

(Post)Colonial We-Narratives and the “Writing Back” Paradigm: Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*

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Abstract This article considers how postcolonial narratives written partly in the first-person plural collective voice reflect recent critical developments in postcolonial studies rather than echoing the outmoded “writing back” paradigm. Even colonial texts such as Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* according to narratologists the earliest example of extensive we-narration to which postcolonial authors respond, dramatize the inherent multiplicity of the self rather than writing into being an opposition between a colonial “we” and a colonized “other.” Early postcolonial we-narratives such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*, this essay suggests, also display a narrative “we” that transgresses the conventional postcolonial center/periphery paradigm. Here the first-person plural voice becomes a marker of multidirectional inclusions and demarcations, equally highlighting the internal fragmentation of the collective “we.”

Keywords we-narration, first-person plural narratives, postcolonial narratology, Joseph Conrad, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

First-person plural (we-)narratives have gained critical attention for three main reasons: their rarity, the challenges they pose to some of the established terms in narrative theory (Margolin 2000; Marcus 2008; Richardson 2009; Alber 2013), and their high incidence in postcolonial fiction (Fludernik 2011,

2012; Richardson 2006, 2009, 2011). In this article I consider the question of why the we-voice seems so appealing to postcolonial writers.

The main argument advanced in the literature on we-narratives in postcolonial fiction is that the we-form allows the postcolonial author to forge a collective identity in contrast to imperial powers and Western individualist notions of subjectivity. These approaches are typified by the works of Monika Fludernik (2012) and Brian Richardson (2011). I would argue that postcolonial we-texts, besides speaking to the notion of postcolonial fiction as “the empire writing back,” also reflect new developments in postcolonial studies. While the seminal *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft et al. 2002 [1989]) is still considered a groundbreaking publication in the field, debates have subsequently moved beyond the colonizer/colonized relation to engage with wider questions of postcolonial identities in today’s globalizing world.

Admittedly, an oppositional we-voice that writes back to the colonizer features in some texts of the anticolonial and cultural nationalist phase of postcolonial writing. It is, however, frequently accompanied by less clear-cut markings of the we-group. We-narratives can, therefore, also be read against the background of recent calls among postcolonial critics to review some of the settled paradigms of postcolonial studies (Wilson et al. 2010; Stam and Shohat 2012; Young 2012; Zabus 2015). Thus far scholarship on we-narratives has not explicitly related recent revisions in postcolonial theory to readings of postcolonial novels in the first-person plural voice. It is crucial here to direct attention to the multi- rather than unidirectionality of many postcolonial texts by highlighting more ambiguous inscriptions of “we.” For the we-voice is hardly an authoritative “we” that establishes a univocal postcolonial utterance. Rather, it frequently entails what Amit Marcus (2008: 152), in his analysis of we-fictional narratives, has called a “disorienting voice.” It may be concluded that postcolonial authors frequently use the first-person plural mode to bring into focus the fissures in liberation narratives.

I address these debates by reading Joseph Conrad’s 1897 novella *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and the revised edition of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat*, which was published in 1986. Closer analysis of Conrad’s novella shows that the inherently unstable and heteroglot we-voice attempts to define itself in light of multiple categories of differentiation: class, race, gender, and sexuality. My reading of the West Indian James Wait shows that discussions of this figure as representing the colonial “other” fall short of taking into account the novella’s insistence on plurality (“we”) as central to being itself. In this sense, the colonial text itself contains a variety of contradictory voices and does not position the we-form as authoritative and merely oppositional to a colonized “other.”

Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat* (2002 [1986]) is a useful example of postcolonial we-narration against which the claims above may be examined, as it is a text of the cultural nationalist phase that eschews an authoritative postcolonial "we." The novel's we-voice comes into existence at the moment of Uhuru (independence) and at first glance appears to corroborate the notion of the postcolonial text as "writing back" to the center. Yet Ngũgĩ's multiplicity of narrative voices and focalizers undermines the impression that the deployment of this innovative narrative style in postcolonial fiction gains significance mainly inasmuch as it underpins the idea of indigenous solidarity and foregrounds a communal voice in opposition to the Western canon. The we-voice deployed in the novel is, in fact, riven by various forces from the very beginning. By introducing a traitor as the narrative's first focalizer, for example, Ngũgĩ positions the "we" of collaboration at the center of his engagement with the postcolonial future. While *The Empire Writes Back*, as Robert R. C. Young (2012: 25) highlights, "assimilates all forms of colonial liberation into a single narrative of freedom from the imperial metropolis," Ngũgĩ's "we" dramatizes the deep-seated contradictions within the postcolonial narrative of national liberation. In this sense, earlier readings of Thabai village as a synecdoche of the Kenyan nation have to be carefully reassessed. I would suggest, therefore, that Ngũgĩ's text—even if only subliminally—also anticipates recent concerns of postcolonial (literary) studies, such as "the question of how to reformulate the emancipatory aims of anticolonial struggle outside the parameters of the nation-state" (*ibid.*: 27).

The present article begins, therefore, with an overview of the scholarship on we-narration—with particular focus on Marcus's (2008) typology of diverse ideological stances adopted in we-narratives. Next, I review Richardson's reading of Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1988 [1897]) as the first novel written largely in the we-form to draw attention to Conrad's favoring of heteroglossia over an authoritative "we." I then discuss Richardson's and Fludernik's arguments on we-narratives and postcolonial fiction and relate these to recent critical assessments of "writing back." In the final section of the article I proceed to a reading of Ngũgĩ's novel.

Approaching We-Narration

Narratologists speak of we-narration or first-person plural fiction when the narrative voice of a text mainly speaks in the first-person plural.¹ Given that the number of novels told entirely in the we-voice is relatively small, texts only

1. Susan Sniader Lanser (1992: 21) uses the terms "simultaneous communal narration" and "simultaneous communal voice" to refer to narratives "in which a plural 'we' narrates."

partly narrated in the first-person plural are also considered we-narration (Richardson 2006). Various typologies of we-narration have been suggested, differentiating between the amount of narrative space taken up by the we-voice or the degree to which it adheres to the conventions of realist poetics (Richardson 2006: 60). For an analysis of the narrative form in (post)colonial texts, Marcus's typology based on the ideological uses of "we" appears most appropriate. Examining the relationships among members of the we-group and between the members of the we-group and others (the "non-we") through the lens of Bakhtinian dialogism, Marcus (2008: 138) distinguishes between "authoritative," "disorienting," and "polyphonic" "'we' fictional narratives." The first category applies to we-narratives in which the "I" is subordinate to the "we" and that are founded on a hierarchy between the we-group and others (ibid.: 139). "Disorienting" we-narration, Marcus suggests, occurs when a member of the we-group challenges the norms and values that hold the group together. This type brings into focus "the relationship between the community and the unruly other within it rather than . . . others who belong to a rival community" (ibid.: 152). The final category is related to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony. Here the "socio-ideological multiplicity" of a group cannot be reduced to a unisonous collective voice. Marcus concedes that this form of polyphony hardly occurs in we-narratives. More common is "a type of heteroglossia, in which the pronouns 'we,' 'I,' and 'they' represent different voices, whose borderlines are fluid and context-bound" (ibid.: 154). Marcus's differentiation, I suggest, allows us to examine in detail the ideological motives underlying colonial and postcolonial uses of the we-voice.

Writing a Colonial "We"? Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

Richardson (2009: 144) points out in his chronological overview of we-narratives that Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* appears to be the "first sustained example" of this narrative form. He lists an impressive range of postcolonial we-narratives that he deems follow the narrative technique of the colonial text: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1963 [1939]), Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973),² Edouard Glissant's *La case du commandeur* (1981), Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992), and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995). Although these narratives come from various

2. Lief Lorentzon (1997) also highlights the frequent occurrence of African first-person plural writing in comparison to the Western canon. Engaging in detail with Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, Lorentzon posits that the narrative form underscores an "ideological" pan-Africanism. For Marcus (2008) the novel presents an "authoritative" form of "we" narration that centers on opposition.

postcolonial societies across the world, Richardson (2011: 4) notes, they “all have found ‘we’ narration to be a crucial strategy in forging a postcolonial narrative voice.” African writing, he observes, displays a particularly high incidence of we-narratives, “all of them as it were rewriting, revising, or signifyin’ on *The Nigger of the Narcissus* as the story of that text’s unassimilable Other is told and retold in the technique Conrad invented” (Richardson 2006: 56).

In this section I will focus on the composition and constitution of the first-person plural narrative voice in Conrad’s novella and the composition of the “non-we” to show that the text itself exhibits many contradictory inscriptions of the we-voice that counter traditional renderings of the colonial voice as monologic. The we-voice in Conrad’s novella first appears in parentheses in a narrative aside. After informing the reader about the number of years the old sailor Singleton has spent at sea, the narrative voice discloses its source of information: “(what we had calculated from his papers)” (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 4). This initial “we” may well refer to an omniscient (heterodiegetic) narrator “we” and thus form part of the range of uses of “we” for “non-we” or “we” for “I” (cf. Pavlidou 2014: 4). But it also anticipates the referential scope of “we” later in the novella, which mainly comprises the collective of sailors on the *Narcissus*. The unspecified “we” here signals the shifting, ambiguous nature of the narrative voice throughout the novella.

Richardson notes that Conrad’s we-voice includes most of the men of the crew but excludes the officers (Richardson 2009: 144), “the malcontent Donkin,” “Singleton, who represents an earlier generation and, as boatswain, ranks slightly higher than the crew proper” (Richardson 2006: 39), and the West Indian James Wait. The we-voice seems to establish its identity by repeatedly demarcating itself from these individuals and others, such as Captain Allistoun and the cook Podmore, throughout the narrative, as the men begin to feel bound together by the “brotherhood of the sea” (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 21). Conrad’s we-narration belongs to what Fludernik calls exclusive first-person plural narration. In contrast to the inclusive “I and you” model, the exclusive narrative includes “I and he/she/they” (Fludernik 2011: 114). The “we,” therefore, comprises both the “I” of the speaker and a “non-I.” The speaking “I” in the we-voice remains hidden throughout the text. It is only at the very end of the narrative, when the *Narcissus* has set anchor in London and the crew leaves the ship, that a speaking “I” of one of the crew members emerges. Yet the “I” remains nameless as the sailor leaves the ship and bids farewell to his brothers (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 128).

While the narrative voice mentions the various nationalities of the sailors that seem to constitute the “non-I” in the “we,” the men, whether old or young, are “all akin with the brotherhood of the sea” (ibid.: 21). Richardson

(2005: 214) contends that “nationality (Irish, Norwegian, American, etc.) is eclipsed amid such an inescapable material basis for such egalitarian cooperation, as Conrad inadvertently confirms Marx’s claim that the workingman has no nationality.” He notes that Conrad sets out to celebrate the birth of a “collective consciousness” among the men “while simultaneously disparaging any possible left-wing recuperation of this condition and sensibility” (ibid.: 215). The mutiny scene, for instance, as Richardson aptly observes, is partly told in the passive voice and followed by third-person narration to highlight the contradictions inherent in the workers’ consciousness incited by Donkin. Moreover, the we-narrative voice also notes internal differences among the group of sailors. Belfast’s devotion to Wait and his abrasive treatment of the other men gives rise to conflict among the sailors:

The two Scandinavians, even, discussed the situation—but it was impossible to know in what spirit, because they quarrelled in their own language. Belfast suspected one of them of irreverence, and in this incertitude thought that there was no option but to fight them both. They became very much terrified by his truculence, and henceforth lived amongst us, dejected, like a pair of mutes. (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 104)

Here the we-voice, it appears, admits its own limited point of view and hence questions the presumed position of authority held by the speaking “I” over “non-I” in the we-group. At the same time, it draws attention to the presence of an authoritative discourse propagated by Belfast that propels the Scandinavians toward the outer edges of the we-community. In this sense, Conrad dramatizes both the centrifugal and centripetal forces (Marcus 2008) at work in the “we,” cautioning against an authoritative we-discourse that threatens the individuality of the group members.

Notably, the out-group, or the “non-we,” against which the “we” defines itself is equally variegated and shifting. While much scholarship on we-narration has focused on the composition and instability of the we-voice, the nature of the out-group has not received equal attention. The “non-we” in Conrad’s novella is differentiated along multiple lines, including class, race, and gender. Donkin, the “votary of change” (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 9), is portrayed as a socialist agitator, and the crew frequently pronounces its difference from him: “He was left alone; and in his isolation he could do nothing but think of the gales of the Cape of Good Hope and envy us the possession of warm clothing and waterproofs. Our sea-boots, our oilskin coats, our well-filled sea-chests, were to him so many causes for bitter meditation” (ibid.: 29). Donkin does not form part of the we-voice, but the sailors display a simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward him and his socialist ideas of an equal status among all members of the ship (cf. Watt 1981: 110).

Singleton, who also embraces a worldview directly opposed to Donkin's, becomes in the novella an icon of anachronistic loyalty and servitude from which the men dissociate themselves: "Singleton seemed to know nothing, understand nothing. We had thought him till then as wise as he looked, but now we dared, at times, suspect him of being stupid—from old age" (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 30). Similarly, the self-righteous and overly pious cook Mr. Podmore is not included in the first-person plural voice: "Like many benefactors of humanity, the cook took himself too seriously, and reaped the reward of irreverence. We were not ungrateful, however. He remained heroic" (ibid.: 61–62). The range of the "non-we" becomes even wider in light of the repeated juxtaposition of the sailors' masculine "we" to the feminized ship: "The *Narcissus* was one of that perfect brood. Less perfect than many perhaps, but she was ours, and, consequently, incomparable. We were proud of her" (ibid.: 37). These multiple markers of differentiation posit the "non-we" not as a single, unified group but as a wide-ranging and diversified set of identities.

While Richardson reads the novella as a colonial precursor of subsequent postcolonial we-narratives, his analysis of the text, as noted above, concentrates mainly on class. Surprisingly, the issue of race remains completely absent from his discussion (cf. Yekani 2011: 127). His positioning of the text as a colonial we-narrative thus eschews central critical debates that have dominated scholarship on the novella: the question of whether Wait's portrayal should be read through a realistic or a symbolic lens and the debate as to whether Conrad reinforces or undermines racist stereotypes (Shaffer 1999: 58).

Nonetheless, Richardson speaks of "the enigmatical Wait" (Richardson 2005: 217) and Wait as the "unassimilable Other" (Richardson 2006: 56) without, however, specifying the basis of his othering. The adjectives *enigmatical* and *unassimilable* suggest the unknowability of the colonized, racial "other" that has been the focus of much postcolonial scholarship. Indeed, scholarship on the novella has highlighted how the collective of sailors establishes its identity in contrast to Wait's race, referring to Wait's initial depiction as "a head powerful and misshapen with a tormented and flattened face—a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger's soul" (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 12). Ian Watt (1981: 105), for instance, suggests that "the narrative begins by insisting on Wait's blackness. At his first appearance Wait's colour dramatically establishes his difference" from the other men.

Many readings of Wait's character hold onto the postcolonial concept of "the other," suggesting that Conrad's narrative others Wait or that the author's contradictory inscription of Wait deconstructs the binary estab-

lished between “self” and “other.” Robert Hampson (1992: 105) contends that the opposition between black/white, good/evil that suffuses the entire narrative is already present in the title, in which “the whiteness of the narcissus is poised against the black sailor, Wait.” Taking into account the multiple levels around which the narrative orbits, Elahe Haschemi Yekani reads the text through the prism of intersections between race, class, gender, and sexuality. She argues that Wait’s “racial ‘Otherness’ is erotically charged” as he becomes a “feminised object of affection” (Yekani 2011: 129). The sailors’ fascination with Wait is counterpoised by the threat Wait poses to their “masculine authority” by “turning them into his feminised caretakers” (ibid.). Wait, in Yekani’s reading, becomes the standard colonial object of fascination and fear against which the crew members assert their “claim to masculinity.” Yet according to Yekani (ibid.: 133), Conrad’s narrative is unable to free itself from the shackles of a colonial mind-set that “cannot grant full subject status to the denigrated masculinity of James Wait, who ultimately remains the ‘Other’ of both the narrative voice and the crew.”

Lissa Schneider (2003: 86), in contrast, contends that Wait’s initial inscription as “absolutely Other” dissolves as the men begin to develop an “idealistic affection for ‘our Jimmy.’” Wait’s interior monologues, she observes, allow the reader to “see past ‘the repulsive mask’ to the dying man; in the end.” In this sense, Wait’s portrayal resists that of “an ‘impenetrable’ Other” (ibid.: 75). Schneider’s argument of a linear progression from despised “nigger” to “our Jimmy,” however, appears to presuppose the existence of an impermeable colonial “other.” In this sense, her use of the concept of “the other,” like Richardson’s and Yekani’s, is grounded in postcolonialism’s unrelenting focus on discourses of difference and otherness. In his article “Postcolonial Remains” Young (2012: 37) critiques this persistent use of the concept of “the other” in postcolonial scholarship, suggesting that “othering is what the postcolonial should be trying to deconstruct.” The reading of literary texts in terms of its othering processes, Young argues, is itself grounded in “the discriminatory gesture of social and political othering that it appears to contest” (ibid.).

An analysis of Conrad’s novella through the prism of we-narration, I suggest, allows us to view Wait in terms of a conjunction, rather than an opposition, of binaries³ and, moreover, brings to the fore the way the self,

3. Nidesh Lawtoo’s (2014) analysis of the text’s surrealist mode complicates these discussions. He admits that conventional readings of Wait as an embodiment of the white/dark binary and — on the symbolic level — life/death, etc., may be a possible allegorical reading. Yet his analysis foregrounds the conjunction rather than the opposition of binaries: “A visual continuum blends the physical darkness of the tragic figure in the foreground and the metaphysical darkness in the background” (ibid.: 232).

in Jean-Luc Nancy's (2000) terms, is already always plural rather than constituted simply in opposition to an "other." Particularly instructive is the second instance of narrative *we* in the novella that follows the description of Wait's handling of his illness (tuberculosis) and death:

He [Wait] seemed to take a pride in that death which, so far, had attended only upon the ease of his life; he was overbearing about it, as if no one else in the world had ever been intimate with such a companion; he paraded it unceasingly before us with an affectionate persistence that made its presence indubitable, and at the same time incredible. No man could be suspected of such monstrous friendship! Was he a reality—or was he a sham—this ever-expected visitor of Jimmy's? We hesitated between pity and mistrust, while, on the slightest provocation, he shook before our eyes the bones of his bothersome and infamous skeleton. He was forever trotting him out. He would talk of that coming death as though it had been already there. (Conrad 1988 [1897]: 26)

This scene could be interpreted as the sailors' collective decentering of Wait on the grounds of his pronounced closeness to death, which they view as an exaggerated performance. One may argue that the men are criticizing Wait's performance of "difference." Nevertheless, they at the same time highlight his being with them ("as if no one else in the world had ever been intimate with such a companion"). Additionally, the comparison to "no one else" and "no man" implies that the "I" is inescapably always already a "we." This is not to suggest the absence of racialized power relations and sociopolitical hierarchies on the ship, merely that the sailors do not imagine Wait as an "unknowable other."

In a similar vein, the narrative use of the possessive *our* suggests a mode of being with instead of a simple opposition to or identification with Wait. Admittedly, the first-person plural possessive usually indexes collective ownership and distinctiveness and is, therefore, often associated with exclusionary and even violent assertions of group or national membership. Yet the first-person possessive in Conrad's novella mainly refers to the crew members' body parts ("our hands," "our heads," "our hearts," etc.), feelings and sentiments ("our feelings," "our hatred"), and attributes or character traits ("our dignity," "our patience"). These semantic categories primarily inscribe the men as human beings rather than indicating exclusive group membership. The *we*-voice equally refers to Wait initially as "our nigger" (*ibid.*: 25, 28) and then more often as "our Jimmy" (*ibid.*: 52, 89, 118). Admittedly, this designation could be read as an expression of the men's colonial desire. My claim, however, is that the *our* here primarily signals plurality, as Wait is in this

manner located inside the “we.”⁴ In conjunction with the earlier example, in which Wait was positioned as part of the “non-we,” Conrad’s deployment of the first-person plural encodes communities as unstable and porous entities. The novella, therefore, does not pit an authoritative colonial “we” against a colonized “other” but, through its complex use of “we” and the possessive “our,” shows that, to use Young’s (2012: 39) words, “no one is so different that their very difference makes them [entirely] unknowable.” Riddled with this form of instability, the text employs what Marcus (2008: 154) has called heteroglossia in relation to we-narratives.⁵ The boundaries between “we,” the “non-we,” and “I” are permeable and shifting throughout the novella and refer to different characters at different times. “They,” for instance, at times refers to the “non-we,” while at other times it designates the sailors.

There seems, therefore, to be a contradiction at the heart of Richardson’s engagement with Conrad’s novella. On the one hand, he praises it for its innovative use of multiperson narration, while, on the other hand, he suggests that Wait figures as the colonial “other” of the “we” that postcolonial authors are “as it were rewriting, revising or signifyin’” (Richardson 2006: 56). The argument outlined above has established that Conrad’s novella challenges an understanding of the colonial and postcolonial “we” in terms of what Byron Caminero-Santangelo (2005: 13) describes as a common “split” in postcolonial scholarship between “a monologic, authoritative colonial vision and a subversive, dialogic postcolonial hybridity.” The we-voice in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* is multilayered and contradictory. It dramatizes not just class divisions but the intersection of class, race, gender, and sexuality and thus defies the simple colonizer/colonized binary. This brief and, admittedly incomplete, reading of Conrad’s novella has shown that the text does not constitute an example of Marcus’s (2008: 137) authoritative type but that Conrad contests “this allegedly centripetal form of narration and display[s] its potential fractures, chasms and centrifugal forces.”⁶

4. John G. Peters (2013: 45) reads Wait as the crew’s other self, “which harbors the guilt, fear, ignorance, and weakness within individuals.”

5. Conrad also attempts to reflect the different linguistic registers of the sailor in the novella. Jakob Lothe et al. (2008: 2) note that Conrad frequently “draws on the discourses of multiple levels of society that create the kind of heteroglossia that Mikhail Bakhtin regards as essential to the power of the novel as a genre.”

6. Dawn Fulton (2003: 1106) stresses the inherent complexity of “we,” noting with reference to the *roman de nous* that “the use of the first person plural pronoun to evoke commonality, although certainly a tribute to its discursive and performative power, nonetheless puts most of its emphasis on the simplicity and unity of the term, overlooking its complexity.”

We-Narration and the Postcolonial

While elsewhere emphasizing the inherent instability of we-narratives, Richardson (2011: 5) argues that this narrative technique is most useful to represent “a collective subject in opposition to the hegemonic paradigm of the isolated Western consciousness.” His analysis thus echoes Bill Ashcroft et al.’s (2002 [1989]: 2) definition of the distinguishing characteristics of postcolonial literatures, which “emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their difference from the assumptions of the imperial centre.”

Richardson (2006, 2011) and Fludernik (2012) both highlight the frequent use of the rather uncommon first-person plural narrative voice in postcolonial fiction. Richardson (2011: 4), for instance, observes that “probably most compelling is the large and diverse group of postcolonial authors who have used ‘we’ narration to articulate collective struggles against colonialism.” Assuredly, neither is it *the* narrative technique of postcolonial fiction, nor does it express an inherent ideological position. Indeed, as Fludernik (2012: 905) contends, “there is no *one* ‘postcolonial’ narrative technique, nor even a specific combination of narratologically definable features that necessarily trigger a ‘postcolonial’ reading of a text.” There are, however, specific narrative strategies that may be particularly useful to underline a text’s postcolonial or anticolonial stance. Thus, in her view, narrative techniques adopted by postcolonial writers often directly respond to the use of a specific technique in colonial fiction. For instance, the use of internal focalization in postcolonial fiction, according to Fludernik, “needs to be contrasted with colonial fiction, in which internal focalization was readily used to characterize the white colonizer as the reader’s focus of empathy, while the native was relegated to the margins, depicted stereotypically from the outside and presented as an object of colonial observation, ridicule, suspicion or fear” (ibid.). For Fludernik (ibid.: 914) this also seems to account for the use of we-narration, for she highlights the primacy of the indigenous postcolonial “we” in opposition to a colonial “we” in postcolonial we-narratives, suggesting that

postcolonial writing here taps indigenous generic and narrative sources and with them hybridizes the Western genre of the novel. Rather than merely telling the story of individual achievement or failure, we-narratives broaden out to embrace in their narrative grasp the story of a community. They thereby implicitly continue memory work and indigenous history writing in the fiction mode. Such stories therefore have a clear postcolonial thrust since they re-establish the culture’s indigenous roots both formally and thematically against the invasion of colonial expropriation.

Fludernik (ibid. 908) further points out that plot structures and character constellations in postcolonial novels may go beyond the “writing back” mode to focus on “tension between the new (neo-colonial) elite and the people.” Nevertheless, her account of first-person plural narratives appears to foreground the demarcation of the indigenous we-voice from colonial culture.

This emphasis on interpretative models of we-narratives that center on the “collective struggles” of postcolonial societies “against colonialism” (Richardson 2011: 4) may leave us with the impression that the deployment of this innovative narrative style in postcolonial fiction gains significance mainly inasmuch as it underpins the idea of indigenous solidarity and foregrounds a communal voice in opposition to the individualist Western canon. It may lead us to read postcolonial first-person plural texts as “writing back” to the center and employ the binarism of periphery/center as a platform from which to undermine or reverse the archive to stress the other’s rights of self-representation and to reject the received hierarchical order. Yet it is important to note that Fludernik and Richardson posit as central characteristics of first-person plural fiction the shifting, fluctuating, and referential multiplicity of the we-form. These observations move away from the now rather outdated mode of postcolonial fiction as “writing back” to the center.

Graham Huggan (2013: 5), for instance, observes that the “‘writing back’ model” is “now virtually defunct.” And as Young (2012: 25) cautions, *The Empire Writes Back* “assimilates all forms of colonial liberation into a single narrative of freedom from the imperial metropolis.” The postcolonial today, Young (ibid.: 27) observes, has ceased to be “a question of a formal colonizer-colonized relation.” Similarly, the editors of *Re-routing the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium* suggest that current concerns in postcolonial studies move beyond the earlier focus on “West/East (or, indeed, West-rest) binaries, and not only ‘provincialize Europe’, but, more to the point perhaps, destabilize grand narratives of both colonial modernity and anti-colonial resistance” (Wilson et al. 2010: 7). This assessment is echoed by Frank Schulze-Engler (2013: 264), who argues that the standard critical vocabulary of postcolonial studies fails to capture recent concerns of postcolonial African writing, such as the reflection on the complex “new historical, social, and ideological constellations in post-independence Africa.” Following Evan Maina Mwangi’s argument on the tendency to ignore the self-reflexivity—the writing back to self rather than to the West—of African texts, he notes that postcolonial scholarship has been too preoccupied with “rediscovering conflicts between colonizers and colonized or on deconstructing ‘European’ or ‘Western’ discourses of power, because these are the problematics on which ‘postcolonial’ theoretical methodological resources . . . privilege the colonial as the prior reference point for contemporary literature” (ibid.).

Caminero-Santangelo's (2005: 1) earlier work on postcolonial revisions of Western classics follows a similar line of argument, suggesting that even "the study of postcolonial hybridity remains tied to a typology which defines postcolonial cultures in terms of their oppositional relationship with the West."

This "strong revisionist mode" (Wilson et al. 2010: 3) that has dominated postcolonial studies since the early 2000s⁷ thus also prompts a reconsideration of the central interpretative approach to postcolonial we-narratives. How does the focus on multiple centers rather than the erstwhile orientation toward the Western metropolis inflect postcolonial conceptions of the we-voice? Do postcolonial first-person plural narratives display diverse oppositional practices that, in Schulze-Engler's terms, encapsulate more adequately the political stakes of the postcolonial African nation? What are the ideological motives that guide the "we"- "non-we" relation in these narratives, and do they conform to Marcus's division of we-narratives into the "authoritative," "disorienting," and heteroglot types? In the section that follows I will explore some of these considerations in Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat* to show that the we-voice is, in fact, guided by multiple centers of consciousness and resists the conventional model of the postcolonial "we" versus the colonial "non-we."

***A Grain of Wheat* as a Postcolonial We-Narrative**

Richardson (2009: 159) lists Ngũgĩ's novel *A Grain of Wheat* among "narratives with significant sections in the 'we'-form." He briefly mentions Ngũgĩ's text in the chapter "Class and Consciousness: 'We' Narration from Conrad to Postcolonial Fiction" in his seminal monograph *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, noting that "the most important political and social event, the arrival of Kenyan independence, is narrated by a brief, abrupt, and most Conradian foray into the first person plural" (Richardson 2006: 49). For Richardson (*ibid.*) the moment of independence is encapsulated by a narrative expression of unity that—rather than referring to a we-group literally present at the event—transcends the immediate story and discourse levels to include the implied author–authorial audience level. Yet this presumed national unity does not emanate from the use of the

7. In *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* Chantal J. Zabus (2015: 2) observes that after "having undergone a near-death experience," postcolonial studies "has now entered a convalescing period of recovery; it is ready to interact and even 'intra-act' with other fields" (*ibid.*: 5). In the introduction to the third edition of *Postcolonial Studies: Key Concepts* Ashcroft et al. (2013: vii) draw attention to the expansion and diversification of the field, noting that its impact is now felt "in fields as varied as globalization, environmentalism, the sacred and even economics, through the significance of the spread of neo-liberalism."

we-voice elsewhere in Ngūgĩ's text. Rather, the text features several we-relations and oppositions. Pace Richardson, the first-person plural voice features in various chapters. Moreover, as I will argue in this section, the we-narrative voice needs to be read in relation to other narrative manifestations of the first-person plural, such as the we-forms used in direct speech, to more fully understand the complexities of the pronominal deixis and the question of group membership. The novel achieves much of its ideological poignancy from the continual shift between third-person and first-person plural narration and multiple and at times conflicting designations of "we."

Perhaps the most important question for any analysis of the function of the first-person plural narrative voice is that of the composition of the "we." As Richardson (*ibid.*: 38) highlights, "virtually no first person plural narrative discloses its membership at the outset; there is always a bit of drama as the reader determines just who this 'we' is." Ngūgĩ's (2002 [1986]: 1) novel opens with an omniscient (heterodiegetic) narrative voice delineating Mugo's nightmare three or four days before Independence Day:

Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the fern and grass thatch and all pointed at his heart. A clear drop of water was delicately suspended above him. The drop fattened and grew dirtier as it absorbed grains of soot. Then it started drawing towards him. He tried to shut his eyes. They would not close. He tried to move his head: it was firmly chained to the bed-frame. The drop grew larger and larger as it drew closer and closer to his eyes. He wanted to cover his eyes with his palms; but his hands, his feet, everything refused to obey his will. In despair, Mugo gathered himself for a final heave and woke up.

The narrative focus on Mugo's subjective point of view revealing his nervous condition and sense of imminent threat stands in clear opposition to a collective consciousness conveyed in we-narration. The single drop of water becomes a symbol of his isolated and tormented consciousness that contrasts with the downpour on the eve of independence, which the community reads as a signal of blessing.

Mugo's lack of bodily control and experience of paralysis call attention to the intensity of his mental torment. Unlike Frantz Fanon's (1967: 52) rendering of the "native's" "nervous condition" in what he calls a "Manichean [colonial] world," Mugo's anxiety cannot be explained simply with reference to the colonizer/colonized opposition. For Fanon (*ibid.*) the "nervous condition" of the colonized (male) subject stems from his "permanent tension" between being treated with violent disdain by the colonizer, on the one hand, and the fantasy of living the life of the settler, on the other. Mugo's "nervous

condition,” by contrast, is primarily a result of his betrayal of the movement and his all-consuming fear of being revealed as Kihika’s traitor.

The we-voice is almost entirely absent from the opening chapters of Ngũgĩ’s novel. In fact, most of the incidents of the first-person plural pronoun throughout the first few chapters can be found in direct speech. Yet these instances, I propose, significantly contribute to the complication and fragmentation of the narrative voice that gains prominence as the narrative progresses. The first-person plural pronoun in direct discourse is, one has to concede, distinct from the “we” narrative voice. For a reading of the communal voice in *A Grain of Wheat*, it is, however, crucial to look at the interaction between character discourse and narrator’s discourse. One evening Mugo’s solitary life is disturbed by the arrival of a group of delegates from the party that has come to persuade him to deliver a speech at the village’s Uhuru celebrations. One of the men, Gikonyo, explains: “We are only voices sent to you from the Party” (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 9). The narration of the visit is interrupted by a chapter-long analepsis into the history of the movement, after which the narrator returns to the temporal frame of the visit. It is here that the collective voice of Thabai village is most prominently invoked by the words of the community leader Warui:

“We of Thabai Village must also dance our part,” he started. . . . “Yes, we must dance the song the way we know how. For, let it never be said Thabai dragged to shame the names of the sons she lost in war. No. We must raise them—even from the dead—to share it with us. Our people, is there a song sweeter than that of freedom? . . . Those who have gone before us, those of us spared to see the sun today, and even those to be born tomorrow, must join in the feast. The day we hold Wiyathi [freedom] in our hands we want to drink from the same calabash.” (ibid.: 18–19)

Initially, “We of Thabai” appears to include only the present residents of the village. Yet the distinction between the deceased and “us” is soon suspended when the latter are labeled “those of us spared to see the sun today.” As in Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, in which the we-voice encompasses several generations, the “we” of Warui’s imagination bridges past, present, and future generations. However, while Armah’s “we” serves as a narrative voice, the intergenerational “we” in Ngũgĩ’s novel remains restricted to the level of character discourse. In Warui’s eyes Uhuru should bring about non-hierarchical and all-inclusive harmony, signaled by the sharing of a draft from the same calabash.

From the very beginning, it seems, the “we” of the party members stands in opposition to Mugo’s troubled and alienated “I.” As Simon Gikandi (2000: 108) emphasizes: “Mugo is represented to us as the archetypal subject defined

by moral crisis. His relationship to his environment, community, and temporality is one of alienation. At a time when people are supposed to be beginning life anew, Mugo is haunted by what will later be revealed as a complex and opaque past.” Mugo’s isolation, as depicted by the narrative voice, contrasts sharply with the sense of community inherent in the “we” of the other villagers’ direct speech. In this sense, Mugo can be read as an example of what Marcus (2008) calls the “disorienting voice” in first-person plural narratives. To recall, disorienting we-narratives in Marcus’s (*ibid.*: 147) terminology “represent a member . . . of their own group as the main source of the unstable identity and the insecurity of the ‘we’ community.” These narratives, according to Marcus (*ibid.*), compare “the recalcitrant ‘I’ with the seemingly cohesive ‘we’”; Mugo’s distance from the village community attenuates the otherwise unisonous euphoria about the Uhuru celebrations. He refrains from committing himself to deliver the speech on Independence Day, and his visitors label him a “strange man” (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 27). Whereas the villagers assume that Mugo’s peculiar behavior results from his traumatic experience in detention and believe him to have assisted their revolutionary hero Kihika, the reader — through the abounding textual clues — soon realizes that Mugo is the actual “traitor.”

In contrast, the deployment of “we” in the speeches of the Mau Mau freedom fighter Kihika may at first glance be read in terms of Marcus’s authoritative “we,” establishing itself here in opposition to an outside “non-we”:

We went to their church. Mubia [the priest], in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: Let us kneel down to pray. We knelt down. Mubia said: Let us shut our eyes. We did. You know, his remained open so that he could read the word. When we opened our eyes, our land was gone and the sword of flames stood on guard. As for Mubia, he went on reading the word, beseeching us to lay our treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth. (*Ibid.*: 14–15)

The cited passage clearly creates a hierarchical opposition between “we” and “their,” colonized and colonizer, for it inscribes the “we” as trusting, abused, and exploited, while “they” are described as hypocritical, greedy, abusive, and violent. Indeed, this use of “we” appears to conform to Richardson’s (2006: 46) interpretation of “we” in postcolonial texts which “use the ‘we’ form of narration to express their struggles against the imperial powers.” The Christian religion appears as imperialism in disguise. Yet this oppositional reading is undercut by Ngũgĩ’s telling of the village’s appropriation of Christianity for the advancement of the freedom struggle. Most chapters feature epigraphs said to be taken from Kihika’s Bible. The motif of Christlike

sacrifice for the community, the search for a Moses-like liberator, and numerous other biblical allusions permeate the narrative (Van Vuuren 2000). Caminero-Santangelo (2005: 63) notes: “Ngugi’s novel represents the forging of a Kenyan culture, and part of this culture includes the integration—and transformation—of elements of European culture. In other words, an ‘authentic’ African revolutionary culture is not defined by its purity from European influences.” Kihika’s deployment of “we” is, therefore, not so much an authoritative “we” strictly opposed to the colonizer “non-we” but one that suggests a more ideologically permeable group identity.

A further complication of “we” can be found in Kihika’s employment of the pronoun after he has killed Colonel Robson, a senior district officer, and seeks shelter in Mugo’s hut. Speaking as a representative of the Mau Mau fighters—rather than of the villagers as in the earlier example—Kihika defends their revolutionary strategy to Mugo: “We don’t kill just anybody. . . . We are not murderers. We are not hangmen. . . . We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of black man’s freedom” (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 185). Kihika urges Mugo to support the fighters in order not to lose touch with the people: “He [the white man] wants to shut us from the people, our only strength. But he will not succeed. We must keep the road between us and the people clear of obstacles” (ibid.: 187). Again, the binary opposition between the villagers and the colonizer is triangulated by the introduction of the collective “we” of the Mau Mau revolutionaries.⁸ Rather than “writing back” to an imagined Western center, Ngũgĩ is interested here in local divisions and competing voices at this threshold in Kenya’s history.

Moreover, the villagers at times introduce a temporally differentiated “we” in which either the elders or members of the younger generation demarcate themselves from the other, each group assuming that its respective fight against colonialism is more effective. Recalling the 1923 procession in Nairobi to free their leader Harry, the elder Warui—even though the peasant revolt failed—urges the younger generation to do the same to free Jomo Kenyatta (ibid.: 13). By contrast, Kihika, who at times also speaks for the younger generation, stresses that writing letters to the “whiteman” as the older generation did is no longer regarded as a feasible method: “This is not 1920. What we now want is action” (ibid.: 14). The “non-I” in Kihika’s “we,” therefore, encompasses different subjects representing different subgroups—the Mau Mau, the younger generation—of the village community at differ-

8. For an account on the portrayals of the Mau Mau in the two versions of the novel, see Amoko 2010, Greenfield 1993, and Maughan-Brown 1985. The 1967 version of the novel includes a number of atrocities committed by the Mau Mau. Ngũgĩ deleted, for instance, the rape of the settler woman Dr. Lynd in the 1986 version of the novel, reducing “the moral complexity of the revolutionary situation” (Greenfield 1993: 31).

ent times. This shifting referential scope in Kihika's use of the first-person plural pronoun reflects what Richardson (2006: 56) calls the inherent "ambiguity and fluctuations of the precise identity of the 'we'" in first-person plural narratives. In his reading of postcolonial novels, however, he stresses the strategic use of the collective voice as an expression of "its difference from the autonomous individual consciousness" (ibid.) of the West. The repeated assertions of a we-community in the direct speech of characters representing different groups in Ngũgĩ's novel, therefore, establish a variety of competing we-voices, whose multiplicity can be read, to cite James Ogude's (1999: 25) discussion of the novel, as a "definite departure from [the] orthodox nationalist narrative."

This narrative reluctance to write into being a homogeneous postcolonial narrative voice surfaces most poignantly in what I would like to call the "we" of collaboration and betrayal. Gikonyo visits Mugo's hut one evening and confesses how he and the other men felt during their incarceration in the camps:

We talked of loyalty to the Movement and the love of our country. You know a time came when I did not care about Uhuru for the country any more. I just wanted to come home. And I would have sold Kenya to the whiteman to buy my own freedom. I admire people like Kihika. They are strong enough to die for the truth. I have no such strength. That's why in detention, we were proud of you, resented you and hated you — all in the same breath. You see, people like you, who refused to betray your beliefs, showed us what we ought to be like — but we lacked true bones in the flesh. We were cowards. (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 67)

Gikonyo's speech highlights the fragility of the movement's we-voice, which, as the camp experience shows, is always in danger of crumbling in light of the individual's struggle for survival. Gikonyo admits that he was never beaten or tortured but that he would have betrayed the movement, handed over the ideals of the "we" to save the "I." The transitive verb *to betray* thus always implies the movement of the "I" from the we-group to the side of the opposed "non-we." The construction of the liberation movement, Ngũgĩ seems to suggest, can never take the form of an authoritative "we" but always contains disorienting and defecting voices. In this sense, Ngũgĩ's novel is an "interrogative text" (Thieme 2001: 27) that consistently questions the composition of "we." In depicting a "we" of the movement as one that always contains the possibility of betrayal, *A Grain of Wheat* regards the notion of collaboration in terms of a continuum rather than something clearly opposed to the movement "we." Ogude (1999: 25–26) notes that "if in the later texts Ngũgĩ seems to isolate patriots from traitors, in *A Grain of Wheat* the line between the two is blurred and the narrative calls for political scepticism

and cynicism towards heroism and hero worship.” Using Gikonyo’s words, the novel furthermore opposes those genuinely fighting for the movement to postindependence opportunists who invent struggle credentials for personal advancement in the postcolonial context (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 67).

Ngũgĩ’s novel, therefore, anticipates a shift in postcolonial studies that occurred many years after its publication. Much postcolonial scholarship has focused on the “othering” and marginalization of subjects deemed outsiders in dominant sociopolitical discourse. This emphasis on difference, as Tobias Kelly and Sharika Thiranagama argue (2010: 9), “has ignored an equally strong interpretive, political, and social anxiety about the problem of sameness, specifically *perverted sameness*.” The traitor, whom the Thabai village community is so eager to identify and punish, causes so much anxiety to the community because he or she, to use Kelly and Thiranagama’s (ibid.: 10) theorizations, “holds up a mirror to society of all that it most fears about itself, revealing the contingency of political affiliation and the fragility of loyalty.” In the case of we-narration, the traitor threatens the coherence of the we-group from within.

This analysis of the first-person plural pronoun in the direct speech of various characters has shown that Ngũgĩ’s novel showcases a number of disorienting voices that call into question a unified national discourse and postindependence national mythmaking. Most significantly, the “we” of collaboration exemplifies the inherent instability of the collective voice. At the same time, however, the high incidence of the we-form demonstrates the characters’ desire to forge a unified national community at the moment of Uhuru. In the following paragraphs I will look more closely at direct manifestations of we-narration in the novel. The first-person plural narrative voice emerges in chapters 2, 6, and 9 and most predominantly in chapters 13 and 14, when the narrative voice relates the Independence Day celebrations.

While chapter 9 appears to locate the “we” voice as a national “we” (“we in Kenya” [Ngũgĩ 2002 {1986}: 127]), chapter 13 identifies the speaking subject as a member of the Thabai village community:

Most of us from Thabai first saw him [Mugo] at the New Rung’ei Market the day the heavy rain fell. You remember the Wednesday, just before Independence? Wind blew and the rain hit the ground at an angle. . . . People said the falling water was a blessing for our hard-won freedom. Murungu on high never slept: he always let his tears fall to this, our land, from Agu and Agu. As we, the children, used to sing. (Ibid.: 173)

The final sentence of the passage narrows the referential scope of “we” by assigning it to the generation of “the children.” Notably, the narrative “we” is of an inclusive nature here, embracing the addressee in its “you” or instance

of second-person narration.⁹ Adopting “the inclusiveness of the oral storyteller speaking to listeners who are familiar with the main events of the tale” (Gurnah 2002: ix), the narrative voice appears to forge an inclusive local community.

Throughout this and the following chapter, expressions such as “our village,” “we,” and “our village hero” (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 175) abound. A number of critics, including Richardson, have noted that the “we” at independence goes beyond the immediate referential scope of the village. Yet the referential scope of “we” is never explicitly fixed. As Fludernik (2011: 101) emphasizes, a central aspect of the function of deixis in we-narratives is their “inherent strategies of referential indeterminacy.” Accordingly, this referential ambiguity of “we” also questions unequivocal readings of Thabai village as a synecdoche of the nation. Ngũgĩ’s narrative strategy rather exploits the obscurity of “we” to highlight the competition between different stories and narrative voices.¹⁰

These competing stories also contribute to the sense of doom tied to the moment of independence:

All these stories were now freely circulating in the meeting. We sang song after song about Kihika and Mugo. A calm holiness united our hearts. Like those who had come from afar to see Mugo do miracles or even speak to God, we all vaguely expected that something extraordinary would happen. It was not exactly a happy feeling; it was more a disturbing sense of an inevitable doom. (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 212)

The hope for “miracles” and “something extraordinary,” on the one hand, and the “disturbing sense of an inevitable doom,” on the other, demonstrate the novel’s ambivalent stance toward the new postindependence nation. Ngũgĩ’s novel, *Gikandi* (2000: 99) aptly observes, “is told from the vantage point of subjects and narrators troubled by the prospects of arrested decolonization and haunted by the ghosts of colonialism past.” *Gikandi* goes on to note that while the novel aspires both to imagine and to write into being a postcolonial future, “the occasional gestures it makes towards hope and renewal are beset by individual and collective fears and anxieties both about the history that is being left behind and the one that beckons” (*ibid.*). Rather than positioning the we-voice against the colonial center, Ngũgĩ, therefore, uses this innovative narrative form to demonstrate the villagers’

9. For a recent discussion of second-person writing, see Parker 2011–12 and Richardson 2013–14.

10. Phyllis Taoua (2009: 216) notes that “various points of view in the narrative are contraposed, which invites the readers to contemplate multiple perspectives and to arrive at a more complex appreciation of the human forces that complicate historical processes.”

desire for a cohesive “we” of liberation but also to draw attention to the many disorienting voices that may potentially unravel the we-group.

Until the beginning of the meeting and General R’s speech, the we-voice reappears consistently. While featuring equally strongly in General R’s address to the crowd, the plural voice as a signifier of national unity is haunted by the “non-we” that in the General’s eyes threatens the transition into a postcolonial future. Koina, his fellow freedom fighter, General R remembers, “talked of seeing the ghosts of the colonial past still haunting Independent Kenya” (Ngũgĩ 2002 [1986]: 216). Trembling “in his moment of triumph,” the General sees those he and his comrades killed in the name of freedom standing in front of him, telling him: “We are still here. We whom you called traitors and collaborators will never die!” (ibid.). The postcolonial “we” thus remains saturated by the very voices that were supposed to be pushed to the margins of the new nation.

We-narration ceases abruptly and shifts to speaking about the “people” and “they” after General R has delivered his speech and asks for the person who betrayed Kihika to come forward. Highlighting the narrative vacillation between “we” and “they,” Gikandi (2000: 124) suggests that “the narrator is both inside and outside the drama of independence. He or she identifies with this momentous occasion, but also seeks a neutral position from which to critique the terms of independence.” Conversely, Caminero-Santangelo (2005: 65) reads the novel as an affirmation and triumph of the “communal voice,” which gains increasing force as the narrative progresses and culminates in the Independence Day celebrations with Mugo’s confession as a sacrifice for the good of the community. Yet the we-voice surfaces only in a few prominent sections of the text while being entirely absent in others. The last chapters, for example, do not feature it at all.

Neither is Ngũgĩ’s “we,” then, posited as an oppositional voice to that of the settler colonialists, nor does it explicitly write back to Conrad’s we-narration. In opposition to Caminero-Santangelo’s account of the novel, Michaela Bornstein (2014: 427) argues as strongly as I have here against reading *A Grain of Wheat* as an instance of “postcolonial rewriting” or “a collectivist rebellion against the regime of Western individualism and its literary hegemony.” Commenting on the widely discussed intertextual relationship between *A Grain of Wheat* and Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* (1911), she infers that Ngũgĩ, rather than writing back to Conrad’s work, uses “Conradian techniques not as political symbols but as political tools” (ibid.).¹¹ Ngũgĩ

11. Schulze-Engler (1992: 324) argues that “Ngũgĩ was thus not only ‘writing back’ to European colonialism and the settler version of history, but also ‘writing forward’ to face newly emerging realities—a task for which, at least at the time of writing his third novel, the ideological

redirects Conrad's heteroglot "we" in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* to focus primarily on the relationship between the different members of the we-voice.

In this respect, the employment of the we-form in *A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates some of the fault lines inherent in theoretical generalizations about postcolonial texts, such as those observed by Mwangi (2009: 256), who criticizes the "persistent tendency to see African art to be nothing but a rant against colonialism and a counterpoint to Western aesthetics." By the same token, Arun Mukherjee (1993: 27) warns that "generalizations about 'all' 'postcolonial people' suggest that Third Worldism and/or nationalism bind the peoples of these societies in conflictless brotherhood, that inequalities of caste and class do not exist in these societies, and that their literary works are only about 'resisting' or 'subverting' the colonizer's discourses." In contrast to these approaches, I have shown that the we-form can also be read as a reflection of recent reassessments and reformulations in postcolonial studies that foreground internal differentiation, the radical intimacy of sameness, and the move away from a preoccupation with "otherness" against the unabated persistence of well-worn postcolonial concepts. Even one of the earliest examples of we-narration, Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* I have argued, features a differentiated group against which the sailors attempt to construct their identity rather than establishing a simple opposition between a colonial "we" and a colonized "other." I have argued in this article that we-narration appeals to Ngũgĩ not primarily as a means of "writing back" but rather as a powerful tool to provide a panoramic view of the village community at this watershed in Kenya's history—a moment marked by multidirectional inclusions and demarcations.

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