

9-22-2018

Mulberiddlesex

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

Sandilands, Catriona. "Mulberiddlesex." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 1, article 56, 2018,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/56>.

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.

CATRIONA SANDILANDS

Mulberiddlesex

There is an unusually rich botanical presence in *Middlesex*. There are the olive, elm, and birch trees that grow along the route of the Stephanides' migration and upward class mobility. There is the weeping willow at the Middlesex house to which Callie compares herself as she grows her hair, and as Cal does as he subsequently "clearcuts" it.¹ There is a botanical story about Detroit in which the city transitions from a prosperous "City of Trees" in 1932 to a ruined city of Osiris grass in the 1970s (see Blanchard in this special cluster). And, of course, there is the flower that Callie deploys as a metaphor for her still-enigmatic genitalia: "My crocus wasn't for show. It was in a state of becoming and might turn out fine if I waited patiently" (Eugenides 330).

The most persistent vegetal presences in the novel, however, are mulberry trees. They line the compound in Smyrna; the leaves feed the precious silkworms that are Lefty and Desdemona's livelihood before they are forced to flee. And there is the mulberry at Middlesex: Callie eats its fruit as she angsts through adolescence, and Cal remembers it when he returns there after his experiences in San Francisco. "Up there in that window . . . I used to read for hours, eating mulberries off the tree outside" (519). The best mulberry scene occurs right after the novel's revelatory climax: "It took place a week later, back on Middlesex, and featured me, a suitcase, and a tree" (396). About to depart for the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, Callie, in the process of becoming Cal, focuses on the fruit: "I was reaching out my window, picking berries off the mulberry tree that grew outside . . . The mulberries had ripened in the last week. They were fat and juicy. They stained my hands . . ." (396). As she eats the berries, she participates in the family history of mulberry relationships that mark the Stephanides' journey from Smyrna to Grosse Pointe. Moreover, she participates in the larger history of global mulberry movements that saw their seeds smuggled out of China in the 6th century and transported to Asia Minor; that saw white mulberry trees planted in the US, starting in the 18th century, in an attempt to generate a domestic silk industry; and that saw mulberries further cultivated as landscaping trees in suburban gardens all over North America.

One reading of this *Middlesex* mulberry moment might focus on how Cal/lie is epically caught up in bio-historical relations (see Alaimo, Breu, Hsu, and Mazzolini in this special cluster). Following the novel's pronounced tendency toward determinism, the mulberry tree—understood as a "mute object" that, as Cal insists, tells his story (see Singh and Seymour in this special cluster)—acts as a bearer of historical and biological destiny. Here, the tree, in its

¹ I use feminine pronouns for the decidedly feminine/female period of Cal's life lived as "Callie" and masculine for the decidedly masculine/male period lived as "Cal." As this paper indicates, the choice is mulberry-centric.

involvements in the multigenerational Stephanides narrative, does at least two things. First, it naturalizes the upwardly mobile immigrant journey from Smyrna to Grosse Pointe: the Middlesex tree, likely planted from naturalized US stock, appears to be the *same* tree that Desdemona cultivated for her silkworms. The tree that she left behind is already there to greet her in Grosse Pointe, and it feeds her grandchild as it had sustained her. Second, the tree makes this particularly bold appearance at the precise moment that Callie faces the fact that she “is no longer a girl like other girls” (396): the mulberry witnesses and nourishes the revelation of genetic inevitability that is the story that Cal insists on telling. Just as the tree meets Desdemona at Middlesex, masculinity is already there to meet Cal once he arrives on its genital shore.

Against such a deterministic vegetality, I argue that mulberries are not at all “mute objects” of Cal’s life; in fact, paying attention to mulberry eloquence is key to unlocking a less stifling reading of *Middlesex*. In general, I advocate a reading practice that takes plants seriously: thinking with plant activities interrupts the tendency to consider literary plants primarily as motifs, metaphors, or, as above, agents of crude naturalization (Adamson and Sandilands). Involving plants in reading means taking them out of these containers and exploring where they grow when given more space. Plants can take stories in less anthropocentric directions: even as Cal enlists mulberries to signal inevitability, their own stories overflow his deterministic views of race, species, territory, and gender identity.

Mulberries are tricky. First, there is the question of mulberry sex. Some mulberries are monoecious, meaning that they have both male (staminate) and female (carpellate) flowers on the same plant; other mulberries are dioecious, meaning that staminate and carpellate flowers are on different plants. Monoecious mulberries frequently self-pollinate, some dioecious mulberries cross-pollinate, and some female trees fruit without pollination at all. What’s more, individual trees change sex at will: one study concluded that trees respond to chemical / hormonal stimuli, and also to physical trauma such as pruning (Vijayan et al).²

Although genetic variation is important, environmental factors thus also condition a tree’s sexual expression at any given time (Govinda et al). Although mulberries are not alone in their botanical ability to change sex, because of humans’ close contact with them for thousands of years, this propensity is well known. So I have to ask: what does it mean, in *Middlesex*, that the mulberry tree is witness to the moment of Callie’s anxiety as she moves from apparently “false” female to “true” male identity? Given that mulberry sex is a complex entanglement of genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors, how are we to read Cal’s determination to attribute his gender identity solely to his XY chromosomal inheritance? Read as something other than a mute object, perhaps the tree offers an eloquent reminder that Cal’s masculinity is also created in the midst of an entanglement of factors that are not only genetic? Perhaps the mulberry is telling us that neither the feminine nor the masculine identities of Callie/Cal was really “false,”

² Much of the published research on mulberry sex variation comes from sericultural industry scientists in India. However, complex mulberry sexual expression is widely acknowledged.

and that changes in identity and expression might be easier if they were understood as a fairly banal fluidity?

Then, there is also the trickiness of mulberry species identity. In most of North America, there are at least two different species of mulberry: *Morus alba* (white mulberry), originally from China and an active participant in multispecies globalization with human and silkworm co-participants, and *Morus rubra* (red mulberry), indigenous to North America and inclined to stay put.³ The distinction between exotic and invasive species is well rehearsed: white mulberries, having escaped their domestic confines, have become invasive, and red mulberries are threatened by this expansiveness. The trouble is that the two species hybridize with great enthusiasm. Indeed, the interspecies adulteration itself is considered the major threat to *M. rubra*: even as its offspring thrive in suburban front yards and around the edges of vacant lots, its lineage is called into question because of its intermingling with *M. alba*.

So the trees that trace from Smyrna to Grosse Point are *not* the same mulberries: the experience of migration and colonial encounter has irrevocably de-naturalized their lineage. *Middlesex's* emphasis on heredity and destiny is contradicted by mulberry stories: the tree that witnesses Cal's identity crisis does not do so from a position of predestined relationship, but rather from one of variability, adaptability, and ecological resilience. Given that the mulberry is, again, eloquent on this point, I also have to ask: what does it mean to read the novel as a challenge to the "natural" progression of the Stephanides' upwardly mobile movements? What does it mean to think about belonging and place not as a matter of heredity, but as one of power and encounter? What does it mean to consider that the mark of the berries on Callie's hand is not the inherited stain of an incestuous relationship, but rather a trace of the more systemic blood of violent colonial and racialized encounters—in both Smyrna and Michigan—that have brought both Cal and the tree to Middlesex?⁴

Reading with mulberries, here, creates interpretive space that overflows the confines of Cal's determinist retrospection: his story is not the only one that the novel is telling, and the trees that articulate their presence in the novel help us find one of the less obvious ones (see Kojima in this special cluster). Plant agencies often overflow the material relations through which we attempt to domesticate them; not surprisingly, they also overflow the interpretive boxes in which critics tend to place them. Mulberries, being especially tricky, are a good place to start to explore what might happen when we follow plants' leads.

³ There is also *Morus nigra*, black mulberry, which has its own juicy global travels.

⁴ Mulberry juice, which leaves a pretty indelible stain, has a long tradition of association with blood, from Pyramus and Thisbe onward.

Works Cited

Adamson, Joni, and Catriona Sandilands. "Insinuations: Thinking Plant Politics with *The Day of the Triffids*." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patricia Vieira, U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 234-52.

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

Govinda, Raju M.V., et al. "A Superlative Study of the Seasonal Variations, Environmental Impact in Sex Expressions of Illustrious and Popular Mulberry Cultivars of India." *Caribbean Journal of Science and Technology*, vol. 2, 2014, pp. 378-91.

Vijayan, K. et al. "Diversification of Mulberry (*Morus indica* var. S36), a Vegetatively Propagated Tree Species." *Caspian Journal of Environmental Science*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 23-30.

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).