

9-21-2018

Introduction: Sex and the (Motor) City: Ecologies of Middlesex

Kaitlin Blanchard
McMaster University

Catriona Sandilands
York 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

Blanchard, Kaitlin, and Catriona Sandilands. "Introduction: Sex and the (Motor) City: Ecologies of Middlesex." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 1, article 49, 2018,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/49>.

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.

KAITLIN BLANCHARD
AND
CATRIONA SANDILANDS

***Introduction: Sex and the (Motor) City:
Ecologies of Middlesex***

This special cluster consists of twelve short essays that were originally presented in two linked roundtables at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) conference in Detroit in June 2017, with the theme of “Rust/Resistance.” Because the conference was in Detroit, and because we wanted to consider the ecocritical possibilities of a specifically historical, intersectional, and ecological understanding of the city, we decided to focus our conversation on Jeffrey Eugenides’s 2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex*, which is set *in* and is also *about* Detroit. For all of its faults, as the following contributions make clear, *Middlesex* constellates an exceptional—indeed, epic—range of social ecologies, concerned with everything from intersex and multispecies bio/geopolitics to transnational economies, to the aesthetics of architecture and decay. Focused on a very particular novel, written about a very particular city and experience of it, the conversation we envisioned would, we hoped, bring to light and develop an ecocritical trajectory that could both collect voices and perspectives not always already familiar to the Environmental Humanities and also deepen or extend already ongoing discussions within the field. The cluster thus assembles people and perspectives from multiple institutions, countries, educations, and standpoints within the Environmental Humanities, in an attempt to both complicate and explore the desire for resilience in, as highlighted in the ASLE conference theme, a “rusted” economy.

We bring this collection to the larger public of *The Goose* as well because any conversation about resilience and/in the rustbelt is also a conversation about the decay of the petro-industrial city more broadly, including our collective, ecocritical responses to it. In particular, late liberalism is the story of a rusted economy whose crumbling industrial centres make especially visible a trenchant distinction: that between what gets counted in and as Life, and what is, as Elizabeth Povinelli explains, not only its biopolitical opposite, death, but also that which is inert, the geos, or Nonlife. This distinction between life/death and nonlife is played out both within and across national borders; it animates scholarship and activism for migrant and refugee justice, Indigenous sovereignties, alternatives to extractivism, Black lives, reproductive rights, queer and trans communities, and radical practices of accessibility. *Middlesex* is nothing if not a story about these animations and animacies as they intersect in an urban geopolitics. Indeed, if a flight toward the putative liveliness and sanctuary of the city in Trump’s America—

and Ford's Ontario—is one made by queer and racialized bodies alike, then *Middlesex's* socio-ecologies underscore our melancholic attachment to the petro-industrial city (and its colonial orientation to the liveliness of matter) and serve as an important focus for critical readings, engagements, and interventions as we resist and revision the city.

Even as it has larger political resonances, *Middlesex* is very much about Detroit. Here issues of sex, gender, race, immigration, and generation collide with narratives about the automotive industry, urban and suburban development, colonization, and globalization. It is, as a result, a complicated, sprawling novel that folds many stories into its decidedly (and problematically) epic structure. It is an intersex *bildungsroman* about a narrator, Cal, who tells a very particular story about his journey to eventual masculine/male identity in the 1970s, an identity that takes shape in the midst of historically pressing controversies about the influence of “nature” and “nurture” in the formation of sexed and gendered identities. It is a multigenerational epic about a Greek immigrant family, moving in 1922 from what was then Smyrna (and is now Izmir) to Detroit, and the migrations and machinations of this family through the difficult racial and class history of Detroit during its rise and fall as the “Motor City”: during the rise of Henry Ford's exploitative, racist automotive empire; during the so-called “race riots” of 1967; during the 1970s oil crisis; and during the fall of Detroit into the “ruins” that are so much the image of the city, even in 2017. It is an awkward, Orientalist, millennial love story. It is an extended reflection on genetics and heredity. It is a situated recounting of suburbanization and “white flight,” of the American Dream, of US colonialism and militarism, of Black civil rights and revolutionary politics, of national and ethnic melancholia, of the powerful affects and effects of family secrets (including but not limited to incest), and of the importance of objects as carriers of, and influences on, identities and histories.

Middlesex begins its first person omniscient narration as the story of a recessive mutation of the fifth chromosome, carried down from Mount Olympus through nine generations and sited in the Stephanides' family gene pool; through dint of war and the massacre of Smyrna the gene then flees across the Atlantic to America where it eventually settles in a midwestern womb of Fordist industry, where it is then born first in the ethnic persona of Calliope (Callie) Stephanides, and then reborn as our latter-day narrator, Cal. Beginning with the story of siblings Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides' flight from the massacre of Smyrna in 1922, and their landing, as husband and wife, on the shores of Ellis Island, the novel recounts the creeping descent of a mutation through a family line narrowed by incest and loss. Calliope's struggle to understand her place in the white supremacy and heteronormativity of mid-century, midwestern self-making occupies the first half of the novel. Cal's account of his grandfather Lefty's alienation from the “Henry Ford Melting Pot,” and his father Milton's insistence on seeing the city in increasingly binarized terms in order to ascend to white economic prosperity, form the companion narratives to Cal's flight from feminine embodiment, and ethnic girlhood, toward white masculinity. The family's entrepreneurial renewal comes when Milton uses the ruse of the racialized “12th Street Riot” of 1967, and the insurance funds from the fiery immolation of his failing restaurant The Zebra Room, to enact a flight to the wealthy suburb of Grosse Pointe and the modernist house on Middlesex. Milton builds a pillared hotdog empire,

Hercules, while Cal flees his parents and a sexologist determined to “fix” his intersexual embodiment to match Callie’s socialized gender presentation.

Cal’s rebirth in a Michigan hospital room after his dalliance with the Obscure Object (a young girl whose name we are to understand has everything to do with Cal and nothing to do with Callie) and “the facticity of desire” marks the novel’s switch to a narrative of transition and heteronormative revisionism. The narrative’s subsequent exploration of latter-day intersex activism and an emergent queer politics of non-binary and intersex possibility unfurls in California, and specifically in the context of a watery, queer, burlesque community, in which Cal takes on the persona of a god-like Hermaphroditus, until the club is raided by police and Cal is released into the custody of his brother. Returning to Detroit, where Milton has already died a death of almost equally mythic proportions, Cal takes on the role of the male head of the Stephanides household as Desdemona confesses to him his incestuous inheritance. Although the novel ends with Milton’s funeral at Middlesex, the reader is also privy throughout to the *a posteriori* position from which Cal narrates the story and affords it its heteronormative temporality: in Berlin, where he works in the diplomatic service and is beginning a heterosexual relationship with a Japanese American woman, Julie Kikuchi.

Given the novel’s ambitious reach—and the author’s provocative intentions—it is no wonder that *Middlesex* is also highly controversial. The novel traces the rise of poststructural and discursive analysis within cultural studies’ linguistic turn and the percolation of such perspectives through the filter of an American imaginary captured by behavioural evolutionism, sexology, Fordism, and exceptionalism. The essays collected in this cluster intervene in these controversies by placing recent trajectories of specifically ecocritical concern at the centre of attention: How do critical emphases on life, nonlife, materialism, form, place, intersectionalities, bodies, objects, and ecological relationships help us understand the complex relations of person, place, generation, heredity, economy, sociality, and matter represented and questioned in *Middlesex*? Conversely, how does *Middlesex* help ecocritical scholars understand the complexities of liveliness, sex, race, class, place, genetics, environment, disability, matter, and identity, both in Detroit and more widely?

The contributors to “Sex and the (Motor) City” implicate both the body and the city as subject and object of ecology. The imperial, colonial, and urban ecologies of *Middlesex* are as complex, densely populated, and wide-ranging as the methods cited, invoked, or in some cases generated in these essays to address the swirl of its controversy. Far from a mere list of critical controversies and concerns, however, these essays take on the form of the epic and proliferate the questions and answers to which a genre and a novel can be response-able. The essays move among the novel’s complex and contradictory depictions of our desires for place and identity as they enliven non-human, historical, and object relations of becoming. They trace: disability and crip ecologies of the city; phenomenology and critical economies; new materialisms; the real of ecological crisis; gentrification, form, and ruin; intersex embodiment and the linguistic turn; queer futurism; the biopolitics of architecture; plant eloquence; transgender rights; the mute objects of non-human, de-colonial relationality; transnationalism, diaspora, and queer affinity; and the borders of identity and nation in the “wet humanities.”

The cluster's concerns also coalesce as a constellation of methods in which the discussion of how and why we read the ways we do is at least as important as the contingent understandings of materiality, ethnicity, objects, architecture, plants, disability, racialization, matter, and, not least, intersex embodiment generated in our conversations. Without asserting a final preference for one type of reading (e.g., surface, depth, material, new material, deconstructive, structural) or necessarily endorsing a taxonomy of such methods, these discussions travel in sympathy with the reparative mood of criticism, and its partial, shifting attachments to (our) objects. Taken together, the essays serve as an example of what can happen, analytically, when multiple ecocritics descend on a particular work from diverse theoretical and analytic/political points of view. In so doing, they provide an imaginative platform in which questions of discipline, form, and substance collide, in complex ways, toward larger projects in the environmental humanities that attend to questions of race, gender, bodies, history, place, matter, and species, *all at the same time*. We invite readers, then, to consider the essays in the cluster both individually and collectively, and to take note of diverse methodologies as well as diverse concerns. Given that Eugenides was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in February, 2018, signalling that his body of work has become a popularly recognized part of the American literary and cultural landscape, we hope that this *Middlesex* cluster constellates both *positions* and *strategies* of ecocritique that go well beyond the novel and suggest, more broadly, sources of collectivity, anti-colonial, queer, and other than human relationality in the midst of resistances in, and to, late liberal economies and ecologies.

Works Cited

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

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Duke UP, 2016.

KAITLIN BLANCHARD is a PhD student in the department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Their doctoral work yokes together queer ecologies, crip theory, biopolitics, and new materialisms, offering an exploration of the material and theoretical affordances of plastics and plasticity as they provide a biopolitical rationale for the rights and recapitulation of human and non human life in colonial projects of sustainability and conservation. Kaitlin's doctoral work is supported by a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

CATRIONA (CATE) SANDILANDS is a Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, where she teaches and writes at the intersections of environmental literature and philosophy, social and political theory, and materialist and multispecies sexuality and gender studies. Her upcoming publications include *Rising Tides: Stories for Climate Changing Times*, an edited collection of short stories, literary nonfiction, and poetry focused on Galiano Island (Caitlin, 2019); and *Cultivating Feminism: Botanizing in the (M)Anthropocene* (TBC, 2020).