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The Stories of Some*bodies*

Collective Telling, Seeing, and Knowing in Natalya Bekhta's *We-Narratives*

Natalya Bekhta: *We-Narratives. Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction.* Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2020 (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series). 203 pp. USD 79.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1421-4411

For many readers of fiction, the use of specific literary forms and techniques is unlikely to register consciously: it's more likely a text will leave broad impressions rather than a sense of its individual strokes. That is, as James Phelan (2017, 47) has observed, "until some close-reading, probability-obsessed narrative theorist points [them] out." In her fresh and timely monograph *We-Narratives. Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction* (2020), Natalya Bekhta self-consciously adopts the role of this close-reading, detail-oriented narratologist as she highlights and fleshes out one of such technical strokes: a form she labels 'we-narrative.'

Despite the fact that stories are tightly tied to the social, very little work within narratology has paid attention to 'we-narration,' to a properly plural narrator who thinks and acts as a group. How might literature, Bekhta asks, *perform* the plural? While much of the book caters to a specialist audience of narratologists and ongoing discussions within the field, there's something deeply intuitive and appealing about reading Bekhta's work in our contemporary moment – a moment filled with both devastating collective crises and energizing collective mobilizations. Within literary spheres, there's anecdotal evidence to suggest the past two decades have seen "a considerable increase" in novels employing forms of collective storytelling like the "we-voice" (p. 2, n. 1). Bekhta's work resides in this literary sphere. While often acknowledging the broader cultural connections of her work, *We-Narratives* is grounded in narrative theory, offering a formal definition of we-narration and an "extensive account of its properties and effects" (p. 177). To achieve this and add to "the critical vocabulary of forms of contemporary fiction" (p. 19), Bekhta's monograph is loosely structured around defining we-narratives, exploring plural discourse, perspectives, and epistemology, and considering the dynamics and demarcations of collectives.

We-Narratives Defined and Situated

The book's introduction and first two chapters build on Bekhta's 2017 article, "We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration."[1] Together, these chapters define, develop, and contextualize we-narrative as a "new narrative situation" (p. 1). This new narrative situation involves the narrator "speaking, acting, and thinking as a collective narrative agent and possessing a collective subjectivity" (p. 11). Importantly, a we-narrative is characterized by its inability to be reduced to single subject, an "I-voice" (ibid.). This definition is rooted in rhetorical narratology's contention that narrative is essentially a communicative act – "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (Phelan 2017, 5). Embedding *We-Narratives* within the broad frame of rhetorical narratology allows Bekhta to foreground we-narrative's characteristic "group narrator" and to cleverly summarize her intervention as narrative situations in which "'somebody' turns into 'some*bodies*'" (p. 11).

We-narratives, as Bekhta explains, frequently involve a degree of instability and fluidity that is both productive and challenging; the first-person plural is a site of negotiation between different subjectivities, scales, diegetic levels, and boundaries. How then, might we understand, categorize, and show this narrative situation at work? Bekhta approaches this question by introducing and exploring we-narrative through a "paradigmatic" example of the form: William Faulkner's 1930 gothic tale, "A Rose for Emily." Via Faulkner's short story, Bekhta foreshadows a number of the book's key concerns: the establishment and infringement of communal boundaries, the ethics of taking a collective perspective, and the ability of the unstable we-referent to account for specific subgroups and diverse perspectives and knowledges. In a careful reading of Faulkner's story, Bekhta highlights how the following passage manages the latter concern:

> **Our** whole town went to her funeral: **the men** through a sort of respectful attention for a fallen monument, **the women** mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house. (Faulkner qtd. in Bekhta, p.7; NB emphasis)

While the use of 'we' might risk flattening out differences and homogenizing the voice of a group, the practice of singling out the thoughts and behaviours of subgroups before reincorporating them into the whole "diversifies the communal voice" and "points to its complex construction and the different social strands of which 'we' consists and the various subgroups from which 'we' draw 'our' knowledge" (p. 7). The chapter stays with fictional stories; however, it is easy to map the significance of this insight beyond the parameters of literary inquiry: attention to the diversity of the communal voice seems particularly pertinent for a collective crisis like climate change where the use of the pronoun 'we' often conflates vastly different degrees of human involvement and responsibility.

How 'We' Narrate

Chapter 1, "We-Narrative: The First-Person Plural Narrative Situation," moves from defining the concept of we-narrative to developing and contextualizing it within both narratological scholarship and broader discussions of collectivity. 'We-narrative' is a malleable term and to develop it first requires specifying how we are to understand the 'we.' To clarify this, Bekhta turns to the work of her theoretical forebears like Susan S. Lanser, Uri Margolin, Brian Richardson, Amit Marcus, and Monika Fludernik. Bekhta notes how her work "builds directly" on Lanser's landmark publication *Fictions of Authority* (1992), which drew attention to the use of "communal voice" and the construction of authority in fiction. For Lanser, "communal voice" appears in the form of "either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority"; for example, "in a *singular* form in which one narrator speaks for a collective, a *simultaneous* form in which a plural 'we' narrates, and a *sequential* form in which individual members of a group narrate in turn" (ibid., 21). Bekhta deliberately "limits we-narrative to Lanser's simultaneous communal form only" (p. 23). Doing so allows for a focus on the specific representational, epistemological, and ethical challenges that arise in the enunciations of a "holistic, supraindividual" group – a group which Bekhta contends does not simply aggregate individuals and which is not (*pace* Margolin) reducible to a single speaker (p. 17). With this in mind, the chapter also considers relationships between communities and collectives and tensions involved in the pulls of individuality/togetherness and similarity/difference.

The second chapter continues the work of specifying what exactly constitutes a we-narrative while at the same time broadening the contextual scope to consider we-narrative from linguistic and philosophical perspectives. 'We,' Bekhta notes, shows up repeatedly in nonfiction – something also summarized by Margolin (1996, 116). We find it in "political, educational, academic, and business contexts where different kinds of speeches and company reports are given, declarations made, negotiations held, or petitions issued" (p. 50). The key terms for this chapter are "indicative" and "performative" and Bekhta deploys them to make clear the particular type of we-references she's interested in: where "[a]n indicative, or straightforward, we-reference has the structure of 'I + somebody else'" and is exceptionally common, the performative is rarer and manifests instead as "a reference by an unspecified entity that creates a group subject and a plural narrating instance" (p. 50). There's much to be gained in this chapter's adoption of interdisciplinary vocabulary – for example, its typology of non-prototypical uses of we-reference would, I imagine, make the chapter highly amenable to cross-disciplinary conversation. At the same time, however, this section of the book is terminologically and referentially dense in a way that sits at odds with the opening chapters and risks losing sight of its key terms.

What 'We' Say and What 'We' See

Chapters 3 and 4 begin to put we-narrative to work in explorations of persons and perspectives. Picking up on the key element of Bekhta's definition of we-narrative, "Plural Narrators: Collective Voices, Lyric Progression, and Direct Speech by Groups," foregrounds the group narrator – looking especially at "lyric progression," or the mode which focuses on the text's structuring around values rather than plot and character (p. 85), and a group's direct speech. This chapter covers a large amount of theoretical terrain as Bekhta works through some of the characteristics and "peculiarities of we-narration," focusing, for example, "on the relation between collective and individual characters and voices, on lyric progression as a distinct quality of many we-narratives, and on techniques for representing direct speech of the many at once" (pp. 67–68). Along with two of the monograph's literary refrains – Toby Litt's *deadkidsongs* (2001) and Joshua Ferris' *Then We Came to the End* (2007) – Bekhta adds to the chapter close-readings of Julie Otsuka's *Buddha in the Attic* (2011) and Susan Sontag's short story "Baby" (1978), arguing that the "peculiarities" of each of these texts can be consolidated by a pragmatic rhetorical framework attentive to collective enunciation and the ways in which we-narratives invite readers to 'enter into' texts.

Chapter 4 moves us from persons to perspectives. "Plural Perspective: Group Ethos, Narrators-Voyeurs, and Diegetic Levels" groups together three main concerns: "(1) the plural perspective as an expression of group ethos, (2) the voyeuristic qualities of communal perspective, and (3) the relationship between plural and singular focalizers" (p. 106). Where Bekhta's 2017 article acknowledges that we-narrative can sometimes be said to represent what Alan Palmer (2010, 39) has called a "social mind," the monograph distances itself from the vocabulary of mind and consciousness. Instead of reading we-narratives as unnaturally representing a multi-person mind, Bekhta describes the representation of a group's perspective as indicative of their ethos, or "expressions of mental states and perspectives originating within the narrating we-group," their "certain constitutive beliefs, values, goals, and norms" (p. 113). In contrast to Palmer and Brian Richardson who have both described the we-perspective as a collective or social mind, Bekhta thinks "groups as groups rather than minds" – that is, as a collection of thoughts, actions, and values that cohere into a group character but do not create a separate "conscious entity" such as, for example, Palmer's reading of the town in *Middlemarch* (p. 111). In a fitting segue to the following chapter's focus on epistemology, Bekhta lingers on the relationship between perspective and knowledge by considering voyeuristic vision in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1994). Through the fluidity of the we-referent, this 'group looking' crosses diegetic levels as readers are unwittingly drawn into the plural narratorial perspective.

What 'We' Know

The readings in chapter 5 follow nicely from the broader topics of depersonalization, perspective, and voyeurism touched on in chapters 3 and 4, and contribute to ongoing conversations about the deep entanglement of seeing and knowing. The question (roughly formulated) of 'how do we know what we know?' frames *We-Narratives*' penultimate chapter, "Collective Knowledge: Epistemological Possibilities of We-Narrators, Gossip, and Unreliability." In this excellent chapter, Bekhta argues that 'we-narration' functions as "an especially apt technique for exemplifying the social nature of knowledge, which combines individual and collective aspects of human experience" (p. 134). In this, it chimes with many recent discussions in a field like Science and Technology Studies which draw attention to the social basis of knowledge construction, consolidation, and verification – as Bekhta notes, knowledge "acquires the status of knowledge by being collectively accepted" (p. 136).

Through close-readings of Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying,* Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Broke Heart Blues,* Bekhta demonstrates the ways in which knowledge is often unevenly distributed within groups, how it blends individual and collective insights, and how it is frequently unreliable and the product of gossip. Unreliability is a hot and contested topic within narratology, but Bekhta keeps the focus helpfully narrow, approaching unreliability on two levels: the level of morals and ethics, and the level of epistemology, such as "inadequate narrators' or readers' knowledge about the facts of the fictional world" (p. 150). Gossip, for example, is especially unreliable on an axiological level: it is a "morally questionable source of knowledge, since often on is *not supposed* to know the information it reveals" (p. 145; italics in the original). Together with chapter 4, Bekhta's assembling of collective seeing and knowing opens onto exciting avenues for further research, related in particular to the kinds of instrumentalized and depersonalized narratives found on the social media platforms of today's highly technologized world (Mäkelä et al. 2021).

Conclusion: Who are 'We'?

We-Narratives' final chapter, "Us versus Them: Community Dynamics in We-Narratives," uses the reading of a single text, Alice Eliot Dark's short story "Watch the Animals" (1999) to consolidate the insights of the book's previous chapters. Moreover, it takes a direct look at boundary-drawing, community-building, and the very real, material, consequences of linguistic divisions like 'us' versus 'them.' Interestingly, the short story's subject matter also lands us in a very natural place for beginning to broaden out or expand on some of the important and intriguing questions raised by Bekhta's work. Dark's text shares many thematic and formal similarities with the paradigmatic example of we-narrative Bekhta uses to open the book, Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily": it takes

place in a small-town community, involves gossip, and deals with the ostracization of a particular member – in this case, Diana. The narratorial 'we,' a community that both observes and participates in the story, attempts to grapple with Diana's love for animals – a love which, from their perspective, breaks with their group ethos. In place of 'us' (the human community), Diana has chosen 'them' (animals – here, dogs). Despite our initial alignment with the we-narrator, across "the story animals become a symbolic test group through which 'our' ethos and Diana's attitudes toward 'us' are made explicit" (p. 167).

Given the fact that, according to Bekhta, "neither the possibility of radical equality nor the post-human agenda of demonstrating animal subjectivities and sentience are, ultimately, the concerns of this short story" (p. 173), animals remain in this chapter metaphorical and symbolic bodies haunting the fringes of both the community and analysis: "'Our' attitudes toward the animals can be read more metaphorically as the attitudes of a conservative community toward outsiders" (p. 172). While it is beyond the purview of Bekhta's project, this final chapter seems its own kind of limit case in the critical application of we-narratives: what kinds of 'we' are we accounting for in a focus on enunciation, on the first-person plural and "communal voices"? What forms might a nonhuman 'we' take? As Eduardo Kohn (2013, 72) has written, "we, in short, are not the only kinds of we." Released just prior to the publication of Bekhta's book, a special issue in the journal *Style*, edited by Bekhta, begins in part to weave these theoretical insights into conversations about multispecies multiplicities. Dominic O'Key (2020), for instance, considers animal collectives in Anglophone fiction, noting that a paucity of plural nonhuman narrators in long-form prose might be explained in part due to the novel's bend towards the depiction of individual subjectivity. Marco Caracciolo (2020), too, has considered nonhuman collectives by turning to forms like the network novel as a representational alternative to collective nonhuman "voice."

Early in the book Bekhta cites Raimo Tuomela's contention that "[c]entral parts of the social world – including social groups, social practices, and social institutions – conceptually (and, typically, functionally) require we-mode thinking and acting and, more broadly, the full we-perspective" (2007, 13; qtd. in Bekhta, p. 15). Bekhta's monograph begins to address the need for a more sophisticated vocabulary and appreciation for this we-mode thinking and acting, for how we tell stories, together. In a world where technology, and social and environmental crises increasingly foreground interconnection and collectivity, we're called upon to take seriously "the promise and challenge of 'we'" (Bekhta 2020, 1). Readers of *We-Narratives* have a "close-reading, probability-obsessed narrative theorist" like Bekhta to thank for a sophisticated theoretical toolkit we can use to begin to do so.

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[1] For this article, Bekhta won the 2017 "James Phelan Award for the Best Essay in Narrative," awarded by the International Society for the Study of Narrative (ISSN).