Unnatural Voices

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An examination of second person fiction might appropriately be followed by an account of the other major new form of telling a story: “we” narration. From certain perspectives, however, the two types seem quite different. Unlike second person narratives that are “unnatural” from the outset—that is, that do not exist in “natural narrative”—first person plural texts are typically directed to a much wider audience and do not immediately call attention to themselves as artificial constructs possible only in literature. However, we will see that literary “we” narratives routinely (if at times barely perceptibly) make themselves strange and likewise produce unlikely or impossible kinds of telling. “We” narration, a common strategy in contemporary fiction, also has a relatively long though little known history that extends for over a century. Many works in this mode are insistently intertextual, carrying on a number of conversations among each other and with other discourses. Their dialogism is further manifested in the ways in which first person plural narration often appears in juxtaposition to other modes of narrating. Apart from a few notable studies, those of Morris, Lanser (Fictions 239–66), Woller, Britton, and Margolin (“Telling,” “Collective”), it has been largely unexplored in the theory of narration and was essentially unrecognized before 1992. In this chapter I will discuss the unexpected origin of this practice in Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel, The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’ and trace the way this strategy works as opposed (and juxtaposed) to other
modes of narration as well as how it participates in another significant innovation: multiperson narration. I also trace the varied ideological work the narration performs as it depicts the crew’s oscillation between isolated individualism and a more collective consciousness.

Using a chronicle form that indicates causal connections as well as independent story strands, I will go on to reconstruct the subsequent history of this technique, noting the very different ideological uses to which it has been put and the varied models of subjectivity it presupposes. Throughout, I will focus on a few central, recurring issues, the first of which is, Who constitutes the narrative’s “we”? The first usage of “we” in John Barth’s *Sabbatical* is accompanied by a footnote which reassuringly states that the identity of the people that form the “we” will soon be disclosed. Barth here is formally (and facetiously) articulating a convention of “we” narration: virtually no first person plural narrative discloses its membership at the outset; there is always a bit of drama as the reader determines just who this “we” is. The beginning of Mark Helprin’s “North Light” begins with the nonspecific line, “We are being held back” (4), moves on to a description of the ridge “we” occupy and the valley below, a depiction of natural forms that does not give any precise information about the setting, neither which continent they are on nor which century it is. It is then made clear that there is a war going on, and that “we” are soldiers. Finally, it is clarified that the “we” represents a group of Israeli soldiers in tanks waiting to attack Syrian forces in the 1973 war.

“We” may represent an intimate or a vast group, and its composition may—and usually does—change during the course of the fiction. Uri Margolin further points out (1996) that it occupies “an intermediate position between the sender role (I) and those of the second and third persons (not-I)” (“Telling” 117); that is, the speaker necessarily speaks in the name of him- or herself and of another. Another important question is how homogeneous or disparate the “we” cluster is, and how it becomes more or less inclusive as the text progresses. The “we” form also raises interesting issues concerning reliability: insofar as it is a subjective form, it is enmeshed in issues of reliability and discordance, but these are issues that are potentially different from those in first person singular narratives since they may involve more accurate intersubjective beliefs as well as communal misprisions or even mass delusion. Finally, we will note how instances of “we” narration interact with adjacent forms (especially first person singular and third person) that so often accompany them.
A first person narrator who frequently uses the plural pronoun to denote the action of a group is not unknown in earlier fiction; Aphra Behn’s narrator in Orinooko often employs it to designate the white colonists in Surinam. The narratives I am concerned with below differ insofar as they produce a tension concerning the identity and knowledge claimed by the “we” voice. More to the point, Susan S. Lanser has documented what might be called the prehistory of “we” narration in two nineteenth century works that employ an “I” narrator yet express a collective subjectivity: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford (1853) and Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896). Lanser notes, “These ‘singular’ communal narrators are constructed through subtle but important departures from autodiegetic practices, for while the narrators retain the syntax of ‘first person’ narrative, their texts avoid the markers of individuality that characterize personal voice and thereby resist the equation of narrator and protagonist. Rather, the narrator’s identity becomes communal” (Fictions 241). The most relevant antecedent, however, is certainly the opening paragraphs of Madame Bovary (1857) in which a “we” speaker narrates the introduction of Charles Bovary into the boys’ classroom before seamlessly if mysteriously yielding to the discourse of the primary narrator and vanishing from the text.

In The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’ Conrad’s use of “we” narration begins deceptively as the work opens in the conventional manner of standard third person narrative. Other than the brief comment that the mate, Mr. Baker, “kept all our noses to the grindstone” (31), the work continues in the third person until a common bond begins to appear among the seamen and “we” becomes the privileged perspective: “We hesitated between pity and mistrust” (36); “We spoke in low tones” (37), and so on. That is to say, Conrad uses different modes of narration in counterpoint to the consciousness of the men he is depicting. The greater their cohesion, the more insistent the use of “we”; a bond is likewise established between the narrator and the crew. Later in the voyage, as sailors retreat back into their own individual selves, the classic third person form returns.

“We” in this text refers to most of the crew, the men of the forecastle as opposed to the officers. It does not usually extend to include the malcontent Donkin, the West Indian James Wait, or Singleton, who represents an earlier generation and, as boatswain, ranks slightly higher than the crew proper. Thus, the seamen’s perceptions of Donkin are represented in terms that express difference: “He stood on the bad
eminence of a general dislike. . . . Our sea-boots, our oilskin coats, our well-filled sea-chests, were to him so many causes for bitter meditation: he had none of these things, and he felt instinctively that no man, when the need arose, would offer to share them with him” (40). Intriguingly, in this passage the “we” narrator discloses the contents of Donkin’s mind, something of course a first person narrator, singular or plural, is not supposed to be able to do.

As noted above, “we” narrators can attain a highly probable intersubjective sense of things or they can produce an unreliable narration that is bounded by the epistemological limitations of the group they belong to. Conrad takes care to utilize the full range of these options, producing a number of observations that are both technically innovative and resonate with the effect of the real. Similar or shared thoughts are depicted as if they were part of a single mind. This practice, however, grows more odd and less realistic the longer it continues, as can be seen in the progression in the following passages: “We were appalled. We perceived that after all Singleton’s answer meant nothing. We began to hate him for making fun of us. All our certitudes were going. . . . We suspected Jimmy, one another, and even our very selves” (43). Especially ironic is the claim that we suspected each other, since each individual is entirely in unison in distrusting the others. Elsewhere, what might be called “group unreliability” strikes: the crew is convinced that Wait’s desire aided by Wamibo’s presumed magic spells “delayed the ship in the open seas. Only lubberly fools couldn’t see it” (142). At other times, the unreliability becomes self-conscious and openly acknowledged: “we . . . sympathised with all [Wait’s] repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions” (139). That is to say, the “we” perspective affirms what it wishes to believe even when it knows it is mistaken.

Conrad returns to third person narration at a few points in the novella to achieve a particular thematic point; in doing so he enacts a miniature drama of the use of narrative perspective. Thus, in the third chapter, as a storm hits the ship, the men’s cohesion begins to break down and the voice of the narrator returns to the third person, using “they” to refer to the men (48–50). The narration, that is, dramatizes the men’s retreat from a shared consciousness as the storm thrusts them back into their isolated selves: “Huddled close to one another, they fancied themselves utterly alone. They heard sustained loud noises, and again bore the pain of existence through long hours of profound silence” (82).

Later in the text, Conrad transforms his narration again. A deluded “we” consciousness appears that is fueled by the malignant Donkin's
usage of a rhetorical “we,” as he employs the language of socialist agitation to incite the crew to mutiny: “He told us we were good men—a ‘bloomin’ condemned lot of good men.’ Who thanked us? Who took any notice of our wrongs?” (100). This period of collective false consciousness (99–103) is followed by extended third person passages, as if Conrad were dramatizing the selfishness and egoism leading up to the mutiny, signaling it as a perverted kind of union. Suggestively, the ensuing mutiny itself is mostly depicted in a literally depersonalized manner, as acts are committed by unidentified agents: “In the shadows of the fore rigging a dark mass stamped, eddied, advanced, retreated. There were words of reproach, encouragement, unbelief, execration” (122). As the passive voice continues, the action is scattered and further depersonalized: “A lot of disputes seemed to be going on all round”; “The hurling flight of some heavy object was heard” (123). The ineffectual mutiny dissolves the men’s common bond of labor and replaces it with a fragmenting and confused discourse. Once order is restored, the “they” narration takes control, as Conrad counters the existing “we” narration of socialists and revolutionaries with an antithetical model of group consciousness which stems from a collective sense of duty.

In the final chapter, the ship gets closer to home and the narration returns to the “we” form. The “we” voice speaks for the final time as the Narcissus comes into its port (166). Once on land, “they” narration is used to depict the men in their last moments together in the shipping office where they are paid off. But in the final paragraphs of the novel, Conrad introduces his final, concluding transformation, as an “I” narrator suddenly irrupts in the text and continues the story seamlessly: “Charley and Belfast wandered off alone. As I came up I saw a . . . woman . . . fall on Charley’s neck” (170). The narrator goes off by himself, with nothing but his pay, his memories, and an isolated consciousness.

Conrad anticipates many subsequent uses of voice and narration that would not become widely used until fairly recently. We may identify three distinct achievements in this work: 1) the first sustained example of “we” narration, 2) a rare early text that effectively employs multiperson narration, alternating between first person plural and third person narration, and also using the first person singular and passive voice narration at strategic points in the text. Most daring, however, is 3) the transcendence of the strictures of realism in the alternation of the “we” and “they” segments, since the “we” voice cannot know the private thoughts of many of the seamen disclosed by
the third person narration. More audaciously, the two voices are not clearly separated and often glide into each other. This juxtaposition of mutually exclusive narrative stances can be seen prominently in passages where a sentence of “we” narration is followed in the next line by a third person plural account: “Our little world went on its curved and unswerving path carrying a discontented and aspiring population. They found comfort of a gloomy kind in an interminable and conscientious analysis of their unappreciated worth” (103). From the perspective of a mimetic theory of narration, the speaker either is or is not part of the group and therefore one of the pronouns is misleading. Other examples are even more resistant to a realistic recuperation. As many Conrad critics have pointed out, the entry into the consciousness of Singleton, Wait, and others is incompatible with the narrator’s claims of having performed physical action onboard: “Groaning, we dug our fingers in, and very much hurt, shook our hands, scattering nails and drops of blood” (68). If the narrator is a character on the ship, he cannot enter the minds of others or report conversations he has not observed; if he is omniscient, he can’t break fingernails onboard, but only pare them silently, from a distant vantage point far above his creation. The narrator, that is, is simultaneously homodiegetic and heterodiegetic.⁴

Conrad criticism has, quite understandably, found this intercalation of voices to be problematic; scholars do not even agree on how many narrators the book has.⁵ The difficulty with such critical approaches is that they presuppose an exclusively mimetic conception of the narrator; that is, they can only imagine him as one (or two) human being(s) who writes only what an individual consciousness is likely to know or a traditional omniscient mind is expected to reveal. Conrad is doing something much more radical here, something that transcends the mimetic poetics that such criticism implicitly presupposes.⁶ There is no single, self-consistent discursive subject in the text. We need to ask, “What is the narration doing now?” rather than, “Who is speaking here?” By following out the varied narrative voices, however, we find that they themselves constitute a kind of narrative that complements and underscores the central events and ideas of the story.

Conrad provides theoretical support for the kind of reading I have offered in his preface to the work: to show life in all its vibration, its color, its form, the artist “cannot be faithful to the temporary formulas of his craft,” including those of “Realism, Romanticism, [or] Naturalism” (xiv–xv). It is precisely the mimetic conventions of realism that
Conrad transcends in this work as he creates a different discourse situation that cannot be found in actual human communication. In doing so, I suggest he anticipates the more extreme abrogations of mimesis in late modernist and postmodern texts discussed elsewhere in this book.

In the history of narrative technique after Conrad, we find many of the same concerns reappearing in different guises. Henri Barbuse’s *Feu*, a 1916 novel about World War I, is mostly narrated in the “we” form, and is stridently opposed to the war it depicts. It explicitly discusses the unusual nature of the individuals that have come to form its collective subject: “Despite all the variations in age, origin, education and status, and everything that used to be, despite the gulfs that used to divide us, broadly speaking we’re the same. Behind the same crude shape we conceal and exhibit the same manners, the same habits, the same simplified character of men who have reverted to their primal state” (18). This text also plays with the precise constitution of its “we”: most of the time, it refers to the individuals that form the patrol, at other times it refers to the entire battalion, and at a few moments it embraces all soldiers.

One is particularly struck by the intensely political uses the technique is routinely put to. The next significant occurrence of “we” narration appears in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s cacotopian novel, *We*. Written in 1920–21, it was not allowed to be published in Russia because of its critique of the excesses of Soviet authoritarianism, millenarianism, and scientism, and on the new state’s ruthless insistence on obedience and conformity. A staunch Bolshevik for many years, Zamyatin was disgusted to see the revolution he had helped create degenerate into the very tyranny Conrad had predicted would ensue. This work was first published in an English translation in 1924, and its unauthorized appearance in a Russian émigré publication in 1927 brought about his denunciation by and consequent resignation from the Soviet Writers’ Union. This futuristic novel opens as the narrator is praising the state and its collectivist mentality, which he attempts to merge with his individual self: “I shall merely attempt to record what I see and think, or, to be more exact, what we think (precisely so—we, and let this We be the title of my record)” (4). Collective descriptions are first provided in “we” form; as the novel develops, it is rapidly replaced by an “I” that
is increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo. The few “we” usages here are primarily markers of indoctrination and servility; the protagonist is most honest and authentic when he says “I.”

An opposite response was provided by Victor Serge, another early Communist supporter and early critic of the new Soviet state. With Zinoviev, he helped form the Communist International; by 1923, however, he had joined the Left (Trotskyist) Opposition; in 1928 he was expelled from the party and arrested. He wrote his major works of fiction at this time, sending them to France for publication since their printing was forbidden in the Soviet Union. His main novel, *Naissance de notre force*, an account of the anarcho-syndicalist uprising in Barcelona in 1917, was published in Paris in 1931. Its first chapter and its final segments employ the first person plural; in between an “I” narrator (who often speaks for a larger group of revolutionaries) is the primary voice. In discussing his choice of pronouns, Serge articulated sentiments that would continue to be expressed by many subsequent practitioners of this form: “The word ‘I’ is repellant to me as a vain affirmation of the self which contains a large measure of illusion and another of vanity or unjustified pride” (1977: 15). Appropriately, Serge’s subject is the collective struggles and emotions of the men who attempt to overthrow the egoistic economic and cultural world of capitalism.

In Italy Ignazio Silone, a founding member of the Italian Communist party, wrote the anti-fascist novel *Fontamara* in exile in Switzerland in 1930. It would first appear in print in a German translation three years later. It became extremely popular, selling a million and a half copies and appearing in twenty-seven languages as the struggle against fascism spread around the world. When Allied troops occupied Italy, the U.S. Army printed an unauthorized edition of the book and distributed copies to Italians in the areas they had liberated. The novel uses a “we” voice throughout, in large part as a naturalistic method of indicating the collective sensibility of the Fontamara peasants. Their life is shared, and so is their story. The “we” refers to the villagers of Fontamara (as distinct from the residents of the nearby town); occasionally, it fails to include two or three of the most wayward of the village’s inhabitants.

As the novel progresses, readers of the work in Italian soon perceive that the narrator is female through the use of gendered adjectives. The speaker then briefly refers to herself as “I” (“Michele Zompa and I stopped at the table” [17]) before returning to her customary “we” narration; much later, we learn her name (30). In the third chapter, the
“we” voice continues speaking (“There was bitterness in our hearts . . . with our soup plates on our knees, we talked about nothing else” [55]). This time the narration is differently gendered, however; these words are spoken by a man who later is abruptly revealed to be the husband of the first speaker (59). Husband and wife alternate speaking in the next few chapters, at one point yielding to the eyewitness testimony of the other (“My husband can tell you the rest if he wants to” [101]). It is as if discrete individuals (and even their age, temperament, and gender) are relatively unimportant; the same narration could be expected from most any of the villagers.

Further in the narrative, the speaker of the “we” changes again as the transmission of the story is passed on to the couple’s son, who narrates the eighth and ninth chapters. The setting alters: the son and one of the more rebellious of the villagers go to town and take the train to Rome, the communal sensibility melts away, and the “we” narration ceases. Instead we get a standard first person account of the two men’s journey; a typical sentence reads, “He seemed to need to go on talking, so I let him” (146). That is, the shared consciousness does not appear to extend beyond the social space that produced it. In the final chapter, the son returns to the village and helps radicalize the others there, and the “we” narration is briefly reestablished. By printing an oppositional newspaper the peasants quickly bring down the wrath of the Fascist authorities, who attack the village and decimate the people. The father, mother, and son, who were on the road when the assault began, then flee to Switzerland.

Use of “we” narration serves to depict the radical disjunction between the perceptions of the peasants and those of the more urban residents. Each group is profoundly ignorant of the world of the other, and has no clue how it functions or what its rules are. What is obvious to one group is inconceivable to the other. At times, the peasants are presented as almost farcically innocent of modern bureaucratic society; elsewhere they are shown to have a sagacity that entirely eludes their urban coevals. Throughout the text, the “we” sensibility is presented as an excellent medium for a communal consciousness and as the basis for collective action. The need for continued and increased social unity is thematized within the text; at one point the villagers speculate on their relative powerlessness before the Fascist enforcers and attribute their weakness to a basic egoism: “Physically, each one of us was a match for at least three of them. But what link did we have in common? . . . We were all born at Fontamara, and here we were all together in the village square; that was what we cafoni had in common,
and that was all. Apart from that, everyone thought of himself” (103). What is needed is still stronger group unity and consciousness.

As we will see, a substantial number of colonial and postcolonial authors have gone on to use the “we” form of narration to express their struggles against the imperial powers. The first is Raja Rao’s _Kanthapura_ (1938), which depicts the arrival of Gandhi’s independence movement in a village in South India and is in some senses an Indian reconfiguring of some of Silone’s themes and techniques. (Rao acknowledged Silone’s novel as the inspiration for his own.) The primary narrator is an old woman who conveys the communal sensibility through the constant use of the pronouns “we” and “us” but never strays into the territory of an omniscient voice. The “we” here is more delimited, and generally includes only some portion of the adult members of the South Indian village, minus the large landowners and the Dalits, or “untouchables.” At times her “we” only designates women; at other times, it includes only Brahmins.

She communalizes (and subjectivizes) knowledge of the world beyond the villages by prefacing it with the words “they say,” itself a partially indeterminate form that exists on the border of third person narration. This results in an unusual epistemic status, the articulation of “what is known,” which is situated somewhere between the invariably idiosyncratic subjectivity of a single individual and the necessarily objective account of a standard third person narration. As first person narration becomes increasingly eccentric in twentieth century fiction and omniscient third person narration seems increasingly inauthentic, “we” narration appears as an intersubjective correction that nevertheless eschews omniscience. As we saw in Conrad, “we” narration can vary in its reliability, being less dependable at times, and more so at others. In the case of Kanthapura’s narrator, she is both ill-informed and partially untrustworthy at many points in the text. Recounting the mythological account of the coloration of the hill, she states that the goddess Kenchamma waged a battle with a demon whose blood soaked into the earth: “Tell me, how could this happen if it were not for Kenchamma and her battle?” (2). Elsewhere in the novel, however, she appears to have more detailed knowledge than she should realistically be able to acquire, and the novel has been faulted on these grounds. It is precisely Rao’s attempt to conform to a realistic epistemology that prevents him from utilizing much of the playfulness, defamiliarization, and innovation that other practitioners have extracted from this technique. For our purposes, the key point is the inclusive-
ness and flexibility of the subjects depicted in this fashion. And, as
the narrative continues and villagers unite in a common struggle, the
“we” designates a collective subject that becomes both more specific
and more heterogenous.

William Faulkner uses “we” narration in a number of ways in
his short fiction. Most common is the case of a first person narrator
recounting the experience of a small group or members of a family,
as “That Evening Sun” records the shared feelings of the Compson
children, a technique that would also be used much later by Toni
Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Faulkner’s story is especially
compelling in its depiction of the utter incommensurability of the world
of the secure white children and that of the threatened black woman;
the “we” here marks an unbridgeable social and hermeneutic divide.
A more daring example is Faulkner’s ultimately unsuccessful attempt
to use a “we” to speak for the Other, as Native Americans “voice”
their collective impressions in “A Courtship.” Most significant for our
critical and theoretical purposes are the more capacious “we” narra-
tions in stories like “A Rose for Emily,” which utilizes a rural voice
that speaks for the higher class of white males. The story begins with a
relatively unobtrusive collective pronoun (“When Miss Emily Grierson
died, our whole town went to her funeral” [119]) which quickly dis-
solves into third person narration but then resumes with a number of
interesting “we” statements. At one point, it is averred that “we” sent
her a tax notice (128). It is not entirely correct to assume that here the
“we” refers to the members of the municipal government, as Margolin
avers (“Telling” 120). Instead, it seems to me the “we” represents a
much larger collective, and continues to refer to the better-off mem-
ers of the community. This synecdochic “we” becomes even more
compressed elsewhere in the story, where what would normally be the
perception of a single individual is presented as a shared experience:
“When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was
turning gray” (127). This surely is a kind of first person plural way of
saying “the next time she was seen in public. . . .” By the end of the
story the collective “we” does change and becomes an actor, physi-
cally present in the story: “For a long while we just stood there . . .”
(130); now the “we” has narrowed and been made concrete, as did
Raja Rao’s, from the town in general to a smaller group of particular
individuals acting and feeling in unison in a specific time and place.

A more striking and sustained use of “we” narration appears in
the work of yet another disillusioned Communist: Richard Wright’s
12 Million Black Voices (1941), a photobook made in collaboration with photographer Edwin Rosskam. As Joel Woller has remarked, the first chapter “is narrated in a cross-generational voice. . . . It functions as a kind of prologue, articulating a collective memory of the middle passage and slavery” (348). In a paragraph describing the horrors of the middle passage, the iterative narration includes the experiences of both the living and the dead: “In the summer, down in the suffocating depths of those ships, on an eight- or ten-week voyage, we would go crazed for lack of air and water, and in the morning the crew of the ship would discover many of us dead” (14). The next chapters are narrated in the present rather than the past tense; according to Woller, the collective voice of the second chapter is rural, southern, and parental; the third chapter is youthful, proletarianized, and urban; while the final chapter takes on a prophetic tone and brings the “dynamic we-you dialectic” (348) to its conclusion, thereby producing the most daring expansion of the composition of the “we”: “The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. . . . Look at us and you will know yourselves, for we are you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives” (146).

It will not come as a surprise that the experimental techniques employed by practitioners of “magic realism” include the use of first person plural narration. Julio Corázar presents an obsessed group of movie fanatics in “We Love Glenda So Much” (1981); for the purposes of this book, the most compelling is the unusual narration in Mario Vargas Llosa’s “The Cubs” (“Los cachorros” [1967]). In this text, “we” and “they” forms alternate, not merely in successive sections or passages, but within the same sentence: “Todavía llevaban pantalón corto ese año, aún no fumábamos, entre los deportes preferían el fútbol y estábamos aprendiendo a correr olas . . .” (107) (“They were still wearing short pants that year, we weren’t smoking yet, of all the sports they liked football best and we were learning to ride the waves . . .” [1]). As Jean O’Bryan-Knight comments, “in a single sentence . . . we observe the group [of four boys] subjectively and objectively” (340). Vargas Llosa has thus compressed the epistemological antinomy devised by Conrad into a starkly unnatural form, thereby foregrounding the transgression that “we” narration always threatens to enact: the collapsing of the boundary between the first and the third persons. O’Bryan-Knight goes on to suggest that the use of this strategy has ethical implications: “A powerful consequence of this complex perspective for us as readers is that we are simultaneously made to
identify with the members of this group and to pass judgement on the group as outsiders” (340, cf. 343–45).

Postcolonial writers, following Raja Rao, have found the first person plural form to be an especially fitting technique to embody a number of shared concerns. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who, like Faulkner, was an assiduous reader of Conrad, employs “we” narration in a short chapter at a central node of his novel, A Grain of Wheat (1967). The most important political and social event, the arrival of Kenyan independence, is narrated by a brief, abrupt, and most Conradian foray into the first person plural: “His name was on everybody’s lips. We wove new legends around his name and imagined deeds. We hoped that Mugo would come out and join us” (204). This affirmation of narrative presence is emblematic of a unity between characters, implied author, and authorial audience, rather than a verisimilar depiction of a group of people who were literally there. Ayi Kwei Armah also uses “we” narration throughout his novel, Two Thousand Seasons (1973). His “we” is a term of resistance, and is repeatedly opposed to the inaccurate discourse of a “they,” as we see from the beginning of the first chapter: “We are not a people of yesterday. Do they ask how many single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now? We shall point them to the proper beginning of their counting” (1). Here “we” explicitly designates several overlapping groups of past and present Africans and people of African descent. This produces some compelling features, including a collective memory which is set forth as authoritative: “Our clearest remembrances begin with a home before we came near the desert of the falling sun” (4). A major drama of the book is the failure of the disparate groups to fully converge; as Margolin observes, “the source of Africa’s tragedy, according to Armah, is the unbridgeable gap between the People of the Way [contemporary African political activists] and the rest” (“Collective” 125). This technique of narration is well suited to presenting an alternative group’s aspirations and sensibility, as we have already seen; it would be used again to present a comparable postcolonial critique by black writers from the Caribbean and South Africa.

Martinican Edouard Glissant has written three novels that employ “we” narration: Malemort (1975), La Case du commandeur (1981), and Mahagony (1987) and has called for a “roman de nous” to adequately express the Antillean experience and sensibility. In Caribbean Discourse (1989) he states: “The author must become demythified, certainly, because he must be integrated into a common resolve. The collective ‘We’ becomes the site of a generative system, and the true
subject” (149). Dawn Fulton (2003) explains this stance further: “For him the idea of Martinican identity cannot be thought in the singular, but only in the plural, and only in a manner that works with ‘relation,’ of connections and conflicts between and among individuals” (1105).

Within the novels themselves, she goes on to note, Glissant acknowledges the difficulties of establishing a collective voice that is able to tell a single story convincingly and authentically (1108). Appropriately, these novels will later go on to produce an intertextual rejoinder in Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau’s 1997 “we” novel, *L’Esclave vieil homme et le molosse*, as the “we” form continues to be insistently dialogical.9

The vast majority of “we” texts valorize collective identity in no uncertain terms; “we” is almost always a favored term and a desirable subject position that is to be sought out and inhabited. Pierre Silvain’s 1971 novel, *Les Eoliennes*, uses the “we” form to produce an opposite effect as it resuscitates and extends the trope originally set forth by Zamyatin. Silvain’s novel is written entirely in the first person plural about a cluster of technicians, each devoid of any individuality. Margolin explains: “Having lived and worked together for so long, they perform a large number of tasks . . . in a perfectly co-ordinated manner. . . . But the joint actions they perform, physical and mental, are by and large routine and trivial. . . . The resultant impression is that of a group of largely de-individualized, depersonalized agents, an autonomous uniformity of near clones performing a series of predetermined, senseless routines” (“Telling” 128). The first person plural represents a powerful trap that the characters are unable to escape. In this regard, it looks ahead to some of the narratives of the 1990s that rethink the larger implications of this narrative form.

Gynocentric fiction has, not surprisingly, utilized the “we” form along the lines of other groups advocating collective action to redress social grievances. Joan Chase’s novel, *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* (1983), is a narrative about three generations of women, all descended from a matriarch, who live together on a farm in Ohio. In this text, the “we” refers to the granddaughters; variations in the specific individuals designated by the pronoun only serve to confirm the shared interests and sensibilities of all: “There were four of us—Celia and Jenny, who were sisters, Anne and Kate, sisters too, like our mothers, who were sisters” (48). Variations in the specific individuals designated by the pronoun only serve to confirm the shared interests and sensibilities of all. In what could be a partial summary of this nar-
rative technique, the text states: “Sometimes we watched each other, knew differences. But most of the time it was as though the four of us were one and we lived in days that gathered into one stream of time, undifferentiated and communal” (48).

Adalaide Morris observes that “in any number, in any combination, at all moments, they speak only in the first-person plural. Although they fight viciously among themselves, these girls are ‘sisterhood’ incarnate” (20); the use of this technique creates a “fused ‘we’ of sisterhood” (25). The situation is in fact still more complex: the “we” applies only to the sisters as a collective entity; when any individual girl is discussed, the third person form is used exclusively. That is, in ordinary discourse, “we” implies a single speaker that is part of the group; this narrator, however, never refers to any of the girls as “I” even though she must be one of those four if the conventions of mimesis are being followed. In a work that otherwise closely adheres to realistic conventions, it can be disorienting to have to conclude that one of the women must be speaking of herself in the third person, a situation for which there is normally no realistic justification. Thus we return to kind of mimetic paradoxes displayed by Conrad, as an otherwise scrupulous realism is transcended by innovative techniques of narration.

Hertha D. Sweet Wong has analyzed collective speaking subjects in traditional and recent Native American women’s autobiography. She notes that “a Native autobiographer, whether a speaking or a writing subject, often implies, if not announces, the first person plural—we—even when speaking in the first person singular. ‘We’ often invokes a (sometimes the) Native community” (171). She also notes that contemporary Native American writers use the technique in a less literal manner, gesturing toward a larger community that is invoked rather than depicted by the pronoun. Two comparable tendencies can be found in Louise Erdrich’s novel, Tracks (1988). This book alternates between the narratives of the tribal elder, Nanapush, and that of the younger, mixed blood Pauline. The old man’s narrative frequently uses the “we” form, and it may expand out to include the spirits of the dead or else contract to refer, Faulkner-like, merely to the small group he is traveling with at the time. Pauline’s narrative is almost entirely first person singular with only a few usages of a fairly conventional plural form. This pattern of alternation itself depicts the move away from a traditional, collective sensibility rooted in the land to a more isolated, individuated, and mobile existence that interacts with
the encroaching world of the white people. Another feminist use of “we” appears rather dramatically in Julia Alvarez’s 1991 novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. The first portion of the text is presented in third person narration and the last portion is in the first person. At the center is a crucial chapter that employs “we” narration; it describes first the shared lives of the sisters and then the strategy employed to prevent the youngest from marrying a controlling, sexist man. In this section, the “we” of solidarity that is lost by Erdrich’s speakers is partially recovered by Alvarez’s.

A different “we” novel of this period uses its narration to demonstrate an inability to identify with a group of women. Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) “we” narrator is a partially indeterminate collection of neighborhood boys who, despite years of investigation and speculation, never begin to understand the motives of the girls who kill themselves. This novel includes a number of subtle, self-reflexive allusions to the idea of a multiple, protean subject. Looking at the youngest girl’s diary, the boys learn that “Celia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity. It’s often difficult to tell which sister she’s talking about, and many strange sentences conjure in the reader’s mind an image of a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads, lying in bed eating junk food, or suffering visits from affectionate aunts” (42). This is not a bad description of a common effect of “we” narration, and captures one of its uncanny features. This passage is followed by another that remarks on another standard practice of this kind of narration concerning the depiction of a shared consciousness: reading the diary together, “we learned about their lives, came to hold collective experiences of times we hadn’t experienced, harbored private images of Lux leaning over the side of a ship to stroke her first whale” (42–43). Here Eugenides provides a partial, naturalistic explanation for one of the more original and unnerving features of such prose, intended perhaps for those made uneasy by the nonrealistic aspects of “we” narration.

Interestingly, in the film version of this work directed by Sofia Coppola (1999), the more unusual features of Eugenides’ “we” narration are absent: the voice-over is performed by a single male speaker, making it seem like one of Faulkner’s more ordinary short stories in which a single character narrates events that happened to himself and two or three companions. Likewise, visual images of four boys sitting down looking at Celia’s diary preclude any play with the precise identity and extent of the group. Finally, the “reality effect” of the images on screen tends to overwhelm and minimize the narrating that frames them, a
phenomenon that has been noted by many film theorists. Looking back at Faulkner’s “That Evening Sun” or Armah’s A Thousand Seasons as well as the gynocentric texts just discussed, we may conclude that “we” narration is equally effective in portraying one group’s inability to comprehend another as it is in forging understanding between disparate individuals. It may either bridge or ossify difference.

Four recent works demonstrate both the staying power of the form and the range of innovations it remains capable of: Nathalie Sarraute’s Tu ne t’aimes pas (1989), Zakes Mda’s Ways of Dying (1995), Joyce Carol Oates’s Broke Heart Blues (1999), and Hazard Adams’s Many Pretty Toys (1999). These might be summarized as, respectively, a postmodern psychomachia; a Shandean investigation of postcolonial uses of the “we”; the presentation of different, overlapping, fallible group consciousnesses; and a metafictional commentary on the fragmented communal subject. The larger trajectory that all four trace is a further subjectivizing of the “we,” as its hitherto stable, intersubjective function gives way to unreliable group sensibilities.

Nathalie Sarraute’s first novel, Portrait d’un inconnu (1948) inaugurated a kind of experimental novel that would later be called the nouveau roman. In all of her fiction she explores subvocalized speech, preverbal impulses, unspoken sentiments, and the constant negotiation of a private, fragmented self with a shifting and derisive “they” composed of external voices. Tu ne t’aimes pas (1989, translated the following year as You Don’t Love Yourself) is a representation of a collection of contiguous voices, some of them contradictory, that seem to form a single, decentered consciousness. Here, the instabilities that flavor nearly all “we” narration are mapped onto the voices of a deconstructed self. As one of the voices complains at the outset of the book: “Of course, we were a little restless, a little ill at ease, embarrassed . . . Not all of us, though . . . We never turn out in full force . . . there are always some of us who are dozing, lazing, relaxing, wandering . . . this ‘we’ can only refer to the ones who were there when you came out with that remark” (2, Sarraute’s ellipses). The work is not so much a psychological study as a philosophical allegory of the multiple subjectivities and voices bound together in a self, as the unstable, shifting, and always incomplete “we” voices provide an apposite image of this polydirectional entity.

Oates’ novel proceeds rather simply if cynically. Broke Heart Blues is narrated by a succession of different, overlapping groups using the first person plural: girls attending the high school, the younger women of the town, the sons of the wealthy, the boys attending the high school,
and so on. Each narration centers on the figure of John Reddy Heart, a high school student who is arrested for killing a man. The different voices share a similar melodramatic sensibility and sensationalistic vocabulary that quickly blend together into what might be described as a single, bubble-gum voice, though one that often includes ironic commentary on collective subjects:

> We laughed but were thinking the identical thought. If our parents knew. If guys at school knew. Shelby Connor said, “He wouldn’t tell.” Millicent LeRoux said, “That isn’t the point. The point is, we’ve got our pride. Dignity. We are who we are. I mean—are we?" “No! No! No!”—we squealed like maniacs. (6)

As the discursive differences between the groups disappear, Heart takes on quasi-mythic status in the shallow minds of his peers. What results is a narration of multiple “we’s” that all sound depressingly similar and reveal the impoverished imaginations of the speakers.

Hazard Adams’ novel has rather less material in first person plural than the other texts discussed here, but it develops the notion of the unreliable “we” further and takes it in new directions as it further problematizes the identity of its collective subject. Many Pretty Toys is set during the sixties, and every third chapter of the novel is told by a “we” voice. Adams reproduces the multiple, divided, and contradictory components of this most disunified subject more thoroughly than any earlier writer other than Sarraute; intriguingly, this voice possesses an insistently metafictional sensibility, and suspects it (they) may be directed by another, greater power. Both of these aspects, the scrupulously precise and the extravagantly postmodern, are linked together in numerous passages: “And so we begin, except that we can also be regarded as having begun, or even eternally telling our tale. Some of us claim, of course, that the tale is really ours, that we have invented it in order to speak a piece we can lay claim to. Some of us point out that if the author spoke before we began, it is possible that those words of his are spoken after ours as well as during or before. Whether or not this means he or He should not be trusted is debated among us” (18). As the novel progresses, “we” find themselves in a situation analogous both to that of the disgruntled characters in the novel within the novel in At Swim-Two-Birds and to Borges’ most ontologically suspicious personae. Much of the drama of the “we” sections is its attempt to determine the nature of this author figure and thus better understand their own destinies.
Zakes Mda provides the most playful and sustained interrogation of the curious epistemology of the “we” narrator; an early passage in *Ways of Dying* reads as if it were intended to answer critics of the practice of Conrad and many of his successors:

We know everything about everybody. We even know things that happen when we are not there; things that happen behind people’s closed doors deep in the middle of the night. We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, “They say it once happened . . . ,” we are the “they.” (12)

In an attempt to ground the impossible knowledge of the contents of other minds in a first person form, the speaker playfully locates the source of such knowledge in a more unreliable (yet widely believed) source, the village gossip, and then goes on to associate this narration with the wellspring of traditional oral literature. The speaker continues with some salient reflections on the control and selection of narratives in this kind of speech community and a direct address to a potentially skeptical audience: “No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and can tell it the way it deems fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient” (12). Here we have a slyly ironic and politically charged explanation (or pseudo-explanation) for information not available under a rigorously mimetic framework. Together, these four recent novels show the richness and vitality of the “we” form and suggest that its potential for further development remains quite promising.

In Uri Margolin’s most recent statement on the subject, he has suggested that “we” narratives are rare for three related reasons: because the exact scope of the “we” may remain ambiguous and may contain different members at different points in the narrative, because the question of the narrators’ access of others’ minds “remains inherently unresolved,” and because the sense of a collective subject is more easily conveyed in lyric or meditative texts (“Collective” 253). The examples above, I would argue, suggest a different conclusion on all three charges. “We” narration is instead a supple technique with a continuous history of over a century that continues to be deployed
in a considerable number of texts, particularly those that emphasize the construction and maintenance of a powerful collective identity, including feminist and postcolonial works. It has been utilized by a considerable number of major twentieth century authors as well as significant figures prominent in oppositional literatures. It is the very ambiguity and fluctuations of the precise identity of the “we” that are among its most interesting, dramatic, and appealing features, and most apposite for an age that eschews fixed essences. “We” narration is especially effective in juxtaposition to other, traditional modes of narrating. This results in a distinctive kind of multiperson narration that continuously defamiliarizes the conventional nature of traditional narrative forms.

It is certainly the case that it is an excellent vehicle for expressing a collective consciousness; the relative rarity of its use heightens its ability to highlight traditional formulas and foreground its difference from the autonomous individual consciousness associated with the rise of the novel in England and the development of modernist techniques of representing minds. For socialists, feminists, and Third World intellectuals who denounce the extremes of bourgeois egoism and the poverty of an isolated subjectivity, “we” narration must seem a prefiguration of the new, more communal, and more egalitarian society are working to promote. The form is also singularly adept in providing expression of the shared sensibilities of a number of different groups, including Conrad’s seamen whose lives may depend on each man performing his tasks; the isolated rural communities of Silone, Rao, and Faulkner and the pre-industrial Gemeinschaft they share; the circle of revolutionaries of Ngugi and Armah; the segregated urban poor of Morrison or Mda; the soldiers of Barbusse and Helprin; the children’s sensibility depicted by Faulkner and Vargas Llosa; and the crass cliques portrayed by Oates. Perhaps most impressively is its repeated use by black Africans and members of the African diaspora (Wright, Ngugi, Armah, Glissant, Morrison, Mda, Chamoiseau) all of them as it were rewriting, revising, or signifying on The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ as the story of that text’s unassimilable Other is told and retold in the technique Conrad invented.

Concerning Margolin’s second objection, we may agree that the narrator’s access to the contents of other minds is potentially problematic, but hasten to point out that this is only an issue if we insist on postulating a mimetic framework for the text. If one ignores these parameters, as Conrad does, or gives them a postmodern wink, as Mda prefers, then the “problem” dissolves. Further, as Adams demonstrates,
a precise if occasionally schematic designation of the exact beliefs of each differing subgroup is also possible in this format. In a different way, Butor provides a mimetically plausible depiction of the thoughts of disparate members of a crowd at a railway station in “La Gare St. Lazare.” Finally, in the case of Glissant’s *La Case du commandeur*, this very oscillation can be effectively thematized within the text. As Celia Britton observes, the novel opens and closes with direct references to the problem of building a collective identity; its final sentence concludes: “We, who so impatiently gather together these disjointed I’s [*ces mois disjoint*], determined to contain the anxiety of each body within this difficult darkness of us [*cette obscurité difficile de nous*]” (Britten, 140).

Even within a realistic framework, it is not clear to me that the presumed knowledge of other minds is always some kind of embarrassment. Margolin explains: “any ‘we’ mental action description [inevitably combines] first person inside knowledge with a second- or third person inferential one. The fact that the ‘we’ is not an authorized spokesman for [the group] makes this problem more acute” (253). But is this charge true of a simple claim such as that predicated of Conrad’s seamen when they are first confronted with Wait’s claim that he was mortally ill: “we hesitated between pity and disgust” (36)? This is surely a wide enough spectrum to include each individual’s belief. More extravagant claims are equally innocent: “We suspected Jimmy, one another, and even our very selves” (43). This statement is presumably a shortened form of “Many (or most) of us suspected Jimmy, others suspected one another, some even suspected themselves”—again, a perfectly reasonable contraction. Finally, consider the case of a statement of a shared perception that is literally false: “We were afraid he would fall in and kill one of us” (69). Though all may have been concerned about the situation, it is obvious that only a few (at most) would have had that specific thought. The point of this kind of narration is not that a meaningless accuracy has been attempted and has failed, as an interview with each character about his state of consciousness at the time would reveal. Instead, Conrad’s statement captures an important aspect of the sensibility of the crew and certainly reveals the thought of at least one of its representative members. Rather than an inherently flawed technique, it seems to me to be instead an extremely flexible strategy that works precisely because of its variable referents. The drama created for the reader is thus to determine how literally and how figuratively to take each such expression of shared mental events. The “we” glides between the lone individual and the entire collective;
between a strict and a more lax denotation; and between mental experiences that are entirely, partially, or minimally shared.

It is most useful to see the “we” narrator as a different kind of figure from the realistic type of first person narrator and more like a postmodern first person narrator who is not bound by the epistemological rules of realism. I argue that “we” is an essentially dialectical perspective that typically (and most successfully) plays with its own boundaries. As Celia Britton observes, “its extreme elasticity provides a point of view that is not limited to any one character or period of time but moves around from one to another. . . . As such it creates a different representation of intersubjective relations between the individual characters, suggesting that people’s most intimate feelings are known to the community” (142). Much of the drama of reading such a work comes from observing the fluctuations in the group that constitutes the “we,” assessing its explicit epistemological statements concerning the origin and veracity of its beliefs, attending to moves away from realism and toward a more paradoxical discourse, and noting fundamental changes in the general reliability of the “we” narrator.

Indeed, one of the great challenges of reading this kind of fiction is to establish the relative objectivity or subjectivity of the “we.” One may even discern a general, if intermittent, historical trajectory that moves from more reliably intersubjective narrators earlier in the century to ever more unreliable ones and then back again to a playful, postmodern “communal omniscience.” The “we” narrators of Silone, Rao, Wright, and (most of the time) Conrad, when confined within their own spheres of experience, are utterly reliable. Those of Eugenides and Oates are utterly fallible, while Glissant and Mda self-consciously provide their narrators the authoritative knowledge they should not normally be able to possess. The “we” of Wright and Erdrich can even include the voices of the dead. To this one may add another important function that leads directly to the subject of the next chapter: the suggestive interplay between “we” narration and more conventional first and third person forms. In such texts, the “we” discourse is propelled into prominence, alternates suggestively with other perspectives, or is even left behind once its thematic and narratological functions are completed.

To return once more to the question of the politics of narration that keeps recurring in discussions of all the innovative modes of narration discussed so far in this book, we may observe that the vast majority of works mentioned in this chapter have a definite and often insistent political agenda; the “we” form seems to attract revolutionaries of all
stripes, even more so than the “you” narratives discussed in the previous chapter. With “we” texts, however, the narration may take on completely antithetical valences. This token of progressive self-awareness and group consciousness from Silone to Mda is also the mark of servility, blindness, and oblivion in Zamyatin and Silvain. The canny method of revealing the sagacity of indigenous, plebian or rural groups can equally well depict small town stupidity and hysteria. Conrad’s means of honoring the seamen who knew and performed their duty is also the term by which we know the genuine socialist revolutionary in the anti- and postcolonial texts. Given the range of positions the form has been used to set forth, we may safely conclude that there is no inherent ideological valence in any narrative form, despite the vigorous claims of its various champions.

The chronicle form I have employed in this chapter, though lacking the dynamism of narrative proper, is nevertheless well suited to indicate the many direct and indirect connections or convergences among different narrative traditions over the past century. A number of obvious lines of descent immediately present themselves: The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ was one of Faulkner’s favorite books, Faulkner was carefully studied by Wright and Morrison and was considered by Vargas Llosa to be the paradigm of modern novelists; Ngugi is a keen reader of Conrad and a novelist widely read by later postcolonial authors; Rao admitted he derived this technique from Silone; and so forth.

If we look at these texts synchronically, we may determine other correspondences as well. An inventory of the most salient varieties of “we” narration, differentiated according to the degree to which they diverge from the poetics of realism, could be aligned as follows: 1) Conventional: the unproblematic case of a single narrator describing events experienced by him- or herself and others, as found in Faulkner’s simpler “we” stories, such as “That Evening Sun.” Technically, this is not really a “we” narration as I use the term above, but a first person singular narration that includes reference to others. 2) Standard: largely realistic narration that nevertheless stretches verisimilitude at key points, especially when the narrator discloses the inner thoughts or feelings of a group or when, as in Joan Chase’s novel, the “we” voice of shared experience and the third person accounts of each girl’s individual actions cannot be realistically squared. This is by far the most common form, found from Silone and Serge to Eugenides and Oates. 3) Nonrealistic: in the texts by Conrad, Wright, Armah, and Mda we have flagrant violations of the parameters of realistic representation. Conrad’s are done solemnly without remark and Mda’s are
self-consciously displayed; Wright’s and Armah’s narrators disclose sentiments that stretch over centuries and range across continents. 4) Anti-mimetic: the texts of Sarraute and Adams eschew realism altogether, and function instead as experimental constructions of multiple discourses that can inhabit a “we.”

This minimal classification can also help us pinpoint the distinctive theoretical differences of “we” narration: whenever a text uses a first person plural narrator to depict the thoughts of others, it necessarily straddles the line between first and third person fiction, as a homo-diegetic character narrator discloses that which can only be known by an external heterodiegetic intelligence. These narrations are thus simultaneously first and third person discourses, and transcend either subtly or flagrantly the foundational oppositions set forth in different ways by Stanzel and Genette.15 Whereas most second person narration oscillates between these two poles, “we” narration curiously occupies both at once.