condition and how thin the line that supports the human relationships is. Although we live in the era of computing and we have stories and testimonies kept in different formats, Packer prefers to keep loyal to her roots and transmits her stories so as to have a more intimate intellectual encounter with her readers, as if they were stories to be shared, to be lived. If so, in this trustworthy experience, she would take advantage of this feature in order to provide her autobiography, her racial perspective, her religious beliefs and her ironic comments on life and history. A satisfactory communion with us readers that, otherwise, could not have taken place so intensively, so purely.

⁹⁰Ibid.

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