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The Poetics and Politics of We-Narration on the Contemporary British Stage

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Abstract: We-narratives are proliferating in the contemporary novel. Constructing a collective subject that cannot be reduced to a singular individual who speaks for the group, they have been hailed by narratologists as remarkable fictional possibilities. This article registers a similar increase of plural narration in contemporary drama and explores how an analysis of the phenomenon's linguistic dimension can be combined with a consideration of these plays' orientation towards performance. Drawing on British examples, we chart an intriguing variety of we-narratives and argue that the political potential of these forms of community building lies in their turn away from mimesis and dramatic realism. Rather than merely representing a collective entity on stage, they also forge one in and through performance and frequently unsettle the conventional identification of one voice with one body. Thus, contemporary uses of "we" model the relationship between stage and auditorium in ways that assert, but also interrogate, the potential for community building in the shared space of the theatre.

Keywords: we-narration, chorus, Mojisola Adebayo, *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*, Forced Entertainment, *The Notebook*, David Greig, *Europe*, Dennis Kelly, *The Ritual Slaughter of Gorge Mastromas*, LUNG, *E15*, Lucy Prebble, *Enron*, Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, pool (no water)

Narrative theorists have lately become very interested in "we-narratives," described by Natalya Bekhta as a "form of collective narrative in which a plural 'we' narrates" ("Emerging" 111). In her acclaimed study *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*, Bekhta discusses the proliferation of such usage of the first-person plural pronoun as a significant development in the contemporary novel, as introducing narrative voices that are not just speaking on behalf of a group but "creat[ing] a collectivity that did not exist before" ("Emerging" 123). She distinguishes this usage of "we," which she calls the "performative we," from the "indica-

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tive we.” The “indicative we” merely means “I + somebody else” (*We-Narratives* 61) – this is the common usage, the sense in which we are also using the pronoun in this sentence. By contrast, the “performative we” describes “the verbal action of constructing a collective subject” (60) in ways that “never reveal an ‘I’ or even hint at the possibility of a singular individual who speaks for the group” (62). For Bekhta, this type of narration by an “unspecified entity” (50) involves unsettling a fundamental tenet of storytelling, namely the identification of one voice with one individual – the “recognizable speaker” (16). Since, as Bekhta claims, “one can only chant, recite, or sing in unison; it is not possible to tell a story in such a way,” she understands the performative we as a “remarkable (fictional) possibility” (1), that is, as a linguistic phenomenon that specifically depends on the affordances of written narrative fiction.

As we will argue in this contribution, there also is a proliferation of “we” forms in contemporary writing for the stage whose specific qualities Bekhta’s model can help to elucidate. This transgeneric and intermedial application, however, is not self-evident; Bekhta herself markedly does *not* include drama or theatre in her conceptualization of the performative we. After all, in performance, each voice is manifested in the body of an individual actor – and thus seemingly always tied to a singular “I.” Or is it? It seems to us that a considerable number of plays calls for performances that question precisely this equation. This article is meant as a first step towards a systematic description and theoretical reflection of this trend.

Our goal is not simply the application of a narratological model to a different genre or medium; we do not intend to minimize or ignore the differences between narrative fiction and drama or theatre. Rather, in using Bekhta’s model as a starting point for our analysis, we wish to explore in what ways the usage of “we” on stage can be said to “draw [. . .] attention to itself as a synthetic narrative element” (*We-Narratives* 51), that is, as an element that draws recipients’ attention to drama and performance as aesthetic constructs. In fact, our discussion of the uses of “we” in drama and theatre will also reveal some underexplored presuppositions in the model itself. Just as importantly, we will broaden the scope to discuss the sociopolitical implications of we-narration on stage more generally, scrutinizing how even less conspicuous contemporary uses of collective voice can model the relationship between stage and auditorium. As plays by German-speaking authors Peter Handke, Elfriede Jelinek, René Pollesch, and Ulrike Syha demonstrate, an increased use of the first-person plural form is not specific to English-speaking contexts. In line with the focus of the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, however, our article will demonstrate the phenomenon’s intriguing variety by concentrating on British examples.

1. Theatrical “We” Formations: Neochoric Play and Postdramatic Polylogue

An obvious place to look for uses of “we” on the contemporary stage is in plays featuring a chorus, a form of collective speech that originated in Greek theatre and has enjoyed a resurgence over the course of the twentieth century.¹ Even Bekhta, in one rare reference to drama in her work, mentions the chorus, which for her serves as a counterexample to her concept of the performative we in narrative texts. She describes its “appropriation” in narrative works such as Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Penelopiad* (2005), where chorus sections function as “intermissions” to the narrative: they do “not have direct diegetic links to, nor influence on, the progression of” the main story, which is told by a first-person narrator (*We-Narratives* 52). Since it merely imports the “we” of the chorus tradition in drama, then, Atwood’s narrative text (according to Bekhta) should *not* count as featuring an example of a performative we.

Bekhta’s understanding of the chorus as an interruption of the main storyline at first sight fits well with how prominent scholars of theatre or drama have understood the form. According to Patrice Pavis, for instance, the chorus, as it is used in ancient Greek theatre, “is a homogenous group of dancers, singers, and narrators who speak collectively to comment on the action” (53). He further describes the chorus as consisting of “non-individualized and often abstract forces (actants),” typically representing “higher moral or political interests” (53). A similar definition has been put forward by Manfred Pfister, who describes the chorus as “a figure-collective outside the internal dramatic system,” which “comments on the dramatic situations without getting involved in them” (74). It should be noted, though, that where, for Bekhta, the intermittent character of the chorus consists in its operating at a remove from the narrative (understood here as the progression of the main story), Pavis’s and Pfister’s characterizations prominently include an emphasis on

¹ Helen Eastman, in her 2013 survey “Chorus in Contemporary Theatre,” describes the chorus as “the key theatrical component in a wide range of contemporary works” (363). It should be noted that plays featuring a chorus can, and often do, predominantly use the first-person *singular*. Prominent examples include David Greig’s *The Events* (2013), a play inspired by Anders Breivik’s 2011 mass shooting in Norway, which demands the casting of a local amateur choir acting as the chorus for each production, and Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop* (2019), a metamusical centred on an African American musical theatre writer named Usher, who is surrounded and interrogated by the six-member chorus of his “Thoughts.” This article’s main interest lies with cases that feature a plural “we” linguistically, even though from a larger theoretical perspective one might argue that the “I,” when uttered as part of a chorus, already has a different quality from an “I” that is uttered by an individualized character (see also the discussion of Mojisola Adebayo’s play in section three below).

its narrative character (understood as a form of mediation of, rather than only as an involvement in, a dramatic action).

In contemporary drama, uses of the chorus often contain elements that destabilize its conventionalized function as a communal complement to an individualized primary action.² Take, for instance, David Greig's *Europe* (1994), where in two of the play's twenty scenes a chorus appears, consisting of eight speakers whose identities remain undefined except for a specification in the stage directions indicating that they are both male and female (47). The choruses open the play's two acts and refer to the collective of the inhabitants of an unnamed "small town on the border" (5) that has seen more prosperous days:

2 The First Chorus

1: Ours is a small town on the border, at various times on this side,

2: and,

3: at various times,

2: on the other,

1: but always

1, 2, 3: on the border.

4: We're famous for our soup,

5: for our factory which makes lightbulbs

1: and for being on the border. (5)

The chorus could indeed be said to interrupt the narrative of the play, which centres on the fateful encounter of a pair of strangers with the village community: it contextualizes the play geographically, historically, and sociologically by, as Pfister puts it, "comment[ing] on the dramatic situations without getting involved in them" (74).

Yet, in our view, the use of the chorus in this play connects even more readily to Bekhta's concept of the performative we as an experimental technique than her own restriction of that concept to the genre of narrative prose may suggest. First of all, by evoking the predramatic collective voice of the chorus in 1994, Greig's rendering of a collective subject does not simply place his use of the "we" in a theatre-historical tradition. Rather, as the very use of the term in the dramatic script foregrounds, the chorus appears to be fallen out of time and thus becomes an experimental element, which Greig uses to replace familiar ways of juxtaposing the individual and the communal. Secondly, in performance, the idea of a renegotiation of the individual and the communal is reinforced by Greig's initial stage direction, which stipulates that the chorus is "*Played by the members of the company*" (4), meaning that the actors playing the eight individual characters also act as the chorus. This metatheatrical

² Moreover, from a literary historical perspective, such an understanding of the chorus ignores that it preceded the emergence of the individualized protagonist and antagonist.

practice of double casting undermines the homogeneity of the chorus as a non-individualized figure-collective in the sense of Pavis. It also questions the defining characteristic of non-involvement as put forward by Pfister: while the chorus speakers one to eight are not involved in the action, the actors performing them are, thus making the chorus in *Europe* a collective subject that draws “attention to itself as a synthetic narrative element” (Bekhta, *We-Narratives* 51).

In her survey of the chorus in contemporary theatre, Helen Eastman describes such instances of an actor “mov[ing] between playing a protagonist and joining the chorus” as moments that “can, in the transition, highlight the differing nature of group and individual identity” (367). We would like to go further: in our view, by combining choric speech with double casting, Greig’s use of “we” destabilizes the realist convention of presenting characters as unique and clearly distinguishable individuals also for the other (non-choric) scenes. The play thus unsettles the identification of one voice with one speaker and calls attention to another interesting problem implicitly raised by Bekhta’s model: the question of the relation between voice (a central category for many narrative theorists) and body (a category that usually does not feature explicitly but is often evoked implicitly).

The starting point of Bekhta’s argument is the idea of “the literal act of storytelling [as] an *individual* performance, if we think of it as an instance of oral narration” (*We-Narratives* 1; emphasis added). “Literal act” here apparently refers to a bodily dimension, to “voice” in the sense of sound produced by physical organs. Bekhta then stresses that we-narratives in her sense are tied to written rather than oral communication because “oral stories that use ‘we’ have a harder time completely dissociating this ‘we’ from the individual who speaks it” (*We-Narratives* 53). This intriguing presupposition prompts the question of how to relate we-narratives to the situation in the theatre, where (just as in oral narrative) there usually is a physical body that is the identifiable source of an utterance and where the written monomedium of the novel is replaced by the multimedium of the theatre. Arguably, the chorus in *Europe* serves the same function as novelistic we-narration: it becomes a formal means of constructing and reflecting on collective subjects that cannot be reduced to or identified with a recognizable speaker who speaks on their behalf. Cases like Greig’s play thus suggest that the presupposition we have detected in Bekhta’s work, namely the idea that we-narratives with their way of destabilizing the demarcation between individual and collective are a phenomenon that can only be found in narrative prose, must be called into question.

Similar experiments with reviving and renewing choric forms of speech can be found, for example, in Mark Ravenhill’s *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007), whose altogether sixteen instalments include five playlets featuring choruses by women (Play One), a “*group of Speakers*” (Play Six, 63), “*the people of a city*” (Play Ten, 119), soldiers (Play Fifteen) and a “*team of Artist-Facilitators*” (Play Sixteen, 189).

Play Six: *Yesterday an Incident Occurred*

A group of SPEAKERS.

– Good morning/evening.

– Yesterday there was an assault in this space. An incident occurred of a violent nature.

– If you saw that incident we ask you to come forward. (63)

Play Ten: *War of the Worlds*

A CHORUS: *the people of a city.*

– This is for you. We gather in this square for you. [. . .]

Sound of a bomb blast.

– You have been bombed. We are sickened. (119)

As Margherita Laera has observed, the chorus playlets feature “exemplar individuals” rather than “rounded characters” (5, 6). What is particularly striking about Ravenhill’s use of “we,” however, is that these communal speakers display a knowledge that exceeds the playlets they appear in, by cross-referencing characters or events in earlier or later playlets in a fashion reminiscent of what Franz K. Stanzel calls authorial narration (that is, featuring the psychological, spatial, and temporal privileges of omniscience and omnipresence). By creating such a quasi-omniscient collective subject, the choric scenes in both *Europe* and *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* go beyond the classic function of providing intermissions to the narrative and also make it difficult to identify the linguistic “I” that features in these plays’ non-choric scenes with a singular individual. We would like to dub this type of we-narration in the theatre “neochoric”: it is a use of “we” in plays that (more or less explicitly) hark back to the tradition of the Greek chorus by alternating dialogue between individual characters with ensemble parts but do so in ways that undermine the very notion and dramatic tradition that the Greek chorus helped create, namely that of the recognizable individual speaker.

It is not only in plays featuring speakers who are explicitly designated as “chorus” that conspicuous uses of the “we” form can be found in contemporary drama. Consider the example of Ravenhill’s *pool (no water)* (2006):

A pool, she had a pool.

Of all of us the most – at least in the eyes of this so-called world – the most successful of us.

So – a pool.

Did she mean to impress? Was it for show?

No. I can’t think. No. Because she’s . . .

She’s good. She’s nice. She has integrity. Her roots.

[. . .]

And she comes to our exhibitions. Cramped little exhibitions in lofts in the bohemian quarter.

Our photos, our *objets trouvés*, she comes, she sees, she sometimes buys.

[. . .]

We adore her. We adore her. We all absolutely adore her. (295)

As the play's first lines indicate, Ravenhill creates a collective voice by having a group of unnamed speakers talk about a "she" whom the speakers juxtapose to their own "we/us." The play features neither a list of dramatis personae, nor does it attribute character names to the spoken text. Throughout, as in this passage, the play-text does not even use dashes to indicate a change of speaker, and with its overall lack of stage directions, it could be perceived simply as a monologue. Such a reading (or staging), however, would ignore the polylogical organization of speech: throughout the play, speech is addressed to the audience rather than to other speakers and develops through questions and answers, repetition and variation, denoting different speakers. When speech is interrupted (as in "Because she's . . ." above), the next line continues and finishes the previous thought. While minimal discrepancies and contradictions between the speakers indicate processes of negotiation between them, their accounts nevertheless converge, resulting in what Heiner Zimmermann has called a "polylogue of consensus" (114).³ This use of "we" creates the overall impression (despite the use of the "I" in some parts) that, rather than with utterances from clearly demarcated individuals, audiences are faced with a kind of "group think" in which thoughts and actions are not attributable to individuals so that nobody has to take responsibility. This performative we, then, is part and parcel of a postdramatic disintegration of character. We therefore propose calling plays that prominently feature the performative we and neither attribute dramatic speech to individual speakers nor to the collective of a chorus "postdramatic polylogues."

Dennis Kelly's *The Ritual Slaughter of Gorge Mastromas* (2012) is similar to *pool* (*no water*) in that it features sections that do not attribute character names to the spoken text, but it also resembles Greig's *Europe* in that these sections alternate with more conventionally dialogical scenes. In these sections, speakers fill the audience in on details from Gorge's life that help to explain his unethical behaviour in matters both private and professional:

– Gorge Mastromas leapt into the second phase of his life with all the energy of a bullet tearing into the soft fleshy parts of a man's guts.

[. . .]

– He would buy a company and look people dead in the eye and say "you will not be fired"

– Then he would fire them

[. . .]

– And then . . .

he met someone.

3 Zimmermann introduces this term in relation to Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997). Many of Crimp's plays make use of plural narration through postdramatic polylogue, including, for instance, his trilogy of short plays *Fewer Emergencies* (2005).

Beat.

[. . .]

- Remember when we said that Tanya was the love of Gorge's life?
- You remember when we said that?
- Well, that was not strictly true
- That was a lie. It was Louisa. (50–54)⁴

In line with the defining characteristics of the postdramatic polylogue, the agents of this we-narration remain undefined in terms of age, gender, class, race, and even in number, as dashes merely indicate a change of speaker and as character names are missing. The way in which the speakers complete each other's sentences suggests not just a combination of distinct voices but a blurring of the very impression of clearly distinguishable individual entities.

As both *pool (no water)* and *Gorge Mastromas* show, postdramatic polylogues differ considerably from neochoric forms of we-narration in their appearance on the page. While the latter are easily recognizable as dramatic in form (featuring a clear distinction between primary and secondary text, which includes the assignation of a speaker or speakers to each portion of the dialogue), postdramatic polylogues are marked by their break with such dramatic conventions. At first sight, postdramatic polylogues might easily be confused with narrative fiction – they display what Janine Hauthal has elsewhere described as a “narrative aesthetic” (“Towards a Narrative Aesthetic?”). In conjunction with this, they gravitate towards epic modes of storytelling (Nünning and Sommer): the “we” in *pool (no water)* give an account of past events and their role in it and, in *Gorge Mastromas*, choric sections do not relate Gorge's past in the dramatic mode of showing but in the epic mode of telling. In the above section, for instance, no *scene* would *show* Gorge speaking with the people he then fires; rather, the speakers directly *tell* spectators what happened. Their audience address breaks the fourth wall and the only action to be seen on stage is that of the speakers' storytelling. In addition, neochoric forms tend to stay in the present of the time of address and seem to declare rather than recount (for example, “We're famous for our soup” in *Europe* or “We're sickened” in *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*).

The distinction between the neochoric and the postdramatic polylogue therefore also describes a tendency either to evoke a connection with theatrical tradition by reinventing it, or to signal a marked departure from generic conventions and distinctions. However, both forms may also combine in individual plays (as they do

⁴ During the 2013 performance at the Royal Court Theatre (directed by Vicky Featherstone), this and other choric scenes featured the whole cast. The production's double casting thus blurred the demarcation between individual and community in the same way as *Europe* does (but, in contrast to *the latter*, the double casting is not explicitly demanded in the playscript).

in *Gorge Mastromas*). In the move from page to stage, moreover, the distinction between the neochoric and the postdramatic polylogue may be even less apparent. After all, in every production it is up to the discretion of the director and team how far to “play up” the allusions to the Greek chorus (thus accentuating the neochoric element) and how far to fundamentally disrupt the concept of identifiable individual characters (the postdramatic principle).

2. Brief Interlude on Audience Address: “We” and “You”

One feature that connects all of the examples we have discussed so far is that we-narration is combined with direct audience address: when used in the playtext, the “we” almost inevitably seems to evoke a “you,” which can be explicitly referred to or implicitly positioned. This is no surprise: theatre scholars have long noted the close connection between chorus and spectators. Hans-Thies Lehmann, for one, has stipulated that the chorus, “(owing to its character as a crowd) is able to function scenically as a mirror and partner of the audience” (130). Hypothetically, the “we” uttered by the chorus or in a postdramatic constellation might even itself include the audience-as-addressee – an example of such an inclusive (in a linguistic sense) usage of the pronoun will be discussed in the next section. In most of our examples, however, “we” is used in an exclusive way, demarcating a group that does not extend to the audience.

This question of grammaticalclusivity needs to be clearly distinguished from the question of ideological agreement – the two may be closely connected but are by no means necessarily correlated. Theatre historians see the latter as a precondition for the function of the chorus in the Greek theatre. As Pavis argues, for the chorus to be accepted by the audience, stage and auditorium have to be “welded together by cult, belief or ideology” (55). According to Pavis, it was when these conditions no longer applied to civic communities increasingly torn by internal contradictions that the chorus fell into disuse. Reviving and/or renewing the Greek chorus as a means to facilitate the self-reflection of the *polis*, both neochoric forms of plural narration and postdramatic polylogues respond to this decline of homogeneity between stage and auditorium by engaging with the very relation of these two collective bodies. Combining we-narration with direct audience address, the plays introduced above – albeit in different ways – summon their audiences to position themselves in relation to the first-person plural on stage by assigning various (sometimes fictional) roles to them.

Greig’s *Europe*, for instance, casts the audience as members of the mobile urban elite and appeals to their moral responsibility as citizens of Europe. In the continu-

ation of the play's first choric scene, the eight numbered speakers create an opposition between themselves, the inhabitants of the "small town on the border" (5), and a clearly privileged "you" to which they appeal in their desire to belong:

ALL: We ask for very little here.
 7: With things as they are we daren't ask for much.
 8: Except that as you pass,
 5: on your way to an older,
 6: more beautiful
 7: or more important place,
 8: you remember that we are,
 ALL: in our own way,
 1: also Europe. (5)

In the course of the play, this initial choric appeal of the excluded is juxtaposed with the acts of exclusion that individualised inhabitants of the town (Horse, Berlin) launch against the play's two migrant characters Katia and Sava. With all four individualised characters being played by the very same actors who perform the chorus, Greig's revival of the chorus replaces familiar ways of juxtaposing the individual and the communal by questioning, through double casting, the very mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (this time in a sociological sense) that his play stages.

Kelly's *Gorge Mastromas* and Ravenhill's *pool (no water)*, in turn, position their audiences in quite a different manner, addressing them as judges and witnesses respectively. The plays' forms of address serve to further highlight audiences' distinct moral responsibility. At the beginning of Kelly's play, the chorus of narrating characters⁵ invites the audience to feel sympathy for young Gorge's actions, as the variously repeated question "Goodness or cowardice?" (14–15, 17, 29–30, 49), accompanied by the request "You decide" (30), indicates. However, once Gorge starts to abuse, or even crush, several characters "in the second phase of his life" (51), they prompt the audience to condemn his actions, as can be seen, for instance, in their commenting on yet another malicious twist of Gorge's intrigues with the rhetorical question "Is that love? You call that love?" (74). In contrast to Kelly's confrontational form of audience address, in *pool (no water)*, the speakers adopt a confessional tone which authenticates their pleas for understanding and enlists spectators as witnesses by way of the confessional "you":

If you'd been in that room with us then maybe, maybe you'd have felt the same. Because today we are all artists.

5 For a more detailed analysis of the play's narrative aesthetic, see Hauthal, "Performing Stories."

And the light was good and the potential for composition was all there – and to be honest it was easy easy easy easy to come up with those images that so [sic] later seemed striking.

[. . .]

Later, we sat in the smoking room and said to ourselves:

That wasn't a good thing to do. That was a terrible thing to do. Why not select delete and wipe away what you've . . . ? Why not?

And we did. No – honest with you – we nearly did. But we never did. (306–307)

While one might expect a confessional stance to be successful in winning over the audience to the speakers' own evaluation, Ravenhill's play shows that this may not always be the case. In many passages, the "we" protests too much – it is only in some instances that the "confession" actually seems to be about an honest exploration of culpability, while for the most part, "we" seems too desperate in the attempt to convince "us" of their rationalizations and excuses. The confessional mode in which the artist-friends in *pool (no water)* use "we" frequently veers into deflection: having betrayed the most successful member of their group, they ostensibly offer themselves up to the judgment of the directly addressed audience. However, ultimately, they do not just seem to be pleading for the audience's understanding but demand to be cleared from responsibility for their unethical action.

Overall, then, the "we" in contemporary plays is more clearly directed at, and sometimes juxtaposed to, a "you" than its counterparts in the narrative fiction discussed by Bekhta. This is surely due to the physical co-presence of the spectators in live performance. In the theatre, a community is not only described or evoked in words but rendered physically. It is this special feature of theatre that urgently poses a question that is sidelined in Bekhta's otherwise extensive discussion of we-narratives: what are the politics of these evocations of community and what do they suggest about contemporary societies and the status they confer on concepts of communality?

3. Evaluations of Community: The Politics of "Us" on Stage

As the examples of *Europe* and *pool (no water)* already suggest, contemporary uses of plural narration do not necessarily have a positive ring. While the pronoun "we" can be used to lend the staging of utopian ideals of community more force, it can also have decidedly sinister connotations: highlighting mechanisms of exclusion, modes of coercion or brainwashing, evasions of responsibility, etc. Bekhta points to the ambivalent connotations of community by suggesting that there is a general tendency towards positive associations where the communal is associated with in-

timacy and close proximity, whereas a “we” that “implies acting together for the sake of explicit political agendas” tends to be regarded with more scepticism (*We-Narratives* 31). In the contemporary plays we have examined, the use of we-narration to stage the Janus-faced character of community is readily apparent – but we do not see such a clear tendency towards a dichotomy of evaluations where intimate proximity has positive and an explicit ideological or activist collectivity has negative connotations. In fact, the opposite is just as likely. In the following, we turn to the politics of the first-person plural pronoun on stage: we wish to illustrate the diverse ways in which contemporary plays use the form to evoke different aspects of community as a sociopolitical phenomenon, inviting positive or negative evaluations on the part of the audience. To this end, we extend our analysis beyond the extensive use of “we” in neochoric plays and postdramatic polylogues to examples in which it occurs more sporadically or obliquely, but no less evocatively.

First of all, striking examples of a positively connoted use of “we” can be found in plays featuring strong ties to activism and the documentary mode of verbatim. Take *E15* (2015) by the UK-based LUNG, who, on their website, describe themselves as “a campaign-led verbatim theatre company.” *E15* is based on interviews with a real-life group of young mothers from London, who joined forces and became activists to resist their eviction from a mother-and-child housing project. In recreating their story, *E15* also more generally decries the poor political handling of the UK housing crisis. The play focuses on five of these women who mainly narrate their stories using first-person singular but also often use first-person plural to describe the actions of the group:

SAPRIYA: We needed to get organized away from the staff.

SAM: We decided to spread the word. Power in numbers. We were all about to be evicted and nobody knew.

JASMIN: Nobody knew we’d been handed those letters. (57)

While the “we” in these quotes could easily be described as corresponding to Bekhta’s indicative we, that is, denoting a group of clearly identifiable individuals who talk about their joint actions, towards the end of the play “we” acquires a different quality:

JORDAN: If you’re walking down the street and you think “I don’t like this” and “I don’t like that” – do something!

JASMIN: Do something.

SAPRIYA: Do something. It will be better for humanity and it will be better for you.

JORDAN: We’re all Focus E15 mums! Do you want to be a Focus E15 mum? Coz we can all be Focus E15 mums!

JASMIN: Our mantra is:

ALL: Educate, agitate, organize. (87)

The action of the play shows how the individual women have built a community that has given them agency. Jordan's first "we" refers to this group whose individual voices merge into unison in the final line (which performs a "we" even without the use of the pronoun). In the spirit of political activism, however, Jordan's second use of the pronoun ("we [. . .] all") also extends to the audience, which the final stage directions invite to participate: "*They chant and invite the audience to join in*" (88). Deliberately abolishing the fourth wall which separates the stage and auditorium, the play's ending extends the meaning of "we" to include the audience. Reminiscent of Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" and his idea of the "spect-actor" (xxx), *E15* is an example of an activist use of "we," whose political ethos is giving a voice and forum to marginalized groups by not just representing them as a community, but by also seeking to forge a new community through and in the theatre.⁶

Mojisola Adebayo's *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* (2017) is another intriguing case of a play that uses documentary techniques for activist purposes and explores the relation between singular "I" and plural "we" in a way that affirms the positive potential of a political collective. The text is a transcript of the police car's dashcam recording of the exchange between the twenty-eight-year-old African American Sandra Bland and the white male police officer who pulled her over and eventually arrested her for a traffic violation in July 2015 – an encounter that led to Bland's death and was subsequently taken up by the Black Lives Matter Movement as an example of police brutality against Black people. Even though, linguistically, Adebayo's playscript documents the dialogue between two individuals, using the first-person singular, Bland's individual voice becomes a collective one on stage through a choral performance that, as Paola Prieto López puts it, reinforces "affective identification" (205). As the playwright herself mandates in her introduction:

It is crucial that Sandra Bland [the character] is played by a large cast of (preferably one hundred) women, led by black women. I suggest a core group of seven black female professional actors (indicated below as BLAND CORE) plus a large community chorus of culturally diverse women (indicated below as ALL), plus a white male actor and female actor playing the police officers. (169–170)

The dialogue splits Bland's voice into several entities. Lines alternate between the seven members of the core group speaking individually (designated as "BLAND ONE," "BLAND TWO," etc. in the text) and parts where the core group ("BLAND CORE") or the larger community chorus ("ALL") speak in unison.

⁶ From a text-oriented vantage point, our analysis supports Enric Monforte's performance-oriented reading of *E15*, which argues that the play interpellates its audiences not just as spectators but also as citizens in a bid to counteract the erosive effect of austerity politics and neoliberalism on communities on a local, national, and global level (64).

The choral performance the play calls for revokes the dramatic convention of the identification between individual body and individual voice. The explicit goal of this choral performance is to show Bland as “an every-black-woman” (170): “The amplification of her voice in the staging becomes a collective gesture of solidarity and support” (170). It is not only Bland’s memory that is celebrated through this multiplication. In making a group of Black female actors the “core” of the performance and women of diverse backgrounds the surrounding chorus, Adebayo also reverses the unequal distribution of power at play in Bland’s real-life arrest. By layering Bland’s voice in various, both singular and plural, entities – the individual actress, the core group of seven Black female performers, and the larger chorus of diverse women –, the play invites critical reflection on the processes of institutional racism and the both racialised and gendered police violence it depicts. In addition, the augmentation of Bland’s voice places special emphasis on how she resisted and spoke up for herself. This emphasis facilitates a theatrical experience of empowerment for the participating performers, while it also enhances the “spectators’ affective involvement as witnesses” (Prieto López 206). By, at least potentially, extending the very experience of participation to the audience,⁷ making them “spect-actors” in the sense of Boal, the play itself could be seen to offer a temporary remedy, a way of recalibrating centre and margins, by modelling the theatre as a space of community building.

In sharp contrast to the emphatically positive staging of communal voices by LUNG and Adebayo, other playwrights use the performative we to represent negatively connoted forms of collectivity. A case in point is *Enron* (2009), Lucy Prebble’s morality tale about the rise and fall of the eponymous US energy company. In the play, the character Jeffrey Skilling, the company’s CEO, often resorts to what could be called a “corporate we”: “Ladies and Gentlemen, Enron is a new kind of company. [. . .] We’re not just an energy company, we’re a powerhouse for ideas. No other company lets people work as freely and creatively as we do” (79). The corporate we makes the individual recede behind the company and functions as the human resource whose labour can be extracted by the larger entity. At the same time, the we-form allows delegation of responsibility to a larger system: “Took advantage

⁷ Adebayo, who “trained extensively with and also worked alongside Augusto Boal” (“Moj Biog”), writes in her introduction: “The audience, too, should feel like participants, not mere witnesses” (170). If a production – as the author already suggested (170) – displays the playtext on a screen, this could allow all members of the audience to join as an impromptu chorus and read it aloud. While this participatory experience is readily available to female members of the audience, the playscript does not touch upon the possibility of male allyship. For a reflection on the experience of performing the play with a cast including also non-Black women performers at the 2019 CDE conference in Graz, see Balestrini, Lippert, and Löschnigg (12).

of . . . ? That's what we do. In business, you buy something at one price, you sell it at a higher one and what's in between, that's your advantage. Which you TAKE" (127). The use of the first-person plural pronoun reinforces the idea that, in corporate life, actions are dictated by different norms than those one might regard as ethical in one's individual private life. This divide between individual and corporate is also emphasised through the play's use of choral speech, typification, and corporate figures: there are ensembles of non-individualised, numbered employees, lawyers, and traders as well as analysts designated (only) by their company name ("JP Morgan Analyst," "Citibank Analyst," "Deutsche Bank"), and there are the "Lehman Brothers," played by two actors who speak in unison (using the first-person plural).

For the audience, it may over large parts of the play be easy to parse the corporate we not only as a negatively connoted "we" but also as an exclusive one – a usage that invites spectators to feel morally superior. This distancing effect is explicitly deconstructed at the end of the play, when Skilling speaks directly to the audience:

I'm not a bad man. I'm not an unusual man. [. . .] And I think there'll come a time when everyone understands that. They'll realize they were banishing something of themselves along with me. [. . .] (*Pointing to a graph of the Dow Jones index that appears as a projection on the wall.*) There's your mirror. Every dip, every crash, every bubble that's burst, that's you. Your brilliant stupidity. This one gave *us* the railroads. This one the internet. This one the slave trade. (150–151; emphasis added)

Addressing the audience not just in the second person but finally also by way of an inclusive "us," Skilling models himself as a representative of the neoliberal capitalist society that the play's audiences also belong to. This shift in the meaning of "we" from corporate to collective changes the tone from distancing to didactic, calling upon audiences to take responsibility for their complicit societal belonging (thus, in a final twist, also at least implicitly evoking an activist sense of collective responsibility).

Our final case is a particularly interesting example of a use of "we" that illustrates another ambivalent use of the collective voice: Forced Entertainment's 2014 production of *The Notebook*. The performance is an adaptation of the 1986 eponymous, award-winning novel by Hungarian-Swiss writer Ágota Kristóf and retains the novel's present-tense narration. Its two male performers are dressed alike, with each a script in hand, thus embodying the narrator-protagonists of Kristóf's novel: a pair of twin brothers who try to survive the Second World War at their grandmother's house in the Hungarian countryside. Just like the novel, the script is written in the first-person plural and the two performers take turns reading it aloud. The "we" in Kristóf's novel is clearly performative in Bekhta's sense, not just because the novel does not differentiate between the two brothers but also because,

as readers learn at the end, the twins separate, with one of them crossing the border and the other one staying behind – which prompts the question how they can narrate “together.” This use of “we” resonates in complex ways with the ideology of the collective on whose mandate wars are supposedly fought. The novel traces the twin brothers’ eroding ethics: in the end, they facilitate the death of their father so one of them can escape over the guarded border. In the novel, the use of “we” is clearly an articulation of the characters’ deflection of responsibility, thus emphasizing problematic aspects in this use of the collective voice.

The performance, in turn, visibly stages the two brothers as two different people and thus, at first sight, seems to suggest that their “we” is indicative, referring merely to the joint acts of two individuals. However, by having the performers interrupt their reading with short utterances, spoken in unison, of the novel’s chapter headings, which tend to refer to settings or characters (for example, “Grandmother’s house,” “Grandmother”), Forced Entertainment still maintain the novel’s performative we. Arguably, featuring two bodies on stage who speak in unison only those parts of the text that are not clearly attributable to a plural entity acknowledges the difficulty of staging a collective entity in the theatre, while at the same time, their reading of a narrative that “traps two people in a single voice and a shared perspective” (*The Notebook*) fuses the two into just that.

Hence, similar to *Enron* and also to *pool (no water)*, the performative we in Forced Entertainment’s *The Notebook* engenders a plural voice whose collectivity has a sinister ring. This “we” is not just two people referring to themselves as a group (“me and you”) – in encountering it, the audience witnesses the emergence of a collective whose moral sense has been warped by war. What is more: there is a creeping sense that the “we” should be understood as an inclusive one, potentially also encompassing and thus holding up the mirror to its readers and spectators. In contrast to plays like *Enron* which make it rather easy for the audience to regard the “we” as an exclusive one (inviting the spectators to be suspicious of a corporate we that does not extend to them), plays like *The Notebook* or *pool (no water)* up the ante by demonstrating how it is not just the larger collective, but the most intimate community – the nuclear family, the group of friends – that can become the breeding ground as well as the arena of egotism and wrongdoing.

4. Conclusion: The Poetics and Politics of We-Narration

As the examples we have analysed in this article illustrate, contemporary playwrights, not unlike the novelists discussed by Bekhta, are experimenting with the

first-person plural form in ways that “structurally register [. . .] the complex dynamics between individuals and communities in general” (*We-Narratives* 11). The discovery that collective forms of narration can also be found in drama might come as a surprise to those who follow the orthodox view of drama as the genre that usually does not narrate at all but that renders *direct*, scenic presentation of dialogue and action rather than their mediation through the voice of a narrator. This group is getting smaller, though – transgeneric narratological approaches to drama, in particular, have shown that narrative elements play a central role not only in the early-twentieth-century tradition of Epic Theatre in the vein of Bertolt Brecht, but also in more recent forms (Nünning and Sommer 343).⁸ The plays brought together in our discussion are (to a greater or lesser extent) part of this turn to narrative.

In the first section, we have presented conspicuous and pervasive uses of the performative *we* as part of two larger tendencies in contemporary drama: one, a turn back to the earliest forms of the European theatre tradition, in the neochoric plays that revive and renew the Greek chorus; the other, the postdramatic tradition that dissolves dramatic conventions concerning the mimesis of character, dramatic speech, and action, which is why we call the plays tapping into this tendency postdramatic polylogues. Even though at first sight it might look as though these two types of plays are diametrically opposed (the neochoric plays emphasizing a distinction between individual dialogues and choric scenes that is deconstructed in the postdramatic ones), a case like Kelly’s *Gorge Mastromas* shows that they may well intersect.

What is more: we have demonstrated that both neochoric plays (especially if they call for double casting) and postdramatic polylogues complicate the concept of the performative *we* by unsettling the conventional identification of one voice with one body, so that in theatrical stagings, the possibilities of probing concepts of collectivity are multiplied. Such contemporary variants are therefore also to be differentiated from uses of the chorus in the Greek tradition, which relies on the clear separation between choric and individual speech and which, in the first place, has the chorus facilitate the emergence of a recognizable speaker in the figures of the pro- and antagonist. Contemporary forms of theatrical *we*-narration provide models for the world by creating a group subject and a plural narrating instance that exists only in and through fiction. The political potential of these forms of plural narration lies in their turn away from mimesis and dramatic realism to literary ways of worldmaking that enable new forms of relationality.

⁸ For overviews of the state of the art in this field, see, for example, Nünning and Sommer, Brütsch, or Hauthal, “Performing Stories.”

Section two briefly outlined how the performative “we” in drama relates to a “you” that may be an implied audience in the case of the text but that in the theatre summons spectators to position themselves vis-à-vis the collective body these plays stage. The question of how these physical and linguistic juxtapositions relate to evaluations of the collective entities then brought us to the last section, which delved into the politics of community. This discussion was prompted by our observation that in many of our examples, “we” has a distinctly sinister ring – an observation that sparked our interest in the relation of the performative we to conceptualizations of community (an aspect that is touched upon, but on the whole sidelined, in Bekhta’s book). In this part, we added examples that feature less conspicuous or pervasive uses of a performative we but that lend themselves especially well to showing how such manifestations of “we” become charged with negative or positive associations. This exploration finally also led us to consider a further aspect that makes drama (in comparison to narrative fiction) particularly intriguing: not only does the performative we in drama serve to critique or commend specific forms of community, but in being geared towards performance, it also lends itself to meta-theatrical reflection. This aspect is more pronounced in the case of the postdramatic polylogue type, which enforces a rethinking of the distribution of voices and bodies on stage, but the neochoric plays also already point in this direction. The staging of “we” and its relation to “you” can be a way for the theatre to assert, but also to interrogate, its own potential for community building by linguistic as well as performative means in the shared space of the theatre.

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