

**“The Vagaries of *E Pluribus Unum*: First-Person Plural Narration in Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* and TaraShea Nesbit’s *The Wives of Los Alamos*”**

**Michaela Beck**

ABSTRACT: The ‘we’ narrator has been witnessing an apparent upswing in 21<sup>st</sup>-century U.S. fiction. Yet, still only a comparably small number of context-focused analyses have discussed this narrative voice so far. Further, inquiries into analyses of the ‘we’ narrator’s cultural and political implications have been repeatedly limited by an underlying association of narratives in the first-person plural with discursive acts of protest and resistance. Integrating text-centered and contextual approaches to the ‘we’ narrative voice, I draw on two examples, Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* and TaraShea Nesbit’s *The Wives of Los Alamos*, to propose that, in a contemporary U.S. context, this narrative voice is intertwined with both, the representation of counter-voices to dominant discourses and the allegorical reaffirmation of fundamental American myths pertinent to U.S. society and culture.

KEYWORDS: ‘we’ narrator, narratology, 21<sup>st</sup>-century novel, Joshua Ferris, TaraShea Nesbit, counter-voice, national allegory.

**Introduction: Reading the ‘We’ Narrator in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century U.S. Novels**

“We the People”—these words set at the opening of the Preamble to the United States Constitution signify the simultaneous invocation, reaffirmation, and self-address of a U.S. national collective. Yet, despite its apparent iconicity in such a non-fictional context, the communally speaking ‘we’ has not gained a comparable prominence in the realm of American fiction. As has been observed by Ruth Maxey, American literary texts employing the first-person plural, or ‘we’ narrator<sup>1</sup> have been a rare phenomenon (“Rise of the ‘We’” 2).<sup>2</sup> In light of this historical scarcity, the comparably large number of 21<sup>st</sup>-century American novels featuring a ‘we’ narrator is particularly remarkable (Maxey “Rise of the ‘We’” 7). So far, more than ten such ‘we’ narratives have been published since the turn of the millennium, including

---

<sup>1</sup> Drawing mainly on Bekhta’s definition of “we-narrative proper”, my use of the term “‘we’ narrator” refers to narrative situations in “which the first-person plural pronoun is used on both the level of discourse and on that of the story to designate the narrating instance(s) that are also the narrated entities” (Bekhta “A Definition” 113; cf. “We-Narratives” 168-71). As such, this understanding can be equated to the simultaneous form of Susan S. Lanser’s much broader concept of ‘communal narration’. (Lanser 21). Importantly, and as Bekhta herself also notes (“A Definition” 113, ft. 19), such definitions based on the respective deictic function of the first-person plural remain permeable to cases in which the ‘we’ is employed by an individual speaker (Cf. Marcus “We Are You” 12).

<sup>2</sup> The rarity of the first-person plural narrator is not specific to U.S.-American fiction (Richardson “Wandering Perspectives” 151; “‘We’ and ‘They’” 112; Bekhta “A Definition” 104).

Kate Walbert's *Our Kind* (2004), Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008), Hannah Pittard's *The Fates Will Find Their Way* (2011), David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), and TaraShea Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014).

Certainly, this apparent popularity of the 'we' narrator in contemporary American novels raises several issues, many of which remain to be examined (cf. Maxey "Rise of the 'We'" 3). This is not to say that communal narration has not been the object of scholarly attention. Certainly, narratological research, feminist scholarship, and individual analyses of the novels listed above have all contributed to the theoretization and understanding of this narrative voice.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, narratological analyses have not much focused on contextualizing the apparent popularity of the 'we' narrator in contemporary U.S. social and cultural discourses. Also—except for Maxey's work—individual analyses of one or more of the novels mentioned above have not discussed the implications of the first-person plural narrative voice in U.S.-American literature and culture beyond their scrutinized texts. Even more importantly, the complexity of the 'we' narrator's contextual significations has been repeatedly limited by readings which tend to associate this narrative voice primarily with discursive acts of problematizing or negating dominant discourses—whether that concerns Western, white, male, individualist paradigms of subjectivity questioned by the use of the 'we' narrator in postcolonial and/or gynocentric fiction<sup>4</sup> or a perceived socio-cultural mainstream in the United States today.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For narratological inquiries see, for instance, the works by Margolin ("Telling in the Plural"; "Telling Our Story"), Marcus ("We Are You"), Richardson ("We' and 'They'"), Fludernik ("The Many in Action and Thought"), and Bekhta ("We-Narratives"). For feminist perspectives, see Zagarell ("Narrative of Community") and Lanser (*Fictions of Authority*). For analyses of the novels mentioned cf. the inquiries by Maxey ("Rise of the 'We'"; "National Stories"), Meinig ("Empathizing"), and Schaberg ("The Work of Literature"), for example.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson's studies are a case in point (cf. *Unnatural* 46, 49, 56; "Wandering Perspectives" 151; "'We' and 'They'" 111f). For alternative approaches to the first-person plural narrative voice, see Marcus ("A Contextual View" 60) and Alber ("Social Minds" 213-214).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Maxey's works ("Rise of the 'We'"; "National Stories" 209). Even though Maxey does not propose to read the 'we' narrator only in relation to counter-narratives and -voices ("National Stories" 211, 213), her overall propositions concerning this narrative voice seem at points to prioritize a reading in terms of new, subversive, or alternative notions of an American 'we' (ibid. 209; "Rise of the 'We'" 9f.).

With this article, I aim to contribute to a more differentiated understanding of this unusual narrative voice in contemporary U.S.-American novels as well as its increasing prominence throughout the last decades. To this end, I discuss two examples, namely Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007) and TaraShea Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014). Drawing on narratological as well as text-centered and context-centered approaches to this narrative voice, I develop a twofold argument. On the one hand and in partial agreement with Maxey's propositions, I claim that the 'we' narrator in these texts emphasizes and frames a communal counter-voice to dominant narratives in the United States today. On the other hand, I furthermore argue that the apparent discourses of dissent in either of these novels are inextricably intertwined with—and even embedded in—their reaffirming of two foundational U.S.-American myths: the myth of the melting pot and, more importantly, the myth of a predominantly middle-class and hence classless society. Therefore, I propose that the 'we' narrator in novels like Ferris's and Nesbit's is not merely tied to countering certain prevailing narratives but also to renegotiating and ultimately reaffirming the dominant paradigms informing American national identity at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Then We Came to the End: 'We' Narration and/as Anti-Capitalist Critique***

In both, its explicit subject matter and its plot, *Then We Came to the End* engages critically with the economic reality of late capitalism in today's United States. Centering on a Chicago advertising agency in 2001, the novel depicts a group of white-collar workers, or 'creatives', all of whom work at the same office floor and serve as the story's communal focalizer and narrator. While focusing almost exclusively on the daily routines and mundane minutiae of its members' professional lives, the 'we' narrator also represents the unraveling of this community in the context of the economic recession of the very early 2000s, and thus the simultaneous disintegration of the communal narrative voice itself: As the group of employees diminishes due to massive layoffs, so does the group of the autodiegetic narrators.

Overall, Ferris's text delivers a satirical, yet also scathing critique of United States' late-capitalist society by causally linking the capitalist system with social atomization, alienation, and the absence or standardization of individual difference through both its content and its narrative voice. Regarding the storyworld, the novel highlights the notion of work-induced alienation and social disintegration by repeatedly describing the employees' isolation from

one another. On a physical level, this isolation manifests in the spatial layout of the novel's primary setting, as each creative is seated in Bartleby-esque fashion in either a cubicle or their own office (56, 58). On a more emotional-experiential level, their alienation becomes apparent in the various descriptions of interpersonal and communal bonds. Although the individual characters form a professional community of peers which "generated [...] [their] greatest sympathy" (19), the communal narrator also clarifies that this outward community is characterized by anonymity (123), a remarkable lack of interpersonal understanding (92), and mutual antipathy caused by enforced proximity (5, 91; cf. Maxey "National Stories" 212). Moreover, the 'we' narrator makes explicit that any notions of empathy are in fact impeded by the highly competitive, cut-throat nature of the characters' profession in the larger capitalist enterprise: As the narrating 'we' opines, "the real engine running the place is the primal desire to kill [...], to inspire jealousy, to defeat all the rest" (109). In Ferris's novel, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism not only entails a condition of profound social atomization; it even alienates individual employees "from [...] [their] better selves" (5).

*Then We Came to the End* also foregrounds images of standardization in its negotiation of U.S. late capitalism. Throughout the novel, it is indicated that the late capitalist differentiation between and catering to increasingly atomized consumer groups does not enable the constitution of a singular personality on part of the individual. Instead, it has the individual consumer conform to a standardized, reductive logic of branding<sup>6</sup> or, as Mathias Nilges has it, the dynamic of late capitalist "standardization of difference" (30). Ferris's text highlights this notion by drawing an explicit analogy between the fictional subjects and trademarks. This becomes visible in the following reasoning of one of the creatives, who is infuriated that a homeless man on the street has 'failed' to render himself a marketable label: "He was offended that the man just sat there for his money. Other bums had positioned themselves. They had brands. 'Vietnam Vet with AIDS.' 'Unemployed Mother of Three.' [...] This guy had nothing—no words on a piece of cardboard, not even a dog or some bongos" (60-61). The same reductive logic of individuation as branding and vice versa is suggested by the way in which the 'we' narrator describes and distinguishes between individual colleagues at the office. Given the utter lack of intimate interpersonal relationships within the diegetic

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also David Foster Wallace: "In our post-'50, inseparable-from-TV association pool, brand loyalty is synecdochic of identity, character" (167).

community, these fictional entities are rendered flat characters, rather than complex ones. They are reduced to a personal name-as-brand accompanied by a very limited set of general features. For example, the character Jim Jackers is thus introduced as “the eager redhead [...],” whereas the name Benny Shassburger signifies “the slightly heavysset, dough-faced Jewish guy with the corkscrew curls and quick laugh” (9). Consequently, even though the narrator explicitly comments on the great variety regarding the individual characters (9), these and similar examples of labelling also reduce their complexity to a very limited range of characteristics and so align the characters’ expressions of individual difference with the standardizing dynamics of branding in late capitalism.

The textual dynamics of the ‘we’ narrator in the novel are intertwined with and further reinforce these images of social atomization, alienation, and lack of individual identity on the discursive level. This has also been observed by Maxey, who claims that the ‘we’ narrator in Ferris’s novel is employed “to represent U.S. corporate life and [...] to investigate ideas of [...] American consumerism” (“National Stories” 209-10). As Maxey suggests (*ibid.* 211f.), this is primarily achieved through the exploitation of what Uri Margolin has delineated as the semantic instability of the ‘we’ narrative voice:

Whenever more than two agents are involved in a ‘we’ state or action description, the exact scope of ‘we’ may remain ambiguous, since it may cover most, but not all members of [...] [a given group], since it may or may not include the speaker, and since its reference group may consist of somewhat different subsets of [...] [the given group] on different occasions of use. (“Telling Our Story” 132)

As such, the same signifier ‘we’ in a given text might stand for a variety of potentially changing reference groups of which the speaker may or may not be a member—with the result that readers of a ‘we’ narrative cannot necessarily identify the members of the speaking community.

This referential indeterminacy of the ‘we’ narrator is particularly foregrounded in Ferris’s text. Although the communal voice continues to speak as ‘we’ throughout the novel, it refers to a changing repertoire of its individual members in the third person (cf. Maxey “National Stories” 212). Because of this, it cannot be ascertained which members of the professional community are actually speaking as part of the ‘we’ at any given moment in the narrative. On the discursive level of the novel, “it is [thus] impossible to pin down the identity of ‘we’ or ‘us’” (*ibid.*). In addition, the reference group of the ‘we’ narrator also changes over the course of

the narrative. The economic recession and the subsequent layoffs diminish the community of advertising creatives, as characters are excluded from the encompassing 'we' the very moment they are fired. This exclusion is represented by the shift from personal names to the pronoun 'they' as collective reference for these characters: "We knew Neil Hotchkiss and Cora Lee Brower and Harold Oak. [...] They had been let go. They packed their things. They left us for good, never to return" (24).

As such, the 'we' narrator's semantic instability interacts with and matches the motive of social atomization on the discursive level of Ferris's text: Like other 'we' narratives, which may "use [...] referential ambiguities to subvert the initial dichotomy between a certain group of people, 'we', and another group, 'they,'" in order to "demonstrat[e] the instability of this community" (Marcus "We Are You" 3), *Then We Came to the End* employs these characteristics of the communal narrator to emphasize the individual isolation of its narrating characters and the gradual disintegration of the diegetic community. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the 'we' narrator serves to mirror and highlight the diegetic images of lacking individuality and standardized difference, as the referential instability of this narrative voice hampers the processes of character individuation (cf. Maxey "Rise of the 'We'" 9). Specifically, the largely anonymous and shifting makeup of the narrating community constantly interferes with the reader's ability to ascribe defining attributes to the characters and to differentiate between them. As Margolin has explained with regard to such non-actual individuals in general, characterization and character-building are hampered whenever "it is not clear which properties belong to which agent," "when property sets are freely interchangeable among individuals," "or when all agents assume the same mass-produced, replicable masks" ("Introducing and Sustaining Characters" 116). In Ferris's text, these limitations on character individuation are further thrown into relief by the fact that "characters are generally spoken for," so that all information concerning these characters is mediated through the voice of the amorphous and largely undefined 'we' (Maxey "National Stories" 211). To sum up these observations, the foregrounding of the 'we' narrator's semantic instability in Ferris's novel co-productively intersects with, and reinforces the diegetic criticism of standardization, social atomization, and alienation in U.S. late capitalist society.

### ***The Wives of Los Alamos: Countering the All-American 'We'***

In comparison to Ferris's text, TaraShea Nesbit's historical novel *The Wives of Los Alamos* seems to be much less directly concerned with the 21<sup>st</sup> century at first glance. As its title already indicates, the narrative is communally focalized and narrated by the fictionalized wives of the scientists who participated in the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos. The novel mediates the experiences of these women in chronological fashion, starting with their arrival at the site in 1943 and ending with their departure after the end of World War II. In so doing, the text also represents the processes through which the assembly of women from Europe and the U.S. are induced to form an allied, yet also comparably homogenous, All-American community. Of course, the negotiation of such notions of conformity in Nesbit's novel can be read as direct references to the invocations of American national belonging in the context of World War II. However, particularly against the backdrop of frequent comparisons between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 in depictions of and cultural reactions to the attacks in 2001,<sup>7</sup> the foregrounding of these notions in Nesbit's novel also calls to mind—and can be read as an implicit commentary on—assertions of an “ultra-patriotic post-9/11 version of American nationhood” that is directly opposed to an external ‘them’ (Holloway 109): In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration drew extensively on “political Manichaeism” (Versluys 150) by dividing the world into a united, homogenous, and good ‘us’ and an equally homogenous, evil ‘them’ (Kearney 111f.). Likewise, the mass media covering and discussing September 11 also “displayed a remarkable unanimity in the meanings that they attributed to the day's events” (Holloway 60). I propose in partial concurrence with Maxey that Nesbit's text intertwines the specific dynamics of the ‘we’ narrative voice with its discussion of these discourses, and that the novel thereby suggests an “alternative American ‘we’” (“National Stories” 209; cf. Maxey “Rise of the ‘We’” 9f.) to the dominant notion of national belonging and conformity in the wake of 9/11.

Discourses of conformity and the entailed loss of individual agency are central motives on both the diegetic level and the level of discourse in Nesbit's novel. On the level of the storyworld, it is repeatedly emphasized how the group of women are silenced, disenfranchised, and coerced to conform as soon as they arrive at the site of Los Alamos. For instance,

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Brian T. Connor (1-2), Deborah J. Schildkraut (511-512), and Geoffrey M. White (294).

the notion of conformity is implied in the following distinction made by the narrating group of women between the various professional or semi-professional designations to refer to themselves before their time at Los Alamos and their reference to the much more general “wives and mothers” to describe themselves at the time of and after their arrival there:

Before we arrived at Los Alamos as wives and mothers we had been teachers in Seattle, housewives in New Jersey, watercolorists in Nebraska, writers in Des Moines, chemists at Harvard, and one of us had been a dancer in the Chicago ballet. Ingrid, Marie, Pauline, and Marjorie all had B.S.s in mathematics with minors in home economics [...]. (64)

Referencing a similar notion of conformity, the female characters further recount how they felt the need to dismiss their non-American backgrounds and to commit to a homogenous All-American ‘we’, lest they be socially isolated or themselves counted among the potential enemies of this community:

We [...] had to suffer through films that asked, *Why are we Americans on the March?* [...] The answer to that question was: *For freedom.* [...] *They gave up their power,* the film said, and *they* meant non-Americans, citizens of other countries. [...] We were Italians and we clenched our teeth; or we were Germans and we laughed out loud [...] And [...] if we had wanted to make a scene, to say *This is wrong,* we would [...] walk out. But where would we go and whose mind would it have changed? We would be back in our drafty living room [...] worrying that our new friends might think us suspect. (50-51)

Additionally, the description of Los Alamos itself as the temporary homestead of the narrating community manifests notions of enforced uniformity, which contrast with and subdue the women’s international and educational diversity: Upon arriving, the women and their families move into “rows and rows of identical houses” (20), which “[are] all painted the same olive color” (27). At the same time, it is also shown how the professional and international diversity of these women’s voices themselves is subdued and silenced by the regulations and restrictions tied to the Manhattan Project: Because they are forbidden to leak any information concerning Los Alamos, the women are highly restricted in their communications with the outside world and with one another (8, 42). Consequently, this national project is being associated with a twofold discourse of enforced conformity and the suppression of individual difference: Not only are the women reduced to the roles of mothers and wives in their daily



actions, but their voices are also being restricted to the innocuous, yet also highly general and uniform themes of motherhood and marriage (97f.).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Nesbit's novel further emphasizes the impression of conformity on part of its narrating characters through the specific framing and structuring of depictions of the women's individual differences. The narrative is divided into very short chapters which only rarely narrate specific plots, but which are mostly dedicated to specific themes or subjects, such as "Cooking" (47-48), "Our Husbands" (41), or "Our Children" (115-117). These chapters catalogue the individual perspectives and differences of the women with regard to these subjects in paratactical fashion and often employ anaphoric constructions to do so. Consider, for instance, the following sentences: "Our husbands, the only cellist in town. Our husbands, as playful and naïve as our little boys, our husbands deep in thought, our husbands walking into telephone poles, our husbands' ongoing drama of the misplaced reading glasses" (43). Although this and similar passages arguably generate a first impression of variation, the combination of anaphoric and parallel sentence structures also contains these notions of difference within a frame of sameness: Despite their individual differences, the members of the communal narrator are still predominantly defined by their outward commonalities at Los Alamos—their husbands, their children, their uniform houses. At the same time, such lists of variation also serve to level disparities by accumulating and amassing them in the overall text.<sup>9</sup> As such, the individual distinction and differences of the narrating characters are paradoxically reduced by being listed in the manner depicted.

These representations of conformity intersect with and are in turn emphasized by the textual dynamics of the 'we' narrative voice on the discursive level of the novel. In similarity to Ferris's text, *The Wives of Los Alamos* particularly emphasizes and exploits the semantic fluidity and referential ambiguities of its narrative voice to this end. For one, the overall reference group of the narrating 'we' in this novel is just as malleable as the reference group of Ferris's 'we' narrator. Starting with only five women, the all-female narrating community in Nesbit's novel

---

<sup>8</sup> The described discussion of enforced conformity in Nesbit's novel can thus also be read as a critical negotiation of gender roles as well as their associated power relations.

<sup>9</sup> Here, I draw on an argument by Barbara A. Biesecker, who states the following concerning the depiction of diversity in Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*: "When viewed together [...] serialization displaces sequence, and the negation of difference is effected through its pluralization. [...] [A] paratactical logic reduces the asymmetries [...] to equivalence, interchangeability, invisibility" (401).

grows “to at least fifteen hundred people in one year’s time” (82). Yet, the reader is not given any further information, so that the specific makeup and the boundaries of the narrating community remain even more ambiguous than in Ferris’s text. Further, most of the communal narrator’s members are anonymous: Although some of the wives of Los Alamos are identified by name, most of the women remain unnamed. Finally, the ‘we’ narrator in the text almost continuously employs the first-person plural to narrate individual experience and to make particularizations, utilizing the ‘we’ for descriptions of apparently singular experiences,<sup>10</sup> as for example in the following account: “At home, we brought out the vacuum, though we had just cleaned the carpet that morning. Under the loud hum of the machine, where our neighbors could not hear us, we sobbed” (138).

This utilization of the first-person plural narrator generates a communal voice that is largely anonymous and amorphous. Further, and in similarity to the dynamics discussed with regard to narrative voice and character individuation in Ferris’s novel, this use of the communal narrator in *The Wives of Los Alamos* almost completely impedes the processes of characterization and character building: Given that individual experience, perspective, and voice cannot be associated with any one character, the attribution of properties to specific narrative agents in this novel is also largely impossible. Thus, on the discursive level, the dynamics of the ‘we’ narrator in Nesbit’s text co-productively interrelate with the explicit depictions of the women’s incorporation into a largely homogenous and almost anonymous collective. Just as these women are made to move into identical houses and to suppress or silence their internationally diverse backgrounds in favor of an All-American ‘we’ at Los Alamos, so are their individual voices assimilated into the all-encompassing, yet undefined and malleable ‘we’ on the level of narrative transmission. Put differently, Nesbit’s exploitation of the ‘we’ narrator is intertwined with and further emphasizes the novel’s diegetic depiction of an overly dominant prescription of All-American ‘we’-ness—both regarding appeals to national unanimity in the context of World War II and, by extension, with respect to post-9/11 invocations of national (comm-)unity and conformity in binary opposition to an external ‘them’.

---

<sup>10</sup> On this, see also Richardson (“‘We’ and ‘They’” 209).

## **Allegorical Readings of the ‘We’: Narrating the Exceptional(ist) Nation**

So far, I have argued that Ferris’s and Nesbit’s novels exploit the dynamics of the ‘we’ narrator for representing apparent counter-voices to major socio-cultural discourses or dominant paradigms in the U.S. today. The second part of this article aims to add to and complicate this first reading of the ‘we’ narrative voice by tracing how these expressions of “an alternative American ‘we’” (Maxey “National Stories” 209) are embedded in and reinforce two master narratives within U.S. cultural thinking: the myth of the melting pot and, particularly, the myth of American classlessness. Despite their appearing as marginal or counter-narratives to dominant discourses in the United States today, Ferris’s and Nesbit’s novels also function as allegories of the U.S. at large (Maxey “National Stories” 210), insofar as they “narrate one coherent set of circumstances which signify a second order of correlated meanings” (Abrams 6). Specifically, they can be read in line with other 21<sup>st</sup>-century U.S. national allegories, which negotiate “national themes by means of a restricted set of characters and scenes” (Irr 522). The two primary texts do so by fashioning their narrating communities as synecdochic representations of U.S. society at large and by intertwining their respective fates with historic events or developments of national significance.

In *The Wives of Los Alamos*, this allegorical dimension becomes visible in two ways. On the one hand, the novel’s direct and implied historical references embed the women’s submission to an all-American ‘we’ within the larger contexts of national calls for unity during World War II and, by extension, similar calls for all-American unanimity and eruptions of jingoism in the aftermath of 9/11. On the other hand, the formation of the narrating community in Nesbit’s novel is also directly linked to the project of U.S.-American nation building. In one sense, this association is visible in the novel’s depiction of Los Alamos, New Mexico, which likens the site to a frontier settlement that requires both material and civilizational ordering as well as domestication: The site is depicted as being geographically isolated (24); many of the houses are not yet erected or unfinished when the first families arrive in 1943 (21f.); fundamental infrastructural facilities such as paved roads are still absent (27); and the supply with fresh water and food is often unreliable (25f., 28, 32, 40, 109f.). Against this backdrop, it can further be argued with reference to Kaplan’s concept of ‘Manifest Domesticity’ that the subjugation of the women’s individual difference equals an analogous, internal “civilizing process” (601) that parallels the exterior discourses of nation-building and of domesticating the metaphorical

wilderness which the setting of Los Alamos represents. By means of these implications, the narrating community of Nesbit's novel is thus rendered a U.S. society *in nuce*, and is tied to the national project as such.

In Ferris's novel, the eponymous end of the narrating professional community is obviously embedded in the larger context of the economic recession at the turn of the millennium. Even more suggestive, however, is the novel's identification of the 'we' narrator's disintegration with the attacks on September 11, 2001: Toward the end of the narrative, an implicit reference to the events on 9/11 not only reiterates the novel's title but also cuts off the 'we' narrator's description of the ongoing diminishment of the professional community: "In the last week of August 2001, and in the first ten days of that September, there were more layoffs than in all the months preceding them. But by the grace of god, the rest of us hung on, hating each other more than we ever thought possible. Then we came to the end of another bright and tranquil summer" (357). By juxtaposing the national trauma of 9/11 and the small-scale drama of the narrating community's dissolution, Ferris's novel intertwines the story of its restricted set of characters not only with the larger context of the economic recession but also with the impression of a violent end to the U.S. national 'we' as it had been previously perceived or depicted.

In sum, the respective reference groups of the 'we' narrators in Nesbit's and Ferris's novels obviously function not only as counterpublics but they also serve as models of the U.S. and its current trajectory at large. Yet, in having their narrating communities serve as such national exemplars, I argue, the two 'we' narratives by Ferris and Nesbit also reaffirm the two dominant paradigms or myths mentioned above. To begin with, this concerns the idealized understanding of the United States as a nation built from the consensus of (inter-)nationally diverse influences, which finds its most well-known expression in the motto *E Pluribus Unum*. In the words of Heike Paul, this national "foundational myth evokes a vision of national unity and cohesion through participation in a harmonious [...] community that [...] molds [...] [new members] into a new 'race [...]'" (258).

While Ferris's novel references this myth by having its ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse community of advertisement creatives (8-9, 92, 111) serve as an—albeit ambivalently conceived—exemplar of *E Pluribus Unum* (Maxey "National Stories" 210f.), it is particularly Nesbit's 'we' narrative which most vividly engages with and reaffirms this myth of the melting

pot. Although the novel explicitly criticizes an overly dominant prescription of All-American 'we'-ness and gives expression to an alternative 'we' to this discourse, *The Wives of Los Alamos* also proposes itself a model of national belonging that reaffirms the "vision of national unity" which "molds [...] [new members] into a new 'race [...]" (Paul 258). That is, Nesbit's novel forwards a notion of citizenship which is built on the individual's voluntary dismissal of difference in favor of a united, undifferentiated, All-American 'we'. This can be seen when Nesbit's narrative is compared to other recent popular cultural representations of World War II. As Biesecker has argued in her discussion of such commemorative textualizations of this war, they "constitute one of the primary means through which a renewed sense of national belonging is [...] packaged and delivered to U.S. audiences" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (394). Specifically, Biesecker asserts, these representations function as pedagogies for a notion of citizenship in which national belonging is achieved by their readers' and audiences' "willed disregard" for social, cultural, and other differences (400). This dynamic also pertains to Nesbit's novel. As has been shown above, the all-female 'we' narrator openly criticizes the enforced conformity experienced at the town of Los Alamos. Yet, the women also describe how they themselves choose to disregard their individual differences to form a community during their stay at that place:

[T]ogether, we were a mob of women armed with baby bottles and canned goods, demanding a larger commissary, and we got it. We were more than *I*, we were *Us*. We were *Us* despite our desire for singularity. We were the *Us* that organized the town council and nominated Starla to speak for the group. (127-28)

Importantly, while the consolidation of this 'Us' at Los Alamos might be seen as a means of enfranchisement for each of the women, it is above all associated with their ability of building a community that, in turn, serves as a synecdochic representation of the U.S. as society and nation. Further, if read in the context of the novel's allegorical references mentioned above, the formation of such a community in Nesbit's text illustrates and promotes a model of citizenship which is built on the willful dismissal of individual difference in service of symbolic as well as physical nation-building: Reigning in and thus metaphorically domesticating the individual female self is not only depicted as a necessity for the women's individual survival, but it is also cast as their civic responsibility in order to ensure the consolidation and growth

of the larger communal and—it is implied—national project of which they are a part.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the same implications are associated with the formation of the communal narrative voice on the discursive and even metafictional level of Nesbit's text. After all, it is only by giving up their individual voices in favor of a communally narrating 'we' that the women are able to communicate their own story and to participate in the construction and commemoration of a narrative of national history. As such, the depiction of community formation and the use of the 'we' narrative voice in Nesbit's text is also intertwined with and perpetuates the U.S.-American myth of the melting pot: The novel's diegetic and discursive processes of community formation clearly resonate with both the construction of "patriotic narrative[s] of duty" in other depictions of Los Alamos (Jack 231) and the pedagogies for citizenship that "induce [...] readers to enact the fantasy of the undifferentiated 'We' of 'We the People'" in recent popular textualizations of World War II (Biesecker 401).

### **The 'Middle-Classlessness' of 'Us'**

As indicated above, Nesbit's and Ferris's 'we' narratives also reference and perpetuate the master narrative, or myth, of the U.S. being a predominantly middle-class and hence classless society. In the words of Andrew Hoberek, "[t]he myth of America as a classless—because universally or at least potentially universally middle-class—nation has a long history [...]" (3). The two primary texts reinforce this myth by reaffirming and naturalizing the cultural hegemony of the American middle class, as they each associate their narrating/-ed communities with a specifically white middle-class position and perspective. In doing so, the texts not only depict these communities as allegorical models of the U.S., but they also negotiate their specific socio-economic position as representative of U.S. society and culture.<sup>12</sup> In Nesbit's text, the white middle-class status of the communal narrator is primarily negotiated with regard to the private sphere, and specifically in relation to the nuclear family and the individual home: The white members of the 'we' narrator are clearly distinguished from the Native American women whom they partly befriend, yet also exploit as domestic

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. again Kaplan (601).

<sup>12</sup> This dynamic is interrelated with the national allegorical dimension of Nesbit's and Ferris's texts. As Irr points out, 21<sup>st</sup>-century national allegorical texts focus on one specific class which "speaks on behalf of 'America,' its vulnerable people, fragile ideals and uncertain destiny" (532).

help (57-63).<sup>13</sup> Further, although the wives of Los Alamos are associated with a middle-class socio-economic position on grounds of the scientific, white-collar work of their husbands, the repeated descriptions of house-keeping and child-raising serve as even more potent markers of cultural and economic distinction in this context. For example, in the chapter “Other Women’s Children”, the narrating group of wives clearly distinguish themselves from mothers and fathers who screamed at or physically punished their children by asserting that “[t]hose parents worked with their hands” (155). In this context, the expression “worked with their hands” obviously contains a double entendre: While it explicitly refers to a physically violent parenting style as the reason for the women’s desire to distinguish themselves from these other men and women, it also implicitly points to the stigmatization of manual labor as the underlying reason for this desired distinction. As such, the negotiation of private matters—in this case parenting—serves to delineate the middle-class boundaries within which the members of the ‘we’ narrator situate themselves.

In *Then We Came to the End*, the specific middle-class positioning of the diegetic and narrating community is tied to the white-collar work of creating advertisements. This is made obvious when the professional community recounts their earlier belief that their economic position was superior and hence impervious to the impact of the larger economic recession: “We thought ourselves immune from things like plant closings in Iowa and Nebraska, where remote Americans struggled [...]. We watched these blue-collar workers” (18). In addition to this explicit economic positioning, the middle-class status of the narrating characters is also implied by their modes of consumption and affluent lifestyle:

At the national level things had worked out pretty well in our favor and entrepreneurial cash was easy to come by. [...] And how lovely it was, a bike ride around the forest preserve on a Sunday in May with our mountain bikes, water bottles, and safety helmets” [...]. New hair products were being introduced into the marketplace [...] and the glass shelves of our stylists were stocked with tidy rows of them. (7-8)

---

<sup>13</sup> The implied discourse of “imperial domesticity” (Kapan 586) in Nesbit’s novel further ties in with the negotiation of the communal narrator as being specifically white (ibid. 582).

As these examples show, Ferris's and Nesbit's texts associate their diegetic collectives with a white middle-class status and position, which they thus generalize by negotiating these communities as representative of the U.S. at large.

Further, it can be argued with Hoberek, Ohmann, and others that the two primary texts even further perpetuate the U.S. middle class's cultural hegemony, and hence reaffirm the myth of American "middle-classlessness" (Hoberek 3) by drawing on the motive of conformity, which the first part of this article has discussed: Although differing with regard to the details of their argument, Hoberek, Ohmann, Jurca, and others have claimed that post-World-War-II American fiction helped universalize the U.S. middle-class-specific concerns and positionality through narratives of threatened individuality or individual agency. According to their arguments, such narratives translate socio-economic or socio-cultural anxieties into the apparently existential conflict between society and the individual, and so transform the specific issues of the white<sup>14</sup> middle class into concerns that are not only shared throughout U.S. society but also tied to the notion of individual subjectivity in general (Hoberek 4, 8; Ohmann 217; Jurca 6, 15). That is, these narratives reaffirm the hegemonic position of the American white middle class by universalizing and naturalizing its issues and perspective.

In this context, the frequently used motives of conformity and lost individual agency in the two primary texts can thus be understood in the sense explained by Hoberek and others: These motives may be read as a narrative strategy for translating the specifically middle-class issues and perspectives of the novels' communal character-narrators into universally shared concerns. For instance, while Ferris's text explicitly mentions the anxieties of its middle-class 'we' narrator in the face of the economic downturn, the novel's simultaneous focus on and criticism of notions of social atomization and uniformity frame these specific concerns in an allegorical narrative of late capitalist dystopia. By means of this narrative strategy, the novel thus implies that these issues are not specific to the white-collar employees depicted in the text, but that they are instead shared by all workers in a capitalist society. In other words,

---

<sup>14</sup> The described dynamic equally ties in with the normativization of whiteness. As Catherine Jurca points out with reference to Ruth Frankenberg, narratives of white middle-class subjects' dissatisfaction with a perceived 'blandness' and standardization are premised on and reaffirm the understanding of whiteness as racially and ethnically unmarked space (17-18).



Ferris's text draws on the narrative tropes of conformity and lost individual agency to naturalize the specifically white middle-class concerns and perspective of its diegetic and narrating community.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, the specific use of the 'we' narrator in both primary texts can be seen to interact with and support this strategy in several ways. As I have argued above, the textual dynamics of this narrative voice hamper the processes of character individuation. As such, the 'we' narrator thereby further highlights the universalizing narrative of lost individuality and individual agency which Ohmann, Hoberek, and others have discussed. Yet, if read in this context, the lack of character individuation entailed by the 'we' narrative voice in the primary texts has arguably two additional ramifications. In one sense, the indistinguishability of the narrating characters implicitly reinforces their normative, and therefore hegemonic position in U.S. society and culture. That is, if the middle-class characters in Ferris's and Nesbit's texts are marked by their precise lack of distinction, this lack also underwrites the assumption that these predominantly white middle-class characters are the 'unmarked', and hence normative center of society (Cf. Jurca 17-18). Moreover, the lack of distinguishing markers on part of the communally narrating characters may also induce or foster identification processes on part of the reader. As Marcus has argued, a "more general and abstract" depiction of the narrating group supports "the narrator's attempt to establish a community with the reader through the use of the first-person plural" ("We Are You" 8).

Overall, the implications of the 'we' narrator in the two novels are intertwined with the discourse of naturalizing a white middle-class perspective via narratives of conformity. As such, the use of the 'we' narrative voice in Nesbit's and Ferris's novels interacts with and reaffirms not only the master narrative of a U.S.-American *E Pluribus Unum* but also the national myth of American (white) 'middle-classlessness'.

### **Conclusion: Contemporary U.S. 'We' Narratives and the Vagaries of *E Pluribus Unum***

By drawing on both text-centered and contextual approaches to the 'we' narrative voice in the readings of Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* and Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos*, I have

---

<sup>15</sup> Arguably, the novel's focus on Hank Neary, the African American, gay character-novelist and ultimately implied first-person narrator only apparently contrasts with the normativization of the white middle class in the overall narrative (Maxey "National Stories" 210-211, 213).

traced the ambivalent contextual implications of the ‘we’ narrator in these two texts. On the one hand, my readings have substantiated Maxey’s propositions concerning the use of the ‘we’ narrator in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American novels (“Rise of the ‘We’” 9f.; “National Stories” 209): It has been demonstrated that both novels intertwine the textual dynamics of this narrative voice with their criticism of apparent mainstream, or dominant discourses in today’s U.S., and so frame an alternative American ‘we’ to these discourses. On the other hand, the readings have also contributed to a more complex understanding of the ‘we’ narrator in this context: It has been shown that the dynamics of the ‘we’ narrator in these novels are also intertwined with, and perpetuate, the myth of the melting pot and the master narrative of American (middle-)classlessness. Based on these readings, I propose to read the ‘we’ narrator in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American novels not merely in connection to the representation and mediation of counter-narratives or -voices. Although the subject certainly asks for more research, I suggest that in this context the first-person plural narrator is employed to readjust as well as to perpetuate an exceptionalist understanding of American national identity at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, the ‘rise’ of this narrative voice in recent U.S. novels points to an ongoing literary renegotiation as well as reaffirmation of *E Pluribus Unum* in its different implications: Nesbit’s and Ferris’s ‘we’ narratives imply that the self-reference of the U.S. national community today can be phrased as both “we out of many” and “out of the many, we”.

### Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed, Heinle & Heinle Thomson Learning, 1999, p. 6.
- Alber, Jan. “The Social Minds in Factual and Fictional We-Narratives of the Twentieth Century.” *NARRATIVE*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2015, pp. 213–25.
- Bekhta, Natalya. “Emerging Narrative Situations: A Definition of We-Narratives Proper.” *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*, edited by Per Krogh Hansen et al., De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 101–26.
- . “We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration.” *NARRATIVE*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 164–81.
- Biesecker, Barbara A. “Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 88, no. 4, 2002, pp. 393–409.
- Connor, Brian T. “9/11 – A New Pearl Harbor? Analogies, Narratives, and Meanings of 9/11 in Civil Society.” *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2012, pp. 3–25.
- Ferris, Joshua. *Then We Came to the End*. Little, Brown and Co, 2007.

- Fludernik, Monika. "The Many in Action and Thought: Towards a Poetics of the Collective in Narrative." *NARRATIVE*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 139–63.
- Hoberek, Andrew. Introduction. *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work, 2005*. pp. 1-33.
- Holloway, David. *9/11 and the War on Terror*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Irr, Caren. "Postmodernism in Reverse: American National Allegories and the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Political Novel." *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3/4, 2011, pp. 516–38.
- Jurca, Catherine. *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Kaplan, Amy. "Manifest Domesticity." *American Literature*, vol. 70, no. 3, 1998, pp. 581–606.
- Kearney, Richard. *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. Routledge, 2003.
- Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Marcus, Amit. "A Contextual View of Narrative Fiction in the First-Person Plural." *NARRATIVE*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2008, pp. 46–64.
- . "We Are You: The Plural and the Dual in 'We' Fictional Narrative." *JLS*, vol. 37, 2008, pp. 1–21.
- Margolin, Uri. "Introducing and Sustaining Characters in Literary Narrative: A Set of Conditions." *Style*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1987, pp. 107–24.
- . "Telling in the Plural: From Grammar to Ideology." *Poetics Today*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2000, pp. 591–618.
- . "Telling Our Story: On 'We' Literary Narratives." *Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1996, pp. 115–33.
- Maxey, Ruth. "National Stories and Narrative Voice in the Fiction of Joshua Ferris." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2016, pp. 208–16.
- . "The Rise of the 'We' Narrator in Modern American Fiction." *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1–13.
- Meinig, Sigrun. "Empathizing with the Experience of Cultural Change: Reflections on Contemporary Fiction on Work." *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Routledge, 2014, pp. 107–18.
- Nesbit, TaraShea. *The Wives of Los Alamos: A Novel*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Nilges, Mathias. "The Anti-Anti Oedipus: Representing Post-Fordist Subjectivity." *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 27–70.
- Ohmann, Richard. "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1983, pp. 199–223.
- Paul, Heike. *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Transcript Verlag, 2014.

- Richardson, Brian. "Plural Focalization, Singular Voices: Wandering Perspectives in 'We'-Narration." *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modeling Mediation in Narrative*, edited by Peter Hühn et al., Walter de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 143–62.
- . "Representing Social Minds: 'We' and 'They' Narratives, Natural and Unnatural." *NARRATIVE*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2015, pp. 200–12.
- . *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Ohio State University Press, 2006.
- Schaberg, Christopher. "The Work of Literature in the Age of the Office." *Merchants, Barons, Sellers and Suits: The Changing Images of the Businessman through Literature*, edited by Christa Mahalik, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 219–35.
- Schildkraut, Deborah J. "The More Things Change ... American Identity and Mass and Elite Responses to 9/11." *Political Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2002, pp. 511–35.
- Versluys, Kristiaan. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1993, pp. 151–94.
- White, Geoffrey M. "National Subjects: September 11 and Pearl Harbor." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2004, pp. 293–310.
- Zagarell, Sandra A. "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre." *Narrative of Community. Women's Short Story Sequences*, edited by Roxanne Harde, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 449–79. Originally published in *Signs* vol. 13, no. 3, 1988, pp. 498–527.