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Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* Is So Inoffensive

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ABSTRACT: I read Jeffrey Eugenides' 2002 novel *Middlesex* as a book that endorses a narrative of heteronormativity and ethnic assimilation. Ethnocentrism is critiqued through irony, first with an incestuous marriage and then by parodying the Nation of Islam. But on the question of homosexuality, the text appears to stage the impasse of sexuality and gender, only to resolve its complexities as a coming of age narrative that affirms heterosexuality.

Keywords: assimilation, intersexuality, heteronormativity

In a 2002 review in *The Nation*, Keith Gessen comments that although Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex* ultimately skirts gender politics, it might nevertheless be considered "politically effective" since it "can be read in schools, discussed in parlors—if only Oprah's Book Club were extant at this hour" (28). Gessen's concept of political effectiveness implies a pandering bloodlessness and the notion that true literature is beyond mere sectarian politics. Robyn Warhol praises Eugenides for having "evidently read plenty of gender theory" (228), implying that such knowledge is employed instructively in his novel to promote social justice; Daniel Mendelsohn, however, complains that the narrator is actually gender-unambiguous, that is, totally male, and that the novel thus reaffirms conservative gender hierarchy (18).

Middlesex is a family saga novel about three generations of the Greek immigrant Stephanides family, who live in the United States. As the saga progresses,

the family roughly enacts the three-phase progressive assimilation that sociologist George A. Kourvetaris describes in such families: the first immigrant generation identifies with a Greek nationality; the second identifies with the Greek Orthodox religion and American nationality; and the third, most assimilated generation identifies with Greek-immigration status as a class (114). The twist in this novel appears in the form of the transgendered narrator, Cal, who was born female and reborn male. This essay explores the interrelation of gender and ethnicity in *Middlesex* to determine whether the apparently assimiliationist resolution—in which the Stephanideses are comfortable in their middle class status and Cal is comfortably male—really presents a vision amenable to a bland conciliatory acceptance of contemporary America.

Cal explicitly addresses the question of politics in a narratorial interjection: "I happen not to be a political person. I don't like groups. Though I'm a member of the Intersex Society of America, I have never taken part in its demonstrations" (106). Interestingly, Cal mentions the term "intersex" here in the context of political activism, whereas elsewhere he comfortably uses "hermaphrodite." Geertje Mak quotes Bernice L. Hausman in pointing out that by the 1920s "[t]he new term *intersexuality* better acknowledged a 'continuum of physiological and anatomical sex differences' and challenged 'the idea of a 'true sex' hidden within the body's tissues'" (Hausman qtd. in Mak 69). Whereas "hermaphrodite" is still freighted with connotations of the unnatural, "intersexuality," as a neologism, attempts to naturalize various sexes, which themselves are naturally occurring. In this light, Cal's choice of "hermaphrodite" implies the conservative view that only the categories of male and female are natural genders.

This kind of terminological distinction resides more on the level of politeness than politics, yet the way that the narrative resolves its queerness *is* political. Judith Halberstam argues that queer content offered for mainstream consumption, such as the movies *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) ultimately "re-center the white male gaze, and [. . .] make the white male into the highly flexible, supremely human subject" (*In a Queer Time and Place* 80). The ethno-gender-normative denouement of both films comes when the transgendered characters, who had earlier presented "a sense of self not derived from the body, and an identity that operates within the heterosexual matrix without confirming the inevitability of that system of discourse" (76) reach the horizon of their flexibility: that is, they fail to become heterosexual. This failure is portrayed as a "form of rigidity" (77). Ultimately, these films seem to say, it is exciting to be queer but wrong to stay queer.

Middlesex, to some extent, gives its narrative resolution in its first few paragraphs. Cal begins with a wry oracular summation of the novel, where incongruous details are listed with little elaboration:

> I've been ridiculed by classmates, guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists, and researched by the March of Dimes. A redheaded girl from

> Grosse Pointe fell in love with me, not knowing what I was. (Her brother liked me too.) An army tank led me into urban battle once; a swimming pool turned me into myth; I've left my body in order to occupy others—and all this happened before I turned sixteen. (3)

At first, Cal focuses on the physiological, but as the list gets to its more unbelievable plot points, it culminates in a break. It then emphasizes the temporal distance between the events of the novel's main narrative and the forty-one-year-old Cal in the present, safely looking back upon the picaresque. For Halberstam, this linkage of the queer with immaturity works to place minority sexuality into "a place held by so-called primitives in colonial anthropology; [the transgender person] literally inhabits a different timescale" (*In a Queer Time and Place* 25).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes the definition of gender and the definition of hetero- and homosexuality as a minoritizing and universalizing impasse. Starting with sexual definition, a minoritizing model would be the essentialist idea that people are born homosexual. A universalizing definition would suggest that "sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities; that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires" (85). Sedgwick admits that the consensus opinion here is probably a compromise between the two (85), and so these definitions are not mutually exclusive. However, the inconsistency arises when we take into account gender definition. The minoritizing view of gender is that gender is "the single most determinative diacritical mark of social organization" (87). The universalizing view is that gender is separate from the body. Therefore, the impasse is that a universalizing definition of gender leads logically to a minoritizing view of sexuality, and vice versa. Like sexuality, ethnic identity is also characterized by the minoritizing and universalizing impasse. Applied to ethnicity, non-assimilative ethnicities would be minoritizing in that ethnicity is viewed as the primary determinant of identity, whereas a universalizing view of ethnicity would suggest assimilation: ethnicity is transpersonal and individuals can become an ethnicity different from what they were.

Middlesex, of course, is also an ethnic novel, and we might even say that Cal's use of the term "hermaphrodite" is a simple result of his effort to be self-consciously Greek. Although Greek ethnicity within America has nearly become simply another form of whiteness—the U.S. Census doesn't record third- and fourth-generation Greeks (Frangos 59), and 80 percent of marriages in the Greek Orthodox Church are now to non-Greeks (56)—some Greeks in America continue to think of themselves as Greek, not American nor Greek-American. In fact, as George A. Kourvetaris points out, "[m]ost Greeks up until 1900 lived outside the boundaries of the Greek nation state" (185), so migrant Greeks historically maintained a Greek nationality while embedded in other nations.

Greeks have tended to be non-assimilative partly due to economic position and partly due to host country hostility. According to Kourvetaris, diaspora Greeks occupied a social category of "middleman minorities." There are two defining traits of this group: "its members are engaged in small commercial enterprises," and "middleman minorities have somewhat tense relations with the majority population" (179). Kourvetaris notes that Smyrna, near the Asia Minor locale where Cal's grandparents Lefty and Desdemona emigrate from, served in particular as a center of Greek "middleman minority" commerce, especially in the wheat and silk trade (180). Kourvetaris also points out that "[h]istorically Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Indians, Chinese, Copts, Lebanese, Koreans, and others have excelled as small business entrepreneurs in alien societies and cultures" (181).

The initial wave of Greek emigration to the US occurred between 1891 and 1921 as a mass international movement. Stavros K. Frangos cites a variety of factors that culminated in a migration to *Kseniti*, or foreign countries:

> The decision to labor in foreign lands was most often motivated by a series of social obligations (such as providing a dowry for sisters and acquiring capital in the countryside), by long-established labor practices (verbal and written agreements to work for employers abroad for fixed periods in exchange for initial fare), by a desire to avoid the growing class discrimination in the rural countryside, and, in the years just before the Balkan Wars and World War I, to avoid military service. (7)

While Frangos discounts the apparently popular claim that a worldwide failure of the currant market contributed to the mass migration (9), Eugenides writes, "Bithynios had never been a big village, but in 1922 it was smaller than ever. People had begun leaving in 1913, when the phylloxera blight ruined the currants" (*Middlesex* 28). Bithynios fits Kourvetaris's description of a non-assimilative subcommunity, where ethnic Greeks "cultivate high degrees of internal solidarity through kinship ties [and] endogamous marriage" (Kourvetaris 179). The small population of Bithynios actually makes the prospect of endogamous marriage unlikely. There are only two marriageable girls: one, according to Lefty, "smells," and the other "has a moustache bigger than mine" (*Middlesex* 29). In a sense, then, the novel's original sin—the incestuous marriage between Lefty and Desdemona—originates as an effect of anti-assimilative minoritizing.

Once in the United States, Desdemona continues to manifest an obsession with a minoritizing view of Greek ethnicity. At Ellis Island, after her "immigrant braids" are cut off, Desdemona tells Lefty: "I don't want to look like an *Amerikanidha*" (82). After debarking in Detroit, Desdemona is unsettled that Lina's husband, Jimmy Zizmo, has an ambiguous bloodline.

> "Pontian!" Desdemona gasped with horror, while also examining the icebox. "He's not a Muslim, is he?"

"Not everybody from the Pontus converted," Lina scoffed. "What do you think, a Greek takes a swim in the Black Sea and turns into a Muslim?"

"But does he have Turkish blood?" She lowered her voice. "Is that why he's so dark?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." (89)

Lina and Desdemona's exchange addresses concern with ethnic identity. Greekness is something that can't be washed off, but for Lina, it is also ultimately unimportant. Desdemona's comments imply a kind of Greek miscegenation (Pontian reflects a degree of Greek that is less pure) and even cultural separation (Muslim instead of Greek Orthodox).

Ironically, it is Zizmo who institutes the conventional Greek gender roles into the house. "The house was sex-segregated like the houses in the *patridha*, the old country, men in the *sala*, women in the kitchen [. . .] Lefty and Desdemona, accustomed to living in their own house, were forced to adapt to their new landlord's ways" (92). Kourvetaris notes that the "ideal" male gender role in the Greek family is an autocratic dominant figure, "whose authority over the rest of the family members, particularly the wife, [is] absolute" (101). In practice, of course, role differentiation in the Greek family has never been this simple. "In reality [the father's] authority [is] contingent upon his ability to prove himself a good provider for his family, a compassionate husband, and an understanding father" (102). Regarding women, the Greek family is characterized by a heavy emphasis on motherhood. In some cases, motherhood "has been the only means by which a woman can achieve full adult status in Greek society" (104).

In the chapters that close Lefty and Desdemona's portion of the novel, these traditional, ethnic gender roles recur to prefigure the broad outcome of the novel as a whole. To prove himself a good provider, Lefty worked "sixteen, sometimes eighteen, hours a day. He worked seven days a week. To support his family he had to be exiled from them" (*Middlesex* 136). But despite striving to the Greek paternal ideal, as the Great Depression mounts, Desdemona is forced to work, accepting a job as a silk worker for the Nation of Islam.

Initially, despite Desdemona's entry into the role of provider for the family, gender roles seem to consolidate along conventional lines. The Nation of Islam is highly gender segregated. In fact, Sister Wanda tells Desdemona "'Islam' means submission" (147), implying that such submission is the Nation of Islam's ideal female role. Lefty begins to traffic secretly in the bodies of women, collaborating on nude photos for "a steady side income" (159). Cal's narration links Lefty's avocation as an updated vision of the harems of his Turkish youth, but ultimately Cal, in a rare failure of omniscience, is "unable to answer" whether Lefty's "interest in these models [was] merely pecuniary" (159). This unexpected lack of narrative insight obviously functions to preserve a sense of ambiguity, which the episode of Desdemona's employment depicts as underlying surface clarity.

The originary event of the novel, which results from fidelity to a conservative differentiation in which marriage must only occur between Greeks, ultimately bears its dialectic opposite. Zizmo, who introduced conventional gender roles into his American household, reappears in the narrative as the historical W. D. Fard, the founder of the Nation of Islam. As though to critique paranoiac differentiation by taking it to its extreme, Fard explains the origins of the white race as the result of a kind of inbreeding, which he calls "unnatural selection" (154–55). Fard uses the echo of Darwin in this phrase to further deploy the rhetoric of science in service of his specious claim. "Now let us make a physiological comparison between the white race and the original people. White bones, anatomically speaking, are more fragile. White blood is thinner. Whites possess roughly one-third the physical strength of blacks" (156, emphasis removed). Desdemona gradually comes to internalize Fard's rhetoric, especially the link between inbreeding and the origination of "blue-eyed devils" (*Middlesex,* 155). Then, haunted by fears of the consequences of inbreeding, Desdemona breaks with Greek tradition and has tubal ligation surgery, ensuring the end to her maternal role. To the reader, Desdemona's act bears the irony that her consanguineous marriage is itself a result of a narrowly conceived Greek identity.

This theme of identity in *Middlesex* accords with Robert F. Reid-Pharr's definition of modernity as the "unrelenting desire [. . .] to order the world, to clearly delineate the good from the bad, the self from the other" (139). Social movements such as "Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association; the Moorish Science Temples, led by the Noble Drew Ali; the United African Nationalist Movement; and even Rastafarianism" all attempt to create a historical black nobility as the basis for a defined positive value (139). For Reid-Pharr, the racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Nation of Islam is a further attempt to deflect the indeterminate place of blacks in the social realm onto "the ambiguity that the Jew represents in relation to the black community" (141). Indeterminacy is the delegitimizing force that deprives blacks of participation in the symbolic order, and though Zizmo and the historical W. D. Fard are both ethnically indeterminate (Fard claimed to be biracial and white at different times), this indeterminacy is the contradiction that the ideology of the Nation of Islam both conceals and, as Reid-Pharr argues, reifies.

Zizmo's reappearance as W. D. Fard is one of the novel's more magical realist turns, risking absurdity, but its effect is to further interweave questions of ethnicity into the plot. Cal's maternal grandfather is, after all, the founder of the Nation of Islam. It is interesting to note that while Eugenides, through Cal, inserts citations of actual nonfiction books on the Nation of Islam (*The Black Muslims of America* by C. Eric Lincoln and *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Mohammed* by Andrew Clegg III, [*Middlesex* 146]), the narrative in no sense bends to historical veracity. Richard Walsh points out that such a move inverts the traditional Platonic hierarchy where fiction is supposed

to have a "parasitic dependence upon nonfictional narrative discourses" (Walsh 111). If anything, Eugenides's reference to these historically verifiable facts with the means of verification given redoubles the fiction: the nonfiction is in the service of both the fictional story itself and Cal's metafictional self-reference. Additionally, Desdemona's experience of Fard/Zizmo's speeches is the quintessential experience of story: through a heating vent Fard was only "the sound of the voice, a deep bass that set her breast bone buzzing" (*Middlesex* 152): there is no bodily presence, only words.

Cal's metafiction expands in the beginning of the third chapter to encompass what Mendelsohn calls a "tenuous subplot, set in the present and concerned with Cal's tentative courtship of an Asian American artist [. . .] constructed solely to give an overarching shape to the novel's four big sections" (18). It is a mistake, however, to see the Cal metafiction as a transparent conceit. Instead, the relation between the main family saga and Cal's narration tends to be what Gary Johnson calls "thematic allegory." Thematic allegory "depends primarily on establishing a relationship between a literary work's 'images' and the extraliterary concepts to which those images are meant to correspond" (Johnson 235). In other words, allegory is the displacement of meaning from a primary narrative onto a secondary narrative. Thus, the addition of narrative action to what could have been merely postmodern self-consciousness in storytelling creates a doubled narrative that indicates allegory: one narrative suggests how we read the other.

The first sentence of *Middlesex* is "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (3). One paragraph later, Cal states: "But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on" (3). Juxtaposed with the two earlier births, which dramatize the transgender element of the novel, what does this third birth refer to? At first, birth in this context seems to suggest the story of *Middlesex* itself: Cal goes on to express his new interest in "great-aunts and -uncles, long-lost grandfathers, unknown fifth cousins, or, in the case of an inbred family like mine, all those things in one" (4). But, since the first two births abbreviatedly refer to major turning points in the novel's plot, this third birth at forty-one seems to suggest a similarly major life change is about to happen.

Either interpretation of Cal's third birth takes temporality as a theme. Describing this third event as a birth already suggests the irruption of the past; birth as a concept tends to evoke futurity. Eugenides comments in an interview: "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The traits of the ancestors show up in us today. I wanted *Middlesex* to be like that, a kind of novelistic genome" ("Interview" 76). "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" is actually the catchphrase of a discredited evolutionary theory that proposed that our personal development reenacts the evolution of our species—that is, that we pass through a bacteria stage, an invertebrate stage, and so on, to our final form as humans. However, like W. D.

Fard's blue-eyed devils, the meaning of this phrase has become diluted; now it could merely suggest the vestigial stages in human embryology, such as gills and a tail, that manifest themselves and disappear. Eugenides does not conclusively invest science with the ultimate explanatory power in his novel at large, as he appears to do in the Fard speeches. Instead, Eugenides treats science as merely one of many discourses. Ultimately, *Middlesex* does not give us a clear relation between past, present, and future.

Mendelsohn's observation that the subplot of Cal's courtship in modern-day Berlin feels thin is a valid one, especially if we consider this part of the novel abstracted from the rest. Otherwise, each of these Berlin episodes tends to preview themes that the chapter treats. When Cal first sees his love interest, he considers nationality in the age of globalization: "You used to be able to tell a person's nationality by the face. Immigration ended that" (*Middlesex* 40). Cal remarks that the girl he sees "[is] Asian, at least genetically" (40). This is an odd modification, but what he means is that "I had a hunch she was American" (40). Cal's ruminations show at least three levels of identity: the genetic, the national, and the globalized. When Cal breaks into the main action, the chapter focuses on his grandparents' decision to immigrate to America during the Greco-Turkish War, a failed war whose goal was to match Greek ethnicity with Greek nationality.

As a heterodiegetic narrator who later becomes homodiegetic, Cal's narrative presence, especially in the Berlin subplot, makes him in a sense always homodiegetic or always a part of the action. That is, when Cal's grandparents Lefty and Desdemona are faced with plot complications that make their immigration to the U.S. unlikely, we as readers already know that they will succeed. In fact, Cal opens this chapter by explicitly reminding us of his origins: "Descended from Asia Minor Greeks, born in America" (40). Cal's presence is always homodiegetic in that the ostensibly heterodiegetic narrative displaces meaning into the frame; further, the primary plot is foreclosed with our knowledge of the future, that is, the Cal in the Berlin plot. This is an example of Johnson's allegorical relationship of embedded narratives where "the allegorical narrative resides within the primary work's diegesis" (Johnson 237).

At the same time, the comparably placid surface of Cal's subplot seems to carry through an inactive heterodiegetic role, as though Cal is so far removed from the tumultuous past he relates that he is uninvolved with it. For example, Cal makes clear that he should not be regarded as a hermaphrodite in the present tense:

> I'm not androgynous in the least. 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome allows for normal biosynthesis and peripheral action of testosterone, in utero, neonatally, and at puberty. In other words, I operate in society as a man[. . . .] I've lived more than half my life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally. When Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her

> nails. It's a little like being possessed. Callie rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe. She sticks her little hands into the baggy sleeves of my arms. She inserts her chimp's feet through the trousers of my legs. (41–42)

Cal deploys the rhetoric of objective science—biosynthesis—in order to prove that he is a man; he then discredits Callie by equating her with a chimp—that is, he evokes the ontogeny-recapitulates-phylogeny slogan. Callie is an evolutionary dead-end that Cal has passed through. Cal's purpose in deploying first science and then scientism is to consign the past to a foreclosed narrative, distanced and inaccessible. In this reading, the allegorical meaning that the main narrative gestures toward is that all manner of heterogeneous, unruly past events, can be tamed and assimilated such that the smooth, uncontested surface of the present, or the null ethnicity of white America, contains the only relevance.

However, Cal's "tentative courtship of an Asian-American artist" challenges that interpretation. To Cal, "the placidity of her countenance along with the smoothness of her skin made her face appear like a mask, with living, human eyes behind it" (41). This description calls appearances into question. While her indeterminate nationality is decided via what products she has ("flared black ski pants, and a pair of maroon Campers resembling bowling shoes[, . . .] the retro bike" [41]), it is only by reading below the surface of these objects that Cal decides she is American: "Chrome and turquoise, [the bike] had fenders as wide as a Chevrolet's, tires as thick as a wheelbarrow's, and appeared to weigh at least one hundred pounds. An expatriate's whim, that bike" (41).

In the chapter on Cal's parents' courtship, Cal opens the narrative with a Berlin episode focusing on the Asian-American artist, Julie Kikuchi. After seeing Julie's art, which she has heretofore concealed, Cal reassures her of her authenticity: "'If you've always done factories, I think it's different,' I told her. 'Then you're not just glomming on. If factories are your subject, how could you *not* do I. G. Farben'" (184). The authentic does not reside on the surface; instead it is the underlying, invisible motivation that makes Julie's project more than the cliché of an American in Germany who photographs holocaust businesses like I. G. Farben. Next, when Julie and Cal kiss, we are presented again with the misreading of surfaces. Julie says "My gay-dar went off completely" (184); moreover, Julie has internalized and [even expects a misreading of her own sexuality. "Haven't you heard of that? 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). Cal assures her she is not boyish, but his pronouncement is counterbalanced by Julie's experiences, "twice in college, three times in graduate school" (184), when she was "the last stop" for reluctant gays.

Julie's use of this phrase shows how race and sexuality relate. David Eng uses the term *racial castration* to designate "the numerous ways in which articulations of national subjectivity depend intimately on racializing, gendering,

and sexualizing strategies" (3). Eng is specifically concerned with how Asian masculinity is abjected into a kind of femininity, but Julie's experience suggests that Asian femininity is specifically racialized as a femininity similarly deprived of reality in American culture at large. Cal's initial description of Julie as having a face like a mask seems vaguely racist. The figure of the yellow peril is based on the unreadability, or placidness, of the Asian face, one that is nonetheless stereotyped as being full of nefarious secret plots. As with the circular reasoning of anti-Semitism, that Asians don't seem to be carrying out such a plot is, for those racializing them, only proof of their ability to dissimulate. This unreadability is carried through to Julie's gender, where she occupies some "middle sex" between male and female.

Frangos' historical examination of Greeks in Michigan points to the plasticity of the concept of Greek ethnicity. For example, prior to the 1821 Greek War of Independence, Greeks were slaves. The abolitionist Photius Kavasales Fisk, ethnically Greek, was born a slave (50–51). And in 1907, when the Oriental Exclusion Act was passed, "Greeks from Asia Minor were labeled Oriental" (25). At one point, Cal himself feels "a little like that Chinese princess" Si Ling-chi, who legendarily discovered silk in 2640 BC (*Middlesex* 63). For Eng, one mode of racial castration is psychoanalytic identification, which even in discredited strictly Freudian terms, is still "integrated into our contemporary sense of self as modern liberal [. . .] subjects" (Eng 14). Reading Cal and Julie's tentative romance under psychoanalytic theory shows how this seemingly placid subplot is actually about incompleteness.

Love, through the vocabulary of identification, is a response to the incompleteness of the symbolic order, represented as the big Other, or the imaginary gaze for whom we always perform. Just as ideology—insofar as it is a description of the relation of an individual to the social totality—is always incomplete (the Nation of Islam's anti-Semitism is founded on a contradictory position that it cannot account for), so a subject's relation to the big Other is haunted by incompleteness. The concept of identification makes clear for us that subjectivity results from submitting the pre-symbolic inaccessible self to the symbolic process of the big Other;—but insofar as symbolism and language is incomplete, subjectivity must also be incomplete. Love becomes a question whose answer, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, is to say

> "I am what is lacking in you; with my devotion to you, with my sacrifice for you, I will fill you out, I will complete you." The operation of love is therefore double: the subject fills in his own lack by offering himself to the other as the object filling out the lack in the Other—love's deception is that this overlapping of two lacks annuls lack as such in a mutual completion (116).

Love, then, is the doomed project of two constitutively blocked subjects trying to sustain a fantasy of completion.

Cal, who insistently describes his masculinity as containing not the least amount of androgyny, obviously identifies with maleness, but that masculinity is just as obviously barred. Cal's male identification has some similarity to female-to-male transsexual Les Nichols. "Where once Les was a radical lesbian feminist who attacked a system built around male privilege, now Les claims that one of the most pleasurable experiences he has had in his new body is the automatic and immediate respect he receives simply because people perceive him as a man" (Halberstam, "F2M" 765). Like Cal, Les apparently understands "his gender performance as no performance at all and his gender fiction as straight-up truth" (765). Cal's pursuit of love is where his limited manhood most manifests itself, because Cal is afraid of revealing his body. "And so, without permanence, I have fallen into the routine of my incomplete seductions," says Cal while reflecting on his sexual history (*Middlesex* 320). Les is less shy. In what Halberstam calls a "postpornographic" video, Les graphically has intercourse with sexologist Annie Sprinkle. Though Les's sexual mechanism is complicated, as is his anatomy, "the sex scene between Les and Annie manages to accomplish what the more factual and explanatory parts of the video could not. . . . [I]t oddly but interestingly refocuses the gaze away from Les's transitivity and toward Annie Sprinkle's. It is Annie's body as much as Les's that represents a postmodern lesbian desire [. . .] for it is she who most obviously gets off on the spectacle of the female body becoming male" (Halberstam, "F2M" 766).

This refocusing is the same movement that occurs in the concluding episode of Julie and Cal's tentative romance. We are to understand that off the page Cal has explained to Julie his anatomy. Julie turns off the lights, prompting Cal to ask:

> "Are you turning off the lights because of you or because of me?"
> "Because of me."
> "Why?"
> "Because I'm a shy, modest Oriental lady. Just don't expect me to bathe you."
> "No bathing?"
> "Not unless you do a Zorba dance." (513–514)

Ethnicity answers ethnicity, but interestingly, either, or both, the nude Asian body and the nude intersex body must remain concealed, implying that some excess of shame persists. The postcoital scene seems at first to affirm that Cal and Julie's two lacks have combined into wholeness. "'I might be your last stop, too,' I said, clinging to her. 'Did you ever think of that?' And Julie Kikuchi answered, 'It crossed my mind'" (514). Cal's use of Julie's term "last stop" is transvalued to instead imply *lasting stop*, the promise of their future happiness. But alternatively, we can read "last stop" as retaining Julie's initial meaning. In this case, Cal refocuses his transgender status onto Julie, as the

Les-Annie video shifts from Les to Annie. Julie is the one with latent homosexual impulses, and Cal is the gender-ambiguous "last stop" before Julie faces her lesbianism. In this reading, Julie's word choice of "cross" evokes gender crossing, and her own, internal transvaluation of the boyishness of Asian females.

The last stop also happens to be the name of the very last chapter in the book, so it is tempting to read Cal's use of "last stop" as a happy ending. If there is an allegorical relation between the Cal/Julie story and the rest of the chapter, this chapter's action is primarily Cal's teenage establishment of himself as male, which is as he presented himself in the beginning of the book. The narrative resolution is brought about by a sense of things coming full circle, not only through the joining of the two intradiegetic narratives, but through the reappearance of Desdemona, whose presence recalls the earlier family-saga sections of the book. Cal and Desdemona's conversation culminates with Cal promising to tell the family saga (528), which is the generative principle of the novel. The final scene is of Cal performing "an old Greek custom no one remembered anymore [. . .] blocking the door, so that Milton's spirit wouldn't reenter the house. It was always a man who did this, and now I qualified" (529). Thus, the allegorical reading would suggest that Julie accordingly accepts Cal as all man. But the question of whether Cal is attracted to Julie's inconclusive gender remains, as does the question of whether the third birth Cal anticipated portends a major change. We recall that his assurances didn't dislodge Julie's experience of being a last stop, and that Cal sentimentalizes her "lovely, unemphasized body" (233); these questions pollute the gender solidity that this last chapter tries to make.

Cal relies on a universalizing view of gender when he tells Julie, "What I told you about myself has nothing whatsoever to do with being gay or closeted. I've always liked girls. I liked girls when I *was* a girl" (513). But, as Sedgwick describes, the universalizing definition of gender leads logically to a minoritizing view of sexuality. In this case, it is Cal's sexuality that has been constant and determinate of his male identity. Mendelsohn wonders why Callie couldn't simply be a gay female (19). According to Sedgwick, the answer is that the impasse of gender and sexuality creates "a field of intractable, highly structured discursive incoherence at a crucial node of social organization, in this case the node at which *any* gender is discriminated. [Sedgwick has] no optimism at all about the availability of a standpoint of thought from which either question could be intelligibly, never mind efficaciously, adjudicated" (90).

Sedgwick suggests that it would take a perspective beyond subjectivity to clarify how gender might be made coherent despite the aporia between gender and sexuality. Only via this impossible omniscient view is that agency possible. Jonathan Culler, examining omniscience in narrative, suspects that the underlying impulse "for the postulation of omniscience is our inclination to recuperate

textual details or effects by attaching them to the consciousness of a person, who becomes their source" (28). The temptation to think that there is some transcendent position from which gender and sexuality will unravel is to miss the point; we can never escape our own subjective commitments, and the impasse cannot be recuperated. Instead, the best we can get at is "pervasive presence rather than transcendent vision," as "to write is to identify with the general consciousness of a community, a collective mind" (Culler 31). For *Middlesex*, the contradictions and inconclusiveness of gender and sexuality *are* what gender and sexuality means.

Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality* cautions us that to think of sex as the outer limit of discourse blinds us to the fact that it is discourse itself that creates sex. We are led to think that the Age of Reason brought on censorship and inhibition to our natural sexuality but what was actually involved was "a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse" (34). By speaking of, categorizing, and describing sex, sex thoroughly came under the modes of power. Foucault summarizes his point: "We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality" (157). When Max Watman comments that he found *Middlesex* dull, he ultimately concludes that such "dullness is a kind of genius. Think of the prurient possibilities here, the license to think of nothing but sex. A little boredom is welcome" (66). The dullness of the sex might well be a kind of genius, but not because dullness is counterintuitive to the innate excitement of sex. Instead *Middlesex* shows that sex is part and parcel to all social mechanisms, the identity politics, the medical regulation, that mystify and make inaccessible any individual's access to their relationship with the social order.

Interestingly, Foucault himself is referenced in *Middlesex*, and is credited with being Cal's own incitement to discourse. The memoirs of Alexina Barbin (published as Foucault's book *Herculine Barbin*) "make unsatisfactory reading" according to Cal (19). *Herculine Barbin* presents an inconsistency with respect to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in that "Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality 'before the law,' indeed, a sexuality waiting for emancipation from the shackles of 'sex'" (Butler 123). For Foucault, Barbin's experience as a hermaphrodite is a world where "bodily pleasures do not immediately signify 'sex' as their primary cause and ultimate meaning" (Butler 123), is a kind of wonderland of unencumbered sexual pleasure. Foucault's sentimentalization of Barbin's sexuality as outside discourse, as being patently different, is like what Gessen hoped Cal as a hermaphrodite hero might have been. For Gessen, "He is not both man and woman, 'throbbing,' like Eliot's Tiresias, 'between two lives.' He is the absence of either, though with excellent taste in clothes" (28).

Judith Butler argues, "The temptation to romanticize Herculine's sexuality as the utopian play of pleasures prior to the imposition and restrictions of

'sex' surely ought to be refused" (125). Instead, Butler points out how Barbin's sexuality *is* produced by social practice and convention. For example, Barbin's autobiography show the narrative conventions of

> her nineteenth century French education.... [S]chooling in the classics as well as French Romanticism [...] Romantic and sentimental narratives of impossible loves seem also to produce all manner of desire and suffering in this text, and so do Christian legends about ill-fated saints, Greek myths about suicidal androgynes, and obviously the Christ figure himself. (126)

What narrative conventions govern Cal's narrative? There is the narrative of the rise of science, first offered as a means to control nature, as in the episode when Cal's parents try to conceive him as a female child based on the speed of male versus female sperm and culminating in Dr. Luce's surgical attempt to make Callie more female. Cal chooses to integrate science as one of the forms of knowing rather than the definitive source of explanation: "In the twentieth century, genetics brought the Ancient Greek notion of fate into our very cells" (479). In terms of sentimentalizing narratives, Cal tends toward the cinematic. For example, to break from his birth in chapter 1 to the immigrant narrative, Cal says, "I'm going to rewind the film, so that my pink blanket flies off, my crib scoots across the floor as my umbilical cord reattaches, and I cry out as I'm sucked back between my mother's legs" (20). Cal's grandfather, after his stroke, is described as "Chaplinesque" (261). The teenaged Callie's love interest is called "Obscure Object" after Luis Buñuel's film *That Obscure Object of Desire*, because the surrealist touch of that film "got [him]" (325). Interestingly, Cal says that his choice to use Obscure Object is for "sentimental reasons. (I also have to protect her identity)" (325). The cinematic intersects both with the sentimental—that is, the excess of meaning transferred to an extratextual source—but also with the realist. The narrative implies that a real person's identity needs to be protected. The cinematic, then, is the mode through which Cal's fantastical ability to narrate the distant origins of his family saga with his grandparents is given coherence and plausibility, despite the impossibility of such narrative unity.

Finally, the answer to my question—why *Middlesex* is inoffensive—comes down to the place of narrative closure, since to close the book with Cal as a stable, happy, heterosexual male is to enact the neutering of the queer that Halberstam says is so comforting to a conservative ideology. It is true that throughout the novel, the underlying ambiguities always threaten to irrupt through the conciliatory surface, but the fact that these undercurrents are invisible, and by definition below the surface, serves to preserve the inoffensive hierarchy of a queer coming of age in which the teleological destination, and what is most desired, is normalcy. Science and cinema both represent discourses that present specular unities which are really full of omissions, and though critiques can be launched from the perspective of these absences, these kinds of critiques are

purely negative; they present no alternative unity free from the taint of ambiguity. Despite its richness, *Middlesex* is inoffensive, but only because to be offensive requires commitment to the negative, which—from what we can gauge from Foucault on discourse—may be inhuman, and is definitely rare or impossible to achieve.

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