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Border Crossings, Watery Spaces, and the (Un)Verified Self in Middlesex

In a 2016 piece for the *London Review of Books* that addresses the current migrant crisis in Europe, Frances Stonor Saunders discusses borders at the level of the individual and the nations of which one is (willingly or not) a part. “The self is an act of cartography,” she writes, and from birth to death our lives are spent following and crossing lines, whether in the form of travel between continents or in daily acts of passing through doorways and neighbourhoods (7). The attempt to secure boundaries in ritualized spaces like train stations and airport security is aided by the traces we leave of a “verified self,” yet there remain things that escape detection by the spectrum of hypervisibility in which so many of us live; as Stonor Saunders notes, over one million unauthorized migrants crossed the borders of Europe in 2015 alone (8). For every migrant who makes it across, there are many who do not, their cheap rubber dinghies deflating before they can reach new shores. The identities of those claimed by the sea are often never registered, and many are buried in unmarked graves (Hernandez and Stylianou). Whether we call such stories illustrations of “wet globalization,” or “salt aesthetics,” or any other number of terms now entering the imaginary of the blue humanities (Mentz and Rojas 4), they confront us with unnerving reminders that watery spaces can be precarious as well as life-giving.

Middlesex is a novel that extensively considers acts of border crossing by land and sea, and its narrative point of view and spatio-temporal settings also help us to witness more clearly what security regimes fail to catch despite their attempts to elicit confessions and document them. Recessive genes, Greek identity, emerging crocuses: all go undetected, at least for a while. Despite Cal’s characterization of the past as a time when it was easier to verify a person’s identity—for instance, by visage, or footwear, or smell (Eugenides 40, 65)—readers are led to question whether identity was ever so codifiable. In many places, we see the failures of textual documentation to verify identity in ways that would protect the beholder: the Armenian Doctor Philobosian, for example, has papers that he counts on to shield his family from Turkish forces since the documents state that he once treated Kemal Atatürk for diverticulitis, yet the papers prove useless when the soldiers who invade his home turn out to be illiterate.

One of the most notable ways the novel contests a rigid policing of boundaries is by constructing a running motif of watery spaces as sites wherein a more liberatory politics of identity might flourish. Eugenides’s characters often seem freest to escape the strictures of imposed identities when in or on the water, revelling instead in fluidity and flux (see Alaimo in this special cluster). Note, for instance, the trans-Atlantic crossing on

The Giulia in which Lefty and Desdemona transform themselves from siblings into husband and wife, or the smuggler Jimmy Zizmo's re-emergence as Minister Fard after he disappears through a crack in the ice in the Detroit River.

Later, Cal too finds the threshold between water and land transformational, whether during the experience of baptism in the Orthodox Church, in early sexual experiences with Clementine Stark and the Obscure Object, or still later in San Francisco, where Cal finds the coastal fog a fitting robe of anonymity that eases the shift into "what's next" (221, 265, 386, 490). Recalling his performances in the aquatic tank at Octopussy's Garden, Cal remarks, "I don't think I could have performed in a regular peep show, face-to-face with the voyeur. Their gaze would have sucked my soul out of me. But in the tank when I was underwater my eyes were closed. I undulated in the deep-sea silence" (484). Finally, when Cal prepares to be physically intimate with Julie Kikuchi at the end of the novel, he says, "it was like jumping into cold water. You had to do it with without thinking too much" (514; see also Kojima in this special cluster). Even if it is daunting to take the plunge, these examples suggest that pleasurable transformation follows immersion: all one must do is go to the water and dive in, or push that boat out from shore, or find the right crack in the ice to be born anew. Water is a place where there is pleasure in the unverifiable, the transitional, the ambiguous.

Yet I also want to trouble a straightforward equation of liquidity with liberation in the novel, not only because such equations are socially and historically selective, but also because the material boundaries of land and water are not without social and ecological risk. Indeed, to be an "unverified self" has for many been less a blessing than a curse, one that keeps some people squarely outside the walls that divide the global "haves" from the "have-nots." In the West, we are not accountable to those we cannot see, having pulled up the drawbridges in what Stonor Saunders calls a kind of "medieval modernism" (9). The risks of non-identity are especially high for the stateless of the world; as Hannah Arendt recognized all too well, people's misguided desire to attach themselves to national identity is fuelled in part by the latent recognition that one's status as a "human being" is of shockingly little value when it comes to being accorded any kind of ethical or political concern (118).

There is a brief moment in *Middlesex* that complicates the text's seeming optimism about watery border crossing, and it occurs as Desdemona makes her way by streetcar into the Black Bottom neighborhood of Detroit in search of work in 1932. "There was no roadblock, no fence," the narrator remarks. "The streetcar didn't so much as pause as it crossed the invisible barrier, but at the same time in the length of a block the world was different" (Eugenides 141). One need not cross oceans, it seems, to enter another country. When Desdemona disembarks at Hastings Street, the narrator remarks that "the streetcar pulled away, as white faces looked back at her, a woman thrown overboard" (142). At one level, this image recalls the earlier, desperate scenes at the Smyrna waterside, where the froth of human detritus that washes up against European military ships almost hides the body of a young girl who clings firmly to a British ship's line while kicking her legs "every so often, like fins" (60). On the Aegean coastline in

1922, life in the water means clinging to what is nearest and holding on with all one's might.

At another level, the image of Desdemona as a woman “thrown overboard” in *Black Bottom* also troublingly diminishes the historical precarity of the Black population of Detroit. Many are descendants of those who endured the Middle Passage, and such people were not merely optimistic “immigrants” seeking a better life in a “land of dreams and opportunity,” as former US Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary (and native Detroiter) Ben Carson suggested in 2017 (Stack). Rather, they were forced migrants, and to be thrown overboard was not a metaphor but a reality for those deemed recalcitrant or no longer useful. In some cases, like that of the infamous slave ship *Zong* in 1781, casting human life into the sea even meant that the ship's owners could collect insurance monies, thereby capitalizing on migrant bodies even in death. Read against this history, Eugenides's running motif of water as a liberatory space becomes more ethically fraught. I use the term *fraught* deliberately here, for the word comes into English from the Dutch *vrachten*, which refers to a ship being “laden with cargo” (“fraught, n2”). Over and against the language of watery passage that buoys up the novel's European immigration narrative and its stories of identity transformation, then, are other, heavier stories—of the ancestors of *Black Bottom*, or of the Potawatomi who held the Detroit region before European boats arrived in the Great Lakes, for instance—stories whose weight threatens to swamp the dominant story of North American arrival. Water is a site of liberation and romance, in some cases, but it also contains a more brutal archive that Derek Walcott describes in “The Sea is History,” where “men with eyes heavy as anchors / [. . .] sank without tombs” and “bone [is] soldered by coral to bone” (137). To write these cartographic histories demands a more complex set of instruments sensitive to the stories of both those who wish to elude capture and those who desperately seek verification, starting with the simple dignity of a name.

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