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## **The Case of Otherness in Young American Prose — on the Distinctness, Multiculturalism and Ethnical Problems in Selected Short Novels from the Collection of Stories *Granta 97* — *Best of Young American Novelists 2***

In the present essay I would like to consider the cases of otherness, multiculturalism and ethnicity as presented in selected short stories gathered in the Polish edition of the collection of stories published by Granta in 2007 — *Best of Young American Novelists 2*. The Polish edition was published in 2008. The collection consists of twenty-one works carefully selected by a six-member jury chaired by Ian Jack. One-third of the authors was born or raised in countries other than the United States (Russia, China, Peru, India, Nigeria, Thailand). Through the prism of the three works (by authors: Nell Freudenberger, Uzodinma Iweala and Jess Row) I would like to look at the notion of diversity and at the concept of the Other.

It seems that what characterized the previous editions of Granta's series ("Americanism" and the issues of social classes as a source of tensions) is replaced with ethnicity, migration, distinctness and multiculturalism seen as a source of both interest and uncertainty. Invoking theorists like Tzvetan Todorov, Emanuel Levinas, Wai-Chee Dimock, Gilles Gunn, Edward Said and others I am going to examine the ways in which both writers and their characters perceive a multicultural world and how they treat diversity — not just religious or ethnic, but also sexual and mental. I would also like to prove that the young generation of American writers (all of the writers are under the age of forty-five) has quite a fair sense of creating plausible images of what bothers and inspires modern American society<sup>1</sup>.

Firstly, it is essential to clarify the concepts which stand behind these words: the

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<sup>1</sup> All of the translations from the Polish language done by the author (unless stated otherwise).

Other and otherness. In this matter it seems most reasonable to point to the origin of these two concepts. Levinas treats the Other as an external cultural construct to us which reveals itself/himself during a face-to-face meeting with *I*. But it is not a shocking negation of the self, but rather the addendum to our being and interiority — as Levinas puts it: “primordial phenomenon of gentleness”<sup>2</sup>. Elsewhere the philosopher adds: “To approach the other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the *I*, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity”<sup>3</sup>. This idea of infinity states as the foundation of ethics and humanism. The relation with the Other is an ethical relation. Why does Levinas treat this face-to-face meeting with a stranger as the fundamental ethical value and what do we risk in rejecting this foundation? His answer is unequivocal and telling: “The other is the only being whose negation can be declared only as total: a murder. The other is the only being *I* can want to kill. [...] At the very moment when my power to kill is realized, the other has escaped. [...] To be in relation with the other face to face — is to be unable to kill”<sup>4</sup>. To avoid killing we shall not consider otherness as a threat to our interiority. What is even more important, the Other does not have a capacity to murder the living being. Levinas believes that

the interiority that, to thinking being, is opposed to exteriority, plays itself out in the living being as an absence of exteriority. The identity of a living being throughout its history contains nothing mysterious: the living being is essentially the Same, the Same determining every Other, without Other ever determining the Same. If the Other did determine it — if exteriority collided with what lives — it would kill instinctive being. The living being lives beneath the sign of liberty or death<sup>5</sup>.

As I understand it, Levinas claims that internalizing of exteriority cannot change the core of identity of *I* — and what follows — it might only open endless ways towards accepting the otherness of the Other. The otherness is therefore understood as a quality of being different, other and as the source of responsibility which comes true only within the moment of meeting (dialogue).

How, then, is the issue of distinctness presented and depicted in the discussed collection? How do the authors describe the relations between the Other, otherness and nativeness? And why do they still try to pertain to these matters whereas — from the outside — it seems that America is able to derive great energy from multiculturalism? To fully address the analyzed content I would like to use a very meaningful thought about the American society as a whole. According to Benja-

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<sup>2</sup> E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by A. Lingis, Pittsburgh 2011, [http://chungsoolee.com/files/Totality\\_and\\_Infinity\\_Whole\\_book\\_Word\\_PDF\\_2012-03-14.pdf](http://chungsoolee.com/files/Totality_and_Infinity_Whole_book_Word_PDF_2012-03-14.pdf), p. 150, accessed: 14.03.2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> E. Levinas, *Entre nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by M. Smith, B. Harshav, New York 1998, pp. 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

min Demott, Americans suffer from a distinctive, though by no means exclusively American, form of *myopia*. They are strongly committed to the ideal of personal self-fulfillment and it goes together with an equally strong counter desire to achieve a oneness of identity with other people. He argues that these are the two sides of the same coin. "Both represent a rejection of the idea that the realization of humanness, whether for oneself alone or for an entire group, »depends«, as he put it, »upon my capacity and my desire to make real to myself the inward life, the subjective reality of the lives that are lived beyond me«"<sup>6</sup>. Do the authors and their characters also reject this ethical dialogue as a source of creating individual identity? To put it chronologically, I will analyze each of the stories in the order in which they appear in the collection.

Freudenberger was born in 1975 in New York and graduated from Harvard. Her story — *Where East Meets West* — is a description of a few days and events in the life of Tabby Buell (she is the protagonist and narrator). She is a retired Latin language teacher, living alone in the suburbs. It seems that she leads a pretty good life — Tabby has got a spacious house and hires a personal nurse (Afro-American Serene). Her former student — George — is a frequent guest in her apartment. He is married to a young woman from Bangladesh — Amina. The young immigrant is looking for a job — she was an English language teacher in her hometown. During the first meeting with Amina Tabby shows no major scruples while speaking with George's partner. She does not have to go out of her way with any sarcasm or to offend her guest. However, following her thoughts we discover that the concept of the Other resonates somehow with her way of thinking. She lets it out when she notices Amina's dark skin colour (which, in combination with a dark space, awakens a little anxiety) and when she thinks of Amina's ascertainment about Tabby's father: "Does she consider white men as good-looking?". After Amina's leaving Tabby explains to Serene that George literally "resourced her from the Internet", from the webpage: Asianladies:WhereEastmeetWest.com. After the moment she adds: "When we were moving here with Frank, this part of Rochester was only white". However, the crucial point in Buell's way of thinking about the otherness seems to be presented in her next thought-monologue, which follows:

Meryl [Tabby's daughter] is teaching in a public school in New York, and I know from Helen [granddaughter] that majority of the students are either Black or Latin. Meryl cannot even pronounce it: she uses this "new language" or she dissembles that she does not notice somebody's skin colour. I have told her once that there were two students in the first class which I had been teaching those days [...] and she looked at me with such a dread as she would have had some attack or something like menstrual cramps. [...] Sometimes I wonder how we succeeded on our way from racial segregation — which, despite my granddaughter's thoughts, I have never supported — to ignoring the fact that something like a race exists. As we all have Alzheimer.

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<sup>6</sup> G. Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness. Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination*, New York 1979, pp. 175–176.

This passage seems to be key to understanding the protagonist's approach towards racial issues. Since her words about Meryl, who does not speak about ethnic matters at all or with reluctance using a "new language", are a proof that American society have not dealt fully with the otherness-treatment problem as something which you may freely talk about. This "new language" is definitely not Levinas' dialogue — it seems to be rather the language of political correctness, devoid of deeper reflection which treats a very important matter in a highly superficial way. It is enough to quote perhaps the most memorable statement of the French thinker to grasp the problem with this "new language": „Positively, we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities on this regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me. [...] I am responsible for his very responsibility”<sup>7</sup>. The problem of "new language" is therefore a lack of accountability — where there is no real dialogue there can be no question of taking responsibility. Tabby seems to present quite a rational view, saying that it is impossible to abandon certain categories of thought in describing what is external to me, but the effort of taking responsibility is worth doing so. The "new language" does not want to notice it — instead it attempts to marginalise the matter of otherness, thus trivializing it and *de facto* ignoring it.

As the story goes on, the old woman is trying to get to know and understand the existence of otherness. She accepts George and Amina as her guests and she eats with them some Indian dish. At some point she even decides to conceal the truth from George and she conceals a young girl's trickery with an alleged letter from Bangladesh (the letter refers to a permission for taking a driving course). Tabby is even able to accept a relationship between her granddaughter and Samaj, who turns out to be an extremely successful visitor from India. Despite the fact that she does not want them to sleep together in her house during their stay, there are two meaningful scenes in which we can trace some signs of her willingness and capabilities of understanding the Other. The first is the situation when Tabby cannot fall asleep, she goes down and finds Samaj working on her computer. Instead of scolding him, she wants him to show her how to use the computer. When they are watching and commenting the Asianladies webpage together they summarize its value with a common word "disgusting". Secondly, during the first moments of the meeting we follow Tabby's impression about Samaj: "Instead I looked at Samaj and something flashed between us, probably nothing friendly, but for sure something of a kind of understanding, as between the two prisoners in the same cell". Levinas accurately notes that

Our relation with him [the Other] certainly consists in wanting to understand him, but this relation exceeds the confines of understanding. Not only because, besides curiosity, knowledge of the other also demands sympathy or love, ways of being that are different from impassive

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<sup>7</sup> H. Corvellec, *An Endless Responsibility for Justice — For a Levinasian Approach to Managerial Ethics*, <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/management/documents/research/research-units/cppe/conference-pdfs/levinas/corvellec.pdf>, accessed: 22.02.2011.

contemplation, but also because, in our relation to the other, the latter does not affect us by means of a concept. The other is a being and counts as such<sup>8</sup>.

Interestingly, it is Tabby who manages to convince Samaj to marry her granddaughter, on which he had some doubts. There is also one great metaphor of understanding the distinctness. At some point of the story Amina is curiously looking out Tabby's house window as she would want to understand, to cross the boundaries, to reach beyond *self*.

It seems, therefore, that the heroes of Freudenberger's story, as it develops, are trying to gain reciprocal trust. We cannot forget that sometimes Tabby expresses some doubts and she does not want to forget about visible ethnical and cultural differences, but anyway the Other might become a source of curiosity, sometimes understanding or even deriving the energy. It evokes what Gilles Gunn wrote about literary trends in American prose which have appeared throughout its development. He argues that American writers have tended to imagine the experience of the Other or otherness in three characteristic modes corresponding with three different episodes from the American history. The crucial one — in this case — is the third mode, which finds its reflection in the contemporary literature. It is called "irregular metaphysics" and it assumes that to fully response to the experience of otherness, to this liminal phase, one has to reverse oneself through the Other — to take its energy, courage, even identify with the other's reality<sup>9</sup>.

Iweala was born in Washington in a Nigerian family in 1982. He graduated from Harvard in 2004. *Dance Cadaverous* is a short story about a young black-skinned boy named Daven (he is the narrator), his family and his dead Chinese friend Zhou. Daven bemoans the loss of the best friend, who died in a car accident while he was under the influence of alcohol. Zhou was born in the United States, but he did not know his home-country culture and language. The narrator of the story also reveals other secrets of a young foreigner — he was not loved by his parents, born as a child of Chinese prostitute, met by Zhou's father — Chavin — during his stay in the Chinese army. Right now he is a successful neurosurgeon, who is cheating on his wife all the time. In several chats with Daven Zhou, cited by the narrator, admits that his mother is not able to speak to him. He feels like a stranger, someone who cannot find his place in reality. A brief, but thought-provoking description of dysfunctional family is initially contrasted with the image of Daven's parents who are highly concerned about their son and care-taking. Nonetheless, as the story goes on, it turns out that they have to face an unexpected truth. Their son was supposed to have become a student of the prestigious Harvard, but — contrary to the parents' will — he chose Davenport. However, it is not the biggest blow. It occurs that Daven nursed some deeper feelings for Zhou. At a time of discovering the unpleasant truth, a young boy becomes the Other — in

<sup>8</sup> E. Levinas, *Entre nous*..., p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> G. Gunn, op. cit., pp. 206–207.

the eyes of his parents. Let me quote a very suggestive description which shows the transformation that has taken place in Daven's family:

The house is quiet. Mother does not have lectures, but she is editing some book and does not move out of her office. And me and dad? As soon as I show up in some room, he comes out of it, not even looking at me. Sometimes he hesitates, as if he wanted to say something, but then he collects the words and put them in his belly. I have the feeling that it grows with each day. If I pass him on the stairs, he draws in whistling breath and stops it, as if I exuded an unlikely smell, as if I was constantly surrounded by the cloud of stench.

In fact, one might even say that Daven is no longer the Other — he has become an alien. Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman underlines the difference between the Other and the alien, claiming that while the Other is someone who is not a stranger, because he bears the traits which I can discover in myself, then the alien is “a slimy substance, incurable disease demolishing the law and order, the most anomalous of anomalies, underspecified, and therefore dull”<sup>10</sup>. What is even more interesting, at first even Daven has some troubles accepting his apparent otherness and distinctness problems in general. He screams at his mother:

— I am not gay — interrupting her. — Daven — she says. — Can You listen for a moment? — Mother, I am not... — Isn't it enough hard to be black? — she postulates. — And be black and gay in addition? — I respond, imitating my mother for the first time in my life. — Daven — she says again. — I have studied the infection rate amongst black gays in our area. I mean, it is dangerous. — So, I will not be dating Blacks! — I scream.

In a latter conversation with his father during the travel, he says: “Listen, it was not like that. It was not just a boy. It was Zhou, dad. It could not have happened with any other person. It was something specific”. And although Daven seems to slowly understand the essence of something *else* in himself, he is not able to precisely describe the core of his feelings. Even at the end of the story, when he escapes the “blackmailing car race” with his father, he claims: “I want to tell him [Zhou] that I have a strong desire to regain my heterosexuality, but — in fact — I do not know If I lost it. If yes, then I do not know If I missed it so much. I want to tell him that he did not have to drift away that fast. I want to ask him what I shall do now”. It seems that Daven cannot make a clear distinction between what Ralph Waldo Emerson would call Me and Not-Me. Not-Me is undeniably his second nature which he is not able to fully grasp and accept.

That is not the way it works for Daven's father — he seems to be a one-dimensional character. Oppressive and narrow-minded, harsh and intolerant — he rejects the possibility of understanding otherness. Levinas underlines the idea that “the Other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the Other is inseparable from

<sup>10</sup> H. Gruchlik, *Inność a obcość w kontekście filozoficznym*, <http://www.anthropos.us.edu.pl/anthropos5/texty/gruchlik.htm>, accessed: 7.11.2008.



understanding the Other”<sup>11</sup>. The hero’s father puts strong psychological pressure on Daven, as he constantly highlights the fact that his son failed his expectations. There is no place for dialogue — there are only one-sided requirements. At some point even the father himself clearly explains his inability to fathom the whole situation and — what follows — to understand his son’s distinctness: “What is wrong with you? Okay, you want to know what I think. I do not like it. I do not even understand how my child could do something like that. I do not get it, to hell! I am not going to hide the fact that it is sinful and abhorrent”.

The last of the analyzed stories is *The Answer* by Jess Row. He was born in 1974, in Washington, graduated from Yale and University of Michigan. The depicted events take place in Yale, in 1993. The hero is a young, not very sociable boy (also the narrator) of Jewish descent — Isaac, who shares his dormitory room with Michael and Jake. It is their first year at college. One of the new students is Rafael from Delaware, who is Muslim. Already in the first conversation between the characters we can trace some tensions connected with the ethnic and cultural differences. Isaac narrates: “He [Rafael] does not smile nor nod, he does not change his facial expression; his mouth is slightly open, he is waiting for my next words. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Michael’s and Jake’s symptomatic glances”. Then Rafael complains about the fact that he has to share one bathroom with girls. Jake responds about the Yale’s policy without understanding. But the crucial thing is his reaction to Rafael’s subsequent confession: “He [Rafael] puts his hand on his knees and looks at the grass between us. — I am Muslim. It is not proper. — Jake bites his lip, literally chews it, trying to control the laughter”. The reaction to the strangeness seems to be quite natural, though incongruous, as even Rafael himself does not feel comfortable with his identity. I stated “natural”, because this is the moment where the West meets the East and Jake’s laughter somehow symbolizes what Said’s *Orientalism* concluded — Western writing about the Orient shows it as a weak, irrational and feminized Other, as opposed to the masculine, rational and strong West.

After this not very successful meeting, Rafael develops closer relationship with Isaac. Young men meet quite frequently, they discuss and argue about a biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice and its Islamic version and a value of psychology in their lives. Already during these conversations Rafael unveils his determined world-outlook. In the story of Ibrahim’s sacrifice he sees the forecast of a primacy of the Islamic world over the Western civilization. When they discuss a matter of sympathy and manipulation in human relationships, he treats them as complete nonsense. However, what is much more important, it appears that Rafael is a member of The United Association of Young Muslims and he supports their programme of restoration of the Islamic world in a few countries (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia). Moreover, he claims that he is a former Catholic. At some point

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<sup>11</sup> E. Levinas, *Entre nous*..., p. 6.

he must have converted to Islam and it seems that this fact entirely changed his point of view. To the extent that he tries to stir up a sense of alienation in Isaac: “Because I see that you are not happy. You may think that this is your place. No — You feel strange here. No less than I do”. It seems that Rafael somehow “puts” himself into the role of the Other. It brings to mind what Tzvetan Todorov writes — referring mainly to the Islamic world — about the feeling of distinctness. He argues that all negative feelings — dispossession, frustration, powerlessness — which are experienced mainly by young men — combined with male pride and then tempted by religious prescriptions, might end up in the sense of humiliation and strong feeling of being the alien<sup>12</sup>. Rafael’s sense of alienation grows up with each conversation with Isaac and finds its climax in a soliloquy about America and the value of power:

America is the society which hate itself the most [...]. And why had all those white wealthy men decided to take these people whom then they have enslaved for four hundred years, flogged, murdered, humiliated and then they chose the best amongst them and gave them the tools to rule the country? [...] But the time will come and they will have to sign their own death warrant, and they are slowly realizing it. [...] Hatred is the fuel in an engine. The problem is how to use it. Hitler understood it. Us, people, we have to kill. We must hate somebody. We have it in our blood. [...] Hatred is the power. It seeks to be directed.

It seems that Rafael truly believes that mistakes from the past shall be still relevant. That the unremitting chain of hatred between the othernesses should last forever. He seems to misconceive the idea of a process of decreation, which is crucial in Gilles Gunn’s view about the essence of the Other. In order to form something of a completely new and different shape you have to kill yourself — metaphorically speaking<sup>13</sup>. This process has to be done in the spirit of dialogue — the *self* has to write himself from the beginning or even completely re-write himself after facing the Other, in order to fully understand not only the external identity, but the internal one as well. According to Todorov, if we refuse to take into consideration visions of the worlds that are different from ours, we will find ourselves cut off from human universality, and end up nearer the pole of barbarism<sup>14</sup>. And at the end of the story it turns out that this barbarism has its place in the contemporary world — Rafael changes his name to Mustafa Ali and dies in an unsuccessful bombing. Even though Isaac firmly rejects Rafael’s views, there is one disturbing description, which underlines or at least casts some doubt on his certainty. He narrates:

Rafael — I am thinking — it is impossible to fix this broken world. [...] I should call a taxi, drive to an airport, buy a ticket to Karachi and bring him back. In a better world our wishes would have a legal force. If I found the solution to escape this story, I would do that.

<sup>12</sup> T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians. Beyond the Clash of Civilizations*, trans. by A. Brown, Chicago-London 2010, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Gunn, op. cit., p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> See T. Todorov, op. cit., p. 34.



But I can only move forward to Phelps's Gate, towards the dark battlements shrouded in the shadow, because I have no place to go.

It sounds almost like admitting to being a stranger. Does Rafael really suffer from the feeling of dispossession at the end of the story? Has the meeting with extreme otherness changed his approach? It seems that he will not be the same human being as he was before.

I would like to start the summary with a response to the following question — why did I choose just three stories? The fact of the matter is that they appear to be the most representative among others. They touch upon the issues which find their reflections in contemporary public debate. Moreover, I assumed that presenting some stories in detail might actually serve as better help in deeper understanding of the matter. As I proved, the notion of otherness, the image of the Other, racial tensions and the problem of a successful multicultural policy are still highly important topics — especially in American prose (it seems that within the whole of the European Union as well). To better understand this phenomenon, let me quote Romain Gary's opinion: "The Americans cannot tolerate the idea of a problem without a solution. They are less than any other people capable of coexisting peacefully with any insoluble problems around and within them"<sup>15</sup>. By creating the plausible characters and giving them a voice, a group of young authors prove that people again and again have to fight with their weak human nature. The analyzed pieces of art also raise the fundamental question about the old Greek category *sensus communis* — can we speak about it in the contemporary world or is it no longer needed, as something rotten and old-fashioned? Does this cultural and mental category mean anything in our dispersed process of cognition? In one of his important works, Dimock asks questions about the nature of this phenomenon:

Is the *sensus communis* something constitutive, a unity antecedently given and binding its members at every level, unifying any individual judgment with the judgment of everyone else as a precondition? Or is the *sensus communis* merely regulative, not really a substratum at all, but much more tenuous, secured only through a negotiated give-and-take, with each judge appealing to a kind of species tribunal for validation?<sup>16</sup>.

It seems that literature is not able to give a definite answer and — what is even more important — the Other will remain the Other and will require responsibility and understanding.

<sup>15</sup> R. Gary, *Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid*, trans. S. Wilkins, G. Braziller, New York 1997 (cited by: T. Todorov, op. cit., p. 86).

<sup>16</sup> W.-Ch. Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time*, Princeton (N.J.) 2006, p. 112.

**The Case of Otherness in Young American Prose  
— on the Distinctness, Multiculturalism  
and Ethnical Problems in Selected Short Novels  
from the Collection of Stories *Granta 97* —  
*Best of Young American Novelists 2***

Summary

The article considers the cases of otherness, multiculturalism and ethnicity as presented in selected short stories gathered in the Polish edition of the collection of stories published by Granta in 2007 — *Best of Young American Novelists 2*. The collection consists of twenty-one works carefully selected by a six-member jury chaired by Ian Jack. Through the prism of three works (by authors: Nell Freudenberger, Uzodinma Iweala and Jess Row) the author highlights the notion of diversity and the concept of the Other. The analyzed pieces of literature show that ethnicity, migration, distinctness and multiculturalism are not only objects of the author's interest but they might also mirror the tensions in the modern American society. Invoking classical theorists of multiculturalism, the author sees the otherness as a source of both interest and uncertainty of literary heroes.