

9-21-2018

Embodied Ecologies and Metafictional Musings: The Limits of Writing Intersex in Middlesex

Christopher Breu
Illinois State University

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)
Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Breu, Christopher. "Embodied Ecologies and Metafictional Musings: The Limits of Writing Intersex in Middlesex." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 1, article 50, 2018,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/50>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

CHRISTOPHER BREU

Embodied Ecologies and Metafictional Musings: The Limits of Writing Intersex in Middlesex

There is a passage late in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* that provides some much-needed historicism to the book's ambitious project of writing intersex. In contrast to the Olympian perspective taken by much of the rest of the book, the passage presents a more modest moment of Foucauldian historicism, contextualizing the transformation of recent conceptions of gender that immediately preceded its composition. The passage contrasts the constructivist understanding of gender in the 1970s with the evolutionary biological one of the 1980s (Eugenides 478). The passage forms a rare moment in which the novel recognizes its own embeddedness within an ecology of knowledge and embodied meaning that it otherwise attempts to disavow.

The binary opposition between constructivism and evolutionary biology is only one of a number of binaries around which the novel is organized, including the oppositions between old world and new, Greek and Turk, Europe and Asia, black and white, mind and body, heteronormativity and its subversion, sex and gender, and of course the oppositions through which it reads Cal's body: male and female as well as masculine and feminine. (For powerful accounts of the limits of the book's racial, sexual, and gender imaginaries, see Kojima, Singh, and Collins in this special cluster). For a novel that seems to be about middles and a kind of middle-way political vision that marks it as very much a product, as Samuel Cohen notes, of the post-Cold-War moment, it is relentlessly binary in its thinking (155-189). While more utopian readings are possible (see the pieces by Alaimo, Singh, and Sandilands in this special cluster), *Middlesex's* binaries are often presented as mutually exclusive rather than in complex tension and interrelationship.¹

In challenging social construction, Eugenides rightly indicates how powerfully destructive this discourse could be for intersex folk. As liberating as constructivist insights have been for feminism, queer theory, some trans* theory, and critical race theory, they also have had the unintended effect of rendering intersex not only invisible but also available for medical intervention as a "defect." In rejecting social constructivism, however, Eugenides privileges a version of what Alaimo has described as "gene fetishism" (*Bodily* 24). Such a fetishistic version

¹ On the limits of the liberal framing of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in *Middlesex*, see Merton Lee, "Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* is so Inoffensive."

of the biological becomes definitional not only for Cal's intersex embodiment but for his gendered subjectivity as well.

The epistemological limitations and forms of unintentional violence produced by social construction have led to the emergence of what Alaimo and Susan Hekman define as the "material turn" in contemporary feminist scholarship ("Introduction" 6). In the work of Alaimo and Samantha Frost, among others, this turn has produced an engagement with both the material and the biological. It would thus seem that Eugenides's novel can be read as part of the material turn. However, his turn to biology contrasts with the "biocultural" understanding of humans and other creatures articulated by Frost, who emphasizes the ways in which biology intersects with cultural and environmental forces (4). Eugenides presents an understanding of biology as entirely genetically produced. Recent work in epigenetics and environmental studies asserts that the biological itself is neither discrete nor predetermined. Genetic encoding is bound up with the lived materiality and ecological situatedness of bodies, such that corporeal and what Alaimo calls "trans-corporeal" factors intermix with genetic probabilities and possibilities (*Bodily* 2).

In *Middlesex*, sex and gender are thus seen as predetermined. This predetermination is most vividly, if humorously, captured in the moment when Cal loses his omniscience as a narrator, when "his" egg descends and becomes fertilized: "As sperm meets egg, I feel a jolt. There is a loud sound, a sonic boom as my world cracks. I feel myself shift, already losing bits of my prenatal omniscience . . ." (211). Falling into embodiment and into the trans-corporeal ecology of various lived habitats is presented as a profound loss of knowledge and intellection.

The narrative moves from first-person omniscience to first-person limited, but never eschews the masculine control of the narrative assumed by either. The novel literally begins with an Olympian perspective, and this perspective is the omniscient and detached standard against which all other narration is measured. The metafictional postmodern novel can be read as an artistic correlate to the linguistic turn. In its self-reflexivity it attempts to transcend the body and access a realm of pure language. Similarly, the knowing irony associated with metafiction strives always for Olympian omniscience, even as it is doomed to fail. The writer always positions himself (for "he" it usually is) as the one who always knows the next move, who is always in the (misrecognized) position of mastery. If, as I suggested above, we need to move beyond the linguistic turn in order to account for the specific material dimension of the intersex body, then Eugenides's embrace of metafictional postmodernism in order to narrate intersex enacts a flight from the self-same material, a flight into language that reinscribes the body/mind dualism that organizes much of the narrative.

The book as a whole can be read as enacting a flight from the very intersex body it attempts to narrate. Not only does the novel spend over two hundred pages on the backstory of the Stephanides family, but even when it turns to Cal's story, it relegates the account of Cal's experience of the intersex body and its unnecessarily medicalized condition to a few chapters. The novel seems more interested in providing the narrative of a gene than of the embodiment of its intersex protagonist. Similarly, the book is more preoccupied with gender than sex, and it

conceives of the former as binary. Meanwhile sex, while potentially more than binary in the novel, is regularly read through the context of a binarized gender. Still there are moments when what Cal calls the “facticity of [his] body” emerges and suggests the possibility of a radical rethinking of sex (see Alaimo and Singh in the special cluster). Even here, though, binaries are regularly reasserted: “Desire made me cross over to the other side, desire and the facticity of my body” (Eugenides 479). Eugenides suggests that desire itself prefers heterosexual expression. The book thus forcefully de-queers Cal. While it does account for the non-binary nature of Cal’s sexed body, it can only see its meanings in terms of binary accounts of sex. This binarizing of sex runs from the very opening sentence of the novel, which gives us two choices, boy or girl, all the way to the end of the narrative, with the closure provided by the heteronormative love story.

What would be different if the book did tarry with the material a bit more thoroughly? Well it might understand sex to be discontinuous with gender. It might also consider it as nonbinary. For this is what intersex pushes us to do. While Eugenides reads it as primarily about gender, I argue that intersex is first about sex, and only secondarily about gender. For intersex to be truly legible, we need to rehabilitate the concept of sex. Such a concept would be neither binary nor fully genetically predetermined, but it would be material and embodied. It would be about the intersections of the genetic, the ecological, the material, the cultural, and the medical (including failed forms of medical intervention). It would not just be about human or genetic agency, but also the agencies of the body’s materiality, of its ecological habitat, and of various forms of technological intervention. A non-reductive account of intersex would take into account the material muddle that is produced by all of these. We need *Middlesex* to become Muddlesex.

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010.

Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman. "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory." *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana UP, 2008, pp. 1-22.

Cohen, Samuel. *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s*. U of Iowa P, 2009.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Frost, Samantha. *Bio-Cultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human*. Duke UP, 2016.

Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter.'" *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink, W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 6-48.

Lee, Merton. "Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* Is So Inoffensive." *Criticism: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 51, no.1, Fall 2010, pp. 32-46.

CHRISTOPHER BREU is Professor of English at Illinois State University, where he teaches classes in twentieth and twenty-first century literature and culture as well as critical theory. He is author of *Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics* (Minnesota UP, 2014) and *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (Minnesota UP, 2005), as well as co-editor of *Noir Affect* (forthcoming from Fordham UP) and the recent special issue of *Symplokē* on Materialisms.