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Materialism's Affective Appeal

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ELIZABETH MAZZOLINI

Materialism's Affective Appeal

This roundtable and special cluster notwithstanding, *Middlesex* is not having a moment. There are almost no recent references to it in national publications, or even on Google Scholar's citation index. At a little over ten years old, the novel is not quite a historic artifact, yet it is far from the cutting edge. *Middlesex's* treatment of intersex identity (among other topics) seems too far behind the current state of discourse for it to offer authority or sensitivity. Its overt reliance on material determinations of identities likewise does not quite jibe with current phenomenological engagements with materialism from within the academic humanities. The novel's dated approach to its extremely current subject matter, taking place against the backdrop of the American automobile industry's slow-motion obsolescence, offers the opportunity to examine how cycles of obsolescence and currency work within academic discourse itself.

Regarding trans and intersex identities, the novel does not cover any of the social, emotional, legal, or health issues that affect the lives of intersex people (see contributions to this special cluster by Breu and Collins). Violence against intersex people was present to popular culture (as in 1999's *Boys Don't Cry*) during the period of the book's production, but it is not even touched upon. Also puzzlingly neglected is the phenomenological experience of being an intersex person. This lack of insight into personal and political experience is probably conspicuous to contemporary readers, who are reading at a time when the self-reported experience of gender is a basis for political action, and when self-determined gender vies for legal status over gender assigned at birth or based on phenotype or chromosome profile. *Middlesex* simply does not delve into Cal's feelings about anatomy, identity, or their interaction. Evoking Greek myth, the novel is dedicated to the opacity generated by large-scale events rather than to transparency into the inner lives of the characters.

The novel's opacity is thorough, down to the genetic level. The gene that codes for 5-alpha-reductase deficiency is presented unreflectively as the last word on identity. Readers looking for commentary that can be used to understand and advocate for intersex people in the decades after the novel's appearance would be (are) disappointed, because the novel's tale about intersexuality seems to boil down to this one powerfully determining gene, expressed in Cal's body, which is at first childishly feminine and then ineffectively masculine. Most of the characters are fairly two-dimensional, and so are their gender identities. The novel is so devoted to the sweep of history and the determinations of genetic profiles that it has little time to delve into complex interpersonal, let alone personal, development. *Middlesex's* lack of relevance for today's politicized conversations about gender identity shows the degree to

which those conversations are dependent upon self-determination based on private experience.

The gene in question is the big exception to the absence of personal development in the novel. The gene that codes for 5-alpha-reductase deficiency is downright *animate*, often even more animate, or “lifely” in the terms of Mel Y. Chen, than the characters (see Kojima, Sandilands, Seymour, and Singh in this special cluster). It overcomes obstacles, exhibits wiliness in the face of powerful forces, and eventually blossoms into self-realization in Cal’s ambiguous body and identity struggle. With a few exceptions (most notably Desdemona), the other characters populating the novel seem to offer little to the reader in terms of expressing or inviting affective attachment, their two-dimensionality discouraging us from sympathizing with them except at the most intellectual level. As the only character that shows development, the gene invites us into its lively and expressive story, even easing our discomfort with an incestuous marriage, while the other characters remain out of the reach of our speculation and attachment.

If it offers little characterological or political purchase, perhaps this bluntly materialist novel could be relevant to scholars working within the humanities’ materialist turn. After all, the book takes an atavistic, even Dionysian non-humanist approach to its story, and imbues a series of nucleotides with animacy and lifeliness. Once again though, the novel’s relevance to a topic that it otherwise might illuminate remains restricted. It may not be only a limitation of the novel, though.

A reason for its limited relevance to the material turn might be that the novel eludes academic materialism’s valued analytic tools. Like everything else, this academic subfield is subject to vicissitudes of the industry that shapes it. *Middlesex* offers none of the kinds of things such scholars seem to be looking for. Thanks largely to the influence of Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, the phenomenological emphasis in materialist scholarship, in spite of overt claims to deflecting or sidestepping humanistic tradition, emphasizes our human attention to our human experience of previously ignored matter, and also asks us to consider the experiential potential that matter itself holds.¹ With its basis in experience, phenomenology invokes privatization, and even self-determination, approaches at odds with the novel’s devotion to open, collective, helpless causality through its mythical idiom. More pointedly, the novel does not seem relevant to academic studies of materialism because it resists affective attachments and does not rely nearly enough on personal and privatized lived experience. In other words, the novel’s lack of humanistic, phenomenological attention to its subject matter ironically is what makes it difficult to deal with from a perspective that otherwise emphasizes posthuman materialism. At the same time, that lifely gene, portrayed according to humanistic conventions, does not allow the reader to delve into the experience of the actual humans. It would seem the novel is materialistic and humanistic in all the wrong places.

¹ Besides Bennett, see also Abram and Cohen. Feminist materialist scholarship, especially and for example that of my fellow contributors to this roundtable, is a, if not the, major counterpoint to my claim, because it problematizes the very basis for phenomenological claims. See Alaimo, and Alaimo and Hekman, for example.

In spite of its seeming ill fit with current discourses, the novel offers a rich opportunity to develop a non-humanist, materialistic mode of addressing literary (poetic, metaphorical, evocative) language; that is, an opportunity to steer momentarily away from the phenomenology of the material humanities, and therefore also to steer away from reading for affection and transparency, and instead toward alienation and opacity. Such an approach would engage *Middlesex* non-representationally and non-ideologically. The novel might appear differently if we regard its genetic fascination as something to work on rather than something to move past.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Representations* on the opaque potential for literary language, Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt argue for a consideration of the denotative, technical, and literal use of language in literature. They argue that privileging literary language and ignoring the denotative, technical, and literal deprives a text of its full capacities for meaning and deprives a reader of a material learning experience. Freedgood and Schmitt focus on historical literature; I believe we can fruitfully think through the denotative, technical, and literal in contemporary literature, too. Perhaps we even ought to do so, especially regarding literature that seems out of step with current thinking. Attending to the denotative, technical, and literal in contemporary literature may call us to reflect on the market-driven ideologies of our own knowledge production industry, and to re-adjust the ideological baggage with which we freight a novel whose subject matter is currently politicized.

As Freedgood and Schmitt point out, such an approach changes the kind of labor that we do as readers. As active consumers of literature, academic humanists do what Evan Watkins in *Everyday Exchanges* calls marketwork: producing taste, bringing about trends, creating interpretive lenses, forming canons, and so on. What if the nature of this work shifted? In the case of *Middlesex*, we might consider how to forge a non-paranoid relationship to the sciences, as Bruno Latour encourages us to do in his oft-cited "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" We might also confront emergent impasses between phenomenology and materiality, experiment with other kinds of literary archives, or even perhaps engage literary arguments that do not match our own political predilections. *Middlesex* might seem irrelevant to some contemporary discourses, but it offers enormous potential for examining the material and affective nature of relevance itself.

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