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The New Greek Chorus: Collective Characters in Creative Nonfiction

My husband, born in the rural Alabama whose history is peppered with Civil War secessionists, underground abolitionists, Jim Crow lynch mobs, Church of Christ evangelicals, college football fans, and Civil Rights activists, has complicated feelings about groups. To my husband, groups too often smack of indoctrination, of group-think that can lead to exclusion, a lack of nuance, and an ability to whip up violent energy among its members. Over our thirteen years together, I've adopted some of my husband's caution around groups, yet the memoir I'm writing contains several distinct groups that form characters sometimes wholly different from the individuals who belong to them. My struggle is how to characterize their communal function and collective personality without doing injustice to its individual members, flattening them unrecognizable with composite characters sent to the page like ambassadors to represent the whole.

In a surprising turn for a memoirist, I'm looking to classic Greek tragedy to help me out.

Albert Weiner's "The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus," published in *Theatre Journal* in 1980, claims that the choruses of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were once made up of fifty members who "danced and sang" during various interludes of the play (Weiner 205). As quoted in the Butcher translation of *Poetics*, Aristotle advised, "the chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action" (Weiner 205). But Weiner is unsure what exactly Aristotle meant by sharing the action—is the chorus an intermediary, offering a conduit between the actors of the play and its audience? Weiner says probably not, since the chorus was just as prone to "positively stupid or inappropriate" interpretations of the play's actions as the principal characters. Because

of its potential for flawed perspective, Weiner initially claims that “the more closely the chorus is integrated into the fabric of the play, the more it resembles a ‘collective character,’ the better” (Weiner 206).

Weiner points to the popularity of choruses that perform “dramatically” as opposed to “theatrically,” meaning that the chorus contributes “towards furthering or developing plot or character; it is literary and unrelated to production” (Weiner 207). In other words, the chorus is not merely the comment thread discussing the play—it influences what happens in the play; it participates. The chorus as a collective character speaks with a voice more powerful for its numbers, subsuming any discrete reaction to the plot in favor of a group response that contextualizes the principal characters’ worlds and the worldviews those characters either share or eschew.

In creative nonfiction, collective characters need not be relegated merely to context or sounding board; they, too, can become principal characters, even narrators. As nonfiction writers work to understand how the cultural expectations we face result in our conformity or deviation from those around us, collective characters can reveal, implicitly or explicitly, the potential of the individual to lose or find themselves among others.

Lee Martin’s essay [“Talk Big,”](#) published in Issue 41 of *Brevity*, uses a collective first-person voice to narrate the circumstances of a manslaughter in Martin’s rural Illinois hometown. The group of men that form the narrator of the essay introduce themselves in collective terms in the opening paragraph: “We know who we are—the lowlifes, the no-accounts, the pissants, the stumblebums. All liquored up. Ten foot tall and bulletproof in a going-nowhere-fast town in southeastern Illinois” (Martin). What’s more, they characterize not only the “Wal-Mart fucked town” they come from, but a growing class of skilled laborers throughout America that have found themselves without enough work, trying to cope with the shame of poverty through masculine bravado. Eventually, a night of drunkenness and insult-trading results in a gun going

off, an unnamed member of the group dead (Martin). In the accompanying [craft essay](#), Martin says that he wrote in this communal voice in order to track how careless words can lead to irrevocable actions, what can lead to mob mentality if left unchecked. But Martin also claims that the collective point of view can help us think about the individual and the self. Like the stumbling, riled-up fraternity brothers my husband tried to avoid after college football games, collective characters who commit violence likely have members that might not be capable of that violence by themselves—thus the rise of hashtags like #notallmen. Only when they act as part of an entity that absorbs and subjugates can they become the limbs that strike out. Crafting the collective character offers a complexity not possible to other modes of characterization.

The trajectory of Martin's essay and the actions of its collective narrator might be read through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the utterance—individual utterances, even singular words, can be spoken in order to anticipate and elicit their response. Martin, embracing the informed speculation his piece must rely on as it recounts a true event that Martin himself did not witness, decides on a likely utterance that would demand an escalating response. “Tonight, it's this: *doubt*,” Martin writes. “Sometimes it takes so little. As in, ‘I doubt that, amigo. I very much doubt that you're going to do any-fucking-thing. I really do’ (Martin). *Doubt* is a challenge, and the collective narrator—that group of men inebriated and posturing outside the bar—knows that the only response to the challenge is action: in this case, a member of the group kicking out the headlight of another member's truck, resulting in the murder. But Martin knows that *doubt* also carries figurative significance; it represents the underlying the fears of the group—“Doubt your nerve, doubt your worth, doubt the weight of your balls, doubt you'll ever amount to a pinch of shit”—and explains their overcompensating response (Martin). The essay—which is not possible without its collective narrator—makes the implicit claim that violence is linked to vulnerability.

We can see the opportunities to better understand the self through collective characterization in Ira Sukrungruang's epistolary essay [“The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology.”](#) also published in *Brevity* (Issue

44). Sukrungruang's narrator—a version of his adult self looking back on his childhood—was once part of a group of Thai-American boys that tormented a classmate at their Chicago temple. The six sections of the essay convey the narrator's regret over his participation in the group's malice by shifting their focus from the group of boys who did the teasing to the boy who received it. The group identity here is more specific than Martin's collective narrator in "Talk Big." The Thai-American boys at the temple don't take represent an entire subset of the working class in America; as Thais, they are already marginalized, perhaps turning that marginalization on one of its own. The boy they neglect and tease in private represents a fearful fate—a failure to successfully navigate their culturally-complex world.

But Sukrungruang's piece is not written in a communal voice, like Martin's. Sukrungruang has a clear narrator who sometimes speak as a member of the group, and sometimes speaks only on his own behalf. Locating himself within the group, Sukrungruang writes: "We said cruel things, too. In our secret circle. In the temple library, where dust coated books about suffering, where furniture went to rot in the damp back room. Someone said, he smells like barf. Someone said, Thai white trash. I said, No wonder his parents dumped him" (Sukrungruang). Here, Sukrungruang characterizes the behavior of the group—the cruel words they spoke about the outsider when they thought he couldn't hear them—but also seems interested in taking responsibility for his personal contributions. Placing his insult at the end of the sentence, Sukrungruang emphasizes the escalation of their cruelty and how the safety of the group invited him to say something especially disparaging, something that the ostracized boy, who was hiding "behind a shelf of Buddhist books, petting a stray cat that had made a nest in the hollow of a cabinet," would likely never forget (Sukrungruang). The ease with which Sukrungruang's narrator is simultaneously individual and part of the collective character of Thai boys could not be achieved in a singular character.

In section IV, the narrator is now less interested in the group's treatment of the boy than he is in the boy himself—why he acted out in the ways he did, inciting such scorn. The focus of the last three sections marks a shift away from observing the group's more typical adolescent behavior to the boy's less

understood behavior. The two delineated roles—group and outsider—become more fluid; the boy’s grandmother bribes the group with curry-fried chicken and sticky rice to play with her neglected grandson, and they make a half-hearted attempt. The narrator now occupies the middle ground, building the reader’s sympathy for the rejected boy, pointing to the attention he so desperately wants by destroying the monks’ vegetable garden at the temple, or showing the group a kitten he found, and then withholding it from their touch on the grounds that it missed its mother (Sukrungruang).

The final section of the essay reveals the purpose of Sukrungruang’s meditation: years later, as an adult, the picked-on boy committed suicide. This news allows Sukrungruang to return to the collective character of his old group, imagining its response. Here, Sukrungruang uses the self as group representative, speaking their collective regrets: “We weren’t surprised. We nodded. But I bet we thought about our cruelty and shrunk into ourselves” (Sukrungruang). The narrator does not eagerly shed his membership in the group, trying to distance himself from their treatment of their classmate, and spends time contemplating culpability. Generously, he assumes their shame and brings them aboard his tacit plea for forgiveness. In a way, Sukrungruang’s collective narrator functions the opposite of Martin’s.

The risk of writing collective characters is their potential for flatness. Especially in creative nonfiction, writing flat characters can seem like a greater injustice than in fiction, as our characters are based on real people and the (sometimes inaccurate or oversimplified) assumption that including them in our narratives points to their significance and justifies their roundness. A section of my memoir introducing the midwife group I saw during my pregnancy describes the midwives, who rotated at every appointment, as a “chipper, bob-haired amoeba.” But it is *because* they rotated that distinctions in their character were hard to come by and far more inconsequential than the effect of their collective, often impersonal prenatal care. Their flatness serves a purpose. It represents an industrial healthcare system that co-opts the spirit of midwifery—the mentorship of the practice—and remakes that spirit in capitalism’s image.

Martin's collective narrator avoids flatness by speaking in the unified voice of a single character—a “we” that is “afraid to be alone, afraid to shut our mouths, let our tongues go dead, our words dry up” (Martin). As readers, we experience the deadly tension between the men's fear and pride, and their realization of the cost, if only internally, marking a shift in their self-awareness. Sukrungruang's Thai-American boys are quite a bit flatter as a character, drawing on tropes of adolescent ruthlessness, but two individuals—the narrator and the outcast—become more dynamic set against the group's more predictable characterizations. Sukrungruang paints the group's cruelty in broad strokes compared to the rejected boy's odder habits, which are rendered in clear images: his “cackle that scattered crows,” his “grin a half-moon,” even his Converse sneakers, stained by the monks' crushed tomatoes (Sukrungruang). This careful attention paid to the boy lends the narrator roundness, as well—his reflective observations deepen his character, distinguishing him from his childhood friends.

That flatter collective characters can serve to make individual characters more dynamic finds a satisfying example in Chloe Caldwell's “The Music and Boys,” an essay from her 2016 collection, *I'll Tell You in Person*. The intricately braided piece chronicles Caldwell's freewheeling high school friendship with a group of boys who “didn't look at [her] sexually” at the same time that Caldwell's parents separate, dismantling the family group (Caldwell 87).

My circle of friends consisted of two other girls and three boys. We girls referred to the boys as the boys. “What time are the boys getting here?” “Should we invite the boys?” “Did the boys call while I was in the shower?” We'd go to Crossgates Mall, and the boys asked for free Orange Julius samples while the girls went to Supercuts to get bangs. We saw *You've Got Mail* and *Titanic*. (Caldwell 71)

But there's a particular boy, Nat, who emerges as the standout, and ultimately forms a different collective character with Caldwell herself. While “the boys” do funny composite stuff like come over to Caldwell's house to play Nerf basketball in the living room, and eat grilled cheese sandwiches with balsamic vinegar,

and spend the night sleeping “head-to-toe” in Caldwell’s twin bed after drinking too much beer, it’s Nat—the only boy to earn a name—who toggles between being one of the boys and being Caldwell’s other half: “We were an odd pair. I’d grown faster; I was taller and had big boobs. Nat was petite. We both bit our nails to the quick. They were ugly and near bleeding. We loved to compare whose were worse. He always thought mine were more disgusting, and I thought his were more disgusting. Really, they were the same” (Caldwell 74). Nat isn’t so much an ambassador from “the boys”—he’s not characterized as a representative of their whole. Because of his closer friendship with Caldwell, we get to know Nat beyond the context of the group. We see his house “deep in the woods” near the place where Wyley Gates murdered his family (Caldwell 73). We come to expect his prankster behavior, spraying Caldwell with so much fart spray at a party that she’s forced to leave to take a shower (Caldwell 74). Most importantly, we experience the kind of enduring friendship that rarely happens among groups; it’s Nat and Caldwell, more invested in one another than in everyone else, who stay connected long after high school—the essay ends with Caldwell dancing “just like Nat” at Nat’s wedding (Caldwell 88).

As the reader’s attention becomes more focused on Caldwell, the dynamics of her family, her failures at school, and her friendship with Nat, “the boys” turn into something of a song-and-dance number. Never is this more effective (and hilarious) as the scene where the boys sing the *Dumb and Dumber* call-and-response (“Mock.” “Yeah!” “Ing.” “Yeah!” “Bird.” Yeah!” “Yeah.” “Yeah!”), literally making them interchangeable, but they also spend the majority of the essay reduced to the basic human functions of eating, drinking, smoking weed, and dancing at barn parties that bring a blissful, carefree order to Caldwell’s life as her family fractures and she contemplates a future she cannot picture. This makes them no less lovable. In fact, their very flatness represents the safety and dependability Caldwell desperately needs as so much changes around her. In his analysis of the Greek chorus, Weiner ends up challenging his original theory and arguing that the choruses exist to disrupt the dream world of the play, to provide an intermission of song and dance that allows the audience to contemplate the scenes they’ve just witnessed

(Weiner 211). The boys of Caldwell's essay spend their page time mostly giving the reader moments of such levity to counteract the quiet family drama at the center of the essay, and we are grateful for the steady laughs they give us—they're not stand-up comics but a group of people who love you and want you to feel better, even at their own expense.

Using Brecht's Alienation Effect, which describes how classical theater injects the familiar with the strange, Weiner concludes that the Greek chorus "explodes [the audience] out of their nightmare and into the real world of sight and sound, into a world where they can think, ponder, contemplate, relax" (Weiner 212). He definitely calls the chorus "a purely theatrical element." This may be true for drama, but in creative nonfiction, the dream or nightmare of the narrative *is* the real world of sight and sound, and the contemplation of our place in that world is the point of writing essays and memoirs about lived experience. Ultimately, both Martin and Sukrungruang use collective characterization—the fusing of multiple characters into something singular and separate—to answer questions about how non-premeditated violence (against others or self) can become inevitable. Martin examines the group's ability to consolidate individual despair and restlessness, and then amplify it. Sukrungruang turns that examination back on the self, locating his own complicity, and then focusing on the ramifications collective characters have on individual ones. Caldwell, for her part, highlights the collective character's ability to add tonal complexity, playing off the energy of the principal characters to reveal both the sincerity and the absurdity of real life. Collective characters live in the world of the principal characters, and can even become the principal character, demonstrating how individual characters can meld with others to make a brand-new character—one who can be meaner or kinder depending on the company they keep.

Works Cited

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