

9-22-2018

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Recommended Citation

Blanchard, Kaitlin (2018) "On Being Intimate with Ruin: Reading Decay in Middlesex," *The Goose*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 53.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/53>

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On Being Intimate with Ruin: Reading Decay in Middlesex

In sympathy with Singh and Sandilands, my contribution to this special cluster takes up the question of the geography, form, and agency of “mute objects” in *Middlesex*. In particular, I turn my attention to Eugenides’s depiction of the “decline” of the city of Detroit in the novel as it telegraphs a conversation between the aesthetics of ruin and the politics of socio-ecological decay. The novel ironizes the elegiac tone of what John Patrick Leary has coined as “The Detroit Lament” in nesting it within a modernist story of scientific progress, growth, and renewal. Ruin, in *Middlesex*, occasions migration and renewal, while also serving as the backdrop for the atemporal story of a gene, and a house (see Seymour in this special cluster), that resists transformation. Yet despite a historical pathos at work in the novel, any political commentary on Detroit’s ruin arrives only retrospectively alongside Cal’s heteronormative revision of his gender identity. We might say, then, that time in the novel takes the form of the chromosome, folding nostalgia and anxiety together into the mobius strip of the ruin. I argue, therefore, for an intimate attention to the ruin in *Middlesex*, and Detroit, as a means of exploring the geo-bio-politics of decay as a problem of our socio-ecological present.

Near the close of *Middlesex*, Cal, Homeric director, recounts his father Milton’s distracted and doomed attempt to ransom genetics with capital, that is, to buy back his “daughter,” with his “Herculean” profit, from an overdetermined capture by binary gender and genetics (see Alaimo, Breu, Collins, and Hsu in this special cluster). The handoff or “dump” of the ransom money occurs in the (by 1975) decrepit Michigan Central Station, a stock subject of what Leary names “ruin porn.” Ruin porn conflates erotic and aesthetic interest in filmically documenting the opulence of urban and industrial ruins.¹ Its lurid fascination with spectacles of degradation—images typified in *The Ruins of Detroit*, a 2010 book by French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre and in Andrew Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*—also and paradoxically participates in a postmodern detachment which abstracts the ruin from any socio-political context, or indeed any attempt to offer a Foucauldian history of the presence of those who still live in the city. The fetishization of Detroit’s decline in film and cinema is

¹ Leary’s account naturalizes Detroit as a “mecca of urban ruins” given that, for him, ruin porn seems to be yoked specifically to industrial, urban ruin (whether in Europe or North America). In Detroit, the slow decline of ruination and the temporal intensity of repeated urban crises merge in the ruins of industry. But this genealogy of ruin is also a genealogy of renewal. Ruin porn has historical and cultural antecedents which go unmentioned by Leary. The 18th century etchings of a degraded Rome made by Giovanni Battista Piranesi deeply influenced Romantic poetry (e.g. “Tintern Abbey”) and its nostalgia for the future. Piranesi was an architect by trade, not an artist, and his copious etchings of a decrepit Rome were part of a campaign to be placed in charge of the city’s urban renewal projects (Hampstead).

ultimately a form of speculative futurism that imagines “our dystopic future” in the inner city. “Detroitism” reflects a fascination with images of “first world urban decline” (Leary), a desire for ruins that are visible and apprehensible, arguably in counter-distinction to an evolving risk imaginary’s fear of the empty wasteland of the nuclear era. *Middlesex*’s nesting of Cal’s narrative of progress within a story about a city continually made available for urban renewal renders Detroit’s material history—like the rendering of animals for (ruin porn’s) film stock—a story of myth’s reformations.

Middlesex struggles to account for the temporality of the city in decay given its recursive and retrospective narration, the double helix of the narrative gene. Detroit and Cal are caught up in the circular reformations of metamorphosis. Only metamorphosis, in the novel, is a story of deterministic, individualistic re-invention around a stagnant biological form: there seems to be no concession made by Eugenides that the gene—despite its animacy—is subject to the vicissitudes of time and environment; it exhibits instead a strangely plastic materiality. Likewise, although the novel outlines the poverty, and the colonial and orientalist fantasies, that inspire urban renewal, these histories of displacement are largely eclipsed by a desire for national belonging expressed in and as heteronormative, monogamous kinship. Metamorphoses, in *Middlesex* and Ovid, are determined by the shape of what has come before. Indeed, the Western tradition of metamorphosis encodes the very idea of return to a prior form within a transformation—in Ovid and Kafka, transformation is, as Catherine Malabou suggests, bound up with salvation, and its function is essentially conservative rather than innovative (12). Form changes, but substance endures. Perhaps counterintuitively, transformation in the tradition of metamorphosis reinforces the permanence, the uninterrupted substance of identity, rather than contradicting it. Aging and renewal can only ever change us into who we already are—at least from the vantage of a self-determining narrative. So it goes for Cal and for *Middlesex*’s Detroit.

At the close of the novel, Cal returns to guard the door of the house on Middlesex against Milton’s spirit. Standing in the threshold between life and death, Cal’s return to Detroit and to Middlesex holds possibility (renewal and reinvention) in ontological reserve, which guarantees its recognizability (even if in the form of a negation or repression), as he narrates the story of becoming who he is *a posteriori*. Cal asks, “what’s the reason for studying history? To understand the present or avoid it?” (80). Eugenides’s excavation of Detroit’s Latin motto as answer, “speramus meliora; resurget cineribus (We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes)” (80), offers the (city’s) present as a history of metamorphoses. As Cal narrates, in 1807,

Judge Woodward envisioned the new Detroit as an urban Arcadia of interlocking hexagons Since 1818, the city had spread out along the river, warehouse by warehouse, factory by factory. Judge Woodward’s wheels had been squashed, bisected,

pressed into the usual rectangles. Or seen another way . . . the wheels hadn't vanished at all, they'd only changed form. (80-81)²

Malabou asserts that only when substance changes is a transformation without a return to a prior formal arrangement possible (10). Such a transformation, the event of the accident, marks the end of biological and historical identity as such and complicates any received understanding of plasticity as always positive, ("resilient cities"), or an equilibrium between the giving and receiving of form (persistence through crisis). Where Roland Barthes once feared that plasticity marked the end of "Nature" given its ability to reproduce almost anything, "the whole world *can* be plasticized, even life itself" (99; original emphasis), Malabou contends that plasticity is neither a strictly biological nor a strictly historical affordance, inhabiting as it does the space between biology and history. Plasticity constitutes here the very threshold of the subject's (re)capacitation within "life itself."

While epigenetics suggests that history can operate in the form of an immanent disruption of genetic ends—that our "exposure" (Alaimo) irremediably entangles history, place, and embodiment—*Middlesex's* omniscient narration works assiduously to avoid such trans-corporeal entanglements. Instead, the camera pans slowly over the decline of the city as late liberalism's assent to a multiculturalism of post-recognition difference speaks through Milton's pre-mortem fugue,

It seemed that most of the city was gone as he gazed down. Empty lot followed empty lot. But Milton was wrong about this, too. Corn was sprouting up in some places, and grass was coming back. It looked like farmland down there. "Might as well give it back to the Indians," Milton thought. "Maybe the Potowatomies would want it. They could put up a casino." (511)

Like ruin porn, the novel's narrative lens offers a dusty spectacle in which some plants (corn), places (Black Bottom), and people (Julie Kikuchi) exist only as Barthesian myth bereft of, well, history. As myth, they have travelled through a process of such thoroughgoing abstraction so as to have been rendered paradoxically natural objects, their current shape impenetrable to a historical imagination. *Middlesex's* distortion of urban history with chromosomal form conveys Detroit's resilience as "stubborn persistence" (Leary) in the face of deindustrialization, housing discrimination, suburbanization, municipal corruption and incompetence, gentrification, and other forms of urban renewal. Driving through Detroit en route to his father's funeral, Cal embraces the city's decay: "at least the city didn't mock my grief by being sparkling or winsome." (511). The novel equates death, that which it argues gives life "weight" (519), with what is in fact the ongoing and constitutive ruin of global capitalism. Accretive and edge temporalities, experiences of dying, wearing out, and ruin that limn death, are the novel's unexpressed phenomenal accounts of transition and transformation.

² Even as a fort, Detroit had long been a place of transition and settlement governed not just by French authorities, but also by "a highly mobile network of mixed Native and European families" (Marrero 67), some of whose members became the economic and political standard bearers ("coureurs de ville") of an early urban culture.

Leary concludes that one finds oneself inquiring of ruin photography, “what happened” and “what’s your point?” In the case of *Middlesex*, one might ask if Detroit’s metamorphosis post-1967 is not just another figure in Cal’s preformationism: “the preformationists . . . believed that all of humankind had existed in miniature since Creation, in either the semen of Adam or the ovary of Eve, each person tucked inside the next like a Russian nesting doll” (Eugenides 199). Preformation, as Cal explains, is a theory that traces its origins to the dissection of silkworm larvae in their metamorphic stage: hanging being on the silk garment bag of insect metamorphosis, Cal yokes his development to the plastic adaptability of insects. Metamorphosis and plasticity are difficult to distinguish in entomology, given that an insect’s plasticity in the face of duress is an extension of its developmental metamorphic capacity (Mawani 166). However, preformation in *Middlesex* is a theory of plasticity that ends, like the silkworm in sericulture, in the scalding bath of Cal’s recognition as “The Man” (518). *Middlesex* oscillates between telling a material, political history of Detroit, the political and aesthetic affordances of the rectangular plotting endemic to industrialism, and the displacements of a colonial impulse toward renewal, and recounting the mythology of a ruin, an aesthetic object that refers in the end to “nothing and no place in particular” (Leary), to plasticity itself. It seems tempting to conclude that the novel wishes to have its formal cake and eat it too, but what remains unaffected is the ongoing ecological, racial, and economic violence of a city whose streetscapes register only the distant, undigestible rot of Fordlandia’s rubber trees: that is, they register only rubber.³

As Milton Stephanides takes his terminal “air ride” over the side of the Ambassador Bridge, readers are treated to a panoramic account of Detroit in the image of death. This is, in *Middlesex*, the elegiac mode made modern. The chase that leads to Milton’s death unspools from the reel of film like an action sequence that cannot keep its lens on the violence at hand. To read to the side of *Middlesex*’s language of disposability its “junk houses” and “dead-end land” (506) might be to consider seriously Cal’s remark that Detroit’s “blight is a general state of affairs” (517) where degeneration, rusts, mildews, and musts bear on plastic and petro state alike not as utopic futures, but as the erosion of the normative or anticipatory subject of disaster capitalism. Such a consideration might serve not only to question longstanding biopolitical divisions between liveliness and morbidity, but also to grasp the “geontological” partition between life and the undead and nonliving of capital (Povinelli) as a division whose license is renewed in the very turn to the affective good of plasticity. Detroit’s story in *Middlesex* is an uncanny story of “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 10) that implicates us in the pornographic fetishization of dereliction, in what Cal calls our very “close relations with entropy” (Eugenides 517). To avow the rotting remainders of imperial desire refigures the spatial subject of ruin porn into the temporal subject of empire and colony *and* renders porn

³ Greg Grandin recounts that Henry Ford insisted that the rubber trees on his Brazilian Fordlandia estate be planted in the same closely plotted arrangements as the crowded machines in his Detroit factories. Ford’s insistence on understanding his factory as a model for the plantation created the very conditions for its failure, since the trees’ close proximity to each other led to a dramatic growth in blight and the bugs that feed off rubber. None of Fordlandia’s latex ever made it into a Ford car.

available to feminist and queer interventions. Of *Middlesex* and ruin porn we might ask: where is the story of (ecological) resilience as a matter of variation, change, *and* the decline/loss of some objects and not others?

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