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Gossip on Main Street: Visualizing Oral Exchange in Mid-Twentieth-Century Small-Town Photography and Art

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This article explores the visual representation of gossip, rumourmongering, storytelling, and other analogues of oral exchange in mid twentieth-century small-town American visual narrative. I herein examine two key visual artists of the interwar period – photographer Ben Shahn and painter Norman Rockwell – and their place within the small-town narrative form, as well as *Life* magazine and its institutional small-town preoccupations. Considering Shahn's photographic work conducted as part of the Farm Security Administration to Rockwell's culturally dominant scenes of idyllic small-town life, I argue that both emphasize gossip's narratability despite their drastically different provenance. Opposing Shahn's scenes of Depression-era poverty with Rockwell's homogeneous vignettes of rural life, it will be concluded that gossip and oral exchange remained a vital narrative constituent for artists of the small town during the mid-twentieth century, and that its narrative significance cannot be overstated.

In the 2 December 1940 issue of *Life* magazine, a feature story titled "A Small Town's Saturday Night" took the ostensibly unremarkable town of Franklin, Indiana and, with the help of Bernard Hoffman's photography, limned in perfect microcosm the fascination that twentieth-century American cultural production bore towards small-town America. We find, among Hoffman's featured photographs of barbershop political discussions and Main Street shoppers, "The Nook," a college hangout-cum-diner, pictured with several booths filled with adolescents engaging in ostensibly idle chat over glasses of Coca-Cola. Hoffman's photograph is sentimental, nostalgic, and, above all else, evocative of the sounds of idealized small-town oral culture. The proximity of the teenagers in their booths in the foreground of the image, whilst the diner frontage looks out onto the busy night street, creates an atmosphere of

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intimacy, of ear-bending gossip and small-town titillation in this quintessential Americana space. To look at the busy interiors of Franklin, through the windows of its shops, and to see the crowds thronged along Main Street, is to "hear" the ubiquitous murmur of small-town sociability, to witness the prevailing hegemonies and dominant myth structures of rural America through the lens of oral culture. Hoffman's photoessay tours the expected locales, both interior and exterior, of small-town America and frequently alights in the places where small-town narrative is most potently visible and audible. Dry-goods shops, drug stores, barbers, the local movie theatre, even the interior of cars: these are the sites where social transaction takes place most frequently, where gossip is traded and stories are told.

This article takes one of the central preoccupations of early to mid-twentieth-century American artistic production, namely a fixation on small-town community and its mythologized presence in American culture, and focalizes this fascination specifically through two intersecting modes. The first is an attention to the visual culture of the period, specifically photography and visual art, which used the small town as both setting and muse. The "revolt" literature accounted for in Hilfer and Van Doren's work is widely discussed, but the role of visual culture in small-town mythmaking and, in particular, invocation of orality is of primary interest to this article, an angle which has been less richly explored in scholarship of the small town.

The second mode that this article is concerned with is the oral culture, specifically gossip, that inheres in these visual, small-town narratives in direct development of oral culture's verbal roots. By considering two key figures of the interwar and Depression period – photographer and painter Ben Shahn and illustrator Norman Rockwell – as well as looking more closely at the aforementioned *Life* article and its visual small-town narrative, this article marks how intrinsic orality is in the shaping of small-town narrative representation of the early to mid-twentieth century and how gossip, storytelling, and banal social exchange offer rich narratorial insight into public perceptions of rural communities and the oral traditions upon which they are constructed. Likewise, the intersections and departures in visual representation occurring between FSA photography and Norman Rockwell, where gossip is imagined as both a social necessity and a problematic signifier of enforced community traditionalism, will be considered in terms of their narrative framing.

Oral culture is essential to the conceptualization of the small town in American culture, with gossip, rumour, and banal exchange often representing the greatest social currency in small-town narratives, both fictive and otherwise. Frequently, it is gossip that dominates small-town orality and becomes a narrative crutch in the small town's early to mid-century representational peak, epitomized in this article by Shahn's Depression-era photography and Rockwell's work from 1928 to 1948. Henry Nash Smith noted in 1950 that

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the small town "is a world of grim, savage religion, of silent endurance, of families held together by no tenderness, of communities whose only amusement is malicious gossip."[1] Of course, the roots of this orality are in literary works, from the nameless gossips in Mary Austin's *A Woman of Genius* (1912) to the anonymous porchspeak of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Small-town literature and its narrative representation in the early to mid-twentieth century mark the virulence of idle talk. Greg Camfield conversely claims that gossip within the small town is not only "natural" but "potentially humane, if practiced carefully," with his references to Sarah Orne Jewett's nineteenth-century local-colour fiction illustrating a dominant, mythologized representation of small-town life.[2] Nash Smith's damning criticism refers to what Carl van Doren, in a 1920 issue of *The Nation*, termed the "revolt from the village," alluding to protest literature authored by Sinclair Lewis, Mary Austin, Sherwood Anderson, and others.

Such narratives were often centred around forlorn Midwestern burgs where gossip became a destructive social disease. Perhaps the most important work among these dissenting small-town texts is Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which I have explored elsewhere in terms of its oral shaping of small-town narrative: "Masters' small-town verse collects the epitaphs of the eponymous town's dead population, their singular voices of remorse and revenge eventually becoming a chorus of provincial unrest."[3] The early twentieth-century and interwar figuring of small-town narrative, as it existed in the literary mode, was highly invested in oral culture, gossip, and the role of speech in shaping (and destroying) community ties. Richard O. Davies notes that "free verse, Midwest style, was not an European import, but an introduction of everyday common speech patterns into the province of poetry," exemplifying how intrinsic orality was in the early formation of small-town narrative.[4] As Masters's early example of small-town narrative tells us, aurality lies at the heart of both idealized and subversive small-town narrative representation, and, as will be shown, such preoccupations become manifested in visual depictions, too.

Camfield's observations, contrasting with Nash Smith's, seem to echo the Depression era and its "nostalgia for a white rural America," which found gossip and oral culture to be socially ameliorating and constructive, depicted

[1] Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol* (Cambridge: Vintage Books, 1950), 286.

[2] Greg Camfield, "Jewett's 'Country of the Pointed Firs' as Gossip Manual," *Studies in American Humour*, 9 (2002), 39–53, 46.

[3] Will Carroll, "Small-town Styx: Rural Confinement and Pastoral Subversion in Spoon River Anthology", in *Rivers*, special issue of *Comparative American Studies*, Jan. 2021, at https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2020.1849924, 118–37, 121.

[4] Richard O. Davies, Joseph A. Amato, and David R. Pichaske, eds., *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2003), 166.

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in canonical works like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938). Here, Camfield acknowledges one of the more significant aspects of small-town narrative and its construction across the interwar and Depression years, which is its evolution from interwar cynicism and derision to post-Depression nostalgia and recuperation. Ima Honaker Herron notes "the belligerent interpreters of the twenties whose concern has been with the dullness and stupidity of small-town existence," with such descriptions finding root even in works published in the decade prior, with Masters, Anderson, and Austin representing this apparent malaise in their narratives. The shift that occurred during the Depression, a product of a national reimagining of its rural spaces in a bid to reclaim a socially, and economically, devastated community infrastructure, is accounted for by figures like Thornton Wilder and Norman Rockwell. As Miles Orvell writes, "the American small town during the 1930s was gaining a larger symbolic dimension, a crucial function in the moral and spiritual economy of the Depression."[5]

This dual narrative in the lineage of small-town America and its narrative representation is vital to understanding its more nuanced sociological significance. If it is indeed a "communal form," as Ryan Poll attests, then naturally the oral culture upon which such communities are built, of storytelling, gossip, and rumourmongering, are fundamental to tracing the narrative significance of this pervasive American environment. Despite the conflicting representations of small-town life during this period, of narratives both utopian and provincial, a closer reading of its textual representation reveals that orality, particularly gossip, remains ubiquitous. As Hoffman's *Life* photography suggests, and so too will discussions of Ben Shahn's photography and Norman Rockwell's art in this article, this was a concern that reached far beyond the written text.

I principally explore oral culture through two related forms: gossip and social exchange. There is, of course, overlap between these two modes but they are figured and treated in a highly specific fashion across small-town narrative and, in particular, the visual work of Shahn and Rockwell. Beginning with this notion of "gossip," I rely on the seminal scholarship of Patricia Meyer Spacks and Blakey Vermeule, whose work on gossip acknowledges that it is "everywhere practiced"; it is an innate social construct that "has the power to destroy lives" as well as "form coalitions with others."[6] It is Vermeule's idea that gossip can "power the whole narrative" that I am most

[5] Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), 432. Miles Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 102.

[6] Blakey Vermeule, "Gossip and Literary Narrative," *Philosophy and Literature*, 30 (April 2006), 102–17, 102–6.

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drawn to, given its frequent invocation in small-town narrative and, as will be shown in this article, visual representations of small-town life. Likewise, when Spacks equates gossip with the novel form, noting that it is a "way of turning life into story," I here contend that in Shahn's street photography and documentary aesthetic there is an intention of turning the banal and everyday into narrative through this oral focus. Gossip is "an expression of the rules and values governing behaviour in a particular time and place"; that place, this article argues, is small-town America in the works of, among others, two Depression-era visual narrators of this space.[7] I contend in this article that the still photograph and illustration have the capacity to narrate with equal potency as text, and that when one considers the American small town across the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s in particular, it finds significant visual artistic representation from figures like Shahn, Rockwell, and *Life* magazine, where a "visual forum of vernacular lyricism" is identifiable across visual genres.[8]

Of course, the primary material that is to be considered momently does not rely solely on the titillation or narrative stimulation of gossip but does, also, make use of banal discussion and idle chatter that we might more readily define as social exchange. These instances of oral discussion are likewise vital in small-town narrative, both textual and visual, and help develop the realism of small-town narratives of the period. Granville Hicks, in his 1940 memoir *Small Town*, recounts how vital social exchange was to the formation and maintenance of his community ties, in a matter akin to what will be shown in Shahn's rural street scenes and Rockwell's small-town idealization:

> The power of the personal word, I suspect, is a hangover from a time when the majority of people lived in small communities more or less like Roxborough. Talk between neighbours used to be almost the only means for the transmission of news and opinions, and it is still an important means wherever neighbourly contact exists.[9]

This article contends that whilst small-town narrative remains an enduring touchstone of American regionalism, genre writing, and visual art, it is the orality innate to such community spaces and its subsequent representation that reveals its inherent narratability. From depicting the private gossip of townsfolk to idle chatter on the sidewalks of Main Street, this article demonstrates that small-town narrative of the Depression continued the tradition of earlier works in privileging oral exchange as a central motif of community narrative.

[7] Edith B. Gelles, "Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case," *Journal of Social History*, 22 (Summer 1989), 667–83, 668.

[8] Caroline Blinder, *The American Photo-Text 1930–1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.

[9] Granville Hicks, *Small Town* (New York: Fordham University Press 2004), 97.

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BEN SHAHN, *LIFE*, AND DEPRESSION-ERA ORALITY

Painter-turned-photographer Ben Shahn rose to prominence in the photographic field initially as a solo photographer who went on to join the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal initiative established in 1937 and headed by bureaucrat Roy Stryker, which sought to "introduce America to Americans" through ethnographic work carried out by itinerant photographers in the nation's rural communities.[10] This socially interrogative, government-devised programme yielded some of the most striking visual narratives of small-town life that, even in the fixity of their frames, capture curious instances of small-town oral culture. Following the devastation of the Depression, the FSA was devised to document and promote awareness of the nation's poverty, whilst simultaneously (and problematically) recuperating a past founded on small, rural communities and the conservative values shared there. Alan Trachtenberg, writing in his important work *Reading American Photographs* (1989), highlights how significant the FSA photographic project is as a narrative record of everyday American rural life, stating that the project "developed as a unique blend of personal visions that are also objective records of scenes, things, and persons witnessed by the photographer," and that ultimately it "expanded into a general ethnology of everyday life."[11] Indeed, this highlighting of an ethnological impulse in the FSA photography implies a general preference for social interaction and a privileging of small-town oration, which becomes evident as the FSA catalogue is studied.[12]

Stryker personally issued "shooting-scripts" to his selected photographers which instructed them to find "modern, democratic communities" within the nation's small-town archipelago and depict the "American scene."[13] In his view, as he searched for "authentic" American social practice among the ruined towns of the South and Midwest, documenting the "egalitarianism" of small-town Main Streets would engender a renewed model of American community.[14] The people found there, and the voices with which they narrated their impoverished lives, are central to these visual documents; James Curtis writes of the FSA as a project wherein "the realism was deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized."[15] In the works of Ben Shahn, these notions of stylistics and documentary are particularly telling, and in the small-town scenes which comprise his contribution to the FSA's catalogue and beyond,

[10] Alan Trachtenberg, 'Minnesota History in the Camera's Eye 1935–1943', *Minnesota History*, 61 (Spring 2009), 174–95, 180. [11] Ibid.

[12] A. Cara Finnegan, "Documentary as Art in 'U.S. Camera',", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 31 (Spring 2001), 37–68.

[13] James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 110. [14] Ibid., 103. [15] Ibid., 5.

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scenes of speech both idle and otherwise, of gossip, chat, and rumourmongering, begin to sketch a small-town narrative that speaks to far more than the FSA's seemingly homologous, "protestant" presentation of documentary without narrative. Within Shahn's ethnographic works of social realism, we can trace distinct rural narratives pertaining to speech, gossip, and idle talk in the same tradition as the literature of the period.

Whilst his fame may not have been as great as that of Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange, two of the FSA's leading figures, Shahn remains a vital figure in small-town narratology and was responsible for producing compelling examples of rural narrative, particularly in his series titled "The Other Side of the Tracks" conducted in 1938 in London, Ohio. Shahn's work in impoverished rural small towns, paying particular attention to groups underrepresented in the national visual imaginary, namely black Americans, rebukes the utopian myths of the nineteenth-century idyll and instead extends the provincial focus of the 1910s and 1920s, adhering to a similar syntax of community building through photographs that capture idle talk, gossip, and ceremony. In an interview conducted on 14 April 1964 with Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, Shahn said of his first interaction with a Leica camera, "I was primarily interested in people, and people in action, so that I did nothing photographically in the sense of doing buildings for their own sake or a still life or anything like that."[16] From the very moment Shahn transitioned into a photographer, someone who would go on to travel the "rutted country lanes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Alabama," he was clear that scenes of passivity were uninteresting and narratorially stagnant.[17] Even a cursory glance at his significant output during the 1930s, which this article will explore in more detail, marks a photographer who was constantly seeking out voice, conversation, and sociability in the rural, small-town environs where he often found himself. His interest in small-town speech patterns is evident across his work, and this article positions him as one of the period's most interesting practitioners of what we might term oral–visual small-town narrative.

Shahn's photograph "Scene in Smithland, Kentucky, 1935" (Figure 1) captures two middle-class gentlemen casually talking outside the "Smithland Grocery Co." storefront, typified by its glass lettering and displayed wares just visible between the two subjects. Both men are well dressed, in buttoned overcoats and dress hats, with the moustached man on the right leaning on a cane. His crooked right arm and the look of wry acknowledgement on his face suggest that something amusing has passed between the two, and we can

[16] "Oral History Interview with Ben Shan, 1964 April 14th," *Archives of American Art*, at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ben-shahn-12760#transcript (accessed 1 Nov. 2021).

[17] Timothy Egan, *The Photographs of Ben Shahn* (Washington, DC: Giles, 2008), xii.

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Figure 1. Ben Shahn, "Scene in Smithland Kentucky," photograph from the Farm Security Administration. Library of Congress, 1935.

presume that neither is aware they are being photographed, given Shahn's preference for a right-angled viewfinder which allowed for covert exposures. Both men are turned inward toward one another, notably so given Shahn's frequent portraits elsewhere in his career that capture subjects leaning with their backs to buildings and facing outward toward the camera. Here, the unmistakable intimacy of social exchange is legible in the body language of the affluent businessmen, and its occurrence on a small-town sidewalk before a grocery store situates the scene within the same traditions of small-town oral culture described in literary texts.

This image appears in multiple forms in the Library of Congress's archived collection as well as in the Museum of Modern Art's digital collections, including, as we come to learn, the *cropped* version discussed above. The uncropped exposure reveals a black man, less formally dressed than the businessman from whom he tellingly stands apart, staring directly at Shahn's lens and leaning against the entrance to the grocery store behind the figures. This symbolic separateness is, of course, contended with in far more detail in Shahn's London, Ohio scenes, discussed later, but it is curious to note how instances of orality and sociability in his small-town scenes can be undercut by this overt exemplification of silence and, by extension, segregation. This variously elided figure of Shahn's Kentucky scene implores a conversation with Shahn, and the viewer, directly as he stands upon Main Street, a figure uninvited to converse. There is undoubtedly a suggestion of social exchange as exclusionary

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here, with the cropped black figure speaking to the same issues of prejudice and racial injustice that are accounted for in the 1910s and 1920s "revolt" literature; Shahn's work invites us to "hear" and, importantly, take note of who *cannot* hear these scenes.

We might pause here and ask how one is to read orality, or to hear its aural qualities in a distinctly visual, still-frame medium such as photography or illustration. "What do I hear of what I see" is the provocation at the heart of Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision* (1993), in which he proposes the same questions around an idea of "negative sounds" wherein "the image calls for them, but the film does not produce them for us to hear."[18] Importantly, Chion distinguishes his primary focus of film from photography or painting – my own principal preoccupations in this article – by stating how the latter "more easily detach from their captions or their commentary" and allow themselves to be read at their "own pace."[19] This article disagrees slightly by stating that this more in-depth close reading of small-town visual texts like photography and illustration allow less of a detachment from their commentary and more of an inherent narrativization. Looking at this first example of Shahn's, the "negative sounds" of conversation here alert us to small-town sociability as well as wider issues of exclusion and segregation as per the multiple copies of this photograph in the archive. This photograph, as with the other works to be discussed, offers to us not the "ventriloquist" commentaries of the moving image, as Chion defines them, but instead space for further reading and narrativizing through the depiction of oral culture.

Shahn's focus on orality is clear in his Kentucky scene, a measure which becomes more accurate still as further equivalent scenes are considered, but why should his small-town photographs seem so attuned to daily speech and gossip? Timothy Egan writes that "from his parents, Ben inherited a love for storytelling. They could connect narratives passed on from prior generations with the struggles of the day. Shahn's art would strive to do the same thing."[20] Egan affirms that it is precisely Shahn's upbringing in the "oral storytelling tradition of his Jewish family in Lithuania" that engenders his photographic narrative style, which perhaps explains why Shahn is so drawn to scenes of social exchange in his rural compositions; he understands that to narrate any social life one must look to the other lives in which it is constellated.[21]

One of Shahn's most deliberate depictions of small-town social exchange, attesting to this "oral storytelling tradition," is "After Church, Sunday in Little Rock, 1935" (Figure 2). Churches, with their attendant connotations

[18] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 192.
[19] Ibid, 7.
[20] Egan, ix.
[21] Ibid., x.

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Figure 2. Ben Shahn, "After Church, Sunday in Little Rock," Arkansas, photograph from the Farm Security Adminstration. Library of Congress, 1935.

of community, social interaction, and orality, are profound signifiers of small-town community in the textual and visual narratives of the period, and Shahn's catalogue is no different. In this photograph, he captures the denouement of Sunday service at a rural church, with the all-black congregation gathered in an assortment of groups, cliques, and postures in the shadow of the church. As Jon Raeburn notes of Stryker's FSA "shooting scripts," and how they sought a "holistic" view of "American culture," there is something both typical and atypical of Stryker's "shooting scripts" to Shahn's scene here.[22] It demonstrates the seeking out of these kinds of "typical" community space, as Stryker would deem them, whilst privileging an all-black community which certainly was not the norm in the FSA's wider ethnographic project. Here, something closer to a natural, uncontrived portrait of small-town sociability, which exists beyond the FSA propagandist *raison d'être*, is visible.

In this post-church scene, talk that was previously denied in the awed hush of the interior during service is set loose; plans form for the day ahead as children skirt to and fro between the gathered adults. The four men in the centre left of the photograph, one of whom stands with both hands in the pockets of his suit trousers, are engaged in talk in much the same manner as the storefront businessmen of

[22] John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 15.

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the Smithland photograph. There is much to be heard in terms of Chion's hypothesis of "negative sound" here, and the photograph feels alive with a distinct community-focussed aurality. In "artful documentary" compositions such as these, a useful term for thinking about the balance here between creative choice and "factual" photography, Shahn presents rural social exchange as an authentic, necessary mode of existence, but likewise presents a scene that feels alive with lived experience and orality.[23] His subjects may not lean in to one another with cupped hands in an exaggerated caricature of gossip, as we'll see with Rockwell, nor do they appear particularly animated with their body language, and yet Shahn captures the subtleties of human speech, particularly in his rural scenes, in a manner emblematic of small-town narrative more broadly. As the porch choruses that comprise Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville, Florida tell us, or the "Mexican Town" immigrant communities in Willa Cather's Prairie trilogy, social exchange is often a central focus of community world building in small-town narrative, and Shahn's visualization of the same is no accident.

In 1938, Shahn undertook significant independent work in Ohio, adopting the same itinerant approach to his work as with the FSA, where he sought out small towns, back roads, and dusty waystations in which, Egan remarks provocatively, "you feel the texture of want."[24] Egan notes, as do many critics who reconcile the vernacular aesthetics of the so-called everyday, the narrative potentiality of banal routine and spaces. He continues by writing that in Ohio, Shahn found "rich repositories of everyday life" and "took photographs at country fairs, travelling shows, people at baseball games, at lunch counters."[25] Found in such quotidian scenes is the portrayal of small-town speech, a necessary asset in the construction of these wider community "repositories"; the question becomes, then, not so much of *feeling* a texture of want, than of *hearing* it too. It is not enough to capture these scenes of apparent everyday American occurrence as sites of vernacular small-town space; Shahn recognizes the importance of capturing the people who perform such spaces into being, often through the simple act of social exchange. With that said, there is a curious anxiety legible in Shahn's work and within the archive he left behind. First and foremost, as John Raeburn claims in his book *Ben Shahn's American Scene* (2010), Shahn wanted to "photograph the average American," which suggests a search for some kind of quintessential rural identity, a quest not necessarily cut from the same cloth as Stryker's idealization, nor a direct extension of "revolt" dissent.[26] Rather, it seems to exist uniquely

[23] Laura Katzman, "Ben Shahn and the Archive," *Archives of American Art Journal*, 54 (Summer 2015), 4–33, 8.
[24] Egan, viii.
[25] Ibid., xiii.
[26] John Raeburn, *Ben Shahn's American Scene: Photographs 1938* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 6.

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Figure 3. Ben Shahn, "Scene at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park," near Columbus, Ohio, photograph from the Farm Security Adminstration. Library of Congress, 1938.

in Shahn's work and his treatment of orality. Raeburn later claims that "Shahn's pictures reveal a striking degree of equivocation about the script's assumption that a photographic survey of small towns would reveal their undiminished vitality and ratify their standing as an American institution."[27] Shahn seemed to rebuke Stryker's "shooting script" mandate that small-town American community was one-note and all-good, though his own desires to find identity and meaning in these same spaces result in a parallel search where, I argue, an attention to orality becomes a key device.

The photograph "Scenes at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park, Near Columbus, Ohio, 1938" (Figure 3) shows two women, one middle-aged and the other elderly, engaged in conversation outside the entrance to a Palmist attraction at the titular amusement park. What at first appears to be a quotidian portrait reveals itself as a measured, thoughtful depiction of gossip. Both women lean against the unit housing the Palmist attraction, with another stall visible through the opening on the left. They are turned inward, like the Smithland businessmen, unaware of Shahn or at least feigning ignorance, and appear to be smiling. Curiously, both women touch their hair, a neat symmetry of body language that marks the idiosyncrasies of everyday speech,

[27] Ibid., 10.

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specifically the subjective, paralinguistic gestures that accompany such talk. Whether a fortuitous coincidence or a perfectly timed exposure by Shahn, the pronounced use of their hands whilst talking outside the Palmist attraction is an amusing sight gag, and one that is rooted in orality. These women, neatly mirroring each's language both verbal and otherwise, convey the associated involvement and absorption of talk and gossip in their small-town setting. Spacks's writings on gossip as constructive as well as destructive are useful in unpacking its visual representations in Shahn's work. Spacks writes of gossip as "healing talk," referring to its physiological effects, which are perhaps, I argue, most potently felt in the intimate, proximal communities of small-town America in which gossip is often an unavoidable and idiosyncratic part of everyday life; such elements are teased out in Shahn's photograph(s) at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park.[28]

The women's expression of humour is itself a healthy social expression, but it is the elderly woman's mimicking of the younger woman's movement, even unconsciously, that is the most vital signifier of gossip's timeless, mollifying effects. They become living signifiers of gossip and small talk as a homogenizing force – an aspect that, as has been noted, can be both destructive and constructive. Spacks's assertion that "gossip involves a special mode of knowing, as well as of saying," is affirmed in the visible speech and symmetrical gesture of Shahn's subjects.[29] Like the clairvoyant seers awaiting patrons through the darkened doorway of the Palmist's room, where cold reading of small anecdotes and details is extrapolated into wider life narratives, so too does Shahn's photograph betray wider narratives of small-town oral culture and its representations. We begin to sketch the lives beyond the figures, to imagine the words said and unsaid as they stand apart from the main hustle of the fair. Shahn's subtle invocations of gossip through his portraits, whether street scenes or vignettes from a county show, lend themselves to such interpretation on the part of the viewer. Appealing to the voyeur, they invite us to hear their conversations and to take part in the unique small-town narratives he captures so adeptly.

A curious counterpart to the "government-sponsored" nature of Shahn's FSA photography is the photojournalism of the period, which adopts a far more overtly dominant, which is to say idealized, narrative of community building than Shahn. Chief among these publications was *Life*, the *raison d'être* of which Sheila Webb defines as ordering the "chaos and flux of life into a comforting narrative."[30] In photojournalist essays concerned with the

[28] Patricia Meyer Spacks, "In Praise of Gossip," *Hudson Review*, 35 (Spring 1982), 19–38, 25.
[29] Ibid., 28.
[30] Sheila Webb, "A Pictorial Myth in the Pages of 'Life': Small-Town America as the Ideal Place," *Studies in Popular Culture*, 28 (April 2006), 35–58, 40.

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small town, which were numerous during *Life*'s peak, the same fixations demonstrated by Shahn become visible in more objective community portraits, and the nuanced and often candid nature of the FSA's photography makes way for more structured, choreographed scenes of small-town life in a dominant mode. The "comforting narratives" of small-town America become the curatorial tools of commercial journalism, collected and presented in an often sterile, highly contrived manner to promote and endorse the dominant mythologies of small-town America.

No example among *Life*'s pages is perhaps more demonstrative of both an appeal to small-town idealized mythmaking and a focus on orality than the feature which this very article opened with: "A Small Town's Saturday Night." The photoessay follows the Dunn family and their Saturday night rituals as a nuclear family unit, passing through certain typical small-town institutions and variously engaging with the scene's community ethos. Mrs. Dunn enters the bustle of Main Street for some late-night shopping; Mr. Dunn retreats to the barbershop that "hums with political discussion"; their children take in a movie at the local theatre and enjoy a milkshake at the drugstore.[31] In the iconic cover photograph for the article, Hoffman captures the "gay white way" of Franklin's Main Street during the height of Saturday night sociability, with the cars triple-parked along sidewalks filled with shoppers of all ages – "By 8:30 Main Street is jammed and central square parked three deep with cars."[32] The throng of noise, both industrial and social, is immediate and potent in Hoffman's sequence of photographs.

In particular, the photograph taken of the barbershop, filled with eight men all dressed in their formal Saturday night attire, captures a certain masculinist mode of small-town orality readily associated with idealized, dominant narratives in the vein of Wilder's *Our Town* and Rockwell's utopian small-town scenes. The image depicts the barbershop as it looked on the titular Saturday evening, busy with male-only custom, as viewed from the street through a glass frontage etched with "Hair Cutting Specialist." An elderly barber cuts the hair of one man whilst men both old and young gather to his right and look on, with one holding a young child smiling directly at Hoffman through the window. A mirror at the back of the store adds further population to the scene through the reflected heads of several of the patrons, bridging the private rhetoric of this space with the busy street and small-town beyond.

Life's caption labels the space a "political forum," and so politics, both local and national, becomes confined to a male-gendered scene of private discussion.

[31] Bernard Hoffman, "A Small Town's Saturday Night," *Life*, 2 Dec. 1940, 63–68, 63.
[32] Ibid., 65.

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Hoffman, it could be argued, attempts to elevate the gathering beyond "gossip" and reframe it as something more formal, relying on historic characterizations of gossip as historically feminized, as Spacks terms it, and captioning the scene with "forum" to grant a certain credibility to the scene. Talk of this kind is homogenized into social exchange of a particularly imperious kind, such is the inherent exclusivity of the space and its central chorus that we see elsewhere pictured. The men smile and turn toward one another on the right of the image with the barber poised carefully at his work, his head tilted as if in recognition at a shared thought or opinion. Framed by the window, the barbershop tableau is a microcosm of small-town oral culture. The "negative sounds" here are, once again, numerous, though we might say that they are, too, specifically gendered in this masculine space as, again, a marker of social exchange in small-town narrative as inherently bound to social dynamics and community ties. The men in Hoffman's photograph ostensibly gather to opine about the state of all things, both local and national, and do so in presumably assenting company. In keeping with *Life*'s broader coverage of life in American small towns, it is a decidedly dominant and conservative portrait of orality that matches the dominant narratives of small-town America that proliferated around the Depression as a rebuke of earlier "revolt" writings.

The idea that "elevated" discussions occur in the barbershop, exclusive to men, whilst women and children engage in commercial sociability outside, is certainly bound to the dominant mythologies of rural America. Dominant traditions like this abound across the *Life* spread, and so the barbershop image itself is particularly exemplary in promoting the dominant white hegemony of small-town America. This deliberate performance again speaks to gossip and oral culture as a constantly shifting facet of small-town narrative – it can be banal, habitual, and routine, but so too can it be deliberate, coded, and ritualized, as this particular vignette in Franklin's barbershop attests.

"Among America's great institutions, none is more remarkable than Saturday night in a small Midwestern town," *Life* writes in the opening copy of the photoessay, affirming the importance of the small-town in wider journalistic narratives of American life. The anecdotes of life on show here, from the performative gesturing of two children sitting at a drugstore counter to the titillating euphemism of the final image – "Lover's Lane" – which captures parked cars along a dirt track just outside town, all contribute to a "complete" image of small-town America, in much the same way as Stryker's FSA shooting scripts strove for "holistic" representation. Again, oral culture informs this narrative most demonstratively, visible in the photograph of Ila Dean and her "boy friend [*sic*]," Mayo Heath. In this photograph, the pair sit at a table in the City Paint and Drug Store, both gazing at each other affectionately, as they lean over their milkshakes. Behind them two men also engage in conversation, but the two young subjects and the hint of

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adolescent romance between them, alluded to by their proximity and presumed conversation, dominate the scene. The table before them is cluttered with glasses both empty and filled, suggestive of a conversation that has been ongoing for some time. The framing of *Life*'s scene centres, like Shahn's equivalent scenes, on the interlocutors and attempts to capture the seemingly ineffable physical properties of social exchange. Interestingly, Hoffman has taken the photograph with the two vacant seats at the table visible; we are encouraged to view this scene but we are not invited directly into this most intimate of conversations. The scene itself evokes a certain nostalgia for a period and place that precede the era of its publication; the small-town's constant figuring of "passing away" permanently seems coded in these images of chat and sociability, and *Life* positions itself as an archivist and advocate of such dominant ideologies.

In the BBC Four documentary *America in Pictures: The Story of Life Magazine* (2011), British photographer Rankin travels to small-town America to trace the history of *Life* as one of the chief narrators of "heartland" America. Speaking in a small-town diner, Rankin interviews Burk Uzzle, a career photographer who, in 1961, became *Life*'s youngest-ever photographer at the age of twenty-three. On the specifics of the magazine's small-town narrative ideology, Uzzle comments,

> *Life* always cared about the big issues of the day, but was devoted to small-town America. Stories of the lives of ordinary people, their work, their pleasure, their anguish. The magazine returned to them again and again across the decades as if the small town summed up everything *Life* believed in.[33]

Most telling in this exchange, however, is Uzzle's insistence that "they would open up to you", "they" denoting the magazine's small-town subjects, and that it was the photographer's job "to be respectful." The phrase "open up" has connotations of oral culture, of bridging a social disconnect and creating a dialogue. It is only natural, then, that *Life*'s photoessays, described by Rankin as a "unique blend of journalism and art," should seem so preoccupied with the language of the everyday and how it is uttered. Again, Uzzle remarks how, "because of its small-town orientation … *Life* seemed to care about real people," a problematic assertion which equates speech and orality – the primary motifs of the Franklin, Indiana photoessay – with an idea of the authentic or "real" as it is coded in dominant narrative.

Given the racial elision at play in *Life*'s small-town profiles, presented as exclusively white spaces, the veracity of *Life*'s claims to narrate the stories of "real people" becomes questionable. It is only the speech and language of

[33] *America in Pictures: The Story of Life Magazine*, dir. Jack Cocker (BBC, 2013).

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white, middle-America that constitutes the "real," *Life* seems to suggest; it is only their narratives that could ever truly represent small-town life. The narratives on offer in these spreads and photoessays are certainly fixated on the small town, but it is a fixation inflected with the dominant, conservative traditions common in post-Depression rhetoric regarding rural America. As Erika Doss notes in her book *Looking at Life*, "*Life* played a major role in representing and disseminating information and ideas, and shaping their meaning to an ever increasing body of consumers fluent in the language of pictorial communication."[34] Doss's arguments here centre around the ideologies driving *Life*'s work and subsequent popularity in what Henry Luce coined the "American Century," where a particular hegemony began to take root, and her repeated use of words like "compelling," "controlling," "coherence," and "integration" are all suggestive of the highly contrived narratives produced therein. The small town, as one of *Life*'s chief muses, sits at the intersection of this visual reportage and institutional narrative framing; the result is a perfect example of dominant ideology in which community life is presented as sacrosanct and ineffable, notably through social exchange and gossip.

Of course, the significant disjuncture between Shahn's photography, sanctioned by government policy, and *Life*'s commercially manufactured appeal and sentiment, is that the latter is designed specifically for a "predominantly white, middle-class" readership.[35] Shahn's work on small-town America, particularly on his portraits, makes a concerted effort to narrate that which was elsewhere being elided, and he specifically goes to the "the other side of the tracks" to visually narrate the lives of African Americans as well the white populace of rural America pictured constantly in *Life*. Shahn is an artist for whom limning the power structures and dynamics of small-town communities through visual narratives of orality is vital. In one such photograph, Shahn photographs black patrons of a rundown café in London, Ohio gathering on the street before their daily haunt, in various postures of talk and chat and seemingly oblivious to his presence. Elsewhere, down London's side streets, he photographs three black women walking a disused stretch of town. The oral culture we might read in Shahn's work, the gossip between the two women at Buckeye Lake Amusement Park or those idling after a Sunday church service, is presented as universal, as a habit of the everyday that does not discriminate. Egan describes how Shahn sought to record the "African-American faces that seldom appeared in the town squares … he

[34] Erika Doss, *Looking at Life: Rethinking America's Favourite Magazine, 1936–1972* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001), 4.

[35] Claude Hubert Cookman, *American Photojournalism: Motivations and Meanings* (Northwestern University Press, 2009), 178.

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went into churches, to the steps of country courthouses."[36] *Life* magazine presents Franklin in a strictly homogeneous mode, from the exclusively white barbershop political forum to focalizing its master narrative through the Dunn family, posited as an archetypal, white American family. Ultimately, its narrative of small-town life, heavily focussed on oral culture and the sites of social exchange, is dictated by the mores of a white, middle-class society.

With these exclusions in mind, what is true across both the FSA's photography and more commercialized photojournalism is a natural interest in the cadences of small-town life, captured through portraits of people at rest and play, talking intimately and in larger groups. Two women standing before a psychic's tent at a county fair, or a family gathered in a general-good's store on Saturday night, carry with them attendant ideas of speech and talk, the primary unit of social exchange which, given the intimate confines of rural community, feels particularly potent in small-town America. Oral culture manifests itself with equal narrative potential in the visual culture of the period as it does in literary texts; Shahn and Hoffman's small-town types (miners, churchgoers, rural businessmen) seem every bit the analogues of, say, Sherwood Anderson's dispossessed small-town denizens, or the hundred dead in Edgar Lee Masters's unquiet Spoon River cemetery. No matter the small town in question, orality is central to its depiction.

"OUTDATED RHETORIC, WARM SENTIMENTALITY": SMALL-TOWN NOSTALGIA, ORAL CULTURE, AND NORMAN ROCKWELL

Though described by art historian Alexander Nemerov as a complicated illustrator for whom sadness and happiness often coexisted in the same frame, Norman Rockwell is largely remembered as a "homespun painter of happy sentiment," who depicted a small-town American life tinged with nostalgia and romanticism during his long tenure with the *Saturday Evening Post*.[37] His paintings and illustrations came to elegize a period that, as dominant small-town narrative repeatedly tells us, "will soon be passing away."[38] Rockwell's aesthetic and style are predicated on the reproduction of dominant small-town referents, from harmonious domestic spaces to leisure and play within the ostensibly safe, small-town environment. Crucially, Rockwell's illustrations of utopian small-town scenes are preoccupied with oral culture and its apparent vitality to rural American space.

[36] Egan, *The Photographs of Ben Shahn*, xii.
[37] Alexander Nemerov, "Coming Home in 1945: Reading Robert Frost and Norman Rockwell," *American Art*, 18 (Summer 2004), 58–79, 62.
[38] Ibid., 141.

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This specific focus on small-town oral culture and its contingent tropes – gossip, rumour, storytelling – becomes apparent as one negotiates Rockwell's extensive catalogue, in which familiar dominant small-town environments ring loud with voices. Richard Halpern deconstructs the small-town mythos of Rockwell's work through the lenses of "innocence" and nostalgia, noting that "Rockwell in effect became a master at representing American ideologies."[39] One of these core dominant ideologies, this article argues, is community and sociability as demonstrated through oral culture, to which Rockwell is keenly attentive through his regional scenes and assorted caricatures. To speak as Rockwell's characters speak, or at least how we imagine them to, is to be accepted into his conforming, conservative, small-town microcosm.

In earlier works, Rockwell shows isolated instances of gossip and orality in a distinct vignette style as was customary on *Post* covers. *Three Ladies Gossiping* (1928), for example, shows a gendered instance of gossip that typifies its historic narrative across art and literature, as pointed out by Spacks and Vermeuele.[40] In the painting, three women are gathered in a tableau of exaggerated intimacy, sitting on dining chairs so proximate to one another that they obscure the body shapes and faces of the subjects. Sartorially, the women appear middle-class and denote a certain affluence. The two women to the right and left of the central figure appear elderly, though the lighter touches on the central figure suggest that a more youthful woman is receiving the gossip directly from either her friends or relatives. The solid, cushioned wooden chairs that the women sit on in this isolated scene are suggestive of a domestic environment, perhaps a dining table or parlour room, and so the gossip we see feels particularly private and intimate, a regular theme in small-town and regionalist painting. This is a natural environment for gossip, if one is to follow Spacks's characterization of gossip as social practice. Spacks writes that gossip occurs "temporarily isolated from a larger social world," a description entirely befitting Rockwell's three subjects, who, by way of the absent background detail, are suspended, temporally and spatially, in a sphere of gossip.[41] Rockwell's style more generally, using anecdote and vignette to suggest the small-town world beyond, speaks to this temporary isolation "from a larger world." Although no small town is immediately visible, its implication is clear.

Beyond their close-knit social circle, the reality of their lives is abstract, colourless. When gossiping, however, and participating in the "atmosphere of

[39] Richard Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 46.

[40] Norman Rockwell, *Three Ladies Gossiping*, oil on canvas, 1928, at https://collection.nrm.org/#view=list&id=1658&modules=ecatalogue&TitMainTitle=Three%20ladies%20gossiping.

[41] Spacks, "In Praise of Gossip," 3.

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erotic titillation" that occurs naturally in highly intimate social gatherings, Rockwell's women narrate their own individual lives through gossip and, in doing so, ostensibly find meaning.[42] Spacks talks of the "hidden life of women, rarely on stage, always whispering in the wings, [which] can frighten those who do not share it," and goes on to ask "what secrets do they tell one another, what power do they conceal?"[43] These questions feel particularly relevant to Rockwell's scene, where his subjects seem suspended in the throes of such secretive verbal indulgence. In the earlier years of the *Post*, figures pictured on the front were often isolated from any knowable "background" – Rockwell's work, as it progressed over the decades, quickly began situating such characters in more familiar, community-oriented spaces. Here, though, they are isolated by their own orality, and the "power" held by these small choruses is not unlike those represented across other small-town texts and narratives, not least the Barbershop politicos of Hoffman's photography.

How, then, are we to read this illustration as evidence of Rockwell's objective small-town narrative model? The answer lies in Rockwell's penchant for the vignette or anecdote, miniature scenes that speak to an objective sense of a world or space. His style stays true, across his career, to limning the scenes and private worlds of small-town America through attention to its homes, its businesses, and, most importantly, its people. Rockwell's signature technique is the description of a face, of bodies at rest and at play, and so it is that such figures are frequently shown in dialogue with one another, interacting as characters in a play or drama. He himself described small-town America as "an already-written story"; it is fair to assume that, at least thematically, his characters "know' one another, and are related in his wider community mythos.[44] They are characters in his stories but, importantly, they are its narrators, too.

The *Post* front cover from 6 March 1948, titled *The Gossips*, is Rockwell's most pronounced depiction of orality as a common, ubiquitous social habit.[45] In this image, thirty talking heads, divided into fifteen pairs, each engage in animated discussion through either face-to-face dialogue or use of the telephone. Ranging from younger couples to the elderly, Rockwell relies solely on facial expressions, at which he was particularly adept at drawing, to gesture toward the body language of gossip and oral culture. Nemerov comments on Rockwell's proficiency as a portraitist of faces: "Rockwell was a

[42] Ibid., 11.

[43] Ibid., 20.

[44] Norman Rockwell, "Artist's Foreword," in Laurie Norton Moffatt, *Norman Rockwell: A Definitive Catalogue* (Stockbridge, MA: Norman Rockwell Museum, 1986), xi.

[45] Norman Rockwell, *The Gossips*, oil on canvas, 1948, at https://collection.nrm.org/#view=list&id=1b4f&modules=ecatalogue&TitMainTitle=the%20gossips&MedTechnique_tab=oil.

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celebrated painter of faces – rendering them into caricatured smiles, frowns, grimaces, and assorted other memorable expressions," observations which are corroborated by Allan Wallach, who notes Rockwell's "stock types," comprising "benevolent adults, patriotic stalwarts, lovable eccentrics," which all appear to feature in *The Gossips*, as a game of small-town "telephone" seems to play out in real time.[46]

Aged men in baseball caps with a scoring pencil behind their ear, older women with rollers in their hair or the middle-class flourish of a fascinator, all feature here engaging in the social repartee of gossip as they discuss, presumably, the same original titbit as it becomes ever more embellished. Variously exaggerated poses of laughter and shock are visible, as the right-hand speaker in each pair turns to their left and passes on the rumour or story. Blakey Vermeule notes that "even the most casual reader of social fiction will recognise that gossiping is what characters do most passionately," and the animated nature of Rockwell's thirty expressions, with some boisterously laughing whilst others adopt expressions of scandal, mark the recognizable performance of gossip.[47] Rockwell seems to attend to the gendered notions of gossip here as well, in a manner not entirely dissimilar to *Life*'s Franklin barbershop scene. Of the thirty characters featured, eighteen are female and twelve are male, a nuanced affirmation of gossips' historic gendering as feminine. Vermeule's comments on how gossip is viewed in dominant narratives is telling: "Gossip is for women. It is idle, frivolous, and vicious." [48] Here she acknowledges the problematic association of gossip as a feminine social practice which Rockwell simultaneously disrupts through his populated, mixed-gender portraits, as well as affirms through the dominance of women in this image.

The narratorial expectations of gossip are further disrupted when we consider the context of Rockwell's work, disseminating local narratives via a national publication. Spacks writes that "gossip lacks a conceivable audience," a notion that Rockwell refutes by presenting his instance of small-town gossip to the *Post*'s peak circulation of seven million.[49] Rockwell constructs a small-town narrative through this established dialogue between the local communities of America and the urban metropoles, where the *Post* was widely read. Gossip occurs universally, but Rockwell suggests, as do other writers and visual artists of the small town, that it occurs most naturally, most organically,

[46] Allan Wallach, "The Norman Rockwell Museum and the Representation of Social Conflict," in Patricia Johnston, ed., *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 282–83; cf. the European game Chinese whispers, wherein a sentence is related to a group by whispering, with the intention that it changes, through embellishment and mistake, into a new phrase.

[47] Vermeule, "Philosophy and Literature," 102.

[48] Ibid., 104.

[49] Spacks, "In Praise of Gossip," 4.

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in localized communities. These small towns might not be explicitly visible in the specific examples discussed here, but their presence is felt because it is the world to which these gossips belong in Rockwell's established wider mythos. The orality here, the gossip and storytelling, is suggested to be endemic to small-town America.

The mimesis between his characters, the "small-town consanguinity" of his figures, and their exaggerated posturing, point toward a thematic and stylistic repetition true across all his works which deal in small-town narratives writ large and small.[50] Oral culture is fundamental to Rockwell's navigation of small-town life; it seems pivotal to him that his subjects talk, gossip, and address both one another and, on a metanarratorial level, the viewer. So often in Rockwell's work, too, the impression is ascertained of a familiarity not simply between subject and viewer, but between the subjects themselves. Across his covers, there is a kind of extended small-town universe in which voices converge and become entwined. What is implicit here is an ideal that Lyn C. MacGregor refers to in her small-town cultural studies, where she notes that "first, everyone in a small town knows everybody else's business … secondly, everyone in a small town knows everyone else."[51] These very same ideas are inescapable when we look at Rockwell's American Scene, where characters seem to move and talk as if animated on the canvas or page. Rockwell's characters know not only each other's secrets, but those of his audience too. Rockwell's world is his white, largely middle-class viewership's world, one they remember through ersatz memories and the nostalgia of childhoods past. To hear that world spoken through his characters is to temporarily revive it as a real, lived space. Rockwell's distinct orality speaks directly to this demographic and makes them complicit in the gossip and rumourmongering of his small-town vignettes. Like Masters, it is not enough to allow passive readership; the viewer must join the conversation.

CONCLUSION

From rural street photography through commercial journalism and popular illustration, the thrum of small-town talk is audible. Small-town narrative relies first and foremost on an active sense of orality and speech within its construction, in marking *how* everyday speech, gossip, and storytelling are not incidental to artistic craft but, rather, integral. As readers and viewers, it is imperative that we recognize the performance and experience of speech, of gossip, of oral mythmaking, in small-town scenes like those of Shahn's,

[50] Halpern, *Norman Rockwell*, 116.

[51] Lyn C. MacGregor, *Habits of the Heartland: Small-Town life in Modern America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 5.

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Hoffman's, and Rockwell's, and to measure the narrative consequences of an instance of gossip or of seemingly benign social exchange. The sheer ubiquity of these techniques in small-town visual texts, as with their literary counterparts, necessitates such close inspection.

As Edith B. Gelles attests, "gossip stores and conveys the written conventions of a circle of people, it is far from idle talk. It is an expression of the rules and values governing behaviour in a particular time and place."[52] The various visual narratives of pre- and post-Depression America show the small town to be a particularly potent "time and place" for gossip and indeed oral culture more generally, positing orality as a fundamental constituent of the small-town narrative model. What makes the work of these visual artists so demonstrative of a genre or narrative style is the syntactical relationship between them and the mutual importance they place on oral traditions within wider small-town narrative contexts. Shahn's Depression-era photography captures the social transaction of people otherwise impoverished, with his cast of subjects ranging from poor, abject small-town inhabitants, frequently black Americans, to more affluent, white denizens marking time through idle recreation and other Main Street activities. Shahn's photography is important not simply because it visually archives such a tight, measured portrait of small-town America in this period of study, but because it marks its own kind of complicated reckoning with the grander myths and dominant narrative structures of the small town in American popular culture. Shahn's scenes react against the stricter homogeneity of the FSA project and, whilst doing so, mark visual narratives of small-town life which capture the exchange of speech and gossip with a narratorial, as opposed to purely documentary, eye.

Rockwell's own visual narratives likewise use a "language" of orality (gestures, paralinguistics, close-up portraits) to offer a contrasting, more idealized vision of small-town oral tradition rooted in dominant mythmaking and historic, New England village traditions. What we see in Rockwell's work is a narrative of community belonging and inclusivity (by way of exclusion of all non-hegemonic, nonwhite demographics), and one which promotes gossip and idle chat as quotidian, harmless, and ubiquitous. Using the same visual syntax of social exchange and visible talk as Shahn, albeit in a different medium, Rockwell conversely manages to craft an archetypal dominant small-town narrative where values are reinforced and shared through gossip and talk.

What is shown conclusively by comparing these dominant and subversive small-town narratives is that social exchange and gossip are the foremost

[52] Edith B. Gelles, "Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case," *Journal of Social History*, 22 (Summer 1989), 667–83, 668.

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referents of such rural and regionally preoccupied visual texts. How the inhabitants of these settings talk, how they negotiate their community spaces through language, and how the writers and artists themselves convey this sense of common speech is fundamental to small-town narrative. In specifically gossip-oriented scenes, such as Rockwell's aptly named work of 1948, Shahn's "Palmist" photograph, or the adolescents in Hoffman's small-town diner, we see how it is uses as exclusive mode that privileges only those within its social orbit; we, as readers of these photographs, are privy only to suggestion of the gossip taking place. Elsewhere, social exchange is depicted as democratic and cohesive in the Little Rock church scene, with a sense of community borne of the prominent suggestion of orality. In Hoffman's barbershop photograph, conversely, small-town social exchange in the dominant, idealized mode again reminds us of the insularity of rural America, of the institutions of power that preclude minorities from likewise engaging. Both interrelated depictions of orality serve to narrativize the community bonds and structures at play in small-town America and to further illuminate how oral culture defines these spaces. It is impossible to conceive of a community where oral culture does not dominate one's day-to-day life, and from Shahn's beleaguered Midwest to Rockwell's idyllic New England, we see that such orality is central to the narratives constructed around these communities. So too, then, should it dominate how we perceive these community spaces which seem to reach out to us directly and make us complicit in their own speech patterns.

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