

# explorations



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## Revision of Ethnic Immigrant Fiction Patterns in *My New American Life* by Francine Prose

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**Abstract.** The paper discusses the changing role of ethnicity in immigrant narratives with the example of Francine Prose's novel *My New American Life* (2011). It is a multidimensional work of fiction which presents ethnicity as a cultural and social asset. The novel brings into play and revisits a tradition of the novel of manners. It uses American cultural and social stereotypes to tailor the main character's new identity of existential in-betweenness, and to represent the American realities of the Bush-Cheney era through the filter of the protagonist's perspective as a semi-legal alien of a suspicious ethnic background. The paper problematizes the geopolitical challenges of immigration that the novel's characters deal with in post-9/11 America. The article argues that in the novel, immigration is presented as a process with a distinct social dimension, prioritizing safety and welfare over the values of democracy and personal freedom.

**Key words:** migration narrative, ethnicity, novel of manners, assimilation, globalization

Critics sometimes compare Francine Prose with Marilynne Robinson and emphasize the importance of tradition in her writing (Myers 2010). *My New American Life* is a novel that offers a new reading of traditional patterns following the principle of "moral fiction," which Prose, like Robinson, follows. It is the only immigrant novel by Prose to date and a brilliant mock immigrant story about a young Albanian woman, Lula, who goes to the United States and stays there as an illegal alien. She works as a live-in nanny for Zeke, the teenage son of Mr. Stanley, in a comfortable suburban house in New Jersey. The action occurs in the post-9/11 era, a time of increased political and social tension, especially regarding immigration. When one day, three mysterious Albanian men arrive, asking Lula to hide a gun, she faces a moral and legal dilemma. She is balancing her loyalty to her old country and romantic attraction to one of the Albanians with the desire to secure her future in the U.S.

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All elements of character construction the writer brings into play – origin, age, gender, and social status – enhance and later shatter common ethnic and immigrant stereotypes. While Prose presents immigration as a social process that prioritizes safety and economic welfare over the abstract values of freedom and choice, the story of Lula's immigrant life encourages the reader to reconsider the idea of American democracy and openness.

Even though migration is not a new phenomenon, migrant writing is identified as one of the cultural products of globalization (Kosmalska 2022, 342). It is “imbued with a vision of cosmopolitan, transnational, hybrid society and the globalised world” (Kosmalska 2022, 345)<sup>1</sup>. Lula's emigration to the USA was a conscious choice. She did not want to live in totalitarian and patriarchal Albania and was sure that in America, she would become prosperous and happy: “Her country's love affair with America had begun with Woodrow Wilson, and Clinton and Bush had sealed the deal by bombing the Serbs and rescuing the Kosovar Albanians from Milosevic's death squads. Even at home she'd had her doubts about the streets paved with gold, but when she finally got to New York and started working at La Changita, the waitstaff had quickly straightened her out about the so-called land of opportunity. And yet for all the mixed feelings shared by waiters and busboys alike, the strongest emotion everyone felt was the desire to stay here” (Prose 2011, 4). An unusual background of Prose's protagonist is part of the plan: in an interview for the Paris Review, the writer admits that she chose the most exotic European country and the one American reader is likely to know the least as the place of her character's origin. She even visited Albania to understand the country's past and present atmosphere better: “If you are going to write a novel, I would not suggest that you pick an Albanian unless you are an Albanian. I was writing about immigration, and I wanted to pick someone from the most psycho-isolated Eastern-bloc country. If you go to the Czech Republic now, it is deceptively easy to forget what happened there. But if you go to Albania now, you are not going to forget it – you just can't; then is now” (La Force 2011). The depressing and far-reaching heritage of the totalitarian past, which any outsider will likely note, makes an Albanian character an unusual protagonist. Lula's ethnicity and origin determine the interpretive perspective and turn it into an asset to be traded in the political market. Naturally, a lack of knowledge about the country's history and culture makes the character an object of curiosity. Lula openly exploits American immigrant sentiments and scarce knowledge about her home country to evoke sympathy and receive a desired legal status in the USA:

Mister Stanley had to understand that in the part of Albania where Lula grew up, blood feuds still raged for generations. Revenges. Bride kidnappings. Their idea of courtship was still the fireman-carry and rape. Her Cousin George was involved in one such case. The couple holed up in a cave and the girl's relatives blocked the

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Kosmalska identifies features of migrant writing as follows: “the real-life nature of the writing (the story appears to have basis in real-life events and the author's first-hand experiences); creolization and multilingualism in the text; references to multiple cultures and/or geographic locations; impact of the Internet and online communication on the structure of the work; common themes and motifs (for example, locality *versus* globalism, community *versus* nation, exploration of belonging and identity issues, comparison of the home and host countries and cultures, living in a multicultural community, intercultural relationships, creation of new traditions and heritage, revision of gender roles and the like) (2022, 345).

mouth of the cave with stones, and the lovers suffocated. Lula thought it was smart to emigrate while she was several rungs down the hit list.

“Dear God,” said Mister Stanley.

So it really was his fault, falling for such a story. (Prose 2011, 19)

Like many others, this tale has little to do with reality: the barbarous tradition is ancient history; Lula’s actual cousin George is a successful Mercedes dealer in Tirana, while blood feuds nowadays are mainly about real estate. However, the stories with breathtaking plots let Lula manipulate the listeners, gaining their sympathy and evoking a desire to help.

Mister Stanley, Lula’s employer, understands Lula’s aspirations. He is a kind, supportive man who trusts and wishes to help the young woman. At the same time, Lula suspects that her Albanian origin may be an obstacle and a source of political and social problems that hinder her legalization in the USA. Therefore, she spins lies about herself, her family, and her country to make her look more reliable. Lula does it for the first time during her interview at the US Embassy and continues inventing family stories when she finally finds herself in the USA. During her interview in Tirana, she mentions her alleged Christmas wedding even though she is half-Muslim and, of course, there is no wedding planned. While the latter is just one of Lula’s innocent self-protective fictions, the former has political significance, which the character knows: “Muslim meant nothing in Communist post-Communist Albania. An American wouldn’t know that. Muslim meant Muslim to him” (Prose 2011, 17). With time, Lula became so used to making stories that she kept doing it, even in private communication.

New identity construction requires new tools; for Lula, storytelling is precisely the tool. Using her wit, imagination, and literary talent, Lula rewrites old folk Albanian tales, turning them into stories about present-day Albania, which is full of exotic conventions and ancient superstitions. Beautiful maidens imprisoned in castles, vampires, exotic magic fruit, blood feuds, and different barbarous conventions become characters and determine plot lines in her stories as Lula entwines legends, superstitions, “folkloric stuff, curses, and proverbs she found on Albanian online forums. She put in everything but the sound track of Albanian folk song” (Prose 2011, 24). Lula claims to be not only the author but also the protagonist who experienced all the horrors and perversities she is describing. In the stories Lula rewrites and remakes, an educated reader can trace allusions to the novels by the internationally recognized Albanian writer and poet Ismail Kadare. By the way, it is in New Jersey that she finally reads his books, and since they are accessible only in English translations, Lula imagines how they sound in Albanian. Thus, Prose creates a situation where a fragment of fictionalized Albanian culture and life translated into English is then translated back into the metaphorical mother tongue of Lula’s home culture. This reversal allows Lula to see how her origin and cultural peculiarity can be presented to others and the advantages they can generate. Kadare’s fiction and Albanian legends Lula knows very well are a source of ideas for her allegedly semi-autobiographical stories: “I’m writing a short story now. It’s about this government bureau that analyzes people’s dreams, and they’re on the lookout for any dreams that might indicate that someone is plotting against the state” (Prose 2011, 70). Of course, Lula’s listeners do not recognize the plot of this and other Kadare’s novels.

Lula is not interested in introducing the original culture of her home country to Mister Stanley, Don Settebello, or anyone else. Therefore, it is hard to agree with the

interpretation of her character as the ambassador of Albania (Olear 2011) because Albanian history and culture in the novel are essentially the product of her imagination. Lula's literary talent is another positive characteristic that should be included in her green card application form. Even though Lula is well aware of the unattractive sides of American life, her only aim is to legalize her stay in the USA.

According to Kosmalska's classification, *My New American Life* is an intercultural novel (the term proposed by Katie Petersen). Such novels

often translate natives to migrants and vice versa. Their writing is immersed in their native and host cultures, being a credible blend of two or more traditions. The permeation of one culture by another forces the writers to explore identity issues. In the very act of writing, the authors analyse and reformulate both their individual and group identities. Their investigations into identity construction help them invent new, alternative conceptions of home and belonging. What follows is that the authors of 'hyphenated', 'intercultural,' 'multicultural' texts disrupt the existing understanding of national literature. (2022, 337)

This way, they blend different cultures and change the understanding of the national but also invent alternative concepts of home and belonging (Kosmalska 2022, 337). The young woman knows that honest accounts of her Albanian life are too painful to be fascinating: "The true stories of her childhood were tales of grubby misery without the kick of romance, just suffering and more suffering, betrayal and petty greed. It was nicer to mine the mythical past. Wasn't that the Albanian way? Five minutes into a conversation, Albanians were telling you how they'd descended from the ancient Greeks. The Illyrians" (Prose 2011, 107). Lola's attitude toward her people and home country is a mixture of sorrow and irony, where the latter prevails. She transplants Albanian plots and prejudices onto American soil, skillfully using the American lack of knowledge about Albania as well as their condescending attitude towards her: "Mister Stanley and Don Settebello obviously believed that the laws of physics no longer applied when you crossed the Albanian border. It was fortunate that she'd mentioned mixing fiction and non-fiction. When she'd written enough for a book, they would sort it all out, but for now her two American guardian angels could think what they wanted about her pretending her stories were true" (Prose 2011, 186-187). Later, she will be astonished to discover that both of her American guardians were aware of her attempts to fool them. However, this will happen when Lula is ready to enter her truly independent American life. This discovery shakes a stereotypical opposition between an intelligent and cunning immigrant and a narrow-minded American host/ess who is excited enough not to notice being used and manipulated<sup>2</sup>.

Albania, as Lula's home country, is typically contrasted with her new country – America, but this contrast is neither nostalgic nor romantic. Her home country is corrupted, politically unstable, and criminally dangerous, which also affects people living there and even their appearance. A comparison of Albanian and American life, attitudes, and conventions in favor of the latter is another tool Lula uses to convince Mister Stanley

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Hemon often uses this opposition in his novels and stories about immigrants from former Yugoslavia (*The Lazarus Project*, *Nowhere Men*, and others).

and Don that she should stay in the USA and to persuade herself that America, no matter what, is the land of opportunities. The migrant narration of *My New American Life* acquires a distinct geopolitical dimension. Not only stories of illegal immigrants of different ethnic backgrounds persecuted by Homeland Security and deported by Immigration but also everyday multiethnicity and advantages of a more open and inclusive world the young woman notices and interiorizes as part of her new American life add to the novel's cultural patchwork and raise demand for liberal globalism, which will secure political and cultural openness of the world. Lula appreciates the ethnic restaurants she can go to in New York, "American" problems, like dyslexia, which no one in Albania would take seriously, a colorful socially, sexually, racially, and culturally mixed crowd she observes on the train, "American" relations between men and women – these many other more or less conspicuous details fill Lula with excitement and create a geopolitical plane of reference:

How appealing her fellow passengers looked in those ingenious vessels – their bodies! – so brilliantly designed to contain all their hopes and fears, their dreams and experiences.... She wanted to stay in this city with them, she wanted to have what they had. She wanted it all, the green card, the citizenship, the vote. The income taxes! The Constitutional rights. The two cars in the garage. The garage. The driver's license. The good sense to appreciate what Don and Mister Stanley were doing to help Lula belong to this crowded, overwhelmed, endlessly welcoming city, where sooner or later, like on the subway, someone would scoot over and make room. (Prose 2011, 54)

Lula's American sentiments, occasional excitement, and exhilaration sharply contrast with Mister Stanley's boredom with his life, Zeke's annoyance with American conventions, and Don Settebello's stories of his job first as an immigrant lawyer and later as a lawyer for the Guantanamo prisoners. At the same time, irrespective of political controversies and criticism of the government, none of the American characters denies the value of American democracy and freedom: "The thing that kills me is... the beauty of the U.S. Constitution. I love this fucking document, it still makes me cry, the sheer goodness and purity of the Founding Fathers' hopes and dreams, their ideas about what humans deserve and how they should be treated. The way these guys in Washington are trashing it... I'm crying about the Bill of Rights" (Prose 2011, 72-73).

Lula's natural wit, straightforwardness, and social and cultural otherness make her an excellent observer, and we see the post-9/11 USA through her eyes. Not incidentally, the title of Lula's future volume of stories is *On the Outside Looking In*. The title is prominent in its double meaning and not only reflects Lula's position as an observer of American life but also contains a political allusion: it was about looking into the windows of beautiful houses in the books she read and admired as a child in Communist Albania and about Mister Stanley belonging to the same class as the characters from these books. Prose again makes different layers of her character's personality overlap.

The otherness becomes an asset both for Lula and the novel's readers. She is unfamiliar with American conventions and uses common sense as her leading guide. Even though it sometimes puts her in awkward situations, her unfiltered perception of American everyday life serves as a lens through which the reader views the intricacies of American society. Lula's observations and interactions with the people around her reflect

the complexity of navigating a new cultural landscape while holding onto her transitional identity and legal and psychological in-betweenness. Therefore, *My New American Life* can also be interpreted as a modernized novel of manners in which ethnicity and experience of migration are the two filters that change the convention. Through the protagonist's journey, Prose explores the nuances of American culture, the immigrant experience, and the interplay between different social classes. The novel's detailed observation of the characters' manners and societal interactions provides a rich tapestry for understanding contemporary American life. Through Lula's interactions with Mister Stanley, Zeke, and Don Settebello, the reader delves into contemporary America's social conventions and values and sees them through the prism of her experience: "Not knowing more than she needed to was a policy that Lula tried to follow, not only with Mister Stanley, but also with Zeke and Don. It was how you survived under Communism. Who said you had to be intimate with everyone's personal secrets?" (Prose 2011, 155-156). On the other hand, Lula is smart enough to dislike her attitude and hypercriticism, calling it a "dismissive immigrant envy" (Prose 2011, 190). Lula's inability to enjoy the small pleasures of her American life derives from her unstable legal status and is a defensive mechanism in case of possible failure.

With time, the young woman learns to differentiate between real America and "made-for-TV version of American life, that half the population was sick and alone or homeless, conscious of the holiday only as something they wanted to end, preferably after free turkey in a steamy, malodorous shelter" (Prose 2011, 231). Such subtle comments on other aspects of modern American life, which seem only loosely related to Lula's immigrant story, create a comprehensive picture of middle-class America with deeply rooted stereotypical conventions only a cultural and social alien may notice.

Mister Stanley symbolizes liberal, open-minded America, embodying the contradictions and tensions within its social fabric: "Lula, when you apply for citizenship and you go for your interview, do me a favor. Don't say you think it's bad luck to go out to a pricey restaurant in Manhattan and raise a glass to a positive change in your immigration status. And have someone else pick up the tab. It's deeply un-American" (Prose 2011, 45-46). Wishing Lula good, Mister Stanley considers her his "cute Albanian pet," a characteristic so obvious and visual that it makes additional comments unnecessary. Despite his liberal views, his interactions with Lula reveal underlying biases and a sense of superiority, illustrating the complexities of American openness.

Although the interaction between different social classes is not central to *My New American Life*, it also affects Lula's status. Her position as a nanny places her near the upper-middle-class lifestyle of the Stanley family, yet she remains an outsider. This dynamic allows Prose to explore the social disparities and the often invisible boundaries that separate different social groups. Lula's relationships with other characters, including her fellow immigrants and Mister Stanley's affluent friends, further illuminate the social stratifications within American society. Don, who praises his partner and lover's beauty and intelligence, does not miss a chance to add that Savitra's grandfather comes from Bangladesh. At the same time, Savitra reacts immediately, adding that he was a textile company owner there and made silk for Christian Dior. This seemingly innocent exchange indicates Savitra's status and her unwillingness to be viewed as an "inferior other" – not even in her past. Through these and similar interactions, Prose (2011) highlights the subtle but overt ways class distinctions are maintained and reinforced.

Lula's outsider perspective allows her to see through the veneer of politeness and decency.

At the same time, female solidarity makes Lula and Savitra feel bonded and converts their ethnic background (old and insignificant in Savitra's case and crucial in Lula's) into an asset, which gives them an emotional superiority and also underscores that *My Lew American Life* is an assimilation story: "When Lula and Savitra emerged from the kitchen to find that the other had started eating, they exchanged a surprisingly friendly and rich communication. Both were thinking that an American girl would have been pissed at the rude American men. But Lula and Savitra came from older cultures that assumed men ate first, after having been waited on, like royalty or babies. They knew better than to expect a hollow show of chivalry from the greedy pigs, though the look that passed between them said, We're American now. The greedy pigs should have waited" (Prose 2011, 172-173). Lula's sharp observations and wry commentary expose the absurdities and contradictions within the social order and implicitly mock the performative nature of liberal charity, as exemplified by Mister Stanley's well-meaning but often patronizing behavior towards her.

Through Lula's journey, the novel not only portrays the immigrant experience but also offers a broader commentary on the pursuit of the American Dream and the social structures that shape it. Lula's experiences reflect the dichotomy between the idealized version of America and the reality she faces. America is seen as the land of opportunities, even though Lula does not know how to make these opportunities accessible and achievable. However, her good friend Dunia does. She marries a plastic surgeon, Steve, and lives a luxurious life, having a car with a driver and using perfume made from roses that bloom once every twenty years. Lula can only wonder how her friend skipped "a step from servant maid to a queen, from an illegal-alien Est Village mojito-joint waitress to a rich New Yorker, or at least New Jerseyite" (Prose 2011, 180). Dunia's life is the enacted American Dream, although the way of reaching her American Dream has more to do with fairy tales than with reality. For Lula, Dunia's model of the American dream "from illegal alien to an American wife" is not a way to follow, mainly because life with a wealthy, controlling homosexual husband resembles, as the character humorously notes, living under Communism (Prose 2011, 184). Prose fills Dunia's story about her family life with details, which might seem insignificant and funny, revealing not only a deeply-rooted American sense of superiority over new immigrants but also ancient patterns of gender dominance. For example, Dunia's husband insists on speaking only English at home and interacting with Americans only, and he wants his wife to become as American as possible. At the same time, in bed, he loves Dunia to speak Albanian in a low, growling voice, which, as the woman assumes, gives him a sense of domination. Dunia's is a patriarchal female dream, and Lula is pragmatic enough to recognize she does not want it for herself: "Have patience, or at least some pride. She had a work visa, she'd have a green card, she'd become a citizen maybe, and all on her own, without having to marry some guy she didn't like" (Prose 2011, 183-184). Like Dunia, Lula craves stability and success, but her new American life also foresees independence. Not incidentally, Prose calls his character a pragmatic optimist (La Force 2011)

Lula encounters numerous barriers - from legal issues regarding her immigration status to cultural misunderstandings. In dealing with the latter, Prose has her character react as a *bona fide* immigrant in the American surroundings. She appreciates American diversity but never fails to notice that they, i.e. Americans, do not cook "normal" food at

home; they are super focused on their mental health (“Under communism, suicide equaled a failing grade in the dead person’s political education” (Prose 2011, 167) and, at the same time, “Everybody wants me to hang on to my roots. They love all the fairy tales and the sayings and folk songs and crap” (Prose 2011, 185). The two models of the American Dream embodied by two female immigrant characters and their experiences distinguish between means used to make the Dream closer. While Dunia uses her female charm, Lula resorts to culture and literature to shape her image of an immigrant and make her priorities understandable.

References to political realities in Albania in the 1990s, criticism of American immigrant policy, and the character’s memories of her “old country” make *My New American Life* a geopolitical novel (Caren Irr’s concept) *par excellence*<sup>3</sup>. In Lula’s stories, Albania is a colorless, sad, and unsafe country, while American life is colorful, joyful, and attractive in its unfamiliarity. Lula’s comparison of Albanian and American realities is humorous: “In her country, under Communism, if someone broke into your place and didn’t take anything, it meant you were in trouble. Whereas after Communism, no one would bother breaking in unless they were planning to take something. Under Communism, there had been nothing to take. Every night, she and Zeke watched a news story about the White House insisting there should be more spying on private citizens. People acted shocked, as they should be, even if it was naïve. In Europe, people admitted that the desire to spy on their neighbor was basic human nature” (Prose 2011, 81).

Lula’s erotic attraction to Albo at times seems to be more potent than her migrant aspirations. Lack of experience makes her an easy target for Albanian gangsters and adds colors and pleasant tension to her otherwise dull routine. Relations with Alvo and his criminal friends turn into the play between “us” (Albanians) and “them” (Americans), and Lula, at times, finds it hard to locate which side she considers hers. Americanness in the young woman’s mind equals progress, civilization, and emancipation as part of them, and it seems to outweigh Albanian sentiments: “Alvo was careful to walk beside her and not to hurry ahead, a positive sign of reconstructed Balkan male behavior. That Lula should even register – and appreciate – this was depressing. But comforting in a way. She liked being with someone who knew what it was like to watch your genius granny tag after your birdbrain grandpa. It was so hard to live among strangers with whom you shared no history, no knowledge of a way of life that went back and back” (Prose 2011, 99 -100). Only going out with Alvo makes Lula feel a sentimental bond with her old country’s traditions. Unrestrained Albanian dances, passionate songs, and raki on Christmas Eve make Lula feel at home without wishing to return home. A sense of home is also enhanced by a contrast with American conventions, their pettiness and artificiality: “So much individual soul was poured into the simple steps, men and women, young and old, married, single, fat, thin. No one wore the stiff mask of vacancy or anxiety that Lula had so often seen on the faces of Americans inventing their own dances, trying to seem unself-conscious even as they labored to telegraph a message about confidence, sexuality,

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<sup>3</sup> Irr (2014) sees geopolitical fiction as a contemporary modification of the political novel. The term describes a wide range of stories that diverge in their representation of the present but share one essential characteristic. They express global political concerns and are patterned and principled in their ideological commitment, though not to a particular political party or program. Migrant novels are one of the most frequently mentioned types of geopolitical fiction.



and whether they were available or taken” (Prose 2011, 208). The power of music seems to wake up well-hidden sentiments, which the presence of Alvo and some raki enhance. This is one of several scenes in the novel in which Prose openly refers to ethnic stereotypes of character formation. The latter can perform different functions – from serving as a framework to understand the complexity of a different culture and facilitating communication to creating a prejudiced social perception (Florack 2011, 493). In Prose’s novel, ethnic stereotypes model other types of opposition – social in the case of Savitra, gender in the case of Dunia, and cultural in Lula’s case. Combined with the motif of migration, a stereotypical opposition of American and Albanian or, broader, South European culture does not allow for creating the attitude of American egalitarian humanism. If Lula loses caution because of her attraction to Alvo, it is only for a short time. Alvo’s arrest and her unsuccessful attempt to help her make her leave the ethnocentric space, which functions only as a temporary therapeutic emotional resort. Lula’s priorities are clear enough, and she is confidently moving into her new American life in a luxurious SUV she gets from Alvo as a farewell present. Thus, the Prose eventually transforms Lula’s immigrant story into a fairy tale, abandoning the adjustment and double identity narratives. This is also a feature of geopolitical fiction that “consistently differentiates between actual and ideal worlds,” expresses a social critique, and explores mechanisms for change (Irr 2014, 22).

*My New American Life* integrates cultures, politics, history, gossip, and legends from different continents and makes America the country that can accommodate all of them. It is a story of assimilation embraced by a migrant character who uses her ethnicity and the political history of her home country as a commodity that sells well on the American market. Prose revisits and revises the conventions of the novel of manners in the view of her migrant character’s ethnic background in post-9/11 America. Security challenges in the context of immigration and the Guantanamo story referred to in the novel are the topics that deserve further analysis.

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