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 refused. 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.