

Gossip Between Social Media and Fiction The Case of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*

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Abstract Representations of gossip thrive in contemporary American literature and TV series, and they are often tied to the impact the Internet and social media have had on the way we communicate. Far from being a new phenomenon, fictional depictions of gossip are found in the very first forms of literature. In general however, literary narratives have assumed a highbrow attitude toward gossip, linking it to minor, morally flawed characters. Also, being portrayed as idle talk, gossip has often been used in opposition to more refined forms of speech. Yet, gossip is a form of narration that responds to the basic need of all fictions, that is, to tell stories about other people. In the era of social media, gossip has acquired prominence in shaping communication, and one can notice a form of exchange between social media gossiping and fictional representation: while on the net gossip shows literary aspirations, in fictions such as Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* gossip stands out as a structural device capable to serve both plot formation and character construction. The analysis of the first chapter of *Freedom* shows the workings of gossip with the result of destabilizing the one-dimensionality of the protagonists, giving voice to multiple perspectives on the real and setting up questions that the plot is supposed to solve.

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1 The Fictional Turn in Online Gossip

There is a scene in the first season of *House of Cards* where the young journalist Zoe Barnes is about to get fired by her boss – the white, male editor-in-chief of a major Washington newspaper – for having disobeyed his order not to discuss the paper on national television.¹ During a heated

¹ Created by Beau Willimon and distributed by Netflix, *House of Cards* is a drama series that started airing in 2013. It explores the structures of power behind American politics in and around the White House, and follows the life of congressman Frank Underwood, a

confrontation, Zoe senses the man's frustration and – iPhone in hand – she provokingly urges him to «say it» (*House of Cards* 2013, Chapter Four) until he is overwhelmed with anger and addresses her with an unfortunate four-letter word. At this point Zoe tweets the exchange and exposes the man's misogynist outburst, which will on the one hand cost him his job, while on the other earn her the support of the Twitter community, which enthusiastically tweets «#gozoe» (Chapter Four). Sharing what was intended to be a private conversation, Zoe exploits the democratization of power the Internet allows. In this case, tweeting is the digital counterpart of oral gossip, with the difference that the information is not exchanged within a context of intimacy, but rather shared with a whole community of users. The episode sheds light on the immediacy of the transmission of gossip on the Internet and on its impact on the reputation of both its victims and its source. Reminding her boss that «these days, when you're talking to one person, you're talking to a thousand» (Chapter Four), Zoe stresses the changing speech policies and news circulation in a world that is slowly drifting away from the printed word in favor of its digital equivalent. But the scene also suggests that, despite the fact that Zoe's Luddite boss – for whom «Zoe Barnes, Twitter, blogs, enriched media» are «all surface, they're fads» (*House of Cards* 2013, Chapter Five) – holds a much higher rank than the hyper-connected young journalist, power remains tightly linked to the narratives that are constructed around it. Also, by associating Zoe with gossip, the episode gives a twist to the development of her character: it invests her with agency and marks her transition from the precarious position as an unvalued and naïve young journalist, to the brutal, ambitious world of politics.

1.1

Twitter and its fellow social media have shaped the way we communicate, establishing a dialogue within the community of users and extending to the Web that longstanding, originally oral practice that is gossip. Traditionally understood as «informal, personal talk that, occurring among people who know each other fairly well, concerns other people» (Fritsch 2005, p. 207), gossip has evolved according to social transformations and it has adapted to the online environment. Acknowledging the position of gossip at the base of social media functioning, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the same rules that govern the «factories of public celebrities» (2013, p. 27) are in use in social networks, blogs and the Internet: «the more intimate, saucy and scandalous the content [...] the higher the

ruthless politician who serves as the House Majority Whip, and whose ambition is to become president of the United States, seeking revenge for having been promised and later denied the position of Secretary of State by the current president.

ratings» (p. 27) According to Bauman, this phenomenon has caused a major change in the interaction between public and private spheres: while in the past we used to worry about the public invading our private life, today the opposite is true. Public society is now «colonized by the 'private' [...] and the art of public life is narrowed to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better)» (Bauman 2000, p. 37). In addition to being concerned with narrativizing other people's intimate lives, social media gossip has also led to the voluntary distribution of private details, with the result of users turning their own lives into fictional narrations.²

1.2

The expansion of gossip to online territory has corresponded to an overt democratization of the practice, extending it to almost anyone with an Internet connection. Without considering obvious forms of online gossip that acknowledge themselves as such, gossip can be found not only on social networks, but also in blogs, commentary sections, forum discussions, and in a vast range of digital writing that we can broadly call 'online storytelling'.³ Online fan forums are one example of communities where users discuss popular television series, they comment on the episodes and speculate about the characters' motivations, producing independent and complex narratives. Another case in point is the phenomenon of *Serial*, a series of radio podcasts based on the true story of a 1999 murder in Baltimore. In each episode, based on her own research on the case, the host explores different aspects of the story and conjectures about the validity of the trial that led to the incarceration of a young man.⁴ These forms of writing often revolve around people – fictional or real – and depend on the collaborative effort of many voices that speculate about the life of others, producing fictionalized narratives. As a result, we notice a form of contamination between social media gossiping and fictional representations

2 Self-presentation on social networks can be seen as a form of fictional autobiography, where users select and edit material from their personal life and rearrange it producing a narrative of the self whose status is located halfway between the fictional and the real. For an investigation of different modalities of online self-presentation and their dynamics, see Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's collection of essays *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (2014).

3 Two of the most popular gossip Web sites in the USA are Gawker, a blog founded in 2003 by journalists Nick Denton and Elizabeth Spire, and TMZ, launched in 2005 by media corporations AOL and Telepictures. Both center on celebrity gossip.

4 *Serial*, created and hosted by producer Sarah Koenig, is a 2014 spinoff of Ira Glass' radio program *This American Life*, which has been airing since 1995.

of gossip that seems to rest on a common premise: fiction and gossip often interact, leading to fascinating results, for they both respond to a universal compulsion to narrate that thrives on people's interest in stories about other people. While online gossip presents narrative elements, in fictional representations gossip is used to affect plot and the construction of characters, usually the protagonists, whose behavior is examined through the lenses of a collective perspective. Contemporary American fictions have confronted the ways in which gossip affects communication and social interactions by focusing on the analysis of specific social settings.⁵ Quite differently, in his 2010 novel *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen has created a story where gossip has the ambitious intent of exposing the dynamics that reflect the complexity of the times the text describes. Concentrating on the evolution of a middle-class family as seen through the eyes of their neighbors, gossip functions as an instrument to explore how America has changed in the last forty years, offering a commentary on issues such as political commitment, the Iraq War, the environment, consumerism, marriage, the relationship between generations, and sexuality.

2 Fictional Gossip: the 'Voice of the World' and Its Impact on Stories

Usually looked at with highbrow scorn, in the mainstream imagery gossip represents a low, vulgar and coarse form of speech, as opposed to its literary counterpart, a refined and opaque language. In the arts the trajectories of gossip and fiction have often crossed, for gossip has inevitably flourished in the fictional representations of life experiences.⁶ Especially in novels,

5 Some of the most relevant examples include Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), which combines gossip in the suburbs with a tale about coming of age and about the excruciating pain of going through adolescence, and adopts the perspective of a group of boys to tell the tragedy of the Lisbon family, and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), which uses gossip to reveal the dynamics at play within the community of a small town in Maine, while at once illuminating the characters' personal dramas. Television shows have also recently offered fictional representations of gossip. Together with the already mentioned *House of Cards*, which explores the world of politics, *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), takes its name from the mysterious character - and narrator of the show - who spreads rumors and news through her blog, commenting on the lives of the young students of an exclusive private school in Manhattan. In *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), set in an apparently immaculate version of the stereotyped American suburb, gossip exposes people's obsession with their neighbors' secrets and scandals.

6 The major study of literary representations of gossip in British and American fiction is Patricia Spacks' work *Gossip*, where the author traces the history of the negative reputation of gossip and its association with female discourse as well as considering its role as a social practice. Claiming that gossip is similar to literary practices, Spacks argues that gossip

when the portrayal of gossip focuses on the content of what is said, rather than on the speech act itself, Patricia Spacks argues that gossip indicates «the circulation of scandal» (1985, p. 7) because of its «symbolic function as voice of ‘the world’» (p. 7), where the ‘world’ does not necessarily correspond to specific characters, but it is rather the voice of society, which sometimes may even remain indeterminate and be expressed through the perspective of an omniscient narrator.⁷ Moreover, literary narratives have traditionally degraded this voice, condemning fictional gossipers to merely «exist [...] for the sake of their utterance» (p. 8) rather than being «defined by it» (p. 8). Also, as Blakey Vermeule has noted, gossip in fiction has almost exclusively been associated with «minor or morally compromised characters» (2010, p. 150), while the protagonists «only briefly tolerate such idle chatter» (p. 150). In fiction, gossip also affects the relationship between readers and narrative. On the one hand, it makes stories interesting and intriguing, because it revolves around episodes in people’s lives that automatically raise readers’ attention. According to Vermeule, gossip usually centers on «sexual scandal, cheating, sudden windfalls, dramatic successes, spectacular failure, and social climbing» (p. 155), inevitably raising questions about ethics, as the gossipers tend to place themselves on a higher moral level than their victims, while at the same time engaging in a practice that exposes their moral ambiguity. On the other hand, gossip acts on the story as a social force, dividing characters into factions, creating at once alliances and tensions between them, separating victims from perpetrators and creating tensions and unexpected turning points in the plot. Also, gossip is used to shape characters, protagonists in particular: because they are portrayed as the subjects of public scrutiny, the protagonists have to confront the ways in which gossip affects their reputation and their belonging to a community or social group.⁸ Expressing the point

«embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life, and a discourse possibly challenging public assumptions; it provides language for an alternative culture» (1985, p. 46).

7 This collective voice has often represented the moralizing intent of society, commenting mainly on issues related to success, power and sexuality, as is clear in some of the most significant works of American fiction: in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, the women who are waiting for Hester Prynne to appear on the scaffold at the very beginning of the novel embody the view of the seventeenth-century Puritan society. Mrs. Costello’s comments on the uninhibited demeanor of Daisy Miller, who gives her name to Henry James’s novella, express the voice of the American expatriates in Europe who think of themselves as the ‘old aristocracy’ and who strongly oppose America’s nouveau riche. In Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth*, gossip is also the voice of a social group, the materialistic New York upper-class at the turn of the century. Much of Faulkner’s fiction is also characterized by the presence of storytelling and rumors, which are usually the expression of the conservative view of women and sexuality in the American South, as is the case in Faulkner’s short story *A Rose for Emily*.

8 Especially in works that explore the dynamics of ethnic groups, gossip is often employed to represent the way individuals negotiate their relationship with their communities: in Toni Morrison’s novels gossip is the distinguishing mode of expression of the African American

of view of society, of the community in the story or of one of its subgroups, gossip is also used to question the reliability of the social voice it embodies, while at the same time multiplying the possibilities of interpretation concerning characters' behaviors.

3 Gossip as the Expression of a Social Mind

The «voice of 'the world'» (Spacks 1985, p. 7) alive in blogs and social media and building upon multiple perspectives provides a social commentary on the time. However, far from being a new phenomenon, or an exclusively American one, it is the evolution of a collaborative voice that has been represented in literature since the early forms of narrative were beginning to take shape, and which can be traced back to the origins of Western literature. A social, collective voice, resulting from a group of people talking about someone else has constantly made itself heard in literary texts, sometimes at full volume, others as feeble whispering between two people. In the *Iliad* for instance, oracles and prophets usually disclose predictions or rumors, while one of the distinguishing traits of the *Odyssey* is the characters' engagement in storytelling and reporting news or rumors about other characters. In Roman mythology, Fame is personified and portrayed as a mythical creature and a goddess, and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she is represented as the personification of rumors, her house a constant confusion of restless voices echoing and repeating themselves.⁹

3.1

The precursor of this literary social voice is to be found in the Greek chorus, which is also one of the early examples of interaction between gossip and narrative. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle attributes to the chorus a double function: it is at once a fictional character and the representative of a collaborative view on society. In his discussion of the origins of poetry and tragedy, Aristotle claims that the chorus should be treated «as one of the actors» (Kenny 2013, p. 40) and that «it should be part of the whole and should take part in the action» (p. 40), stressing the relevance of a social perspective as intrinsic part of the action. While he discusses the

community, which often contributes to the protagonists' isolation. In Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, gossip becomes an instrument that helps to define the boundaries of the Indian community: it builds its idea of identity and its values, and it strengthens the people's sense of belonging.

⁹ Chapter five of Hardie's book *Rumour and Renown* offers a detailed analysis of Ovid's description of the house of *Fama* in the *Metamorphoses* (cfr. Hardie 2012, pp. 150-177).

origins of tragedy, Aristotle places it as a creation of «the leaders of the dithyramb» (p. 21), which was a choral form of poetry, acknowledging the genesis of tragedy within a communal, social context. He also addresses the issue of the social origin of narrative and motivates it by arguing for the place of narrative amongst basic human instincts. While discussing the mimetic dimension of poetry and tragedy, the philosopher insists on the fact that «representation comes naturally to human beings [and] so does the universal pleasure in representations» (p. 20). Aristotle motivates this simply by maintaining that «learning is delightful» (p. 20). Knowledge and pleasure are then seen as fundamental aspects of narrative practices and it is this feature that establishes a correlation between gossip and fiction.

3.2

Scholars have recently examined the role of the Greek chorus analyzing its structure and function in plays. In her essay *The Chorus in Greek Life and Drama* Helen H. Bacon looks at Greek choruses from a social standpoint, claiming that they should be considered as «integral part of the action» (1995, p. 7). In her view, «a choral performance is an action, a response to a significant event, and in some way integral to that event» (p. 18). A similar position, which emphasizes both the active part of the chorus and its role as a collective force, is offered by P.E. Easterling: «One of the major functions of the chorus [...] is to act as a group of 'built-in' witnesses, giving collective and usually normative responses to the events of the play» (1997, p. 163), and, he underlines, «quite apart from their crucial role as performers, these groups are often represented as personally involved in the events they witness [...], and in a few plays they have a specific identity as major participants in the plot [...]» (p. 163). According to Easterling, chorus members jointly respond to the action they take part in. Bacon pushes this view a little further, attributing to the chorus a «choral mentality [...] that occurs in some form in many societies including our own» (1995, p. 9).

3.3

There is an interesting relation between these studies on the functioning of the chorus in Greek tragedies and the recent developments in cognitive theories applied to fictions, for example Alan Palmer's work on fictional minds. Palmer investigates the intricate relation between individual and social minds in the novel, and argues that «just as in real life, where much of our thinking is done in groups, much of the mental functioning that occurs in novels is done by large organizations, small groups, work colleagues, friends, families, couples, and other intermental units» (2010,

p. 41), of which tragic choruses are one of the earliest examples. Palmer is interested in the identification of moments of intermental thinking occurring in novels because they constitute a mind of their own that produces a unique kind of reasoning. When the joint thinking and talking of a group concerns other people, it usually results in gossip and creates unitary interpretations and judgments.

4 Jonathan Franzen's *Good Neighbors* as Social Mind

Contemporary authors have been confronting the relation between private and public in their writing, especially examining how the dynamics between individuals and their community are affected by technological developments.¹⁰ Jonathan Franzen (1998) has taken part in the debate, arguing in his article *Imperial Bedroom* that the problem with privacy in America is not so much that the private sphere is being threatened by the public one, but, quite the contrary, that the public realm is being invaded through the excessive exposure of people's intimate facts. Years later, in *I Just Called to Say I Love You*, Franzen reaffirmed his position claiming that in his view, privacy «is not about keeping [his] personal life hidden from other people. It's about sparing [him] from the intrusion of other people's personal lives» (2012, p. 143). Similar concerns are at the center of Franzen's fourth novel, *Freedom*, published in 2010, almost ten years after the writer had received international recognition with *The Corrections*, which earned him the National Book Award in 2001. *Freedom* investigates the familiar private drama of a Midwestern middle-class couple, Patty and Walter Berglund, and their children, Jessica and Joey, who struggle through an upsetting family crisis brought about on the one hand by Joey's rebellion against his mother's suffocating love, and on the other by Patty's affair with Walter's best friend, the rock musician Richard Katz. The story is told against the backdrop of the social and economic changes the United States experiences from the late 1970s to the years of Obama's presidential election. As the title suggests, the book is a reflection on freedom, a sacred concept for American culture and at the same time an idea that has been

¹⁰ A few examples include Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* (2013), which portrays a future where privacy is seen as an obstacle to the welfare of a society based on transparency, and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), which depicts a society where social interaction only happens through technological devices, habitually used to access intimate information about others. Jonathan Safran Foer (2013) has also explored how technology affects social relations in his article *How Not to Be Alone*, while Zadie Smith (2010) has analyzed in *Generation Why?* how the exposure of private details on social networks affects authenticity and social diversity.

undermined by the language of politics.¹¹ But the novel also investigates the aspirations, limits and contradictions of individual freedom, its relation with happiness and self-realization, the compromises characters make and the things they sacrifice in the name of an idea they still do not know how to define. One of the most celebrated and discussed novels in recent years in the United States, *Freedom* relies on gossip as the gateway to the story. *Good Neighbors*, the first chapter, is set in the neighborhood of Ramsey Hill in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and through the neighbors' perspective it introduces readers to the story of Patty and Walter Berglund. The neighbors' version of the story depicts the Berglunds as college sweethearts who have made it their mission to make a life for themselves as close as possible to happiness and perfection. Patty is an attractive woman, an accomplished housewife and stay-at-home mother, absolutely devoted to her family, extremely modest and helpful to her neighbors. Walter is a lawyer and an environmentalist, well known in the community for his generosity and niceness. The Berglunds live in a beautiful house that they have spent a lifetime renovating, and have two brilliant children. Things start unraveling when Joey, the couple's adolescent son, leaves home to go and live next-door with the Republican neighbors his liberal parents despise. The crisis upsets the relationship between husband and wife and between parents and children, but it also extends to individual concerns, such as self-realization and the compromise between personal ambitions and moral beliefs. Patty suffers from a severe depression, while Walter starts to re-evaluate his principles and makes radical but questionable changes in his life. The neighbors offer a complex portrait of the protagonists, at once corroborating and deconstructing the image of perfection the Berglunds used to embody, providing multiple perspectives that challenge the possibility for the reader to construct a coherent image of them.¹² Gossip problematizes the characters' one-dimensionality and emphasizes their ambiguity, raising issues about the protagonists that the novel will address through the plot.

11 The implicit reference in *Freedom* is to Operation Enduring Freedom, the military action used to justify the war in Afghanistan as a response to 9/11.

12 Franzen himself has been caught up in the mechanisms of gossip many times. In 2001, his statements caused quite a stir after he expressed discomfort about his novel *The Corrections* being selected for the Oprah Winfrey's book club, which led to the cancellation of his appearance from the show. In 2010, *Freedom* received extraordinary attention within and outside literary circles. *Time* magazine dedicated to Franzen the cover story calling *Freedom* a «great American novel» (Grossman 2010), and many critics praised the book with hyper-enthusiastic reviews. Two best-selling writers, Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Weiner, created the hashtag «#franzenfreude» to express their disappointment toward critics' excessive attention to *Freedom* and their disregard for more popular writers and genres. In addition, Franzen has often been criticized for his openly provocative aversion to social networks.

5 «I Don't Think they've Figured out yet How to Live»

The novel opens two years after the Berglunds have relocated to Washington, when the people of Ramsey Hill read an article in the *New York Times* that features Walter's «very unflattering story» (Franzen 2010, p. 3) about his involvement in the coal business. The article depicts a very different Walter from the 'Minnesota-nice' type the neighbors remember. Trying to make sense of Walter's unexpected change, the neighbors go back to the years when he and Patty used to live in the neighborhood. The newspaper article is used as a device that triggers people's speculations about the Berglunds' life, and it frames a chapter-long narrative that covers twenty-five years of their lives, from the moment they moved to the neighborhood in the late 1970s to their sudden departure in 2002. In between are the happy early years of Walter and Patty's marriage, Jessica and Joey's childhood and adolescence, and the gradual gentrification of the neighborhood. At the end of the chapter, Joey has started university, his sister is in college, Walter has a new job, and Patty is living at their lake house, until they eventually sell the house on Barrier Street and relocate to D.C. The chapter is told entirely from the neighbors' perspective, revealing how the narrative they construct about the Berglunds originates from the fragments they have gathered during the years. Gossip becomes the vehicle for the reconstruction of events, functioning as both a rhetorical and an informative device: it triggers a whole series of conversations between the neighbors, working as a sort of engine that is at the core of the social communication in the neighborhood, and at the same time it introduces readers to the story. Received as a sensational event, the story of the Berglunds' downfall echoes through the neighborhood, keeping everyone busy and talking. Like all gossip, neighborhood conversations revolve around sensational issues such as the decline of Walter and Patty's marriage, sex and the specter of infidelity, their faults in bringing up their son, Walter's inheritance money, Patty's apolitical attitude and personal failure. Some neighbors speculate about Joey's age when he started having sex with the girl next door: «When exactly Connie and Joey started fucking wasn't known» (p. 11). Mothers discuss the causes of Patty's depression: «The consensus among the working mothers was that Patty had too much time on her hands» (p. 19). One neighbor speculates whether or not Walter and Patty are still attracted to each other: «I wonder if she's actually in love with Walter or not [...] Physically, I mean» (p. 9); some wonder about Patty's past and her family, others comment on Walter's faults in his role as a father and a husband: «Instead of dragging Joey home by the hair and making him behave himself, instead of knocking Patty over the head and making her behave herself, he disappeared into his work [...]» (p. 26). Free indirect style and occasional conversations are the filters employed to convey the neighbors' perspective about the Berglunds. A fitting example of

Palmer's intermental mind, the people of Ramsey Hill act as a chorus and actually constitute a character of their own, observing and commenting on the Berglund's unsuccessful efforts to understand «how to live» (p. 26).¹³

6 The Voices of Gossip

Gossip is a practice usually carried out between few people, but it is always a form of reported speech that passes through many filters and that presents itself as the collaboration of many voices. In *Freedom* this process happens on two levels at once: not only do the neighbors comment on the Berglunds, but the narrator as well, despite embracing the neighbors' perspective and adopting their language, occasionally makes observations about the characters, offering yet another point of view on the story. The narrative voice belongs to a heterodiegetic omniscient narrator whose narration is focalized around the neighbors' collective consciousness, and therefore seems aligned with the gossiping voices. At times the focalization is attributed to individuals, such as the Paulsens: «Another problem, as Merrie Paulsen pointed out, was that Patty was no great progressive and certainly no feminist (staying home with her birthday calendar, baking those God-damned birthday cookies) and seemed altogether allergic to politics» (p. 7). Other times the narrator uses collective reflectors, adopting what Palmer would call a 'social mind,' such as the «working mothers» (p. 19). Most of the time however, the narrating voice tacitly embraces the standpoint of neighbors as a group, and it is to this community that we are led to attribute most of the comments we read, even though the source is not always clearly stated.¹⁴

Walter had made quite a mess of his professional life out there in the nation's capital. [...] it seemed strange that Walter, who was greener than Greenpeace and whose own roots were rural, should be in trouble now for conniving with the oil industry and mistreating country people. Then again, there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds. (p. 3)

However, there are also moments when the narrator comments on the gossiping neighbors, at times mirroring and parodying their style, and

¹³ «I don't think they've figured out yet how to live» (p. 26) is the closing line of the chapter, which ends with an exchange between Seth and Merrie Paulsen, a married couple that lives on the same street as the Berglunds, and often represents the neighbors' perspective. Besides functioning as a device that ends the chapter on a suspenseful note, Merrie's statement about 'how to live' indicates a concern with ethics, typical of the discourse of gossip.

¹⁴ James Wood calls this «unidentified free indirect style» and uses the example of Giovanni Verga, whose stories, «though written technically in authorial third person, seem to emanate from a community of Sicilian peasants» (2008, p. 24).

distancing himself from them. Consider the following sentence: «Patty was looking a mess, gray-faced, poorly slept, underfed. It had taken her an awfully long time to start looking her age, but now at last Merrie Paulsen had been rewarded in her wait for it to happen» (p. 14). The passage starts with the narrator describing Patty from Merrie's perspective, but ends ridiculing Merrie's trivial envy of her neighbor's good looks. Later, when another neighbor, Carol, reports the fight between Walter and Joey, the narrator observes that her audience included «any neighbor sufficiently disloyal to the Berglunds to listen to her» (p. 22), criticizing the neighbors' inconsistent behavior. The narrative voice intervenes to undermine the perspectives of the community and stresses the artificiality of their narratives. While the neighbors tell a story about the Berglunds that opens up a whole range of possible interpretations, pushing readers to question the truth about the protagonists, the narrator uses his authority to problematize the neighbors' contradictory and ambiguous conduct. The neighbors' speech is questioned not only thematically, but through language as well. When for instance, Carol narrates the fight between Walter and Joey, what must have been an intense, painful confrontation is reduced to a story saturated with clichés and simplistic expressions. Carol describes how Walter «just totally lost it» (p. 23), how Joey was «totally reasonable», and «totally responsible» (p. 22) instead, and how «the world would be a much better place» (p. 22) if all young people had Joey's self-assurance. Although Carol is given the privileged task of producing the only account of the fight between father and son, her language is reductive, it makes her appear banal, it stresses her limitations and turns her almost into a caricature version of herself.

7 Gossip as Social Criticism

The use of gossip and the ambivalence of the narrative voice corroborate Franzen's complex portrait of the American middle-class, of the contradictions behind the professed liberalism of some characters and the hypocritical defense of morals on the part of a more conservative group, who cannot resist the attraction of sensational details about other people's misfortunes. The neighbors' gossip about the Berglunds reveals the moralizing intent behind their stories.¹⁵ While pointing out the Berglunds' faults, the neighbors implicitly tell a counter-narrative about themselves, a story where they affirm their own moral superiority. Ironically, what moves the people of Barrier Street to talk about their neighbors is in fact a low form of *Schadenfreude*: not only rivalry, envy and competition, but a perverse

15 In *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, historian Hayden White (1980) argues that in order to make sense of history we tend to give it the structure of a story, and the process of narrativization of historical material usually conceals a compulsion to moralize.

satisfaction in watching the Berglunds' suburban dream shatter to pieces. This is not surprising, because the very nature of gossip is based on the paradox of trying to impose moral behavior while deviating from it. The idle talk that circulates in the neighborhood is often a way for people to reassure themselves and affirm their status as moral people, successful parents, and loving husband and wife (after all, readers have been warned, they are 'good neighbors'). The neighbors cannot help feeling «relief and gratitude» (p. 24) for the normality of their children's conduct, and the satisfaction they derive from witnessing the Berglunds' downfall is clearly irresistible. In a conversation with his wife about Patty's failure as a parent, one neighbor hints at the danger of gossip, acknowledging that what he and his wife are doing is probably wrong. His wife, on her part, finds it «funny», «delicious» and «hilarious» (p. 14), openly surrendering to the powerful lure of gossip. At the same time however, the neighbors as fictional characters benefit from gossip in the sense that it contributes to make them look less self-possessed and uptight than they tend to appear. Gossip does not necessarily make them despicable: when they lose control of their composure and reveal their acid, bitter, angry side, the neighbors seem to become in fact more compelling and convincing characters.

8 The Effects of Gossip on Plot

Gossip is the standard that determines the characters' position towards their community. At times a unifying agent, gossip brings the neighbors together to discuss the Berglunds' disgrace. Their talk excludes Walter and Patty from their group, and charges the story with tension, creating the basis for an interpretation in terms of a 'we versus they' dichotomy. However, gossip also works as a disruptive force, revealing the intrigues at play among the people of Ramsey Hill, and sometimes offering an insight on the gossipers' private opinion about each other. Relationships between the neighbors are strengthened or weakened depending on the amount of gossip they share about other people and on the alliances this practice helps forging, alliances which obviously vary depending on whom the latest scandal is about. Gossip then, serves to bring to the surface the dynamics of social exchange and to explore the characters' contradictions, their vices and the futility of their preoccupations, which revolve around other people's problems, their misconduct, and their failures. Gossip epitomizes the plots that unfold under the surface of what looks like an apparently quiet, modern American neighborhood, but is in fact a place for petty competitiveness, envy and judgment where nobody is excluded from the game. The neighbors' talk gives readers details about the story, at the same time withholding important information, creating tension and arousing our curiosity about the Berglunds. Readers are provided with an

instrument to interpret this section of *Freedom* as a sarcastic description of suburban life. A scandalous event such as Walter's exposed conspiracy with the coal business animates the otherwise boring life in Barrier Street. It is, however, a temporary distraction, destined to die away as soon as people find something more interesting to keep them busy, as the narrator remarks toward the end of the chapter: «Even the Paulsens lost interest in the Berglunds, now that Merrie was running for city council» (p. 26). The reader knows that there must be more to the story of Walter and Patty than the fragments the neighbors have based their conjectures on, and gossip has the effect of opening up the story for investigation, providing multiple possibilities of interpretation concerning what is true about the Berglunds. In a sense, the questions the neighbors ask themselves correspond to those readers are left with at the end of the first chapter: what has changed in Walter and Patty's relationship that has so radically transformed their marriage? Why is Patty so apolitical and why does she avoid confrontation with people? Are Patty's obsession with her son and Walter's neutrality really the causes of Joey's rebellion? Why has Walter betrayed his environmental and moral beliefs by getting involved with the coal industry? The novel will try to answer these questions by exploring the protagonists' lives from their adolescence to the years after they have left St. Paul and by retelling the story from the protagonists' different perspectives, creating a dialogue between them and revealing the superficiality of the neighbors' initial account. The story is a complex portrait of a peculiar yet ordinary American family, whose story illuminates some of the fundamental moments in U.S. recent history.

9 The Thin Boundaries between Fiction and Gossip

In *Freedom*, gossip is represented in its traditional form as face-to-face interaction. Social networks are almost never mentioned in the novel, and the Internet is never portrayed as a means of communication exchange. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, given Franzen's overt skepticism of social networks. We cannot ignore, however, that a large part of our daily conversations and much of today's cultural debate take place online, and the combination of the two has resulted in hybrid forms of exchange between gossip and fictional representations. The possibilities opened up by new media have contributed to make the boundaries of fiction less definite. Fiction has expanded its borders exploiting the social, interactive side of the Internet: some writers have used social networks to tell their stories while others have asked readers to participate to the narration of their

novels, following the inclination of literature towards social interaction.¹⁶ At the same time, gossip has adapted to new ways of communicating and transmitting information, responding to the narrative disposition that distinguishes online storytelling. Social networks and blogs prosper because of our never-ending thirst for stories and indiscretions about other people's lives, and they encourage the narrativization of our experience and that of others. Social networks pages are a mix of hybrid content authored by interacting multiple voices that offer a curious form of social commentary. Twitter shows the embodiment of this process: in a continuous flux of information that is shared among people who usually belong to the same social circle or share the same interests, texts and images are written, read, retweeted and passed on, creating feeds that are polyphonic narratives made up of 140-character fragments. Considering the interaction between online and fictional gossip, it would be fascinating to think about social media as an event that, far from being new, has its roots in the compulsion that has always been at the core of fictional representations: our need to tell stories about other people. This could start a discussion that would position a contemporary phenomenon like Twitter within a tradition that dates back to the first forms of mimetic representations of life experiences. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid drew one of the most representative portraits of *Fama*, the goddess of rumor, who, according to Hardie, is at the same time the «unattributable, unreliable» (2012, p. 156) voice of the world and «a personification of the poet's own verbal makings [...], the word of the poet asserting his uniqueness and authority within a poetic tradition» (p. 156). In Ovid's description, the house of *Fama* resembles a version of Twitter before its time: it is a marketplace of opinions where one can hear an ongoing dialogue happening among a cacophony of voices.¹⁷ The house occupies a privileged position and is constantly under public scrutiny, its gaze extending even to the most distant places of the world. Interestingly

16 Teju Cole (2014) has used Twitter to publish *Hafiz*, a short story created by assembling retweets from multiple accounts, so that on the writer's feed they would appear as a coherent, though multivocal, narrative. Jennifer Egan (2012) has also used Twitter to serialize her short story *Black Box*, conceived as a collection of dispatches sent by the protagonist, a spy working undercover. In 2012, Derby, Horowitz and Muffett published *The Silent History*, a serialized novel that originally came out only in the form of an app for mobile devices. Part of the story is made up of 'field reports', which can be written by readers and posted as complementary to the narrative.

17 At the world's centre lies a place [...] | Whence all things everywhere, however far, | Are scanned and watched, and every voice and word | Reaches its listening ears. Here Rumour dwells, | Her chosen home set on the highest peak, | Constructed with a thousand apertures | And countless entrances and never a door. | It's open night and day [...] | [...]; it all reverberates, | Repeating voices, doubling what it hears. | Inside, no peace, no silence anywhere, | And yet no noise, but muted murmurings | Like waves one hears of some far-distant sea, | Or like a last late rumbling thunder-roll, | When Jupiter has made the rain-clouds crash (Kenney 1998, p. 275).

enough, another traditional representation of gossip and rumor belongs to Virgil, whose personification of *Fama* is a «monstrous bird» (Hardie 2012, p. 108), indeed a much darker interpretation than Twitter's blue logo.

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