

# Working Through Collective Trauma: Metafiction, Intertextuality, and the Need for Externalization and Relativization of Trauma in *The Virgin Suicides*

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Recibido: 02/09/2012

Aceptado: 10/05/2013

## ABSTRACT

In a period when Trauma Studies have been assuming more and more importance, Jeffrey Eugenides's first novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), happens to center precisely on the traumatic adolescent experiences of its protagonists. Its fragmented content mirrors the very structure of the dreamy narrative: after witnessing the Lisbon sisters' mass suicide, the group of male narrators decides to tell a story truthful to their posttraumatic condition. This brings about the collective narrator's failure to master the accuracy of the past events accompanied by their urge to recount the truth about the inexplicable suicides. In this paper, the novel is analyzed in terms of its connections with "another's word", to echo Bakhtin: on the one hand, the narrator negotiates with the community, with different kinds of written and oral accounts, even with their own childhood memories; on the other hand, the text communes intertextually with other texts. These connections help in the process of working through or coming to terms with trauma. It is argued that the path towards healthy mourning (as opposed to melancholia) must have recourse to the Other. In the novel, this is achieved via storytelling and subtle intertextual references to previous fictional works.

**Keywords:** trauma, Bakhtin, collective narrator, intertextuality, storytelling.

## Superando el Trauma Colectivo: Metaficción, Intertextualidad, y la Necesidad de Exteriorizar y Relativizar el Trauma en *Las Vírgenes Suicidas*

## RESUMEN

En una época en la que los Estudios de Trauma han ido adquiriendo mucha importancia, la primera novela de Jeffrey Eugenides, *Las Vírgenes Suicidas* (1993), se centra precisamente en las experiencias traumáticas de sus protagonistas durante la adolescencia. El contenido fragmentado refleja la estructura del texto imaginativo: tras presenciar el suicidio colectivo de las hermanas Lisbon, el grupo de jóvenes narradores deciden contar un relato fiel a su condición postraumática. Esto conlleva la incapacidad del narrador colectivo para controlar la precisión de los acontecimientos pasados, junto con su necesidad de narrar la verdad sobre los suicidios incomprensibles. En este artículo, la novela se analiza en función de

su relación con la “palabra ajena”, hablando en términos bakhtinianos: por un lado, el narrador negocia con su comunidad, con diferentes tipos de versiones orales y escritas, y con sus propios recuerdos de la infancia. Por otro lado, el texto se relaciona de manera intertextual con otros textos. Estas conexiones ayudan en el proceso de reelaboración o aceptar el trauma. En mi opinión, en el camino hacia un duelo sano (opuesto a la melancolía) es necesario recurrir al Otro. Esto se consigue a través de la narración y de las referencias intertextuales sutiles.

**Palabras clave:** trauma, Bakhtin, narrador colectivo, intertextualidad, narración de cuentos.

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction. 2. The Concept of Trauma and PTSD in *The Virgin Suicides*. 3. The Need to Tell a Story: Metafiction as Internal Dialogue. 4. Influences and Stylization of Traumatic Discourse. 5. Conclusion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1930s Mikhail Bakhtin defined the novel as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” and composed by “heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-linguaged elements” (1987: 262, 265)<sup>1</sup>. Jeffrey Eugenides’s first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, follows such definition in a very detailed manner: it abounds in voices, styles and languages. The adolescent voices of a group of boys are framed by the perspective of their adult selves who are the we-narrator of the book. Other characters’ contradictory views are juxtaposed to official medical and journalistic records. The implied author’s magic-realist and metafictional turns are used to describe the boys’ excessive perception of suicide and the narrator’s traumatic memory of it. All the agents in the novel are in constant dialogue with each other, their styles and languages intermix, alternating tragic passages with “undercutting irony” (Kelly 2012: 324), imagination with empirical evidence, traumatic memories with adolescent desire.

In fact, critics have inquired into the book’s various formal and ideological aspects: it has been seen as a coming-of-age novel (Millard 2007: 73), as an observer-hero tragedy (Kelly 2010: 315), and even as a pastoral work comparable to 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings (Heusser 2007). The multiple voices in *The Virgin Suicides* simultaneously camouflage and unveil an ‘unspeakable’ gap, a collective trauma rendered in a suggestive, self-reflexive mode. This ‘unspeakability’ is reinforced by the narrator’s refusal to give plain, unambiguous answers to the enigmas surrounding the suburban location where the story takes place. The very subject matter of the book, suicide and its aftermath, despite (or, probably, due to) being a gruesome taboo, provides propitious grounds for “heteroglossia”—an intentional diversity of speeches or voices.

The present paper approaches Eugenides’s debut from the perspective of Trauma Studies, and analyzes its dialoguing voices with regard to the impact and response to trauma in the collective narrator and in the suburban society as a whole. Particularly, I

will examine how the narrator and the text are in dialogue with “another’s word”: on the one hand, the narrator negotiates with the community, with different kinds of written and oral accounts, even with their own childhood memories; on the other hand, the text communes intertextually with other texts such as Cortázar’s “Queremos Tanto a Glenda” and García Márquez’s *El Otoño del Patriarca*. In *The Virgin Suicides*, these dialogues are activities of “coming to know another’s word, a coming to knowledge whose process is represented in the novel” to speak in Bakhtin’s words (1987: 353). These dialogues or connections are also exploited as a way of coming to terms with an adolescent trauma because they relate the collectivity of men to a community where they can belong, thus endowing the story with wholeness and all-inclusiveness. This relatedness may also help in understanding the connection between a collective trauma embodied in the collective “we”, and another kind of trauma, called by Dominick LaCapra, structural trauma.

In the following analysis, I will draw on adolescent experiences of loss, haunted present and difficulties to speak about the past as symptoms of trauma. The contradictory aftermath of trauma consists in a push to make sense of it, accompanied by a pull towards a perpetual denial, an irrational failure to integrate this traumatic memory into the psychological schemes of the consciousness (Greenberg and Van der Kolk 1987: 191). To apply Bakhtin’s theory, the confrontation of centripetal and centrifugal forces in this novel only reflects the existing confrontation in the different voices that form the collective narrator. These centripetal (or unitary) and centrifugal (or stratifying) forces are manifest in the narrator’s struggle for unification of the discordant story into a fictional whole, and the seemingly failing attempt at unifying it. The resulting constructedness of such account never leads the men to understand the missing story of the Lisbon sisters’ suicides but instead helps them learn the need of a social context and another’s words.

Although the voyeuristic quality of the collective narrator remains a major issue in the novel, another crucial component, as Lisa Perdigao remarks (2010: 78) is the focus “on the act of writing” or, to be precise, on the conscious use of language. It is not clear whether their story is written down although there are hints at the fact that this story can be just a product of “an elaboration of romantic memory” (2002: 240) or mediated “apocryphal accounts” (225). Written or not, the process of weaving the collective narrator’s traumatic memories into a shared monument of grievance is treated here as a healing device because it allows for an active participation in textual and social dialogues. The narrator’s awareness of being fixated upon the girls and the suicides propels a story-telling that can be taken as a therapeutic remedy when accompanied by a therapeutic practice: in this case, this is the narrative voice’s exhaustive research that has lasted 20 years. In this research, the men who integrate the collective voice of the story use voices, rather than one single voice, to speak about their wound, to depict it for the listener, and to make sense of it. The resulting text provides a bird’s-eye view of the 1970s historical space and time: the contemporaneous environmental movement that was accused of eclipsing the

Vietnam War (Anonymous 1969), the post-1967 racial tensions in white suburbia, layoffs in automobile plants, and increasing rates of suicide in this period (Peck 1982: 30). The girl's suicides are the point of departure for a poignant critique on the hidden suburban malfunctioning, and the strong control on knowledge and sexuality. The suburban illusion of communality and the strife to preserve this illusion also stand at the core of the trauma suffered by the adult men who form the collective narrator. It is the artificial togetherness of the suburbia that implies fake bonds amongst the members of Grosse Pointe. This artificiality even disseminates into the small community of the boys who will become the narrator twenty years later—as focalizers, then, of the story—making their togetherness seem unnatural.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF TRAUMA AND PTSD IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

Before starting with the in-depth analysis of the novel, there are several concepts in need of clarification, such as the very notion of trauma itself, as well as the concepts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and collective trauma, and the way these are intertwined in the narrative. Freud's definition of trauma as "wound of the mind" has been refashioned into "a psychobiological 'wound' evolved in relation to a variety of coupled psychological, biological, social and other environmental factors" (Nijenhuis and Van der Hart 2011: 419). However, there are discrepancies as to the antecedents that cause people to be traumatized. There still remains the question of what is the cause of trauma: the event itself, the individual experience of it, or the emotional and somatic consequences left on the individual (see Atkinson 2011: 135). Traumatized subjects frequently go through a violent experience, fail to encode this experience in their psyche, and fall into subsequent processes of acting-out and, perhaps, working-through. However, the question remains whether traumatized victims always follow the same stages along the process of facing and dealing with trauma and its symptoms.

The notion of "collective trauma," while important for some critics, is questioned by others who see it as an ambiguous continuation of medical and psychological trauma (Traverso and Broderick 2010: 8). The conditions for (unexpected shock or gradual social mediation) and results of different traumatic experiences (lethargy, shell shock, PTSD, etc.) are so heterogeneous and all-inclusive that they escape a unified definition. Moreover, such a unified definition is obstructed by the differences in perspectives on trauma from fields such as psychology and psychiatry, cultural studies, neurobiology, history, etc. Being just another field that explores trauma, fiction blurs even more the already unclear boundaries of the concept.

Yet, on the other hand fiction gives a broad range of creative solutions to post-traumatic situations. *The Virgin Suicides* in particular exploits collective trauma both for its fragmenting and for its unifying features but leaves its aftermath, that is, the result of collective trauma, forever oscillating between these two poles. This is where

the beauty of the novel resides: trauma leaves the door to the past open while at the same time sets ajar a window to the future. This is evident in the collective narrator's very last, long utterance that starts in the past tense ("It didn't matter in the end..."), and then changes to past perfect ("that we had loved them"), present ("which is deeper than death"), and finally future tense ("where we will never find the pieces to put them back together") (2002: 248–49).

In *The Virgin Suicides*, there seems to be a "double-voiced discourse" to speak in Bakhtin's words (1987: 324): the narrative voice's negation of "stress disorders and insufficient neurotransmitters" as responsible for the tragedies, and the text's affirmation of multiple impulses behind the narrator's negation, one of these impulses being collective trauma. While the narrator takes advantage of the use and abuse of the concept Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD) so as to dramatize the psychiatric conclusions in the book, the text approves a collective recovery from the unspeakable traumas in the book. The Lisbon sisters' psychoanalytic record follows a similar path to that explained by trauma critics: violent event (their youngest sister's suicide), numbing and silence (gatherings in silent meetings witnessed by Father Moody), grief and mourning (reentering social life), deficient amounts of serotonin ("a neurotransmitter essential for the regulation of mood", 2002: 220), etc. The narrator's conclusions refute mockingly the ones drawn by the psychiatrist in the novel—Dr. Hornicker. His comparison of the sisters' suicidal behavior with the lemmings' actions, together with the fictitious coinage of medical abbreviations, emphasize the importance of trauma discourse in Eugenides's narration, while launching an attack on the overuse of the notion of PTSD:

Dr. Hornicker gave an explanation of the Lisbon girls' erratic behavior—their withdrawal, their sudden fits of emotion and catatonia. The report maintained that as a result of Cecilia's suicide the surviving Lisbon girls suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. 'It is not unusual', Dr. Hornicker wrote, 'for the sibling of an A.L.S. [adolescent lost to suicide] to act out suicidal behavior in an attempt to come to grips with their grief. There is a high incidence of repetitive suicide in single families.' Then, in a marginal aside, he dropped his medical manner and jotted: 'Lemmings' (157)

Such narration not only parodies trauma discourse and the whole culture of trauma, but also overrules the medical discourse in favor of a sentimental, and even melancholic, one. Ironically, this melancholic discourse inherent to the story of the narrating group of men hints at their own posttraumatic condition. The haunting quality of the dead sisters persists well into their present lives as middle-aged men; and the melancholia that their story-telling emanates becomes a discursive token of their tribute to an adolescent trauma and to the Lisbon girls. The faux detective story is a fluctuation between the obsession to know the truth distorted by time and trauma, and the simultaneous unconscious denial to tell with authority how everything happened. Years later, the aging collective narrator recalls the impact that the EMS

truck had on them and the symptoms of silence that accompanied it: “Discussing it later, many of us felt we suffered a mental dislocation at that moment, which only grew worse through the course of the remaining deaths. The prevailing symptom of this state was an inability to recall any sound” (152). This silence only makes the suicides more clamorous.

Together with the collective voice’s insistent questioning—not only of the medical opinions but also of the coroner’s reports, the media versions, even the rest of the suburbanites’ stories—, there is the text’s discursive association of the suicides to a multiple social phenomena that magnify the collective trauma. This sociological connection may hint at the escapist core of white suburbia that eschews racist problems (the race riots in Detroit 1967), forgets war (*i.e.* the Vietnam War), and obviates ecological crises (cf. the Environmental Movement of the 1970s). Thus, to the narrating men’s personal loss, there is to be added the suburban communal “blow,” as Kai Erikson states, “to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together” (1979: 110). The sociologist invokes an image of natural disasters for the readers to imagine the particular quality of such experience that links personal trauma to public problems: it is like a “burning black wave lashing down the hollow and raking everything in its path” (139).

In the novel the link between the suicides and the sense of social malady is presented as a disturbing experience shared by the close-knit collectivity of men, which has long-lasting—or “indelible,” according to Neal J. Smelser (2004: 42)—effects on their group identity and on their sense of belonging within their society. Additionally, the collective narrator mirrors the public reaction in the aftermath of the mass suicide. Several characters associate the negative experience of the suicides to the progressive downfall of the Lisbon family’s actual house and the suburban landscape, and finally of the country as a whole:

Something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls. Our parents thought it had to do with our music, our godlessness, or the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn’t even had. Mr. Hedlie [...] put the whole thing down to the misfortune of living in a dying empire (2002: 231).

The suburban fragmentation and social repression block their healing from taking place on a collective level, which causes an increasing deterioration in the bonds among the inhabitants of the suburb and brings forth a social “dissociation.” This is reinforced by the environmental crisis, by an irrational fear of the black influx into the white suburbs, by the increasing numbers in youth suicide, and by layoffs at Detroit automobile plants, events which are given little thought throughout the story and instead are screened by magic-realist turns and deliberate melancholic fixation on the girls.

### 3. THE NEED TO TELL A STORY: METAFICTION AS INTERNAL DIALOGUE

Patricia Waugh confers the status of metafiction to “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact” (1990: 2) and alludes to Bakhtin’s definition of parody so as to appraise the “process of relativization as the ‘dialogic’ potential of the novel” (5). She elaborates on this as follows:

The conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant ‘voice’ of the omniscient, godlike author. Novels which Bakhtin refers to as ‘dialogic’ resist such resolution. Metafiction *displays* and *rejoices* in the impossibility of such a resolution (6, original emphasis)

Indeed, in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” (1934-1935), Bakhtin remarks that “one of the main subjects of human speech is discourse itself” (1987: 355). The narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* deploys this self-reflexive technique in order to debunk its own collective authority and open a space for constructive internal dialogues with other characters in the story via interviews, and with other stories embedded in its own story via the media, diaries, or reports. Its collective voice even plays with an ambiguous second-person narratee: “We’d like to tell you with authority what it was like inside the Lisbon house, or what the girls felt being imprisoned in it” (2002: 170).

The insistence on the word “story” when referring to the interviews with other suburban residents, to the newspaper reports, and to the imaginations of the collective narrator only heightens the therapeutic need for externalization, a need that dwells in the dialogic. To put it differently, through storytelling the collective voice aims at sharing this story with a listener. The oral character of all this dialogic storytelling and the process of their “telling” and “re-telling” it repetitively, suggest a certain refraction of the original stories. This refraction or alteration implies distancing and change in the course of fabulation. Furthermore, whenever a dialogue with the character proves unfruitful, imagination and humor prove a helpful resort: “We could imagine what the girls felt inside because we knew what they were eating” (163).

Thus, the constructedness resulting from the mentioned refraction and imaginative fabulation unmask the constructedness of the collective trauma suffered by the collective narrator. According to Jesús Benito, metafictional constructedness and the magic-realist passages are complementary:

Postmodern metafiction revels in the permanent failure of representation to offer access to the real thing, recurrently exposing human urge to reach after systems to order experience; on the other hand, even at their most fantastic, magical realist texts strive to retain a sense of the real and to reconstruct a feeling of order by filling the

gaps with magic. But in its attempt to express the unrepresentable [...] magical realism approaches the ideologies of the postmodern by continually breaching the mimetic contact. (2009: 74)

The traumatic representation of suicide and its aftermath in the novel poses a need to express the “unrepresentable” and “unspeakable” aspect of trauma, to use LaCapra’s and Herman’s words (2001: 92; 1997: 1). Metafiction emphasizes the unrepresentable aspect of trauma, or the “failure of representation”, while magic realism gives voice to this unrepresentability. It is not surprising that formally this magical realist narrative is delivered from a collective we-perspective which mirrors a more holistic suburban perspective because it is “societies, rather than personalities, [that] tend to rise and fall in magical realist fiction” (Parkinson Zamora and Faris 1995: 10). The way out of a perpetual collective traumatization lies in establishing conscious and concrete connections within the story based on understanding and creative activity. To speak in Bakhtin’s terms, the narrator’s community dialogizes meaning not only by relating their words, their discourse, to the object of this discourse—the five Lisbon girls—but also by orienting these words toward “a future answer-word” (1987: 280).

The first major self-reflexive appearance is the youngest sister’s diary, which can be also classified as a ‘mise-en-abyme’ structure. After Cecilia’s attempted and eventually completed suicide, the collective narrator describes and analyzes extensively the outlook, content, and their own personal reaction to the unusual discourse in her diary. Just as the readers read and interpret the narrator’s account, so is Cecilia’s story examined, recited, and learned by heart. Both the novel and the journal explore the linguistic medium as an unreliable, contradictory, and aporetic instrument that features unnecessary details, textual traces leading to dead ends and largely speculative information. The narrator says: “We got tired of hearing what they ate” (2002: 42) or “We became acquainted with starry skies the girls had gazed at while camping years ago” (43). In the same way, readers may get tired of the narrator’s repetition of phrases like “we were never sure” (99, 178) or “no one is sure” (90, 107), and even become acquainted with the boys’ staring at the sunset: “The sun was falling in the haze of distant factories, and in the adjoining slums the scatter of glass picked up the raw glow of the smoggy sunset” (34).

The ambivalence that this indirect comparison inspires in the readers cannot be mended by the authority and uniformity of the collective “we” which, instead of exerting control over the narrative and gaining credibility due to its plural status, destabilizes it by comparing the focalizing boys who years later narrate the story to the psychologically upset Cecilia. It is even more interesting to point out that:

Cecilia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity. It’s often difficult to identify which sister she’s talking about, and many strange sentences conjure in the reader’s



mind an image of a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads, lying in bed eating junk food, or suffering visits from affectionate aunts. (42)

Similarly to the narrator's peculiar collective condition, the youngest sister opts for the same first-person-plural voice—"Today we had frozen pizza", writes the girl—and the same dreamy language, unnecessary details and poetic passages which fails to reveal the mysterious motivation behind the suicides. The narrator notices that Cecilia's prose unfolds "two rotating moods," romantic and cynical, when its own discourse is molded on the same poles. It can be argued, then, that the narrating men deploy "an alien language" that does not correspond to their own age (Bakhtin 1987: 287), the language of adolescence, and that they do so either to maintain the emotional proximity to the girls that such language provides, or because of their own fixation on trauma.

This use of an alien language serves to approach creatively—but not reproduce or mimic—the intrusive experience and its haunting symptoms. Their empathically motivated words can both mediate or distance the violent experience from the traumatized, and simultaneously bring them closer to each other, especially when a shared trauma is involved. But although psychologists observe that one of the effects of writing—and by extension of fabulating—might be that "the act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person organizes and thinks about trauma" (Pennebaker 1999: 1248), there is still the requisite of sharing the pain. According to Judith Herman, some stages of recovery consist in "reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and community" (1997: 3). It is what the narrators do: they glue dispersed pieces of memories, try to reach for the suburban inhabitants' truths, and create new bonds by showing interest in the individual experiences of others. Yet, they do not so much try to restore existing connections where these never existed—due to repression and artificial togetherness in suburbia—but instead build new encounters with individuals, and with languages that spur their imagination.

However isolating, protective, and pampering the suburban society may be, the traumatized men who form the collective narrator are in need of communing with it. Finding points of intersection with other suburbanites might mean a progressive work towards recovery from their abreacting practice of gathering, in which their collective voice "goes over" the collected evidence in an act devoid of agency:

rather than consign the girls to oblivion, we gathered their possessions once more, everything we'd gotten hold of during our strange curatorship: Cecilia's high-tops; Therese's microscope; a jewelry box in which a strand of Mary's dishwasher-blond hair lay bedded on cotton... (186)

While these ritual gatherings work as an unhealed collective act of grieving, the act of letting others' stories smuggle into their main narrative, of juxtaposing

subjective versions to all the official records and the neighbors' reported evidence, represents a movement away from passivity. In this regard, *The Virgin Suicides* is also a celebration of the plurality of voices which enhances rather than detracts from the boys' and, later, mature narrator's fallibility. Not only is the text open to exuberant imaginative descriptions, short verse, shopping lists, notes, song lyrics, transcriptions of dialogues over a ham radio, but also embraces "another's speech" which according to Bakhtin (1987: 308) is never "clearly separated from authorial [in this case, the collective narrator's-as-author] speech."

Versions by the psychiatrist Dr. Hornicker, the journalist Ms. Perl, the teacher Miss Arndt, the girls' parents, the girls' lovers, and the narrator's own revisions of the whole mixture offer a variety of interpretations and misinterpretations for the reader to choose from. Such variety arrests the expected controlling quality of the narrative so as to let the others' minor stories into it, such as old Mrs. Karafilis' impossible integration into U. S. society, or Mr. Buell's own war trauma. By doing so, the narrator's report and testimony also demand the readers' powers of political inference to think about the possible social factors which indirectly conducted the teenage sisters to their suicides. Among these are the suburb's predicament with regard to the integration of the first generation of immigrants, resulting into crime (Sammy "the Shark" Baldino's case) or Ulysses syndrome (the old Greek lady living in the basement); the environmental awareness of the suburb turning into a wasteland (dying elm trees, plagues of fish flies, stench from the lake); and unhealed historic wounds like WWII or the race riots which are part of the author's background as well. In an interview, Eugenides announces his choice of Mrs. Karafilis as a biographical one—"she is my own grandmother"—and muses over the ways of dealing with a U.S. writer's ethnic heritage (also applicable to the general panorama in the United States)—whether to keep it in the basement or bring it to the fore by rope (Schiff 2006: 115). The same is applicable to trauma in general: is it ethical to bring it to the public attention? Or is it contagious and therefore dangerous to recreate it?

The narrator welcomes a storytelling that puts forth its traumatic unreliability and limitedness, reconciling the surviving boys' account with their community through remembering the dead Lisbon sisters. Bakhtin praises such "folkloric and down-to-earth storytellers" whose limitedness and specificity make them productive (1987: 313). After the girls' suicide,

Families moved away, or splintered, everybody trying out a different spot in the Sun Belt, and for a while it appeared that our only legacy would be desertion. After deserting the city to escape its rot, we now deserted the green banks of our waterlocked spit of land [...]. The exodus was short-lived, however. *One by one, people returned from their sojourns in other communities, reestablishing the faulty memory bank from which we have drawn for this investigation.* (2002: 242; emphasis added)

In this way, the languages used by the different characters constitute the narrator's second voice. This hesitant oscillation between their own imaginative memories and these of the neighbors can be compared to the middle-voiced discourse that LaCapra thinks is "the most suitable for representing or writing trauma, especially cases in which the narrator is empathically unsettled and able to judge only in a hesitant, tentative fashion" (2001: 197). The collective narrator's account can be classified as middle voice, but it seems more suitable here to regard it from a multi-voiced perspective. To the above-mentioned incorporation of artistic genres (poems, notes, lyrics), and characters' stories, it seems noteworthy to mention the inclusion of "extra-artistic" genres, to speak in Bakhtinian terms. Such is the scholarly medical register used to explain the girls' suicidal behavior or the journalistic register used to raise public awareness of suicide. An example of the former register is to be found not only in the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosed by the psychiatrist Dr. Hornicker, but also in the explanation given by Dr. Kotbaum from the Western Psychiatric Institute who "had found that many suicidal persons possessed deficient amounts of serotonin, a neurotransmitter essential for the regulation of mood." (2002: 220). On another occasion, the narrator rehearses in a dry statistical tone:

We learned that there were 80 suicides per day in America, 30,000 per year, [...] that the rate of suicide among the young (15–24) had tripled in the last four decades, [...] but that, contrary to our expectations, the highest rate of suicide was found among white males over 50.<sup>2</sup>

A simple look at the press (*South Amboy Citizen*) might convince the readers of the striking similarities between fiction and fact:

Over 30,000 people commit suicide each year. One out of six are between the ages of 15 and 25. Suicide is now the second major cause of death among high school and college students. The suicide rate for young men ages 15–24 has more than tripled in the past 30 years. [...] The highest suicide rates are found among men over the age of 50. (Anonymous 1989)

The narrator's voice absorbs these traditionally dominant discourses and at the same time these are attenuated by an attendant mockery that the narrative puts them through—note the irony in the doctors' surnames or the futility of the data about suicide. Thus, these different stories and registers juxtaposed to the collective narrator's imaginative passages are constant reminders of the constructedness and discursivity of the narrative—and by extension of the physical world—and of the relativization within the novel. By negotiating with the "alien word," the narrator establishes a quilt of traumatic stories which abolishes the collective authority of the "we" and puts forth dialogue.

In their search for dialogue and a sympathetic answer, the men who form the narrative voice occasionally refer to somebody, either through a second person pronoun or through more indirect asides in brackets.<sup>3</sup> Once the sympathy and emotional involvement of this vague narratee is raised, the reconstruction of the story that integrates the fragments and explains the enigmas can take place. According to Boris Cyrulnik, telling a traumatic story to a third party, especially to a far-removed reader, who creates the illusion of understanding and who will keep the secret, will result in “an astonishing feeling of calm” because “if we talk about the disaster we have suffered, we make it exist in someone else’s mind and delude ourselves into thinking that he or she understands it, despite the pain” (2011: 152–53). In a more generalized remark, Bakhtin confirms that, “every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (1987: 280, original emphasis).

By engaging a listener, the collective narrator would be able to transmit their “empathic unsettlement,” which according to LaCapra allows for a tense interplay between critical reconstruction and affective response to the voices of the victims (2001: 109). In other words, it is not only the Freudian “talking cure” on its own, but also the need to find the appropriate language that is oriented towards a “responsive” understanding.

Through the narrator’s multiple eyes, or more precisely through their focalizing teenage counterparts, the listener is meant to identify not vicariously but virtually, and feel with them without losing his or her critical capacity. The major references to someone outside the diegesis appear whenever the narrator exhibits an object or picture that would confirm reality. For instance, on describing the Lisbons’ front yard and the elm standing in front of the house, a subtle aside to the listener appears: “(see Exhibit #1)” (178). Another photograph in the inventory “shows the girls sitting Indian style, balanced in the lawn’s seesaw [...] by the counterweight of a smoking hibachi uphill. (We regret to say that this photograph, Exhibit #47, was recently found missing from its envelope)” (229). Even though the narrator urges this unknown listener to read the reports, to recall the songs, not to touch the pictures, or to imagine the girls’ suffering, an appendix comprising the described exhibits is absent. The importance of this textual “you” resides not only in the rebellion against any objective and monologic explanation of the world but also in that “the arena for the encounter,” to quote Bakhtin again, is provided by “the subjective belief system of the listener” (1987: 282), and by his or her volition to refashion the fragmented story so that it could signify for him or her.

#### 4. INFLUENCES AND STYLIZATION OF TRAUMATIC DISCOURSE

In this section, the focus falls on the “stylization” of discourse in *The Virgin Suicides*, that is to say, the use of someone else’s discourse for different purposes from the

original ones. This use is achieved “by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own” (Bakhtin 1999: 189). The concept follows from Bakhtin’s idea that language is not ‘res nullius’, it “is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (1987: 294). Although Bakhtin never centers overtly the dialogic potential of the literary text in the readers as Barthes does, it can be implied that the ambivalence of dialogic writing presupposes a decentering of authoritarian discourse: “authoritative text always remains [...] a dead quotation” (344).

The following analysis stretches out of the mere actions, story, characters, and narrative voice so as to explore some intertextual dialogues with other texts: their mutual influences, reciprocity, and possible intentions behind these dialogues. The narrator’s discourse can be regarded as possessed not only by the girls’ haunting ghosts but also by other texts and their intentions, refracted through the collective voice. *The Virgin Suicides* re-appropriates motifs and themes from Cortázar’s short story “Queremos Tanto a Glenda” (1980), and García Márquez’s fiction (e.g. *El Otoño del Patriarca*, 1975 and *Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada*, 1981). Additionally, the tendency of the text to relate to and depart from these alleged influences suggests, to use Anne Whitehead’s idea (2004: 104), that the connections between the characters and the collective narrator allow for connections among different kinds of trauma which can dissipate the sadness and solitude existing at the core of the novel.

Although there is a death or a loss in each of these texts, what is to be examined here is how these narratives help Eugenides’s novel in bridging a gap that is threatening to become a structural trauma. LaCapra defined this kind of trauma as one to which everyone may be subject, one which “should be correlated with absence in contrast to loss” (2001: xiv) and

may be evoked or addressed in various fashions—in terms of the separation from the (m)other, the passage from nature to culture, [...] alienation from species-being, the anxiety-ridden thrownness of *Dasein*, the inevitable generation of the aporia, the constitutive nature of originary melancholic loss in relation to subjectivity. (77)

The text seems permanently inhabited by melancholia or “sadness [that] had started long before” the suicides, as one of the men who form the narrative voice points out at some point (Eugenides 2002: 120). This sadness, which is enhanced by intertextuality, never leaves the atmosphere of the narrative, constantly reminding of “the contiguity of limit-experiences”, to use Michael Rothberg’s words (2009: 139), such as the ones occurring in García Márquez’s, Faulkner’s, and Cortázar’s works. This intertextual space, according to this critic, can open the survivor to the suffering of others. This is precisely what the mutually illuminating dialogues work toward in *The Virgin Suicides*: although the narrator tells us that there is no true story and everything said is just being continually transmuted, the text speaks of multiple valid

stories from which we can learn via interdiegetic and intertextual influences, permutations, and echoes.

Cortázar's short story "Queremos Tanto a Glenda" is an experimental venture into the obsession and determination that a group of fans can acquire once their object of adoration—the actress Glenda Garson—escapes the universe they have constructed and starts exercising her free will. The collective narrator in Cortázar's story—a group of fans fixed upon the actress and her image in films—constructs a parallel fictional universe in tribute to an unattainable, even obscure, object of desire, whom they would never be directly acquainted with: "el laboratorio estuvo en condiciones de sustituir en *Los Frágiles Retornos* la secuencia ineficaz de los pájaros por otra que devolvía a Glenda el ritmo perfecto" (2007: 21).

The works of Cortázar and Eugenides are both populated with a possessed collective presence, a sense of having a mission, and an imminent death. But whereas the group of fans in "Queremos..." is endowed with the power to modify and edit the films in which the actress performs, the traumatized men in *The Virgin Suicides* can only repeat endlessly the reports and newspaper articles they have heard and read about. While the former present themselves as gods after Glenda's retirement: "Vivimos la felicidad del séptimo día, del descanso después de la creación" (25), the latter need to "feel the imprisonment of being a girl" when the girls start to disappear gradually from the social suburban scene. Both groups try to endorse the Other in their narratives, but Eugenides's collective narrator never violates the physical border between them and this female Other. In this sense, they are represented as the ultimate victims—passive, self-blaming, and unable to force an end upon the story (their narrative finishes with a coda). Thus, chapter five ends with the passive statement: "we had loved them, and [...] we will never find the pieces to put them back together" (2002: 249), while Cortázar's short story, even though it leaves the ending open to the readers' imagination, gives an important clue: that the group of fans are not only the tellers of the story but also actors in it: "Queríamos tanto a Glenda que le ofreceríamos una última perfección inolvidable" (2007: 26). This ultimate, apparently murderous, action is what eventually dissolves the group of fans. On the other hand, the successive addition and coordination at the end of the story about the five suicides in Eugenides's novel, speaks of the wish to remain together even though it would be impossible.

The parallelisms between the two works—the contiguity between their collective voices and the similar outline of the story—could easily turn the men in the novel into perpetrators who objectify the Other. Nevertheless, in Eugenides's example there is not as much rebellion against as there is resignation to a world which is out of human control. Eventually, neither the rebellion of Glenda's admirers nor the traumatized men's resignation can bridge the absence at the core of the two narratives. The origin of the mentioned rebellion and resignation—the absent female—could create an anxiety and obsession beyond repair. The collective narrator in "Queremos..." bypasses a fall into perpetual absence by creating a loss—that of Glenda—and thus

becomes the ultimate perpetrator. As LaCapra says (2001: 57), “the conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—and generates hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome”. In opposition to Glenda’s admirers, the men in Eugenides’s novel can prevent a conflation of loss and absence only by proximity to the girls, to the suburbanites, and to external texts, one of which could be “Queremos...,” even if that means contiguity to and possible equation with perpetration.

When considering fictional works related in first person plural, Faulkner’s and García Márquez’s influences on the short book are not to be discarded. As some reviewers have commented, Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (1930) already exploits the collective narrator-as-witness, who as characters produced no significant effect on the succession of the events. However, in the case of *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrative functions differ in several ways: first of all, the men who integrate the collective voice take advantage of the narrative to portray the boys—themselves twenty years earlier—as empathic sufferers after the girls’ tragedy. Thus, despite the lapse of twenty years, their portraits as focalizers become as vivid as their teenage loves’. In opposition to Faulkner’s narrator-as-the-inhabitants of the small fictional town of Jefferson, whose tone is much more domineering, all-knowing, and turning private convictions into universal truth, Eugenides’s speakers, as befits their position as traumatized subjects in search of a coherent truth, present a more restricted and less privileged point of view by confronting their subjective versions to all the official records and the neighbors’ reported evidence. *Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada* uses the same structural device of inciting in the reader unresolved dilemmas. Eugenides admits being aware of García Márquez’s text at the time he was writing his own novel, and of the similarities in terms of form between the two (Schiff 2006:106; see Collado-Rodríguez preceding article in 2005). Both Eugenides and García Márquez place women at the core of male misery. Women’s actions are depicted as inexplicable and even irrational: the fact that Angela Vicario tells her brothers of her premarital sexual relations with Santiago Nasar or Cecilia Lisbon’s tendency to be suicidal are depicted as results of an inevitable destiny or an absurd coincidence.

The absurdity of life—everybody knows that Santiago Nasar is going to be murdered but nobody reacts, everybody knows about the Lisbon girls’ incarceration by their mother but nobody reacts, everybody knows about Miss Emily intentions to use rat poison but nobody reacts—reflects the absurdity of suicide, to echo Albert Camus. The opposition between societal responsibility and individual freedom are two of the main theoretical pillars of Existentialism. In his collection of essays, Camus argues that the whole concept of freedom is illusory except for that kind of freedom that dwells in the absurd and recognizes death as its only reality. Once the individual pauses his or her mundane routine in order to consider the meaning of life, “the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (1975: 19). Absurd as it might seem, people who commit suicide are assured of life and its meaning since they make the latter choice, while the rest go on living either in

uncertainty or without giving too much thought to the meaning of life. “Why” is also the traumatized survivors’ question once they have begun revising the meaning of the traumatic event. According to Herman (1997: 178), “[s]urvivors of atrocity of every age and every culture come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why? The answer is beyond human understanding”.

Thus, a traumatic loss—a suicide, murder, or natural death—is naturally accompanied by uncertainty, different interpretations, and oneiric nuances. García Márquez is known precisely for introducing the deadly event at the very beginning of his works and for developing it into a contradictory, magical and ambivalent artifice. *El Otoño del Patriarca* (1975) displays a first person plural narrator as well as a persistent presence of the dead tyrant in the story of its narrator. Similarly to the dictator’s natural death, the narrated suicides appear unreal because of the nature of discourse: by telling the story, the collective narrator resurrects happenings, stories, rumors of the dead characters’ lives that bring them back to discursive life in a very uncanny way. Both novels use the memories of the members of the community: dispersed memories of past events whose uncertainty infects the narrating. On comparing Cecilia’s second venture into suicide and the second time the dictator is found dead, it turns out that both events take place at the beginning of a second chapter, and that the dreary loss is being treated as unbelievable and unreal by the narrators: “We didn’t understand why Cecilia had killed herself the first time and we understood even less when she did it twice” maybe because of the fact that “there had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes” (2002: 33, 35). Similarly, in *El Otoño...*,

La segunda vez que lo encontraron [...] ninguno de nosotros era bastante viejo para recordar lo que ocurrió la primera vez, pero sabíamos que ninguna evidencia de su muerte era terminante, pues siempre había otra verdad detrás de la verdad. Ni siquiera los menos prudentes nos conformábamos con las apariencias, porque muchas veces se había dado por hecho que [el dictador] había perdido el habla de tanto hablar y tenía ventrílocuos traspuestos detrás de las cortinas para fingir que hablaba (web, 20)

The “truth behind the truth”—the truth hidden in rumors and urban myths—proves not so important at the end of *The Virgin Suicides*. What is important here is the process of searching this truth, throughout which the collective voice strives to keep away from reversing the order in the binary teller/told, boys/girls, we/them whereas the narrator in García Márquez’s tends to embed the story of the Patriarch in their own story of an oppressed community, giving him “una jerarquía mayor que la de la muerte” (90). In Eugenides’s novel, the collective narrator avoids any conflation or collapse of the “distinction between reconstruction and dialogic exchange through a kind of generalized free indirect style or middle voice that may neutralize or collapse not only binary oppositions but all distinctions” (LaCapra 1995: 816, emphasis



added). *The Virgin Suicides* opens a dialogue with García Márquez's text in order to get to know itself better, to define itself in relation to its predecessor, in the same way the men-as-narrator define themselves in relation to their female counterparts. Thus, the narrative acknowledges the suffering in other narratives, but never appropriates it. Unlike *El Otoño del Patriarca*, the last lines of *The Virgin Suicides* never declare that "nosotros sabíamos quiénes éramos mientras él [el dictador] se quedó sin saberlo" (111). Unhealed trauma has made such individuation impossible in *The Virgin Suicides*. However, the possibility of a dialogue with and relation to *El Otoño del Patriarca* recalls a different kind of definition of trauma: openness to "solidary relationships in ways that [...] allow them to share the suffering of others" (Alexander 2004: 1).

The suffering the two texts share lies in their narrators' subjection to a fallacy, to a lie, exercised by an institution (either the dictator or the adult suburban community) and their incapacity to know how to live without this lie because "la mentira es más cómoda que la duda, más útil que el amor, más perdurable que la verdad" (91). Yet, in Eugenides's text the suburban community's lie has long-term consequences since it represses the reality (Vietnam War, racism, youth suicide rate, etc.) beneath an illusive screen. In Lewis Mumford's words, the suburb is "based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle" (1961: 494). Eugenides's novel pastiches a reality marked by the national division in opinion in the 1970s United States and by what Jimmy Carter called a "crisis of confidence" at the end of that decade. By bringing together the eternal sadness of two different realities, the US American in the 1970s and the Latin American in the years prior to 1970s, a politics of relations is called upon, relations based on empathy, multiplicities and variations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The ending of the novel dwells in ambiguity: although the collective narrator's last words are inclined towards an eternal melancholia, they nevertheless observe that "as we make our conclusions we feel our throats plugging up, because they are both true and untrue" (247). Their story allows for the hesitant play between centripetal and centrifugal forces: a textual unification of a myriad of disjunctive contexts, and a refusal to centralize and totalize the enigmatic subject-matter of the story. The end of the narrative seems to crystallize into an unbridgeable gap, an absence at its core, while the process of narrating opens cracks towards a dialogized heteroglossia through dialogues within the narration (their collective voice interacts with fictional texts in the construction of their story, with a silent "you," with other characters' memories and stories, etc.) and enters a dialogue with other traditions (such as the experimental Latin-American) and themes, motifs and echoes coming from texts belonging within these traditions. In other words, the path towards healthy mourning

(as opposed to melancholia) must have recourse to the Other. It is only through such invocation—invocation that signifies a social, textual and intertextual bond—that a text becomes populated with plurality and contiguity which can bring for an active therapeutic symbiosis.

The collective narrator's strife for integrity is symbolically expressed in their we-narration, which nevertheless fails to restore the union in suburbia simply because such union had never existed before. It also fails to attain a unified outcome and conclusion in their mission. However, the double discourse offers many hints to the readers: despite the narrators' failures, ambiguity, and denials originated from their traumatic witnessing, the text transcends the merely regional society of Detroit suburbia with its white supremacy, escapism, and repression so as to tackle the very meanings of life and death in relation to other texts. The narrator's task is to listen and interpret "from the site of trauma," (Caruth 1995: 11). In this way, the metafictional passages (or the dialogues within the text) serve as a form of emotional connection to the dead girls and their context, and subsequent engagement with the readers through which the boys' empathic unsettlement is given expression. The collective search for the truth aims to enshrine the memory of the Lisbon girls in a coherent but stratified narrative and simultaneously at a ritual healing by means of active research and storytelling. The final product remains truthful to the enigmatic core and experimental (in this case, magic-realist) hyperbole inherent to trauma because, as Herman says (1997: 184), "these [strategies] might acquire a special meaning: a symbolic means of keeping faith with a lost person, substitute for mourning or expression of unresolved grief".

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to acknowledge that the writing of this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education (research project FFI2012-32719) and the Aragonese Regional Government.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas E. Joiner reports strikingly similar facts in *Why People Die by Suicide* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Other narratologists claim that a “narratee can only be inferred from the presence of an I, necessarily calling for a you since any first person discourse implies an addressee” (Amossy 2001: 15).

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