The Voice of Collective Memory

As virtually all critics commenting on *The Virgin Suicides* recognize, it is crucial to address its highly unusual narrative voice, which speaks to us in the first-person plural. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, for instance, observes that this plural voice is “of an uncertain condition,” and that it represents “the collective perspective of an indeterminate number of mature men” (30; cf. Cioci-Pop 84; Dines 961; Heusser 179; Christian Long 359; Vanyova 49). Eugenides himself, meanwhile, has spoken of an “impossible narrator,” whose voice it is difficult to locate precisely (Kehlmann and Eugenides 88). Claudia Ioana Doroholschi, finally, defines the novel’s plural narrator as a “shifting entity” with unclear boundaries:

> Any attempt to establish how many boys belong to this community, or what exactly their names are, is bound to fail. Sometimes one or more of the boys are detached from the group and become individualized, or referred to as “one of us,” but the exact identity of those who tells [sic] the story remains indeterminate. (185)

Doroholschi rightly insists that one cannot tell for certain who belongs to this constantly shifting ‘we,’ and even the grammatical ‘mistake’ in her description – the phrase “those who tells” – is in fact peculiarly appropriate, as it encapsulates the conflicting pulls of group identity and individualized selves that render the novel’s narrative voice so strangely haunting.5

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4 On the differences in narrative voice between Eugenides’s novel and Sophia Coppola’s film adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* see Hovland 260; McKnight 125–127; Richardson 52–53.

5 For more general accounts of the potential effects of first-person plural narration see Uri Margolin’s “Telling Our Story,” Amit Marcus’s “We Are You,” Alan Palmer’s *Fictional Minds* (218–229), Monika Fludernik’s “The Many in Action and Thought,” and Natalya Bektha, “We-Narratives.”
As Brian Richardson notes (52), there is one passage in *The Virgin Suicides* that indirectly reflects on this unusual narrative voice and its relation to collective identity. After Cecilia’s suicide, the girl’s diary eventually ends up in the boys’ possession (41), and they proceed to study the book with well-nigh religious devotion:

We know portions of the diary by heart now. [...] We passed the diary around, fingering pages and looking anxiously for our names. Gradually, however, we learned that although Cecilia had stared at everybody all the time, she hadn’t thought about any of us. Nor did she think about herself. The diary is an unusual document of adolescence in that it rarely depicts the emergence of an unformed ego. [...] Instead, Cecilia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity. It’s often difficult to identify which sister she’s talking about, and many strange sentences conjure in the reader’s mind an image of a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads [...]. (42)

Unlike most coming-of-age narratives, the narrator maintains, Cecilia’s diary does not depict the “emergence of an unformed ego” (i.e. an adolescent’s path toward a ‘fully-formed,’ mature identity), but instead confronts the reader with an undifferentiated collectivity (“a single entity”). This, in turn, renders it difficult for the reader to identify individual members of the group – an effect that, according to Doroholschi, in fact applies to the novel’s own collective narrative voice.

For Debra Shostak, these similarities are far from accidental. Rather, Shostak argues that we are dealing here with a classic case of narcissistic projection by a group of male voyeurs. The boys’ use of the pronoun *we*, Shostak contends, “implies the effacement of the speakers’ individuality and prepares for their conception of the Lisbon sisters as also de-individualized” (819). The narrators’ portrayal of the Lisbon girls is thus, in Shostak’s view, very much a projection of their own image onto the objects of their desire – and indeed, the phenomenon of narcissistic projection is itself indirectly acknowledged in the passage discussed above, for according to the narrator, Cecilia continually “stared at everybody all the time,” without, however, truly thinking about them. This, arguably, is a good description of the boys’ own voyeuristic idealization of the Lisbon sisters, who are the center of the boys’ obsessive attention even as their reality as independent human beings continues to elude their male observers.

Accordingly, both Bree Hoskin (216) and Ceri Hovland (266) have observed that the Lisbon girls enter the boys’ “collective memory” in distorted form, and it is precisely by exploring the idea of collective memory that we can understand more fully in which sense Eugenides’s narrator is “impossible.” Deriving his ideas about collective memory from the French sociologist Maurice Halb-
wachs, Jan Assmann observes that the most basic, “primal form” of a rupture between the past and the present is the “irremediable discontinuity” of death, for it is when someone dies that those left behind have to decide whether or not that individual is worth the effort of being remembered (19). More generally, Assmann contends that all groups face the question of what they must not allow themselves to forget; conversely, each of the components incorporated into a group’s collective memory may provide us with clues regarding that community’s most cherished values (16). Collective memories, in short, should not be envisioned as the random remains of times gone by; rather, according to Assmann, a group’s stock of collective memories accumulates in a process of negotiation about which aspects of the past are to be considered significant, and this shared effort in turn fosters a sense of belonging among the members of the community (24).

One implication of Assmann’s observations is that we should not conceive of collective memory and identity as something solid or given. If Iwona Irwin-Zarecka maintains that collective memory is “best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share” (4), then this is in part to emphasize that collective memory is not simply the sum of several individuals’ personal memories. Rather, only those components form part of a group’s collective memory that are, as it were, made publicly accessible (for example in the form of written records and historical artifacts, but also in the form of shared oral accounts of personal memories). At the same time, however, personal memories form part of a group’s potential resources of remembrance even when they have not (yet) been shared, for in principle these personal memories could be communicated if and when the need arises – at least, that is, as long as the individuals in question are still alive. Accordingly, though Irwin-Zarecka is right in emphasizing the shared, ‘externalized’ nature of collective memory in real-life groups, collective memory in the abstract also includes the information stored in the minds of individuals as one of its potential or virtual resources. Even in the case of real-life groups, moreover, Jan Assmann is careful to note that collective identity is necessarily “underpinned by factors that are purely symbolic,” with the social body as such being “simply a metaphor – an imaginary construct” (113). Collective identity, in other words, “does not exist as a visible, tangible

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6 In the German original, Assmann’s elegant formula for this process runs: “Durch Zirkulation gemeinsamen Sinns entsteht ‘Gemeinsinn’” (Das kulturelle Gedächtnis 140).
It is now no longer difficult to see that the first-person plural narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* is precisely such an impossible, symbolic personification of a group’s collective identity. Therefore, we should not think of the narrator as merely a collection of individual voices (i.e. as a chorus of boys speaking together). Rather, the narrator’s plural voice is the personification of an abstract, collective entity, and while each of the boys constitutes an individual part of the community of memory personified in this narrator, the collectivity itself remains qualitatively distinct from the sum of its parts. A key passage from *The Virgin Suicides* illustrates this point, reflecting as it does on the ”unnatural” way in which the narrator’s collective memories accumulate:

Our own knowledge of Cecilia kept growing after her death […], with […] a kind of unnatural persistence. Though she had spoken only rarely and had had no real friends, everybody possessed his own vivid memory of Cecilia. Some of us had held her for five minutes as a baby while Mrs. Lisbon ran back into the house to get her purse. Some of us had played in the sandbox with her, fighting over a shovel, or had exposed ourselves to her behind the mulberry tree that grew like deformed flesh through the chain linked fence. […] A few of us had fallen in love with her, but had kept it to ourselves, knowing that she was the weird sister. (40)

The narrator here explains how various individuals and subgroups (“some of us”) contribute to the group’s collective memory, and initially one might imagine that the boys must have gotten together at some point to share their memories with one another. This, however, turns out not to be the case, for the narrator states explicitly that some group members refrained from revealing their memories to the others. More specifically, the narrator notes that “[a] few of us” had fallen in love with Cecilia yet had kept it, not to ‘themselves’ – as would be the more ‘logical’ way of putting it – but to “ourselves.” Far from being a simple grammatical mistake, this phrase signals that the plural narrator, as a ghostly, entirely symbolic entity, has access even to those memories that the individual group members have refrained from sharing with their peers. The novel’s narrator is impossible, in other words, because he is the disembodied, plural voice

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8 This is why I refrain from using the term “choral narrator,” suggested by Rachel McLennan (22).