

Of Self and Country: U.S. Politics, Cultural Hybridity, and Ambivalent Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*

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Despite negative interpretations coming from Marxist critics like Fredric Jameson¹ and the implications of cultural relativism associated with it,² Postmodernism represented a powerful cultural shift that, even if commodified, has produced profound ideological effects, among which remain demands for a more egalitarian society. Within the U.S. in the 1960s, the first wave of postmodernist artists and thinkers openly demanded a type of political tolerance that, rooted in a defense of gender and racial hybridity, could put an end to the ideological implications that, in practical terms, had changed John de Crèvecoeur's "melting pot" metaphor into an Anglocentric assimilationist strategy.³ Still now, this defense of progressive political beliefs in the United States strongly resists the successive attacks that have been coming from the New Right and its most influential representatives, presidents Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush.

In the field of creative literature, ideological demands for hybridity have surged in different cultural periods, frequently associated with particular strategies—for example, the use of the conceit that characterized seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. The works of writers as influential as Shakespeare, Donne, the pre-romantic Blake, or the modernist T. S. Eliot offer clear examples of this emphasis on the blending of disparate experiences into new surprising metaphors and rhetorical devices. In the field of prose narrative, the appearance of a period that clearly favored the aesthetic and ideological hybrid took longer to emerge, probably due to its own "prosaic" quality. In U.S. fiction, the uncertainties of Romanticism were followed by one of the epochs where once again ambiguity and hybridity became remarkable ideological icons that later critics interpreted as social symptoms of the necessity to escape from the pragmatism of bourgeois official discourse. In Hawthorne's, Poe's, or Melville's pages we can recognize a sustained pull towards uncertainty, undifferentiation,

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¹ *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

² See Christopher Norris, *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

³ See Ana M. Manzanás and Jesús Benito, eds., *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003) 60.

and ideological fuzziness that strongly contests the categorical arguments of the advocates of the Enlightenment project.⁴ Inheritors of this tendency to pursue the blurring of categorical limits were many modernist writers, such as T. S. Eliot, Joyce, or Faulkner, whose steps were later followed by postmodernist “fabulators”—as critic Robert Scholes denominated them⁵—such as Barth, Vonnegut, or Pynchon. These writers insistently carried out parodic contestations of traditional and categorical master narratives, overtly meant to blur the boundaries between fiction and factuality.

During the eighties and the nineties, postmodernist works were in their turn contested by the newer aesthetics of dirty realism and minimalism. In the works of writers such as Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Stephen Dixon, U.S. society was depicted as the space of the valueless posthuman self, devoid of the protective, even if patriarchal, umbrella of humanism. These minimalist characters were frustrated beings who lived boring lives and lacked transcendental values and, correspondingly, their existence was presented in bare, apparently simple, realist literary terms.⁶

However, more recently a younger generation of white North American writers has emerged that seems to continue along the anticategorical path reopened by their famous postmodernist predecessors forty years ago and continued by so-called “ethnic writers.” Names such as David Foster Wallace, Chuck Palahniuk, or Jeffrey Eugenides can be linked not only to the first wave of postmodernism. They are also related to an ancient literary tradition that seeks to go beyond the apparent world of categorical forms and offer an interpretation of life that may surpass one of the main pillars of categorical thinking: Aristotle’s Law of the Excluded Middle. With this principle, the influential Greek philosopher established the theoretical bases for a type of dual thinking that is rooted in his discussion of categories. It is mainly in Book VII of his *Metaphysics* and in his treatise *Categories*⁷ that the critical foundations of this politically dangerous Law become firmly established. In part five of the *Categories*, Aristotle affirms that “while remaining numerically one and the same,” substance is the only principle “capable of admitting contrary qualities.” Things other than substance do not possess this mark. This statement leads Aristotle to proclaim, “one and the same color cannot be white and black. Nor can the same one action be good and bad: this law holds good with everything that is not substance.”

⁴ See Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981).

⁵ Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). See also R. Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

⁶ See Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, “Minimalism vs. Postmodernism in Contemporary American Fiction,” *Neohelicon* 28.1 (2001): 129–43. See also, Chuck Palahniuk, *Stranger Than Fiction* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) 141–46.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, and Aristotle, *Categories*, trans. E. M. Edghill, provided by the Internet Classics Archive. On line at <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.mb.txt>> and <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/categories.mb.txt>>.

Later on in *Categories* the philosopher reminds readers, in what was to be one of the basic pillars of the Western metaphysics, that even substance cannot admit contrary qualities *at one and the same time*. The rigidity of this norm became extremely influential in the classical understanding of the physical world⁸ and was to offer racism a strong philosophical support. Simply stated, according to Aristotle's argumentation, a mixture of white and black colors cannot exist, a notion that proved to be socially true for many nonwhite people living in the Western world.

Through the centuries, many philosophers and artists have denounced the implications of Aristotle's Law and contested the categorical agendas that many political leaders effectually based on it. Jeffrey Eugenides's second novel, *Middlesex*⁹ (2002)—winner of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction—may be singled out as an example of the type of contemporary literature that sides with the hybrid in the ideological struggle against the artificial limits imposed by categorical thinking and supported by the American New Right. I contend in this essay that Eugenides's novel recuperates the anticategorical line of earlier postmodern fiction, specifically of the type that Linda Hutcheon termed "historiographic metafiction,"¹⁰ and that this recuperation facilitates the existence of an ethical impulse centered on a contestation of right-wing politics and on the prevalence of hybridity over the categorical interpretation of life that historically characterizes patriarchal political regimes.

In order to carry out his otherwise overabundant critique, Eugenides offers in his novel a kaleidoscopic revision of twentieth-century U.S. history that compels him to reinterpret the American Dream. Following a double critical line of contemporary border and queer views,¹¹ as well as updated discoveries in evolutionary biology—explicitly presented in the book—the author draws a sustained parallelism between race identity, and gender and sex identity. By problematizing traditional binaries related to race, gender, and sex definition, his novel finally demands the opening of a borderland or "third space" where mixed races and intersex identities can coexist. Eugenides's M.A. degree in Creative Writing (Stanford, 1986) and his life as a contemporary American expatriate in Germany give an indication of his critical and political views. They help us to understand his interest in describing uncanny spaces that open to a reality

⁸ See Robert Nadeau, *Readings from The New Book On Nature: Physics and Metaphysics in the Modern Novel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). See also Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, "Trespassing Limits: Pynchon's Irony and the Law of the Excluded Middle," *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 24.3 (1999): 471–503.

⁹ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹¹ Cf. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

saturated by modernist anthropology motifs, magical realism, and matriarchal notions. All of these aspects are already present in his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993).

The political aims of *Middlesex* strategically comprise a clever experiment in narrative voice and a game with the number two, as well as a thematic insistence on the necessity to fill the gap between the two elements in any given binary. In keeping with this, I will center my analysis of the book mainly on the following issues: the nature of the narrative voice within the general structure of the novel, the critique of the American Dream, and the final nonresolution of the narrator's plight as a sexually hybrid person within the context of what might be called our contemporary posthuman culture. Furthermore, from an academic perspective, the narrator's figure and narrative approach stand out as the epitomic symbol of the most influential critical schools on gender and sex identity but also of some of the most popular genres deployed in the history of the twentieth-century American novel. *Middlesex* moves from being mostly a Greek-American contemporary epic in Books One and Two to a modernist bildungsroman, or novel of experience, in Book Three. However, this narrative genre gradually hybridizes into a beatnik story in Book Four, which comes to an end after some thrilling pages written in the mood of the detective genre. Correspondingly, in the last two books of the novel the protagonist's undefined gender and sexual identities become a bodily extension of the hybrid racial condition of all her/his family—and of all immigrant families who went to the new promised land of America or who were already there when the first Anglo-Saxon colonists arrived.

As I hope to demonstrate, the literary result is a huge artifact written in the mode of historiographic metafiction. Departing from trendy academicism, the author saturates his protagonist's story with notions and strategies that enhance the hybrid nature of both, life in general and human identity in particular.

The novel features a narrator as protagonist, Cal (previously Calliope), who literarily embodies sex and gender middle grounds: she/he is a male pseudo-hermaphrodite or, more precisely, somebody who was born apparently a girl, was subsequently brought up as such, but finally underwent a painful process of physical, psychic, and cultural transformation that turned her/him into what society considers to be a man. The narrator offers an extensive scientific report that may account for these shifts in sex and gender. However, science cannot fully explain the existence of an uncertain and unstable gender-sex identity that, echoing Judith Butler's notion of performativity, does not allow for any sense of closure. "I'm not androgynous in the least," the narrator says, "5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome allows for normal biosynthesis and peripheral action of testosterone, in utero, neonatally, and in puberty. In other words, I operate in society as a man. I use the men's room. Never the urinals, always the stalls.... I've lived more than half my life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally. When Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech

impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her nails. It's a little like being possessed. She rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe" (41–42).

Yet, far from being a mere scientific narrative, Eugenides's second novel becomes a profusely symbolic artifact aimed at denouncing categorical thinking and its social consequences of tribal patriotism, imperialism, racism, and sexual and gender discrimination. In order to develop this ideological attack, Eugenides constructs the figure of Cal as a bodily and narratorial space where different interpretations meet. She/he is narrator and character, Greek and American, woman and man. As such, in her/him also collide the patriarchal perspective that sees life in terms of historical progression and the matriarchal understanding of life in cyclical terms (68, 96, 209), a fusion that allows the novelist to connect old modernist anthropology with modern feminist views.¹² In sum, Eugenides resorts to a variety of narrative strategies, themes, and motifs that he has taken from an extensive anticategorical literary tradition. His sources go back to classical Greece and extend up to postmodernist times: to the works of the abovementioned fabulists, the resurgence of the feminist movement, and the different contemporary realisms carried out by the so-called "ethnic writers."

Cal, the narrator and protagonist, takes his (previously "her") name from Calliope, the Greek muse of epic poetry, a literary ancestor clearly associated with her/his own narrative, which is eminently epic, especially in the first two hundred pages of the book. This first part of the novel (Books One and Two) takes the form of a historiographic metafictional account. It extends from the fortunes of the Smyrna Greeks and their massacre at the hands of the Turks in 1922 to the lives of some of them and their siblings in the United States, until the birth of the protagonist takes place in 1960. Cal announces her/his own birth at the beginning of the narrative but then, echoing the strategies of Sterne's narrator Tristram Shandy, she/he postpones the telling of her/his own story almost till the middle of the book—from page 215 onwards. The narrator openly declares that, like the mythical Tiresias, she/he knows both sexes (1), and it comes as no surprise that, like the seer, Cal is gifted with narrative omniscience. The reference to the mythical figure clearly points to the book's indebtedness to *The Waste Land* and ultimately to the fact that *Middlesex* stands at the end of a long literary tradition that, as T. S. Eliot himself argued, seeks the reunion of reason and feeling, and the end of a categorical dissociation of artistic sensibility.¹³

Cal frequently refers to her/his omniscience, which she/he boastfully equates with supernatural knowledge in comments such as: "These scenes ran through my mother's mind during the interminable Sunday service" (13). This

¹² See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History* (1951). Comp. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 187–213.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966) 287–90.

extraordinary capacity allows the narrator to report on many events and on the thoughts of many characters. At the same time, however, following Tristram Shandy's example, she often recognizes a certain limitation of her/his omniscience in direct addresses to the narratee. Metafictional asides such as the following one are common: "Of course, a narrator in my position (prefatal at the time) can't be entirely sure about any of this" (9). Being like Tiresias, Cal is entitled not only to prescience but also to the use of the grandiose tone of that mythological figure: "I alone, from the private box of my primordial egg, saw what was going on" (206). This peculiar combination of alleged omniscience,¹⁴ literary parody, and eventual uncertainty about some of the facts the narrator reports, may gradually lead readers to conclude Cal's playful unreliability.

The narrator's capacity to see the past and Tiresias's capacity to see the future further recall the literary reference of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, where the narrator also confesses, by the middle of the poem, that she/he is the mythological *blind seer*, stressing her/his paradoxical cognitive (in)capacity. Showing again her/his intertextual playfulness, Cal reminds readers that Smyrna endures today in the stanza from T. S. Eliot's masterpiece where Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, tempts the narrator with a weekend of fun and sex at the Metropole (50). The frame-breaking reference to the real author's name is obviously one more call of attention to the metafictional character of the novel, and readers are systematically impeded from fully believing in Cal's omniscient mood. Eventually, it is Cal her/himself who reaffirms the unreliable character of the narrative by denying her/his previous assertion: "As far as special powers went," she/he confesses, "I didn't seem to have any. A Tiresias I wasn't" (495). In this way, readers are progressively forced to move on textual grounds of undefined quality; real life mixes with the narrator's world, alleged truth with playful incongruence, and the story enters the territory of the cognitive borderlands.

The fact that Cal is at times a playful, unreliable narrator and that apparently she/he does not care much about this condition is also a characteristic shared by one of the uncanny proto-figures of borderland narratives: the double-voiced trickster of Native American fiction.¹⁵ Furthermore, the issue is also a call of attention to the creative and inventive side existing in all narratives, including traditional historiography. *Middlesex* has inherited from earlier postmodernist novels and Native American narratives¹⁶ its open character as an artifact of uncertain historiographic data, therefore inviting its readers to question the ultimate objectivity of any sort of historical writing. However, the book's

¹⁴ See Jonathan Culler, "Omniscience," *Narrative* 12.1 (2004): 22–34.

¹⁵ Dee Horne, *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

¹⁶ On the connections between Native American fiction, magical realism, the figure of the trickster, and postmodernism, see José David Saldívar, "Postmodern Realism," *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 521–41. See also Manzanar and Benito 125–59.

dubious middle ground between historical fact and invented fiction is also enhanced by other strategies that systematically question the limits between the two elements that form any binary while paradoxically postulating the necessity to negotiate historical truth. This paradox brings about one of the most powerful regulative ideas that characterize historiographic metafiction: the reader is invited to think that the “will to fabulate” must be finally overcome by a “will to truth.”¹⁷ That is to say, narrative playfulness must ultimately give way to ethical commitment. In the novel under discussion, Eugenides conveys this message mainly by means of a functional game on the number two, with the critical aim of questioning the categorical bases of patriarchal right-wing discourse. In this sense, the textual *game* has great ideological significance.

An important structural division appears soon: *Middlesex* has a dual plot. Cal the narrator tells the long family history that goes from 1922 to 1975, in retrospect, while in the present the protagonist is living in a formerly divided city, the now reunited Berlin. There she/he is trying to establish a relationship—whose story Cal also narrates—with a Japanese-American woman, another example of race hybridity.

The stylistic emphasis that Eugenides puts on hybridization and middle grounds develops into a powerful ideological strategy every time the narrative deals openly with social and political issues. In Cal’s report, present and past frequently intermingle, just as the former Asia Minor Greek characters that appear in the retrospective narrative—already Euro-Asian hybrids—move to a further intermediate state in which they become Greek-American. However, opposing this hybrid impulse, Cal’s father finally announces his “full Americanness.” He takes such a decision in the middle of the Cyprus crisis of 1974, which places him in overt opposition to his Greek-American friends, frustrated by the assistance the U.S. government has given the Turks against the Greeks. “Don’t be so naïve, Milt,” one of his friends tells him while sipping a Pepsi, “It’s that goddam—sssss—Kissinger. He must have—sssss—made a deal with the Turks” (359). Soon after, the establishment of new NATO bases in Turkey confirms the alliance to seize the northern part of the Mediterranean island. The incident means that Cal’s father, who is described in different occasions as a Republican who believes in the American Dream of material riches, loses his old friends. Such loss of ties with his cultural past and friends comes as a result of his having fallen in the trap of cultural (pseudo-)assimilation propitiated by the old metaphor of the melting pot, a metaphor strongly contested by border and postcolonial critics, who persistently denounce the imperialist behavior that the United States exert against their own minorities.¹⁸

¹⁷ Christina Kotte, *Ethical Dimensions in British Historiographic Metafiction: Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, and Penelope Lively* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001) 99.

¹⁸ See Alfred Arteaga, ed., *An Other Tongue* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), and Manzanos and Benito 49–50.

Furthermore, the author also uses the abovementioned condition of the narrator's playful unreliability to develop his political critique. On several occasions, Cal states that she/he is a nonpolitical person. However, playfulness is then left aside and the reports the narrator makes on historical events together with her/his personal opinions on such matters become not simply political but historically revisionist of the Anglo-Saxon ideological narrative that the colonists imposed on the different minorities existing or immigrating to the United States. Some examples will substantiate my point. Early in the story, Cal confesses, "we hermaphrodites are people like everybody else. And I happen not to be a political person. I don't like groups" (106). Her/his apparent substitution of "political" for "sociable" may give us an indication that for Cal to be political is to be a party member (319), a confusing argument that is probably shared by many. Cal's use of the term "political" is certainly misleading when we realize the nature of the protagonist's ideological opinions and the selection of historical events she/he decides to write about. As poststructuralist criticism has argued for more than thirty years, selection and description are inescapably ideological,¹⁹ and Eugenides's narrator plays abundantly with this notion.

Cal writes from the position of an expatriate whose distancing irony makes her/him share worldviews similar to the ones defended by some expatriate predecessors in real life—modernist artists who, like Ezra Pound or Ernest Hemingway, became very critical of the American way of life. As likely as not, many North American readers will consider the narrator's ideological position as that of a leftist liberal thinker whose personal experiences have forced her/him toward a mistrust of the U.S. status quo. Cal's historical report centers first on the political situation of Asia Minor and the siege of Smyrna in 1922, when the Turks massacred thousands of Greek civilians under the passivity and complicity of the American, British, and other European naval forces (51–62). The narrator "simply" describes what happened, but eventually the descriptions and the selection of events that she/he chooses to report become highly denunciatory of the hypocrisy and many excesses of colonialism.

Gradually, the story becomes a condensed revisionist history of the United States from a postcolonial perspective. In the course of *Middlesex*, Cal reports, in that peculiar "apolitical" manner, on the imperialist ways in which the port authorities mistreated immigrants when entering the United States (73–76). She/he criticizes the Ford "Melting Pot" English School and the firm's political control of its workers (92–105), and also denounces the living conditions that exist in the African-American ghetto of Detroit (140–43). However, the narrator's retrospective and pseudo-omniscient report on her/his family's fortunes up to 1960 also allows Cal to question the categorical political answers coming from

¹⁹ See Hayden White's influential revision of historiography and the alleged objectivity of the historian's work in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

repressed minorities. In what looks like one more playful example of historiographic-metaphorical excess, the narrator concludes that the historical personage W. D. Fard, the actual founder of the Nation of Islam, was indeed her/his uncle Jimmy Zizmo (163). The radical revisionist ideas of this mysterious historical figure—"The white man! Born of lies. Born of homicide. A race of blue-eyed devils" (155)—are therefore attributed to a fictional ex-con cheater whose income had come from bootlegging and who decided to found the African-American political association when he got into trouble with some rival gangsters. The American Dream is certainly understood in different ways by opportunist Zizmo and by Cal's hard-working father, but the latter is an assimilationist ironically called Milton—"Sing, Heavenly Muse"—and he forsakes friends and love for the mere pursuit of money, "a man who could never stop thinking about business" (250). For both characters, the Dream has been reduced to a mere economic wish that does not bring about any real happiness.

In the second part of the novel (Books Three and Four), Cal recounts her/his own life in more detail. Therefore, readers might expect a higher degree of reliability now that the narrator has become fully autodiegetic. Cal's is the eye of the witness, and from this privileged position her/his voice recounts the African-American riots that took place in Detroit in 1967 from the perspective of her own self as the seven-year-old Calliope. This perspective leads the narrator to affirm that what happened then was a real "guerrilla uprising," and the "Second American Revolution," a social revolt that had to be suffocated with the help of army tanks. The events were not, Cal affirms, the mere riots that were reported by the media and by history books (248). Narrative comments about the incompetence and racism of white politicians abound all along this part of the book. The politically biased role of the narrator becomes all too clear in fragments such as the following one, when she/he enters into a long disquisition about the political likes and dislikes of the people: "Generally speaking, Americans like their presidents to have no more than two vowels. Truman. Johnson. Nixon. Clinton. If they have more than two vowels (Reagan), they can have no more than two syllables. Even better is one syllable and one vowel: Bush. Had to do that twice. Why did Mario Cuomo decide against running for President? ... Cuomo knew he'd never win. Too liberal for the moment, certainly. But also: too many vowels" (185).

Cal's ironic perspective is once again modeled on expatriate thinking. From Europe she/he develops European views on the radical innocence or political simplicity of the people of the United States as a collectivity. But hers/his is also a political game on language: English has an abundance of monosyllables, a characteristic that is not shared by other European languages, notably French, German, Spanish, or Greek. Paradoxically, the Greeks are at the beginning of the teleological process that, going through the European Renaissance, reaches modernity in the creation of the United States. However, despite their being

white in the WASP ideology, Greeks do not belong to the privileged Anglo-Saxon stock, depository of the “pure spiritual Christianity” and “civil liberty” that stand out as the basic pillars of U.S. teleology of “manifest destiny.”²⁰

Not surprisingly, this second-class white narrator is aware that her/his main story begins in 1922—the magic year of Modernism—when there was an oil shortage, and ends in 1975, when the whole planet was suffering from the embargo carried out by the Arab Oil Exporting Countries (498): the combination of economic pressures and political shortsightedness frequently results in destruction and human massacre. The narrator’s political denunciation of the status quo extends to many other parts of the novel, even to the moment in which she/he reports her/his father’s death in 1975, “before the Cold War ended, before missile shields and global warming and September 11 and a second President with only one vowel in his name” (512).²¹

In the final pages of *Middlesex*, Cal’s hybrid condition as a pseudo-hermaphrodite functions as a symbolic solution for so much social and individual tragedy—including the existence of that President with only one vowel in his name. The answer can only reside in tolerance for the other, even if the other is an ambivalent mixture of discursively well-defined gender and sex identities. From a postcolonial perspective, tolerance consists of first evaluating and then admitting different opinions and holding them together—even in paradoxical or oxymoronic ways—in a third space that, therefore, overcomes the validity of Aristotle’s Law. As considered above, in the first two hundred pages of *Middlesex*, the Stephanides family history acts as an iconic symbol that reflects the fight between tolerance and categorical prejudices.

Correspondingly, the narration that follows from Book Three is mainly centered on Calliope’s—later Cal’s—personal quest for a fixed gender and sexual identity. This quest offers Eugenides the possibility of revising different theories of gender identity that have appeared since the sixties. In the experiments of sexologist and Johns Hopkins professor John Money, these theories give an example of the earlier categorical confidence in nurture over nature, a confidence that eventually brought about unwanted sexual surgery.²² Notably, in the novel, the character Dr. Peter Luce bears a striking resemblance to Dr. John Money.

²⁰ See Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885), in *A Nineteenth-Century American Reader*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Washington, DC: United States Information Agency, 1987) 21–24.

²¹ Comp. Katherine Hume, *American Dream: American Nightmare—Fiction Since 1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 266–92.

²² See Jessica Jernigan, “Hermaphrodite’s Memoir,” Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides, *Borders*. On line at <<http://www.borderstores.com/features/feature.jsp?file=eugenides>> (17 July 2005). Comp. Milton Diamond, “Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation in Children with Traumatized or Ambiguous Genitalia,” *Journal of Sex Research* 34.2 (1997): 199–211.

However, the request for freedom of identity resides mostly in Eugenides's experimental use of the pseudo-hermaphrodite Cal as narrator of the novel. Together with his denunciation of political dumbness and shortsightedness, Cal's report gradually becomes more concerned about issues directly related to the individual quest for identity. Besides being an uncommon type of narrator and despite her/his unreliable condition, Cal is also a cultivated person who argues fluently about contemporary critical issues. The narrator's critical perspective comes basically from a poststructuralist stance and explicitly includes a reference to Foucault's introduction to the journals of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, a text subsequently used by queer theorist Judith Butler.²³ The life of this hermaphrodite also offers certain resemblances—or possible intertextual borrowings—with the case of Eugenides's protagonist: Herculine lives in a convent where eventually she/he engages in what she/he believes to be a homosexual love affair. She develops an enlarged clitoris or small penis, and writes a confession where she/he shows her/his concerns about sexual identity, explicitly referring to "this incessant struggle of nature against reason." Likewise, Calliope studies in a college for girls where she/he becomes attracted to one of her/his classmates; she also develops an enlarged clitoris, writes her/his confessions as Cal (the story we are reading), remarks on her/his sex and gender ambivalence, and explicitly mentions the struggle between constructionist and essentialist theories in current interpretations of sex and gender identity.²⁴

Butler's emphasis on the instability of gender and sex binaries is put to the test in this final part of the narrative. Cal's role as narrator becomes specifically one of convincing readers that there is nothing wrong with her/his apparently freaky condition: it is only the result of a chromosome deficiency syndrome motivated by family inbreeding (41), that is to say, something that can be explained by scientific reasons and chaotic permutations. Her/his condition forces the protagonist to carry out a particular quest for sex *and* gender definition, for a human self that Cal sometimes understands to be a mere social invention—as her/his own grandparents proved it to be in their journey to America (67)—and sometimes as the result of chaotic chance. Along the episodes written as a Bildungsroman, Cal experiences a dialectic conflict between her/his upbringing as a girl and new physical manifestations centered on the gradual upsurge—paradox intended—of the *crocus* or small penis. She/he has a first assumed homosexual experience with her/his girl mate the Obscure Object—parodically named after the *double* female protagonist of Buñuel's film *That Obscure Object of Desire*. The event is followed by Calliope's first experience of alleged heterosexual relations with the Object's brother, but "she" dislikes it

²³ *Middlesex* 19. Eugenides refers to Michel Foucault's Introduction to *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Journals of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite* (New York: Colophon, 1980). See Butler's contentions in *Gender Trouble* 31–32 and 124–35.

²⁴ See Butler 124–35, and comp. *Middlesex*, Book Four.

and goes back to making love to her—by now also becoming “his”—girl mate, while at the same time becoming much more conscious of the eruption of the crocus (386-88).

Book Four opens with Calliope’s full realization of her/his hermaphrodite status, a condition that she/he still tries to fix with the help of the *Webster’s Dictionary*, the ideological book that classifies her/him as “monster” (430-32). However, the established notion of monstrosity has also been ironically undermined by the narrator in her/his continuous play with the binary Same/Other and their reference to “humanity.” If, in categorical terms, the monster is a being other than human, the narrator has progressively stressed that, from the beginning of the twentieth century, people have also become other than human. We have become posthuman entities. Borrowing from strategies incorporated in the American novel by Thomas Pynchon, and continued by cyberpunk and minimalist authors, Eugenides also reports in *Middlesex* on the technological change of the human self into the posthuman entity suggested by Norbert Wiener already in 1954.²⁵ The shift, according to the narrator, started in 1913 when people stopped being human and became a mere mechanism in the assembly line of Ford’s car factory in Detroit (95). The assumption of posthumanity means for the narrator the understanding that her/his story is virtually a movie (“and so now, having been born, I’m going to rewind the film,” 20), and that, as corresponds to cybernetic beings, our insides are “a vast computer code, all 1s and 0s, an infinity of sequences” (37). The traditional limits of monstrosity imposed by the categorical dictionary become, thus, subverted by the kaleidoscopic ironic narrator.

Calliope’s progression in textual power occurs when she has access to Dr. Luce’s report on her case in which, to the protagonist’s horror, the scientist recommends her/his castration (437). Her/his panicky escape takes Calliope along different places and cultural motifs of the early seventies until she—now becoming an apparent “he”—settles in iconic San Francisco. Along her route West, Calliope cuts her hair and becomes Cal. Her/his fortunes take Cal to become a bum in Golden Gate Park for a short period. Subsequently, the protagonist discloses her/his “freaky” body to public contemplation in a peep-show. Seen from Butler’s theory of performativity,²⁶ the protagonist surrenders to the commodification of the body in stage performances. Cal’s father’s death will bring her/him back to the Stephanides family and to the re-encounter with Desdemona, the mythic matriarch who unveils the biological reason—incest—that motivated Cal’s hermaphroditic condition (524-27).

²⁵ *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1954). See also Catherine K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁶ See Butler 171-90.

In this final part of the novel, the narrator frequently speculates about the formation of gender and sex identity. She/he becomes ever more concerned about the works of constructionist and essentialist theorists on the formation of individual identity. Cal's digressions come to an end in one final act of dynamic conciliation that surpasses categorical thinking, biological determinism, and postmodern cultural criticism. The narrator's queer-oriented conclusion is that gender-sex identity and the new type of being that she/he represents are a result of both nature and nurture, a conclusion that may help readers to discover the categorical positions that also permeated postmodernist criticism and, especially, some forms of poststructuralist cultural analysis.²⁷ In the early seventies, postmodernism and poststructuralism combined to eradicate gender differences. Eventually the belief that identity was socially conditioned developed into a pamphlet war between the new generation of cultural critics and the traditional camp of so-called essentialists who contended that the role of biology was primordial in accounting for gender differentiation. Cal, narrator and cultural critic, explicitly refers to these theories and how they informed her/his own case (478-79, 520-21). Yet, in the end of the long narrative, she/he makes readers realize that *Middlesex* is also a novel about race, culture, and colonialism. Categorical discrimination is so entrenched that it may deprive the individual of the belief in the ultimate American myth: "I'm not sure," Cal says, "with a grandmother like mine, if you can ever become a true American in the sense of believing that life is about the pursuit of happiness" (524).

In this crossroad of contending identity theories, the narrator stands unsatisfied, conscious that her/his indeterminate identity is neither based solely on nature nor entirely socially constructed, but is a combination of both. A "strange new possibility is arising," she/he says at the end of *Middlesex*. "Compromised, indefinite, but not entirely obliterated: free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind" (479). In order to reach such a conclusion, Greek-American author Jeffrey Eugenides has needed more than five hundred pages of intertextual irony, historical denunciation, modernist nostalgia, scientific research, and big doses of thoughtful digressions. However, the results add up in the demands for a new type of ethical responsibility, one that openly advocates for a hybrid space of tolerance for individuals and communities.

²⁷ See Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 30-34.