LABORING TO UPHOLD THE IMAGE OF SUBURBIA: REPRESENTATIONS OF DEVIANT SEXUAL DESIRE IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* AND *MIDDLESEX*

By

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This paper argues that Eugenides’ novels employ instances of deviant sexuality to unmask the efforts of suburbanites to define their living spaces—against the city as the locus of filth—as stable and orderly models of the American Dream. Existing socio-historical scholarship about suburbia contends with a notion of the suburb as a haven for white, middle-class families. Two competing perspectives emerge out of this scholarship: the first critiques the conformist force of the homogeneous American suburb; the second revises the history of suburbia, complicating the picture by providing evidence of Black suburbanization and working-class suburbs. I conclude that while suburbs have historically housed differences of race and class, the collective imagined suburb includes only white middle-class families. This paper seeks to extend the critique of the revisionist scholars by introducing sexuality as a category of analysis and exploring representations of “deviant” sexuality in suburban literature.

My reading of Eugenides' novels suggests that implementing sexuality as a lens through which to interrogate suburban ideologies offers further insight into the ways in which suburbanites define themselves in opposition to the “filth” (sexual and otherwise) that resides in the city. In *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides demonstrates the suburban impulse to suffocate the sexual desires of five white, middle-class sisters, resulting in their suicides. In *Middlesex*, he
complicates his critique, showing how race and class differences dissolve behind a façade of normative heterosexual family structure, that is, until, evidence of deviance surfaces in the birth of an intersexed child. This intervention into suburban discourse will foreground the process by which individuals hold up for themselves the image of the American suburb and exert an enormous effort to achieve and maintain rightful membership in white, middle-class suburbia.

This thesis speculates that further interdisciplinary scholarship about suburbia must be done in order to attend to the dissonance between the image of a white-washed homogeneous suburb and its more complicated experiential counterpart. I conclude that sexuality, as a category of analysis, connects with race and class in order to emphasize the inherent heterosexuality that frames the image of suburbia. An analysis of sexuality offers a more complete picture of the ways in which individuals labor to conceal their various deviations from suburban norms.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

America in 1951 had a population of 150 million . . . no interstate highways, and only about a quarter as many cars. Men wore hats and ties almost everywhere. Women prepared every meal more or less from scratch. Milk came in bottles. The mailman came on foot.
—Bill Bryson, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*

The America that Bill Bryson describes as the setting for his youth in his book, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir*, conjures a specific image of a simple, relaxed and content suburban nation. It resonates with the type of family life and moral code present in television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Happy Days* that “depicted a time of economic prosperity, political quiescence and social stability” (Marcus 25). A commonsense vision of 1950s America includes single family homes, married couples with children and pets, white picket fences, men in gray flannel suits and housewives in aprons. Central to this image is the overwhelming sense of satisfaction this lifestyle effects. Bryson comments: “I can't imagine there has ever been a more gratifying time or place to be alive than America in the 1950s. No country has ever known such prosperity” (5).

Bryson recalls his childhood suburb as a happy place that put the American Dream within reach for more people than ever before. The postwar period witnessed an influx of Americans to the suburbs who appropriated their own happy American lifestyle by moving to places like Levittown, purchasing appliances, and mowing their lawns.

The image of the American suburb has transformed slightly over the twentieth century, but it remains linked to the ideas about what constitutes a happy and normal American life that originate from the 1950s suburb. The continuity of the image over time is reflected in Richard Bachman's fictive account of an Ohio suburb at the end of the twentieth century. In his novel *The Regulators*, he describes a hot July afternoon on Poplar Street:
it's all watermelon and Kool-Aid and foul tips off the end of the bat; it's all the summer
you ever wanted and more here in the center of the United States of America, life as good
as you ever dreamed it could be, with Chevrolets parked in driveways and steaks in
refrigerator meat-drawers waiting to be slapped on the barbecue in the backyard come
evening (and will there be apple pie to follow? What do you think?). This is the land of
green lawns and carefully tended flowerbeds; this is the Kingdom of Ohio . . . (20)

In this excerpt, Bachman depicts the American suburb as a location where day-to-day existence
is happy and carefree. Individuals pursue their own duties and pleasures but all merge at various
points to enjoy a fond sense of community. Life in Bachman's suburb is simple yet uniquely
American, fully equipped with baseball and watermelon.

These snapshots of the American suburb articulate the lifestyle it promised for the
millions of people who have relocated from urban and rural areas and continue to reside there
into the twenty-first century. Noting that the 2000 U.S. Census reported that half the American
population resides in suburbs, Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Weise attest to the importance
of suburbia in the current moment. They contend that “suburbia is a landscape that is ubiquitous,
a backdrop to life so commonplace that few take conscious notice of it” (1). Thus, while Bryson
expresses nostalgia for a happier 1950s suburb, the census shows that 50 percent of Americans
still believe in that place and choose to make it their home nearly half a century later.

Bachman's description of a 1990s version of America looks very similar to Bryson's
memory of his childhood neighborhood. The fact that 40 years separates the two indicates the
powerful cultural impact the image of the suburb has had over time. Americans' continued
desire for suburban life necessitates an interrogation of the idea of the suburb, specifically
because, as Nicolaides and Weise point out, it has become so commonplace that to be American
means also to be suburban (1).

The idea that the suburb serves as a happy refuge for white, middle-class families has
indeed been challenged since the middle of the twentieth century. Two bodies of contestation
have emerged out of suburban socio-historical scholarship and critique the image of the American suburb. On one side, social critics and scholars have derided the suburb for fostering unproductive conformity and rendering an American culture that is white-washed, homogeneous and unimpressive. While they confirm the image of the suburb as white and middle-class, they fear that it lacks aesthetic value. On the other side, scholars have revised this earlier generation of critique by insisting that suburbia does encompass diversity and incorporates racial and class difference. They contend that the image of the suburb does not translate to live suburban experience. Chapter Two, “America and/as Suburbia: Construction and Contestation of the Image of the American Suburb,” traces the origin of the suburb to eighteenth century London, where suburbs developed in order to remove white, bourgeois women from the filth inherent in the industrial city. Relying on Robert Fishman's characterization of London, this chapter illustrates the central role that proper (hetero)sexuality played in the construction of suburbia. Then, a review of the diverging discourses in the suburban literature reveals that scholars overlook sexuality, in favor of race and class (and in a few cases, gender), in order to leverage their critique. In this gap, I position my analysis of texts that speak to questions of race and class, but also call attention to sexuality as a central axis of difference for interrogating the image of suburbia.

Queer studies scholars emphasize the necessity of considering sexuality as a distinct and integral category of analysis in theorizing about spatial organization. In *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed investigates spatial organization through the lens of sexuality. In a discussion about queer orientations of objects in space, she argues that “the desire for connection generates likeness, at the same time that likeness is read as the sign of connection” (122). This doubling allows communities to perpetually reinforce the naturalness of their likeness, but Ahmed points
out that shared attributes are “retrospectively taken up as evidence of community” (122). Thus it becomes naturalized that queer sexualities belong in mobile, diverse and anonymous cities (as is commonly believed) while white, middle-class—normal—families are best suited for the suburb. Ahmed employs the metaphor of peas in a pod, reminding us that peas even from the same pod are hardly similar. However their proximity to one another erases difference. In other words, the touching of the peas to one another and to the same pod—their contiguity—effects likeness that is linked to the familial, the familiar. (124). Similarly, the avoidance of difference or the refusal to acknowledge it in suburbia allows for it to disappear from view. Thus, critics of suburban conformity are able to see homogenization in a far more subtly diverse and cosmopolitan neighborhood. They can select Levittown as the signifying example of suburban conformity without considering other contexts that might suggest otherwise.

Ahmed also thinks of institutions as orientation devices that “take the shape of ‘what’ resides in them” (132). She argues that “institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others” (132). In the context of suburbia, indeed “white bodies gather and cohere” (132) to form the edges of such spaces. Specifically, white, middle-class, heterosexual bodies define the perimeters of their suburban spaces, and reify them with fences, gates and legislation. To those who inhabit the suburbs, these boundaries are permeable and thus, invisible (or at least, inconsequential) to them. Ahmed reminds us that institutions are created over a long period of repetitive decisions (133) which, in the case of suburbia is clear. Historical, sociological, and urban planning studies reveal the myriad ways suburban boundaries were established and maintained according to strict lines of race and class. Thus, as Ahmed argues about whiteness as an institution applies fully to suburbia: to those inside suburbia, the lines dividing it from the city are invisible. However, nonwhite and/or queer bodies—non-residents—
in suburbia are made to feel uncomfortable, “exposed, visible and different when they take up this space” (133).

In order to elucidate the “repetition of decisions” (133) that produce an image of suburbia as distinctly white, middle-class, heterosexual and homogenous, I analyze two suburban novels written by Jeffrey Eugenides using sexuality as a central category of analysis: The Virgin Suicides and Middlesex. These novels take place in suburban Detroit and foreground instances of deviant sexuality in order to unmask the suburb as merely an imagined space, one that requires a significant amount of willful labor to perpetuate. The Virgin Suicides tells the story of the five beautiful Lisbon sisters who find themselves suffocated by the normalizing forces of their neighborhood and escape its expectations by committing suicide. Narrated from the perspective of a group of adult men who grew up alongside the Lisbon family, the novel recounts the events during the summer between the first girl's suicide and that of the remaining four. Middlesex is narrated by Cal, an intersexed man who was raised as a girl in a Greek-American family and leads a transient adult life as a member of the Foreign Service. Tracing the incestuous relationship of his grandparents, Cal outlines the story of his family's emigration to America and their journey toward becoming members of the American suburb. Ultimately, Cal chooses to leave the suburb in search of himself in San Francisco and Berlin, from which he narrates the story.

I begin the analysis of Eugenides' novels in Chapter Three, “The Threat of Female Heterosexual Desire in The Virgin Suicides,” turning to his first novel to explore the ways deviant female desire disrupts the sexual status quo in suburbia. In The Virgin Suicides, we can see that the attempts to contain the sexualities of the five Lisbon sisters are congruent with the active efforts of suburbanites to perceive their neighborhood as separate from and superior to the
nearby city of Detroit. Eugenides emphasizes the impulse of suburbanites to continually work to uphold the illusion that suburbia is unaffected by and immune to city filth. It also prompts us to look to *Middlesex*, at the way suburbanites labor to dissolve sexual deviance alongside differences of race and class.

Chapter Four, “Incest and Intersex: Suburban Sexual Deviance in *Middlesex*” looks at the ways Eugenides extends his critique of the suburban myth in his second novel by tracing the journey of a family of Greek immigrants, who secretly engage in incestuous unions, but are able to access racial and class privilege and eventually gain membership in an American suburb. In *Middlesex*, Eugenides traces the historical development of suburbia alongside the story of the Stephanides family’s attempt to grasp the American (suburban) Dream. The novel shows how Cal’s intersexed identity bars him from suburban membership in ways that his family’s ethnic and class background did not. This elaborates my argument about white, middle-class female sexuality in *The Virgin Suicides* by foregrounding the way the Stephanides family becomes suburban, able to dissolve their differences of race and class in order to conceal their incestuous lineage. Cal is the culmination of two generations of deviant sexual desire, a haunting reminder that sexuality in suburbia exists outside traditional boundaries but is continually covered up and ignored.

By way of conclusion, I return to the suburban discourse and the ideological significance of the suburban image and consider how my reading of Eugenides' novels elaborates on it. Using sexuality as a central category of analysis illuminates the suburbanites continued efforts to define themselves against the deviance of the city and perpetuate the imagined suburb as a haven for reproductive heteronormativity. I suggest that literature serves as a template on which to imagine alternative conception of American suburban identity. My work raises larger questions
that further research might hope to answer by incorporating socio-historical scholarship as well as literary representations of American suburbs.
While the suburban discourse is nuanced and varied, two bodies of thought emerge from the suburban studies literature: those who argue that a homogeneous, white middle-class suburb exists in reality and are fearful (or in some cases, celebratory) of its effects; and those who believe the image to be more complicated and nuanced and that despite the imagined suburb, racial minorities and working-class people have inhabited and contributed to the suburbs all along. First, I explore the approaches of scholars whose work confirms a homogeneous, white-washed middle-class landscape in their criticism of the suburb's tendency to foster conformity. Then, I examine the interventions made in terms of gender, race and class that make a case for diversity in the suburbs. Finally, I evaluate the trend toward literature as an ideal location for negotiating suburban identity. I call for the introduction of sexuality as a category of analysis through which scholars can expose further grounds for suburban identity formations and also look to literature to illustrate the effects of the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality in suburbia.

Historicizing the Suburb

In order to understand the construction of the suburb as a refuge and haven for white middle-class Americans, one must first examine the ideology of filth that characterizes the city in which the suburb defines itself against. Robert Fishman traces the origin of the ideologically filthy city to industrializing London, calling it “birthplace of suburbia,” which harbored both literal and figurative dirt that was to be escaped by those who could afford to relocate outside city limits (18). Fishman outlines the development of middle-class suburbs of London that responded to the desire of the British bourgeoisie to distance themselves from the “crowded,
dirty, noisy and unhealthy” urban center (23). As early as the eighteenth century, the ideological foundation of suburbia was “defined in relation to its rejected opposite: the metropolis” (27).

The dichotomous relationship between city and suburb that emerged from Victorian attitudes about space and place frames the way American suburbs would later become characterized. In contrast to early eighteenth century notions of a caste society in which social distinction was not diminished by proximity to the poor, the idea that maintaining social status required “physical segregation” developed as the nineteenth century approached (32). Several factors contributed to this trend. First, Fishman indicates that growing disparity in lifestyle between the wealthy and the poor facilitated an increasing repulsion for the city and its lower classes. Next, he states that the bourgeoisie family unit turned inward and began to understand the nuclear family to be the “overwhelming focus of its members' lives” (33). Third, the Evangelical movement that predominated in the second half of the eighteenth century emphasized moral purity, holding the nuclear family as the desirable model and depicting the evils of city life (such as the lottery) as imminent threats to the natural order of family. Here, Fishman begins a brief analysis of female sexuality. He contends that while association with the city and its potential for sin was unavoidable for men because they needed to preserve economic ties with it, women could be protected from temptation by remaining in their proper domestic sphere. Evangelical Christians perceived women as “creatures whose passions overpowered their wills, Eves and Jezebels quicker to sin than men” and thus required insulation from contact with the potentially dangerous urban dwellers (36).

The conception of the city as a threat to the purity of (white) bourgeois women tied directly to the high level of mobility women enjoyed in the urban center. They encountered men of varying social statuses which opened up the potential for sexual transgression. Women
participated in the workplace, which was often located below the family living space and moved somewhat freely in the public realm. By the nineteenth century, as Delores Hayden points out in *Redesigning the American Dream*, the notion that a woman's place was in the home pervaded and “implied that no decent woman was out in city streets, going places where men went” (209). Because home and workplace were often located in the same building, separation of spheres in city spaces was nearly impossible. The presence of women, especially working women, in public spaces was increasing understood to indicate sexual availability and a failure of the proper gender order. The nineteenth century belief was that “because the working woman was no one urban man's property (her father or her husband had failed to keep her at home), she was every urban man's property” (210). Hayden emphasizes that this Victorian model rests upon gendered assumptions that the proper sphere of women was the home and the rightful place for men was in the public sphere. Thus, contact between white bourgeois women with the urban poor caused anxiety about the purity of women and threatened to tarnish the moral superiority they demonstrated in their homes.

Thus, the suburb functioned as both ideological and literal escape from the real and imagined filth of urban London. The suburb originated in opposition to the city and the threat of deviance that mobility and exchange fostered. As both Fishman and Hayden demonstrate, this impulse to constrain and protect the sexual purity of white bourgeois women motivated many of London's elites to relocate to the suburbs in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This has direct implications on contemporary perceptions of suburban space into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sociological and historical accounts of suburban space indicate that contemporary suburbia continues to rely on the opposition of the suburb to its city with the
implicit, yet central, assumption about the necessity to police middle-class white women's sexuality by controlling their mobility.

Suburbanization occurred later in the United States than it did in England primarily because industrialization in American cities occurred at a different pace. Fishman pinpoints the late nineteenth century railroad suburb as the apotheosis of American suburbs. As cities became increasingly populated and modernized, the land just beyond city limits became ideal residential space—for those who could afford to travel by railroad between home and city. The railroad “provided remarkably rapid access to the center, yet its relatively high cost insulated the bourgeois peripheries from lower-class invasion” (136). Fishman contends that in this historical moment, Americans perfected the “classic suburb” (135) which was characterized by “the pattern of tree shaded streets, broad open lawns, substantial houses set back from the sidewalks” (145–146). The landscape fostered a union between nature and family life that allowed white bourgeois families to enjoy their private lives in a space that was clearly separate from the city. As Fishman notes, while the suburb indicates economic and aesthetic success, “it is also a testimony to bourgeois anxieties, to deeply buried fears that translate into a contempt or hatred for the 'others' who inhabit the city” (154). Elite Americans enjoyed insulation from the undesirable city population until the automobile democratized the suburb in the twentieth century.

While scholars confirm that working-class people and racial minorities established residency in suburban spaces near the turn of the twentieth century, the values and standards of the white (bourgeois) American middle class pervaded. “Through statutory, ideological, and cultural means, they reinforced both the barriers and internal meaning of their own elite suburb” (Nicolaiades and Weise 4). Following World War II, widespread economic prosperity made it
possible for more Americans to own homes, but by then suburbia had become imbued with enormous cultural meaning that would only expand later in the century. Through a combination of various cultural representations of suburbia and legislative measures regulating who could live there, 'good' neighborhoods were perceived to be for the white and middle class.

Postwar suburbs such as Levittown advertised not only a home but an American lifestyle—one that was strictly reserved for white, middle-class families. This lifestyle included proscribed gender roles reminiscent of those of Fishman's eighteenth century London. In fact, the suburb relied on an ideology of separate spheres because it required specific roles to be fulfilled by each member of a nuclear family: husband worked outside the home and provided monetarily for his family, wife kept house and cared for the children, and children took advantage of the leisure opportunities available to them in their neighborhood. As the twentieth century wore on, observers began to realize the cultural impact of suburbia, and many became concerned that this prized American lifestyle bred conformity and lacked any valuable cultural aesthetic.

**Critics of American Conformity in Suburbia**

By the middle of the twentieth century, scholars of American suburbs were beginning to recognize various consequences of the increasing migration of white middle-class families out of cities and into suburbs. Advertisements in particular championed the suburb as the apex of the American Dream, symbolic of the success of both post-war American capitalism and democracy. They offered American G.I.s the opportunity to partake in the American Dream by purchasing a piece of suburbia—fully equipped with state-of-the-art appliances—in which they could raise a family and live comfortably. Scholars and critics, however, launched attacks on this promise of suburbia from two divergent angles. Some, such as William Whyte and Lewis Mumford, were skeptical of the homogeneity that tract housing facilitated and argued that this new way of life
imposed conformity upon middle-class America and denied them individuality. Other scholars, increasingly as the twentieth century wore on, sought to revise suburban history, claiming that the American suburb is in fact, diverse on several levels. These revisionists insist that the conformist suburb is a mere ideology and that people of various race and class backgrounds laid claim to the American suburb. However, proponents on each side of the polemic understand that the ideology of suburbia has increasingly become synonymous with America. But scholars disagree about whether the white, middle-class American suburb exists in reality or only as a shared perception of such place. The “myth of suburbia” arose out of this debate, a phrase used to denote the disparity between the promise of homeownership and material success in places like Levittown and the actual delivery of a false sense of homogeneity and ultimately, a way of life not distinctly different from that in the city (Berger 39).

In *When America Became Suburban* (2006), Robert A. Beauregard combines sociological and historical evidence to retrace the formulation of American national identity that occurred precisely at the collision of suburbanization, domestic prosperity and global dominance of the United States. He terms this time period between the 1940s and the 1970s the “‘short American Century’” (xiii). He argues that conceptions of post-war American life were rooted in mass consumption, a new way of living that centered on commodities and white collar labor. Advertising and television portrayed an uncritical picture of suburbia, citing ads for dishwashers and shows like *Leave it to Beaver* that insisted the American Dream was attainable in the suburb. Beauregard explains this impulse to present an image of the “suburban way of life [as] ideologically and substantively ‘clean’ and uniquely American” as opposed to the filthy, racialized and riotous city as a political maneuver to situate American democracy and capitalism uniquely against both communism and their European cultural heritage. The opportunity to
safeguard and insulate the home front and the nuclear family within suburban boundaries
motivated suburbanites distance themselves from the evils fostered in the city and beyond (159).
The suburbs symbolized both “political freedom and freedom of consumer choice” to the
industrializing Western European nations and offered a uniquely American alternative to
communism (170). And for many Americans, the suburb was an alternative that was attainable,
even sensible. Suburbanization led to American exceptionalism because no other nation in the
world had made such a lifestyle so desirable and readily available to its citizens as did the United
States during the 25 years after World War II. Thus, a national identity arose from the suburban
landscape, characterized by freedom, progress and a shared sense that “Americans are always in
the process of ‘becoming’” (183).

Beauregard foregrounds the intellectual and literary critiques of the conformity, boredom
and homogenization that resulted from tract housing, consumer culture and domestic life. (138).
These critiques, ironically, were made at the same time families were rushing to the suburbs,
namely in the 1960s and 1970s (141). Lewis Mumford's often quoted description of the tract
housing developments and the lifestyles available to their residents illustrates the powerful
cultural force of the suburb. In 1961, he characterized the suburbs of the United States as:

a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances,
on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class,
the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances,
eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in
every respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. [In short] . . .
the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from
which escape is impossible. (6)
Mumford's critique indicates the costs of supposedly achieving the American Dream through the suburban way of life. The result was a social class of “organization men” who were reduced to mere mechanisms of the American capitalist, cultural regime. Since Mumford's early characterization of the suburb as vacant of cultural or intellectual capital, scholars have continued to attack the suburb as a homogenizing force that fosters a distinctly powerful—but ultimately deceptive—image of what it means to be American.

Liberal feminists posited a gendered critique of the conformity of the suburb, specifically attacking the role of housewife it proscribed for women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, describes a widespread dissatisfaction among suburban women and its expectations of femininity. Freidan explains that many women did not find fulfillment in housework and appliances as popular images of the suburb suggest they should. Instead, the suburb trapped them in roles that prevented them from maximizing their abilities outside the home. For Friedan and her readers, the separate spheres that the suburbs encouraged did not bring happiness but resulted in feelings of emptiness and despair. Despite the economic prosperity and general optimism, suburban women were “haunted in their homes” (Clapson 130).

Observers of suburbia highlight various consequences of a conformist white middle-class that were not made obvious in the promising depictions of suburban lifestyles present in print and visual media. Two crucial phenomena emerge from homogenizing forces of the American suburb, as represented in the scholarship: the creation of a private, non-confrontational moral order and the invisibility of whiteness. An overview of the ways in which scholars articulate the moral order and whiteness poses further critiques of suburb and also leaves gaps that later, revisionist scholars will take up with evidence of suburban diversity.
The loosely connected social environment of suburbia fosters a sense of indifference that is often read by observers as a peaceable lifestyle. However, scholars such as M.P. Baumgartner and Lorraine Delia Kenny have understood this as moral minimalism, or the avoidance of conflict that is ultimately damaging. M.P. Baumgartner defines moral minimalism in his book, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (1988) as an approach “in which people prefer the least extreme reactions to offenses and are reluctant to exercise any social control against one another at all” (Baumgartner 3).

Baumgartner’s anthropological study of Hampton, a suburb of New York, reveals the extent to which residents keep conflicts private, sometimes resolving family problems quietly and internally but most often avoiding them altogether (42–43). Baumgartner concludes that the custom of moral minimalism in the family is transmitted to the larger context of the suburban communities. Thus, a common practice of avoidance and indifference pervades in the American suburb. This perception is congruent with the belief that “social control is dirty and unpleasant work” (130) and so confrontation is strongly discouraged. In fact, “staying away” from an offensive neighbor becomes the naturalized response of reasonable, mature adults (131). Thus, avoidance becomes the norm and alienation develops among neighbors.

Kenny’s evaluation of moral minimalism in *Daughters of Suburbia* results from her ethnographic study of eighth grade suburban white girls. She finds their suburban environment encourages a moral minimalism that does not create space for critical consciousness about right and wrong, good and bad, but instead provides for the girls only a cursory understanding of their morals and values. For example, a discussion of abortion in class was quickly diverted to the topic of the only non-white student’s “pretty” Korean name as opposed to her “boring“ American one (23). This functioned as a scapegoat so that the girls would not have to firmly claim a
position for themselves or discover that they disagree with one another. Kenny labels this sort of avoidance as “‘acting white’ in that they effortlessly and unselfconsciously deracialized the norm” (25).

This small example serves as an indicator for the ways whiteness functions in suburbia as invisible. Congruent with the preference to avoid confrontations in favor of distant but friendly exchange, Kenny finds that suburban whites fail to acknowledge the cultural capital and social privilege their whiteness provides. Whites are perceived to be without race in suburbia which allows them to enjoy their privilege through various “silences, disavowels, and rationalizations” (46). Racial identity, unnamed and inexplicable for Kenny's white, middle-class informants, remains powerfully invisible.

Also, in the void of real-life Others in suburbia, Kenny finds that suburbanites construct imaginary Others in order to stabilize their normativity. Media representations of Otherness, in particular, aid in the ability for suburban dwellers to consider questions of race or issues of reproductive rights as someone else’s problem. Kenny’s eighth graders believe themselves to be insulated from these issues and as a result, entirely uncritical about them. They take their privilege for granted, Kenny concludes, because nothing about their greenhouse existence forces them to do otherwise. The girls end up leading “storyless (normal)” lives that cannot account for difference in any productive way (199). Instead, they reproduce the suburban belief that one is simply born white by “disavowing difference and telling white lies” (198).

According to Baumgartner's assessment of moral minimalism and Kenny's critical evaluation of the functioning of whiteness in suburbia, the ways in which suburbanites come to understand their own identities lies in the security of the knowable and the similar. Thus,
through conventions such as moral minimalism and invisible whiteness, suburbia can avoid or ignore any challenges to the homogeneous suburban ideal.

The analyses of suburban spaces by scholars such as Mumford, Beauregard, and Kenny argue for the acknowledgment of the individual investment of suburbanites in upholding an image of the suburban American Dream. Political and social ideologies, perceptions (or, in Kenny’s case absence of perception) about race, and understandings of community are continually and reciprocally formed and informed by suburbia. Thus, according to these scholars, suburbia is a “uniform environment” (Mumford 6) that encourages conformity, upholding white, middle-class, heterosexual family values. It is established not only through tract-housing and legislation but by interpersonal practices that perpetuate the ideological distinction between city filth, diversity and deviance and the ideal suburban way of life. In other words, the ideology of suburbia requires willful performances that with enough repetition become normalized and thus, the city-suburb divide becomes naturalized.

Revisionist Critique of Suburbia

While many scholars denounce suburbs as white-washed wastelands, others counter this characterization by attending to race and class as categories for analyzing suburbia. Suburban scholars who aim to reveal the commonsense image as unrepresentative of the population of the American suburbs have examined specifically Blacks and the working class. These scholars do not evaluate the moral, cultural or aesthetic value of suburb as the critics of conformity did. Most revisionist scholars write at least a generation after Mumford and Whyte and seek to complicate the connection between the image of a conformist suburbia and its experiential counterpart. Drawing from the rapid rate of diversification of suburbs that began in the 1970s, suburban scholarship also benefited from a theoretical shift toward multiculturalism in the 1980s.
Scholars began to rewrite the history of the American suburb as a place that fostered some diversity, despite overt attempts to prevent it.

While the suburbs offered protection from the crime and random violence prevalent in the city, Black families were subject to racial discrimination and threats there as well. Despite the passage of Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act in 1968, often referred to as the Fair Housing Act, which “prohibits racial discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing,” racial minorities experienced implicit racism as they moved to the suburbs (Loewen 136). In other words, throughout the 1970s, “Blacks were in the suburbs but not of the suburbs” (Lake 3). Writing in the early 1980s, Robert C. Lake argues that race lines were merely replicated in suburban space, which means, at the individual level, “suburbanization for blacks connotes constrained residential choice, a restricted and less efficient housing search process, and limited opportunities for housing equity and wealth accumulation” (239).

Revisionist scholars contend with the body of scholarship that reifies the suburb as the locus of racism, redlining and intolerance. They also respond to the criticism of conformity to complicate the gap between those become representative of suburbia (the white middle class) and those who also actually live there (which includes racial minorities and poor and working class). If “contemporary suburbia [is no longer] the stuff of television reruns” (Lang 7), then revisionist scholars aim to reconstruct a suburban collective memory that can account for diverse values and priorities (Mattingly 49).

Despite redlining and other discriminatory practices intended to keep African Americans and other racial minorities out of the suburbs, members of the Black middle class did begin to migrate there after 1960 (Clapson 82). Several factors enabled Black suburbanization. While overflowing city ghettos and decentralization legislation of urban slums contributed to the push
of African Americans toward suburban spaces, Civil Rights activism and African Americans’ exercise of choice were central vehicles for black suburbanization. The suburban aspiration for African Americans functioned similarly to the ways it did for white Americans. Avoiding the city, procuring a house with a garden and residing in the suburban neighborhood itself were motives for both Blacks and whites who relocated from urban or rural areas (51–52). The burgeoning Black middle class sought after the safety, comfort and privacy that suburbia promised. By 1960, nearly 3 million African Americans resided in suburbia.

Black families who did settle in suburbia enjoyed many of the advantages of suburban life, particularly better schooling, safety, mobility and social integration. For those who remained in the suburbs and withstood racial discrimination benefited from the opportunities afforded by the suburban way of life. In some cases, government intervention countered discriminatory practices and encouraged Black suburbanization. For example, Chicago implemented the Gatreaux Assisted Housing Program in 1976 to desegregate housing areas in the city and relocate racial minorities and working-class families to the suburbs (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 40–41). Through legislation such as this, the suburban ideal—in some form—became attainable for many Blacks and working-class people that were previously excluded from it. The declining inner city of Chicago made suburban life seem an attractive alternative. The program offered an escape to suburbia that promised to benefit participants' “safety, their children's schooling and social relations, and their own job opportunities” (54).

Revisionist scholarship often treats class as a category of analysis that is distinct from (yet related to) race. This body of work illustrates that not all suburban spaces are reserved for middle-class Americans. In fact, working-class streetcar and industrial suburbs proliferated by the end of the nineteenth century (Nicolaides and Weise 3). Composed mostly of blue collar
workers who labored in nearby factories, these neighborhoods operated communally. Many residents built their own houses, tended vegetable gardens and raised livestock. These efforts allowed them to experience their own version of the suburban ideal (3–4).

Working-class and lower-income suburbs continued to grow following World War II. (Muller 74–75). Sociological evidence also points to suburbia as a home to the poor; they are scattered throughout suburban spaces. While the imagined suburb relies on a firm boundary between middle-class Americans and the poor and working class, this is not the lived reality for many suburbanites. The attitudes and values of working-class suburbanites also differ from their more affluent counterparts. They are characterized by social interaction through local informal groups, a lively street culture that fosters community cohesiveness, and a lack of aspiration for upward mobility. This portrait of working-class and poor suburban life contrasts sharply the vision of the middle-class suburb which is stereotypically vacuous of communal relationships and instead driven by material gain and consumerism.

Taking into consideration the various interventions posited by revisionist scholars, suburban critic Bennett Berger concludes:

Clearly then, one suburb (or one kind of suburb) is likely to differ from another not only in terms of the cost of its homes, the income of its residents, their occupations and commuting patterns, but also in terms of its educational levels, the character of the region, the size of the suburb, the social and geographical origin of its residents, and countless more indices—all of which, presumably, may be expected to lead to differences in “way of life.” (39)

Revisionist scholars have intervened at crucial points to counter the notion that the suburb is a site of white, middle-class conformity and to challenge the predominant image that extends from that perception. Indeed, racial minorities live and have lived in suburbia and working-class families have carved out spaces for themselves as well. This critical juncture in suburban scholarship presses for a revisioning of the American suburb as a multicultural and diverse place
that does incorporate various ways of life. It foregrounds the disparity between the image of the suburb and its experiential reality and creates discursive space for exploring further axes of difference that are present there.

**Searching for Suburbia in Literature**

As revisionist scholars point out, the suburb that produces robotic Organization Men in gray flannel suits is an incomplete picture. The suburb as a haven for white middle-class families who occupy identical housing and perpetuate a conformist American culture is not the only model of the American suburb. More recent socio-historical evidence proves that suburban populations do include working-class and poor Americans as well as Blacks and other racial minorities. Despite these historical interventions, the *image* of a white, middle-class suburb remains hegemonic. Thus, when Bill Bryson recalls his childhood suburb and Richard Bachman illustrates an Ohio neighborhood, each is really conjuring a representation of suburbia. This representation does not account for diverse racial identities, class backgrounds or gender roles that clearly exist there.

Instead, the image of the suburb functions as a literary construction. The whiteness and middle-class status that presumably formulate the foundation of suburbia do not properly reflect demographic information; it is a narrative about the United States and Americanness. As the polemic within suburban discourse demonstrates, this narrative carries considerable cultural consequences. It helps to shape conceptions about what it means to be American throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The image of the white middle-class suburb stands at odds with the more complicated picture posited by revisionist scholars. Because the suburb represents a place that in actuality, is more subtly diverse that the image accounts for, to begin to understand it, we must examine literature.
Literary texts are appropriate places to investigate the “already mythologized setting” of suburbia and explore the ways authors negotiate with its constructedness. (Price 126). Suburbia offers a lens through which to examine the details of every day suburban life and the meanings and implications for the fictive suburbanites that are involved. From this analytical standpoint, perfunctory activities such as mowing the lawn, cleaning the house or helping out a neighbor become politicized; as part of commonsense vision of suburbia, they become part of the larger dialectic about who lives there versus who gets to be represented. Thus, a move from historical and sociological scholarship to literary constructions of suburbia allows observers to tease out the intrinsic complexity and heterogeneity that characterizes the meaning making of suburbanites' lives. Also, the image is a familiar trope, resonating with readers as part of a shared imagined place. Fictive accounts of suburban life can manipulate that commonsense trope to reveal to readers its inherent incongruity.

The impulse to look to literature for a broader understanding of suburbia, for Roger Webster, stems from the fact that “suburbia has no ‘history’; its archives are empty. There is no depth from which archeology might exhume its artifacts.” (Webster 2). Referring to the critique of suburban conformity, this perspective of suburbia renders it a depthless and artificial site that bears little nuance. In an attempt to complicate this prevailing image, Webster locates literature as the primary site for exploring the complexity of the various intersections suburban space, American identities and meaning making.

If suburbia signifies the absence of culture, the lack of aesthetics, then “that very absence of signification becomes a haunting presence” (2), a paradox Webster turns to narrative to explain. Literary representations unmask the simulacrum of suburbia by using it as a backdrop for which to craft individuality and subjectivity (4). Due to trends in cultural studies and
interdisciplinary scholarship, literature about suburbia has shifted from an external perspective to an internal one, allowing those inside suburbia to define their subjectivities in relation to it rather, as has been traditionally done since the nineteenth century, in opposition to it (3–5).

If we understand suburbia as simultaneously consumer and producer of culture, as Webster suggests, then literature can provide a discursive space in which to understand it. A recent trend of literary representations of suburbia is to characterize it as a liminal space, drawing attention to “the condition of ‘in-betweenness’ reflecting an uncomfortably rootless position ascribed to the suburbs” (Lea 141). Narratives can explore more freely the ways “people wrestle personally with their feelings of belonging and alienation” in suburbia precisely because their constructedness allows for imaginative representations and meaning making (141). Scholars from both sociological and historical traditions suggest literature as a place from which to understand racial and class divisions that have shaped and been shaped by the image of the American suburb. Revisionist scholarship discredits the white, middle-class suburb ideal by introducing data about the presence of Blacks and working-class families. Thus, the commonsense vision of suburbia—Bryson's childhood neighborhood and Bachman's Poplar Street—remains cohesive, despite addition of racial and class minorities into suburban history. Thus, analysis of literary characterizations of the suburb facilitates an evaluation of the ways the suburb functions as an ideology.

**Suburbia and Sexuality**

The image of suburbia exists as an ideal marker of American middle-class identity. In order to make a claim for diversity, some scholars examine the various racial identities, class backgrounds and gender ideologies that challenge the dominant paradigm of white, middle-class, educated family as only desirable model for suburbia. Scholars have relied on narrative analyses to nuance the critique of suburbia and provide commentary on the lived experience of life in the
suburbs. However, in this push to complicate and revise the discourse, sexuality has remained outside the ever-widening focus. While heterosexual family structure is foundational to the suburban ideology, scholars who challenge other normative elements of suburbia (that is, whiteness and middle-class status) fail to interrogate the presumption of heterosexuality. The commonsense vision of the suburb relies on heterosexual marriage and procribes distinct roles for women (wife and mother) as well as men (husband, father and breadwinner). Both the critics of conformity and revisionist scholars neglect to notice that assumption of heterosexuality functions similarly as that of whiteness and middle-class status.

Discussion of sexuality within suburban discourse is limited to a critique of the repressiveness of traditional gender roles set in place by heterosexual marriage contracts, invoking the suburban impulse to police female sexuality that Fishman describes in 18th century London. For example, Constance Perin indicates sexual activity in suburbia is perceived to disrupt social life, encouraging a fear and silence around sexuality (Perin 173). As Betty Friedan and Dolores Hayden argue, suburbia has served to maintain Victorian notions about gender roles and domesticity, shrouding female sexuality with a cloak of privacy. The suburb relies on a foundational rejection of the sexual availability the city facilitates for white women, yet sexuality remains absent as a critical lens through which to contest and complicate the ideal of the American suburb.

The gap in the discourse around female (hetero)sexual desire also calls for further interrogation into other deviations from the norm. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities are instances of sexual deviance that remain unacknowledged by suburban scholars. Queer studies scholars, many drawing from literary traditions, advocate a central focus on sexual desire and deviance as well as queer sexualities and identities.
Queer sexualities are often perceived as belonging in the city. Urban spaces have not only been locations for female heterosexual deviance, but are also largely conceptualized as meccas for queer sexualities. The belief that the cosmopolitan city supplies a haven for queer identities and desires is evidenced by Judith Halberstam's admission that she, too, uncritically conceived of urban space as progressive and friendly to queers as opposed to rural spaces that were backward and dangerous places to conduct queer lives. *In a Queer Time and Place* explores Halberstam's own biases regarding the urban-rural divide and interrogates the pervasiveness of the concept of “metronormativity” that, in her analysis, “reveals the conflation of ‘urban' and ‘visible”’ as opposed to rural and closeted (36–7). She attends to the ways in which rural spaces are perceived as closets that are characterized as hostile environments for queer identities.

Halberstam discusses specifically the urban-rural divide because she is concerned with the life story and media representations of Brandon Teena, however the suburb aligns ideologically on the side of the rural in this case. Lawrence Knopp points out the portrayal of gentrified gay neighborhoods such as San Francisco's Castro district as centres of hedonism and self-indulgence, of other gay entertainment areas (such as San Francisco's South-of-Market) as dangerous sadomasochistic underworlds, of red-light districts as threatening to 'family values', of non-white neighborhoods as centres of rape, or alternatively, of suburbs as places of blissful monogamous (and patriarchal) heterosexuality. (193)

Scholarship about queer identities and desires has centered on urban spaces primarily because of the institutional representation and visibility often available there. However, as Halberstam, Knopp and other scholars argue, cities are not the *only* viable spaces where queer identities are carried out and they are not the quintessential refuge from suburban heteronormativity.

Also, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the perceived proper, natural and desirable orientations of space emphasize individual spaces, divided living quarters, homeownership and
the “unblemished lawn, free from weeds, dandelions, dog feces or planted tires” (Perin 31) as symbolic achievement of the American Dream. Implicit in that articulation is the heterosexual family. For example, Delores Hayden remarks on the myriad ways domestic spaces come to shape women’s “natural” roles as wives and mothers. The negation of female sexual desire and its ideological relegation to marriage and motherhood leaves the image of suburban housewife steadfast in the American vision of the suburb. Certainly, the lack of attention to queer sexuality in suburban scholarship also speaks to the ways queers have been discounted as sexual deviants and precluded from active participation in the American suburban imaginary and instead perceived as belonging in and shaped by urban filth.

While revisionist scholars sought to complicate the picture of the American suburb by introducing evidence of Blacks, working-class and poor people that have called suburbia home since its inception, the axis of sexual diversity remains invisible. Heterosexuality stands unchallenged by suburban critics from both sides of the polemic resulting in a further reified norm. In response to this oversight in the discourse, I invoke queer studies scholarship and introduce sexuality as a category of analysis for understanding the construction of the suburb in Jeffrey Eugenides' novels. Because sexuality inextricably informs constructions of race, class and gender, previous disregard for it results in an incomplete challenge and critique to the image of suburbia. Employing an intersectional model that accounts for a multiplicity of simultaneous identities (race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation) will effect a more nuanced reading of The Virgin Suicides and Middlesex and open larger questions about how the suburban image functions as a regulator of sexuality.
CHAPTER 3
THE THREAT OF FEMALE HETEROSEXUAL DESIRE IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

Containment and protection of female heterosexual desire motivated members of the white middle class to relocate to suburban spaces since the eighteenth century. As Robert Fishman illustrates, the foundation for the ideological construction of the suburb as a morally superior alternative to the industrialized city rests on the perceived necessity to confine white bourgeois women in order to ensure their sexual purity. Defined in binary opposition to the city, the twentieth-century American suburb is interpolated through advertisements, print and televisual media, fiction and socio-historical scholarship as the realization of the American Dream. While suburban discourse complicates the ideology of suburb as a sexual refuge through explorations of race and class, it is integral to recognize the gendered implications for the suburb that originate in industrializing Victorian London, because it is within this tradition Jeffrey Eugenides situates his articulation of late twentieth-century American female sexuality in *The Virgin Suicides*.

Eugenides constructs an unnamed suburb of Detroit as the backdrop for the explanation and critique of the suburb's inherent repression of female heterosexual desire. The decision to leave the suburb unidentified invites two congruent interpretations. First, the setting of *The Virgin Suicides* recalls the Detroit suburb in which Eugenides grew up (Callado-Rodriguez 37). Second, the anonymity of the suburb allows it to stand in as the prototypical suburb, simultaneously ideologically pervasive yet impossible to define in certain terms. Furthermore, the city of Detroit carries significant symbolic meaning: “As the literal engine of progress for the twentieth century, Detroit represents the heart of socioeconomic American culture, the hub of industry for which the suburbs act as a fortifying mechanism and idyllic shelter for the achievers of the American Dream” (Womack and Mallory-Kani 165). Eugenides draws from the cultural
legacy of Detroit as a location “in which industrial development had a close and early link with suburbanization” (Kenyon 3). Cultural historian of Detroit Amy Maria Kenyon recognizes the significance of Detroit to the history of suburbia but she explicitly denies that its suburbs stand as a universal model (3). However Eugenides disagrees. He comments, “Detroit, to my mind, is one of the very important American cities, where things happened that are emblematic of American history: the rise of the auto industry, the race riots of 1967. In addition, “lots of culture has come out of Detroit” (qtd. in Schiff 114–5). Detroit also is a notorious center for poverty, crime, pollution and other “filth,” an exaggerated space from which to elucidate the city/suburb binary. Thus, the effect of allowing the specific location of The Virgin Suicides to remain nameless precipitates a reading of the novel as addressing the condition of suburbia as both specific to Detroit and also indicative of larger cultural implications.

Within this context, Eugenides emerges as a suburban author, situating his narratives—first The Virgin Suicides and later, Middlesex—within the same socio-historical moment of 1970s suburban Detroit. He invokes a rich history of industrialization, Ford factories, immigration, racial tension and economic decline. The suburb features significantly in The Virgin Suicides forcing the reader to contend with it as Eugenides presents it. It is suburbia that Eugenides seeks to critique and he does so by intervening in the image of the American suburb with instances of deviant sexual desire. The effect is an unraveling of an image that is tied to an existing place with a narrative of its own: an actual—albeit unnamed—suburb of Detroit.

Another function of the nameless setting for The Virgin Suicides is the distance it creates between Eugenides' own childhood on which he draws in order to create the setting for the novel (qtd. in Schiff 112). In order to launch a meaningful and poignant critique of the place he comes from, Eugenides must establish a buffer between his lived experience and the fictive one in the
novel. Forcing a gap between himself and the suburb creates discursive space from which he can critique an ideal with which he is intimately familiar. The unnamed suburb coupled with the collective narrator that tells the story retrospectively form a rhetorical duality of the author's distance and proximity to the subject of the novel—the suburb. As a result, Eugenides writes from a well-informed, reliable position to launch a nuanced, careful critique of the American suburb. This question of distance/proximity will recur later in chapter regarding the discussion of the narrators.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides introduces the narrative of the five Lisbon girls who, as is foreshadowed by the title and revealed in the opening pages of the novel, escape suburbia via suicide. Narrated by a collective group of adult men who lived nearby the girls as youth, *The Virgin Suicides* memorializes the death of the Lisbon girls by recounting the events during the year between the attempt of the first sister, Cecilia, and the subsequent suicides of the four remaining girls. The narrators trace the simultaneous deterioration of their neighborhood in an attempt to elucidate both the cause and the consequence of the tragic loss of the virginal yet desirous adolescent girls. They embark on an obsessive journey to capture the memory of the Lisbon girls, piecing together various source materials in order to speculate about the motivation for their suicide. A tension emerges between Detroit and the suburb in which the Lisbon girls serve as a metonym for the sexualized filth of the city that threatens to corrupt and unmask the illusory suburb. This tension is revealed by the various moments in the text in which suburbanites willfully ignore the city’s presence, choosing to reinterpret its warning signs or to not acknowledge them at all. An analysis of the ways the narrators reconstruct the memory of the Lisbon girls distills three distinct methods suburbanites employ in order to perpetuate the suburban image: repression, restoration and misrecognition. First, Mrs. Lisbon (in addition to
other implicit forces) functions as the repressive guardian over her daughters' sexualities by containing both their desires and their bodies under suffocating levels of surveillance. Second, they counter the denigration of the Lisbon home that occurs alongside the grieving process of the family over their loss of Cecilia by cleaning up any visual reminders of instability or deviance. Restoration of the home, the lawn and the neighborhood figures centrally in the suburb's effort to define itself as a beacon of purity—both sexual and social. First, suburbanites in the novel continually misrecognize indicators of city presence in their neighborhood and instead reinterpret or ignore them. In each of these instances, suburbanites in *The Virgin Suicides* choose to ignore the looming presence of Detroit, resulting in an overall schema of willful—yet unacknowledged—labor performed in order to maintain the ideological boundary between city and suburb.

The novel opens with a sense of nostalgia for a suburban neighborhood that was once idyllic. The narrators introduce their first piece of many pieces of evidence they collect in their memorial of the Lisbon girls. Labeled “Exhibit #1,” a snapshot of the Lisbon home, taken by a real estate agent prior to Cecilia's first suicide attempt suggests a recent suburban past that existed harmoniously with the image of the American suburb (5). Described as “a comfortable suburban home” the Lisbon house was once a prototype of suburban life in a time when “the slate roof had not yet begun to shed its shingles, the porch was still visible above the bushes, and the windows were not yet held together with strips of masking tape” (5). The photograph illustrates that at one point, prior to the suicides of the Lisbon girls, life in this suburb of Detroit was stable, even happy. At the very least, life was normal.

The photograph is tattered, an indication that the suburban status quo represented there exists only as a faded memory. The image conjured by the picture is reminiscent of
uninterrupted, pristine lives previously carried out in the Lisbons' neighborhood but also representative of an extra-diegetic longing for an American way of life that the suburb no longer delivers. The photograph foreshadows the decline of both the Lisbon home and the suburb, but also recognizes the necessity for the boys to retrace their suburban histories and recover the memory of a suburb that would otherwise be lost. Thus, the novel attends, from the beginning, to the competing narratives about the Lisbon girls and the suburb: the sterilized, nearly forgotten story that the suburb selectively tells and the retelling by the narrators that complicates and contradicts it. An analysis of the various ways suburbanites (fail to) respond to the suicides of the Lisbon girls illustrates the naturalized labor required by the parents of the suburb to maintain an illusion of an enclosed, regulated space. The arduous efforts of the narrators to reconstruct the past of their childhood suburb, then, reveals their own awareness that the suburb of their parent's generation is a fiction, and while they are complicit in the reproduction of that fiction, their consciousness of it is, in a small way, also a critique.

**Policing Female Sexuality: Repression of the Lisbon Girls' Desire**

Eugenides demonstrates the various ways the suburbanites in *The Virgin Suicides* work vigorously to maintain the illusion that their suburb is a safe haven for white middle-class families, defined against the filth and deviance of the city. Their efforts are foregrounded through the active repression of the sexuality of Lisbon girls. As discussed in the previous chapter, suburbia hinges upon the control of female sexuality, confining women to reproductive roles of wife and mother while denying them sexual agency. The suburb in general, but also Mrs. Lisbon specifically, work diligently to ensure the sexuality of the Lisbon girls is controlled because they have a vested interest in the girls virginity. Their suburban imaginary depends on the repression of female sexual desire and thus, must be policed.
Mrs. Lisbon is the key guardian of her daughters’ sexualities. Characterized by the neighbors as embodying “queenly iciness,” she monitors the girls’ bodies for signs of make-up and forbids revealing clothing (8). She assembles homemade dresses that desexualize the girls with their low hems and bagginess and attest to their virginity with the accents of lace. Kenneth Womack and Amy Mallory-Kani describe the Lisbon parents as “jostled by fears of the rampant promiscuity sometimes desired by pubescent girls en route to sexual maturity, [and so they] inhibit excessive amounts of social interaction between their daughters and others in their age bracket of the opposite sex” (169–70).

Despite Mrs. Lisbon’s continued efforts to conceal and the girl’s bodies from the eyes of adolescent boys, the narrators are fascinated by their beauty. Throughout the novel, the narrators serve as voyeurs, observing the girls obsessively while always aware that the girls were out of their reach, unattainable and impenetrable. They comment, “whenever we got a glimpse [of the girls], their faces looked indecently revealed, as though we were used to seeing women in veils” (8). Despite this intense obsession with the Lisbon girls, they cannot locate its origin or explain its significance, even years later as adults.

Cecilia's psychiatrist, Dr. Hornicker, offers one explanation for her condition following her initial suicide attempt. He concludes “her suicide was an act of aggression inspired by the repression of adolescent libidinal urges” (21). Dr. Hornicker suggests to Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon that they “relax their rules” and permit the girls to interact with boys their own age (21). Momentarily, they reform their restrictive policies. Not only did they allow boys allowed to enter the house for the first time (22), but they also hosted a chaperoned party to which many neighborhood boys received invitations (24).
The party exists in the boys' memory as a distinct turning point for the Lisbon girls. They recall that as guests nervously congregate in the basement, Cecilia excuses herself from the party. She climbs upstairs and leaps from a window onto the fence. Mrs. Lisbon, recognizing that temporary relaxation of her stringent rules only pushed Cecilia over the edge, responds by intensifying the isolation of the remaining four girls. For most of the summer of Cecilia’s suicide, the girls remain inside, locked away from outside influence. They return to school in the fall, but are barred from any extracurricular activities and do not socialize with their peers. They stand as a unified body in the memory of the narrators, moving through the hallways of the school almost as if they were apparitions. The narrators recall “various sightings” of the Lisbon girls who “merged into general image” of “skirts growing transparent in the light” and who would “vanish” if followed (100). The elusiveness of the Lisbon girls piques the interest of the neighborhood boys. The more Mrs. Lisbon isolated the girls, the more curious the boys became.

One classmate of the girls, Trip Fontaine, takes particular interest in Lux and convinces Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon to allow him and his friends to take Lux and her sisters to the Homecoming dance. At the dance, each Lisbon girl experience their new social freedom differently, but Lux’s actions bring about the most severe consequences for the girls. Crowned Homecoming King and Queen, Trip and Lux sneak out of the dance, away from the surveillance of Mr. Lisbon and escapes to the football field. Trip confesses later to the narrators that “just got sick of her right then” and leave her to find her own way home (138–9). When Lux arrives home hours after curfew, Mrs. Lisbon is listening to church music, “‘the kind of music they play when you die’” while she Lisbon disciplines her daughter (135). The music foreshadows the suicides of the remaining Lisbon girls, but more immediately the death of the newly experienced social freedom they each had tasted that evening.
Lux’s disobedience leads Mrs. Lisbon to “shut the house in maximum-security isolation” (141). She forces the girls to withdraw from school, explaining that it was her motherly duty to shelter them from boys while they continued to mourn Cecilia’s death (142). The control she exerts on the girls’ sexualities through shapeless clothing and extreme isolation exemplifies the level of labor required to plug up the cracks in the suburban myth. Mrs. Lisbon functions in the novel primarily as the guardian of her daughter’s sexuality. Her obligation as suburban mother is to contain female sexual desire and ensure it is only expressed through the proper avenues of heterosexual marriage and motherhood. Thus, the Lisbon home transforms into a metaphorical bunker, with canned goods piled up in the basement. When Mr. Lisbon resigns from his position at the school, no one entered or left the home. The narrators recall a distinct odor emanating from the house that smelled of decay and rot but also “contained too much syrup to be death itself” (165).

Despite the enormous pressure to remain contentedly contained in their home, the Lisbon girls resist in subtle ways. Therese transcended her suburban isolation by communicating in Morse code through the “genderless, nationless medium” of a hand radio with an unidentified person in Columbia. The girls experienced the world outside their suburban prison through travel catalogs. Lux, in particular, rebelled against her imprisonment, participating in clandestine sex acts with working-class boys on the roof.

Mrs. Lisbon put forth her best efforts to contain her daughters’ sexualities, yet they found ways to imagine themselves out of their prison. Even extreme isolation away from any potential threat of corruption (in school, church, extra-curriculars, etc.), Mrs. Lisbon cannot suffocate the girls’ desires entirely. They surface anyway, revealing Mrs. Lisbon’s efforts to be in vain.
However, Eugenides shows that these mild acts of resistance were insufficient and suggests that the Lisbon girls could never truly become agents of their own sexuality within the confines of their suburb. Therese communicated her frustration with the constraints of her suburban life, telling her date at the Homecoming dance: “we just want to live. If anyone would let us’” (132). Suicide offered the only escape from isolation for the Lisbon girls. They invite the boys to witness the final moments of their struggle as they imagine together escaping to Florida to start new lives. However, that fantasy is overshadowed by the girls’ plans for suicide. While they are able to imagine a place where they can exist outside the confines of their suburb, they can never get there and are left only with the option of suicide.

The repression of female sexuality—and the resulting suicides—necessitates other forms of labor. Because the suicides of the Lisbon girls signals an escape from the repressive forces of suburbia, even more labor is required to sustain the image of the suburb. Despite the fact that the Lisbon girls challenge the suburban status quo, the neighborhood responds collectively in order to ensure the image of their suburb remains outwardly stable. Their labor exists on a larger scale than that of Mrs. Lisbon; while policing female sexuality forms the core of suburban labor, covering up any deviance requires a group effort.

**Keeping up Appearances: Restoration of the Home and the Suburb**

Mrs. Lisbon's failure to repress sexuality successfully (which is first unmasked by Cecilia's suicide) speaks to a larger ineptitude of the suburb to sustain a haven for white women. As Chapter One indicated, exterior maintenance of the suburban home reflects upon the stability of those who inhabit it. In other words, a deteriorating home evidences a crumbling moral standard within it—an indication that the suburb as a whole, has failed to live up to its own image. Thus, the neighborhood in *The Virgin Suicides* steps in and performs the necessary labor that the Lisbons do not. In this way, Eugenides emphasizes the amount of willful labor the
suburbanites exert in constructing and maintaining their ideological suburb by foregrounding their obsessive impulse to restore the deteriorating Lisbon home.

Following Cecilia’s initial suicide attempt and continuing until Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon move out, the Lisbon’s neglect to perform the proper upkeep of their home. In an effort to erase the evidence of the deviant behavior that has plagued their suburb, the Lisbons' neighbors combine efforts to maintain the exterior of their home. Some neighbors, the boys report, are not concerned by Cecilia’s suicide but focus their attention instead on the potential threat the fence on which she jumped to her death posed for others. A team of men, in a self-serving neighborly favor, attempt to remove the fence “free of charge.” (53). They cannot do it themselves and solicit the help of a tow truck, assuming the Lisbons would be grateful.” Mr. Lisbon acknowledges the labor with a salute and the neighbors return to their own lives, their obligation fulfilled. “Mr. Bates did some edging . . . [and] Mrs. Hessen’s humped back dove and surfaced amid her swelling rosebushes as she sprayed” (56). A sense of normalcy returns momentarily to the suburb. Since everything—aside from an unsightly trench where the fence used to be—appears to be in its place once again, suburbanites can return to their imaginary peaceful space. Tidy outward appearance reflects a stable internal structure and so the Lisbons' neighbors insist upon a return to normalcy by removing the reminder of Cecilia’s suicide.

The suburb unites at other points to clean up the Lisbon home. Following Cecilia’s death, “the house receded behind its mists of youth being choked off, and even our [the narrators'] own parents began to mention how dim and unhealthy the place looked (145). Mr. Lisbon fails to manicure his lawn as well. (85). Parents complain to the headmaster of the school about the worsening condition of the Lisbon house, combining to form a “chorus of disapproval” (162). They believe that Mr. Lisbon's lack of attention to his home indicates a
related inability to “run his own family” (162). In other words, an unkempt suburban home
represents an unkempt suburban life. In their continued efforts to mask any signs of symbolic
filth in their midst, the neighbors try to clean up the Lisbon’s literal filth, hoping that helping
them to maintain a front of stability would reaffirm for them the imaginary suburb.

The neighborhood's response to the army of fish flies that descend upon their homes and
die reveals their obsessive impulse to resist filth in their midst. The narrators wonder “what got
into us that year or what we hated so intensely the crust of dead bugs over our lives” (56). In
another collective effort, suburbanites scrape the veneer of insects from their homes, mailboxes
and swimming pools, and tackle the Lisbon house at the end. The narrators notice the Lisbon
house is coated with more bugs than the others—”walls an inch thick”—as they sweep their
house and bag up fallen tree limbs (57).

The suburb ritualizes these processes of restoration, as exemplified by the narrators'
account of the neighborhood's annual weekend of leaf raking. The language Eugenides employs
to describe the event conjures images of camaraderie and triumph. The neighbors perform the
“raking in military ranks,” each accumulating leaf piles according to their own unique style (91).
Raking delivers “pleasure [they] felt all the way to [their] bowels. Sometimes the pleasure was
so keen [they] raked up the grass itself, leaving patches of dirt” (91). Having mastered the
decaying remnants of nature on their front lawns, the neighbors conclude their ritual by stepping
back and admiring their labor (91). This sort of ritualized restoration resonates with socio-
historical accounts of suburban homes and lawns attest to the neighborly duty of properly
maintaining the exterior of one's home in order to project an image of stability and cleanliness.

Mr. Lisbon, a usually lone but faithful participant in the suburban ritual, failed to rake his
yard in the fall following Cecilia's suicide. This time the neighbors do not feel compelled to
compensate for Mr. Lisbon's transgression and leave the leaves to pile up and get soggy, “making the Lisbon lawn look like a field of mud” (93). His inability to perform the proper labor that maintains a united suburban front further reflects his ineptitude to head his household. The leaves symbolize the tarnishing effect that the deterioration of the Lisbon home has on the suburb in general; they creep into other, well-kept yards, agitating the neighbors who upheld their duties. The image of suburbia suffers from the single blemish of the Lisbon house, which explains the neighbors' first impulse to assist the Lisbons in removing the fence and the fish flies and then their irritation when Mr. Lisbon cannot fulfill his obligations on his own.

The Lisbons fail to contain the sexuality of their daughters within the private space of their home, the first signal of deviance in suburbia. As a result, they cannot maintain the outward appearance of stability, unable to perform the necessary duties required for acceptance in suburbia. While neighborhood attempts to cover for the Lisbons' transgression from suburban norms, they eventually conclude that the Lisbons are not capable of keeping up appearances and consequently do not warrant suburban membership. This sense that those who are not worthy of enjoying the privileges suburbia has to offer, and thus do not belong there, suggests that an alternative space where they do belong exists: the city. The Lisbons' inability to enact the suburban fiction disqualifies them from claiming residence there, as if to suggest that anything that does not neatly fit into the image of the suburb should be—and almost always is—contained outside the suburban boundaries. Eugenides articulates the American perception of city and suburb as existing in binary opposition; the neighborhood's willingness to assist the Lisbons only to a certain point reifies their belief that the distinction between these spaces is impermeable. Thus, it allows them to overlook the evidence of the city in their midst that the narrators signal to
Misrecognition of City Filth in Suburbia

Eugenides exemplifies the ways suburbanites misrecognize the presence of Detroit in their midst through the narrators' reconstruction of their childhood suburb from an adult perspective. Their retrospective approach to the suburb allows Eugenides to distinguish between the narrators' understanding of its relationship to Detroit and that of their parents. This temporal distance serves as a narrative strategy to establish an ideological distance between the narrators and their childhood suburb. Eugenides can then allow them to comment somewhat critically on a space that so intimately informed their adolescent understanding of the world. Out of the narrators' retelling of their youth through simultaneous lenses of distance and proximity emerges the most subtle, but also the most precarious form of labor performed in novel: misrecognition of city presence in suburbia.

The narrators themselves never visit the city as boys, only observing it from the rooftop, hearing “sounds [they] usually couldn’t hear . . . sounds of the impoverished city [they] never visited, all mixed and muted, without sense, carried on a wind from that place” (34–5). For them, the city was a place only partially reflected in the setting sunlight through the haze and smog emitted from the factories. The occasional shouts (34), gunshots (36) or passing freighters (208) comprised a murmuring soundtrack of city life that the boys knew nothing about and their parents chose to actively overlook.

As a result of the vast ideological distance from Detroit, suburbanites could ignore aspects of city life that did not directly affect their daily life. For example, not until Cecilia’s death did the town recognize the strike of cemetery workers occurring in Detroit. The boys explain their ignorance: “we didn’t think it affected us” (36). However, the narrators recognize
that the city looms much closer to the suburb than the suburb is willing to acknowledge. From their roof view, the boys could see “the abrupt demarcation where the trees ended and the city began” (34), suggesting the insulation from the crime, poverty and other filth of the city is actually an imaginary buffer.

Suburbanites insisted, however, that the city is distinct and distant from their neighborhood, defining themselves against the filth it represented. For example, the narrators mention that the Mrs. Woodhouse, the headmaster’s wife, commutes to Detroit to volunteer with inner city children in the Head Start program. While an inconsequential detail to the overall narrative, the relationship between Mrs. Woodhouse and Detroit reveals two suburban assumptions: first, life in suburbia is in order and the children there have no need for a Head Start program; and second, city children have something to gain from the influence a white middle-class suburban woman can exert over them in her spare time. Eugenides offers this detail to provide insight into the ways Mrs. Woodhouse (and her neighbors) constructs an ideological divide between herself and the corruption of the city. They actively work toward maintaining the ideological boundary of their suburb in order reaffirm their position of privilege over the less fortunate city dwellers. Implicit in this metanarrative is the demonstration of moral superiority of Mrs. Woodhouse over racial and class others that inhabit crime-ridden, unregulated city spaces. Her relationship to the city reinforces the necessity for insulating white, middle-class, heterosexual women (and their children) from the city environment than engenders troubled, at-risk youth. The fact that she moves freely between suburb and city does not diminish the effectiveness of the suburb as a refuge for female sexuality. Rather, her role as mentor to city children intensifies the moral distinction between family life in the city—clearly in turmoil—and stable healthy familial relations that the suburb makes possible.
Another instance of choosing to look away from the evidence of the city in the suburbs that contributes to active perpetuation of the suburban ideology occurs in the incidental treatment of racial others. As Lisbon girls and their Homecoming dates cruise through their suburb, enjoying their sole brief moment of social freedom, they pass a black maid on every corner, waiting for the bus. No one in the car notices them. They fade into the suburban landscape as if they don’t exist. However, the narrators' retrospective recognition of the presence of black maids serve as a reminder both that the city is only a worker’s commute away from the suburb and that city residents can and do permeate the suburb’s tree-lined border on a daily basis. The children in the car overlook this reality, thus fortifying the illusion of the impenetrable suburb.

The narrator's cognizance of the existence of the black maids signals a development in consciousness from childhood to adulthood. The young people in the car replicate the impulse of their parents, that is, to ignore the maids altogether. The narrators, speaking from the position of a generation later, do see the black maids, which is markedly different from their parents’ perception. However, their retelling of this scene does not acknowledge the implications of the intimate inter-racial, cross-class relationships made possible by the presence of black maids in a white middle-class suburb. The narrators may see the maids, but they do not recognize them as breaches in the suburban image or evidence of the functioning reciprocal relationship between city and suburb.

The distinction between the unquestioned performance of misrecognition on the part of the narrators' parents and the conscious but complicit attitude the narrators embrace is heightened by the discussion about their lack of experience in the city. The narrators characterize their relationship to a Detroit they’d never been to by stating: “Occasionally we heard gunshots coming from the ghetto but our fathers insisted in was only cars backfiring” (36). The narrators,
looking back on the situation through the lens of adulthood, are cognizant of the disparity between the real presence of gunshots and their fathers’ repackaging of the story to fit within the fictive suburb they perceived. However, they only understand the implications of this to the degree that they know the sounds were gunshots, not exploding engines. They do not see their fathers’ deceptions as attempts to convince themselves of the protection and safety their suburb offered. The narrators accept a certain level of dishonesty as ineffectual. Violence and crime are associated with the city and thus outside the concern of suburbanites.

Eugenides comments on the irony of the illusory divide between city and suburb with the discussion of the cemetery strike. Prior to Cecilia's death, no one had ever died in the boys’ suburb and consequently, they lacked any knowledge about or experience with cemeteries. Thus, there was no reason to know that city cemetery workers were on strike until Cecilia commits suicide and the Lisbon family realizes their suburb's cemetery is full. The narrators excuse their neighborhood’s ignorance of the strike, stating they “didn’t think it affected [them]” (36). While most neighbors attend the funeral held in the city, parents leave the boys at home “to protect [them] from the contamination of tragedy” (38). This paper later addresses the question of the suburb's effort to disavow tragedy, but in this instance, parents intend to protect their sons from another type of contamination: the city. By preventing the boys from entering the city parents can protect the boys from the ills of Detroit and perpetuate the illusion of the suburb's detachment from it. Ironically, the cemetery strike serves as another announcement of Detroit's presence in suburban space in that it effects real consequences for Cecilia's funeral. Attendees are further confronted by the city at the funeral service when “the hearse had trouble getting through the gate because of the picketing” of cemetery workers (38). However, the incident is
dismissed, buried in the back pages of the neighborhood newspaper and kept secret from the boys.

The suburbanites’ misrecognition or avoidance of the city's presence in various contexts allows Eugenides to elucidate the extent to which a sort of false consciousness is perpetuated in suburbia. These details of suburban life are normalized, neutralized, and ultimately, unrecognizable as evidence of city filth. Even as adults who critique suburbia at various points in the book, the narrators are complicit with the perpetuation of the imaginary suburb. However, they are distinct from the suburban generation that preceded them because they notice the black maids and understand their father's dishonesty. Their retelling of the narrative that includes these details serves as a mechanism through which Eugenides can call attention to the disparity between the suburb of their parents' and their own understanding of it. In this gap, Eugenides launches his critique of the uncritical complicity that the suburban ideology requires.

The clearest example of suburbia’s efforts to distance itself from city life is in the town’s response to the Lisbon girls’ deaths. The Catholic Church documents all the girls’ suicides as “‘accidents,’” a term that circumvents any questions of causality (37). The local newspaper neglects to “run an article on [Cecilia’s] suicide attempt because the editor, Mr. Baubee, felt such depressing information wouldn’t fit between the front-page article on the Junior League Flower Show and the back-page photographs of grinning brides” (14–5). Even Mrs. Lisbon “refused to acknowledge any calamity” as neighbors drop by to express polite sympathy (17). Neighbors also delay sending flowers following Cecilia’s second, successful suicide attempt while they decided whether to “let the catastrophe pass in silence or to act as though the death were natural” (42). Confronting the reality of suicide is not an option for them. Instead, they struggle
to repackage it as an accident, an aberration that does not disrupt the suburban status quo and can fade quietly into suburban memory.

The suburb encourages the Lisbon girls to also conceal any outward signs of disruption caused by Cecilia's death and to continue their daily lives as if unaffected. Their school does sponsor a Day of Grieving so as to dedicate appropriate time for the Lisbon girls and their peers to process their loss. However rather than invoking the memory of Cecilia, the day aims to address grief in general so that “tragedy was diffused and universalized” (104). These strategies allow suburbanites to politely dodge the questions about why Cecilia chose suicide and avoid any indictment of the suburban way of life. The suburb collectively repackages Cecilia's suicide as an accident and then quickly dismisses it without further interrogation. Thus, she fades into memory not as a rupture in the homeostatic suburban fiction, but as an unfortunate incident of little consequence.

**Conclusion**

The boys recount the story of the Lisbon girls decades after their deaths. As adults, the narrators continue to piece together the meanings and implications of the suicides, cataloging pictures and interviews into an archive of “exhibits.” They spend their lives obsessed with the girls, fantasizing about them even in the company of their wives. They are each haunted by shadows of the Libsons, exerting an enormous effort on what might have been “the fingerprinting of phantoms” that exist only in their imaginary (187).

The narrators’ laborious endeavor of uncovering and sustaining the memory of the Lisbon girls mirrors the willful efforts of the suburbanites to maintain and perpetuate the illusion of a stable and pristine suburb. Eugenides foregrounds the sexuality of the Lisbon girls as the lens through which the suburban myth is revealed to be cracked and permeable. The boys’ desperate attempts to cling to a memory of beautiful, virginal, desirous girls is a way for Eugenides to call
attention to the lengths to which people will go to convince themselves their illusion is reality. The narrators recognized the Lisbon girls as human beings at one fleeting moment in the text, while they are on the Homecoming dates with Trip and his friends. Kevin Head is shocked to notice “‘[the Lisbon girls] weren’t all that different from [his] sister’” (123). However, the narrators dismiss this revelation and continue to search for a Rosetta stone to provide insight into their mysterious lives (170).

At the end of the novel, the narrators reveal that their childhood suburb had recently been “razed to put up a subdivision” (245). In other words, the very suburb Eugenides has shown to be an illusion, a figment of its residents’ imaginations, is destroyed and replaced with a fresh version, a new set of homogenous housing, tiny saplings, and most importantly, no memory of the Lisbon girls. While the narrators struggle to sharpen their perception of their suburban landscape, looking to the Lisbon girls for inspiration and explanation, they too are caught up within the suburban imaginary. However, their primary function is to foreground the intense labor required to maintain an illusion, to convince oneself that the illusion is reality, and then to conduct daily life accordingly. The desperate impulse of the boys to invest so much of themselves into memorializing the Lisbon girls marks a subtle, yet important distinction between their view of the suburb and that of their parents. The subdivision that replaces the Lisbons' suburb is outwardly the same, a replication of white, middle-class, heteronormativity. However, as the narrators show throughout the novel, this subdivision is characterized by a consciousness of the fictive suburb, and while its residents (the narrators included) are complicit in its replication, they are indeed aware of its illusory qualities.

Eugenides focuses on the girls’ sexuality specifically, because as suburban discourse points out, female sexuality is supposed to be contained and the suburb has historically been the
place where it is kept safe and secure. The Lisbon girls’ acts of resistance that culminate in their suicide reveals the failure of the suburb to completely repress female sexuality. However, the reiteration of suburbia in the form of a new subdivision, signals to the insistence upon perpetuating the myth that in fact, suburbia can exist in a vacuum, away from city deviance. By razing one suburb only to build a subdivision, the memory of the Lisbon girls is erased and the evidence of the cracks between the city and the suburb can be—almost—completely discarded.

The narrators’ point of view, characterized by their simultaneous distance from and proximity to their childhood suburb, allows them to present a negative portrait of the American suburb. They stand both as observers and critics of the cultural forces of their suburb that resulted in the death of the Lisbon girls. But they are also characters of the novel that function to leverage Eugenides' critique of the suburbs as well. Eugenides positions the narrators between himself and the unnamed suburb in which presumably he grew up in order to rupture his own proximity to the suburb. He removes himself from the narrative, criticizing it from the outside. As a result, The Virgin Suicides concludes with disdain for the American suburb of the 1970s, but also suggests that it has undergone a slight transformation in the lifetime of the narrators (and of Eugenides). In other words, the novel's resolution allows the reader to imagine an “outside” of suburban norms—one in which the narrators and Eugenides both report from. While this outside is only subtly different from its predecessor, it is indeed an improved and self-conscious version of its former suburban self.

The distance Eugenides establishes from the suburb about which he writes in The Virgin Suicides sets up a template for further critique in Middlesex, his second novel that also takes place in suburban Detroit. Middlesex intensifies the connection between the suburb and the city as it historicizes the cultural moment of 1970s Detroit and its suburb, Grosse Pointe, the setting
for the climax of the novel. By tracing the process by which the antagonists attain suburban membership over the course of the twentieth century, Eugenides complicates the labor required in *The Virgin Suicides* to maintain the suburban ideal, but also the labor that is needed to become suburban in the first place.
CHAPTER 4
INCEST AND INTERSEX: BECOMING SUBURBAN IN MIDDLESEX

In *The Virgin Suicides* Eugenides critiques American suburbia through the retelling of the suicides of five middle-class white girls. The novel renders their suffocated sexualities the unfortunate—but necessary—by-product of the repressive suburban environment. Set outside of Detroit in the early 1970s, *The Virgin Suicides* introduces the Lisbon family as otherwise normative members of their neighborhood: Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are married, their daughters are heterosexual, Mr. Lisbon is employed and supports his wife and children, and the family attends church regularly. Neither Eugenides nor the narrators raise questions about the family's right to be suburban; it is assumed. As a result, the novel's central concern lies with the process of perpetuation of the ideology of suburbia rather than its origin.

In *Middlesex*, however, Eugenides expands the temporal reach of the novel to include the process of becoming a white, middle-class, American member of suburbia. Further cementing his position as a suburban author, he presents a historical trajectory of the development of suburban Detroit alongside the story of three generations of the Stephanides family. The suburban destination for the family of immigrants culminates in the 1970s in Grosse Pointe, the suburb of Detroit where Eugenides grew up. Some scholars contend that the “*The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex* can be usefully understood as a single textual entity” because of their shared location and temporality (Womack and Mallory-Kani 157). However, considering these texts as distinct effects a more productive analysis of the ways in which each illustrates the American suburb and leverages a critique through different instances of deviance. First, Eugenides addresses intersections of race and class in *Middlesex* that he allowed to remain invisible in the Lisbons' white, middle-class status in *The Virgin Suicides*. Next, the retelling of a past through Cal, the narrator and protagonist of *Middlesex*, functions as not only as a memorial
but also as an explanation of his foundation in and rejection of his childhood suburb. Finally, Eugenides' treatment of incest, queer desire and intersexuality that intersect with marginalized racial and class backgrounds offers a more multi-valanced critique of suburbia than the Lisbon girls' deviant heterosexual desire could provide. While it is indeed useful to examine these novels alongside one another, to conflate them because “the narratives converge within a distinct spatiotemporal moment” is to overlook each novel's particular critique (157).

Sexual deviance in *Middlesex* appears in the American suburb in the form of incest and queer adolescent desire. Cal's grandparents and parents enter into incestuous marriages, a fact that is hidden behind outwardly normal heterosexual unions that yield seemingly average offspring. Queer desire is potentially present in the metanarrative of Cal's adult romance with Julia, however it is more obviously present in Callie's lesbian\(^1\) relationship with Obscure Object as a child. The link between these instances of deviant sexuality occurs not in terms of desire, but in Cal's gender, specifically his intersexed gender identity.

The chronology of Cal's family history begins with the emigration of his grandparents from Asia Minor in 1922 and culminates in the story of his present-day life in Berlin. Cal recalls the events that occur between these points in time. Through retelling of both his family's history and his own, he assumes different narrative voices. At times, he serves as the omniscient narrator that can provide reliable historical context. In other moments, he considers his story to be a personal memoir, allowing the reader to engage with and invest in the characters'

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\(^1\) While Cal presents the gender identity of a man as an adult, it is not until he fully reveals his “physical predicament,” that is, his non-normative genitalia, to Julia, his romantic interest, that he is able to engage with her sexually (107, 514). The recognition of his intersex identity as it presents itself vis-a-vis his genitals has prevented him from becoming sexually intimate with women for most of adulthood. While Susan Frelich Appleton contends that Cal inherits the privilege of heterosexual men by assuming a male gender identity, I argue that his experience lacks two key characteristics of such privilege: childhood socialization as a boy and normative male genitalia (“Gender, Law, and Narrative” 436). Also, because for the duration of Callie's relationship to Obscure Object, she believed herself to be a girl who was sexually attracted to another girl, I choose to describe their interactions as lesbian.
relationships to the suburb (*Middlesex* 19). This narrative strategy allows the novel to take on larger questions about suburbia because it forges a relationship between Cal and the reader and allows Eugenides to assume the position of distant social critic. The division of narrative frames effects an image of suburbanites distant enough to allow readers to see the ways in which people buy into the suburban image. Through omniscient narration, the reader is privy to the anxieties and struggles of the various characters who labor to become American. Still, it is intimate enough to evoke a sympathetic reading of the Stephanides' family's struggle. Also, because the reader experiences the novel from Cal's point of view, the novel encourages support for him along his journey.

Cal’s purpose of beginning with a retelling of his grandparents’ emigration and his parent’s lives growing up in the U.S. is to locate the origin of the recessive mutation on his fifth chromosome (that is the cause of his intersexuality) and archive the “rollercoaster ride of a single gene through time” (4). Moving between two voices and across time, Eugenides constructs a mythical narrator that is able to recall details with impossible, but believable authority. Just as the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* provide the vehicle for Eugenides critique of the suburb, Cal is the intermediary between the author and the reader. Whether Cal is immediately present or subtly narrating events separate from his own experience, the reader perceives the novel through his perspective. This strategy invites the reader to relate to and sympathize with Cal's condition. Francisco Callado-Rodriguez argues:

Cal's role as narrator becomes specifically one of convincing readers that there is nothing wrong with her/his apparently freaky condition . . . Her/his condition forces the protagonist to carry out a particular quest for sex and gender definition, for a human self that Cal sometimes understands to be a mere social invention. (81)

Callado-Rodriguez's interpretation of Cal's construction of his memoir results in a celebratory reading of the novel. He applauds Eugenides' depiction of Cal as a textual location where
multiple categorical opposites collide: woman/man, foreigner/native, and character/narrator. This results in Callado-Rodriguez's conclusion that *Middlesex* works to “denounce categorical thinking” (75). This reading suggests that Cal's position at the meeting place of many identities opens an imaginative space where nature and nurture exist harmoniously rather than as binary opposites (83). Callado-Rodriguez suggests that it is categorical thinking that prevents Cal from achieving full Americanness. Thus, *Middlesex* reflects a positive suburban space that encourages and incorporates difference as fundamental to its existence. From this perspective, Eugenides' Gross Pointe transcends categorical thinking and incubates identities that straddle the binary opposition of gender.

However, this type of celebratory reading fails to acknowledge that Cal narrates *Middlesex* from Berlin, a city historically perceived to be accepting of sexual and gender deviance. He does not remain in Gross Pointe; he leaves the United States altogether, pursuing a career with the Foreign Service so as to never be forced to remain in any single place for more than a few years. Cal's stay in Berlin will be temporary as well (Eugenides 106). Stricken with shame about his non-normative gender identity (106), Cal refers to his adult male life as a “wandering in the maze these many years, shut away from sight. And from love, too” (107). In this way, the suburb has failed to deliver a fraction of the American Dream to Cal, rendering him a lonely expatriate whose only remnant of his suburban upbringing is the shame he carries about his non-normative gender.

More importantly, a celebratory reading such as Callado-Rodriguez's does not account for the two-thirds of the novel Eugenides dedicates to detailing the considerable effort the Stephanides family exerted in order to obtain white, middle-class status and gain membership into suburbia before Cal's intersexuality interrupted his girlhood.
Race and class are the two major axes of difference faced by the Stephanides family as they enter the United States and begin to build a life there. Foregrounding the labor performed in order to bury their ethnicity and working-class background and prepare for an American future reveals the ways in which the Stephanides family actively participates in constructing the suburban ideal. Their purpose is to ensure that this ideal includes themselves, which necessitates that they forget about their incestuous history and reinvent themselves as worthy of suburban membership. A chronological analysis of the ways in which they confront barriers between themselves and the Americanness they seek to achieve will illuminate the interconnections between race, class, sexuality and gender.

An overview of the Stephanides family's venture into suburbia and Cal's rejection of it demonstrates that indeed, Eugenides finds in Cal a triumphant compromise. The first-two thirds of the novel illustrate this journey of Desdemona and Lefty, and then of Tessie and Milton (including other family members on the way) in order to articulate the process of overcoming difference and becoming legitimate members of middle-class America—and thus, the suburb. The final third, then, shows the narrator’s journey from Callie to Cal in order to call attention to the types of identities and differences the American suburb refuses to subsume and must reject in order to maintain a proper heterosexual family order within its borders. In other words, Cal’s intersexed and queer identities bar him from suburban membership in ways that his family’s ethnic and class background did not. Cal’s rejection of the opportunity to be “operated” back into normality is more broadly a dismissal of the conformity suburbia requires in terms of gender and sexuality. The denouement of the novel signals to a hopeful future for Cal and Julie. Yet the suburb and its residents remain unchanged, doomed to reproduce the normative forces that inspired Cal's original exodus as an adolescent. The concluding message in *Middlesex* is similar
to that in *The Virgin Suicides*: while the consciousness of its residents may have progressed beyond that of their suburban environment (in this case, evidenced by Cal's sexual encounter with Julie), the suburb inevitably reproduces itself and the gender and sexual norms contained therein. Cal's compromise, while a victory for himself, does not advance the discourse of the American suburb beyond a mere recognition of deviance and a willingness to curb that deviance back into heteronormative articulations. In order to embody an intersexed identity—as opposed to a heterosexual male suburban one—Cal must flee not only suburbia, but the United States altogether.

**Transcending Difference: Race and Class in Suburbia**

Just as in *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides begins *Middlesex* by revealing the climax. In the very first sentence, Cal discloses, “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974” (3). However, the story that precedes Cal’s birth and rebirth involves the incestuous unions of his grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona and his parents, Tessie and Milton. In order to explain how Cal negotiates his identity as an expatriate living in Berlin, Eugenides first details Greek immigrants' journeys from Smyrna to Detroit and the ways in which their children became middle-class Americans.

As suburban scholarship notes, white, middle-class families stand as the ideal suburban residents, yet studies challenge that ideal by insisting that members of marginalized racial identities and working-class people have achieved and continue to aspire to life in suburbia. Eugenides situates his fictive suburb within this dialectic, showing through the suburbanization of the Stephanides family that the social structures of twentieth-century America benefit those who most closely approximate the white, middle-class, family ideal. Sara Ahmed's metaphor of peas in a pod explicates the process by which working-class Greeks become middle-class
Americans. Ahmed's argument, as demonstrated in the second chapter of this paper, centers on the retrospective homogenization that occurs within communities such as the suburb. Close proximity generates a perception of likeness, she argues, and the Stephanides family benefits from this in their endeavor to define themselves as white, middle-class, and suburban. They distinguish themselves from Blackness and working-class status and achieve a suburban identity in opposition to Detroit and its deviance. Desdemona and Lefty work actively to reformulate their identities in order to erase their ethnic and class differences and become subsumed under a sort of retrospective homogenization that will enhance the social standing of their children.

Cal begins tracing this process in 1922, when his grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty take their first steps toward Americanness in their flight from Smyrna to the United States. Deserted by the Greek fleet, Lefty convinces a French official that he and Desdemona (who he claims is his wife) were born in Paris in order to gain access to a French merchant vessel to emigrate to the United States. Accompanied by their new friend, a bloody and desperate Dr. Philobosian, who Lefty claims is his cousin, “three new French citizens” set sail, leaving a burning city behind them. In order to earn a passage to the United States, they must whiten themselves slightly, claiming a French identity so that they may escape Smyrna. This passage foreshadows how the flexibility of their racial identity will benefit them as they assimilate into American culture. Their willingness to be perceived as French in order to gain access to a privilege unavailable to Greeks in Turkey lays the foundation for the ways the Stephanides family will reinvent themselves in the United States.

Once in America, Lefty struggles to overcome class barriers and attain his portion of the American dream through various avenues. First, he gains employment in a Ford factory in Detroit in 1922. Lefty becomes part of the machine of the assembly line along with many other
non-English speaking immigrants (95). Desdemona also embraces the assembly line mentality in the home, completing domestic duties perfunctorily (98). The impact of the Ford English School where Lefty attended mandatory classes reaches into the Stephanides home directly. The various courses educate students in the English language but also provide lifestyle guidelines for the Americans-in-training. They serve to impart American culture onto immigrant workers and specifically center on cleanliness as the most important achievement. For example, Lefty recites in unison with his coworkers phrases like “employees should use plenty of soap and water in the home” and “the most advanced people are the cleanest” (97). In another instance, two Ford officials visit the Stephanides home to police the cleanliness of their employee and ensure he was conducting his life properly. They suggest that Lefty obtain a mortgage and inquire about his grooming habits. They provide a new toothbrush and instruct him how to use it (100–101). Each of these are transparent efforts by Ford to assimilate their immigrant workers to an American way of life by cleaning up their filth. The purification process culminates in a pageant in which symbols of various nations (including Greece) are integrated into the “Ford English School Melting Pot” (104). As Henry Ford looks on approvingly, the immigrant workers are made one step closer to becoming Americans as their ethnic difference is dissolved into a cauldron that unites each of its components in whiteness (104).

Following termination from the factory, Lefty seeks out economic success through illegal endeavors. He feels pressured to provide for his expecting wife and begins smuggling alcohol and opens a clandestine basement bar that he named The Zebra Room (132). He also participates in auto-erotica, supplying female models for a photographer for extra income (158). The wealth he gains from these activities allowed him to purchase a building in Detroit and create an “above ground Zebra Room [that] was a bar and grill” (168).
While Lefty struggles to achieve a middle-class status for himself and his family, Desdemona experiences the binary conceptions of race in Detroit that left her ironically on the Black side. She gains employment at a Muslim Temple, making silk, in which she has to darken her ethnic background in order to be hired. The others at the temple are Black, and espouse hatred toward whites (153–6). Desdemona realizes that part of her becoming a Detroiter necessitates “that she [see] everything in terms of black and white.” Desdemona’s experience at the temple highlights the race relations in Detroit as distinctly black versus white, with no middle ground. Desdemona’s ability to be perceived as Black foreshadows the privileged position the Stephanides family will be granted later by this insistence on a binary. Despite Desdemona's ability to pass as Black in this context, she is later interpolated as white, thus transcending her ethnic difference in opposition to African Americans of Detroit.

Eugenides traces the changing racial climate of Detroit throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s through the experiences of Milton (Lefty and Desdemona's son) and his wife (and second cousin) Tessie. Milton tries to grasp his portion of the American Dream by using a loan made possible by the G.I. Bill to transform The Zebra Room into Hercules Hot Dogs (201). Eventually becoming a chain of restaurants, Hercules Hot Dogs symbolizes the merging of Greek and American identities that is fueled by American capitalism. Milton commodifies his Greek heritage—his 'difference'—and repackages it in a prototypical form of American consumption: fast food (201). Cal narrates a Technicolor image of booming business in motion, with a hint of critical humor, with a “close-up of the cash register ringing open and closed, of Milton’s hands counting money” (204). Milton also purchases a home, its spacious living room a reflection of his material success (204). Equipped with his own business and a new home, Milton extends his grasp of the American dream extends past that of his parents which moves him closer to
permanent membership in the white middle class. As a testament to his parents' increasing
immersion into American culture, Cal notes that the television remains turned on and Milton
only serves drinks with “names of people,” such as Tom Collins (223). Despite this new
privileged lifestyle, involving entrepreneurship, homeownership and leisure, the encroaching
black population of Detroit tarnishes the value of their business and their home. Despite
overwhelming financial success, Milton experiences 'white flight' in terms of economic loss.

The race riots in Detroit in 1967 mark a turning point for the Stephanides family,
transforming them almost immediately into members of the white, middle class. First, the riots
solidify a white identity for Milton and his family, a racial category his parents worked to attain a
generation earlier. Historically, Detroit has been a central location in which the racial binary
between blackness and whiteness was exaggerated. Desdemona's realization that residents are
either black or white and that no third racial identity exists is consistent with the socio-historical
context of Detroit at the time. To be white meant simply, to be not black. Thus, ethnic difference
dissolves and whiteness becomes a homogenizing racial category that includes the Stephanides
family. As Valerie Babb points out, whiteness and Americanness are synonymous (118). Thus,
the race riots of Detroit benefit the social status of the Stephanides family because it defines
them as white it also made them more American.

The riots not only benefit the racial identity of Milton and his family, but also effect
financial gain. Cal comments:

Shameful as it is to say, the riots were the best thing that ever happened to us. Overnight
we went from being a family desperately trying to stay in the middle class to one with
hopes of speaking into the upper, or at least the upper middle. (252)

Milton receives a significant portion of insurance money following the demise of his diner in the
city fires that allow him to purchase two symbols of upward mobility: a Cadillac (252) and a
home in the suburbs (254). Now securely members of white America, the Stephanides make permanent their place in the middle class by moving to suburbia. He overcomes the racist bias of the real estate agent who attempts to steer him toward a more appropriate neighborhood for his ethnic background. Milton's ability to pay cash for a home earns him the right to move to Grosse Pointe, a white middle-class suburb. In other words, his class status (as expressed in terms of his liquid assets) grants him the privilege to transcend his ethnic identity. The Stephanides family then, becomes full-fledged members of white, middle-class American suburb. They have achieved the American Dream and now own a portion of suburbia to prove it.

Through the narrative of the Stephanides family's journey to the United States and subsequent acquisition of an American identity through whiteness and middle-class status, Eugenides foregrounds the amount of effort each requires. Neither comes to any member of the family automatically, but each must perform the identities correctly in order to be eventually permitted as legitimate white Americans in suburbia. Cal later remembers being referred to as the “ethnic girl” in her all white prep school, indicating that her family's membership in suburbia is never guaranteed. It is also applied retrospectively and varies in different locations, as Callie's prep school experience indicates. Instead, it is contingent upon the proper intersection of heterosexuality, middle-class status and whiteness—a meeting place that Cal's intersexed identity reveals to be predicated on incestuous sexual deviance.

**Linking Whiteness and Heterosexuality**

Whiteness studies scholar Mason Stokes contends that while central, whiteness is not the only defining characteristic required for attaining Americanness. He claims that “whiteness works best—in fact, that it works only—when it attaches itself to other abstractions.” (13). For his work, the key abstraction is heterosexuality; he argues that both whiteness and heterosexuality work together to form an enormous, yet nearly invisible, “normative disciplinary
presence” (13). The incestuous marriages in Middlesex testify to Stokes' argument. For both Desdemona and Lefty and Tessie and Milton, incest is obscured by whiteness and heterosexuality. In other words, the sexual deviance that predicates these unions is buried beneath presentations of white identity and heterosexual, reproductive marriage. These couples escape social ostracization that could potentially result from their incestuous relationships because they approximate the normative American family by projecting proper race (white) and correct desire (heterosexual).

Stokes' theoretical apparatus renders previous suburban scholarship on race and class incomplete without attention to sexuality. In order to fully understand the multiple dimensions of racial and class differences in the suburbs and the ways they challenge the presupposition of whiteness, we must also consider (hetero)sexuality. Stokes' intervention foregrounds the underlying assumption of heterosexuality on which the suburbs function. Thus, heterosexual marriage frames the image of the suburb in concert with whiteness and middle-class status, making sexuality an integral component of refashioning oneself as American.

In Middlesex, the protagonists grapple with various experiences of deviant desire that they attempt to silence under a guise of heterosexuality. Incest, the most prominent and taboo form of deviant desire in the novel, begins before Desdemona and Lefty arrive in the United States. In Smyrna, the brother and sister struggle with their desire for one another. Stricken with guilt, Lefty seeks alternative outlets, visiting prostitutes who resemble Desdemona (32). He prays to God asking for reprieve from his unnatural desire (31). Desdemona, oblivious to her own sexual desires, is unaware of Lefty's intentions until they depart from Smyrna to the United States.
The duration of the trip to the United States marks a more permanent transformation of their desire for Desdemona and Lefty. In addition to assuming false nationalities to gain entrance to America, the trip signifies a translation of a sibling relationship into a marital one. Lefty was “aware that whatever happened now would become the truth, that whatever he seemed to be would become what he was—already an American, in other words” (67). While on the ship, he engages in a “simulated courtship” with Desdemona, enacting a proposal and performing a wedding ceremony (67). Cal notes that the marital charade functioned to ensure for themselves that their fictive courtship is not overshadowed by incest (68). Other travelers, as Cal indicated earlier, are too engrossed in their own pursuits of a new life to notice Desdemona and Lefty’s fictive courtship is predicated by the incestuous love between brother and sister (49). Thus, their transatlantic voyage affords them the opportunity to transform themselves from Greek refugee siblings as they board to a reproductive married couple when they disembark. In other words, no one—not the French officials in Smyrna, the fellow passengers aboard the ship, or the immigration administrators in New York—questioned the legitimacy of their marriage and as a result, the incest could be masked and kept secret. Declared “literate, married to only one person (albeit a sibling), democratically inclined, mentally stable, and authoritatively deloused” Desdemona and Lefty are welcomed successfully into the United States as husband and wife, and as potential Americans (74–5). Ethnic difference, masked by a bit of deceit and marriage, is overcome just enough to allow them access to the United States.

While outwardly presenting a front of heterosexual marital normalcy, underneath the surface sexual anxiety brews for Desdemona. She worries that her sexual transgressions would result in deformed children, thereby indicting her for failure to properly engage in heterosexuality. Desdemona resorts to sexual avoidance to remedy her fears about producing
abnormal offspring. Denying her husband sexual access to her body in order to control her reproductive capacities deviates from the heterosexual norm. Heterosexual marriage within suburbia (also termed heteronormativity) facilitates procreation; refusing to engage in heterosexual sex disrupts reproduction and is thus deviant. Desdemona's effort to mask her incestuous marriage by forbidding sexual activity with her husband exemplifies another type of labor involved in the journey toward heteronormativity. And, as Stokes points out, this is a central component to claiming an American identity.

Deviance Revealed: Callie/Cal

The birth of Calliope to Tessie and Milton does not appear in the primary narrative strand until Book Three (of four) in Middlesex, nearly halfway into the novel (216). Cal marks the day of his birth as a baby girl as a schism between two worlds. He states: “Up until now it hasn't been my world. Not my America” (217). While he provides no direct explanation, the events that follow suggest that Cal recognizes the distance between the his parents' experience of America and his own, in the same way that the narrators of The Virgin Suicides understood the dissonance between theirs and their parents' understandings of their suburb. From this point, Calliope (or Callie) is the central figure in the narrative as Cal details his girlhood in Detroit, his adolescence in Grosse Pointe and his eventual escape from suburbia to various urban spaces. Her labor as an adolescent girl to approximate appropriate femininity and his labor as both an adolescent boy and adult man to realize a satisfying gender identity constitute the remainder of the novel.

In the first half of Middlesex, Eugenides emphasizes the labor required for the Stephanides family to achieve white, middle-class suburban status, a process that overlaps in the narrative with Callie's birth. However, the second half of the book centers on the willful effort to maintain this position of privilege which, most poignantly, necessitates a complete disavowal of
Callie's intersexed condition. In other words, Books One and Two depict the family's journey toward something, namely, access to white middle-class suburbia. Cal’s narration of his adolescence, however, retrospectively reveals the Stephanides' journey away from something: their deviant past as it is embodied by Calliope. Callie's body is physical evidence of the incestuous past of her parents and grandparents; her genetic mutation announces her family's sexual deviance, exposing their secret in a way that cannot be ignored—at least not for very long. However, the family succeeds in overlooking Callie's condition until she reaches adolescence. Until then, they enjoy an unInterrupted middle-class American lifestyle, able to look away from their deviant histories and pretend that they are normal, rightful suburban residents.

Until puberty, Callie, her family and their physician regard her as a relatively normally developed girl. Cal remembers, “I was brought up as a girl and had no doubts about this” (226). Activities such as playing with dolls contribute to an unquestioned acceptance that Callie was both sexed and gendered correctly, as a girl. Sex and sexuality are issues “shrouded in a zone of privacy and fragility,” unspoken about in a suburban space that depended on this silence. Even Tessie bathed her daughter with blinders on, never noticing the unusual shape of Callie’s genitals (226). A beautiful baby, Callie grew into a beautiful girl. Her “harmonious” physical attributes perpetuated the illusion that Callie was developing normally (278).

As a child, Callie experiences sexual desire for other girls. While she is aware that something is “improper” about her relationship with neighbor girl, Clementine Stark, she “would not have been able to articulate it” (265). She knows enough to keep secret her feelings for other girls, but “didn’t connect this feeling to sex” (265). And since sex was “something I shouldn’t tell my mother” about, Callie continues to grow up without any language to describe her desires or guidance about how to understand them (265). This queer desire, understood by Callie as
between herself as a girl and other girls, does not prompt her to question her gender identity; for her, these are distinct. It is not until later, in conversation with Dr. Luce, would she be forced to think of her gender and sexuality as related components of her intersexed condition.

Due to “Dr. Phil’s decrepitude and Tessie’s prudishness, [Callie] arrives at puberty not knowing much about what to expect” (283). But by age twelve, Callie begins to notice the disparity between her body’s maturation and that of her peers. Her classmates rapidly transform into women and she considers the possibility that she would be “left behind” in the race toward adulthood (285–6). Callie’s body does change, but instead of developing breasts and hips, she grows taller and her voice deepens. In order to counter the androgynous pull of her body, she grows her hair long, clinging to the only feminine characteristic she could control. Her “problematic body” asserts itself to Callie despite her ardent attempts to hide it behind her hair and ignore it in hopes it would somehow become normal (294). She actively cultivates long hair, laboring to mask her androgynous body behind a marker of femininity so that others can ignore the other indications of maleness. Callie dreams to “someday live inside [her hair]” (306). It provides a barrier between her and the outside world. As she grows up, she retreats inside her hair.

Meanwhile, Callie works actively to become feminine, shaving her legs and armpits, plucking her eyebrows and applying make-up (311). The emergence of “a few darkish hairs above [her] upper lip” are attributed to her Greek heritage and remedied by a trip to the salon (310). Callie accumulates name brand markers of femininity; products such as Daisy razors, Lip Smacker and Breck Crème Rinse with Body clutter her bathroom cabinet. Callie assuages her mother’s concerns and avoids an appointment with the gynecologist by faking her period. She flushes unused tampons and “feign[s] symptoms from headache to fatigue” (361). Comparing
her acting talent to Meryl Streep, Callie perpetuates the illusion of her transition into
womanhood, allowing those around her to easily follow in that illusion. She “acts” the part of
teenage girl successfully. Her desire to properly occupy her proscribed gender role of girl
coupled with her family's presumption that she was indeed, a girl, leaves no room for the
question that she, perhaps, was not one. Despite her body's insistence upon androgyny, she
accumulates the proper feminine accoutrements in order to convince herself, her peers and her
family that she does fulfill the gender identity assigned to her at birth.

Evidence of deviance from gender and sexual norms is ignored or remains unnoticed by
Cal’s family until she suffers from an accident and is taken to the hospital and given a physical
examination (396). Following physical and psychological examinations at the Sexual Disorders
and Gender Identity Clinic, Dr. Luce concludes that Callie’s clitoris is larger than a normal girl’s
and that a quick operation would “fix” everything. When she discovers medical files that
reported her XY chromosomes, she realizes then that the intent of Dr. Luce’s surgery was not to
normalize her female body but to castrate her male one. Surgery could reconstruct her genitals
so as to make them resemble normal female genitalia, thus affording her a seamless transition
into womanhood. In other words, Callie is incapable of masking her own deformity any longer,
and surgery is needed—and the only option—for returning her body to the fiction of girlhood.
The surgery represents the most obvious form of labor required by suburbia. In order to return to
suburban normalcy, Callie must restructure the physical marker of her gender variance, that is,
her genitals. Surgery promises to “correct” her genetic transgression and facilitate a smooth
transition back into suburban heteronormativity as—almost—a normal woman.

The suburb offers only two opposing roles for its residents: woman or man. Callie's
intersexed body rejects both of those options. Instead, it reveals the incestuous relationships that
presumably caused the genetic mutation. A physical testament to the generations of forbidden desire, Callie's body must be transformed in order to conform to suburban gender ideologies and continue to keep the family's deviance a well-kept secret.

But, despite Dr. Luce's insistence upon forcing her body to cooperate with the gender role she had occupied since birth, Callie chooses to reject this impulse to ‘fix’ her ‘deformed’ body. This rejection of the surgical procedure to correct her condition doubles as a rejection of the social structures of suburbia that require adherence to the gender binary. Cal cuts her hair short and hitchhikes west, to the city. At this point in the narrative, a teenage suburban girl named Callie becomes a wandering intersexed boy named Cal.

Cal escapes to Berkeley and San Francisco. In the city, he feels he can reconstruct his identity because in many ways, he is anonymous. The sense of anonymity is heightened by his work at Octopussy, a peep show club that capitalizes on his ambiguous genitalia by displaying his body from the waist down to curious viewers. They do not see his face, however, reducing his body to a commodity and allowing him the ideological space to reinvent himself as separate and distinct from his genitals. He severs ties with his family and seeks the comfort of other gender “deviants” in order to grow into his new self. The city serves as a site of rebirth for Cal because the image of the city is not threatened by Cal's intersexuality in the same way the suburb is. Because Cal is the product of incestuous desire—a point that the novel relies on biological determination to explain—his very existence stands to threaten the fiction of suburban normality his family had constructed for themselves. The city offers anonymity and multiple avenues through which to articulate gender. It is no accident that Cal chooses San Francisco, a city perceived to be haven for gender and sexual “deviants.” Nonetheless, urban space carries less
rigid expectations of gendered roles, allowing Cal to navigate his own identity outside of the traditional roles of woman or man that suburbia offers.

Cal eventually returns to Grosse Pointe after his stay in San Francisco to attend his father's funeral. While Tessie originally perceives Cal's masculine identity as “criminal” and a form of “punishment” for her own deviant sexual desire, she grows to realize that Cal was essentially the same person as Callie (520). Cal comments, “[a]fter I returned from San Francisco and started living as a male, my family found that, contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important” (520).

*Middlesex, Intersex and Suburbia.*

Cal's return to a tolerant suburban family metonymically represents the potential suburban membership available to him following his gender conversion. Eugenides concludes *Middlesex* with a hopeful teenage Cal, standing at the front doorway of his parents' home, “happy to be home, weeping for my father, and thinking about what was next” (529). The reader knows what follows this scene in Cal's life as he has provided glimpses into his adult life throughout the text: he continues to present a successful male gender identity, he maintains a close relationship with Tessie, he travels with his job in the Foreign Service and, most importantly, he falls in love. Eugenides sets up the metanarrative of Cal's relationship to Julie in order to frame the entire novel as a prologue to their love story. Cal narrates his romance with Julie in the interstices of the novel, rendering it an interesting, but ineffectual narrative strand until the novel's close.

Because the novel ends chronologically prior to the present day from which Cal narrates, the intermittent tale of Cal and Julie serves to validate the hopefulness Cal described in the final pages. Eugenides concludes the novel in this way to force the reader to connect the optimism
Cal feels as a teenage boy to the romantic breakthrough he experiences as an adult with Julie. This strategy invites a positive reading of the novel, and consequently, of the suburb.

Despite the resolution of the novel that indicates Cal is happily adjusted to his identity, Susan Frelich Appleton questions Eugenides' choice to depict Cal as a heterosexual male. Some scholars applaud the “queer-oriented conclusion . . . [that facilitates] a new type of being” through the character of Cal (Callado-Rodriquez 83), Appleton prefers to view Cal as a straight man. She interprets his choice to trade in a girlhood for a manhood as a decision made “[i]n recognition of his chromosomes, hormones, and physical attraction to women” (406). While overall offering a positive and productive reading of *Middlesex*, Appleton explores possible alternatives to Cal's identity, such as a lesbian woman, or a person who repudiates gender and sexual categories altogether. However, Appleton's reading is useful because it acknowledges the successful transition to manhood Cal experiences. She also suggests that readers (especially those she terms “gender dichotomists”) can more readily empathize with a heterosexual male version of Cal. In other words, Cal's other possible gender expressions would be too deviant to engender the type of rapport with the reader that he is able to do so in *Middlesex*; a lesbian woman would deter the homophobic reader and a gender outlaw would offend the gender dichotomist (434–7). Because Eugenides portrays Cal as fitting neatly within the boundaries of heterosexual manhood, his existence does not disrupt the relationship between categories of gender (of which there are two) and sexuality (one of which is correct—heterosexual—and one that is deviant—homosexual).

While Appleton correctly contends that Eugenides' emphasis on the biological component of Cal's condition “portrays Cal and other intersexed individuals as the hapless victims of a condition or abnormality over which they have no control” (437), her concern with *Middlesex* is
in its implications for United States legal decisions regarding marriage. Her critique fails to acknowledge that Cal articulates his heterosexual male identity outside of the United States. The culmination of his desire—that is, the insinuated sex with Julie—does not occur in an American context, but in Berlin. In other words, he overcomes the final barrier of shame in a foreign urban space.

To redirect Appleton's questions about alternative identity choices for Cal within the context of American suburban discourse reveals Cal's status as a straight man to be considerably less successful. His decision to temporarily abandon his family in search of his identity in San Francisco implies that his suburban environment did not provide a safe haven for this transition. His career path in the Foreign Service as an adult further reflects the suburb as an insufficient residence for an intersexed man. Finally, his relationship with Julie that marks his final personal reconciliation with his body, occurs in Berlin, a place he will soon be forced to leave. These details complicate Appleton's reading of Cal as a straight man, specifically because he rejects the role of straight man that could be available to him in the suburbs had he desired it.

Just as Cal's parents and grandparents buried their sexual deviance underneath a facade of white, middle-class heteronormativity, Cal could have refashioned himself similarly, obscuring his gender variation behind his normative racial, class and sexual identities. Outwardly, Cal functions as a normal man. Therefore, to 'pass' as a heterosexual man would have granted him membership into the American suburb. With the secrets sexual deviance of his predecessors and his non-normative genital construction properly kept, Cal could perpetuate the Stephanides family's suburban legacy. He would simply need to uphold the family's fiction of normativity. Yet, as Appleton fails to note, he rejects that option. He chooses not to embrace a straight male identity in favor of an intersexed one. Because he takes on a queer gender identity that indicates
that his sexual orientation escapes clear demarcation into the categories of straight or gay, he
must abandon the suburban life altogether. Choosing to stay in Grosse Pointe would threaten to
undo all the labor his parents and grandparents put forth in achieving suburban status. So, he
removes himself as the physical evidence of incestuous desire and aspires toward a straight male
identity that incorporates his intersexuality rather than disavow it.

Eugenides shows the suburbs to be tolerant of gender variance as long as it can maintain
a safe distance from it. Tessie's reaction to Cal's first homecoming following his reinvention of
himself as male exemplifies this attitude. At first, she fears his gender identity will reflect poorly
on her own behavior. But, she accepts her child once she realizes that he is essentially the same
person, equally qualified to fill the daughterly role despite a masculine gender presentation
(520). Tessie's treatment of Cal symbolizes the larger attitude toward deviation from the norm
that characterized the suburb for previous generations of the Stephanides family: as long as you
do not threaten to unmask the suburb as a mere ideology, you may stay.

Cal's desire to love and be loved as an intersexed man precludes suburban membership.
For this reason, the suburb that Eugenides wishes to applaud for its progressive tolerance of
gender variance is instead reified as rigid, traditional, and rooted firmly in white, middle-class
heteronormativity. While the Stephanides family is a testament that the suburbs do, in fact,
house sexual deviance, they also reveal the necessity to contain it completely—an endeavor that
requires an enormous amount of effort. So while Cal recognizes a slight shift in attitude
between the world views of his parents' generation and his own, he concedes, “[s]till, it was not
nothing to witness me so changed” (515). In other words, the Grosse Pointe he leaves behind
remains only slightly unchanged after Cal escapes to San Francisco. Despite his hope that his
suburb would become “a place designed for a new type of human being,” it remained “the beacon it was intended to be,” a beacon of suburbia (529).

The considerable length of Middlesex allows for extensive character development, not only of Cal, but of his family as well. Furthermore, the shift between omniscient and first person narration facilitates the humanization of each major character in the novel. Because the reader experiences the journey to the American suburb from the perspective of each generation of the Stephanides family, the novel evokes a sympathetic response to the ideological work that individuals do. Unlike The Virgin Suicides, which concludes with a critical anticlimax, Middlesex invites readers to celebrate Cal's personal triumph and empathize with his family's struggle for suburban membership. While Eugenides attempts to connect the critique of suburbia from his first novel to his second, Middlesex ultimately humanizes the labor the suburb requires to the extent that the novel becomes a different project altogether.

The duality of distance/proximity present in The Virgin Suicides’ narrative structure does resonate with Cal's simultaneous intimacy with and rejection of Grosse Pointe. The novel's structure of narrator retrospectively telling the story of the suburbs anticipates an extended critique of the suburb. Cal's initial separation from the suburb, as a resident of Berlin, suggests that he rejects the suburb because of the repressive forces that made his intersexed condition possible. But by the end of the novel, Eugenides expects readers to sympathize with each unique member of the family and forgive them for their laborious clamoring for suburban membership. Because Cal's story ends with romantic triumph, the transgression of his grandparents can be forgiven and forgotten. In this forgetting, however, is an American suburb that continues to exert willful labor in order to protect and maintain an image that would not include the Stephanides family had Cal attempted to embody an intersexed identity in Grosse Pointe.
The resolution of *Middlesex* advocates an acceptance of the image of the suburb as an inevitable but manageable obstacle to the American Dream. Transcending this barrier requires sacrifice and deceit, but delivers a satisfying suburban lifestyle that results in permanent belonging in America. *Middlesex* claims that approaching whiteness, middle-class status and heteronormativity grants access to suburbia. To refuse is noble, but to accept is normal. Thus Eugenides fails to deliver a sequel to his scathing critique of the image of the American suburb he poses in *The Virgin Suicides* because *Middlesex* celebrates the malleability of race, class and sexuality rather than critiquing the necessity to repress difference in favor of normalization.
Eugenides' image of suburban Detroit resonates with the pictures painted by both Bill Bryson and Richard Bachman. A distant observer might witness the outward signs of similarity in these illustrations: well-manicured lawns, children playing outside, single family homes, a sense of neighborhood camaraderie. These details provide a rough sketch of the commonsense vision of American suburbia that each of these authors conjures in their fictive settings.

Yet the story of suburbia is not as neatly packaged as it seems to be. Its ubiquity in the American imagination allows for the image of the suburb to stand as a cultural icon without too much protest. Thus, Bryson can write suburbanites enjoy “a good laugh . . . and then sit around drinking iced tea and talking appliances for an hour or so. No human being had ever been quite this happy before”—and readers believe him (6). It is not that Bryson is intentionally deceitful, because his memoir attests to the fact that for him, the happy neighborhood did exist. Rather, Bryson invites the readers to share his nostalgia for the suburbs and is successful because he taps into a familiar American trope about the suburb as the apotheosis of the American Dream. Of course, not every reader will relate to Bryson's childhood experiences of the suburb directly, but they can at least imagine it. The ideology of the American suburb, while upholding whiteness and middle-class status as quintessential suburban qualities, is democratic in that it allows anyone to participate in the fantasy. Because the suburb exists only as an image, it becomes repackaged as experience through series of repetitive decisions—fictions suburbanites tell themselves and each other. Central to this narrative is a binary mode of thinking that divides urban and rural spaces in opposition to one another and ranks the suburb as the preferred, safe, white middle-class haven over the filthy, crime-ridden and diverse city.
Implementing and maintaining this image and separation from the nearby city requires an enormous amount of labor, as Eugenides demonstrates in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*. The Lisbons and their neighbors repress the potential deviant sexuality of the five sisters, cover up the markers of deterioration of the suburb and willfully ignore evidence of Detroit's presence in their midst. *The Virgin Suicides* arrives already embedded in the suburban image, unlike *Middlesex* which traces the laborious process by which the Stephanides family gains entrance into suburbia. The labor in *Middlesex* occurs in many forms over three generations of individuals who are each invested in their own journey toward Americanization. Transcending racial and class differences, the Stephanideses emerge as rightful members of the American suburb. The continued effort to project whiteness, middle-class status, and heteronormativity allows them to imagine themselves as having achieved the American Dream.

Each of these novels exemplifies the inextricable tie between race, class and sexuality, as Mason Stokes contends in *The Color of Sex*. For the protagonists in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*, the unacknowledged mandate of heteronormativity in suburbia effects negative consequences. The Lisbon girls escape the sexual repression in their neighborhood by committing suicide. Cal rejects the suburb's offer to allow him to stay, provided he perpetuates the labor that masks his family's incest and his own intersexuality. While Eugenides specifically contends with the suburb as literary space, his proximity to the actual suburb suggests a return to the ramifications the imagined suburb may have on the real, experiential suburb. My reading of Eugenides novels claims that socio-historical scholarship is incomplete without consideration of sexuality as an avenue by which to interrogate and challenge the commonsense vision of the suburb.
Revisionist scholars have recently begun to expand on previous work on Black suburbanization and working-class suburbs to incorporate sexuality and queerness in the discourse. For example, Wayne H. Brekhus' work *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity* (2003) provides ethnographic data about gay men who reside in suburbia and negotiate their sexual identities in various ways. Brekhus finds that the gay men he encountered in a single suburb of New York City articulate suburban gay identities that range from fully visible within the suburb and more private, with a separate gay identity reserved only for city spaces. He outlines three categories of gay identity presentation in terms of duration and intensity: the peacock (the lifestyler), the chameleon (the commuter), and the centaur (the integrator). Brekhus' study relies on a boundary between urban and suburban space and recognizes the distinct expectations and moral code present in each. He comments, “suburbs, for instance, have a sanitizing effect on public displays, while commercial and red light districts of larger cities encourage more conspicuous identity displays” (20).

Brekhus' project is concerned only with the literal experience of the individuals in the suburb. While it is important to adjust suburban history to include gay men and other queer identities, this sociological study insists on a reality of suburbia that ignores its literary dimension. *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs*, in focusing on recording and assessing experience, overlooks the looming image of suburbia that clearly excludes gay male identities. As my readings of Eugenides novels show, the imagined suburb powerfully shapes the every day twentieth century details of suburban residents and imbues perfunctory tasks such as yard work with enormous cultural weight.

Brekhus contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to rewrite suburban history, but it cannot be complete without considering the imagined aspect of the suburb.
Because the image is a literary space, it cannot be captured by socio-historical research. Thus, suburban scholarship requires an interdisciplinary approach in order to account for the complex and subtle reach of the image of the suburb.

The image remains pervasive into the twentieth century necessitating a continued exploration of its impact on the construction of American identity. Those who chose to reside in the contemporary suburb do so because it promises to provide a particular American lifestyle that they desire for themselves. Characterized by middle-class status, homeownership, material and economic success, idyllic landscapes, convenient location and friendly neighbors, the suburb serves as a healthy haven from the ills of the densely populated city. The recent trend toward gated suburban communities exemplifies the sense that the suburb remains both separate and superior from its urban counterpart. Fortressing a neighborhood with walls and gates solves “Americans' dilemma of how to protect themselves and their children from danger, crime, and unknown others while still perpetuating open, friendly neighborhoods and comfortable, safe homes” (Low 462).

Implicit in this impulse to erect physical boundaries around a suburb is the ideological distance it establishes from the city. The perceived need for division of spaces rests on the assumption that the city produces crime, poverty and social disorder. The suburb, then, still exists as a viable alternative, a space constructed in opposition to city filth that offers a safe, stable, American way of life. However, as Setha Low points out, the distinction between suburb and city results in “false security” provided by “architectural symbols such as gates and walls” (262). In reality, “gated communities are not safer than nongated communities . . . . Instead, the logic of symbolism satisfies middle-class understandings of the nature of criminal activity—‘it makes it harder for them to get in’” (462). Low insists the insulation offered by the trappings of
suburbia is false. In other words, gates and walls provide ideological security and separation but fail to deliver any actual protection from the threat of crime. Residents simply feel safer when enclosed within a gate.

Low's discussion of gated communities speaks to an intensified example of the fundamental thrust of suburbia: to protect white, middle-class families from contamination by various forms of city filth. Bryson and Bachman corroborate this in their descriptions of blissful suburban life that resonate with a commonsense understanding of the American suburb. However, if as Low suggests, the promises of suburbia are false ones, why do these images persist? Why do Americans continue to reside in a suburb that perhaps does not insulate them from the city? What is at stake for those who do not fit within the prototypical model of suburbanite?

Eugenides novels begin to answer some of these questions through his literary representation of suburbia. Legal scholar Susan Frelich Appleton merges the questions raised by his critique with contemporary issues about human rights and gay marriage. Using Middlesex as a bridge between fictive identities and the assumptions they reflect in society, Appleton poses a new question: “Given his [Cal's] unusual sexual circumstances, what effect does this protagonist with such a winning personality have on our understanding of sex and gender, and in turn, the way the law approaches these categories?” (393).

Appleton's reading of Cal as a useful tool for humanizing difference shows how literature can be employed to effect real change. She argues that a “mainstream view” of American society emerges from the world that people encounter in “books, movies, theater and the media” (394). Thus they provide discursive space for imagining American differently and incorporating various deviations from gender and sexual norms. Because Cal is an approachable and likable narrator,
the reader wants him to succeed and celebrates his personal triumph. *Middlesex* humanizes an intersexed character whose actualized counterpart remains invisible and marginalized in American society. Appleton argues that literary characters such as Cal serve as “thought experiments about the forks in the road that lie ahead” in the realm of legal change, LGBTQ rights and overall social consciousness (396).

The readings of Eugenides' novels presented in this paper, along with Appleton's analysis of *Middlesex* in a legal context suggest that the literary space of suburbia always already informs socio-historical scholarship about any actual place. To ignore the constructedness of the image and the intense labor required to maintain it is to miss the central purpose of the image in the first place: to create and sustain an American identity that is white, middle-class, heterosexual and suburban. Further interdisciplinary work promises to elucidate the consequences of perpetuating the image of suburbia and point to new imaginative spaces that account for the diverse population of the American suburb.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mallory Szymanski received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and history from the University of Florida in 2006. This thesis marks the culmination of her work toward a Master of Arts degree in women's studies.