"See synonyms at MONSTER": En-Freaking Transgender in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*

Sarah Graham

Middlesex, the title of Jeffrey Eugenides's epic 2002 novel, promises ambiguity. However, the opening line, "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl … and then again, as a teenage boy" (3), presents sequential and distinctly separate categories. The inconsistency between the hybridity implied by Eugenides's title and his contrastingly boundary-conscious first line points to a contradiction at the heart of the narrative. This discrepancy is underscored by the novel's conclusion, which apparently celebrates intersexuality while simultaneously endorsing gender conventions. In the final scene, Cal (formerly Callie) Stephanides, a newly male-identified intersex subject and the novel's narrator, returns to his family home for his father's funeral, having literally and figuratively run away from Middlesex (the suburb of Detroit, Michigan in which Callie came to see herself as sexually indeterminate) the year before. Cal's return to Middlesex appears to symbolize acceptance of his transgender status, since he claims that he is "happy to be home" (529). Moreover, he declares himself "a new type of human being" (529), one whose face resembles both that of his "grandfather and … the American girl" (529) he used to be. Thus, the novel appears to end with an affirmation of intersexuality, the possibility of being "both/and" rather than "either/or," countering the definition of "hermaphrodite" in *Webster's Dictionary* that had prompted Cal to flee Middlesex:

> 1. One having the sex organs and many of the secondary sex characteristics of both male and female. 2. Anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contradictory elements. See synonyms at MONSTER. (430)

I contend, however, that *Middlesex*'s apparent endorsement of indeterminacy in sex and gender is qualified by Cal's final act. He performs a

traditional Greek ritual during his father's funeral, one reserved for men: rather than attend the service with his family, he remains at home to prevent his father's spirit from entering the house, explaining that "[i]t was always a man who did this, and now I qualified" (529). Indeed, Cal's manhood is apparently affirmed by the fact that his father's spirit does not revisit the family home while he blocks the doorway: implicitly, Cal's transition from female to male is complete and the possibility of inbetweenness—middlesex—left behind. In this article I argue that, like Cal, who rejects intersexuality in favour of a distinct gender identity, the novel itself continually expresses anxiety about sexual ambiguity by associating such hybridity with monstrosity and freakery. I propose that the novel's use of Greek mythology and the tropes of the traditional American "freak show" destabilize its otherwise affirmative representation of the central character by suggesting that intersexuality is, in fact, a "synonym for monster."

It might be argued that, by using the language of myth and freakery, *Middlesex* represents the reality of transgender experience in order to critique prejudices against those deemed "Other" in terms of sexuality or gender. In her defence of novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which present gay, lesbian and transgender figures in ways often deemed unpalatable by readers and critics today, Heather Love writes:

> Texts that insist on social negativity underline the gap between aspiration and the actual. At odds with the wishful thinking that characterizes political criticism, they are held accountable for the realities that they represent and often end up being branded as internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use. These texts do have a lot to tell us, though: they describe what it is like to bear a "disqualified" identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it. (4)

Such "dark, ambivalent texts" (Love 4) present experiences that include loss, alienation, and self-loathing and, as a result, critics and readers have been inclined to reject them as antithetical to the progressive work of queer activists and scholars. For Love, however, such texts are important

because queer readers in the present are still "feeling backward" despite social change and can relate profoundly to the emotions and experiences which "depressing" novels such as *The Well of Loneliness* describe.

Applying Love's reasoning to *Middlesex* might mean arguing that its representation of Cal's unhappy life as an intersex subject is not "retrograde" but a revealing description of what it means to live with a "'disqualified' identity" (Love 4). To reject entirely any representation of queer life that is less than positive would be to fall prey to what Love calls the "politics of optimism" (29), but my critique of *Middlesex* is not an attempt to redeem or disavow the past as a way of managing the shame associated with it (Love 32). In Cal, Eugenides presents a figure who is not only perceived by himself and others as tragic in the 1960s and 1970s but who holds to the unlivability of intersex identity in the twenty-first century. The textual strategies the novel deploys may reflect the difficulties of living with a "'disqualified' identity," but they also affirm the validity of that disqualification. In a consideration of *Middlesex*, Thea Hillman, Board Chair of the Intersex Society of America, notes:

> People with intersex continue to be used to satisfy the interests of others: as scientific specimens, as naked teaching models for medical students, as literary metaphors, as gags for popular sitcoms, and lastly—where we at least might get a cut of the profits!—as circus freaks and peep show attractions. (n. pag.)

Cal is used in many of these ways in *Middlesex*. My argument in this article is that, while the novel may be defended for bringing to light the exploitation of intersex people, the metaphors and inter-textual references it uses suggest that it is also complicit with that exploitation.

Importantly, the negative representation of Cal is inconsistent with that of other boundary-crossers in the novel. In many other respects, *Middlesex* does appear to live up to the promise of its title by celebrating the transgression of boundaries and affirming ambiguous states of being. For example, through emigration and immigration, geographical and temporal borders are crossed, connecting modern America to Europe's past and creating multi-identified citizens: Cal's Greek grand-

parents, Desdemona and Lefty, escape civil war in their home nation of Turkey and become American by pretending to be French. Other characters who cross boundaries of sexuality and race include Lina, Cal's great-aunt, who is a lesbian and Jimmy Zizmo, his great-uncle, who is mixed-race. Hybridity is reflected in the novel's narrative strategy, too, which subverts the boundary between first- and third-person narration: Cal is an omniscient, sometimes unreliable, first-person narrator who has detailed knowledge of events that he did not witness, presenting the thoughts and emotions as well as the actions of the two preceding generations of his family. Generically, too, the novel defies categorization: Eugenides has described it as a "hybrid" text that is simultaneously an "immigrant saga," a "third-person epic" and a "first-person coming-of-age tale" (Foer). A review in the *The New York Observer* also highlights the text's diverse narrative strategies: "Map [the novel's] genome and you'll find ancestors as diverse as the case study, the immigrant saga and the sitcom" (Begley). Transgression and hybridity thus populate and shape the novel, both in its content and its form.

The novel's appreciation of boundary-crossing, however, does not extend to its intersex narrator. Tracy Hargreaves argues that *Middlesex* insists upon "the cultural and psychic necessity to have one gendered and sexual identity, not two, rather than [offering] an exploratory fantasy of speculating what it might be like to have or be both" (2). Samuel Cohen also notes, in his discussion of endings in contemporary historical fiction, that "in the end, the 'middle' of [the novel's] title, which it had so promisingly staked out as its territory early on, is abandoned" (384). These perceptions of *Middlesex* as unsympathetic to sex/gender ambiguity are confirmed by the strategies that Eugenides employs to link Cal's intersexuality to monstrosity. For example, his intersex status is caused by sibling incest, something often perceived as deeply transgressive even when consensual. Cal's condition, "5-alpha reductase deficiency," is not the only, and by no means the most common cause of intersexuality, but it is the only form emphatically linked to incest. Further, "5-alpha" is extremely rare, historically associated with consanguineous relationships in a few isolated communities (principally New Guinea and the Dominican Republic). It is almost certainly the

most dramatic manifestation of intersexuality, since "5-alpha" appears to cause female children to make a sudden transformation to male at puberty. Desdemona and Lefty (Cal's grandparents) are siblings, descendents of generations of closely-related people from a small village on Mount Olympus. When Desdemona finally reveals to Cal that her husband is also her brother, she describes the symptoms of "5-alpha": "My mother, she use to tell me something funny …. In the village, long time ago, they use to have sometimes babies who were looking like girls. Then—fifteen, sixteen—they are looking like boys! My mother tell me this but I never believe" (526). While the transformation associated with "5-alpha" mirrors the boundary-crossing theme of the novel, Cal's difference is unequivocally, needlessly and implausibly (given the relative rarity of "5-alpha") connected to a prohibited sexual act. Although his grandparents are presented sympathetically, I contend that their incestuous relationship introduces inescapable moral ambiguity into *Middlesex*, thus compromising its potentially positive representation of intersexuality. The implication is that Cal is flawed because he is the product of a transgressive act. He is further linked to his antecedents in that his quest for normalcy—passing as unambiguously male—mirrors that of his grandparents' attempt to pass as people related only by marriage, rather than by blood. Their relationship is a secret that torments Desdemona, and a mystery which Lefty threatens unwittingly to reveal as he declines into dementia late in life. Cal is, then, the embodiment of something that cannot be spoken and his life is a struggle with the consequences of his grandparents' transgression.

Eugenides claims that his aim in *Middlesex* is to make use of "mythological connections without making the character a myth" (Bedell), suggesting that he wants to make Cal a believable, human figure who counters the invisibility and misrepresentation typically associated with intersexuality. Nevertheless, the monstrosity suggested by incest is underlined by the novel's use of Greek mythology, which aligns Cal with tragic mythological figures: Hermaphroditus, Tiresias, and the Minotaur. Such tropes are, however, never deployed in relation to other "deviant" characters. For example, Lefty and Desdemona are not presented as tragic or monstrous, despite the many catastrophic examples

of incest in Greek myth: most famously, Oedipus marries his mother Jocasta with disastrous consequences and Adonis is the product of incestuous relations between Theias and his daughter Smyrna, whose name is given to the besieged city from which Lefty and Desdemona escape, underlining the connections between them. Likewise, Aunt Lina's lesbianism is never linked to tragic Sapphism, although Sappho is often described as committing suicide over a love affair with a boatman. Similarly, Uncle Jimmy's multiple identities (first a gangster and later the founder of the Nation of Islam) are not aligned with the hybrid (half human, half animal/bird/tree), disguised or trickster figures found in myth. By contrast, Cal's similarity to mythological monsters is made absolutely explicit.

By persistently using the term "hermaphrodite," rather than "intersex," Eugenides invokes the myth of Hermaphroditus from which the term derives. A beautiful young man, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, is pursued by a nymph named Salmacis who begs the Gods to unite her with him. The Gods literally combine Salmacis with the object of her desire and Hermaphroditus—whose name already suggests a blend of male and female, being a combination of his parents' names—suddenly becomes a person of dual sex, a fate he considers a disaster. The female has (albeit unintentionally) thwarted the male's freedom to be unequivocally male and Hermaphroditus curses the site of their meeting. Based on this origin story, the hermaphrodite's lot is miserable, associated with disempowerment, the theft of identity and an unhappy dual existence. In addition, the term "hermaphrodite" may be deemed problematic because it alludes to an impossible state of being: no-one can be equally male and female and the preferred term "intersex" indicates a blended rather than divided state. While the modern term might indicate the possibility of redefining sexual ambivalence, Cal is associated in the novel with the mythic term and all it connotes. His connection to this tragic figure is confirmed by his performance as "Hermaphroditus" in a sex show at the age of fourteen, just as he is beginning his female to male transition.

The mythological story of Tiresias, who also lived as both male and female, is another example of hybridity represented as punishment. Before her apparent transformation into Cal, and in a state of confusion

about her identity, Calliope is cast as Tiresias in her school play. Like Tiresias, Cal's indeterminate state renders him "Other;" as an adult, he rejects rather than celebrates his duality, seeking to project instead an unambiguously male identity, asserting that he is "not androgynous in the least" (41). Francisco Collado-Rodriguez notes a further connection in that, like Tiresias, who could prophesy the future, Cal has impossible insight into the past (76). Despite these prophetic abilities, Tiresias's changed condition is a penalty, as in the myth of Hermaphroditus, confirming the negative associations of twin identity. In addition, Tiresias's fate is linked, like Cal's, to sex, since the trigger for his transformations from male to female (and back) is said to be the sight of snakes mating. As with Hermaphroditus, the novel invokes damaging images of transgender figures from the past to show the legacy that queer subjects are forced to contend with in the present. In so doing, however, it risks implying that the distant past is the only possible source of queer models and that the tragedy with which they are associated is an inevitable, rather than merely possible, aspect of intersex experience.

The key example in Greek myth of duality caused by a monstrous sexual union is one that is especially relevant to *Middlesex*: the Minotaur, a hybrid figure with a physical burden that is the product of a transgressive act by his mother. With the body of a man and the head and shoulders of a bull, the Minotaur was the child of Pasiphae, who was cursed with infatuation for a bull that drove her to offer herself to it for sex in a wooden contraption that disguised her as a cow (Graves 293). The child of this union, a ferocious killer, was imprisoned in a labyrinth. The connection between Cal and the Minotaur is emphasized by the role that the myth plays in the conception of Cal's father. Desdemona fully consents to her relationship with her brother but fears giving birth to a damaged baby, so she avoids sex with him. However, not long after they arrive in Detroit, the couple attend a theatrical show based on the story of the Minotaur. Expecting a serious Greek drama they are offered instead a burlesque of partially-dressed girls dragged away for consumption by the Minotaur, a "pure movie monster" (108). Later, aroused by these scenes, Desdemona and Lefty have sex, which results in pregnancy. For Desdemona this experience is like a frightening entrapment in a

maze, "stumbling over the bones of women who had passed this way before her" (113), an image that evokes the horrors of the Minotaur's prison. Narrating these events, Cal comments, "Parents are supposed to pass down physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates" (109). This suggests that the sexual act inspired by the Minotaur will result in a heritage for Cal that includes the Minotaur's unhappy fate as a reviled, dual-identified brute.

The Minotaur is associated with thread, since it is the cause of his death: young people were sacrificed to the monster until he was slain by Theseus, aided by the Minotaur's half-sister, Ariadne, who supplied Theseus with a ball of thread to help him navigate the labyrinth. The motif of thread runs through the novel, emphasizing that Cal is a product of his ancestors' transgressions and reiterating his connection to the Minotaur. Desdemona cultivates silk, both on Mount Olympus and later in America when she is temporarily employed by the newly-established Nation of Islam. Desdemona's silk thread, then, takes her across boundaries of place and race, representing both the narrative itself and the flawed genetic thread that links her to her grandchild Cal. This connection is underscored by the image of the departing ship that takes Desdemona and Lefty from Europe to America: as it leaves the dock, balls of thread connecting those on board to those left behind onshore unravel, filling the air with lines which symbolize the ties of ethnic origin that are stretched and broken by the process of migration. Mulberry leaves, which feed silk worms, grow both on Mount Olympus and in the garden of Cal's home in Middlesex, Detroit. At the novel's close, however, the mulberry tree in Middlesex is bare of leaves, suggesting that the link between the European legacy and America is finally broken: it is no longer possible to make threads of silk or, by implication, of narrative. The end of narrative is appropriate for the novel's closing pages, of course, but it also insinuates that Cal's life of indeterminacy, created by his connection to his past, has ended now that he has transitioned to male. While this might be deemed a positive ending for the novel, it is undermined by the reader's knowledge of Cal's troubled adult life, which has been revealed in fragments across the text.

Although Cal's narration reaches back through decades before he was born, and despite his Tiresian prophetic abilities, the novel has a significant gap. Between the closing scene, when Cal is fourteen, and the start of his narration at the age of forty-one, only glimpses of his life as an adult are offered, many of them unhappy memories. The faltering in Cal's story beyond the age of fourteen associates his later life with invisibility and difficulty: having detailed the lives of his ancestors, he falls into silence as his adulthood begins, suggesting that it—or more, accurately, its intersexual aspect—is unspeakable. Indeed, Cal makes clear that it is the urge to tell the story of his family and their legacy, not his own story, that finally brings him back into voice twenty-five years later: "before it's too late I want to get it down for good: this roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time" (4). This breakdown in narrative continuity, symbolized by the image of broken thread, links Cal to his Greek heritage but suggests that both the connection and Cal are damaged.

Socially-condemned desire shapes Cal's life and his first experience of love reiterates his similarity to the tragic figure of the Minotaur. Although her teenage affair with the girl known only as the "Obscure Object" is not complicated by knowledge of Cal's intersex identity, Callie understands the relationship to be a sexual transgression (lesbian) and therefore, she believes, doomed to fail. The "Obscure Object" pseudonym that Cal applies retrospectively refers to Luis Bunuel's 1977 film *That Obscure Object of Desire*, a story of thwarted love which, evoking another image of duality, features two different actresses playing the same character. The young Calliope, musing (appropriately, given that she is named after the Greek Muse of poetry) on her hopeless love for the Obscure Object, seeks refuge in the basement bathroom at school, suggesting the Minotaur's maze; she thinks that she "hid[es] from the world a knowledge she didn't quite understand herself … in this subterranean realm" (329). The occasional use of the third person in the narrative underscores the adult male Cal's sense of dissociation from his early incarnation as a girl, but as an adult, Cal again describes himself as Minotaur-like, "wandering in the maze these many years, shut away from sight. And from love, too" (107). This suggests both his invisibility as an intersex person and what he believes to be the unspeakability

of his condition, which makes it impossible for him to form intimate relationships. The adult Cal presents himself as "possessed" by the girl he was raised to be, finding himself occasionally making feminine gestures: "Calliope surfaces … like a childhood speech impediment" (41), a simile suggesting that his female aspect, like the Minotaur's animal element, is a disability or flaw. Cal has been socialized to understand himself as monstrous, but the novel's persistent invocation of the tropes of Greek myth suggests collusion with exactly the sense of Otherness that haunts him.

Reflecting Leslie Fiedler's view that "All freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic" (137), Cal's monstrosity is also suggested by his performance as the "Special Attraction The God Hermaphroditus ½ Man ½ Woman No Gimmick! The Real McCoy!" (481) at the "Sixty-Niners" sex club in San Francisco in 1974, when he is fourteen. Appropriately, San Francisco, rather than being associated with divisions of race and class as Cal's home town of Detroit came to be (the city's race riots of 1967 are detailed in the "Opa!" chapter in *Middlesex*), is characterized by the blurring and breaking of sexual boundaries. Cal's performance at Sixty-Niners is effectively that of a performer in a freak show: "Hermaphrodites have always been standard attractions at circuses and fairs," claims Fiedler, because they are "truly archetypal monstrosities" (141), due both to their mythic connections and their challenge to conservative ideals of sexual difference. Cal swims naked in a tank of water, displaying his ambiguous genitals for paying customers in peepshow booths. Much about this performance (its advertising posters, the voice-over that accompanies it—"bodies fused, male into female, female into male" [491]—the blatant display of corporeal difference) echoes the tropes of the freak shows seen regularly in the United States in the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries. Rosemarie Garland Thomson asserts that the freak show was embraced by American society in this period—the beginning of modernity—because in the context of an increasingly ethnically-diverse population it "bonded a sundering polity in a collective act of looking" (4). As the fragmenting effects of modernity created a divided population, the freak show united its audience in a shared sense of sameness as they viewed together bodies

that represented difference, unstable boundaries, excess or absence. The disrupted communities of modern America came to rely on appearance, "rather than kinship or local membership" (Garland Thomson 12), to indicate social status and belonging, and the popularity of the freak show exemplified this collective reliance at its most extreme. In the show at "Sixty-Niners," Cal's ambiguous body appeals to heterosexual and gay men and lesbians; thus, the sex show, like the freak show, unites an otherwise diverse audience.

The "enfreakment" of Cal that begins with his association with mythic monsters is underscored by the novel's deployment of freak show tropes elsewhere in the novel. For example, posters advertising freak shows and highlighting particular exhibits would make grand claims about the causes of the individual's difference and offer detailed biographies as evidence that the freak was genuine. This strategy of written and oral "spiel" is echoed in *Middlesex*'s detailed history of Cal's family, which traces the journey of the recessive gene that caused his intersex status and links it to a transgressive act. Hybrid freaks, such as those who seemed to combine human and animal traits, were often explained by stories which linked their freakishness to the circumstances of their conception. Thus, a freak known as the "Lion Woman" was accompanied by a spiel which explained that her mother was attacked by lions which were then killed by her father; John Merrick (known as the "Elephant Man") attributed his condition to his mother being knocked down by an elephant at a circus just before he was born. This device of origin stories echoes both the erotic Minotaur images that provoke Lefty and Desdemona to conceive Cal's father and Cal's sense that he inherits the Minotaur's hopeless, hybrid fate.

While the novel's use of myth and freak show tropes conveys Cal's monstrosity, echoes in the text of the strategies used to represent intersex subjects in medical discourse also pathologize him. The presentation of Cal's body in the sex show evokes the typical medical images of hermaphrodites which communicate that to be the owner of an ambiguously-sexed body is shameful: the genitals of the intersex person are the subject of meticulous drawings or photographs but their faces are never represented; in later photographs, a bag is often placed over the subject's

head.[1] While ostensibly protecting the subject's right to privacy, these images—like the Greek myths—communicate strongly to the viewer that to occupy a boundary between sexes is a hideous fate. Unlike the dual-sexed members of freak shows, who displayed their ambiguity via clothing, Cal is naked at "Sixty-Niners." He also keeps his head out of the audience's view, making him as anonymous as the intersex subjects of medical textbooks. Like them, he has no direct ownership of his body, and this similar presentation suggests that his sexual hybridity is appalling rather than marvellous for him, the viewer in the club, and the reader. The novel thus vacillates between critiquing the injustices experienced by those deemed "Other" and reproducing images of exploitation and prejudice for consumption.

The text's ambiguous position between appraisal and reproduction is confirmed by Cal's response to his experiences at "Sixty-Niners." Although freak shows typically pathologize difference and assert a hierarchy between viewer and viewed, Cal claims to feel a new sense of empowerment. On a single occasion he immerses his head in the water tank and opens his eyes: "I saw the faces looking back at me and I saw that they were not appalled. … It was *therapeutic*. … Shame over having a body unlike other bodies was passing away. The monster feeling was fading" (494). However, Cal's claim is undermined by what the reader already knows: his work at "Sixty-Niners" can only be undertaken in a state of intoxication and with a consequent dissociation from his scrutinized body. Further, the act of looking back at his audience is a voiceless response to its collective gaze that does nothing to destabilize the power relation between subject and object. Indeed, the "monster feeling," far from "fading," reasserts itself throughout his adult life, causing a string of failed relationships and an endless migration around the world that reflects his sense of unbelonging. Thus, the narrative consistently undermines a positive representation of intersexuality by implicitly contradicting the validity of Cal's own assertions.

It could be argued that by allowing Cal to tell his own story *Middlesex* challenges the traditional silence associated with difference, in which the "Other" is kept voiceless by the dominant order. Nonetheless, a comparison with freak shows is again informative: the exhibited figures did

not speak but were spoken for by showmen, and the published autobiographies of freaks were invariably ghost-written. As Fiedler notes, such life-stories were "a part of the act rather than a way of seeing beyond it" (274), intensifying the mythification of the person rather than dispelling mystery. The novel's recurring use of the tropes of myth and enfreakment are thus, to use Fielder's terms, part of its act, running counter to Cal's voice and undermining the text's status as an apparent challenge to—a way of "seeing beyond"—conventional ideas about the unspeakability of intersex experience.

Alice Dreger and Anne Fausto-Sterling both note that the priority in the treatment of intersex people in Europe and the USA since the nineteenth century has been to eradicate their ambiguity by making their bodies—through drug treatment and surgical intervention—fit whatever is deemed to be the gender norm in a given place and moment.[2] Anxieties around intersex bodies are at least partially related to antipathy towards same-sex desire, a possibility that is raised by an ambiguously-sexed body. Thus, although the bodies and perceptions of intersex people may actively challenge and destabilize the conventional boundary between female and male, and between homosexual and heterosexual, they have not in recent decades been permitted to embody that challenge long-term, that is, into adulthood. Wherever possible, the medical establishment "treats" (that is, attempts to eradicate all signs of) intersexuality as soon after birth as possible, usually on the unacknowledged grounds of social stability rather than medical need. Dreger attributes such acts to the medical establishment's understanding of the disruptive power of intersexuality, a condition that "does not threaten the patient's life, but rather the patient's culture" (197). As medical science has developed, so techniques for identifying and treating sexual ambiguity have been refined, with the result that intersexuality has been rendered increasingly invisible. That is not to say that its occurrence has been eradicated, since it is relatively common, nor that treatment has been perfected, since many intersexuals suffer a range of physical problems as a result of the treatment that claims to "cure" them.[3] Such medical interventions do mean that the challenges intersexual people pose to heteronormativity is distinctly muted: rather than reshape per-

ceptions of what is normal, intersexuals are required to accommodate social norms.

Middlesex does criticize modern medicine's response to intersexuality through Cal's treatment at Dr Peter Luce's "Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic" in New York, but the novel nevertheless remains complicit with its epistemologies. Luce's methods are clearly presented as abusive and ineffective: Cal is examined, photographed and insensitively put on display in a manner reminiscent of both the freak show and the practices of nineteenth-century sexologists. He is also shown pornography and clumsily quizzed about his sexual desires. However, this treatment provokes Cal to accept Luce's binary model of sex/gender: he rejects two viable queer identities—lesbian and intersex—in favour of a yearning for unequivocal heterosexual maleness. While his panicked escape from Luce's clinic results in a trans-American (and trans-gender) journey from New York to San Francisco that mimics and queers the archetypal male role of West-bound pioneer, Cal's aim is to arrive in San Francisco a boy, thus securing his literal and metaphorical distance from the terrifying hermaphroditism that he has seen defined by the *Webster's Dictionary* in the New York Public Library. Thus, while the novel critiques the brutal treatment of intersex subjects by the medical profession, its implicit confirmation of a binary sex/gender model effectively validates that treatment.

Despite his wishes, Cal's body does not conform to the conventions of maleness and so his transformation from girl to boy is never quite complete. His experiences at the age of fourteen are emblematic of his whole life. The impossibility of absolute female-to-male transition is confirmed by the comments of the gang of boys he meets in San Francisco who read Cal as male but tease, "you throw like a girl, man" (471), a phrase that encapsulates his duality. Cal senses that once he is living as a boy he is "like an immigrant, putting on airs, who runs into someone from the old country" (471). When he encounters teenaged girls, the incident underlines his failure to assimilate and pass as male. The "immigrant" simile connects national and gender boundary-crossing and is redolent of Lefty and Desdemona's more successful migratory journey across moral and national boundaries. Cal's self-fashioning as male

is further complicated by his new role at "Sixty-Niners," which relies for effect on the performance of his liminal, rather than his masculine qualities. Ultimately, though, it is Cal's persistent rejection of ambiguity which ensures that even in his new life he will continue to see himself as a "synonym" for "monster," since his adulthood is characterized by a perceived failure to be male rather than the successful adoption of an intersex identity. The novel resists presenting Cal as content with ambiguity and consistently affirms his discomfort with intersexuality in its imagery of mythic beasts and sideshow freaks.

Zachary Sifuentes agrees that Cal's male-identification "exposes itself as a misinformed, compulsory participation in the logic of sex/gender/desire" (154). Despite his membership of the Intersex Society of North America, the adult Cal rationalizes his rejection of an intersex identity on the grounds that he is not a "political person" (106). Instead, he lives as a man, armouring himself against any implication of ambiguity with extreme signifiers of masculinity, which he describes as the necessary "overcompensation" (41) of cigars, double-breasted suits, and developed muscles. Despite his efforts, however, Cal does have an ambiguous body and dare not reveal the contents of his "discreet boxer shorts" (107) to any potential lover, this part of his anatomy being presented as the sole evidence of his "third sex" status. His self-image is driven by what he defines as a key signifier of masculinity, sexual desire for women, and he believes that a person with such desires must learn to live as a man, rather than affirming the queer possibilities of living with an ambiguously-sexed body.

While the novel, by associating intersexuality with monstrousness and freakery, seems to suggest that he has made the correct decision, Eugenides persistently figures Cal as a vulnerable and isolated person living alone in Europe (returned to the location of his mythic and ancestral heritage and in exile from the United States), wandering like Odysseus but without any promise of home. The simultaneous invocation and denial of ambiguity that Cal exemplifies is symbolized by the location from which he offers his retrospective narrative, Berlin. As a city historically associated with division and duality, Berlin could be read as a positive metaphor: Cal's decision to live there might suggest

comfort with inbetweenness. However, it is made clear that Cal lives in post-reunification Berlin, so any sense of a divided past—for Cal and for the city—has been replaced with a newly whole, coherent "self." Similarly, Cal's employer, the Foreign Service is "split into two parts," but Cal works in only one, the "box of Amerika Haus" (40), whose plain architecture mirrors Cal's self-presentation as unequivocally masculine.

As an ambiguously-sexed figure, Cal represents what Judith Butler terms an "unthinkable, abject, unlivable" body, one who is a part of "the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the [intelligible] domain as the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside" (xi). The "intelligible" body reviles but relies upon the ambiguous body to be the "Other" against which it may define itself. Elizabeth Grosz mirrors Butler's comments in her work on freaks, noting that "the freak is an *ambiguous* being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life. Freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self definition" (57). Speaking specifically of intersex experience, Alice Dreger uses comparable terms, contending that "a 'hermaphroditic' body raises doubts not just about the particular body in question, but about all bodies" (6). Thus, the hermaphroditic or intersex body destabilizes the viewer's sense of self even as s/he affirms that same viewer's normalcy. Little wonder that such a challenge to the stability of social and sexual binaries might be deemed both monstrous and compelling. By persistently exposing Cal's vulnerabilities and difference throughout his long narrative, associating him with the grotesque and failing to normalize him while it sanctions other boundary-crossers, *Middlesex* offers its readers the same opportunity to view the "Other" from a safe distance and find reassurance.

In the context of a heteropatriarchal culture dependent upon binary categories of sex, gender and desire, *Middlesex* may be read as a valuable attempt to make visible a lived experience that is rarely represented beyond medical textbooks and the few memoirs of intersex people. It might be argued that the novel, through its descriptions of Cal's negative self-perceptions and experiences, acknowledges the ways in which

intersex people have been represented and understood in the past—as dysfunctional monsters—and seeks to counter that depiction. However, Eugenides's insistence on representing a particularly rare form of intersexuality, attributed to a sexual union that many consider transgressive, undermines this positive effect. The use of figures from Greek myth to describe Cal is a strategy not deployed in the representation of other boundary-crossing figures in the text, thus implying that he is both more monstrous than they are and more tragic. Finally, Cal's claim that he is healed by his appearance in a sex show seems flimsy given other evidence about his unhappy life. By deploying the tropes of the freak show Eugenides affirms Cal's status as a freak for the audience within and outside the novel, offering him up for consumption in order to confirm the viewer/reader's own sense of normalcy. Ultimately, then, *Middlesex* presents a wide-ranging narrative that makes important associations between ethnic, racial and sexual otherness, explores the connections between past and present, and asserts the role that European history and culture plays in shaping contemporary America. All of these contribute to the novel's status as a Pulitzer Prize winner, reflecting as it does upon the experience of American society, one that is built upon, yet remains deeply troubled by, differences of all kinds. In pursuing these themes, however, the novel in some respects sacrifices its central character, who lives in an exile that is both self- and socially-imposed. Despite its picture of a teeming, diverse America, Cal is consistently alone in *Middlesex*, belonging to no sexual or gender, national or ethnic community, liminal in every respect. Despite his claim to be happy with an in-between state in the novel's closing pages, Cal persistently communicates discomfort with his disunited state, always seeking to escape it, and his negative self-perception is affirmed rather than countered by the novel's representation of him as a "synonym" for "MONSTER."

Notes

1 See, for example, images in Dreger 21, 48–9.

2 See Dreger 180-201 and Fausto-Sterling 45–77.

3 Dreger estimates that intersexuality is "about as common as … cystic fibrosis … and Down syndrome" and that "several thousand medically defined 'intersexuals' [are] born in the United States each year" (43).

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