

Repetition, Rhythm, and Recital

Lyrical Strategies and the Ritualistic in Twenty-First-Century US 'We' Narratives

Michaela Beck (Independent Scholar)

Abstract:

*In this article, narrative liminality is employed as a conceptual lens with which to describe and analyze elements of rhythm and repetition in a specific corpus of narrative texts: namely, contemporary US novels and works of shorter fiction which are narrated in the first-person plural. In this context, narrative liminality is used to approach rhythm and repetition in these narrative texts as liminal (textual) practices which travel between narrative/ity and other (symbolic) forms. As is argued here, these practices move beyond narrative/ity and partake in the qualities of (the) lyrical/ity as itself an interplay of fictional and ritualistic elements. To conceptualize rhythmic and repetitive elements in this manner, this article utilizes Katie Owens-Murphy's concept of 'lyrical strategies.' By further drawing on Jonathan Culler and Nele Janssens, this contribution seeks to relate these strategies to narrative/ity, lyrical/ity, and the ritualistic as different (symbolic) forms. The main section of this article then applies and contextualizes these elucidations in an analysis of rhythmic and repetitive elements in TaraShea Nesbit's 'we' narrative *The Wives of Los Alamos*. This analysis first traces the intersections among lyrical, ritualistic, and narrative tendencies in the primary text. In an ensuing second step, the discussion then seeks to shed more light on the extratextual affordances and politics of these intersections in twenty-first-century US society and culture by relating them to Lauren Berlant's theorizations of US national collectivity and civic belonging in what she refers to as a "post-normative phase."*

Recital I: From Narrative Limitations to Narrative Liminality/ies

Over the course of the last decades, US literary fiction has seen the publication of a number of texts which can best be described as 'we' narratives—that is, novels

and works of short(er) fiction which represent and are narrated by a collective explicitly referred to as ‘we’¹—including, among others, Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2012), Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* (2007), TaraShea Nesbit’s *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014), and Anne Valente’s *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down* (2016). Given its still comparably rare and arguably unconventional status, this narrative situation and voice has been the object of increased attention among literary theorists and narratologists alike.² In addition to their narrative situation, however, these texts are also remarkable in another sense: A high percentage of ‘we’ narratives, such as those listed above, contain and highlight elements which, traditionally, have not been associated with the form and logic of narrative—namely, repetition and rhythm on different textual and formal levels. Despite having been mentioned in a small number of works on ‘we’ narratives and narratives of community more broadly (Bekhta, “A Definition” 107; Jobert 544; Zagarell 450, 454), the function and/or meaning-making of these textual strategies as well as their interaction with, and effects on, narrative dynamics in this specific corpus of texts still remain to be sufficiently analyzed. More often than not, discussions of such repetitive and rhythmic elements in prose texts have started from a rather limited, or dualistic, approach to narrative/ity: They have either discussed these elements exclusively within the assumed boundaries of narrative/ity or, conversely, posited a relationship of conflict and opposition between narrative/ity on the one hand and rhythm or repetition on the other hand. In addition, to the extent that twenty-first-century US ‘we’ narratives in particular have not yet been adequately related to their historical and cultural contexts (cf. Maxey 2),³ this lack of research also pertains to the use of repetitive and rhythmic elements in these texts.

This article aims to address these issues and blind spots by approaching such repetitive and rhythmic elements in contemporary US ‘we’ narratives through the conceptual lens of narrative liminality. For one, this means examining these strategies not by way of an expanded or expanding concept of narrativity but instead a

1 This understanding of ‘we’ narration draws on Bekhta’s definition of “we-narrative proper,” which pertains to only those 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” (“A Definition” 113; cf. “We-Narratives” 168-71).

2 See fn. 3 for examples.

3 Although by no means lacking in terms of number, analyses of ‘we’ narration in literary fiction have not yet examined these ‘we’ narratives in relation to their specific US cultural and social contexts, as they have often proceeded from a formalist or rhetorical stance, and/or have discussed literary ‘we’ narratives in a culturally and historically comparative manner. The works by Margolin (“Telling”; “Plural”), Fludernik (“The Category of ‘Person’”; “The Many”), Bekhta (“A Definition”; “We-Narratives”), and Richardson (“Plural Focalization”; *Unnatural*; “Social Minds”) are cases in point.

concept of the lyrical and, more specifically, of lyricality as a combination of fictional and ritualistic elements. Moreover, this approach entails tuning in to the dynamics of conflict and cooperative interaction among narrativity, lyricality, and the ritualistic as different, yet gradable and interpenetrating symbolic forms which each govern practices of communication, experience, and knowledge. Lastly, in the context of the present analysis, it also means tracing the politics, or ‘cultural work,’ of these lyrical strategies and their effected interrelations between narrativity, lyricality, and the ritualistic within the contexts of contemporary US society and culture.

To pursue these aims, the following discussion first introduces the concept of lyrical strategies and explicates their connections with narrativity, lyricality, and the ritualistic. In the ensuing analysis of rhythmic and repetitive elements in TaraShea Nesbit’s ‘we’ narrative *The Wives of Los Alamos* these elaborations will be related to works of research on ‘we’ narratives so as to delineate the intersections among lyrical, ritualistic, and narrative tendencies in the primary text. In the process, this analysis also seeks to trace the extratextual meanings of these intersections in twenty-first-century US society and culture by relating them to concerns about and models of collectivity and civic belonging in the contemporary United States. In so doing, this article develops a twofold argument: First, the liminal dynamics of lyrical strategies in Nesbit’s novel are crucial to projecting and constituting a coherent and stable ‘we’—in other words, a narrated/ing community. Second, insofar as these strategies help envision a coherent as well as historically continuous national identity and sense of belonging while allowing the authorial audience to establish affective ties to such an imagined collectiveness, they contribute to the novel’s addressing and making sense of a set of uncertainties, transformations, and ruptures in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American society and culture.

The Liminalities of Lyrical Repetition and Rhythm in Prose

As has been hinted at already, narrative/ity and lyric/ality have been largely approached as not only distinct but also as contrasting forms in narrative and literary research (Owens-Murphy 4). As such, the relation between these forms has most often been theorized in terms of conflict and/or mutual exclusivity (Dubrow 254, 258)—the lyric as solipsistic, private, and monologic discourse representing the thought and/or utterance of an individual ‘I,’ versus narrative as public and social

discourse (Culler, “Theory of the Lyric” 121-25; Owens-Murphy 6-8; Michael 265).⁴ This notwithstanding, recent research has focused on texts and textual practices which combine narrative and lyrical elements and have theorized narrativity and lyricality in more dynamic and complex terms—that is, as sets of prototypical and gradable tendencies (Wolf 75-76) which are more or less present in a given textual artifact or practice and whose relation is marked by both conflict and cooperation (Dubrow 264).⁵

Within the range of these works, Owens-Murphy’s *Lyrical Strategies: The Poetics of the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2018), Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), and Nele Janssens’ discussion of lyrical prose and the ritualistic (2018) are most pertinent to the present analysis. Owens-Murphy’s research offers a most comprehensive analysis of lyrical components in a variety of canonical American novels, focusing on highly dramatized narrators, direct address, the protraction of metaphor, as well as on the use of repetitions and rhythms. Being perhaps most readily associated with lyric texts, repetitions can function as specifically lyrical strategies to the extent that they “return[] our attention to the same sound, word, line, [...] phrase,” or other components (19).⁶ In the process, repetitions establish associative connections between the repeated elements, thereby emphasizing a textual logic of synchronicity and recurrence (16) and “obstructing the forward momentum and temporal logic on which narrativity hinges” (19, cf. 44).⁷ With regard to rhythms as structured patterns of repetition, Owens-Murphy traces a slightly different, though similar dynamic. As she explains with the example of polysyndeton, the frequent use of coordinating conjunctions constructs rhythmic patterns which evoke a logic of both accumulation—the enumeration of discrete entities—and repetition—the reiteration of the respective conjunction and parallel sentence structures or phrases (48-54). In turn, such rhythmic patterns in prose—whether on the syntactic level, as in the case of polysyndeton, or on the level of sound, meter, and potentially even narrative structure (cf. Caracciolo 49)—also complicate the movement of narrative progression: In Owens-Murphy’s words, such “patterned movements of repetition”

4 Engaging critically with this tradition, Culler argues that such readings of lyric not only fictionalize and individualize this form but also gloss over its ritualistic or musical features and its public dimensions (“Theory of the Lyric” 125; cf. McHale, “Narrative in Poetry” 13).

5 Apart from those already mentioned, more prominent works in this context include the analyses by Friedman, Hühn, McHale (“Narrativity and Segmentivity”; “Narrative in Poetry”), and Phelan (*Living to Tell; Experiencing Fiction*).

6 This lyrical tendency is of course not inherent in all repetitions in narrative texts (Owens-Murphy 18).

7 This is not to argue that repetition is generally linked to stasis. Lyrical repetition can involve dynamic movement on different levels (Owens-Murphy 20; cf. Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 152-53).

“impede narrative development, blurring the contours of plot by obscuring distinctions of time, importance, and causality” (50).

(Lyric) repetition and rhythm do not only involve tendencies of narrativity and lyricality, however. As Culler and Janssens have argued in line with Roland Greene’s propositions,⁸ lyricality is itself marked by a tension between ritualistic and fictional elements; in other words, between “elements that provide meaning and structure and serve as instruction for performance and those that work to represent character and event” (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 7; cf. Janssens 108). Within the former category of ritualistic elements, repetitions and rhythms take an arguably central position. Not only are scripted repetitions considered to be integral to rituals and rites more generally (Ryan 28; Snoek 10-11), but repetitions and rhythms in literary texts can also be understood as nonrepresentational “instructions for performance” in Greene’s sense: They effect and produce language “that you want to repeat, to reread, to recite” (Culler, “Theory of the Lyric” 125; cf. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 137-38; Janssens 108-09). By thus evoking ritualistic speech acts and performances,⁹ these lyrical strategies are also closely tied to the community-building aspects and effects of ritual (cf. Ryan 30). As Janssens explains, “ritualistic texts encourage recitation, which has an inclusive effect. When someone repeats a lyrical text or, more specifically, participates in a ritual, the individual affiliates themselves with a certain community” (Janssens 116; cf. Greene 7). Importantly, these processes of community-building effected by rituals do not necessarily depend on linguistic (or literary) representation and reference. As Janssens emphasizes: “What invites citation is not a shared ideology [...], but a shared experience” which is “social rather than individual” (116).

As needs to be noted in light of these observations then, lyrical repetitions and rhythms play a key role in the impersonal or social dimensions and meaning-making of the lyric: If we follow Culler’s arguments that the lyric does not represent a merely subjective experience or utterance but instead constitutes a “public discourse about meaning and value” and that this public discourse is further “made distinctive by its ritualistic elements” (*Theory of the Lyric* 350), then lyrical rhythms and repetitions are indeed vital to and afford such communal significance and authority of the lyric. Moreover, as Janssens’s analysis of ritualistic tendencies in lyrical prose texts has shown, these dynamics and implications are not limited to the

8 According to Greene, “lyric discourse is defined by the dialectical play of ritual and fictional phenomena, or correlative modes of apprehension that are nearly always available in every lyric” (5).

9 In the context of this article, ‘ritual’ and ‘ritualistic’ are understood in a broad sense, with the term ‘ritual’ referring to culturally constructed and sanctioned actions or speech acts which are (mostly) collective, repetitive, symbolic, and scripted (cf. Snoek 10-11), irrespective of their relation to religious and/or sacred contexts.

genre of lyric poetry, but they may equally be traced in narrative fiction. As will be seen in the following analysis of Nesbit's novel, attending to these elements with a specific focus on the intersections among lyricality, the ritualistic, and narrativity thus constitutes an important avenue to exploring both the poetics and the politics of lyrical strategies in contemporary US 'we' narratives.

Rhythm, Repetition, Recital: Lyrical Strategies in Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (Per)Forming a Narrating/ed 'We'

TaraShea Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (*WLA*) is predominantly marked by narrative tendencies. Overall, the novel represents, and reads as, a sequence of events, thereby following a trajectory of equilibrium, disruption, and resolution—or beginning, middle, and end. As is indicated by its title, Nesbit's novel is concerned with, narrated by, as well as focalized through the wives of those scientists who participated in the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos. Representing the daily and private lives of the women at the military site, the novel traces how the group of these women from the US and different European countries coalesce into an all-American community, and it interlaces these small(er)-scale developments and happenings related to the narrating 'we' with the larger-scale sequence of political and social events entailed by the historic progression of WWII. In the process, Nesbit's text not only represents but also comments on and evaluates the women's thoughts, actions, and emotions in retrospect: The narrating 'we' is—although identical with the collective of characters in terms of person—clearly removed from the experiencing 'we' in terms of time and knowledge.¹⁰ Being narrated from such a posterior position and perspective, *WLA* unfolds the events and processes at Los Alamos in chronological fashion, opening with the women's move to and arrival at Los Alamos in 1943 and ending with their departure three years later.

At the same time, *WLA* also contains repetitive and rhythmic elements which interact with these narrative dynamics. As is argued shortly, this interaction can be theorized in terms of both conflict and cooperation. Repetitive and rhythmic elements obstruct the movement and temporal logic of narrative progression in Nesbit's novel,¹¹ yet in the process they also contribute vitally to the representa-

10 For instance, the narrating wives explicitly reference their own past lack of knowledge (and power) regarding the war efforts, the Manhattan project, and its outcome to deflect or come to terms with having participated in and having contributed to these developments (Nesbit 181, 196).

11 In proposing such a reading of lyrical repetition and rhythm, this article also aims to delineate an avenue to further developing Phelan's concept of "lyric progression" (*Living to Tell* 158-59): While Phelan's elaborations on the subject center on the potential absence of change, the focus on the present situation (of a character-narrator), and the absence of the audience's

tion, performance, and maintenance of a communal ‘we’ on the levels of story and discourse. Overall, these lyrical elements manifest in the form of repetitions as well as rhythms on the lexical, syntactical, and structural levels of *WLA*. Throughout its little more than 50 short chapters, the novel features a combination of polysyndetic sentence structures and anaphoric repetitions of words or phrases. Pronounced examples for these strategies can be found in the very last chapter, titled “We Left,” from which the following quote is taken:

We left and lectured on atomic energy. We left and wrote autobiographies about life on the Hill. [...] We left and many things turned atomic [...]. We left and founded organizations that opposed nuclear weapons. We continued atom research, we become social works, we became grandmothers, we became black-listed [...]. We left and moved to places where air raid sirens blared [...]. We left happy, we left relieved, we left thinking we had been a part of something unique, we left with doubts about our husbands, or about ourselves, or our country, or all of these, or none of it. [...] We left pregnant, we left tired, we left, in some ways, just as we arrived [...]. (227-30)

As is perhaps most readily observed, the chapter’s title is reiterated in anaphoric fashion at the beginning of several paragraphs, consecutive sentences, and phrases. Moreover, these repetitions are combined with frequent parallelisms on the level of syntax and the use of coordinating conjunctions such as “and” and “or.” As a result, the combination of (anaphoric) repetitions as well as polysyndetic and parallel sentence structures in this section contrasts the narrative logic of causality, temporal progression, and movement with a logic of repetition and accumulation.

Although this section and the last chapter as a whole arguably narrate a main event—the women’s final departure from Los Alamos—it does not transmit the temporal progression of this departure in linear fashion. Instead, it catalogues the different experiences, opinions, and thoughts of individual members and subgroups of the narrating ‘we’ in this context by presenting them as synchronic alternatives. As such, this chapter is also structured and thematically integrated by the repeated reference to this event—“[w]e left”—as continuously present, with the progression of plot being almost completely obstructed by an iterative and list-like form and logic. As the same dynamic is visible in almost all chapters,¹² the described obstruction of narrative progression equally applies to Nesbit’s novel as

ethical judgement of the character-narrator as the central characteristics of lyric progression (*Living to Tell* 158; *Experiencing Fiction* 152), they focus much less on the linguistic and formal elements that may contribute to these characteristics.

12 Other pronounced examples can be found in the chapters “Our Husbands” (41-46), “Growing” (52-56), “Help” (57-62), or “Our Older Children” (169-71).

a whole (cf. Richardson, “Social Minds” 209).¹³ Consequently, the sequential unfolding of large-scale events and changes in the storyworld is repeatedly subordinated to the synchronic exploration and representation of the (narrating/ive) collective—its internal differences, similarities, and developments—in relation to these events and changes.

Tied to this dynamic, the rhythmic and repetitive elements in the previous quote also contribute to a ritualistic form and logic¹⁴ in which the phrase “we left” comes to function as a scripted speech act that—at least partly independent from the referential content of these words—invokes and constitutes a coherent and continuous ‘we’ in the storyworld and on the level of discourse. Of course, as is the case in ‘we’ narratives more generally (Bekhta, “A Definition” 106-07; Fulton 1106), the frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun in the quoted section emphasizes the notion of community and as such also contributes to the textual performance of the collective character-narrator by directly denoting a ‘we.’¹⁵ At the same time, however, the repetition of the phrase “we left” and the use of parallel and polysyndetic sentence structures combined establish a rhythmic pattern in which these two words assume the function of a scripted, communal refrain—a refrain whose recital and ‘recitability’ establishes a ‘we’ that is both synchronically coherent and continuous over time: On the one hand, the repeating of this refrain constitutes and highlights a textual structure which organizes the novel’s last chapter and, in turn, also integrates the variety of discrete entries that it catalogues. By extension, this formal-structural integration of textual elements thereby implies a symbolic integration of the wives and their differences into a coherent, experiencing ‘we.’ On the other hand, the recital of the words “we left” also functions as invocation and performance of an identical, yet posterior narrating ‘we’: In one sense, the invocation of a coherent experiencing ‘we’ in *WLA* can be understood as the premise and origin for articulating a narrating ‘we’ that is continuous with, and based on, the notion of such a prior community.

In a more general context, a very similar understanding has been promoted by Fulton. As he argues: “In order to speak as one and identify itself as a group, [...] the *we* assumes a prior union through which this common voice is articulated. The vocalization of a first person plural perspective [...] can thus extend backward and forward in time, restoring continuity, or, in a sense, providing the illusion that

13 As such, Nesbit’s novel is also marked by what DuPlessis has defined as “the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre”—that is, “segmentivity” (51). Overall, segmentivity describes a way of creating meaning “by selecting, deploying, and combining segments” which are “operating in relation to chosen pause or silence” (51; cf. McHale, “Narrativity and Segmentivity” 28).

14 The chapters listed in fn. 12 offer further examples for ritualistic forms and dynamics in *WLA*.

15 This argument is grounded in a rhetorical model of fictional representation (cf. Walsh 35), which is also central to Bekhta’s elaborations (“A Definition” 101-02; fn. 1, 2).

this continuity was never lost” (1106). Apart from this reading, the reiteration of the words “we left” may equally be approached as a (fictional) ritualistic recital for the narrating characters; that is, a scripted and shared performance which itself integrates its participants—the plurality of narrating wives—into a narrating ‘we.’ In any case, the described ritualistic dynamics thus help textualize a coherent and continuous narrating/ed collective which incorporates not only diversity, conflict, and dissent, but also the different narrative levels, historical positions, and stages of knowledge ascribed to the experiencing and the narrating ‘we’ in Nesbit’s text.

As the previous elaborations already indicate, this twofold consolidation of the narrating community does, however, not necessarily depend on a specific characteristic, perspective, or ideology that is commonly shared. Indeed, *WLA* formally conveys and represents the partly enforced homogeneity of its all-American narrating collective¹⁶ while also emphasizing the women’s shared circumstances at Los Alamos as a source of solidarity and collectivity (77). At the same time, the novel very much highlights the diversity, difference, and an actual lack of unity among the wives—whether in terms of their different national, cultural, or racial backgrounds (4, 22, 50–51, 84); their personal experiences regarding marriage and motherhood (52–56, 115–17, 134–36, 145–50, 169–71); or their political opinions on the war and the Manhattan Project (13, 198, 228).¹⁷ As such, the textual coherence and continuity of the communal character-narrator instead largely depends on, and is performed by, rhythmic patterns, repetitions, and ritualistic recitals such as the one described above. By reading this projection of community as, and in relation to, model(s) of US national collectivity and civic belonging in the twenty-first century, the last part of this article will inquire into the politics and cultural work of the novel’s lyrical strategies in a contemporary US-American context.

(Allegorical) Repetition: Projecting the National ‘We’

To delineate the extratextual implications of lyrical strategies in *WLA*, we can first situate the novel within a more recent literary trend that Caren Irr has identified as the twenty-first-century US national allegory: a genre in which “a restricted set of characters and scenes” is used to “speak to national themes” (522). Such an allegorical reading of *WLA* is primarily warranted by the reference to World War II

16 Apart from more explicit references to the women’s enforced homogeneity during their time at the military site (Nesbit 50–51, 64), these notions are conveyed through a very consistent use of the ‘we’ pronoun and the anonymity of almost all members of the narrating/ed ‘we’ (cf. Richardson, “Social Minds” 207).

17 In addition to the list-like form and logic of many of the novel’s chapters, the use of frequent particularizations, such as “some of us” or “most of us,” contributes to the impression of diversity and difference within the narrating ‘we.’

as the historic context of the narrating/ed 'we.' Like other recent US pop-cultural texts which employ representations of World War II to negotiate "a certain idea of what it means to be a 'good citizen'" and to delineate a "renewed sense of national belonging" for contemporary US audiences (Biesecker 394), the novel's portrayal of the formation of its all-American 'we' during WWII equally speaks to and negotiates larger concerns about (national) identity, belonging, and continuity in twenty-first-century US society and culture: Whether on account of racial discrimination, inequality, or conflict in the context of 'post-racism,' 'new racism,' or 'color-blind egalitarianism' (Bonilla-Silva and Ray 60, 62; Gallagher 41-42, 47-48); socio-economic disparity and precariousness (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3, 19; Samuel 140-41); or cultural pluralism and concomitant anxieties about a homogenous national and cultural identity (Berlant, *Queen of America* 2-3, 110-11; Renshon 3; Tillett 227, 233-34)—the twenty-first-century United States have arguably seen the advent of a "post-normative phase, in which [...] clarities about the conditions for enduring collectivity, historical continuity, and infrastructural stability have melted away" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 225).

Against this backdrop, the meaning-making and cultural work of *WLA*'s lyrical strategies—and the allegorical signification of the novel's narrating collective—emerge from their contributing to a projection and performance of national collectivity that allows for integrating the instabilities and ruptures of the present moment. These strategies help delineate a form of communality that promises and invokes national coherence and belonging. As has been demonstrated, the use of lyrical strategies in *WLA* serves to textualize a narrating/ed 'we' whose ultimate cohesion depends on rhythmic patterns and repetitive or ritualistic performances rather than on its members' similarity or agreement. On an allegorical level, these lyrical strategies and their ritualistic effects thus serve to model and convey an arguably affect-based vision of (US) national belonging that can be productively theorized as an "intimate public sphere" in the sense of Lauren Berlant's definition of this term (*Queen of America* 5).

WLA generally delineates a form of (national) communality that—insofar as it is an allegorical extension of the coherent, fictional 'we' centered around shared, repetitive performances and rhythms—promises a sense of inclusive and immediate togetherness which is equally grounded in shared (and repetitive) performances and which potentially elides the need for consensus or sameness. Moreover, the novel itself offers its authorial audiences such a sense of unmediated togetherness through the use of lyrical repetitions and rhythm. To the extent that repetitive and rhythmic elements in the novel generate "language that you want to repeat" (Culler, "Theory of the Lyric" 125), these lyrical strategies invite contemporary authorial audiences to participate in a repeated, ritualistic performance—in other words, the returning to, (re)reading, or reciting of certain sentences or phrases in Nesbit's novel, such as the phrase "we left." In turn, this performance affiliates its partic-

ipants with a(n imagined) community that equally offers a sense of inclusive and immediate belonging, as it is not so much based on representation and readerly identification as on the shared act and experience of this performance.¹⁸

It is this sense of immediate connectivity which Berlant deems central to the affective politics of intimate publics in a contemporary US cultural and social setting. Analyzing the desire for public intimacy and social belonging in this context, Berlant argues that “[a]n intimate public promises the sense of being held in its penumbra. You do not need to audition for membership in it. Minimally, you need just to perform audition, to listen and to be interested in the scene’s visceral impact” (*Cruel Optimism* 226). What intimate publics promise is thus a sense of belonging which—insofar as it depends on a shared performance of participation and the affective sense of such a common participation—elides political debate or action, ideological consensus, or sameness. In turn, such a sense of belonging allows for effectively “displac[ing] [...] instability and contradiction from the center of sociality” (224-26).¹⁹ In the same way, *WLA*’s highly similar modeling and conveying of (US national) collectivity based on communal and repeated performances can equally be said to offer such a sense of intimate social and national belonging which integrates—yet also contains—disparity, conflict, and the perceived dissolution of social connectivity in the contemporary moment.²⁰

The novel’s lyrical strategies and ritualistic dynamics are likewise central to evoking a sense of national and collective historical continuity. As has been argued, lyrical repetitions and rhythms in *WLA* not only emphasize notions of temporal continuity by interrupting or impeding narrative progression but also establish and function as ritualistic recitals which bind the different narrative levels, stages of comprehension, and historical standpoints of the experiencing and narrating ‘we’: each before and after the women’s stay at Los Alamos, the United States’ development and use of the atomic bomb, and the clear emergence of the US as a global power. By extension, the ritualistic effects of these lyrical strategies also evoke a transhistorical continuity between contemporary authorial audiences and each of the contexts and perspectives of the fictional experiencing and the narrating ‘we.’ Just like the novel’s rhythmic and repetitive elements invite readers to participate in a text-based recital and ritualistic performance which establishes a sense of synchronic connectivity, so do these same strategies affiliate the authorial

18 The frequent repetition of first-person plural pronouns as part of and within the reiterated phrases further contributes to this effect.

19 Of course, as Berlant has explicated in great detail throughout her works, such an affective, juxtapolitical sense of connectivity bears its own limitations and constraints. Apart from her elaborations in *Cruel Optimism* (223-63), see, for instance, Berlant’s *The Female Complaint* (6, 12-13) and “The Epistemology of State Emotion” (47, 73).

20 On the functions and meanings of ritual in relation to cultural pluralism more broadly, see also Seligman and Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity* (2012).

audience with the fictional narrating collective. That is, the readers' repeating, returning to, or reciting reiterated phrases and elements in Nesbit's text also elicits a sense of continuity with the fictional narrating 'we' on account of an assumed common performance—the reiteration or recital of said phrases and elements. In turn, given the described linkage of the narrating and the experiencing 'we' in Nesbit's novel, this performed continuity also ties contemporary audiences to the experiencing 'we' and its respective historical perspective and position.

Indeed, other representational and/or narrative strategies additionally promote readerly identification with the novel's experiencing and narrating 'we'—such as the consistent use of internal focalization and the representation of consciousness or the accumulation of differences among the female character-narrators to such an extent that, as Richardson has rightly pointed out, “the depiction threatens to approach universality” (“Social Minds” 207). Nevertheless, the described sense of communal continuity generated by readers' ritualistic recitals is both more immediate and inclusive: It is not, or at least not only, based on the similarity of the characters and the actual reader but based on a shared ritual, and it constitutes more than the mere return to an idealized past by effectively tying together (narrated) past, present, and future. In this way, lyrical repetition, rhythm, and their ritualistic effects in *WLA* indeed allow contemporary US audiences to make sense of, navigate, and accommodate the uncertainties, changes, and ruptures of the present moment (cf. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3, 19): They not only contribute to envisioning communal and national coherence or belonging but also serve to establish a sense of transhistorical continuity.

Recital II: One Account of Narrative Liminality/ies in Contemporary US 'We' Narratives

As the present analysis has demonstrated, the lens of narrative liminality proves to be essential for shedding light on the textual dynamics as well as the extratextual signifying, or the cultural work, of Nesbit's novel. For one, looking at and beyond the border zones of narrative by way of this lens affords analyzing rhythmic and repetitive elements in *WLA* as distinctly liminal strategies which operate at the intersections of narrative/ity, lyrical/ity, and the ritualistic. More precisely, lyrical repetition and rhythm as well as their ritualistic effects interact with the novel's narrative tendencies by way of both contrast and cooperation: They impede the forward movement of narrative progression and, in turn, help textualize a highly dramatized, coherent, and continuous narrating/ed 'we.'

At the same time, approaching the aforementioned elements in *WLA* as such nonnarrative, lyrical strategies also showcases the extratextual significations and politics of such (narrative) liminality in relation to contemporary US culture and

society. As has been elucidated, lyrical strategies and their ritualistic dynamics in Nesbit's text not only contribute to the novel's proposing a stable model of cultural identity and (intimate) civic belonging within the framework of the nation, but they also allow for the authorial audience to become affectively tied to such an imagined collectiveness. In effect, these liminal strategies and workings arguably play a vital role in negotiating, making sense of, and containing, the described uncertainties and transformations at work in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US society and culture, insofar as they help (re)formulate models of national collectivity in this historical and cultural setting.

What is left then is, perhaps, a closing repetition: Moving analyses of (literary) texts towards and beyond the limiting borders of narrative/ity and, specifically, zooming in on the intersections among narrative/ity and other (symbolic) forms constitutes a highly productive approach. It is productive not merely for gaining a better understanding of the (extra)textual dynamics of contemporary US 'we' narratives, but also for further showcasing the relevance and, indeed, the prevalence of narrative liminality in and for twentieth- and twenty-first-century US literature and culture. As such, these further advances remain an objective for hopefully repeated explorations in the future.

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