



“But in the end it wasn’t up to me” –
- A Queer Reading of Eugenides’ *Middlesex*

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Introduction

Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* is many things; it is a Pulitzer-prize winning novel, it is a bestseller, and it is the second novel by Eugenides. It is also the tale of a family spanning several generations, a novel that deals with history, immigration, and assimilation. Furthermore, *Middlesex* is a book that brings up subjects like racial tensions, family problems, religion, and incest. *Middlesex* could also be labeled a coming-of-age novel or a portrait of how the United States appeared to Greek-Americans from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1970s. The book's author said in an interview that "[t]he book, just like its hermaphroditic narrator, was meant to be a hybrid. Part third-person epic, part first-person coming-of-age tale" (interview with Eugenides, quoted in Shostak, 384). This is indeed evident in the book for just like the novel itself, the main character Cal(liope) Stephanides is many things: the narration begins with the sentence "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (3). Over the course of the novel he is a young girl, a homeless young man, a peep-show worker and in the end he works as a diplomat stationed in Berlin.

The narrator tells the reader the story of his¹ family's journey from a small village overlooking Mount Olympus to Grosse Point, Michigan, but also the story of how his anatomy came to be male. Cal is born with 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphroditism, which means that Cal's body has XY chromosomes just like genetic males, external genitalia resembling those of a female, and from puberty onwards a hormone balance that is dominated by testosterone, and lacking estrogen and dihydrotestosterone, also known as DHT. These factors result in the fact that Cal is raised as a girl by the name of Calliope, or Callie for short, but is later examined by lead medical specialists when he does not develop as most girls do and finally becomes male-identified and takes the name of Cal.

¹ Throughout this essay male pronouns will be used since this is how Cal identifies at the end of the book, making this the most respectful choice in regards to the fictive character's gender identity.

The first 250 pages or so of the novel do not deal with Cal directly, but with the events that led up to him inheriting the mutated gene, which seems to be due to his paternal grandparents being third cousins, but also brother and sister, and their son, Cal's father, marries the daughter of their cousin.

This essay will rely on queer theory, and focus on how the character Cal Stephanides defies binary conventions of both gender and sexuality. This will be accomplished by examining how he defies the gender binary, not only by transitioning from a young girl to a teenage boy, but also by having a body that does not fit into the dichotomy of genetic males and females. Furthermore, through his transition he challenges the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Apart from mapping how Cal's gender identity is portrayed and explained, I also intend to apply Judith Butler's theories of how gender is culturally constructed and performative to an investigation of the normative violence exerted on intersex people by non-intersex people. Might Eugenides, a non-intersex male, be at risk of exerting some kind of normative violence by writing a novel with an intersex protagonist? Can an author who has not experienced how it feels to be forced to adapt to having a body that does not conform to the binary of sex write a novel sensitive to the struggle of real intersex individuals and that does not discriminate against them? Since this essay will rely on queer theory, and queer theory aims to be subversive, the reading offered in this essay will be a political one.

Chapter One

In the 1999 preface to the second edition of her book *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler writes that she “opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original” (viii). As the point of departure of an essay about literature, this quotation might seem queer, in the older definition meaning “odd,” but to understand queer theory one must realize that what we consider to be “true and original” is merely a cultural construction. Relating this to gender identity one could argue that the gender binaries are not something god-given or inherently true, and may therefore be treated as something that can be critiqued or changed. What is the reason for wanting to critique or change this cultural construction? Butler writes that she has a “strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses about sexuality.” This “desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such” (xxi) is what this willingness to counter the normative violence and uproot the pervasive assumptions stems from.

How is gender constructed then? Annamarie Jagose writes, in her book *Queer Theory - An Introduction*, about Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories that “language does not so much reflect as construct social reality” (79). This is something that Butler seems to agree with, since according to her “[t]he juridical power of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field” (7). Furthermore she claims that in order to be subversive we must adopt a “critical genealogy” and “formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize” (ibid.). Butler’s argument here is that we exist in a world limited by the language we use and the politics of our world, and in order to “counter the normative violence” and “make life possible” we must work from within these limitations and show that the paradigms are not natural.

They can be changed if we critique them and the ways in which they uphold themselves.

Heterosexual matrix is a term that Butler uses, and she describes it as “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized.” It is a “hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility,” which can be interpreted in such a way that even though this is the most powerful discursive model, there are other ways to talk about gender. The heterosexual matrix works by assuming that there must be “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender [...] that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (208). The implications of this discourse are that certain kinds of gendered expressions are more accepted in Western culture, and others are less so, or maybe even inconceivable.

Later Butler maps the theories of Monique Wittig who claims that “the category of sex is neither invariant nor natural, but is a specifically political use of the category of nature that serves the purposes of reproductive sexuality” (153). The implications of this are that there is no reason to divide human bodies into different categories based on sex, “except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality.” This explains which gendered expressions are permitted by the heterosexual matrix, namely men and women with male and female bodies respectively, and the hierarchal relation between them, namely heterosexuality. According to Wittig, this is accomplished through language, which she views as “a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects that are eventually misperceived as ‘facts’” (157). In essence, since language constructs social reality, as according to Saussure it does, talking about sexual difference creates this difference, and by extension the notion that this difference was natural or pre-discursive. This means that there are no more natural differences between the genders than between any two people with different body shapes, and since the notion of gender is based on presumed natural differences between the sexes, gender is unnatural and culturally constructed through and because of the heterosexual matrix. Since gender is culturally constructed one cannot *be* a gender, but according to Butler, gender is

“the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of presence and absence on the body's surface” (184). This means that there is no body that is by its own appearance a gendered body, but a body becomes gendered by the culture prescribing significance to what is present and what is absent. Furthermore Butler claims that “coherence [in relation to gender] is desired, wished for, idealized, and [...] this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification” (185). This corporeal signification takes on the form of “acts, gesture, and desire” which “produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body.” In other words, there is no internal core that creates the effect of gendered acts, and therefore the gendered body does not exist “apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (185). This is how gender is a cultural construction, and performative, which in extension means that a body does not have a gender unless the culture creates a gender and applies it to the body.

In Western society and culture there is a heavy reliance on, and deep seated belief in, science and its objectivity. This is one of the things that reinforces and upholds the gender binary since biologists usually view sex as only male or female and disregard gender all together. Butler discusses the biologist Dr. David Page's claims to have found “the binary switch upon which hinges all sexually dimorphic characteristics” (144 quoted in Butler, from “Life in XY Corral” by Anne Fausto-Sterling). Although Dr. Page is a researcher at the respected Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Butler finds several problems with his research. The first problem Butler identifies is that the samples that the research is based on are taken from people who had “XX chromosomes, but had been medically designated as males” and others who had “XY chromosomal constitution, but had been medically designated as female” (145). What this “medical designation” had been based on was not explained. The reason for wanting to find this “master-gene” was because there is “a good ten percent of the population [...] who] do not fit neatly into the XX-female and XY-male set of categories” (146). The next problem found with Dr. Page's research is the fact that “exactly the same stretch of DNA said to determine maleness was, in fact, found to be present on the X chromosomes of females.” Page defended his research by claiming that it was not the presence or

absence of the gene sequence that determined maleness, but “that it was *active* in males and *passive* in females” (146). Butler states that this claim about active versus passive is still hypothetical (ibid.). This shows how unproven his research actually is. Another problem with Page’s research is that he is trying to prove what determines whether a body is male or female, but this has “implicitly already [been] decided by the recourse of external genitalia” (147), which creates a logical paradox in the research. Page is trying to find out which gene determines whether a person is male or not, but makes arbitrary assumptions about the sex of ambiguously sexed bodies before he even starts.

Furthermore, “Page and his coworkers conflate sex-determination with male-determination” according to Butler, seeing how they focus on finding out whether a gonad is a testes or not, and “femaleness is always conceptualized in terms of absence of the male-determining factor or of the passive presence of that factor” (147). Butler refers to the geneticists Eva Eicher and Linda L. Washburn, who claim this is due to “cultural prejudice” and “a set of gendered assumptions about sex” (147). This view of femaleness, or ovaries, being passive or signified by an absence shows how science fails to be objective, and therefore is not less affected by the heterosexual matrix than the rest of the society. For example, Dr. Page tries to find out how the “‘binary switch’ gets started, not whether the description of bodies in terms of binary sex is adequate to the task at hand” (148). Viewing femaleness as passive, and not questioning the sex binary are, according to Butler, due to “cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relation of gender itself [that] frame and focus the research into sex-determination” (148). This is a problem since biologists “seek to establish ‘sex’ for us as it is prior to the cultural meanings that it acquires” (148-149), but as shown above biology is not free from cultural influence itself. Butler claims that “the task is even more complicated when we realize that the language of biology participates in other kinds of languages and reproduces that cultural sedimentation in the objects it purports to discover and neutrally describe.” Butler argues that “sex, as a category that comprises a variety of elements, functions, and chromosomal and hormonal dimensions, no longer operates within the binary framework that we take for granted” (149). This shows how even the seemingly objective or

natural biological sex is also culturally constructed, and how the scientific discourse available to us at this point is not sufficient to describe all the complexities of gender due to a faulty focus on an arbitrarily constructed sex binary.

In his article “‘The Glans Opens Like a Book’: Writing and Reading the Intersex Body,” Iain Morland writes about the different paradigms that have operated within the medical community regarding intersex bodies and how they are understood. Morland begins by writing that intersex people’s “genitalia have tended to be called ‘ambiguous,’ which does not mean that they intermittently change shape into other body parts, or that they vacillate in and out of the universe” (335). While it might seem quite obvious that the term “ambiguous” refers to genitals that are hard to understand, and not genitals that change shape or appear and disappear, this quote explains something about the attitudes in society regarding intersex bodies: they are not culturally intelligible and therefore considered faulty. In the 1950s there was an established protocol to perform genital surgery “in order to make intersexed bodies more easily understood by the non-intersexed” people. Part of Morland’s critique of this is that these genital surgeries are often performed on very young children.

Morland himself has “had 14 surgeries, some consensual, but the majority before I was old enough to personally consent” (336) and claims that this “happens five times a day to infants in American hospitals alone” (335). The fact that surgeries are performed on patients that cannot consent, and because of how often it happens, it is easy to argue that this poses a serious ethical question: is it ethically defensible to perform surgery on someone that might not consent? This question is even more pressing when one considers that “[m]ost intersex infants are not born ill” (335) and one intersex patient complains that “[t]here is no care for whether or not I have perfectly functioning adult genitalia [...]. It’s a kind of ‘lookism’” (343). In essence, intersex genital surgery has traditionally been performed on patients too young to consent. It is also done without prioritizing function, and does not consider the fact that most intersex conditions do not pose a medical risk to the patient. This is why, according to Morland, the Intersex Society of North

America wants to “transplant surgery from the old medical model into a paradigm where the patient is at the decision-making centre” (336-337). The old medical model is defined as “paternalistic” since clinicians were at the center instead of patients.

The other part of Morland’s critique is an extension of the critique of “lookism,” in which he brings up the question of what the surgeons are trying to imitate when transforming ambiguous genitalia into unambiguous ditto. At the center of this critique is Morland’s own term of “nostalgic genitalia” which is defined as “the fantasy of the endlessly mammoth penis, of the immeasurably spacious vagina, of the infinitely delicate clitoris” (339), which of course do not exist. The implications of this are that the surgeons are trying to imitate something that has no tangible referent in the real world. Despite this, surgeons still use terms like “correction,” “reconstruction” and “recreating” when describing what it is they do to the intersex genitalia. Morland comments on this: “[i]n the case of hypospadias, the patient has never had a urethra running to their glans, so there is literally nothing to reconstruct” (339). Consequently, surgeons perform non-consensual surgeries on genitalia that they label as ambiguous in order to make them look like genitalia that are culturally intelligible, although the genitalia that are labeled as unambiguous are just as arbitrary as the ones that the surgeons are trying to “correct.” This form of forced body modifications on intersex people, by non-intersex people, is a literal expression of Butler's theories of the “normative violence” which the heterosexual matrix exerts on those who do not fit in the norm.

Given the novel’s subject matter, it is no surprise that literary criticism on *Middlesex* has focused mainly on Cal’s gender identity in one way or another; for example Rachel Carroll has written an article entitled “Retrospective Sex: Rewriting Intersexuality in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*.” As the title suggests, it is an article dealing with how the novel *Middlesex* portrays intersexuality, and it focuses on how the narrator Cal retrospectively tells the story of his gender identity. Carroll argues that “the retrospective logic at work in this narrative is complicit in a heteronormative temporality which reinforces the causal relationship between sex, gender and sexuality which queer theorists have sought to interrogate” (187). This can be seen in the claim that “[t]he generational narrative

acts as a carrier for a genetic narrative” and in the way that Cal attributes his intersexed state solely to his grandparents being brother and sister (190). This implies that Cal's gender identity is genetically determined, a view that Butler describes as “biology-is-destiny” (8).

Carroll writes about how intersex theorists have found that it is common for intersexed bodies to be viewed as a “medical emergency” that needs to be fixed, even though the intersex state might not pose any threat to the patient’s health, and medical intervention can have severe consequences. In Carroll's reading, Cal’s refusal to undergo “corrective” surgery is not a “subversive bodily act,” to borrow Butler’s term, but instead a way to “preserve a normative sexed identity as male and sexual identity as heterosexual” (188). Carroll refers to the way Cal lies when writing about his own life for the examination by Dr. Luce, which he does because he wants “to pass as normal in a heteronormative culture” (195). When he finds out that Luce wants to perform surgery on him so that he can pass as female, even though Luce believes that Cal is genetically male, Cal runs away. Carroll labels this as “an act of defiance against the medical establishment and its management of intersexed bodies,” but also claims that “on another level Cal remains hostage to its discourses” (195). In Carroll’s reading Cal forms his gender identity on Dr. Luce’s “case notes and their record of genitals palpated [...] rather than his own corporeal experience” (195). Furthermore, Carroll claims that Eugenides places Cal’s desires “firmly within a heterosexual matrix” through explaining Cal’s attraction to girls as an effect of him being genetically male. This implies the notion that there is a “direct, causal link between sex and sexuality” and “sex as the *origin* of gender and sexuality,” although in the narrative this link is inverted because Cal’s attraction to girls narratively precedes his male gender identity, and the former is used to explain the latter (195).

The above-mentioned examples are Carroll’s arguments about apparent heteronormativity in *Middlesex*, but she also maps what she calls queer moments in the novel, “moments in which the binary logic of the heterosexual matrix begins to fold in on itself” (197). One such example is the various descriptions of Cal’s sexual organ and sensations. On the one hand, Carroll claims that they are “almost parodically evocative of the naturalizing metaphors by which female sexuality and

feminine sensibility have traditionally been denoted” (197), with references to flowers, blooming and fertility. On the other hand, Carroll also claims that this “metaphor also allows for a significant indeterminacy with regard to its sexed referent,” which is exemplified by the fact that Cal’s “pink stem” is “pushing” and “stirring” and is sometimes “hard as a root” (*Middlesex*, 330). By describing what is understood to be Cal's clitoris/hypospadiac penis² in this way, Eugenides opens up for a challenging of the heterosexual matrix.

Furthermore Carroll claims that while Cal does perform sexual activities with his female friend while still identifying as a girl, the friend feigns unconsciousness “as a way of enjoying Cal’s attentions while disavowing the implications of their intimacy: principally, the lesbian identity which it would seem to disclose” (198). When Cal has what would seem to be heterosexual sex with the friend’s brother, he imagines entering the body of the boy having sex with his female friend. This, Carroll claims, makes “the boundaries between same-sex and heterosexual roles become blurred” (199). Although Carroll labels this as another queer textual moment, she also claims that “this remembered fantasy is enlisted to support his recuperative narrative, whereby a male sexed identity is discovered as the cause of a sexuality which is retroactively understood as heterosexual” (200). Carroll’s conclusion is that the novel is written in a way that places the narrative within the heterosexual matrix, and even though it does contain some queer textual moments, it is still the binary male heterosexuality that is portrayed as Cal’s true gender identity and the discovery of this identification constitutes the narrative climax of the story.

Robert E. Kohn has written an article entitled “Freudian Daydreams in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex*,” which is a psychoanalytical reading of the novel. Kohn quotes Freud who argues that “flying dreams are dreams of erections,” and focuses on two instances in the novel where Cal has dreams of flying or floating. The first dream is when Cal is in a cottage in the woods with his female best friend, the Obscure Object, her brother Jerome and their friend Rex. At this time Cal is still living as Calliope, and treated as a girl. When they get there, Rex makes out with the Obscure

² Hypospadias is when the urethra does not open at the tip of the glans of the penis, but rather somewhere along the underside of the penis shaft.

Object while Jerome makes out with Cal. Instead of focusing on making out with Jerome, Cal imagines himself entering the body of Rex and making out with the Obscure Object. Kohn argues that this is a way for Cal to find an outlet for his desires towards the Obscure Object while not having to wonder if he is having unnatural desires. Furthermore Kohn argues that “[Cal’s] readiness to imagine [him]self inside a male body reveal[s his] desire to be male rather than female” (139). The second flying dream is when Cal finds out that his father has died in a car crash, and he has a daydream about him flying the car he was killed in instead of believing the newspapers which said that it was “part of the ten-car pileup on the bridge” (Eugenides, 574). This dream signals, according to Kohn, that “[p]erhaps he wants to replace his father in the privileged relation to his mother, or is simply experiencing the Oedipal triumph over his father by imagining his catastrophic fall into the Detroit River,” or it could signal that “[p]erhaps he is reverting to his original nurture as Calliope and [...] re-experiencing her Oedipal craving for sexual union with her father” (140). Kohn also refers to Butler’s claim that “[t]erms of gender designation are [...] never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade” and relates this to Cal having what he describes as Calliope’s manners peeking through.

According to Kohn, this shows how Eugenides has made Cal less ambiguously male at the figurative level (the dreams of flying), and more ambiguously so at the narrative level (having the manners of Calliope appearing every now and then). Kohn seems to be over-emphasizing the meaning of these dreams, by relying on an arbitrary connection between “flying” and “erections.” Furthermore, Kohn refers to Freud who says that “women can have the same flying dreams as men” (139), which makes Kohn’s argument less convincing. Instead of focusing on how Cal identifies, Kohn focuses on dreams of flying, which have been given an arbitrary meaning. This has nothing to do with Cal’s gender identity because of the arbitrariness of the interpretation of the dreams, and also because both men and women can have the same flying dreams. I would argue that Kohn’s article is based on outdated theories, and much of the article relies on weak argumentation.

In the article “Theory Uncompromised by Practicality: Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*,” Debra Shostak discusses the discrepancy between the theories of hybrid identities and the practical implications of those in real life, where “real life” is represented by the novel *Middlesex*. Shostak argues that by weaving the story of Cal’s intersexualism together with the tale of Greek immigration and assimilation, Eugenides “implicitly overdetermines the metaphor of hybridity to refer at once to the body, to cultural identity, and to narrative structure” (384). She also refers to Mendelsohn who argues that the novel “pretends to be about being in the middle [considering the title *Middlesex*], only to end up suggesting that you have to choose either end” (385). Shostak continues to discuss the notion of hybridity, and argues that one cannot occupy a place in the middle when the options available are binary. In order to be culturally intelligible one cannot exist in a place outside the culturally constructed binary.

According to Shostak, Eugenides used the genetic explanation for Cal’s intersexuality as a way to connect the two parts of the novel that are on the one hand, the immigration/assimilation tale, and on the other, the tale of being intersex. Shostak points out that in order for Desdemona and Lefty to fit into American society, they have to let go of their past and their Greek heritage, and in order to keep their past and their Greek heritage they have to sacrifice the possibility of fitting into American society. Therefore, it is impossible to attain a hybrid ethnic identity. One must make a choice between being either Greek or American.

The title of the article is borrowed from the novel itself, where it is used to describe the suburban house in *Middlesex*: “futuristic and outdated at the same time... *Middlesex* was a testament to theory uncompromised by practicality” (*Middlesex*, quoted in Shostak, 397). Shostak’s most pressing point seems to be that the poststructuralist theories of gender, of deconstruction of the gender binary and/or the heterosexual matrix, are a “utopian fantasy” (386-387), and that in reality it is impossible to live as an intergendered³ individual. Shostak claims that “this ‘solution’ to the

³ Note the difference between intersex and intergender. The former describes a situation where the physical sex of the person does not fit into the binary of male – female, and the latter describes a situation where a person identifies as a gender outside of the binary of man – woman.

conundrum of Cal's sex forces Eugenides into a binary model." Shostak argues that this is not due to a failure of imagination on Eugenides' part. Instead Shostak argues that it is an effect of the social discourse itself: "the conservatism lies not in the messenger but in the materials with which he can work" (410).

In this chapter I have outlined the theories I have used in my analysis of *Middlesex*, and furthermore described some of the previous literary criticism on the novel. The next chapter will consist of the analysis of the novel through the application of said theories and with some references to the previous literary criticism brought up above.

Chapter Two

Why should I have thought I was anything other than a girl? [...] My ecstatic intuition about myself was now deeply suppressed. How long I would have managed to keep it down is anybody's guess. But in the end it wasn't up to me. The big things never are. Birth, I mean, and death. And love. And what love bequeaths to us before we're born. (438-439)

This quote is found just before Cal is “born [...] again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room” (3). It is a quote that is central to my reading of *Middlesex*, especially the words “But in the end it wasn't up to me,” and I will explain why I find this important. Eugenides spends a considerable portion of the novel mapping the genetic background to how Cal inherited the mutated gene. The circumstances seem to originate from the fact that Cal's grandparents are from “Bithynios, that mountain village where cousins sometimes married third cousins and everyone was somehow related” (44). Describing the situation, the narrator fills in: “[t]hat was how it went in Bithynios. Every so often a hermaphrodite was born, a seeming girl who, in growing up proved otherwise” (81). From this point onwards the theme of incest is present, and is continued when Cal's grandparents, who are brother and sister, fall in love. They flee from Bithynios because the Turkish army is attacking, and on the boat that is taking them to America they have the chance to reinvent themselves as lovers instead of siblings: “Each time Lefty encountered Desdemona on deck, he pretended he'd only just met her,” and then they continue to imitate flirting and courtship even though they are already in love. The narrator questions why they did not simply reinvent themselves as already engaged, and answers by saying “[b]ut it wasn't the other travelers they were trying to fool; it was themselves” (77). This shows how even Cal's grandmother and grandfather think that what they are doing is wrong, evidenced in how they are trying to fool themselves. After arriving in the US Desdemona and Lefty stay with their cousin Sourmelina, and when they tell her about their marriage Desdemona says: “You have to promise never to tell. We'll live, we'll die, and that will be the end of it,” adding: “People can't even know I'm your cousin” (100). Desdemona and

Sourmelina become pregnant and give birth at roughly the same time, and both babies have “[o]ne mutation apiece” (143). These babies grow up to be Cal’s mother and father, Tessie and Milton respectively. The fact that Tessie and Milton are interested in each other is described as “what brought the return of my grandmother’s heart palpitations” (195) since she was afraid that further incest might result in unhealthy grandchildren. Cal describes how the gene has been passed down through his family, and starts by saying “[t]he thread began on a day two hundred and fifty years ago, when the biology gods, for their own amusement, monkeyed with a gene on a baby’s fifth chromosome” (238-239). This shows how Eugenides adopts a genetic deterministic approach to why Cal is born intersex, and this, coupled with the social stigma surrounding incest, both in real life and among the characters of the novel, could be read as Eugenides exercising “normative violence,” to borrow Butler’s term. The deterministic approach goes full circle from page 6, where Desdemona uses a spoon to find out the sex of the unborn Cal and says he is going to be a boy, to page 592, where she finds out he is in fact living as a man and tells him that she and Lefty were siblings.

Debra Shostak and Rachel Carroll brought up very similar arguments in their readings of *Middlesex*. Carroll states that “[t]he generational narrative acts as a carrier for a genetic narrative” and Shostak argues that Eugenides adopts a genetic deterministic approach to explain Cal’s gender identity, but she also argues that he uses this to tie together the theme of immigration with the theme of intersexuality. I do not disagree with this last argument, but at the same time I am not interested in analyzing the theme of immigration in the novel. What is of interest is that previous literary critics have noted the genetic deterministic discourse present in *Middlesex* which is represented by the tale of immigration. Furthermore Shostak argues that Eugenides had to make Cal identify as a binary gender, since it is only these that are possible within the current social discourse. I agree with Shostak insofar as Eugenides seems to be confined within a discourse that only permits for two genders, but on the other hand, I disagree with her that one cannot imagine situations outside the social discourse. By making Cal identify as male, and therefore remain inside

the binary, Eugenides reinforces the social discourse of the enforced gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality – in essence he exerts “normative violence.”

When Cal is referred to Dr. Luce to examine what can be done to help him, the novel opens up for a break with the genetic determinism discourse. Dr. Luce works at the “Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic” (457) and his role in the novel is to determine what gender Cal is. When they first meet, Cal is still living as Callie, a girl who imagines the way Luce sees her: “[t]o a scientist like Luce I was nothing less than a sexual or genetic Kaspar Hauser.”⁴ Cal speculates about Luce’s theories concerning his gender identity. He imagines that Luce notices that he is performing femininity: “[the] sweater, pale yellow, with a floral wreath at the neck, told Luce that I refuted nature in just the way his theory predicted” (459). Because Cal has already been examined by other doctors before, Luce already knew about Cal’s “XY karyotype, [his] high plasma testosterone levels” (465) which are both signs that Cal is genetically male, which is why the sweater indicated that Cal “refuted nature.” Besides clothes, Dr. Luce also notes Cal’s “tenor voice [...] that [he] sat with one leg tucked under [him] [...] how [he] examined [his] nails [...] the way [he] coughed, laughed, scratched [his] head, spoke; in sum, all the external manifestations of what [Luce] called [Cal’s] gender identity” (459). Dr. Luce’s theories about gender identity are summed up as differing from Kleb’s theories from 1876 that “maintained that a person’s gonads determined sex” (461). Luce, on the other hand “argue[s] that gender is determined by a variety of influences: chromosomal sex; gonadal sex; hormones; internal genital structures; external genitals; and, most important, the sex of rearing” (462). These quotes indicate the shift away from genetic determinacy in the novel, but the issue of Cal’s gender identity is still not up to him.

As a part of examining which “the prevailing gender” (465) is in Cal’s case, Dr. Luce interviews him, and has him type his “Psychological Narrative” (469), which basically amounts to an autobiography, with Cal’s life and feelings as its central theme. Regarding the interviews, Cal notes that “[t]he answers I gave were sometimes not as important as the way I answered them”. This is

⁴ Kaspar Hauser was a boy from Bavaria who in the 19th century claimed to have been raised in a dark cell without human contact. This sparked the interest of many scientists at the time.

exemplified with Dr. Luce relying on stereotypes about how men and women acted in interview situations. Although he “knew their limitations [...] they were clinically useful” (469). Cal notes that he “began with the facts and followed them as long as [he] could” when he was writing the psychological narrative, but that he in fact “was making up most of what [he] wrote, pretending to be the all-American daughter [his] parents wanted [him] to be” (470). Instead of writing about his attraction to his female friend he transferred his attraction to her brother, for example. As with the interview, Luce was not only interested in what Cal wrote but also how “Luce was interested in the gender giveaways of my prose [...]. He picked up on my Victorian flourishes, my antique diction, my girls’ school propriety” (471).

Once again Dr. Luce relied on arbitrary stereotypes of gender expression when trying to examine gender identity, which places his views firmly within the heterosexual matrix. Dr. Luce seems to argue that a stable gender expression must follow from a stable gender identity, even though the notions of femininity and masculinity – as well as their applications as “naturally” womanly and manly respectively – are culturally constructed and arbitrary. While writing, Cal emphasizes that “I also knew I was writing for an audience – Dr. Luce – and if I seemed normal enough, he might send me back home” (470). Hence, even though this part of the novel marks a movement away from genetic determinism, Cal is still in a hierarchically lower position, with Dr. Luce in a dominant position. The hegemonic effect of the heterosexual matrix is apparent when Cal wants to be the “all-American daughter my parents wanted me to be” and when he feels that “if I seemed normal enough, [Luce] might send me home.” Cal is at the mercy of an oppressive power, and when the book moves away from the assumption that Cal’s genes decided his gender identity it seems the story implies that Cal is still forced into a specific gender identity by the heterosexual matrix. In the end, Dr. Luce argues that Cal indeed has a female gender identity, but this is based on things that Cal lied about. Rachel Carroll’s argument that Cal’s attraction to girls is used to explain his gender identity as that of a genetic male ties into this in an illuminating way. Cal felt like he had to lie about his desire for his female best friend, and substituted her with her brother in the psychological

narrative. Dr. Luce also uses pornography as a diagnostic tool, and asks Cal which actor turns him on “The woman or the man?” (471). Cal is not attracted to either of them, but reveals that he is lying: “[s]ticking to my cover story, I managed to get out, very quietly, ‘The boy’” (472). In order to appear to be a normal girl, Cal has to feign female heterosexuality, and when he identifies as male he uses male heterosexuality to justify or explain his gender identity.

In the US there is an association called Intersex Society of North America, or ISNA, which works to improve the situation of intersex individuals, and Eugenides lets Cal comment on how he feels about them: “The intersex movement aims to put an end to infant genital reconfiguration surgery. The first step in that struggle is to convince the world – and pediatric endocrinologists in particular – that hermaphroditic genitals are not diseased” (121). These thoughts can be recognized from Iain Morland’s article quoted in Chapter One, but Cal seems to be distancing himself to some extent from ISNA: “I don’t like groups. Though I’m a member of the Intersex Society of North America, I have never taken part in its demonstrations. I live my own life and nurse my own wounds” (121-122), which of course is a fully reasonable approach. Although in the context of *Middlesex*, it can be argued that this is problematic. On their website the Intersex Society of North America says that “[t]he words ‘hermaphrodite’ and ‘pseudo-hermaphrodite’ are stigmatizing and misleading words” and also points out that “some medical personnel still use them to refer to people with certain intersex conditions, because they still subscribe to an outdated nomenclature that uses gonadal anatomy as the basis of sex classification” (ISNA). Cal/Eugenides uses the term “hermaphrodite” consistently throughout the novel, which is a conflicting position compared with the views and goals of ISNA. This is problematic since ISNA is an organization created for, and by, intersexual individuals, and Eugenides is not intersex but has a substantial platform when it comes to spreading his views, considering the fact that he is a bestselling author – seeing how his debut novel *The Virgin Suicides* has been adapted into a film, the first chapter of that novel won the 1991 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction and *Middlesex* has sold in over three million copies and made Eugenides win the Pulitzer Prize. As a foil to Cal’s attitude toward ISNA, there is also the character

Zora who has “Androgen Insensitivity.” Cal explains this condition: “[h]er body was immune to male hormones. Though XY like me, she had developed along female lines” (548) although “Zora didn’t want to be a woman. She preferred to identify herself as a hermaphrodite. She was the first one I met. The first person like me. Even back in 1974 she was using the term ‘intersexual’” (549). In my reading, this quote shows how Zora uses the term “intersexual,” in accordance with the views of ISNA, which stresses the stigmatizing effects of “hermaphrodite.” Despite this, Cal uses the older derogative word, which seems to indicate that Eugenides is either ill-informed about the struggles of intersex individuals, or possibly that he chooses to ignore this. Since asking Eugenides himself is out of the question, one cannot ascertain which of these is true. Zora can be read as Cal’s foil in the way that she has the same XY karyotype, but she does not identify as male, while the narrative structure of the novel seems to try to explain Cal’s male identity with the fact that he has XY chromosomes. The other way Zora can be read as Cal’s foil is that she identifies as “a hermaphrodite” to use Cal’s/Eugenides’ words, and therefore refutes the culturally constructed notion of gender as binary. The final way Zora can be read as Cal’s foil is that she uses the term “intersexual” while Cal insists on using the, according to ISNA, stigmatizing term “hermaphrodite.” At one point while Cal lives with Zora, he asks her why she ever told anyone she is intersex, commenting “Look at you. No one would ever know.” Zora’s reply is that she wants people to know, and when Cal asks why she says “Because we’re what’s next” (552). This shows the discrepancy between Zora’s and Cal’s views on what it means to be intersex.

Despite their differences, Cal mentions that he “was gladdened” by the fact that Zora was “empathic of [their] solidarity” since they “were up against the same prejudices and misunderstandings” (553). Before moving out from living with Zora, Cal “read everything that Zora gave [him]” about intersex and how they have been treated in different cultures. Cal arrives at the conclusion that “[m]any cultures on earth operated not with two genders but with three. And the third was always special, exalted, endowed with mystical gifts” (557). After reading this Cal decides to try to let his “soul leave [his] body” or “fall into a trance state or become an animal” but

is unsuccessful (557), which in the context seems to imply that Cal does not agree with the literature that Zora has given him. It seems that most of Zora's views do not leave any lasting impression on Cal, and even though he is thankful that she took care of him after he has run away from home he does not view the world in the same way as she does. At one point in the novel it seems as if Cal has adopted a view similar to that of Zora, namely when he thinks about the house in Middlesex as "a place designed for a new type of human being, who could inhabit a new world. [He] couldn't help feeling, of course, that that person was [him], [him] and all others like [him]" (595). That quote seems to imply that Cal agrees with Zora, but during the course of his retrospective narration he uses the word "hermaphrodite" and states that he disagrees with ISNA about their essentialist approach and does not want to participate in their meetings. So if Zora makes Cal view himself and other intersex people as "a new type of human being," this effect is only temporary. The above mentioned examples can be seen to strengthen the argument that Cal is a character that is not representing the goals of the intersex community.

While discussing different theories about gender, Cal writes "[b]ut it's not as simple as that. I don't fit into any of these theories. Not the evolutionary biologists' and not Luce's either. My psychological makeup doesn't accord with the essentialism popular in the intersex movement, either" (539). This quote seems to indicate that Cal refutes all of the mentioned theories, and strives to bring nuance to the debate about what decides gender identity. That Cal does not agree fully with the thoughts of the intersex movements has already been discussed, and Dr. Luce believed that Cal was best living as a girl, which Cal disagreed with. In Dr. Luce's file about Cal one can read "CONCLUSION: In speech, mannerisms, and dress, the subject manifests a feminine gender identity and role, despite a contrary chromosomal status" (493). Once again it is obvious that Luce is trapped in the discourse of the heterosexual matrix and makes no distinction between femininity and a female gender identity. After having read this, Cal runs away and leaves a note for his parents, in which he motivates his actions by writing "I am not a girl. I'm a boy. That's what I found out today" (495), with reference to having found out that he has an XY karyotype and

“undescended testes” (490). Later on Cal discusses this with an imagined reader and writes that “[d]esire made me cross over to the other side, desire and the facticity of my body” (539). There are two parts to this issue, of which the first is that the surgeries that Dr. Luce wanted to perform on Cal “may result in partial or total loss of erotosexual sensation” (493), which means that Cal might have been unable to experience sexual pleasure afterwards. The other part of the argument is that Cal has the chromosomes of a genetic male, and therefore is a man per definition, which is a thought that could be labeled as “genetic determinism” or “biology is destiny.” This second part of the argument is amplified in relevance when one considers the context of the novel: that Eugenides spends just under half of the book detailing the events that led up to Cal being born with a specific gene. In her article, Carroll emphasizes the point that Cal started to identify as male based on “case notes and their record of genitals palpitated [...] rather than his own corporeal experience” (195), which I agree with.

After having come home again, Cal is asked by his mother about him living as male: “Don’t you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?” to which he replies “This is the way I was” (585). Throughout the entire novel there seems to be an underlying assumption that Cal is a man because of his chromosomal status or biological sex, although Butler argues that sex is a gendered category and just as culturally constructed as gender. One could compare the fact that there is no true or original gendered body – culture constructs ideal sexual dimorphism according to Butler – to Morland’s thoughts of surgeons trying to imitate non-existent unambiguous genitalia of what they perceive as ambiguous genitalia. Bill Goldstein writes in a literary review published in the *New York Times* that Eugenides has said that he wrote *Middlesex* after having read the memoirs of “Alexina Barbin, a 19th-century French hermaphrodite,” but he felt that Barbin did not succeed in describing the emotions or anatomy of an intersex person and wanted to write about these things himself. Comparing this to the surgeons who are imitating a non-existent ideal original of “unambiguous” genitalia, *Middlesex* can be argued to be an imitation of a non-existent ideal original of the intersex narrative. As a result of this, intersex individuals are once again urged to conform to non-

intersex individuals' views of how they ought to be, which is comparable to the power which the surgeons hold when determining what "unambiguous" or "ambiguous" genitalia are. Even within *Middlesex* one can find thoughts that are similar to these: for example, when Cal discusses the notion of normality in connection to Dr. Luce's examinations:

I had miscalculated with Luce. I thought that after talking to me he would decide that I was normal and leave me alone. But I was beginning to understand something about normality. Normality wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody would just leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. But people – and especially doctors – had doubts about normality. They weren't sure normality was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost. (503)

The phrase "Normality wasn't normal" is quite similar to Butler's argument that "normal" sexual dimorphism is not, in fact, normal but culturally constructed, as well as Morland's argument that ideal "unambiguous" genitalia is just as arbitrary as "ambiguous" genitalia. This quote shows that Eugenides has been thinking about this as well, but it does not alter the fact that he portrays a non-existent ideal of how he as a non-intersex person thinks that intersex people should think and feel.

Cal explains why he "cross[ed] over to the other side" (539), but in other places of the novel it seems as if he has not in fact crossed over from female to male, but instead varies somewhat in his identification. One such example is when he writes "Unlike other so-called male pseudo-hermaphrodites who have been written about in the press, I never felt out of place being a girl. I still don't feel entirely at home among men" (539). This quote can be read as evidence for Cal not in fact identifying fully as male, although he continuously claims that he is living as a man. Another example of Cal's possibly indeterminate gender identity is when he writes "[e]ven now, though I live as a man, I remain in essential ways Tessie's daughter" (585), which can be read as either Cal identifying as something other than a man, or that he identifies as a man but feels that he acts in a way only a daughter can do. The turning point in the narrative of Cal's gender identity seems to occur while he is hitchhiking across the country, and is picked up by a married couple in a RV:

And it is right then that it happens. At some moment on Route 80 something clicks in my head and suddenly I feel I am getting the hang of it. Myron and Sylvia are treating me like a son. Under this collective delusion I become that, for a little while at least. I become male-identified. (508)

The fact that Cal labels the situation a “collective delusion” seems to indicate that he does not identify fully as male, or maybe that he does so fully but only “for a little while.” The issue of Cal’s gender identity is multi-faceted, and it is impossible to give a final and definite answer as to what Cal identifies as, simply because he is a fictional character and we cannot ask him ourselves.

Carroll mentions “queer textual moments” in her article, but her focus is mainly on the description of Cal’s anatomy or sexual activities. I do not disagree with this, but I would like to argue that there are more queer textual moments in the novel, such as those exemplified in the previous paragraphs. In his article, Kohn mentions that Eugenides has written Cal as quite unambiguously male at a figurative level, which he argues is due to Cal having dreams about flying or floating. Kohn also argues that Cal has a more ambiguous gender identity at a narrative level since he does have some mannerisms left from his life as “Calliope.” I would argue that the flying dreams are a very weak argument for deciding someone’s gender identity for several reasons. The first reason is that Freud himself said that “women can have the same flying dreams as men” (Kohn, 139). This makes the dreams completely useless in determining whether the dreamer is a man or a woman. The second reason is that these dreams have been given an arbitrary meaning and I would like to argue that they cannot be used to make any conclusions about anyone’s gender identity. At the same time, I do agree with Kohn that there are some ingredients in the narrative that point toward Cal having a more ambiguous gender identity.

Conclusion

“But in the end it wasn’t up to me” (439). This quote is central to my reading and analysis of *Middlesex*. Throughout most of the novel the issue of Cal’s gender identity is not up to him to solve because of the genetic deterministic discourse in which Eugenides participates. This is most clearly represented by the number of pages Eugenides spends on detailing the incestuous family affairs that lead up to Cal being born with a mutation on a specific chromosome. Due to this, Cal is robbed of any power over his own gender identity, and the social stigma of incest can be argued to be transferred to being intersex. Afterwards, Cal is brought to Dr. Luce who focuses on the “sex of rearing” and tries to determine which the “prevailing gender” is. This is done through interviews and Cal writing a “psychological narrative.” During these examinations, Cal feels that he has to appear normal, so that Luce will send him home, which can be linked to Butler’s ideas about the heterosexual matrix and its hegemonic power. Dr. Luce also examines “the external manifestations of what he called [Cal’s] gender identity,” which ultimately is the culturally constructed performativity of gender according to Butler. Luce also picks up on the way Cal writes, something that he has learned at an all girls’ school. To summarize, Cal has been forced by the heterosexual matrix to lie to Luce, and perform gender in the way that he has been taught when everyone thought he was a girl. Once again, Cal is not in control of his gender identity.

Cal distances himself from ISNA throughout the novel, both through the quote “Though I’m a member of the Intersex Society of North America, I have never taken part in its demonstrations. I live my own life and nurse my own wounds” and through using the word “hermaphrodite” consistently. This can be argued to be problematic since Eugenides is a respected bestselling author, and ISNA is one of the few organizations that give intersex individuals a voice. In *Middlesex* there is also the character of Zora who identifies as intersex instead of man or woman, and says that “we’re [intersex individuals] what’s next.” She is in many ways a foil to Cal, and only appears in

the novel for a short period of time and does not seem to leave a lasting impression when considering Cal's views which are apparent throughout the whole novel. Seeing how Cal narrates in retrospect and the narrator seems to be distancing himself from ISNA, one can argue that Zora's views are refuted.

Cal claims that he does not fit into any theory about gender identity, not "the evolutionary biologists' and not Luce's either," and he does not feel comfortable with "the essentialism popular in the intersex movement." Mapped out above are arguments that Eugenides has constructed the novel so that Cal's male gender identity is a direct effect of his genes, which are the result of the incest in his family. Butler argues that there is no true or original gendered body, and ideal sexual dimorphism is just culturally constructed based on non-existent originals. According to Morland, the so-called "unambiguous genitalia" surgeons aim to create from intersex genitalia are also based on non-existent ideal originals. Eugenides tries to create some sort of ideal intersex narrative, because he was unhappy with the way the memoirs of Alexina Barbin evaded questions about anatomy or the emotions of intersex people, and by doing this it could be argued that *Middlesex* is an imitation of some sort of non-existent ideal original. Cal states that he has "cross[ed] over to the other side," but at several points in the novel there are quotes that seem to indicate that it is not in fact that simple. For example, he feels that he remains in "essential ways Tessie's daughter," that he did not feel "out of place being a girl" nor does he feel "entirely at home among men." He comments on the moment that he became male identified as being a "collective delusion." All of this points to Cal identifying as something other than strictly male, although this is how he lives and is read in society, which could be related to Butler's theories of performative gender. Cal manages to perform "man" well enough to be understood by others as a man, regardless of how he identifies. On the penultimate page of the novel Cal is again back in the house in the area called Middlesex, and he feels that it is "a place designed for a new type of human being" and that "that person was me, me and all others like me" (595). This can be read as a reference to Zora's "we're what's next," and the fact that the name of the house is Middlesex could be read as a reference to a non-binary

gender identity. If so, Cal is not allowed to live as he identifies, since he is living as male, and if he indeed identifies as male this is explained in the novel as an effect of incest and genetic determinism.

To summarize, Eugenides places Cal within a frame of genetic determinism and the heterosexual matrix, which leads to Cal having no chance to either identify as he wants, alternatively live as he identifies. Although he says that he lives as a man there are several instances in *Middlesex* that seem to indicate that his gender identity does not fit into the binary of man – woman. The fact that Cal is somewhat hesitant in his attitude towards ISNA, and that the word “hermaphrodite” is used throughout the entire novel implies that *Middlesex* does not speak on behalf of the intersex individuals in society, but in fact exerts some kind of normative violence.

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