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## From Rusty Genetics to Octopussy's Garden

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STACY ALAIMO

## *From Rusty Genetics to Octopussy's Garden*

Having grown up in Pinconning, a small town on Michigan's Saginaw Bay, I know that the Bay area is dreadfully toxic due in large part to Dow Chemical. So my first line of inquiry for *Middlesex* was to query the toxicity of Detroit. Anyone familiar with environmental racism will not be surprised to learn that the most polluted place in Michigan isn't my old 48650 ZIP code, but 48217, a predominantly African-American ZIP code in Detroit (McCauley). What does this have to do with *Middlesex*? Nothing. And that would be my primary critique of this book from environmental and environmental justice perspectives. Since this piece was written for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) conference—in Detroit, with the theme “Rust”—it is fitting to note that despite a few mentions of smog and chemically pink skies, the novel ignores environmental and environmental justice issues, imploding, instead, into an incestuous, human origin story in which an isolated gene reigns. The genetic reductivism of *Middlesex* reproduces the conception of the gene as an immaterial code that determines malleable matter. Genetics in *Middlesex* is thus too rusty: as in, outdated, simplistic, and clunky. But it is also not rusty *enough* in that the genetic determinism precludes a new materialist sense of the body as exposed to material agencies and corrosive forces.

Popularized accounts of the gene as an isolated actor have long been allied with capitalist, consumerist individualism as many in feminist science studies have argued (Spanier; Haraway; Fox Keller; Alaimo). This fetishization of the gene as the prime mover separates the human from the world, detracting from an environmental sense of interrelation, interaction, and permeability, posing the body as a site for technical expertise and medical “fixes” rather than social and political praxis. Alternatives to the novel's genetic origin story would include my conceptions of trans-corporeality and exposure, Celia Roberts's materialist feminist work on hormones as “endomateriality,” Ladelle McWhorter's sense of evolutionary sexual “deviance,” Arun Saldanha's “reontologized race,” and Astrida Neimanis's conception of a queer, anticolonial “posthuman gestationality.”

The novel's notion of intersexuality is also rusty. *Middlesex* considers how intersexuality could complicate sex and gender, but ultimately reverts to “relentless binaries,” as Chris Breu argues in this special cluster. Heterosexuality, for example, is used to prove that the protagonist is truly “male.” Michele Foucault's question in *Herculine Barbin*, “do we *truly* need a *true* sex?” (x; his emphases) resonates. As heteronormativity and genetic reductivism become the measuring rods for what is really real, as Stephanie Hsu also notes in this special cluster, the possibilities for intersexuality to disturb sex and gender binaries are foiled. For example, the narrator

explains “his” early gender confusion by dismissing lesbianism as a diversion: “Why should I have thought I was anything other than a girl? Because I was attracted to a girl? That happened all the time. It was happening more than ever in 1974. It was becoming a national pastime” (Eugenides 388). Of course, sexual object choice and gender or sexual identity are different matters, but the novel diminishes supposedly trendy “lesbian” sex in order to foreground the narrative thrust in which heterosexual desire “proves” the protagonist’s masculinity. As Rachel Carroll argues, this “retrospective logic” is “complicit in a heteronormative temporality” (187). Readers could interpret the intersex protagonist’s sex scenes (in which “he” thought they were a “she,” but later decided the desire for a girl proved “he” was a “he”) as something other than heterosexual or homosexual. But to do so would be to deviate not only from the protagonist’s own heavy-handed interpretation, but also from the novel’s paradoxical scientific discourse in which, for example, intersex syndromes are categorized as being unproblematically—and paradoxically—either male or female. The gender binary seems impervious to Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (1993) proposal for at least five sexes, even though the novel is ostensibly about a “middlesex.”

Even when *Middlesex* ponders the instability of sex and gender, a naturalized heteronormativity remains. For example, after describing much ostensibly “lesbian” sex with “the Object,” the narrator reaches for an animal analog: “Dr. Luce will tell you that female monkeys exhibit mounting behavior when administered male hormones” (Eugenides 387). This implies that *even* monkeys—natural creatures presumed to be heterosexual—will perform “unnatural” acts when given the “wrong” hormone. Many female primates, however, mount other females for sexual pleasure, so it makes no sense to categorize this behavior as “male,” as Paul Vasey has argued (127). Moreover, calling the narrator’s sex organ a “sleek dolphin” hardly clarifies matters since these, and other, cetaceans regularly enjoy same-sex sex.

Whereas the novel’s mounting monkeys are supposed to embody the foundational heteronormativity of an ostensibly natural order, other animals are cast as bestial. Lina hated pregnancy because it “linked her with the lower forms of life” (Eugenides 114). Dr. Philobosian warns of a baby “furry as a bear,” and another born with “pop eyes” and warts because the mother “touched a toad while making love” (one wonders how or why this would occur) (116). These two extremes of animality—as presumed norm or as abject base—can be discarded by the end of the novel, which offers a more fabulous sense of the possibilities for transspecies being and desire. In San Francisco, at “Octopussy’s Garden,” Bob Presto announces at his underwater show: “Let’s hear it for Hermaphroditus! . . . Only here at Octopussy’s Garden, where gender is always on a bender! I’m telling you folks, we put the glam rock in the rock lobsters, we put the AC/DC in the mahi mahi” (485). (Being roughly the same age as the protagonist, I will confess that the “glam rock” reference resonates: a tendrill of news of David Bowie’s bisexuality travelled to my small town, shimmering with tempting prospects.) The wacky glamour does not detract from the fact that “Octopussy’s Garden” is an exploitative place with underage sex workers as well as legacies of racist and ableist freak shows, colonialist exoticism, and other spectacles of those who have been seen as not quite “human.” And yet, as we consider the possibilities for posthumanisms and new materialisms to emerge from the embodied perspectives of those who have long been denigrated as outside the category of the

human, we might linger in Octopussy's Garden to marvel at the potential for an intersex posthumanism to promiscuously engulf sex and gender dualisms and humanist heteronormativity. Ellie and her Electrifying Eel, for example, surprise the viewers, partly by looking back at them:

For there it was on the slender girl's body, there it was where it should not have been, a thin brown ill tempered-looking eel, an endangered species, and as Ellie rubbed against the glass the eel grew longer and longer; it stared at the customers with its cyclopean eye; and they looked back to her breasts, her slim waist, they looked back and forth from Ellie to eel, from eel to Ellie, and were electrified by the wedding of opposites. (486)

Many eel species, in fact, are themselves hermaphroditic, their sex affected by environmental factors. Oddly, the "eel" on Ellie's body is described as an "endangered species," which links the established medical practice of "fixing" intersex conditions at birth with the scientific history of "correcting" all manner of nonhuman sexual diversity by denying it, encoding it, or explaining it away (Bagemihl).

I conclude with the queer futurism of Octopussy's Garden, where the customers "dream of sexual transmogrification" (486) involving beings who liquefy the barriers, not only between sexes, but also between species. With Fausto-Sterling we might imagine that "things were altogether different" as "the sexes have multiplied beyond currently imaginable limits" (24). This need not be merely fantastical but, rather, an "insistence of the material," which refuses to "conform to our cultural, linguistic, and theoretical scripts" (Breu ix). As Vernon A. Rosario predicts, "molecular genetics is likely to require a shift from binary sex to quantum sex, with a dozen or more genes each conferring a small percentage likelihood of male or female sex that is still further dependent on micro- and macro- environmental interactions" (279). Back at the garden, Zora, who has Androgen Insensitivity, involving XY chromosomes but a female appearance, performs as a mermaid with seaweed tresses and a glittering emerald fish tail. When Cal asks why she doesn't just pass as female—since she could—but identifies as a hermaphrodite instead, she answers, "with her fairy eyes," looking into his: "Because we're what's next" (490).

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