


The Paradox of Testimony and First-Person Plural Narration in Jensen's *We, the Drowned*

Divya Dwivedi

Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

Henrik Skov Nielsen

*Aarhus University*Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb> Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

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Divya Dwivedi and Henrik Skov Nielsen,

"The Paradox of Testimony and First-Person Plural Narration in Jensen's *We, the Drowned*"

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Abstract: In their article "The Paradox of Testimony and First-Person Plural Narration in Jensen's *We, the Drowned*" Divya Dwivedi and Henrik Skov Nielsen posit that the analysis of narratives of limit-experiences provides insight into literature's relation with the formation of community and subjectivity. Testimonies such as Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and other narratives of survivors of concentration camps, especially the *Muselmänner*, focus on aspects of community. Dwivedi and Nielsen discuss how in Carsten Jensen's novel *We, the Drowned* group identity, intersubjectivity, and the possibility for and mode of testimony about traumatic events are narrated. Although Jensen's the novel departs from mimetic or "natural" techniques of telling in non-fictional discourse, its "unnatural" narrative techniques tell us much about historical and political realities and actual experiences of discontinuity, death, testimony, and war.

Divya DWIVEDI and Henrik Skov NIELSEN

The Paradox of Testimony and First-Person Plural Narration in Jensen's *We, the Drowned*

In the study at hand we undertake a comparative analysis of narration in first-person plural of extreme experiences of degeneration and death. Both Carsten Jensen's 2006 seafaring novel *We, the Drowned* and testimonies of survivors of Nazi concentration camps tell of suffering and atrocities which are unspeakable. We address questions about literature's relation to reality, community, and subjectivity by analyzing we-narratives. The "we" assumes that a collective subject speaks and illuminates historical and political realities, memory, and shared experiences. We argue that this view is not supported by the functioning of first-person plural in narratives under consideration. We also interrogate the view that some experiences defy speech and narration and that both the novel and testimonies such as Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* or Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* share the same objective of the narration of extreme experiences. Following Agamben, we define "extreme experiences" as events encountered by individuals who do not have categories of representation adequate to them or those experiences which exhaust the available categories and bring them to their limits.

In the title of Jensen's novel, the narrating subject "we" also includes "the drowned" who would then be narrating post-mortem. The title thus already ties in with two recent strands in contemporary literature research: the examination of group identity and the mode of testimony of victims of traumatic events. We argue that the novel cannot be analyzed adequately if the literary presentation of social and political processes is reduced to a mimetic representation. Language, including linguistic features such as personal pronouns and *deixis*, works differently in fictional narratives than in everyday speech and non-literary discourse even while these discourses are incorporated, ventriloquized, or represented in works of fiction. At the same time, such a use of language does not divorce fictional narratives from socio-political contexts. Rather, they often contribute to our activity of making sense of our world thereby refusing to have their meaning determined by any particular context.

The formation of collective subjectivities is ideological. The relationships among members of communities and between communities are maintained through historical processes of inclusion and exclusion as well as through prior conceptual determination of what counts as community. It is illuminating to compare *We, the Drowned*, where the drowned is included in the "we," with two different kinds of testimonies from Nazi concentration and extermination camps that focus on the community of survivors constructed through the exclusion of the *Muselmann*. The first kind of testimony is exemplified by Levi's account in *If This Is a Man* of his imprisonment in Auschwitz. The conditions there create "two particularly well differentiated categories of men — the 'saved' and the 'drowned'" (100). The distinction is registered in a discourse whose subject uses "we" to indicate belonging to the group of survivors, and "they" for the group of the drowned, also called *Muselmänner*: inmates who, although technically alive, are physically and psychically damaged beyond repair and unable to act or speak (103; on *Muselmänner* see also, e.g., Friedland). To the survivor, the drowned represent the loss of the "humanity" with which he identifies himself, and from which he derives his residual sense of self in the extreme conditions of the camp. Observing that *Muselmänner* have no story to tell and that their state is irrevocable, Levi defines Auschwitz testimony as speech unsupported by the experience of the speaking subject (103). The subject who is able to speak survived but did not fully experience what the *Muselmann* underwent. Thus, the speaker testifies on behalf of the subject who experienced, but lacks speech. The subject of testimony emerges in this paradox of experience without language, and language without experience. The second kind of testimony (we refer to those collected and published by Zdzisław Ryn and Stanisław Kłodziński and appended, in part, to Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*) is by some *Muselmänner* who, contrary to Levi's presupposition of the irrevocability of this state, survived their condition and were able to tell of it, starting with the words "Ich war ein Muselmann" (Agamben 166-71). Here the subject of speech is also the subject of experience even as the experience is categorized as one without speech. These "drowned" say "we" for themselves. This non-fictional "we," then, also bespeaks a condition of speech

quite different from the one captured by the paradox in the first kind of testimony. The question of man's "humanity" is thus reopened.

This second kind of testimony has more in common with our fictional example. *We, the Drowned* is an exploration of how differences are conceived in order to distinguish one community from another, conducted through the seamless shifting of "we" to trace the cloud-like formation, dissolution, and reconstitution of groups with continuously changing members. It revolves around Marstal, a seafaring town in Jutland in the years between two wars with Germany, the First Schleswig War and World War II. Many stories are told within the larger story of the Marstallers during this period — stories of the unique Danish schooners, of the travels of seamen and the travails of the women, children, and old people on land. Across almost four generations, the little township at the outskirts of a small country becomes a key player at the dawn of globalization where ships and sea travel make the exchange of peoples, slaves, arms, and culture possible across the continents, and suffers economic catastrophe. The adventures on sea and land, the suffering in war and at school, the turmoil in society and of each character, all provoke the question of how one should live with and act towards others. As one character articulates it, this question contains another one: what is a human? Read alongside the testimonies, it provides a critical perspective on the formation of communities based on an understanding of "what is human," such that some humans can be excluded from this community.

The "we" of this narrative is manifold. In the first chapter, "The Boots," "we" consists of Laurids Madsen and his fellow sailors: "All of Aero was up in arms, and we immediately formed a homeguard" (6). The approach of war is initially treated humorously, and "we" becomes citizens bringing brooms and pitchforks to the beach, where they hope to surprise the Germans. Things quickly turn sinister, and "we" shifts to the sailors and soldiers on a warship headed towards Germany (11). The figure of the *Muselmann* is evoked early on. The setting in the novel is not the concentration camp, though, but the deck of the ship being destroyed by German flames: "others stood motionless, staring straight ahead, their inner mechanisms broken. The lieutenants Ulrik, Stjernholm, and Corfitz rushed around screaming into their faces ... only pushing, shoving and kicking would stir them" (23). Opposed to the "others," "we" later becomes those who survived the bombing of the ship: "We'd lost our nerve — and with it our ability to act. We had to content ourselves with having simply survived: we could muster nothing more" (28).

Later in the chapter "we" includes startlingly those on different sides of the war, the horror of the war erasing the difference and casting them into a single "our march": "Our captors weren't much better off. They led us away ... their faces frozen, mute witnesses to the destruction they'd so closely avoided themselves. Our march looked more like a wholesale retreat from the theatre of war than an organized transportation of prisoners. Horror at the unthinkable forces that war had unleashed united both victors and vanquished" (28). In the second chapter, "The Thrashing Rope," "we" becomes the school boys of the next generation, including Laurids's son Albert Madsen and Lorentz, a fat, wheezing boy, charged, in the eyes of Albert and friends, with a femininity that provokes their violence and taunts. Here the inclusion seems to take place through a shared experience of horror. Although the tyrannical school master Isager unites the children in terror, the exclusion within the groups designated by the "we" becomes more pronounced: "And again [Lorentz] gave us the look which pleaded: can I be one of you now? But we looked away, as we always did. Afterwards we thought that he'd never stand a chance if he looked that way at the crew of the *Anne Marrie Elisabeth*. No one respects a weakling who crawls" (94).

This discontinuity within the "we" gestures towards Joseph Conrad's sea-story *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1899), in which the crew on the ship often form a "we." The "we" in Jensen refers to several generations of Marstallers; they do not, however, cohere into a single community held together by the belief in and the premise of ethnic continuity. The "we" in the novel deictically points not just to generations whose members may have never met or known each other, but also to people who fundamentally disagree, fight and even destroy each other, and who are not always Marstallers. The "we" breaks apart, and highlights the fragmentary constituency of its referents. It is dynamic and changing, and includes men and women, young and old, present and absent, and especially the co-existence and co-narration of the drowned and the saved in an often unresolved tension. This is unnatural when compared with expectations of spontaneous conversational storytelling, also termed

"natural narratives" (Fludernik 13). Nevertheless, we will show that "unnatural" narrative techniques are employed for the sake of a literary contemplation of very real, historical phenomena of war, exploitation, dehumanization, and death, and their ethical dimensions. The novel's use of first-person plural for the drowned is a unique experiment that exceeds the current widespread experimentations with person in novel writing (such as second-person or "you" narratives and present tense first-person narratives) and occasions renewed thinking of the political questions regarding experience, memory, and testimony.

Stories told by collective voices ("we"-narration) pertain to the formation of communities, identity, and historical memory. However, while it is natural to hear the voice of a community in the "we," how can the plurality of voices be heard as "a" voice? This depends on our understanding of "community" and the levels of homogeneity, coherence, and uniformity assumed for it. The voice of the "we" requires theorization in terms of the peculiar ability to speak as a plural voice before it can be taken as a representation of communities or of intersubjectivity. Uri Margolin points out, following Roman Jakobson, that the "we" is semantically unstable and internally contradictory because it never clarifies who the sender of the message is. It also appears to speak on behalf of more than one, raising questions of authority and access to another's interiority. Accordingly, we-narration is infrequent in fiction (132).

Things go terribly wrong in the Schleswig War, and instead of the expected joyful victory, many die as the ship is bombarded from the coast. Blood and guts and mutilated men are everywhere, and here, interestingly, we find a very explicit split between those still living and the dead or wounded: "But already those of us who were still uninjured were ... avoiding the stricken ... The living closed ranks against those marked for death ... questions rang in our heads like an echo of the destruction around us: Why him, or him? Why not me? But we didn't want to heed them" (18). Such a distinction makes sense in a natural framework; you are either living or dead and only as one of the living can you speak and be included in a group able to refer to its members by "we." And yet this is exactly the division that large parts of the rest of the novel negate. By the end of the novel, the "we," at its most unnatural, has completely changed and now includes the parties that were split in the beginning: both the saved and the drowned, joined in dance as well as in narration: "we danced with the drowned, and they were us" (688).

It is useful here to consider two accounts of community formation and their relation to the singular and plural subjects of speech. The first is Benedict Anderson's well-known thesis that communities, except for rare face-to-face ones, are formed through concrete practices that engender the imagination of identity with others who are otherwise completely unrelated, to form a living "image of their communion" (6). Both national newspapers and novels can be "forms of imagining" providing "the technical means of representing the kind of community that is the nation" (25, 33-35). The second is Alan Palmer's argument, in *Social Minds in the Novel*, that "we" represents organic collectivities synthesized in an "intermental functioning" and a social entity, for example the inhabitants of a town (65). "We the people," "we, the Hindus," "we, the refugees," and so on, are expressions of social groups, which, for Palmer, develop a close understanding of each other's thoughts, beliefs and inclinations, and cooperate towards shared goals: "Intermental minds ... are intermental units, large, medium or small, that are so well defined and long-lasting, where so much successful intermental thought takes place, that they can plausibly be considered as group minds" (48). Hence, Palmer suggests, a town "literally and not just metaphorically has a mind of its own" (65). This view entails a remarkable elision of the differences between understanding, empathizing, agreeing, and co-operating, and takes little account of actual historico-political processes that produce "the social." Our analysis of two kinds of non-fictional testimonies of Auschwitz will show that they are precisely attempts to record and comprehend these processes. In comparison, Jensen's fictional narrative and Agamben's philosophical meditation are attempts to make sense of those very processes and the kinds of discourses — including testimonies — they produce. In other words, these very diverse works are engaged in an interrogation of collective subjectivity, be it an "imagined community" or "social mind," to see it not as the source of the speaking "we" but as an effect, on the one hand of processes that produce the "social," and on the other of certain employments of the shifter "we" that reveal its inherently instability.

We, the Drowned dwells on its "we" as the product of specific social and literary operations which can only partly be characterized as the fragmentary anonymity of gossip, story, or legend: "Our town has no such a thing as privacy. There's always an eye watching, an ear cocked. Each and every one of us generates a whole archive of talk. Everyone in our town has a story — but it's not the one he tells himself. Its author has a thousand eyes, a thousand ears and five hundred pens that never stop scribbling. It's all guesswork. And because we don't know for sure, we can't seem to let it go. We know his motive, though. We found it within ourselves ... We know more about you than you know about yourself. We have seen you, and we have seen more than shows itself to you in the mirror ... Everyone in our city has a story, but it is not the one he tells himself" (211, 213). The operations that generate the fragmentary narratorial voice of first-person plural can be theorized by Richardson's emphasis on unnatural voice. Richardson notes the pre-history of first-person plural narration documented by Susan S. Lanser: "These 'singular' communal narrators are constructed through subtle but important departures from autodiegetic practices, for while the narrators retain the syntax of 'first person' narrative, their texts avoid the markers of individuality that characterize personal voice and thereby resist the equation of narrator and protagonist" (39). Commenting on *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Richardson remarks that "Intriguingly ... the 'we' narrator discloses the contents of Donkin's mind, something of course a first person narrator, singular or plural, is not supposed to be able to do" (40).

The "we" is a dance choreographed by frequently selecting and setting apart one character or a group outside the "we" that may be speaking in that particular phase. This standing apart cannot be understood in terms of the tragic chorus either, which can be said to play the role of spectator and commentator. Rather, here, the character — often treated as pariah — is often distinguished from the "we" and then presented to the reader by this we-narration. But in the cases of Albert and Knud Erik, and later Herman Frandsen, the character is not excluded, and not merely narrated: it also, in turn, stands outside and tells "us" a story. An even more exacerbated instance of this "we" operating through an overt separation is in the use of paralepsis to narrate Isaksen's meeting with Klara Friis, resulting in his defeat and ousting from Marstal: "If he'd been listening properly, he'd have understood she'd given him a vital clue and seized his chance. But anger had got the better of him: he now had no doubt that at last he'd come face to face" (445). The "we" knows about Klara's intention to secretly resist Isaksen's efforts to restart Marstal's shipping business though Isaksen cannot fathom it even as he listens to her. That is why the "we" can characterize, from the outside, the view that the Marstallers (who are also the "we") have of Isaksen's departure, even if this does not coincide with the intimate knowledge of the "we" shown above: "He didn't fit in — that was the general verdict" (447). The "we" does not coincide with itself. While it is possible to explain statements such as "We did not know, but we were the last" (476) as largely owing to retrospection, other examples are more clearly non-mimetic. For example, we get an elaborate backstory about the rather unsympathetic character Herman, then a line break, and then the following sentence: "Herman never told us about that night, not to anyone of us" (214). We have, therefore, the strange narrative situation of we-narration with — in Genette's terms — zero focalization.

It is fruitful here to compare the novel with yet another sea-novel: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* opens in the first person singular (henceforth FPS), and one finds sentences and long passages in which the perspective of the protagonist Ishmael is respected, and entire chapters in which it is transgressed to a striking degree, and the narrative suddenly provides extended access to the thoughts of other characters. This happens, notably, in chapters 37-39. Then chapter 40 is in the form of drama. Next, we return to Ishmael in chapter 41 with the following words of assurance: "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew" (179). The explicit transgression in these chapters and the following return to Ishmael illustrate the possibility of having two voices in first-person narrative: that of the first-person character, and one that does not belong to any character or personal narrator but rather forms an impersonal voice of fiction (Nielsen 139). It is notable that *We, the Drowned* does not consistently use the "we" form. The chapter "Voyage" is a story told by Albert in FPS. The "I" narrates, separated from the "we" narrative section by the caesura of the chapter change. There are many stretches of third-person narration, sometimes focalized through specific characters as is frequently the case in all the chapters of Section II about Albert as an old businessman. In section III, the "we"

leaves Albert and becomes the third generation of Knud Erik and other eleven-year olds. However, the same chapters also tell of Klara Friis, Knud Erik's mother, and of the widows who have become business women, thereby reverting intermittently to the previous generation, where the "we" now also includes the women of Marstall's shipping community. Narration focalized through this group often uses "they." Speaking specifically about Conrad's sea-novel and its juxtaposition of mutually exclusive narrative stances, Richardson notes that "From the perspective of a mimetic theory of narration, the speaker either is or is not part of the group and therefore one of the pronouns ["we" and "they"] is misleading ... The narrator [in Conrad] is simultaneously homodiegetic and heterodiegetic" (42). Accordingly, "'we' narration always threatens to enact ... the collapsing of the boundary between the first and the third persons" (48).

We now turn to non-fictional witness narratives. Levi says that "we, the drowned," a phrase exactly translated by Jensen's title, "are not the true witnesses ... We, the survivors are not only exiguous, but also an anomalous minority. We ... did not get to the bottom. Those who did so and those who saw the Gorgon have not returned to tell about it, or have returned mute; they are the Muslims ... the complete witnesses" (*The Drowned* 83-84). For Levi, as the *Muselman* cannot narrate and testify, he/she becomes the figure that marks, in the eyes of the survivors the limit of humanity so that it indirectly testifies to the ultimate evil of the camp (*If This Is a Man* 100-03). Agamben, in his analysis of Levi's narrative, gives the name "aporia of Auschwitz" or "Levi's paradox" to this structure which holds together the human survivor or subject and the non-human *Muselman* or desubjectified remnant (*Remnants* 82). He proposes that Levi's paradox of testimony "succeeds in isolating a new ethical element," which is the obligation to testify to the de-subjectification at the core of the subject (21).

Focusing on those testimonies of survivors built on the view that "the real witnesses to the inside of the camp and hence to the truth about Auschwitz are the people who went under in the camp, not the survivors," Stefan Iversen follows Agamben's reading of Levi and concludes that, in a specific sense, testimony is possible where two mutually exclusive lacks remedy each other in what he terms "the double speech of the testimony": "in the testimony there are two who do not-speak. The missing language of the *Muselman* can be heard where the speech of the survivor falls short ... the sender is double: witness and *Muselman*. Out of the split sender-structure a non-human is heard who has much to say but no language, and a survivor who has language but little or nothing to say. This figure — the double speech of the testimony — is specific for witness literature" ("I vidnesbyrdet er [der] to, der ikke-taler. *Muselmandens* manglende sprog kan komme til orde dér, hvor den overlevendes ord kommer til kort ... afsenderen er dobbelt: vidne og *muselmand*. Fra den spaltede afsenderstruktur høres et ikke-menneske, der har meget at sige, men intet sprog at gøre det i, og et overlevende menneske, der har et sprog, men kun lidt eller intet at sige" ["*Mass-klo*" 183-84; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Nielsen).

This ethics derived from the paradox of testimony is problematized in the light of the hitherto under-theorized fact that some *Muselmänner* survived the past *Muselman* that they themselves were and became able to say "Ich war ein *Muselman*" (Agamben, *Remnants* 165). Agamben admits that these narratives, which often use first-person plural, refute the basic assumption in Levi's paradox that the *muselman* is the one who by definition cannot narrate (165). Where the potentiality of language is its power to refer to its own existence over and above the content of what is said, Agamben suggests that *Muselman*-hood is the impotentiality of language (*Potentialities* 182; *Remnants* 158). The "sayable" is something more than what can be said, and is best understood in terms of the indexicality of shifters such as "I," which point to the event of enunciation and say only this: there is speech. Whereas the gap between language and experience characterizes Levi's paradox, for Agamben the *Muselman* as the impotentiality of language is the gap between its potentiality — the "I speak" as the pure fact of speaking or the existence of speech—and its actualization (*Potentialities* 182; *Remnants* 158). The one who says "I was a *Muselman*" is the one who overcomes the impotentiality of language in order to bring about testimony (*Remnants* 145). Thus, he/she also refutes the notion that there is always an abysmal gap between language and experience and that the state of the *Muselman* is always irrevocable. The past tense distances the one who speaks and witnesses from the one who could not speak. According to Agamben, the testimonies by *Muselmänner*

"do not add anything essential to what we already knew, except for one particular point which calls into question not simply Levi's paradox, but even one of his fundamental presuppositions" (*Remnants* 165). The erstwhile *Muselmann* speaks through the no-longer *Muselmann*. Two different "I's" are assumed in a single actualization of speech in a specific kind of "we" — we, the former and the current "I" with all ties cut other than the very instance of speech.

Nevertheless, for Agamben this "not only does not contradict the paradox but, rather, fully verifies it" (*Remnants* 165). However, when we listen carefully to the narrative within each testimony, a diversity of experiences emerges. Indeed, one ex-*Muselmann* states that "In general one can say that among the *Muselmänner* there were exactly the same differences, I mean physical and psychological differences, as between men living in normal conditions" (*Remnants* 167). The word *Muselmann* then does not name a single essence, as Levi's paradox requires. Another testimony by Jerzy Mostowsky reveals that "whether or not an inmate was considered a *Muselmann* depended on his appearance" — not a substantial difference. He adds that "I too was a *Muselmann*" but "I wasn't conscious of being one," and that those categorized as *Muselmänner* "didn't realize that they belonged in that category" (*Remnants* 167). For yet another, Edward Sokòl, appearance was an external mark under which inmates were classified as *Muselmänner*: "like the other inmates I tried to protect myself from getting pneumonia by leaning forward ... and patiently, rhythmically moving... That is how I kept myself warm when the Germans were not watching" (*Remnants* 166). He uses "us" for himself and other *Muselmänner* — including those who acted differently. The figure is not his identity but a technique for survival. Similarly, Bronislaw Goscinski recalls what he observes as *Muselmann*: "The period in which I was a *Muselmann* left a profound impression on my memory. I remember perfectly the accident in the Kommando of fall 1940" (*Remnants* 171). His testimony uses "we" to describe the survival tactics of so-called *muselmänner*, weakening the conceptual cleavage that Levi's paradox relies on: "*Muselmänner* worked out of inertia, or rather, pretended to work.... We often pretended to work like that for a whole day, without even cutting one block of wood ... But we had to make sure that no one saw us, which was also tiring, *Muselmänner* had no goals. They did their work without thinking" (*Remnants* 169).

All these fragmentary uses of "we," "they," and "I" in the testimonies tell us about community formation, group identity and the operations of language in expressing this. *We, the Drowned* is a presentation of precisely these phenomena. In the last pages of the novel, the "we" joins together the dead and the living, Marstallers and the refugees of sea-faring, war-faring and ship-wreck brought to Marstal by the *Odyssey* and nameless other ships at the end of WWII, not in an identity but in a dance, as well as in narration: "we danced with the drowned ... And they were us" (690). The drowned here are not just the physically drowned, the casualties of the brutal wars that sink the victor and the vanquished alike. They are also the still-living who, like the many *Muselmänner* of Auschwitz, do not return, and others who, like the second kind of testimonies appended by Agamben, return from having seen the gorgon. It is no longer the survivors versus the dead and the drowned, but everyone "remains," to echo Agamben's pregnant phrase, in this unnatural dance. There are many gorgons in the novel. Laurids is caught in an explosion and is flung up high to die, but returns to earth, never again the same man, struck mute by his strange experience: "Those of us who'd been left behind in Marstal couldn't help noticing that Laurids was a changed man. We understood that the war had been a bad time for him and that he'd witnessed things that do a man no good ... As none of the rest of us had experienced battle, we didn't know what to make of Laurids's attitude, and so we left him alone" (53). This appears to be an instance of experience without language versus language without experience. Laurids then leaves behind the life he had known in Marstal and goes missing at sea, leaving no trace. Albert journeys to find Laurids, to find his "Papa tru," the ancestor, the origin. He is confronted with the horrifying secret of the shrunken skull of James Cook, a symbol of cannibalism. He seeks the answer to the dark cargo in Jack Lewis's ship, revolted at the thought of it being slaves. He learns too late that it is tribal people traded as live fodder — living future corpses — for the cannibal tribe on a remote island. He finds his father only after having gazed into this terrible possibility of man, encapsulated, like Levi's question "if this is a man," by Jack Lewis's question: "'What's a human being? Yes, what?' He looked directly at me. 'Can you tell me that?'" (145).

The unseen gorgon rises, in this novel, not in a figure (unless we see it represented in the skull), but in the events that make this question erupt again and again. Albert later sees the gorgon in the vacant eyes of his father. Scared of the same skull, *Papa tru*, in Albert's words, "was still crouched in the dust. A wet patch appeared on the sand between his legs. In his petrified state he'd lost control of his bladder" (201). The realization that dawns on Albert as he witnesses the figure of his lost "papa tru" is that there was no knowledge to be extracted from these events other than the very horror of the question that they were the event of — a kind of heart of darkness where no object, moral or ethical, was to be recovered. Thus he says: "There was once a time when I thought that I'd learn something if I found my papa true. But I hadn't. I hadn't grown wiser. I'd just grown harder" (203). As an old man Albert is once again confronted with a horror, not of witnessing the deaths of known ones, but of vividly seeing them die at sea before their actual deaths. He is struck dumb by this knowledge because his fore-knowledge cannot be shared with the ones who went about their lives, unaware that their loved ones, in a sense, were already dead. He cannot mourn them, he cannot save them. Here the difficulty of testifying is affixed to the future rather than to the past, as in Auschwitz: "'I've seen the war, Mrs Rasmussen.' He spread out his arms. 'All these deaths. I see the pleading in the widows' eyes. How did my Erik or my Peter die? And I know. I could give her the answer. And yet I can't. There's a terrible helplessness in that'" (298-99).

Knud Erik confronts his own gorgon (as do all his shipmates) when as captain of a ship in the Allies' convoys he is forbidden to rescue survivors of shipwrecks caused by U-Boats or German planes. To save his crew (since stopping means near certain death at enemy hands) he has to obey the order of sailing over the floating survivors, their lifejackets still blinking their distress signal. He turns into a vacant shell since he cannot cease to be tormented by what he has witnessed. The living bodies churned by his ship leave froths of red water, and sailors are told not to turn back and look, just as in the case of the gorgon, but Knud Erik does precisely that. In contrast, Knud Erik's mother, Klara Friis, is the character who cannot bear to see, to witness the gorgon, the horror of life, to touch the bottom. The sea becomes for her the concrete embodiment of this idea, despite the fact that death and destruction spare neither land nor sea. Like Xerxes, she decides to whip the sea for having taken her husband and son from her. However, by bringing Marstal's seafaring to a halt, she ends up punishing the town itself, leaving it a ghost town prey to wartime economics. The final and perhaps most profound irony of the novel is that the most terrible drowning to occur is this suffocation of the city and its men. The exception are the young men who sign on to foreign ships for diminishing wages and increasing perils, and meet their fates in the war anyway.

Klara is the defeat of Penelope, of the ethos of the Odyssey, which as Knud Erik says, failed because Odysseus as captain did not bring back a single member of his crew alive but survived alone to resume domesticity with the waiting wife, the marriage bed a symbol of the subordination of the sea to the land, of adventure to re-territorialization. There is no return for the Marstallers, but Klara cannot accept this, to the point that she would rather pronounce her son dead. Her cry "Everything must go! Everything must go" is the very opposite of the "we" that witness the many gorgons in the novel. For the "we," even the drowned are not to be lost (671). Nothing is lost, because it remains in the "we." This is the most apt term to designate the remnants of the 100 years of the novel, not just of Marstal, but of seafaring, of trade with cannibals, of global trade in slaves and weapons, and of the rapes and murders on the decks. Of the novel's first-person plural we could say that "My name is Legion, for we are many" (Gospel of Mark 5:9). In the expanding circle of the dance at the novel's end, they come not in some resuscitated or healed form, nor as their former selves, or as ghosts, revenants, or symbols. They come as they are, as they died, limbs missing, flesh peeling. The dance goes beyond funereal rites, graveyards, pastors and mourners — all ways to exorcise the no-longer-human.

Jensen's novel is striking in its grand execution of a literary feat that demonstrates how social minds need not be the source of FPP narrative. Nor can we say that storytelling builds social minds or communities (the hated Herman in the novel becomes the grotesque but endearing story-teller Old Funny). Borrowing from Richardson's proposal of "we-narratives" as carrying "unnatural voices," Amit Markus analyses Israeli "we" narratives to disagree with Richardson's surmise that the "vast majority of 'we' texts valorize collective identity in no uncertain terms" ("Contextual" 50). As Markus shows,

"we"-narration does not necessarily celebrate collective identity. On the contrary, in the texts he studies, "employment of first-person plural displays growing discontent with the established ideology" (60). This is a valuable insight that, also in Richardson's footsteps, dissociates narrative form and ideology — especially the formation of operative communities, in contradistinction to what Jean-Luc Nancy calls inoperative communities — against recent reiterations within contextualist or cultural narratology that "narrative forms [can be] understood as socially constructed cognitive forces" and that cultures are better seen as "'narrative communities' ... forged and held together by the stories their members tell about themselves and their culture as well as by conventionalized forms of storytelling and plot" (Nünning 64, 61). However, Markus's demonstration seems to be confined to the use of "we" to symbolize ideological "collective norms" that are then subverted by breaking away from the "we" and showing it for what it is: dubious, unreliable, imposed (56-57). In Jensen's novel the "we" ceases to be a symbol of community and of collective norms when it is used to break the spell of conventional or natural storytelling. The first-person plural indexes communities of fragments from which no society emerges and in the end the "we" becomes all-inclusive without being cohesive:

We don't know if that's how it actually happened. We don't know what Albert thought or did in his final hours. We weren't there. We only have the notes he left us, together with the columns of figures that spelled out what proved to be the beginning of the end of our town. In telling this story, each of us had added something of his own. Our picture of him is made up of a thousand thoughts, wishes and observations. He's entirely himself. And yet he's one of us ... We don't really know anything and we each have our own version of the story, because we're all looking for a little of ourselves in Albert ... We've gone over his life again and again, just as we always go over each other's lives in our conversations — some whispered, some spoken aloud. Albert is a monument we've all carved and erected. (388)

Jensen's "we" spills beyond even the Marstallers. The spillage is perhaps harbored by the sea where the drowned and the saved sojourn together without collapsing into one another. This "we" can be understood neither in terms of the string-bead theory of identity — and the role of narrative in articulating identity — nor of Albert's idea of "strength in fellowship" nor even of the legend/saga form of storytelling, but of something more fundamentally disjunctive.

In conclusion, the unique contribution of *We, the Drowned* in making the "disjunctive" explicit can be observed by the contrast of voice "We were the drowned": "we" is the fragmentary community of "I" and "you" and "they." We read the first-person plural of *We, the Drowned* as a literary version in part of Levi's paradox and in part of the testimonies of the *ex-Muselmänner* foregrounded by Agamben. *We, the Drowned* is experimental in several respects, but not as a playful metafictional game: even as the novel diverges from what could be possible in non-fictional discourse, its unnatural narrative techniques are as many means to say something about the historical and political realities and actual experiences of discontinuity, of death, of testimony, of war, of drowning, and most unusually of testifying about having once drowned.

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Author's Profile: Divya Dwivedi teaches philosophy and literature at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi. Her interests in scholarship include the ontology of the literary and theories of voice, time, and space. Dwivedi has published on Gandhi's political thought and the novels and political cartoons of O.V. Vijayan and her forthcoming publications include the collected volumes *The Public Sphere from Outside the West* (with Sanil V., 2014) and *Narratology and Ideology: Encounters between Narrative Theory and Postcolonial Criticism* (with Henrik Skov Nielsen and Richard Walsh, 2014). E-mail: <divyadwi@hss.iitd.ac.in>

Author's Profile: Henrik Skov Nielsen teaches literature, and narrative and fiction at Aarhus University. His interests in scholarship include the study of the relation between authors and narrators and on unnatural narratology. Nielsen's recent publications include "The Ethics of Literary Borrowing: Risks and Rewards," *Narrative Ethics* (2013). E-mail: <norhn@hum.au.dk>