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.18

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.

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

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18 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).
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 ‘un-conventional’ 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

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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). 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 “boot-blacking” 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.