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Author(s): RACHEL CARROLL

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# Retrospective Sex: Rewriting Intersexuality in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*

RACHEL CARROLL

This article examines the representation of intersexuality in Jeffrey Eugenides's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2002 novel *Middlesex*. It situates the depiction of intersexuality within the context of current scholarship on sexed identity within the field of gender and sexuality studies. It argues that while a fictional focus on ambiguously sexed identity might appear to be aligned with queer critiques of fixed categories of "sex," Eugenides's narrative remains implicated in **heteronormative assumptions**. **More specifically**, it will explore the narrative strategies which frame Calliope Stephanides's intersexed body, focussing on the relationship between the male-identified adult Cal, "author" of this fictional autobiography, and his remembered teenage girl self. It will suggest that the retrospective logic at work in this narrative is complicit in a heteronormative temporality which reinforces the causal relationship between sex, gender and sexuality which queer theorists have sought to interrogate.

The narrative of Jeffrey Eugenides's 2002 comic epic of Greek American identity, *Middlesex*, journeys through time and space from Greco-Turkish hostilities in Smyrna in 1912, to the 1967 "race riots" in Detroit, through to post-unification Berlin in 2001. However, this reconstructed family history is also mapped against the narrator's retrospective account of an ambiguously sexed identity. Intersexuality demonstrates both the indeterminacy of "sex" as a category by which to define bodies and identities and the normative violence to which deviant bodies are subject.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the medical and surgical management of intersexed bodies can be considered symptomatic of a heteronormative imperative; as Alice Domurat Dreger has put it,

Teesside University.

<sup>1</sup> See Cheryl Chase, "Hermaphrodites with Attitude: Mapping the Emergence of Intersex Political Activism," *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 4, 2 (1998), 189–211; Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998); and Christine Matta, "Ambiguous Bodies and Deviant Sexualities: Hermaphrodites, Homosexuality, and Surgery in the United States, 1850–1904," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 48, 1 (Winter 2005), 74–83.

“a significant motivation for the biomedical treatments of hermaphrodites is the desire to keep people straight.”<sup>2</sup> The refusal of “corrective” surgery is pivotal to the life history recounted in *Middlesex*. However, I will argue that this act of apparent resistance to medical orthodoxy serves less to contest the binary logic of sexed, gendered and sexual identities than to preserve a normative sexed identity as male and sexual identity as heterosexual. Eugenides’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel seems to be expressive of a broader cultural and theoretical interest in the discontinuities of sex, gender and sexuality; *Middlesex* gives a memorable fictional voice to one of “those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings” who, as Judith Butler puts it, “fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility.”<sup>3</sup> However, this article will consider the ways in which a nominally transgressive narrative can nevertheless remain captive to normative discourses.

Dreger describes “hermaphrodite studies” as a “lively storytelling genre in medicine”<sup>4</sup> whose authors attracted a degree of celebrity on account of the sensational case histories they published. More recently, the emergence of advocacy movements campaigning for the rights of intersexed people has inaugurated of a new genre of “storytelling”: the testimonies of intersexed people, often recording traumatizing encounters with the medical establishment. Hence this genre of life-writing has become the site of highly charged claims for self-determination, authorship and agency. Storytelling is a significant motif in Eugenides’s acutely self-reflexive novel; this article aims to explore the narrative strategies within which Cal’s intersexed body is framed. The intersexed body problematizes the notion of origin in relation to sexed and hence gendered and sexual identity. However, fictions of origin – whether cultural, generational or genetic – dominate the narrative of *Middlesex*. I wish to interrogate the retrospective logic at work within *Middlesex* and to explore the ways in which it serves to contain the contingencies of sex, gender and sexuality suggested by the intersexed body.

## BORDER CROSSINGS: CULTURAL AND SEXED HYBRIDITY

Cal Stephanides, the narrator and protagonist of *Middlesex*, is a third-generation Greek American whose cultural heritage provides ample opportunities for the author to playfully evoke the mythological meanings of the figure of the hermaphrodite. Self-reflexive allusions to classical mythology abound in

<sup>2</sup> Dreger, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

this ebulliently metafictional novel. Cal is conceived following her parents' return from a theatrical production of *The Minotaur*, studies Ovid's *Metamorphoses* at school and is cast as Tiresias in a student production of *Antigone*. Later, as a teenage runaway living amidst the sexual countercultures of San Francisco, he re-enacts the myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus for the titillation of the punters in Bob Presto's club, the Sixty Niners.<sup>5</sup> Cal is a diminutive for Calliope, the muse of heroic epic, and indeed the narrator claims, in a rather disingenuous apology, an epic status for his story: "Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic too."<sup>6</sup> In this aside, cultural and genetic constructions of heritage and inheritance are humorously conflated. Indeed, parallels between the kinds of national, ethnic and racial border crossings which Cal's forebears undergo and the sexed and gendered border crossings which Cal encounters as an intersexed person are a recurring motif in this novel:

My grandparents had fled their home because of a war. Now, some fifty-two years later, I was fleeing myself ... A ship didn't carry me across the ocean; instead, a series of cars conveyed me across a continent. I was becoming a new person, too, just like Lefty and Desdemona, and I didn't know what would happen to me in this new world to which I'd come. (443)

This analogy is not without precedent, as Judith Halberstam has noted in relation to transsexuality: "Myths of travel and border crossings are inevitable ... But they are also laden with the histories of other identity negotiations, and they carry the burden of national and colonial discursive histories."<sup>7</sup> The crossing of borders is, of course, not in itself a subversive act. Indeed, the Stephanides family's American story charts an assimilationist imperative which first challenges but then compounds racial and ethnic hierarchies. The fate of the family hot dog restaurant business – Hercules Hot Dogs – is instructive here. Located within an African American neighbourhood as a consequence of the segregationist effects of urban housing policy, it is the last white-owned business to be destroyed by fire during the 1967 "race riots" in Detroit. However, the subsequent insurance settlement enables the family to join the "white flight" from the city and only accelerates their economic and social mobility, such that Cal's parents are able to place her in a private girls' school and thereby evade the racial desegregation

<sup>5</sup> My use of gendered pronouns reflects Cal's sexed identifications at different stages in his/her life.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002) 4. Page references hereafter given in text.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 165.

of the public school system. Middlesex Boulevard is the location of Cal's teenage family home. In this least desirable of the sought-after white neighbourhoods in Grosse Point, the Stephanides live happily alongside an orthodox Jewish family; both are subject to the "points system" by which real-estate agents police racial boundaries, but both enjoy the privileges of a hard-won, if somewhat provisional, "whiteness." The complex, contradictory and contested nature of normative constructions of national and racial identity is embodied in Middlesex as a location. Similar tensions are at work in the narrative depiction of intersexed identity – the "middle sex" to which the title more punningly refers.

The conflation of cultural and sexed hybridity in the border-crossing analogy is reinforced when Cal reflects on his origins in this way: "I'm the descendant of a smuggling operation, too. Without their knowing, my grandparents, on their way to America, were each carrying a single mutated gene of the fifth chromosome" (71). His grandparents's passage not only allows them to undergo a transformation of national identity but also of familial identity; in 1912 they leave the burning shores of Smyrna brother and sister, to dock in America husband and wife. This union is itself implicated in ethnic and racial discourses given that it is attributed to, and implicitly explained by, the shortage of marriageable Greek women. Desdemona and Lefty's incestuous marriage is retrospectively identified by Cal as the genetic cause of his intersexed state. This deduction is not simply a reflection of one branch of medical opinion.<sup>8</sup> It is also symptomatic of a narrative logic which serves to fix the indeterminacy of intersexed identity by reference to a founding origin. Cal attributes his intersexed state to their consanguineous union – and so establishes genetic determinism as the driving force of his retrospective narrative, which is neatly reduced to the "rollercoaster ride of a single gene through time" (4). The generational narrative acts as a carrier for a genetic narrative, whereby Cal's identity is destined to be determined by the past; in this way his possible futures are foreclosed by an inheritance which is written into his genes:

I'm quickly approaching the moment of discovery: of myself by myself, which was something I knew all along and yet didn't know ... the discovery of the mutated gene that had lain buried in our bloodline for two hundred and fifty years, biding its time ... it started the chain of events that led to me, here, writing in Berlin. (361)

<sup>8</sup> 5-Alpha-reductase deficiency, the condition with which Cal is diagnosed, is thought to "have a strong genetic component" given its higher frequency in populations characterized by isolation and intermarriage. Dreger, 40.

In *Middlesex*, a theory of genetic inheritance – only one medical hypothesis among many seeking to explain the incidence of intersexed births – serves as the premise for a complex and compelling narrative strategy: one which rewrites what Cal “didn’t know” into something “known all along.”

### “FIRST ONE THING AND THEN THE OTHER”

The course of Cal’s life story is anticipated in the opening of the novel:

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 in Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974 ... But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on. (3)

This arresting, proleptic prelude to the action of the narrative correctly raises an anticipation that Cal’s identity will be medically mediated. However, the process by which his identity is determined is much more protracted and ambiguous than is suggested in this narrative sleight of hand. By focussing on the process by which Cal “becomes” intersexed, I will explore how the retrospective logic at work in this narrative is complicit in a heteronormative temporality.

In his article “‘The Glans Opens Like a Book’: Writing and Reading the Intersexed Body,” Iain Morland writes, “Intersex bodies have genetic, hormonal, and anatomical configurations that cannot be adequately apprehended by hegemonic discourses of sexual difference.”<sup>9</sup> More specifically, these bodies confound the binary logic of sexed identity. The cultural and historical construction of gender has been compellingly demonstrated over the decades by feminist and gender theorists. More recently, queer theorists – and most prominently Judith Butler – have questioned the rhetorical manoeuvre by which this argument has sometimes been made, namely the differentiation of gender, as culturally mediated, from sex, as biologically fixed.<sup>10</sup> The cultural construction of “sex” is made all too apparent in the medical management of intersex bodies. Intersex theorists have noted how the birth of an intersexed infant is conventionally interpreted as presenting a “medical emergency”;<sup>11</sup> the appearance of ambiguities in, or discrepancies between, genetic, hormonal and anatomical definitions of sex is deemed to warrant rapid and radical surgical intervention, even though the intersexed condition does not necessarily in and of itself pose a threat to

<sup>9</sup> Iain Morland, “‘The Glans Opens Like a Book’: Writing and Reading the Intersexed Body,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Culture Studies*, 19, 3 (2005), 335–48, 335.

<sup>10</sup> See Butler.

<sup>11</sup> Fausto-Sterling, 45.

the baby's immediate or even future health. Such interventions pose important ethical questions given that they constitute medically unnecessary cosmetic surgery on a subject unable to give consent, and given that such initial surgeries are often a prelude to lifelong medical interventions, whose side effects can include irreversibly impaired sexual function. Cheryl Chase is one of the most eloquent of theorists and activists who have articulated a critique of this practice: "Pediatric surgeries literalize what might otherwise be considered a theoretical operation: the attempted production of normatively sexed bodies and gendered subjects through constitutive acts of violence."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, advocates of intersex rights have made analogies between female genital mutilation (FGM) and what they term infant genital mutilation (IGM), some noting that while Western opposition to FGM sits comfortably within latent colonial assumptions, acceptance of IGM within Western medical practice reveals a very culturally entrenched commitment to normative constructions of sexed identity. The medical and surgical management of intersexed bodies is, then, a highly charged issue within intersex theory and activism. I will consider Cal's refusal of "corrective" surgery as a teenager in Eugenides's novel in this context and question the extent to which it can be aligned with a queer critique.<sup>13</sup>

Intersexed conditions are various and the particular form which Eugenides fictionalizes offers specific narrative opportunities. Many intersexed conditions are apparent at birth in the form of ambiguous external genitalia. However, Cal is diagnosed as having a 5-Alpha-reductase deficiency, a condition in which an individual's genitals appear female at birth but undergo an apparent male-to-female transformation at puberty. A powerful motif in the life-writing of intersexed people is the discovery in later life of a hidden sexed history, in the form of surgery performed in infancy and concealed throughout childhood.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Cal's condition enables Eugenides to construct a narrative in which intersexed identity is experienced within a temporal and teleological structure: as having a "before" and "after," as departing from an origin to arrive at a given destination, as crossing a border upheld by a binary logic. Or as Cal puts it, in

<sup>12</sup> Chase, "Hermaphrodites with Attitude," 189.

<sup>13</sup> For a reading of *Middlesex* as "reiterating and troubling scientific and cultural engagements with sex, gender and desire" see Zachary Sifuentes, "Strange Anatomy, Strange Sexuality: The Queer Body in Jeffrey Eugenides *Middlesex*," in Richard Fantina, ed., *Straight Writ Queer: Non-normative Expressions of Heterosexuality in Literature* (McFarland & Company: Jefferson, North Carolina and London, 2006), 146.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Cheryl Chase's account of her discovery that she "had been my parents's son for a year and a half." Chase, 194.

another knowingly classical reference, “Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other” (3). This logic echoes the retrospective tendency which intersex theorists have discovered in conventional medical discourses of intersex. Its management is premised on the assumption that a true sexed identity does exist – and that it must be restored. This restitution narrative, as Dreger has described it (borrowing from Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller*), informs the terms by which patients, or more often their parents, are advised. Genitals are described as being “unfinished” or “incomplete” and surgery offered as simply finishing a process of development begun in the womb. Eugenides’s narrative strategies share the paradoxical relationship to origin which Morland attributes to normalizing surgery, which “purports to reconstitute a sexed original which is somehow prior to the intersexed original, prior to the origin and arrival in the world of the human subject, the intersex individual.”<sup>15</sup>

The third birth to which Cal alludes in the opening of the novel refers in one sense to his anticipated emergence as the author of a life history to rival its historical antecedents: “When this story goes out into the world, I may become the most famous hermaphrodite in history” (19). His aspiration towards authorship arguably has its roots in his interviews with Dr. Luce, the medical celebrity to whom Cal is referred following a routine emergency room examination. Dr. Luce is not only the founder of a Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, but also the author of a column for *Playboy* magazine, headed “The Oracular Vulva,” in which the said organ is ventriloquized to respond to readers’s enquiries and to offer some educational insights into erotic cultural history. Cal’s case history is destined to become incorporated within the medical archive on which Luce founds his fame; Cal later identifies his anonymized body in one of Luce’s publications: “That’s me on page 578, standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes” (3). However, Luce also invites the teenage Cal to write her own life history as an aid to his diagnosis. It is here that Cal’s entanglements with the discourses of the normative – and his later struggle to become the author of his own life – become most tense. The autobiographical authority of Cal’s teenage life history implicitly competes with the medical authority of Luce’s case notes; however, it becomes evident that both authors falsify reality in order to preserve a culturally constructed “truth” of sex.

<sup>15</sup> Morland, 342.



Unaware of the hypotheses which Luce is testing, but rightly fearing the kinds of intervention which the “wrong” response might prompt, Cal fakes her life. This faking is not without precedent – Cal is already adept at a ruse deployed to evade unwanted parental and professional scrutiny:

That summer – while the President’s lies were also getting more elaborate – I started faking my period. With Nixonian cunning, Calliope unwrapped and flushed away a flotilla of unused Tampax. I feigned symptoms from headache to fatigue. I did cramps the way Meryl Streep did accents. (361)

Cal’s anxieties about the onset of menstruation, her dread of visiting a gynaecologist and exposing herself to his invasive examination and her self-consciousness in the presence of her more developed peers are recognizable features of “normal” pubescent girlhood, especially given that the onset of puberty is effectively a prelude to a lifetime of gendered scrutiny. However, in her self-authored life, Cal endeavours to convince Luce of the normality of her gendered identity by concealing the truth of her emotional life as a teenage girl; principally, she conceals her attraction to other girls and her sexual experiences with her female best friend. In this fictionalized autobiography, the adult Cal remembers her first foray into life-writing as derivative and inauthentic, but also, crucially, as performative in that it serves to produce an identity contingent on the needs of a specific moment:

Half the time I write like a bad George Eliot, the other half like a bad Salinger ... But on that Smith Corona I quickly discovered that telling the truth wasn’t nearly as much fun as making things up. I also knew that I was writing for an audience – Dr. Luce – and that if I seemed normal enough, he might send me back home. (418)

This ploy is effective in that Luce is convinced of Cal’s successful socialization as a girl. Luce studiously avoids gendered pronouns in his first interviews with Cal’s parents, but now pronounces Cal their “daughter” and delivers his diagnosis; concealing the reality of Cal’s intersexed body, he prescribes “corrective” surgery in order to align Cal’s genitals with her gender.

Simultaneously with Luce’s disclosure to Cal’s parents, however, is Cal’s discovery of Luce’s case notes, which record the identification of undescended testes and a hypospadiac penis, mistaken to date for a generous clitoris. The normative impulse at work in Luce’s decision, and its potentially devastating effects for Cal as a sexual being, are made clear in the notes which Cal surreptitiously reads:

Though it is possible that the surgery may result in partial or total loss of erotosexual sensation, sexual pleasure is only one factor in a happy life. The ability to marry and pass as a normal woman in society are also important goals. (437)

Cal's subterfuge – her attempt to pass as normal in a heteronormative culture – inadvertently licenses radical surgical intervention in the name of restoring normalcy, or rather its appearance. As Cal herself puts it:

I had miscalculated with Luce. I thought that after talking to me he would decide that I was normal and leave me alone. But I was beginning to understand something about normality. Normality wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. (446)

It is at this point that Cal takes flight, leaving the clinic, his parents and his home to protect his bodily integrity. This is without doubt an act of defiance against the medical establishment and its management of intersexed bodies. But on another level Cal remains hostage to its discourses.

It is Luce's case notes and their record of genitals palpated and examined which forms the origin of Cal's newly sexed identity, rather than his own corporeal experience. Moreover, it is this medical history which inaugurates the retrospective logic which dominates the text we read. The adult Cal lays claim to an unequivocal maleness decreed by his hormonal constitution; in the earlier stages of the narrative, and in anticipation of events yet to unfold, he asserts, "To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology, I've got a male brain. But I was raised a girl" (19). Retelling his life for his imagined avid reader, Cal rewrites his past desires as anticipating the male heterosexual destinations with which he later identifies. For example, remembering her locker room self-consciousness in the presence of a schoolgirl elite at her single-sex prep school, Cal reflects, "I look back now (as Dr. Luce urged me to do) to see exactly what twelve-year-old Calliope was feeling, watching the Charm Bracelets undress in steamy light. Was there a shiver of arousal in her?" (297). However, Cal's desires are placed firmly within a heterosexual matrix. Cal attributes her sexual attraction to girls to his belatedly discovered maleness in such a way as to infer a direct, causal link between sex and sexuality, one which seems to preclude, or at least refuse to acknowledge, the possibility of same-sex desire. And yet whereas this matrix posits sex as the *origin* of gender and sexuality, in Cal's narrative sex becomes the rhetorical *effect* of sexuality; *her* teenage sexual attraction to girls is retrospectively explained and legitimized by the discovery of *his* "true biological nature" (327). Hence the retrospective narration recuperates the same-sex desire which Cal feels as a teenage girl as a signifier of an incipient heterosexuality, which is then mobilized to authorize a sexed identity which follows rather than precedes his desires.

## THE MIDDLE PART: ADOLESCENCE AND INDETERMINACY

The retrospective narrative strategies employed by Eugenides in *Middlesex* make it impossible for the reader to access Cal's experience as a teenage girl other than through the adult male Cal's self-consciously knowing hindsight; Cal's female adolescence is mediated by the adult Cal's conviction in his genetically sexed identity as male.<sup>16</sup> By revisiting Cal's adolescence as experienced by her as a girl I aim to recover the discontinuities of sex, gender and sexuality which the narrative seeks subsequently to contain.

Kenneth Millard has noted the ways in which contemporary fictions of adolescence situate formative experiences "in relation to historical contexts or points of origin by which individuals come to understand themselves as having been conditioned."<sup>17</sup> In this way, adolescence is figured as subjectively experienced but historically determined; hence narratives of adolescence can become narratives of historical, and perhaps especially national, development. *Middlesex* could be read as exemplifying this trope, especially where sexed hybridity is interpreted as a metaphor for cultural hybridity and Cal's inbetweenness as a cipher for the immigrant experience. However, the emphasis on "points of origin" by which individuals "come to understand themselves as having been conditioned"<sup>18</sup> reveals a retrospective logic by which adolescent experience is subordinated to the adult identity which supplants it. In the context of an analysis of representations of adolescence and same-sex desire, Angus Gordon suggests that adolescence can be understood as the "the idea that a particular period of life is fundamentally structured by its transitionality and indeterminacy."<sup>19</sup> Expressions of sexuality and desire which depart from heterosexual norms are normalized so long as the transition to adult heterosexuality is completed and the apparent "indeterminacy" resolved:

the meaning of adolescence is always understood to become apparent only in hindsight; it is structured throughout by a foreshadowed denouement, which is the subject's arrival at adulthood ... the discourse of adolescence typically recuperates

<sup>16</sup> This is not the first time that Eugenides has explored female adolescence through a male perspective; in his 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*, also set in Grosse Pointe, Michigan in the 1970s, the narrative voice represents the collective experience of a group of boys brought together by their shared obsession with a family of teenage girls and their deaths by suicide.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Millard, *Coming of Age in Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 10. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Angus Gordon, "The Retrospective Closet: Adolescence and Queer Prehistory," *Australian Historical Studies*, 36 (2005), 315–31, 321, emphasis added.

[same-sex desire or experience] as detours (even at times as necessary detours) on the path to an eventual heterosexual consummation.<sup>20</sup>

In her 1996 book on sexuality and narrative, *Come As You Are*, Judith Roof suggests that the middle part of the narrative is the structural location where lesbian identity is permitted to become visible, but only as a detour, a digression, a prelude to what follows: in her words, as “the pretext for the heteronormative’s spectacular return.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar way I would suggest that *Middlesex* has a kind of middle part – **dedicated to teenage girlhood** – in which discontinuities of sex, gender and sexuality are given expression, but that, ironically, their possibilities are closed down rather than opened up at the point at which Cal becomes conscious of her intersexed identity. I aim to explore tensions between normative narrative tendencies and queer textual moments, by which I mean moments in which the binary logic of the heterosexual matrix begins to fold in on itself.

Exactly what occurs between Cal and her teenage female lover remains obscure in *Middlesex*; just as the object of Cal’s passion strategically feigns unconsciousness at what her body is experiencing, so Eugenides draws a discreet narrative veil over the nature of her pleasure. While the desires which inspire these encounters raise questions for Cal about her sexuality, the acts which they prompt do not appear to raise questions about her sex. The elaborately euphemistic terms with which Cal describes her own sexual sensations is almost parodically evocative of the naturalizing metaphors by which female sexuality and feminine sensibility have traditionally been denoted: “For that spring, while the crocuses bloomed, while the head-mistress checked on the daffodil bulbs in the flower beds, Calliope, too, felt something budding ... A kind of crocus itself, just before flowering” (329). The association between sexuality and fertility, the reference to enfolded organic forms and the allusion to “blooming” and “flowering” conspire to suggest that female sexual arousal is integral to natural cycles of fertility, a process by which the female is made receptive to a reproductive destiny. However, this metaphor also allows for a significant indeterminacy with regard to its sexed referent:

A pink stem pushing up through new dark moss. But a strange kind of flower indeed, because it seemed to go through a number of seasons in a single day. It had its dormant winter when it slept underground. Five minutes later, it stirred in a

<sup>20</sup> Angus Gordon, “Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative and Queer Theory,” *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 5 (1991), 1–24, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xxxiv.

private springtime. Sitting in class with a book in my lap, or riding home in car pool, I'd feel a thaw between my legs, the soil growing moist, a rich, peaty aroma arising, and then – while I pretended to memorize Latin verbs – the sudden, squirming life in the warm earth beneath my skirt. To the touch, the crocus sometimes felt soft and slippery, like the flesh of a worm. At other times it was as hard as a root. (330)

While the “pushing” and “stirring” of Cal's “pink stem” could be placed within the lexicon of euphemisms for male sexual sensation, the crocus which can be both “soft and slippery” and “hard as a root” has qualities of both male and female genitals. Indeed, Cal admits that “I knew from personal experience that the Object had a crocus of her own. It swelled, too, when touched” (388); the crocus is here implicitly identified as, or at least with, the clitoris. The only difference relates to its size: “Mine was just bigger, more effusive in its feelings. My crocus wore its heart on its sleeve” (388); and elsewhere: “I worried at times that my crocus was too elaborate a bloom, not a common perennial but a hothouse flower, a hybrid named by its originator like a rose” (330).<sup>22</sup> Such an effusive bloom would seem to offer considerable potential in terms of sexual pleasure but Cal's adolescent sexual desires are principally played out in service to the pleasure of another; as Cal laconically concedes: “It was never my turn with the Object” (348). Cal's teenage lover is retrospectively named after Luis Buñuel's 1977 film *That Obscure Object of Desire*; this ruse is ostensibly to protect her identity but also evokes the way in which her own identity is obscured and objectified by Cal's obsession. Cal refers to her “crocus” as “An obscure object all her own” (329) and indeed the elusive and enigmatic object of her affections comes to stand for the indeterminacy of her genitals. However, an indeterminacy of agency and object is a recurring motif of Eugenides's depiction of teenage sexuality.

An unspoken pact develops between Cal and her friend, whereby the Obscure Object feigns unconsciousness as Cal acts out her desires when they share a companionable bed: “Sometimes when I climbed on top of the Object she would almost wake up. She would move to accommodate me, spreading her legs or throwing an arm around my back. She swam to the surface of consciousness before diving again” (386). The Obscure Object's passivity, assuming that is a form of unspoken consent, can be understood as a way of enjoying Cal's attentions while disavowing the implications of their intimacy: principally, the lesbian identity which it would seem to disclose. In

<sup>22</sup> Judith Halberstam writes that in the nineteenth century the “female hermaphrodite was considered a freak of nature with an enlarged clitoris who desired to penetrate other women who might be drawn to her ambiguity.” Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 55.

terms of characterization, and from Cal's perspective, it also seems an extension of a narcissistic sense of entitlement integral to the Object's privileged class and racial identity as a wealthy white girl. In other ways, however, it could also be placed within the spectrum of normative female heterosexuality and indeed it is a role which Cal herself reluctantly plays when she finds herself cast in the sexual script pursued by the Obscure Object's brother, Jerome, and his friend Rex. Jerome strategically supports Rex's amorous ambitions with the Obscure Object, by engaging and disarming Cal as a companion whose presence might otherwise become an obstacle. Here Cal adopts a passivity which resembles that of the Object, but where the Object's passivity enables her to enjoy a sexual experience at odds with her nominally heterosexual identity, Cal's passivity enables her to endure a sexual experience compelled by the pressures of heteronormativity: "I didn't stop him. I remained completely still while he did his thing ... Behind my impassive face my soul curled up into a ball, waiting until the unpleasantness was over" (373). Cal's behaviour is within the spectrum of normative female heterosexuality so long as female sexuality is assumed to be innately passive and male sexuality innately active; hence heterosexuality becomes something which men "do" to women. Equally, while Jerome is not forceful and certainly not violent, the distinction between consensual and coercive sex is uneasily blurred in this scene.

However, while reluctantly going through the motions of making out with her best friend's brother, Cal fantasizes about inhabiting the body of the Obscure Object's boyfriend Rex; here the boundaries between same-sex and heterosexual roles become blurred: "And then, because I suddenly knew that I could, I slipped into the body of Rex Reese. I entered him like a god so that it was me, and not Rex, who kissed her" (373). By assuming the fantasized agency of a heterosexual boy, Cal is able to legitimize her own desires for the Object, to make them meaningful and authentic in heteronormative terms. As Cal writes, "I saw [her breasts]; I touched them; and since it wasn't me who did this but Rex Reese I didn't have to feel guilty, didn't have to ask myself if I was having unnatural desires" (375). Just as the Obscure Object acts out a feminine sexual passivity as a way of normalizing her same-sex desires, here Cal acts out a masculine heterosexual activity in order to normalize her desires. It is at the moment at which Cal deduces that Jerome is "inside me" (375) – signified by "pain like a knife, pain like fire" (375) – that Cal experiences a revelation:

We gaped at each other and I knew he knew. Jerome knew what I was, as suddenly I did, too, for the first time clearly understood that I wasn't a girl but something in between. I knew this from how natural it felt to enter Rex Reese's body, *how right it*

*felt*, and I knew this from the shocked expression on Jerome's face. (375, emphasis in original)

From the retrospective vantage point of the adult Cal, this remembered fantasy is enlisted to support his recuperative narrative, whereby a male sexed identity is discovered as the cause of a sexuality which is retroactively understood as heterosexual. Nevertheless, this is a rather queer textual moment. It is not so much the "entry" into her friend's body that is emphasized as the object of this exercise, as Cal's entry into the body of a boy. Moreover, Jerome's response, apparently so pivotal to her own revelation, is quickly revealed to be entirely her own projection: "Reader, believe this if you can: he hadn't noticed a thing" (376). Jerome's unknowingness might be attributed to his youthful inexperience or to a self-absorbed indifference to his partner's body; however, it is also suggestive of an indeterminate sexuality reminiscent, perhaps, of Cal's earliest erotic sensations playing in the swimming pool with her childhood friend Clementine: "I fall between her legs, I fall on top of her, we sink ... and then we're twirling, spinning in the water, me on top, then her, then me ... I'm not sure which hands are mine, which legs" (266). Hands and legs become interchangeable and agency blissfully blurred. Similarly, in Cal's encounters with the Object, "What pressed on our attention was that it was happening, sex was happening. That was the great fact. How it happened exactly, what went where was secondary" (386). What has *not* happened in any of these scenes is phallic penetration, an act assumed integral to normative definitions of heterosexuality; what these scenes imagine is a sexuality whose bodily encounters defy binary categorization and forms of sexual pleasure unencumbered by presumptions about "what goes where." I would suggest that the adult Cal's much-lamented failure to establish enduring heterosexual relationships is attributable less to the fact of his intersexed body than to his own renunciation of the kinds of sexual indeterminacy which characterize the teenage Cal's desires.

### CONCLUSION: THE LAST STOP

The generational family narrative has acted as a productive fictional holding frame within which to explore the cultural hybridity of histories and identities; while the family provides a model of historical inheritance and collective memory, its discontinuities – often acted out in motifs of infidelity, illegitimacy and estrangement – simultaneously subvert any aspirations towards a familial form of "grand narrative." However, while a fictional genealogy may allow a space within which to foreground the historical and cultural contingencies of identity, in *Middlesex* it is arguably complicit with a

heteronormative matrix within which queer contingencies of identity are contained. The heterosexual transgression which is posited as the cause of Cal's condition is normalized by structures of family and marriage, but Cal's body remains an anomalous "last stop" (184) in the family journey of the Stephanides, rather than the prelude to a differently conceived way of living.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his claim to an unequivocal maleness – "I operate as a man" (41) – the adult Cal lives what he calls a "closeted" (107) life, leaving the country of his birth and undertaking an itinerant career as a member of the Foreign Service as a means of escaping his body and its implications: "After college, I took a trip around the world. I tried to forget my body by keeping it in motion" (320). The narrative location of this retrospective life history is post-unification Berlin, where Cal works for the Foreign Service and lives amongst a Turkish *Gastarbeiter* community. If the parallel between sexed and cultural hybridity were to be pursued, this might seem a promising location from which to explore a post-sexed identity: "This once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for Einheit. Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin" (106). Indeed, Cal's reference to "another birth" (3) in the opening of the novel might raise such an expectation. However, the indeterminacy of sexed, gendered and sexual identity suggested by the intersexed body – and played out in the "middle" part of the narrative – has been foreclosed by a persistent investment in binary categories of identity. The possibility of living a life beyond not only national but also sexed borders remains unimagined at the end of the novel, which proves unable to fulfil its own reproductive promise.

<sup>23</sup> Cal's tentative courtship of Julie Kikuchi, an expatriate Californian living in Berlin, fails to deliver a solution to his single state. Julie's wariness of romantic entanglements is attributed to a series of ill-fated relationships with closeted gay men; her reflections reveal the problematic nature of the conflation of sexed and racialized borders: "'Asian chicks are the last stop. If a guy's in the closet, he goes for an Asian because their bodies are more like boys'" (184).