6 “Saddened by a History We Knew Nothing About”: Collective Memory and Rituals of Mourning in Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Virgin Suicides

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”: though it may seem far-fetched to begin this chapter with a comparison between Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Virgin Suicides (1993) and Charles Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities (1859), the latter’s opening line would in fact be a fitting epigraph for the former.\(^1\) In its original context, Dickens’s opening may be read as an expression of the narrator’s ambivalence towards the world historical events depicted in the text: the French Revolution as a fundamental moment of historical rupture that, in the words of Immanuel Kant, “is not to be forgotten” (The Conflict of the Faculties 159; original emphasis).\(^2\) Likewise, the notion of a fundamental break in historical continuity, as well as its impact on collective memory, are among the key themes of The Virgin Suicides. In Eugenides’s novel, a group of now middle-aged boys find themselves unable to forget a sequence of events that took place in the early 1970s, in the suburban community of their youth. In those distant days, the boys’ sense of unquestioned belonging is suddenly disrupted when Cecilia, the youngest of the five Lisbon sisters, tries to commit suicide by slitting her wrists in the bathtub. Cecilia survives the attempt, and following a psychiatrist’s recommendation Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon for a time relax their strict domestic regime, even allowing their daughters to give a party. The sisters invite some boys from the community, but just as the party gets going, Cecilia excuses herself, goes upstairs and throws herself out of her bedroom window; her body impaled on the staked fence in front of the Lisbon’s family home, the girl dies immediately. And yet, this terrible event is only the first blow to the boys’ collective sense of belonging. Exactly one year after Cecilia’s first suicide attempt, three of her sisters – Lux, Bonnie, and Therese – take their lives, with Mary, the last daughter, following only one month later. Even as adults, the neighborhood boys continue to be haunted by the Lisbon girls, their memories simultaneously

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1 I would like to thank Diane Piccitto for her comments on the first draft, as well as Anja Neukom-Hermann for her feedback on the final version of this chapter (parts of which are based on my unpublished Lizenziat thesis, “Past the Game of Fiction”).
2 In the German original, the corresponding phrase is: “ein solches Phänomen in der Menschengeschichte vergisst sich nicht mehr” (Kant, Der Streit der Fakultäten 67).
evoking the joys of adolescent love and the pain of personal trauma: the best and the worst of times. Though the boys’ deeply personal recollection of historical rupture evidently differs from the world historical scope of Dickens’s novel, the narrators in both texts display a deeply ambivalent relation to the past.

In the case of either text, however, we should not focus exclusively on the narrator’s ambivalence, but instead also keep in mind the problem of polarization. The opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, for instance, revolves around the clash between two starkly opposed evaluations of the past:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, [...] it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, [...] – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (5; bk. 1, ch. 1)

According to Dickens’s narrator, it is only the “noisiest authorities” who insist on such a polarized view of the past, and perhaps our sense of the narrator’s ambivalence arises precisely from his attempt to adopt a – supposedly – more nuanced historical outlook: a synthesis, as it were, of two ‘simplistic’ interpretations. In the discussion that follows, we will see that the boys in *The Virgin Suicides*, too, try to dismiss competing and sharply delimited interpretations of the past in favor of their own, more cautious and provisional assessment.

In addition, polarization is a key concern in *The Virgin Suicides* because the early 1970s – i.e. the period in which the novel is set – occupy a critical position in American cultural memory. More specifically, 1974 is not only the year of the final four suicides in Eugenides’s novel; it also marks the end of a period of upheaval in American history that can be said symbolically to begin with the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, and which witnessed conflicts over the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence into mainstream discourse of second wave feminism, a new politics of gay pride, the sexual revolution and countercultural experiments, race riots, peaceful as well as violent protests against the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and an oil crisis which brought to an end the postwar economic boom that Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Extremes* (1994), has called the twentieth century’s “Golden Age.” It is a “Decade of Upheaval” (Blum et al. 851) that the historian James T. Patterson explicitly describes as a time of “rapidly rising polarization” (676), and the period has since become a focal point in discussions about the so-called culture wars.
in the United States – a term that James Davison Hunter introduced into the debate in 1991, only two years before *The Virgin Suicides* was published.⁴

Eugenides’ novel is thus not only set in a quintessentially American cultural space (i.e. suburbia), but also at a time of crisis that continues to be perceived as a defining moment in national history, albeit in sharply polarized ways: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” This polarization, moreover, is frequently associated with the emergence of so-called identity politics. John Anner, for instance, speaks of a gradual shift within social justice movements in the wake of the 1960s from “broad, universalist goals” to “more specific struggles, often based on identity” (7; cf. Barbara Ryan 2–3). As we shall see, this historical context is relevant to *The Virgin Suicides* because the novel explores in detail the problem of collective identity – especially its construction and  

Footnotes:

⁴ This is, of course, not to suggest that the culture wars arose, as it were, out of nothing. See, for instance, Adam Laats’s *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era*, which traces the origins of the debate back to the 1920s.
maintenance on the basis of a particular interpretation of the past, as well as its potentially exclusionary nature. In contrast to the previous chapters, the discussion of Eugenides’s novel thus allows us to confront the inner workings of a group or collective: its myths of origins; its strategies of othering and marginalization; and its ritualized home-making practices. Indeed, in foregrounding the problem of communal belonging, we will be able to show that The Virgin Suicides not only comments on the role of identity politics in the history of the United States, but also critiques the widespread fantasy that the home – suburban as well as national – is, or ever was, entirely innocent (Figure 9).

**The Voice of Collective Memory**

As virtually all critics commenting on The Virgin Suicides recognize, it is crucial to address its highly unusual narrative voice, which speaks to us in the first-person plural. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, for instance, observes that this plural voice is “of an uncertain condition,” and that it represents “the collective perspective of an indeterminate number of mature men” (30; cf. Ciocoi-Pop 84; Dines 961; Heusser 179; Christian Long 359; Vanyova 49). Eugenides himself, meanwhile, has spoken of an “impossible narrator,” whose voice it is difficult to locate precisely (Kehlmann and Eugenides 88).

Claudia Ioana Doroholschi, finally, defines the novel’s plural narrator as a “shifting entity” with unclear boundaries:

> Any attempt to establish how many boys belong to this community, or what exactly their names are, is bound to fail. Sometimes one or more of the boys are detached from the group and become individualized, or referred to as “one of us,” but the exact identity of those who tells [sic] the story remains indeterminate. (185)

Doroholschi rightly insists that one cannot tell for certain who belongs to this constantly shifting ‘we,’ and even the grammatical ‘mistake’ in her description – the phrase “those who tells” – is in fact peculiarly appropriate, as it encapsulates the conflicting pulls of group identity and individualized selves that render the novel’s narrative voice so strangely haunting.

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4 On the differences in narrative voice between Eugenides’s novel and Sophia Coppola’s film adaptation of The Virgin Suicides see Hovland 260; McKnight 125–127; Richardson 52–53.

5 For more general accounts of the potential effects of first-person plural narration see Uri Margolin’s “Telling Our Story,” Amit Marcus’s “We Are You,” Alan Palmer’s Fictional Minds (218–229), Monika Fludernik’s “The Many in Action and Thought,” and Natalya Bektha, “We-Narratives.”
As Brian Richardson notes (52), there is one passage in The Virgin Suicides that indirectly reflects on this unusual narrative voice and its relation to collective identity. After Cecilia’s suicide, the girl’s diary eventually ends up in the boys’ possession (41), and they proceed to study the book with well-nigh religious devotion:

We know portions of the diary by heart now. [...] We passed the diary around, fingering pages and looking anxiously for our names. Gradually, however, we learned that although Cecilia had stared at everybody all the time, she hadn’t thought about any of us. Nor did she think about herself. The diary is an unusual document of adolescence in that it rarely depicts the emergence of an unformed ego. [...] Instead, Cecilia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity. It’s often difficult to identify which sister she’s talking about, and many strange sentences conjure in the reader’s mind an image of a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads [...]. (42)

Unlike most coming-of-age narratives, the narrator maintains, Cecilia’s diary does not depict the “emergence of an unformed ego” (i.e. an adolescent’s path toward a ‘fully-formed,’ mature identity), but instead confronts the reader with an undifferentiated collectivity (“a single entity”). This, in turn, renders it difficult for the reader to identify individual members of the group – an effect that, according to Doroholschi, in fact applies to the novel’s own collective narrative voice.

For Debra Shostak, these similarities are far from accidental. Rather, Shostak argues that we are dealing here with a classic case of narcissistic projection by a group of male voyeurs. The boys’ use of the pronoun we, Shostak contends, “implies the effacement of the speakers’ individuality and prepares for their conception of the Lisbon sisters as also de-individualized” (819). The narrators’ portrayal of the Lisbon girls is thus, in Shostak’s view, very much a projection of their own image onto the objects of their desire – and indeed, the phenomenon of narcissistic projection is itself indirectly acknowledged in the passage discussed above, for according to the narrator, Cecilia continually “stared at everybody all the time,” without, however, truly thinking about them. This, arguably, is a good description of the boys’ own voyeuristic idealization of the Lisbon sisters, who are the center of the boys’ obsessive attention even as their reality as independent human beings continues to elude their male observers.

Accordingly, both Bree Hoskin (216) and Ceri Hovland (266) have observed that the Lisbon girls enter the boys’ “collective memory” in distorted form, and it is precisely by exploring the idea of collective memory that we can understand more fully in which sense Eugenides’s narrator is “impossible.” Deriving his ideas about collective memory from the French sociologist Maurice Halb...
wachs, Jan Assmann observes that the most basic, “primal form” of a rupture between the past and the present is the “irremediable discontinuity” of death, for it is when someone dies that those left behind have to decide whether or not that individual is worth the effort of being remembered (19). More generally, Assmann contends that all groups face the question of what they must not allow themselves to forget; conversely, each of the components incorporated into a group’s collective memory may provide us with clues regarding that community’s most cherished values (16). Collective memories, in short, should not be envisioned as the random remains of times gone by; rather, according to Assmann, a group’s stock of collective memories accumulates in a process of negotiation about which aspects of the past are to be considered significant, and this shared effort in turn fosters a sense of belonging among the members of the community (24).6

One implication of Assmann’s observations is that we should not conceive of collective memory and identity as something solid or given. If Iwona Irwin-Zarecka maintains that collective memory is “best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share” (4), then this is in part to emphasize that collective memory is not simply the sum of several individuals’ personal memories. Rather, only those components form part of a group’s collective memory that are, as it were, made publicly accessible (for example in the form of written records and historical artifacts, but also in the form of shared oral accounts of personal memories). At the same time, however, personal memories form part of a group’s potential resources of remembrance even when they have not (yet) been shared, for in principle these personal memories could be communicated if and when the need arises – at least, that is, as long as the individuals in question are still alive. Accordingly, though Irwin-Zarecka is right in emphasizing the shared, ‘externalized’ nature of collective memory in real-life groups, collective memory in the abstract also includes the information stored in the minds of individuals as one of its potential or virtual resources. Even in the case of real-life groups, moreover, Jan Assmann is careful to note that collective identity is necessarily “underpinned by factors that are purely symbolic,” with the social body as such being “simply a metaphor – an imaginary construct” (113). Collective identity, in other words, “does not exist as a visible, tangible

6 In the German original, Assmann’s elegant formula for this process runs: “Durch Zirkulation gemeinsamen Sinns entsteht ‘Gemeinsinn’” (Das kulturelle Gedächtnis 140).
realism" (ibid.), and any attempt to personify it will necessarily be reminiscent of the ghostly: a disembodied, impossible voice. 

It is now no longer difficult to see that the first-person plural narrator of The Virgin Suicides is precisely such an impossible, symbolic personification of a group’s collective identity. Therefore, we should not think of the narrator as merely a collection of individual voices (i.e. as a chorus of boys speaking together). Rather, the narrator’s plural voice is the personification of an abstract, collective entity, and while each of the boys constitutes an individual part of the community of memory personified in this narrator, the collectivity itself remains qualitatively distinct from the sum of its parts. 

A key passage from The Virgin Suicides illustrates this point, reflecting as it does on the “unnatural” way in which the narrator’s collective memories accumulate:

Our own knowledge of Cecilia kept growing after her death […], with [… a] kind of unnatural persistence. Though she had spoken only rarely and had had no real friends, everybody possessed his own vivid memory of Cecilia. Some of us had held her for five minutes as a baby while Mrs. Lisbon ran back into the house to get her purse. Some of us had played in the sandbox with her, fighting over a shovel, or had exposed ourselves to her behind the mulberry tree that grew like deformed flesh through the chain linked fence. […] A few of us had fallen in love with her, but had kept it to ourselves, knowing that she was the weird sister. (40)

The narrator here explains how various individuals and subgroups (“some of us”) contribute to the group’s collective memory, and initially one might imagine that the boys must have gotten together at some point to share their memories with one another. This, however, turns out not to be the case, for the narrator states explicitly that some group members refrained from revealing their memories to the others. More specifically, the narrator notes that “[a] few of us” had fallen in love with Cecilia yet had kept it, not to ‘themselves’ – as would be the more ‘logical’ way of putting it – but to “ourselves.” Far from being a simple grammatical mistake, this phrase signals that the plural narrator, as a ghostly, entirely symbolic entity, has access even to those memories that the individual group members have refrained from sharing with their peers. The novel’s narrator is impossible, in other words, because he is the disembodied, plural voice

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7 "Die Evidenz kollektiver Identität unterliegt einer ausschliesslich symbolischen Ausformung. Den ‘Sozialkörper’ gibt es nicht im Sinne sichtbarer, greifbarer Wirklichkeit. Er ist eine Metapher, eine imaginäre Grösse, ein soziales Konstrukt” (Das kulturelle Gedächtnis 132).

8 This is why I refrain from using the term “choral narrator,” suggested by Rachel McLennan (22).
of an abstract collectivity of middle-aged males engaged in a project of communual remembrance. And it is this plural narrator’s discursive strategies of historical reconstruction that we must now proceed to examine more closely.

**Fall from Grace: Myths of Origin and Founding Trauma**

While there is little doubt that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides would be perceived as disruptive in any community, Martin Heusser has shown that Eugenides’s plural narrator draws on a specifically American version of pastoral aesthetics to portray the time before the suicides as a prelapsarian, suburban idyll. According to Heusser, pastoral rhetoric has been a defining feature of American self-descriptions from its earliest days, with the country being imagined as a “Garden of the World”: a blessed new land in whose fertile soil a youthful nation can take root and prosper (“Et in Arcadia Ego” 176). In turn, it is this kind of imagery that, according to Heusser, informs American ideals of the suburb as a garden-like landscape “equally poised between the city and the wilderness” (ibid.). Moreover, just as the idea of a New World conjures up images of a space unburdened by history, so do pastoral landscapes appear as both secluded and outside the flow of historical time:

> The cardinal convention of the pastoral [...] is the opposition, explicit or implicit, between the idyllic pastoral environment and the reality of the world at large – the contrast between an ideal, secluded here and now, perfectly peaceful and timeless, and the outside world, haunted by continual change and death. (“Et in Arcadia Ego” 177)

Neither history nor death, Heusser notes, are supposed to disturb the peace of a self-enclosed, pastoral space – and if we examine how Eugenides’s narrator describes life in the suburban community before Cecilia’s suicide, then we find that his depiction of the boys’ communal home as an earthly paradise matches these pastoral conventions precisely:

> There had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes. The majority of dying had happened during the Second World War when we didn’t exist and our fathers were impossibly skinny young men in black-and-white photographs on jungle airstrips [...]. Now our dads were middle-aged, [...] but they were still a long way from death. Their own parents, who spoke foreign languages and lived in converted attics like buzzards, had the finest medical care available and were threatening to live on until the next century. Nobody’s grandfather had died, nobody’s grandmother, nobody’s parents, only a few dogs: Tom Burke’s beagle, Muffin, who choked on Bazooka Joe bubble gum, and then that summer, a creature who in dog years was still a puppy – Cecilia Lisbon. (35)
In the narrator’s account, death as such had of course always existed, but only in a different time and place. In the narrator’s description, history and death form part of an external, historical wilderness of “jungle airstrips” and world wars – until, that is, Cecilia, the youngest of the Lisbon sisters, takes the decision to end her life.

The irruption of Cecilia’s death into this pastoral suburban world thus constitutes, for the narrator, a fall from grace into a world of exile and death that is also imagined as the end of childhood innocence. As Heusser notes (“Et in Arcadia Ego” 181), the narrator portrays the immediate aftermath of Cecilia’s suicide as a moment of intrusion by the world beyond the home community:

From the roof of Chase Buell’s house where we congregated [...] we could see, over the heaps of trees throwing themselves into the air, the abrupt demarcation where the trees ended and the city began. The sun was falling in the haze of distant factories, and in the adjoining slums the scatter of glass picked up the raw glow of the smoggy sunset. Sounds we usually couldn’t hear reached us now that we were up high [...] – sounds of the impoverished city we never visited, all mixed and muted, without sense [...]. (35)

The irruption of violence and death is not only associated here with the realm of the sacred (“where we congregated”); it also propels the boys’ gaze outward, beyond the boundaries of their home community, and suddenly history – in the form of industrial production, urban poverty, and pollution – manages to intrude, even as the meaning of its disturbing signs continues to elude the boys (“mixed and muted, without sense”). The boys keep watching for a while, and though later, one by one, they turn towards “home” (35), they will never recover their earlier sense of unquestioned and ‘childish’ communal belonging.

We need to be clear from the outset about the extent to which this image of a fall from pastoral suburban grace is in fact an entirely artificial construct (Heusser, “Et in Arcadia Ego” 179). Slavoj Žižek’s notion of “the Fall” as one characteristic feature of ideological fantasies is useful in this context, for according to Žižek the Fall constitutes a decisive event in phantasmagoric narratives, but as such it has always already happened (The Plague of Fantasies 18). In addition, Žižek suggests that the Fall is a moment of symbolic castration that involves the “loss of something which the subject never possessed in the first place” (19). Both of these characteristics of the Fall suit the situation in The Virgin Suicides perfectly, for not only does the novel begin when the Fall has already happened (i.e. after the five suicides, which are already revealed as past in the novel’s very first sentence); the group of now middle-aged men are also still turning their gaze back longingly toward girls whom they never actually “pos-
sessed” in the first place. As we saw earlier, the Lisbon sisters are idealized figures of youthful adoration – “a purely potential, nonexistent X,” in Žižek’s terms (19) – and only in those rare moments when the boys actually spend time with the Lisbons does the “revelation” come over them that the girls “weren’t all that different” from their own sisters (123).9 Moreover, even the narrator himself admits that the prelapsarian idyll of suburbia had in fact been a conscious construct or fantasy world established for the children by their parents. Accordingly, when they note that their parents remain surprisingly stoic in the face of Cecilia’s death, the boys sense “how ancient they were, how accustomed to trauma, depressions, and wars. We realized that the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in” (55). The suburban community may have appeared Edenic to the group of boys, but this had never simply been the natural or true state of affairs.10 Instead, as a fantasied fall from grace, the suicides become a kind of mythical moment of origin for Eugenides’s plural narrator: an expulsion from the illusory plenitude of childhood innocence into a fallen subjecthood founded on absence or lack.11

We may summarize the argument so far by noting that Eugenides’s novel constitutes a fiction of home in at least two different senses. On the one hand, The Virgin Suicides personifies collective belonging in the form of an impossible narrative voice that is unlikely to occur in a non-fictional text. On the other hand, the narrator draws on partly fictional models – a pastoral aesthetics, in particular – in his (re-)construction of a childhood home whose innocence was lost in one exceptional moment of rupture. The ideological fantasy of the boys’ shared innocence and its tragic loss sustains the narrator as a plural subject. This loss thus constitutes the mythical moment of origin for the narrator as the personified voice of the boys’ community of memory. Which begs the question: What, precisely, is the relation between myth and collective memory?

9 The fact that the girs are constructed as idealized adolescent fantasies has been widely commented upon in the critical literature; see, for instance, Hayes-Brady (212) and McLennan (30).

10 See also Martin Dines: “[I]t is not only the novel’s narrators who appear to dwell in a ‘timeless zone’; their parents also seek suspension from history” (963). Interestingly, the narrators’ comments are echoed almost verbatim in Lynn Spigel’s discussion of real-life suburbia in postwar America: “Postwar Americans – especially those being inducted into the ranks of middle-class ownership – must, to some degree, have been aware of the artifice involved in suburban ideals of family life. For people who had lived through the Depression and the hardships of the Second World War, the new consumer dreams must have seemed somewhat pretentious” (220).

11 See McLennan, who suggests that “the narrator(s) construct [the suicides] as their own point of origin” (27).
The Sacred Law of Authority

In the context of discussions about collective memory and identity the notion of myth is not to be understood as a story that is, in any straight-forward sense, untrue. Rather, as Jan Assmann rightly observes, myth is defined by its social function:

Myth is foundational history that is narrated in order to illuminate the present from the standpoint of its origins. [...] Through memory, history becomes myth. This does not make it unreal – on the contrary, this is what makes it real, in the sense that it becomes a lasting, normative, and formative power. (38)\textsuperscript{12}

Myth, for Assmann, is a performative discourse that creates, rather than merely reflects, a social reality. Moreover, in addition to its foundational role, myth may also serve as what Assmann calls a “contrapresent” – a function that sometimes conflicts with myth’s foundational role because myth as contrapresent emphasizes “what has gone wrong, what has disappeared,” and the present thus “finds itself dislocated or at the very least falling short of the great and glorious past” (62). It is difficult to think of a better description of how, in The Virgin Suicides, the boys’ loss of a mythical innocence provides the basis of their collective identity even as it instills their present with a lasting sense of lack and impairment: “scarred [...] forever, making us happier with dreams than with wives” (169). The sisters’ suicides, as a foundational moment of loss, is the reason why the boys, as grown-ups, still gather in their “refurbished tree house,” where they keep the “sacred objects” that document the myth of the Lisbon girls (246). The boys’ attitude toward their collective myth of origin thus also bears out Dominick LaCapra’s observation that an extremely destructive or disorienting event may become both a founding trauma and an occasion of “displaced sacralization” (Writing History, Writing Trauma 23) – a point to which we shall return shortly.

\textsuperscript{12} The German original runs: “Mythos ist eine fundierende Geschichte, eine Geschichte, die erzählt wird, um eine Gegenwart vom Ursprung her zu erhellen. [...] Durch Erinnerung wird Geschichte zum Mythos. Dadurch wird sie nicht unwirklich, sondern im Gegenteil erst Wirklichkeit im Sinne einer fortdauernden normativen und formativen Kraft” (52).

\textsuperscript{13} In the German original, Assmann characterizes this ‘contrapresent’ as follows: “Sie geht von Defizienz-Erfahrungen der Gegenwart aus und beschwört in der Erinnerung eine Vergangenheit, die meist die Züge eines Heroischen Zeitalters annimmt. Von diesen Erzählungen her fällt ein ganz anderes Licht auf die Gegenwart: Es hebt das Fehlende, Verschwundene, Verlorene, an den Rand gedrängte hervor und macht den Bruch bewusst zwischen ‘einst’ und ‘jetzt’. Hier wird die Gegenwart weniger fundiert als vielmehr im Gegenteil aus den Angeln gehoben oder zumindest gegenüber einer größeren und schöneren Vergangenheit relativiert” (79).
First, however, we ought to state clearly that the narrator, as the voice of the boys’ collective identity, cannot ultimately wish to resolve the trauma of the girls’ suicides because this would unravel the myth that underpins the group’s existence. Importantly, this is not to suggest that the boys’ desire for relief from the inordinate pressures of trauma is feigned or unreal; on the contrary, there is no doubt that “[s]ometimes, drained by this investigation,” the boys long “for some shred of evidence, some Rosetta stone that would explain the girls at last” (170). At the same time, however, even in this passage the narrator uses the word sometimes to qualify the boys’ desire for a final explanation. The reason for this is that the narrator himself cannot possibly desire the boys to overcome the suicides’ negative effects because this shared experience of trauma is the only reason why the group as a community of suffering – and hence why the narrator – exists in the first place. The narrator, as a personification of collective memory, is thus caught in a double bind, for while on one level the whole purpose of the group he represents is to find collective ways of coping with trauma, he must at the same time prevent the boys from ever leaving their traumatic memories behind – for if this were to happen, then the community, and thus the narrator himself, would cease to exist. Accordingly, Rachel McLennan is right in insisting that, in the final analysis, the narrator is not truly interested in explaining or resolving the enigma of the past; instead, he wishes to legitimize his own mythical version of it: a version that sustains his identity as the personified voice of a group of middle-class, white, heterosexual American males (34).

Among the narrator’s strategies of legitimation, his recourse to two discourses of power and authority is particularly striking: the language of religion and the idiom of the law. According to the narrator, for instance, the Lisbon girls at times appear “like a congregation of angels” (25), while Cecilia’s “illuminated” diary looks “like a Book of Hours or a medieval Bible” (32). By using these and similar phrases, the narrator imbues the story of the Lisbon sisters with an aura of the sacred and thus as beyond question or close examination: “Please don’t touch. We’re going to put the picture back in its envelope now” (119). At the same time, the narrator deploys the discourse of law and legal inquiry to prevent accusations of downright mystification: “We’ve tried to arrange the photographs chronologically, though the passage of so many years has made it difficult. […] Exhibit #1 shows the Lisbon house shortly before Cecilia’s suicide attempt” (5). Referring to “documents” and “Exhibits” (e.g. 101) as well as to interviews conducted with various witnesses (e.g. 78), the narrator evokes an atmosphere of thorough investigation, trial, and judgment, with the boys meeting almost daily to “go over the evidence once again, reciting portions of Cecilia’s journal” (238).
Tellingly, in this last quotation, the rituals of law (to “go over the evidence”) and the realm of the sacred (“reciting” scripture) do not truly remain separate; rather, the narrator uses the combined authority of these two registers to bolster his own discursive authority. In this, *The Virgin Suicides* as a novel can in part be read as reflecting on the historical fact that the law, in ‘archaic’ societies, was indeed inseparable from the religious realm of the sacred, and that even today the law as a highly ritualized institution resembles the practices of religion (e.g. Stollberg-Rilinger 149–160; cf. Girard 24).

If the narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* uses certain types of discourses to lend authority to his account, he also continually works to dismiss as insufficient all attempts by others to explain why the Lisbon sisters might have killed themselves. Journalists like Ms. Perl, for example, are portrayed as distorting and simplifying the Lisbons’ suicides:

Ms. Perl [...] single-handedly initiated the feeding frenzy of speculation that continues to this day. In her subsequent articles – one every two or three days for two weeks – she shifted her tone from the sympathetic register of a fellow mourner to the steely precision of what she never succeeded in being: an investigative reporter. Scouring the neighborhood in her blue Pontiac, she cobbled together reminiscences into an airtight conclusion, far less truthful than our own, which is full of holes. (222)

Just as he dismisses other “reporters” (224), the narrator here questions Ms. Perl’s journalistic abilities (“what she never succeeded in being: an investigative reporter”) before faulting her for her “airtight conclusions.” More generally, the narrator claims that the boys are “forced to wander endlessly down the paths of hypothesis and memory” because no one has told the Lisbon girls’ story to their “satisfaction” (224) – a word that has much to do with expectations and desires, but leaves open the question of factual truth. In a similar vein, the narrator objects to other attempts at explanation:

Mr. Conley [...] said, “Capitalism has resulted in material well-being but spiritual bankruptcy.” He went on to deliver a living room lecture about human needs and the ravages of competition, and even though he was the only Communist we knew, his ideas differed from everyone else’s only in degree. Something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls. Our parents thought it had to do with our music, our godlessness, or the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn’t even had. Mr. Hedlie mentioned that fin-de-siècle Vienna witnessed a similar outbreak of suicides on the part of the young, and put the whole thing down to the misfortune of living in a dying

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14 As Bilyana Vanyova Kostova rightly notes, “the narrative clings unto uncertainty” (53).
As Terry Eagleton notes, the rejection by some postmodern thinkers of the very idea of absolute truth rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what this idea implies: “Absolute truth does not mean non-historical truth: it does not mean the kind of truths which drop from the sky, or which are vouchsafed to us by some bogus prophet from Utah. On the contrary, they are truths which are discovered by argument, evidence, experiment, investigation. A lot of what is taken as (absolutely) true at any given time will no doubt turn out to be false. Most apparently watertight scientific hypotheses have turned out to be full of holes. Not everything which is considered to be true is actually true. But it remains the case that it cannot just be raining from my viewpoint” (After Theory 108–109). Citing Bernard Williams, Eagleton adds that in effect “relativism is really a way of explaining away conflict,” for if there is no such thing as truth, “then political radicals can stop talking as if it is unequivocally true that women are oppressed or that the planet is gradually being poisoned by corporate greed” (After Theory 109).
nize that in order to legitimize this version of the story, the narrator strategically discounts other versions of the past without really examining their respective merits. The narrator’s construction and maintenance of the group’s foundational myth is thus far from politically neutral or innocent, but instead depends on the systematic exclusion and disparaging of others: journalists, adults from within the community, and – as we shall see – those perceived as ethnically different.16

**Old World Corruption and Ethnic Others**

One example for the narrator’s disparaging of ethnic difference is they way in which he subliminally attributes the irruption of death into the boys’ youthful suburban idyll, not to conflicts arising from within the community, but instead to corrupting influences from the Old World. For instance, the narrator places great emphasis on the fact that, after Cecilia’s first suicide attempt, “the most popular theory” held that Dominic Pallazolo, “the immigrant kid,” was to blame (19). According to this theory, Dominic was hopelessly in love with a girl called Diana Porter, who one day left on vacation for Switzerland – an event that propelled Dominic into such depths of despair that he “climbed onto the roof of his relatives’ house and jumped off” (without, however, hurting himself because his fall was broken by the “yard’s calculated shrubbery”; 20). Dominic, the narrator observes, “looked frail, diseased, and temperamental, as we expected a European to look,” and though he later distances himself from the theory that Cecilia killed herself because of Dominic (32–33), the fact remains that the first extended reference to ethnic otherness is also associated with the threat of disease and corruption, as if the boy’s own, ‘real’ Americanness depended on Dominic as a negative foil – which of course it does, given that their own grandparents are immigrants who speak foreign languages (35; cf. Dines 970; McLennan 28). Moreover, as Martin Dines observes (971), after Cecilia’s death Eugenides’s narrator introduces more and more Old World figures into the scene of the American suburb: the Hessens, an “old German couple” (56); the Stamarowski, whose house exudes an air of “Old World decay,” in part because of the bats that circle over it and which, the boys believe, have “come with the Stamarowski from Poland” (88–89); and, finally, “Old Mrs. Karafilis,” who as a young woman during World War I had to flee from the Turks (172), and who is unsurprised by the Lisbon girls’ deeds because – her grandson Demo claims – the “Greeks are a moody people” to whom suicide “makes sense” (174). In fact,

16 See Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, who notes that in order to construct a sense of community, “one almost inevitably needs the presence of the Other” (60).
even the Lisbons themselves are affected by this ethnic othering because their family name links them to Portugal, the “first European country to acquire an overseas empire” (Dias 68). In addition, the narrator continually emphasizes their Catholicism (Eugenides 8, 20, and 37), as if this Old World religion, too, played a part in the mysterious plague of death that has infected this all-American suburb located, according to the narrator, in a county bearing the “Anglo-Saxon” name Wayne (166).

And yet, things are not quite as straight-forward as that, for the narrator’s own account continually reveals the precariousness of that Old World – read: non-Anglo-Saxon – otherness that he so desperately wants to maintain. Martin Dines, for instance, has observed that the Catholic Lisbons are also associated figuratively with the early history of Puritan settlement (972); their home contains “stark colonial furniture” as well as a “painting of Pilgrims plucking a Turkey” (The Virgin Suicides 25), and when dressed up for a ball the Lisbon sisters look “like pioneer women,” with hairdos that have “the stoic, presumptuous qualities of European fashions enduring the wilderness,” and wearing dresses that “look frontierish” (118). The narrator thus portrays the Lisbons both as archetypically American and as vaguely foreign (i.e. Catholics associated with continental Europe), and perhaps this disturbingly insistent cultural hybridity explains why the narrator feels unsettled in their sublime presence (cf. Dines 972).

At any rate, the truly threatening Others for the narrator are not those ‘European’ others from within the community, but the ‘non-white’ people who live, for instance, in that distant city beyond the demarcation line of trees. Tamara K. Hareven argues convincingly that, historically, the pastoral desire for a harmonious life in the garden-like suburbs is closely related to white, middle-class fears of racial and social Others, with the city representing immigration, ethnic conflict, and poverty (244). We have already seen that, in The Virgin Suicides, the city appears as “impoverished” (35), and the narrator also tells us that both the Lisbon girls and the boys recall the Detroit race riots of 1967, “when tanks had appeared at the end of our block and National Guardsmen had parachuted into our back yards” (124). This, together with the gunshots that the boys occasionally hear “coming from the ghetto” (36), creates an underlying sense of outside menace that binds the all-white suburban community together (Dines 967). The narrator himself is aware of the exclusionary nature of the suburb in which the boys grew up:

Brave blacks had been slipping in for years, though they were usually women, who blended in with our maids. The city downtown had deteriorated to such a degree that most blacks had no other place to go. [...] Even though we’d always chosen to play
Indians and not cowboys, considered Travis Williams the best kickoff returner ever and Willie Horton the best hitter, nothing shocked us more than the sight of a black person shopping on Kercheval. We couldn’t help but wonder if certain ‘improvements’ in The Village hadn’t been made to scare black people off. The ghost in the window of the costume shop, for instance, had an awfully pointed, hooded head, and the restaurant, without explanation, took fried chicken off its menu. (99)

Even though the boys are accustomed to the sight of black maids, and perfectly willing to admire dark-skinned Others on TV, the narrator confesses to a sense of shock when confronted with non-hierarchical intermingling. Moreover, while the narrator incorporates his reference to the Ku Klux Klan with great comic subtlety (“awfully pointed, hooded head”), the underlying threat is no less serious. After all, the narrator also makes clear that the Board of Commerce had long been worried about the “influx of blacks”; indeed, it is only temporarily – “[w]hile the suicides lasted, and for some time after” – that the “outflux of whites” becomes a matter of greater concern for the leaders of the community (99).

Moreover, if the presence of blacks just beyond – and sometimes within – the boundaries of the boys’ home community proves disturbing to the narrator, he also finds himself haunted by the repressed memory of America’s pre-Columbian past. There is, for instance, a brief but telling reference to cowboys and Indians in the passage quoted above, and when the narrator mentions the “Anglo-Saxon” name of the county in which the boys grew up, he explicitly distinguishes them from “a parade of Indian county names, Washtenaw, Shiawassee” (166). Moreover, though Martin Dines rightly observes that “the biggest cliché in the book of American hauntings [is] the house built over an Indian burial ground” (962), he also fails to mention that The Virgin Suicides, too, recycles this well-worn device, for right after Cecilia’s suicide, one boy insists that he found “an Indian arrowhead” buried in the Lisbon’s lawn (55). Of course, there is more than just a hint of parody about this reference (as, indeed, there is about the bats hovering over the Stamarowski’s house, or about the ghost with the pointed hood that evokes the Ku Klux Klan). And yet, if there is any truth to Freud’s assertion that one function of jokes is to mask aggression, as well as genially to bribe listeners into taking the side of the person who tells the

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17 See Bilyana Vanyova Kostova: “Although the cultural story of the suburb might appear fictitious, it is in fact a condemnation of the conformity, homoegenity and artificiality of the time, and a reflection of their disruption through the effects of the influx of black people, environmental decay, and people’s disillusionment with the government in the 1970s” (51).
joke (The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious 98), then we should at least be wary of dismissing out of hand the idea that the narrator’s remarks are ultimately more serious than they seem to be.\footnote{In The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious, Freud writes: “The joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles would not let us utter aloud or consciously [...]. It will, further, bribe the listener with his own gain of pleasure into taking our side without probing very far” (98). The German original runs: “Der Witz wird uns gestatten, Lächerliches am Feind zu verwerten, das wir entgegenstehender Hindernisse wegen nicht laut oder nicht bewusst vorbringen durften [...]. Er wird ferner den Hörer durch seinen Lustgewinn bestechen, ohne strengste Prüfung unsere Partei zu nehmen” (Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten 85).}

What supports this idea is that the Lisbon girls themselves are repeatedly associated with Native American culture. Cecilia’s diary, for instance, at one point mentions a commercial with a “weeping Indian paddling his canoe along a polluted stream” (44). In one photograph, moreover, the Lisbon sisters appear “sitting Indian-style” on the lawn in front of their home. Most ominously, however, we encounter the girls’ images in a series of photographs in which they pose in “totem-pole shots, taken at a tourist attraction” (228–229). Mysteriously attracting the signs of a past that refuses to stay repressed, the Lisbon sisters at first appear as Catholic Europeans, then mutate into “pioneer women,” and ultimately even seem to ‘go native.’ The narrator thus imbues the girls’ gender difference with a haunting sense of racial and ethnic otherness: a porous, unstable identity that unsettles the boys’ attempts at defining the boundaries of communal belonging.

Indeed, the boys seem to fear and adore the girls in equal measure, and there is a good case to be made that it is precisely for this reason that the narrator constructs the Lisbon sisters in terms of the sacred. According to René Girard, “[a]ll sacred creatures partake of monstrosity” (265), and there is indeed something monstrous about the boys’ image of the girls as “a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads” (The Virgin Suicides 42). For the boys, the sisters transcend all the ‘normal’ boundaries of identity – of gender and race and even humanity – and some of them even imagine Lux as “a force of nature, impervious to chill, an ice goddess generated by the season itself” (150). The girls are thus both semi-divine objects of desire and castrating, racialized female demons who bring death and corruption into the boys’ ‘innocent’ suburban world.

\textit{Gender Trouble: The Othering of Trip Fontaine}

Once we recognize the narrator’s strategic link between ethnic othering and gender difference, it no longer appears as an innocent detail that there is one
other character whom we encounter “sitting cross-legged like an Indian” (76). This other character is called Trip Fontaine: a focal point of gender trouble, and crucial in terms of plot because, in the narrator’s account, he appears as the one individual who is most directly responsible for the suicides of Lux, Mary, Therese, and Bonnie (with the exception, perhaps, of the Lisbon parents). We learn about Trip that he falls in love with Lux Lisbon and that, despite Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon’s strict rules about dating, he ultimately manages to convince the parents that he and three other boys ought to be allowed to accompany the four sisters to the homecoming ball. While Mary, Therese, and Bonnie return back to their family home by the agreed time, Lux and Trip stay behind to have sex on the football field, where Trip simply abandons the girl, not caring “how she got home” (138). Lux returns home much too late, and Mrs. Lisbon reacts by shutting “the house in maximum-security isolation” (141). A simple, by no means implausible explanation of the girls’ suicides lies precisely in this experience of domestic entrapment, and Trip appears as largely responsible for their imprisonment in the narrator’s reconstruction of the events. It is therefore significant that, from the very first moment that Trip appears in the text, the narrator describes him as disturbing preconceived notions about masculinity, desire, and gender difference:

Only eighteen months before the suicides, Trip Fontaine had emerged from baby fat to the delight of girls and women alike. Because we had known him as a pudgy boy whose teeth slanted out of his open, trolling mouth like those of a deep-sea fish, we had been slow to recognize his transformation. In addition, our fathers and older brothers, our decrepit uncles, had assured us that looks didn’t matter if you were a boy. We weren’t on the lookout for handsomeness appearing in our midst, and believed it counted for little until the girls we knew, along with their mothers, fell in love with Trip Fontaine. Their desire was silent yet magnificent, like a thousand daisies attuning their faces toward the path of the sun. (69)

Socialized in a world where it is a woman’s duty to be desirable rather than actively to desire, and where – according to the (heterosexual) men at least – “looks didn’t matter if you were a boy,” the narrator now witnesses the effect of masculine beauty on girls and women whose desire he perceives as “silent yet magnificent.” In this way, the narrator not only frames Trip as the villain of the piece, but also identifies him as the source of anxiety regarding the meaning of masculinity.

What further complicates the challenge posed to the boys’ beliefs by this male object of desire is the fact that Trip is also related to homosexuality. Shortly after Trip is introduced in the text, we learn that his father lives with another man,
and the narrator is quick to conclude that this explains why the son’s frequent (hetero)sexual exploits are tolerated by Mr. Fontaine: “[T]he iffiness of his own conduct prevented him from questioning the susurrations coming from under his son’s door” (73–74). The narrator here explicitly associates Trip’s disturbing desirability with the ‘deviant’ lifestyle of the father, as if growing up in an ‘unconventional’ household might explain Trip’s ‘perverted’ masculinity. Importantly, the plural narrator never cares to elaborate how he – or indeed any of the boys – could possibly know the reason why Mr. Fontaine allows his son a considerable degree of sexual liberty; the narrator simply claims that it must be “the iffiness” of Mr. Fontaine’s conduct that explains it all, without any evidence to prove his point.

Interestingly, on several occasions the narrator also tries to fend off an underlying sense that the boys might themselves be susceptible to any homoerotic interest in Trip. For instance, though the narrator describes Trip’s good looks in lavish detail – noting the “tight seat of his jeans,” as well as a tan that must have made “his nipples [look] like two pink cherries embedded in brown sugar” – he also insists that Trip’s “musky scent, the coconut-oil smoothness of his face, the golden grains of intractable sand still glittering in his eyebrows” did not affect the boys “as it did the girls” (71). Read in isolation, the narrator’s reassertion in this passage of the boys’ heterosexual position may appear innocent enough. However, as soon as we examine it in the light of a later episode in which the boys fantasize about the taste of Lux Lisbon’s strawberry lipstick the interpretive situation becomes more complex:

Woody Clabault’s sister had the same brand, and once, after we got into his parents’ liquor cabinet, we made him put on the lipstick and kiss each one of us so that we, too, would know what it tasted like. Beyond the flavor of the drinks we improvised that night [...] we could taste the strawberry wax on Woody Clabault’s lips, transforming them, before the artificial fireplace, into Lux’s own. [...] But the next day we refused to remember that any of this had happened, and even now it’s the first time we’ve spoken of it. At any rate, [...] it was Lux’s lips we tasted, not Clabault’s. (151)

The boys who, according to the narrator, remained relatively unaffected by the sight of Trip’s cherry-like nipples are now even prepared to kiss another male – and though the narrator emphasizes that they were drunk, and that of course “it was Lux’s lips” they tasted, he is also hesitant to talk about the experience, as if the boys’ identity as heterosexual males depended on a complete rejection of any kind of queer desire. Moreover, what casts a particularly ironic light on the narrator’s attempt to distinguish the boys’ supposedly normal desires from ‘deviant’ same-sex attraction is the fact that the narrator seems to find nothing
queer about their continuing fascination with five girls who have been dead for decades.

The best way to analyze the mechanism at play here is to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of homosexual panic. According to Sedgwick, the notion of homosexual panic attempts to describe the way in which “many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail” (Between Men 89), and Jason Edwards has elegantly summarized the gist of Sedgwick’s argument:

Because solidarity between men within patriarchy generates and requires certain intense male bonds that are not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated homosexual bonds, Sedgwick believes that an endemic, almost ineradicable state of male homosexual panic was the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement from the late nineteenth century onwards. (38)

In other words, in an environment of male privilege, tightly-woven groups of men – such as the grown-up boys in The Virgin Suicides – are likely to feel a continual need to portray their own homosocial community as free from, and fundamentally different to, any stigmatized forms of queer desire. Accordingly, it is possible for us to read the way in which the narrator of Eugenides’s novel tries to keep Trip’s disturbingly attractive sexuality at bay as in part a symptom of homosexual panic.19

As if to distance himself further from Trip’s unsettlingly ‘unmasculine’ eroticism, the narrator once again resorts to his characteristic strategy of associating any kind of otherness with ethnic difference. We have already seen that Trip, like the Lisbon sisters, at one point appears “sitting cross-legged like an Indian,” but there are many similar examples of a subtle process of ethnic othering. For instance, the narrator maintains that Trip’s supposedly excessive masculine eroticism developed “during a trip to Acapulco,” where Trip had sex with a recently divorced, much older woman (70). Mexico, as Martin Heusser has shown, often serves as a heterotopic space in American culture; the country is “associated with romantic myth, on the one hand, […] and with backwardness and banditry, on the other” – which explains why Mexico can represent an entire spectrum of transgressions, “from the feared to the repressed to the secretly

19 Sedgwick later noted that the term homosexual panic also has an entirely different use as “a defense strategy that is commonly used to prevent conviction or to lighten the sentencing of gay-bashers” (the implication the defendant is less guilty if he suffers from a pathological aversion to homosexuals) – a use of which Sedgwick was unaware when she first introduced the term (Epistemology of the Closet 19).
desired” (“Mexicanness” 70; cf. Allatson 1485).\(^{20}\) Mexico thus functions as a space of deviance in the U.S. cultural imaginary, and Trip seems somehow to have contracted the disease of sexual transgression on his brief stay in Acapulco. Moreover, the narrator places conspicuous emphasis on the “lustrous” tans of Trip and his father, which leaves their skins with a “mahogany hue”:

> At dusk, Mr. Fontaine’s and Trip’s skins appeared almost bluish, and, putting on their towel turbans, they looked like twin Krishnas. [...] Marinated in baby oil, Mr. Fontaine and Trip boarded their air mattresses equipped with back rests and drink holders, and drifted beneath our tepid northern sky as though it were the Costa del Sol. We watched them, in stages, turning the color of shoe polish. (74)

In the narrator’s account, Trip and his father are wont to engage in behavior that is decidedly un-American: fitting perhaps for “the Costa del Sol,” but certainly not appropriate within the boundaries of a white suburb. As if in consequence of their ‘foreign’ behavior, Trip and Mr. Fontaine soon turn into literal non-whites, looking almost like “Krishnas” and “turning the color of shoe polish.” Even though Trip and his father clearly form part of the boys’ home community, the narrator’s discourse transforms them into racialized others.

However, even such blatant ethnic and racial othering is not sufficient for Eugenides’s narrator, for he also links Trip’s difference to the ‘lower’ or working class. For one thing, if Trip’s and his father’s skins turn “the color of shoe polish,” then this phrase carries with it classist as well as racist overtones, for “bootblacking” is one of the jobs where the historical link between race and class has been particularly strong (Vogel 52n20). Moreover, the narrator points out explicitly that the tans of Trip and his father were darker even than those of the “Italian contractors, working in the sun day after day” (74). When compared to the boys as a group of white, middle-class, male heterosexuals, Trip thus ends up appearing as wholly Other; he is the son of a gay father, desirable ‘like a woman,’ and poised precariously somewhere between a worker and a person of different racial and ethnic background.

And yet, despite the various strategies of othering that the narrator deploys against Trip, he nevertheless relies on him as a source of information, whereas he cannot bring himself to trust anyone who truly comes from outside the suburban community – a fact that is most readily apparent in the boys’ reluc-

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\(^{20}\) The parts of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* that are set in Mexico may serve as one particularly famous example for the country’s function as a heterotopic, more ‘liberal’ space where ‘deviance’ is far more acceptable (e.g. 250). Similarly, in Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain,” Mexico appears as the place where same-sex ‘transgression’ is possible (275).
The name “Butch” emphasizes the character’s ‘excessive’ masculinity – a masculinity that is at the same time associated with queerness because the term butch can also denote a lesbian of (supposedly) masculine appearance.

As Rachel McLennan notes (28), the boys notably shy away from trying to gain any information from a character named Butch, who for a time is granted – limited – access to the Lisbons’ family home:

Butch, who cut the Lisbon grass, was [...] allowed inside for a glass of water, no longer having to drink from the outside faucet. Sweaty, shirtless, and tattooed, he walked right into the kitchen where the Lisbon girls lived and breathed, but we never asked him what he saw because we were scared of his muscles and his poverty. (22)

Whereas in other instances the narrator dismisses potential informants because, in his view, they “made terrible sources of information” (68), he admits that the boys cannot even bring themselves to ask Butch any questions because they are “scared” of his alien habitus (“shirtless, and tattooed”) as well as of his poverty and the muscular body that testifies to Butch’s routine engagement in physical labor. McLennan thus rightly speculates that the dismissal of the other potential informants on the basis of their ‘improper’ manner of speech may in fact reflect a middle-class bias against the supposedly coarse language of members of the working class (28).

Before proceeding any further, it may be useful to draw together the two main strands of the argument so far: on the one hand, the narrator’s strategies of othering, and, on the other hand, the ideas of myth and sacralization. We have seen that the narrator of The Virgin Suicides both idealizes and de-individualizes the Lisbon sisters, turning them into a kind of sacred monstrosity that is both part of the boys’ home community yet also curiously other (as indicated by the girls’ association with Europe, early American history, and Native American culture). In order to lend authority to his mythical account, the narrator not only combines the two discourses of the sacred and the law, but also disparages any alternative versions of the story. More specifically, the narrator argues that no one could ever fully explain the mystery of the Lisbon sister’s actions because they are not “merely historic.” This is telling because historical guilt is precisely what the narrator needs to erase from the boys’ suburban home community in order to portray it as innocent: the history of Native American dispossession, for instance, or the policies of racial segregation pursued by many U.S. suburbs (cf. Millard 82).

However, in order to keep the suburb free from such intrusive forces, the narrator continually has to police the boundaries of the boys’ home com-

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21 The name “Butch” emphasizes the character’s ‘excessive’ masculinity – a masculinity that is at the same time associated with queerness because the term butch can also denote a lesbian of (supposedly) masculine appearance.
The idea of discursive sacrifice is inspired by a comment by Alex Woloch, who observes in a study of minor characters in fiction that narrative competition is often played out not only on the level of plot, but also on the level of discourse, with characters being “wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed” in the sense of being marginalized or excluded from the text and its telling (25).

The Function of Sacrificial Violence

In order to understand more fully Trip’s role as a discursive scapegoat, as well as its relation to the narrator’s sacralization of the Lisbon girls, we need to examine in some detail René Girard’s thesis that sacrifice is a means of deflecting intra-communal violence. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard argues that all communities are threatened by the possibility of internal rivalry and conflict, and that sacrificial rites are one means of re-directing this type of violence in order to preserve the unity of the group in question (4–8). John Pahl has usefully summarized Girard’s complex argument as a sequence of six basic steps:

1. **Mimetic Desire / Acquisitive Mimesis:** A subject (individual or group) imitates a rival’s desire for an object
2. **Crisis of Differentiation / Rivalry:** Conflict for the object is threatened, or occurs
3. **The Scapegoat / Legitimation of Violence:** A scapegoat is identified whose elimination can resolve rivalry without fear of reprisal or escalating vengeance
4. **Sacrifice / Enactment of Violence:** The scapegoat is expelled or killed; the object’s possession is clarified
5. **Restoration of Order:** Unanimity (temporarily) prevails
6. **Repetition, Masking, and Prevention through Religion:** Myth, ritual, prohibition, and (eventually) apotheosis of the victim (“the Sacred”)

22 The idea of discursive sacrifice is inspired by a comment by Alex Woloch, who observes in a study of minor characters in fiction that narrative competition is often played out not only on the level of plot, but also on the level of discourse, with characters being “wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed” in the sense of being marginalized or excluded from the text and its telling (25).
create a cycle of desire, enactment, and restoration that sanctions “legitimate”
vioence, but rules out unchecked rivalry (29)

According to Girard’s model, an internal conflict arises from rivaling desires
that are centered on the same object (steps 1 and 2). This conflict can be resolved
if the group manages to agree on a surrogate victim or scapegoat (step 3) who
is “expelled or killed” in an act that restores the unity of the group (steps 4 and
5; see Girard 84–86). Myth, ritual, and prohibition subsequently serve as means
of stabilizing the outcome in order to prevent future outbursts of “unchecked
rivalry” (step 6). In assuming a “mythico-ritual character,” sacrificial violence
is not only directed outward, but also “conceals the site of the original violence”
(Girard 261). In the process, the original violence is masked or disguised, and
the group must to some extent misunderstand the nature of the sacrificial act
for it to be effective (7). Ultimately, Girard contends, by “channeling its energies
into ritual forms and activities sanctioned by ritual, the cultural order prevents
multiple desires from converging on the same object” (158), and thus ensures its
continuing existence.

The best way to apply Girard’s model to The Virgin Suicides is to begin with
the notion of internal rivalry and focus on those internal conflicts that could
potentially tear the group of boys apart. The first of two sources of rivalry has
to do with the role of the Lisbon girls as the objects of desire for the group of
boys. As mentioned earlier, in Eugenides’s novel we never learn precisely how
many boys form part of the group. We do know, however, that their number
exceeds that of the Lisbon sisters because, when Trip goes to the homecoming
ball with Lux, it is only “some of us” who are chosen to accompany Mary,
Therese, and Bonnie (115). The boys, in other words, are rivals in their desire
for the Lisbon girls – and it is precisely this kind of internal rivalry that, ac‐
cording to Girard, can undermine the unity of a group and, thereby, threaten its
very existence. Perversely, then, from the narrator’s point of view the fact that
the Lisbon sisters kill themselves constitutes a solution to the problem of internal
rivalry, and it is thus no coincidence that he presents the scene of Cecilia’s first
suicide attempt in terms of a sacrificial rite:

Mrs. Lisbon burst onto the porch, trailing Cecilia’s flannel nightgown, and let out a
long wail that stopped time. Under the molting trees and above the blazing, overex‐
posed grass those four figures paused in tableau: the two slaves [i.e. the paramedics]
offering the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the truck), the priestess bran‐

23 See also Girard’s comments on myth: “Myths are the retrospective transfiguration of
sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order
that has arisen from them” (67).
dishing the torch (waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips. (6)

As part of his mythical reconstruction of the past (Shostak 818), the narrator describes this scene as a sacrificial act that is, of course, traumatizing for the boys as individuals. At the same time, from the point of view of the group the Lisbon girls’ suicides constitute an act of terminal violence that, as Girard suggests, “can only be labeled sacrificial retrospectively, because it brought all hostilities to an end” (132). Put in the bluntest terms: had the girls lived, then the boys’ friendship might not have survived.

If this interpretation seems disturbing and even callous, then this is in fact part of the point, for as Moshe Halbertal has noted in his study *On Sacrifice* (2012), feelings of guilt almost inevitably arise from the practice of sacrificial violence. According to Halbertal, sacrifice in the biblical sense “is a substitute for the violence that the offerer might himself deserve” (i.e. an act of atonement in the face of God; 32). Halbertal also contends that this view of sacrifice is incompatible with Girard’s model, as the offerer is not motivated by a desire for violence, but instead by fear and anxiety. However, perhaps it is possible to reconcile Girard’s and Halbertal’s positions, for if communal conflict were to escalate, then everyone who is part of that community might become the victim of violence – which in turn would explain widespread feelings of fear and anxiety. A second disagreement between Halbertal and Girard relates to the question of the victim’s innocence, for while Halbertal regards innocence as necessary because this renders the victim “capable of becoming a vehicle for ultimate projection” (33), Girard holds that the victim’s innocence or guilt are simply irrelevant because it is the victim’s status as “relatively indifferent” to – i.e. as not truly important for – the community that make him or her appear “sacrificeable” (4). Despite these differences, however, both Halbertal (34) and Girard (1) observe that the act of sacrifice itself always threatens to look like a crime because the sacrifice does not constitute a just punishment of the victim (for Halbertal because the victim is innocent, and for Girard because sacrifice has nothing to do with punishment in the first place). Without glossing over their fundamental disagreement, we can thus say that both Halbertal and Girard view acts of sacrifice as ‘borderline crimes’ that are, for that very reason, likely to lead to a sense of guilt on the part of those who commit – and benefit from – the sacrificial act.

This last point is crucial for a reading of *The Virgin Suicides* because guilt and mutual reproach are another factor that could lead to conflict within the group of boys. We have seen that, from the perspective of the group as a whole (i.e. from the narrator’s point of view), the Lisbon suicides constitute a ‘sacrifice’
that solves the problem of internal rivalry. However, precisely because the boys as a group benefit from the suicides, their collective identity is haunted by a sense of guilt. In addition, there is the much more concrete sense of guilt that each of the boys is likely to feel because, as John R. Jordan and John L. McIntosh put it, in the aftermath of suicide “[g]uilt can be felt regarding what one did, did not do, imagined one might have done, and so forth” (31). Jordan and McIntosh also observe that one way of reacting to such feelings of guilt is to blame others and thereby cast the focus “away from oneself” (30). In the case of the group of boys in The Virgin Suicides, this could quickly lead to a vicious circle of mutual reproach and so undermine the boys’ sense of communal belonging. There is thus a need for yet another surrogate victim, and this is – as we have seen – Trip Fontaine: the discursive scapegoat on whom the boys can shift the full weight of communal blame.

In the case of The Virgin Suicides at least, Halbertal’s idea of the victim’s necessary innocence thus works less well than Girard’s model; after all, Trip’s extremely insensitive treatment of Lux may well have contributed to the suicides, but this is not the true reason why the group of boys chooses him as their primary scapegoat. Rather, what makes Trip ‘sacrificeable’ is that he is close to but not truly part of the community; because of his good looks and success with women (including Lux Lisbon), Trip has long been the object of envy and resentment for the boys, and his discursive destruction thus combines the sweet taste of revenge with the relief that comes when one is, finally, absolved from guilt. Tellingly, the final reference to Trip reports his dismissal in a letter clearly written by Lux Lisbon, one of the ‘sacred’ and adored girls:

Dear whoever,
Tell Trip I’m over him.
He’s a creep.
Guess Who (192; original emphasis)

Trip’s eradication on the level of discourse is thus sanctioned on the level of the story by an act of ‘divine’ rejection which simultaneously eliminates Trip as a rival for the group of boys.

And yet, Girard’s model suggests that the sacrificial solution can only become permanent if its true function is masked or disguised, for instance through myth, ritual, or what Pohl calls the “apotheosis of the victim” (29). We have already seen that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides constitute the primary act of ‘sacrificial’ violence in the sense that they solve the problem of intra-communal rivalry for the boys, and we have also examined the extent to which the narrator portrays them as semi-divine, mythical creatures. The discursive destruction of Trip, by
contrast, constitutes a secondary act of sacrifice intended primarily to ward off mutual reproach and guilt, and accordingly Trip’s “apotheosis” remains subtle and incomplete. Nevertheless, the narrator not only calls him a seducer “greater than Casanova” (72), but also notes that he and his father look like “Krishnas” (74). Trip is, in short, a sex-god, to whom all women from the suburban community supposedly turn “like a thousand daisies attuning their faces toward the path of the sun” (69), and whose stature in the narrator’s account may not truly reach, but at least approaches the realm of the mythical.

Ritual, Rejection, and the Culture of Mourning
To say that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides on one level constitute the solution to a communal problem is, importantly, not to deny its painful and traumatic nature for the boys. Indeed, if one function of their commemorative rituals is continually to retell their mythical story in order to disguise the troubling nature of sacrificial violence, then on another level these rituals are simply an attempt to cope with trauma. Moshe Halbertal’s comments on religious rituals prove illuminating in this context, for according to Halbertal rituals serve to de-individuate the participants, who would otherwise have to face the overwhelming divine presence entirely on their own (15–16). Moreover, as a time-tested protocol for proper behavior, rituals provide supplicants with a sense of stability and security even in the presence of the sacred, and accordingly Halbertal describes them as procedures that allow believers to overcome the “anxiety of rejection” (18). Rituals, that is to say, symbolically express that one is not merely a forlorn individual, but instead part of a community whose members all suffer from the same fear: divine rejection and punishment.

Halbertal’s comments are pertinent to The Virgin Suicides because, for the boys, the Lisbon sisters’ suicides constitute an ultimate act of rejection by their semi-divine objects of desire. In the novel’s final sentence, the narrator movingly expresses the boys’ lasting sense of violation and bereavement:

It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn’t heard us calling, still do not hear us, up here in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together. (249)

The boys’ love for the Lisbon sisters may have been idealizing and voyeuristic, but nevertheless they did try to stay in touch with the Lisbons even after their parents had imprisoned them in their own home. For example, the boys eventually call the girls, barely saying a word but instead playing songs into the
phone that “most thoroughly communicated our feelings” (195). When the sisters respond by playing songs like “Alone Again, Naturally” or “Candle in the Wind,” the boys respond with “You’ve Got a Friend” or “Wild Horses” (196), trying to offer some kind of consolation. When the girls secretly invite the boys over to their home, pretending that they want to elope with them, the boys feel genuinely elated, not knowing that the girls will commit suicide while the boys are waiting for them, dreaming of their future together (212–213). It is therefore understandable that the boys take the suicides as a gesture that is directed against them personally, and they instinctively resort to the time-tested power of ritual to try and deal with the annihilating power of this ultimate gesture of rejection.  

If the precise shape of the boys’ ritualistic acts of commemoration nevertheless appears pathological – one of their “most prized possessions” is the “titillating” report of one of Lux’s gynecological exams (155) – then this may be quite simply because they have never been taught how to mourn. At school, for instance, during his speech at Convocation, the headmaster refers to Cecilia’s suicide only obliquely, acknowledging that “it has been a long, hard summer for some of us here today,” but also suggesting that “today begins a new year of hopes and goals” (104). Moreover, while the headmaster’s wife in time manages to convince most teachers that the school ought to schedule a “Day of Grieving,” her main argument for the project is that grief may be “natural,” but “[o]vercoming it is a matter of choice” (ibid.). In the end, the “Day of Grieving” proves a total failure, at least according to the narrator’s account:

Most people remember the Day of Grieving as an obscure holiday. The first three hours of school were canceled and we remained in our home rooms. Teachers passed out mimeographs related to the day’s theme, which was never officially announced, as Mrs. Woodhouse felt it inappropriate to single out the girls’ tragedy. The result was that the tragedy was diffused and universalized. As Kevin Tiggs put it, “It seemed like we were supposed to feel sorry for everything that ever happened, ever.” (104)

Not only is the day’s theme “never officially announced”; it is also an event that fails to include either the Lisbon sisters (who “kept asking to be excused to go to the bathroom”; 105) or their father (a teacher at the school who only learned about the Day of Grieving when it was already “well under way”; 106). As a result, “all the healing was done by those of us without wounds” (105), and it therefore comes as no surprise that the success of the event remained a matter

24 See Bilyana Vanyova Kostova, who rightly notes that it is virtually impossible to decide unequivocally whether the boys should be seen as “bystanders, perpetrators or victims” (49).
of dispute (107). Moreover, in the aftermath of the other sisters’ suicides, the only act of mourning that the narrator records is the dedication of a memorial bench to the Lisbon sisters: a “project that had been put in motion eight months earlier” after Cecilia’s suicide and “was rededicated just in time to include the other girls” (231–232). Though the genuineness of such gestures need not be doubted, there nevertheless remains a sense that no one really tries to help the boys truly to deal with their traumatic experience of loss.

Interestingly, there are hints in Eugenides’s novel that the suburban community’s inability to mourn may have something to do with its broader cultural context. For one thing, the Greek grandmother of one of the boys confesses that she “couldn’t understand how the Lisbon’s kept so quiet, why they didn’t wail to heaven or go mad”; more generally, she is unable to fathom why in America “everyone pretended to be happy all the time” (175). The Virgin Suicides thus at the very least raises the question of whether an inability to mourn may be a more widespread problem in the United States. The other passage from the novel that is relevant in this context relates to the ill-fated Day of Grieving, and more particularly to the comment by the headmaster’s wife that “[g]rief is natural,” whereas “[o]vercoming it is a matter of choice” (104). Intriguingly, the boys learn about this comment from a former teacher who now has “a job in advertising,” and who actually used the same formula as a slogan for a dietary product: “Eating is natural. Gaining weight is your choice” (ibid.). The language is typical of advertising, which insinuates endless possibility (“Just do it!”) and often involves an imperative to enjoy (“Enjoy Coke!”; see Žižek, Enjoy Your Symptom xvii). Terry Eagleton holds that such “pathological optimism” ultimately reflects “a fear of confronting loss” (Across the Pond 139), and if this is indeed the characteristic mood of capitalism in America, then The Virgin Suicides is at least partly a critique of this state of affairs.

Identity Politics: An Impossible Perspective

The Virgin Suicides is many things. It is a moving account of a group of boys trying to deal with the aftereffects of a traumatic experience of loss. It is also an analysis of collective identity: how it almost invariable relies on ‘sacred’ myths of origin; the extent to which it involves sacrificial practices of othering; and the importance of rituals that not merely represent, but in fact serve to create and maintain the unity of the group in question (Stollberg-Rilinger 13–14). Moreover, the novel constitutes an indictment of those societies that fail to provide its members with the adequate social resources for dealing with loss. The boys in The Virgin Suicides may be guilty of voyeurism, narcissistic projection, and exclusionary discourses of belonging; but while it would be easy to dismiss
them as merely an unsavory collection of self-centered white, middle-class, heterosexual males, it is difficult to deny the traumatic nature of their experience.

It is crucial to insist that the boys’ sense of being wronged and wounded is not merely illusionary because the novel’s critique of identity politics would otherwise be far less convincing. Bilyana Vanyova provides a concise summary of the harmful effects explored in Eugenides’s novel:

Progressively, the narrator’s narrative subtly connects the private suicides of the five sisters to their capacity to shake off the repressed public conformity of the suburb and, what is more, to expose its malfunctioning. Their refusal to live brings to the fore the social effects of heavily repressed collective wounds such as race riots, lay-offs, the impossibility of integration experienced by immigrants, or the ecological crisis. It also highlights the smothered adolescent erotic desire that injures not just the girls’ sexual awakening […] but also the narrator’s […]. (56)

For Vanyova, there is thus no doubt that the girls as well as the boys ought to be seen as real victims, their developing identities thwarted by their environment. On a more general level, Terry Eagleton contends that, though the categories of identity politics may be “ontologically empty,” they nevertheless arise from real experiences of oppression:

Women are not so much fighting for the freedom to be women – as though we all understood what exactly that meant – as for the freedom to be fully human; but that inevitably abstract humanity can be articulated in the here and now only through their womanhood, since this is the place where their humanity is wounded and refusèd. Sexual politics, like class or nationalist struggle, will thus necessarily be caught up in the very metaphysical categories it hopes finally to abolish; and any such movement will demand a difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible double optic, at once fighting on a terrain already mapped out by its antagonists and seeking even now to prefigure within that mundane strategy styles of being and identity for which we have as yet no proper names. (“Nationalism” 24)

For Eagleton, the politics of identity arises from a sense of being wounded on the basis of that ontologically empty identity, and just as it would be wrong to deny the reality of these wounds, it would be counterproductive to turn the wound itself into a kind of fetish. Instead, we need an “impossible double optic”: staying firm in our commitment to these oppressed and wounded identities, but simultaneously bearing in mind that “our social, sexual, or racial identities” should not in fact be “all that important” (“Nationalism” 26).
In *The Virgin Suicides*, this impossible double optic is in some way expressed through the conflict between the collective narrator and the boys as individuals. The narrator, who is a personification of the group’s collective identity, works to perpetuate the group’s founding trauma, which is the only reason why the group still exists. By contrast, the boys as individuals are desperately trying to overcome their burdensome emotional and psychic wounds, and the support they seek from the other members of the group is mainly a means to this ultimate end (i.e. the particular group to which they belong is not all that important as an end in itself). The novel thus depicts a conflict between, on the one hand, identity politics as an end in itself, and, on the other, identity politics as mainly a means for creating the social conditions under which the identity for which one has been made to suffer and fight is no longer particularly important. We can also rephrase this idea in the form of a simple question: How can we avoid becoming trapped in an identity in which we have been forced to invest so much effort, but that we did not actually want thrust upon us in the first place?

The idea that *The Virgin Suicides* gives narrative form to the “impossible double optic” required in identity politics also allows us to formulate more precisely why the novel’s setting, an American suburb in the early 1970s, is far from negligible or accidental. In the introduction to this chapter, we have seen that the period between, roughly, 1963 and 1974 is not only associated with an unprecedented polarization in American society – the so-called culture wars – but also with the emergence of identity politics as such. Second-wave feminism, black power, or gay liberation are among the most prominent examples of such ‘identitarian’ movements, and virtually all movements of this kind can be seen as challenges to the hegemonic power of white, middle-class, heterosexual males. From the point of view of those who happen to belong to this latter category, there is thus a real sense that the Decade of Upheaval between 1963 and 1974 constitutes a historical experience of loss – though of course what was lost were in fact the spoils of historical injustice and oppression. What *The Virgin Suicides* does, in effect, is to place us in the position of those who, as a group, are in a very real sense the victims of historical events beyond their control, but who at the same time fail to (or perhaps refuse) to grasp the extent to which the victimhood of others was not only far worse than their own, but in fact the very precondition for their earlier, privileged position.

More specifically, in *The Virgin Suicides*, the boys hold fast to an image of mythical innocence preceding the Lisbons’ suicides, refusing to probe deeper into the exclusionary nature of the place they call home. Moreover, though the boys are right in suggesting that the Lisbon sisters’ pain is not “merely historic” (231; emphasis added), this does not mean that socio-historical pressures play
no part at all. For instance, the fact that no one tries to prevent Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon from effectively imprisoning their daughters in their suburban home arguably reflects a deep-seated cultural bias in favor of what Isaiah Berlin has called negative liberty (i.e. the freedom from interference; 121–122) – particularly when it comes to parents ‘protecting’ their daughters (i.e. to restricting the freedom of young women to participate in the life of the community, and thus their freedom to belong). Likewise, while the Lisbon girls may not have killed themselves exclusively because the United States in some ways looked like a “dying empire” in the early 1970s (The Virgin Suicides 231), the general atmosphere of pessimism may well have played a part. Accordingly, if the boys at one point confess that Old Mrs. Karafilis had been “shaped and saddened by a history we knew nothing about” (172), then perhaps this is an apt way for us to describe the boys’ relation to the past of their own home community as well. At the same time, The Virgin Suicides as a whole in fact anatomizes collective belonging and the politics of identity, and as such the novel constitutes an attempt to understand its own historical moment: the emotional dynamics of the culture wars; the vagaries of identity politics; and a culture obsessed with fetishistic memory but lacking in historical understanding.

If Eugenides’s novel nevertheless refuses simply to portray suburban communities as mindless spaces of conformity, or to condemn the boys’ desire for home as such, then this should not be misconstrued as a sign of critical weakness. Rather, the degree of the novel’s affection is a measure of its strength, for it is far easier to criticize those spaces of belonging with which we do not identify than to expose ourselves to the alienating flaws at the heart of the homes that we love and cherish. A critical but affectionate gaze: this has also been the aim of the present study, which we must now proceed to bring to a close.