Between

Collective Forms of Storytelling in Suburban Novels

Gabriele D'Amato

Abstract

This article explores the public dimension of dwelling in two American suburban novels that employ collective forms of storytelling and exemplify the deep entanglement between narrative form and sense of place. Drawing on research at the intersection of narratology and new formalism, the article will demonstrate the inextricable relationship between narrative form and spatiality. While sociocultural representations of suburban space have typically understood it as a static backdrop, the analysis focuses on four strategies displayed by the we-narrative in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* to convey a deeper understanding of the collective experience of the suburbs.

The article then discusses the spatial forms underlying Eugenides's novel and Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*. While the former builds on the spatial form of the whole as a site for negotiating individual and collective experience, *The Ice Storm* relies on the form of the hierarchical network to represent the spatial and sexual entanglement of dysfunctional suburban families while formally disrupting it through pseudo-multiperspectivity.

Keywords

Suburbs, Dwelling, Collectivity, Narratology, We-narratives.

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Introduction

This article explores the public dimension of dwelling in two American suburban novels through the entanglement of narrative form and spatiality, by focusing on two peculiar formal structures, that is, a collective form of storytelling (we-narrative) and a complex example of formal engagement with collectivity (pseudo-multiperspectivity). By foregrounding experimental forms of storytelling, these contemporary novels attempt to convey the peculiar dimension of dwelling in a liminal and in-between place as the American suburbs[1], traditionally characterized by a wide range of spatial dichotomies, such as private and public, containment and porosity, center and periphery, as well as recurring thematic ones, such as virginity and promiscuity, marriage and adultery, flourish and decay.

The last two decades have devoted an increasing attention to spatiality in narrative theory as a category of primary importance not only in its structural dimension, but also «in both the act of storytelling and experiencing a storyworld» (Caracciolo, Marcussen, and Rodriguez 2022: 10). In the first page of a book-length study on narrative theory and spatiality, Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu state that «[s]pace has traditionally been viewed as a backdrop to plot, if only because narrative, by definition, is a temporal art involving the sequencing of events» (2016: 1). This understanding of spatiality seems to me a crucial insight

[1] As noted by McManus and Ethington, it is important to distinguish between the denotative noun 'suburb', which indicates the objective location or place, and the connotative 'suburbia', which refers to «the way(s) of life of the people living in suburbs, portrayed as an identifiable group, community or class in society» (2007: 321).

for approaching the analysis of dwelling in narrative. As noted by Laura Bieger, who discusses belonging and dwelling as anthropological premises of narration, «narrative's relation to space is not merely metaphorical», since «[s]torytelling presupposes emplacement» (2015: 19), but space is not even a medium of storytelling, in Ryan's terms (2014), as «[i]t is constitutive of and constituted by media and mediating practices» (Bieger 2016: 19). Recent approaches positioned at the intersection of narratology and ecocriticism[2] argue that space should more properly be regarded as closely bound up with narrative form. Thus, the significance of narrative space is by no means limited to the mere location of the setting.

Similarly, the last two decades have witnessed a wide array of studies devoted to suburban novels, movies, and tv shows as a means of understanding the elusive quality of American suburbia[3]. Most of them, however, still rely on a conception of suburban space in narratives as a static backdrop and a sociocultural representation of the real-world suburbia, as the title of Rupa Huq's monograph, *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture* (2013), clearly demonstrates. However, taking inspiration from an environmental understanding of spatiality and following a new formalist approach (Levine 2015), this article considers suburban space and narrative form as intrinsically bound up. Put bluntly, I would like to explore how the experience of the public dimension of dwelling in the US suburban landscape is narratively shaped through two peculiar formal structures, namely the we-narration of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), and the "pseudo-multiperspective" narration of Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994)[4]. Thus, I suggest examining the concept of dwelling through the experiential quality conveyed by the specific narrative forms that my two case studies adopt.

To properly discuss the public dimension of dwelling in narratological terms, it is crucial referring to the notion of "place" as theorized by geographical studies, where it is considered as space experienced by living subjects: in Foote and Azaryahu's terms, «[s]pace becomes place as it acquires experiential depth» (2009: 97). Therefore, as noted by Marco Caracciolo, «[p]lace is always already in a meaningful relationship with those

[2] See Easterlin 2012, Caracciolo 2022, Caracciolo - Marcussen - Rodriguez 2022.

[3] See Jurca 2001, Beuka 2004, Gill 2013.

[4] See D'Amato under review.

who inhabit it» (2013: 429)[5]. For the purpose of this article, it is therefore fundamental to conceptualize narrative – and especially narrative form – as entangled with spatiality: «space always presents itself in a particular form […] conversely, we cannot think about literary and aesthetic form without bringing in spatial relations» (Caracciolo, Marcussen, and Rodriguez 2022: 4). Drawing on this insight, I suggest that a similar understanding of the relation between narrative form and place can be highly rewarding in examining US suburban space because of its elusive and almost 'formless' nature. What particular narrative form should be adopted to represent a formless place? As we will see, suburban space has often been considered as a sort of «noplace», a liminal landscape that oscillates between the utopian ideal of community and the dystopian underside of it (Beuka 2004). Consequently, as noted by Dines and Vermeulen, «[t]he closest anyone has come to defining the suburban narrative in its own terms is to suggest it is an in-between, a middle» (2013: 3). Through we-narrative (Eugenides) and pseudo-multiperspectivity (Moody), my two case studies reproduce at a formal level some of the key features of suburban space, such as the divide between center and periphery, and the entanglement of public and private, by shaping the American suburb as an elusive and lived place that foregrounds a peculiar typology of public dwelling.

In the first section, I will discuss four strategies to explore the public dimension of suburban dwelling, with *The Virgin Suicides* as my case study. These strategies mostly rely on the main spatial dialectic foregrounded by the novel, which is a recurring plot element in suburban narratives, namely the transgression and subsequent intertwining of private and public spaces. In the second section, I will focus on two spatial forms linked to the main formal strategies of the two novels: the *whole* of the communal we-group in *The Virgin Suicides*, and the *network* of multiple focalizers in *The Ice Storm*. Both spatial forms will be ultimately challenged through thematic and structural elements that question the enclosed unity of the whole and the connective nature of the network, seeking to overcome dualisms traditionally associated with suburbia.

[5] Even though in this article I will not specifically focus on readers' experiential responses to spatial references, it is important to stress that a storyworld should not be regarded as an objective system of containment nor a lifeless background, but as «a place, or rather a collection of places that readers experience through their embodied and emotional reactions» (Caracciolo 2013: 429).

Narrative Strategies for a Public Dimension of Suburban Dwelling

There is no general consensus, among geographers, on a strict definition of suburb, which is a notoriously slippery category. Some consider the term as a pejorative one, while others regard "suburban" as a mindset more than a literal or geographic space (Huq 2013). However, definitions have significantly expanded in recent years. Over the last two decades, the research field of *suburban studies* has emerged to go beyond the traditional dichotomies that we have already seen. Most recent accounts speak of diverse suburban forms and features, questioning the term "suburb" as a «one-size-fits-all concept that globally travels to study those settlements at the urban edges» (De Vidovich 2019: 7). While acknowledging the transitional character of suburbs, especially in their global dimension, this article will focus on a specific example of suburban place located in space, the United States, and time, the Seventies. Both *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Ice Storm* – which appeared just a few months apart – present narrators' reminiscences of their youth, thus providing shared themes and cultural meanings on the suburban way of life. Therefore, although recognizing the debate around the limits of the typical view of suburban narratives, I follow Timotheus Vermeulen's suggestion to «not so much look away as to look *awry*» (2014: 3, original emphasis).

Many scholars have addressed the peculiar experience of inhabiting suburbia through concepts such as "utopia", "dystopia", or "heterotopia". In a seminal book-length study of suburban fiction, *SuburbiaNation* (2004), Robert Beuka speaks of suburbs as «heterotopic» spaces and considers the notion of non-place as one of the structuring principles of the suburban way of life, describing the fictional suburb as «homogenized, soulless, plastic landscape of tepid conformity, an alienating "noplace"» (2004: 4). For Beuka, the homogeneity of architectural styles and the uniformity of parklike landscapes produce more an *idea* than a reality: through visual evidence of a similarity between neighbors, suburban landscapes suggest «the utopian ideal of perfect community not only through similar experience and social stature, but also through a sense of shared, communal space» (2004: 5-6). On the other hand, the dystopian dimension of American suburbia has now become a well-established trope in both fictional works and theoretical accounts. Geographers Ruth McManus and Philip J. Ethington, for example, stress how media often highlight the dystopian elements of living in the suburbs (2007: 321).

In his attempt to overcome this traditional dualism between utopian desires and dystopian fears, Beuka resorts to the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, stating that he will only discuss texts that «offer compelling evidence of the heterotopic nature of suburbia», in contrast «to the more simplistic visions of suburbia from postwar television and the recent spate of antisuburban films» (2004: 19). By considering suburban places as heterotopic «mirrors» to mainstream American culture, Beuka seems to find a way out of the utopia/dystopia binary, but he still approaches the US suburb as a detached space where fictional characters are located and whose stories depend on the failure of a utopian dream (see George 2016: 31-32). In other words, an understanding of the suburb as a mirror that «reflects both an idealized image of middle-class life and the specific cultural anxieties about the very elements of society that threaten this image» (Beuka 2004: 7) reiterates a conception of spatiality that follows Ryan's container-based approach. By considering suburban stories as merely contained in a space whose very existence would serve to mirror the culture at large, Beuka sees suburban place as something preexisting its stories. He then does not consider how stories actually contribute to the creation of place, discarding the mutual entanglement of place and narrative form that I have discussed in the introduction[6]. Thus, while criticizing the simplistic and selective view of suburban landscape as homogenized conformity encouraged by traditional suburban stories, Beuka ends up proposing another form of generalizing definition, even reinforcing the utopian/dystopian divide that he was seeking to overcome.

On the other hand, for an understanding of the suburban experience of dwelling, it is crucial to go beyond the common notion of suburbs as a non-place by definition[7]. In the final chapter of *Scenes from the Suburbs* (2014), Vermeulen explores the suburb as lived space by analyzing a group of teen movies that re-appropriate those spaces that are usually associated with the idea of non-places, such as wastelands, phone booths, or parking lots. A

[6] Moreover, there is still much debate about Foucault's original conceptualization of heterotopia, particularly between literary theorists, who often automatically apply it to every fictional appearance of a prison or a hospital, and geographers, who, following Edward W. Soja's understanding of the concept, sometimes regard it as «a way of looking at any space, a particular perspective rather than a particular spatial form» (2009: 33). It seems to me that suburban spaces are too complex and variegated to be considered as having a «heterotopic nature» *per se*.

[7] See Kunstler 1994.

similar re-appropriation is seen by Vermeulen (2014: 47) as a performative act that infers a certain sense of place beyond the closed and stable one so commonly related to suburban narratives, for which Beuka speaks of a «sense of placelessness» (2004: 2). Following Foote and Azaryahu, sense of place refers to how a peculiar location is subjectively experienced through a deep intertwinement of personal emotions and cultural meanings: «[sense] of place is a common allusion to what makes a place distinct, special, or unique» (2009: 98). In Vermeulen's account of Rian Johnson's movie *Brick* (2005), these re-appropriated suburban non-places are presented as a site of community: as we will see more in detail, Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* conveys this kind of embodied and lived experience of dwelling in the suburbs through a similar re-appropriation of non-places, such as the sewer duct, and the functionalization of unused spaces, such as the roof of a house, and renders it particularly effective through its communal we-voice. Both sewer duct and roof serve to destabilize the traditional suburban dualism between private and public spaces, thus producing the peculiar public dimension of dwelling in the suburbs that I aim to describe in this article.

Therefore, I argue that the public dimension of dwelling in my two case studies does not require an understanding of suburb as a heterotopic space but emerges from the interplay between the formal and thematic engagement with spatiality. Formally, *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Ice Storm* employ a communal we-group narrator and a network of focalizing characters, respectively, to convey a collective experience of dwelling in suburban places. Thematically, both narratives disrupt the boundaries between private and public through spatial trespassing and character interactions with non-places, that transform private or unused spaces in collectively experienced ones.

The popularity of Eugenides's debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, helped establish the use of what Natalya Bekhta has analyzed as "we-narratives", namely a collective form of storytelling «defined by the narrator speaking, acting, and thinking as a collective narrative agent and possessing a collective subjectivity» (2020: 11). In *The Virgin Suicides*, the communal we-narrator is a group of infatuated teenagers turned into a middle-class suburban community who struggle to piece together memories of their youth in the 1970s suburban neighborhood of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. The novel follows the typical plot structure of we-narratives, with a confrontation between a community, the we-group of boys, and an outsider, the Lisbon family, and especially the five mysterious and fascinating sisters. Throughout the novel, the we-narrator clearly distinguishes itself from outsiders, thus foregrounding another key feature of we-narratives (Margolin 2000:

594-95), that is, the reversal of the central/peripheral relation between individuals (the Lisbon sisters) and community (the we-group). As noted by Bekhta, most of the contemporary Anglophone we-narratives «are concerned with communities and small-scale groups» (2020: 33). Thus, stories set in the suburbs seem particularly suited to this collective form of storytelling: in *The Virgin Suicides* the we-group, and the whole neighborhood, is initially concerned with preserving its comfortable way of life as the Lisbon family increasingly disregards norms and values of the community. By ignoring such rituals, the Lisbons separate themselves from "us", thus thematically foregrounding the formal divide between the we-group and "them", the outsiders. This formal structure seems to replicate the much-debated dichotomies of suburban stories, drawing a sharp line between those who are and can be part of the community and the threatening *others*, whose inability to adapt to the norms of the community is even seen as an «assault on American values» (2020: 110). For Bekhta, «the collective scope of focalization […] transcends any personal experience» (109): as focalizers, we-narrators frequently express emotions and opinions in a generalized manner, since the we-narrator is «a collective character narrator whose voice does not imply an "I"» (11). This collective expression of thoughts and judgments, far from being an "unnatural" transgression, formally foregrounds the public dimension of dwelling in the suburban space: the we-group observes and inhabits places as a separate unity, a collective subjectivity where any private information becomes «part of the communal pool of knowledge» (8). In other terms, there is no private knowledge, or experience, as we will see, of the members of the we-group that sooner or later does not merge back into the we-community. In a certain sense, it is impossible for the we-group to isolate a private dimension of dwelling.

The first narrative strategy employed by the novel for conveying a collective dimension of dwelling is the experience of *private places as if they were public*. This is made clear by the we-group's obsession with the lawns, a typical *private* suburban space whose neglect by the Lisbon family threatens the community as a whole. As Bekhta remarks, the comments about the lawn in front of the Lisbons' house characterize the we-group in opposition to the outcast family: «[d]ifferent families used different methods […] We all did our part. Afterward, the scrubbed grass, like thoroughly brushed hair, gave us a pleasure we felt all the way to our bowels […] At the end of day we stood at the curbside surveying our lawns» (Eugenides 1994: 91). But from the year of the suicides Mr. Lisbon stopped raking the leaves from his lawn: «[f]rom time to time as we raked, we looked over at the Lisbon house […] The more leaves we swept away, the more seemed

heaped over the Lisbons' yard» (92). Although the neighborhood is composed of individual private houses, the only one that stands out from the others is the Lisbons', whose neglected lawn cannot be collectively experienced as it is not part of "our" lawns whose scrubbed grass gives a deeply embodied pleasure, «felt all the way to our bowels».

The second strategy still relies on the collective experience of places but emphasizes it through *sensory references*. In Nancy Easterlin's view, place is a process that emerges from «an array of components, including emotion, intellection, memory, self-definition, sociality, culture, and physical location» (2017: 828). Drawing on research in place studies, Alexa Weik von Mossner underlines how «[m]uch of this dynamic construction of place is unconscious and the result of an embodied experience that involves seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching a material environment as well as moving around in it, measuring its extension and physical properties through climbs, walks, leaps, and other physical activities» (2019: 568). Similarly, Robyn Warhol remarks how the visual and the kinesthetic are not the only dimensions of spatial construction available to the novel, by discussing the "visceral" creation of space in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* where many places «are characterized by smell, touch, sound, and even taste» (2014: 612). *The Virgin Suicides* presents a vividly physical experience of the suburbs, with characters climbing trees, having sex on the roof, or crawling into sewer ducts. As we have seen, the we-group frequently acts like a single body, with shared emotional and perceptual information: thus, it is not just a «pool of knowledge», or «a single mind» (Bekhta 2020: 116), but a collectivity with common desires, emotions, and sensory experiences. For example, in the last section of the novel, when the Lisbon house is completely abandoned to itself, an almost unbearable smell reaches the we-narrator, who perceives it collectively: «[t]he sodden smell of the Lisbon house reached us, then faded, so that we thought we'd imagined it» (Eugenides 1994: 202). The Lisbon girls are diffusedly conjured through sensory experiences and their shortcomings: in so doing, the we-narration conveys the sense of place through the collective sensory reminiscence that links together the Lisbon sisters and the lived suburban space. Apart from the voyeuristic we-narrator's gaze, the second part of the novel offers many examples of collective sensory experiences, from hearing: «[w]e could no longer evoke with our inner ears the precise pitches and lilts of the Lisbon girls' voices» (Eugenides 1994: 186); smelling: «[t]he fact that we had once been close enough to pass through the aromas of the girls' separate shampoos began to seem more and more unreal» (187); to tasting: «[o]ur mouths throbbing with the taste of girls» (236).

A telling example of the last sense – touching – brings us to the third narrative strategy, that is, the *collective re-appropriation of non-places*. In the wake of Vermeulen's lived space, *The Virgin Suicides* – which shares the teen aspect of his case studies – is full of impersonal spaces that acquire experiential depth, as in Foote and Azyarahu's definition of place (2009: 97), through the communal we-group and the sensory experience enacted collectively. Thus, a non-place as a vacant lot becomes a lived space where the we-group gathers on nights, and "the street" is re-appropriated with a collective physical touch: «[w]e wandered back to the lot, then walked down to the street, putting our palms against the asphalt still warm from the day's sun» (Eugenides 1994: 201). One of the most evocative non-places in the novel, however, is the sewer duct, which plays a central role as it emerges at the beginning of the story with the figure of Paul Baldino, a boy who sneaks «into forbidden places» by hiding in a voting booth to watch a special film intended only for girls (11) or squeezing up into people's cellars (12). However, Baldino's most daring break-in is that of the Lisbon house, only to find Cecilia with her «wrists oozing blood»: «[h]e said he had crawled into the sewer duct underneath his own basement […] as he passed under people's houses he could smell what they were cooking» (13). These tunnels emerge as a penetrable space that connects the whole suburban neighborhood from underneath, a non-place re-functionalized to disrupt the boundaries between private and public. It is no coincidence that when, at the end of the novel, the we-group looks for a way into the Lisbon house they are reminded that «our tunnel had already been built: the storm sewers» (199).

The disruptive nature of tunnels introduces the last strategy that I consider here, namely the *trespassing of private boundaries*. Despite the rigid divide between "us" and "them" that shapes we-narratives, the we-group constantly seeks to enter the unknown realm of the Lisbon sisters, by violating the apparent sacrality of their dark and decaying house. As she discusses the voyeuristic atmosphere that characterizes many we-narratives, Bekhta notes that in *The Virgin Suicides* «the we-narrator's gaze is very clearly male» creating «a particular atmosphere as five girls are observed, day and night, at school and at home, by teenage boys» who strive to reveal and enter their «stronghold of mysteries» (2020: 115).

However, it is not only by means of binoculars or tree branches that the we-group seeks to penetrate the house, but, as we have seen, it looks for extension ladders to climb up to their windows, or storm sewers to emerge from underneath, actively violating the most private of suburban dwellings. On the other hand, the Lisbon sisters themselves try to trans-

gress their parents' strict rules: in particular, at the time of maximum-security isolation, Lux starts making love with different guys on the house's roof. We can see it as another form of re-appropriation of non-places by teenagers, or, more precisely, as a functionalization of an unused space: following Vermeulen's account, the love on the roof – voyeuristically witnessed by the we-group – illustrates one of the «elementary aspect of the teenagers' re-appropriation of non-places, namely that it remains invisible to the adults» (2014: 164). In a suburb where «everything seems to be accessible, where the limit between public and private spaces is neutralized and where there is accordingly no hidden zone» (Potier 2022: 94), the Lisbon house stands as a stronghold of private impenetrability, and the ultimate way for violating this space is to transform it in the very tunnel through which the boys tried to enter it: «when we lit bonfires that night, every house leaped forward […] Only the Lisbon house remained dark, a tunnel, an emptiness, past our smoke and flames» (Eugenides 1993: 92). Similarly, while guiding their lovers to the roof, Lux brings them through the house as if it were a dark tunnel to the real space: «[t]hey said it was always too dark inside the house to see, the only thing alive Lux's hand» (147). By making use of the house as a sewer duct – where lovers could accidentally pick up a half-eaten sandwich, bowls of spaghetti, empty tin cans – Lux re-appropriates this forbidden space, with her unaware parents sleeping nearby, to transform the roof into a public, lived place where she can make love «on the premises of her confinement», without even leaving the house, «sneaking out to do it in a vacant lot or down by the lake» (146).

A certain degree of overlap reveals that these strategies are effectively employed together: for example, it is through the re-appropriation of the forbidden spaces of her house that Lux can trespass its private boundaries. Similarly, the experience of private spaces as if they were public instills in the we-group the desire of transgressing the only remaining private space. Although similar strategies appear also in *The Ice Storm*, in the next section I will focus on the most relevant aspect of Moody's novel, namely its formal construction.

Fluctuating Wholes and Hierarchical Networks

In her seminal *Forms* (2015), Caroline Levine argued that we can rethink political power and social formations by paying attention to complex formal patterns, especially through narrative, «[t]he form that best

captures the experience of colliding forms» (2015: 19). Following recent studies at the intersection between narratology, ecocriticism, and new formalism[8], I believe that a new formalist approach can be a productive tool for exploring the entanglement of narrative forms and spatiality, by understanding narrative as «capable of absorbing and staging, within its folds, a multitude of conceptual forms» (4). In this section, I will explore how Eugenides and Moody build on and challenge the spatial forms of the whole and the network to reflect on a formal level two key elements that generate the public dimension of dwelling in the suburbs: the fluctuation between individuals and wholeness in *The Virgin Suicides*, and the trespassing of spatial boundaries in *The Ice Storm*.

In her discussion of the whole, Levine describes two strands of critique related to concepts such as «totality», «unity», or «containment», endorsing the tradition that warns «against the power of unities to imprison and expel» (2015: 26). Then, while remarking how «bounded containers have been among the most disturbing of all political forms» (25-26), Levine argues that the power of bounded wholes to hold things together makes them a valuable kind of political action. Among their neglected affordances, she highlights their power «to create a meaningful unity out of multiplicity» (46). This line resonates strikingly with Bekhta's definition of we-narratives, as a form that «expresses multiple subjectivities in their unity» (2020: 1). By creating a we-group narrator possessing a collective subjectivity, most of we-narratives produce an «effect of groupness […] that is not without ideological implications» (29): communities are defined in opposition to others, through physical and symbolic boundaries, and the most significant discrepancies are usually *contained*, as a prerequisite for the existence of the community itself. In *The Virgin Suicides*, as we have seen, the whole neighborhood regards the Lisbon family and their house as a threat to the unifying way of inhabiting the suburbs: within the whole of the neighborhood, an even stronger whole – that of the group of teenagers – is shaped through Eugenides's narrative form. Here, I would like to see the whole as a spatial form that conveys the public dimension of dwelling in the suburbs by affording not only imprisonment and exclusion, but also «centrality and inclusiveness» (Levine 2015: 39). It is a concept that I have touched on before while discussing the strategy of sensory references. While on the one hand we can certainly warn against the quelling of difference associated with communities and suburban life – what Beuka

[8] See Caracciolo - Marcussen - Rodriguez 2022.

called homogenized conformity –, on the other hand the enclosed space of the we-group creates a collective knowledge and a shared experience that result from the fluctuation between individual characters and collectivity: in other words, individual members of the community are occasionally singled out and then 'reabsorbed' into the we-voice, with their new experiences that enrich the «communal pool of knowledge». Despite Bekhta's remark that «*any* group requires a certain convergence between its members in order to come into existence» (2020: 135, original emphasis), and thus a certain degree of *uniformity* is required, I see in the fluctuation afforded by the we-narration a formal re-enactment of a central element of the public experience of dwelling: that is, a constant interplay between private emotions and experiences and their collective negotiation inside the we-group. I have discussed in the introduction the limits of approaching narrative space as a container of characters and plots: rather than being a mere container, narrative space can be regarded, in some scenarios, as «a site of negotiation of the lived, experiential qualities conveyed by a story» (Caracciolo 2013: 425). In the same vein, I suggest that the spatial form of the whole in we-narratives, and in *The Virgin Suicides* in particular, generates a dialectical space as a site of negotiation of the private experiences of every member of the we-group. In the end, Eugenides's novel consists of an act of collective *dwelling in* the past by a group of men who spent their lives *dwelling upon* their lost youth and the hauntingly fascinating Lisbon sisters.

If the spatial form at the heart of *The Virgin Suicides* is a whole, *The Ice Storm* relies on the network[9], but ultimately subverts its structure through a delayed disclosure. Set in the «most congenial and superficially comfortable of suburbs», New Canaan, Connecticut (Moody 1997: 3), *The Ice Storm* is a bleak portrait of two dysfunctional suburban families in the tumultuous sociopolitical climate of 1973, defined by sexual experimentation, political uncertainty, and moral transgression. The novel follows a schematic structure: it is composed of three parts, each consisting of four sections entirely focalized – with rare exceptions – through each of the four members of the Hood family: the father Benjamin, the daughter Wendy, the mother Elena, and the son Paul, respectively. This formal engagement with a group of characters again conveys a collective experience of the suburban space: it is no coincidence that what David Bordwell (2008) calls «network

[9] As noted by Levine, «[s]ome networks are densely local, such as social relationships in a village; others, like shipping routes, put vast spaces between nodes» (2015: 114). Suburban stories clearly present the former.

narrative» turns out to be one of the favorite formal engagements with suburban stories, as exemplified by different movies such as *Happiness* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999), or *Little Children* (2006). While traditional network narratives usually present vastly separate plotlines that contingently converge in diegetic «knots» (Schmitt 2014: 84), in suburban network stories are often *local* in scope, with characters as family members whose lives are completely disconnected from one another. Think about how in *Happiness* Todd Solondz portrays US suburbs through three sisters' and other characters' related yet separate plotlines to foreground the typical suburban form of interlinked and isolated disaffected relationships[10]. Thus, these networks nonetheless consist of parallel story lines and several protagonists whose «projects are largely decoupled from one another, or only contingently linked» (Bordwell 2008: 192).

While we-narratives express multiple subjectivities in their unity, multiperspective narratives present multiple subjectivities distinct from each other, usually in a conflictual relationship. In contrast to the communal voice of the we-group, multiperspective narratives frequently convey distinct and incompatible voices. How is the suburban space affected by this fragmented narrative form? In general, having access to a wide array of characters' consciousnesses allows readers to experience a particular space in its differences and complexities: for example, a peculiar location – such as a family house or a school – can even be the thematic focus of a multiperspective narrative, with different characters' presenting their individual emotional investment with it. Thus, multiperspective narratives usually foster a perceptual relativism that can problematize any individualistic account of a given space, by juxtaposing several personal experiences and 'senses of place'. Moreover, this juxtaposition of incompatible gazes on the same inhabited space can also challenge its private dimension, thus cracking its boundaries toward a public investment. It is what happens in the first chapter of *The Ice Storm*, where we are introduced to the Williams family house through the focalization of Janey Williams's lover, Benjamin Hood. Walking through the empty house, Benjamin illusorily feels like its owner. While the narrator initially presents the house as «belonging to Janey and Jim Williams» (Moody 1997: 3), Benjamin's strict focalization gradually turns it into his

[10] See Vermeulen (2014: 78-79) who refers to the metaphor of the foam to describe a constant flux that «consists of interconnections but interconnections changing from one second to the next» (78).

own property, from the room (23) to the whole house: «[p]ossession was the large part of ownership […] all the Williamses' personal property belonged that afternoon to him» (29). Suddenly, as he is about to leave through the back exit, Benjamin hears a laughter of teenagers which reveals his daughter Wendy and his mistress's son Mike clumsily fondling each other in the basement. The scene will be then reported through Wendy's focalization, revealing how the house was far from empty, far from his possession, and how Wendy's transgression was – even spatially – underlying his own. It is no coincidence that, as we have seen with the roof in *The Virgin Suicides*, Wendy and Mike's act of transgression is again a re-functionalization of an unused space, as «[t]he basement of the Williams house was unused and lonely» (41). However, while teenagers' re-appropriation of suburban space normally remains invisible to the adults, in this case Wendy is caught by her father, who was himself trying to inhabit that empty space. The multiperspective network thus replicates the entanglement of both moral and spatial transgressions: the Hood father has an affair with the Williams mother, while the Hood daughter sexually experiments with both the Williams sons, and, later in the story, the Hood mother makes love to the Williams father. The two families' enmeshment is replicated physically in the image of Elena Hood and Jim Williams having «trouble untangling themselves» (176) in the car where they made love. Thus, the suburban space emerges as a site of transgression and entanglement, where people swap and share all the traditional commodities of the suburban way of life, from partners and houses to keys and cars. In *The Ice Storm*, the denial of private spaces in the suburbs reaches its peak: everything is *forced to be* accessible and exposed, there is no hidden zone, with the unraveling of the Watergate scandal underlying the whole novel. The most relevant plot element of this entanglement is the key party, a form of swinger event where female partners randomly pick car keys out of a bowl in which the men placed them. By randomly connecting partners and families, I suggest that the key party clearly replicates the network-like progression of the narrative. The intertwinement of public suburban space and adultery is made evident in Benjamin's attempt to explain his extramarital affair to his wife: «[l]ook around you, anyway. It's the law of the land. People are unfaithful […] At least we can get out of the house […] Let's just go and try to be part of the neighborhood» (71). Thus, adultery and moral transgression seem to be inherent elements of the community. In an apocalyptic reading of the novel, Anna Hellén notes that:

> In New Canaan, the spatial practices, in Lefebvre's terms, are at odds with representations of space. The characters seem to ignore or even subvert the authoritative plan behind the suburb intended to keep the family unit intact, to safeguard the integrity and self-sufficiency of each household: Each movement in space amounts to a trespassing, and each human encounter to a transgression (2020: 36).

She then underlines how the moral transgressions are paralleled by «a pattern of spatial trespassing» that violates the boundaries of the suburban space. Thus, while the multiperspective network replicates the inextricable entanglement of suburban families and public places, I argue that the novel employs another level of formal complexity to foreground the pattern of spatial trespassing: pseudo-multiperspectivity.

In the last section of the final part, Paul, the Hood family son, reveals himself as a first-person omniscient narrator (see Dawson 2013: 195-221), thus casting a different light on the representation of his parents' and sister's fictional consciousnesses as well as on the multiperspective conflict that he fabricated throughout the whole novel. I define this kind of narration as pseudo-multiperspectivity, that is, a complex form of multiperspective narrative in which the multiplication of focalizations or narratorial stances turns out to be a formal or rhetorical strategy developed by a first-person omniscient narrator. In *The Ice Storm*, the presence of this kind of narrator as a homodiegetic witness of the story is explicitly declared since the first sentences, but the true identity of the impersonal narrator is delayed until the end of the novel, with Paul misleading readers by referring to himself in the third person. Thus, while the novel does not provide an ontological disruption as in another case of pseudo-multiperspectivity, such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), it nonetheless presents an example of a paraleptic narrator who imagines thoughts and consciousnesses of different characters, and a plot twist through the delayed disclosure. The revelation that this first-person anonymous narrator is in fact a member of the family forces readers to rethink the network-like spatiality of the novel as dependent on a hierarchical structure. What Paul does is to stage a multiperspective account of events – Mike and Wendy's interrupted intercourse in the first part, the key party in the second one – to simulate a perceptual relativism that is entirely made up by himself. Consequently, the network ultimately gives way to the form of the "hierarchy": pseudo-multiperspective narratives thus enable us to problematize the relativistic and democratic assumptions associated with multiperspectivity by exposing the rhetorical and formal strategies that can hide behind the creation of

conflicting points of view. In *The Ice Storm*, Paul's act of narrative imagination is his attempt to make sense of a dysfunctional family, a decaying era of suburban life, and the confused enmeshment of private and public. Thus, expanding Hellén's insight, I suggest that the novel links its patterns of spatial and moral transgression to its formal construction, with Paul's first-person omniscient narration literally *trespassing* the boundaries of his family's fictional minds.

In both my case studies, the patterning of spatial trespassing is at the core of the narrative. But while Eugenides's we-narrative builds on the form of the whole to remark the neat divide between 'us' and 'them', thus foregrounding the public dimension of dwelling through the we-group's collective experience of space, Moody's novel offers an interplay of network and hierarchy – a hierarchical network – to stress both the disruption and the entanglement of private and public spaces. Through their distinctive narratorial stances, and through their collective experience of suburban dwellings, these novels exemplify the deep entanglement between narrative form and sense of place.

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