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 the 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 Stamarowskis, 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 Stamarowskis 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 straightforward 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

17 See Bilyana Vanyova Kostova: “Although the cultural story of the suburb might appear fictitious, it is in fact a condemnation of the conformity, homogeneity 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).