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Ecological Crisis, or “Intersex Panic,” as Answer of the Real?

Toward the end of *Middlesex*, Cal is riding around Detroit in a car when, meeting the defiant gaze of a Black man on the street, he realizes with surprise that he is being seen as “The Man” (Eugenides 518). The effects of virilization on Cal’s body have made him a representative of white male privilege, signalling the loss of what Kojima (also in this special cluster) recognizes as “queer affinity”: not between Julie and Cal, but between Julie and Calliope, representatives of ethnic girlhood who were expected to grow into their “secondary sex characteristics,” as the phenotypical aspects of gender that develop during puberty are named by the discourse of endocrinology. Endocrinologists such as Harry Benjamin are credited with pioneering the medical technologies of gender confirmation for trans adults that have also informed the diagnosis and treatment of intersex infants and conditions (Stryker). However, as trans studies scholars such as Julian Gill-Peterson vigilantly point out, endocrinology has also accommodated scientific racism by assigning racial/ethnic meaning to differences that can be linked to the body’s hormone production (e.g., genital shape and size, or emotion and mood regulation). Cal’s particular intersex variation straddles these genealogies, since 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome is a hereditary condition observable in the Global South, including in the Asia Minor region that Desdemona and Lefty claim as their homeland. Cal’s gender transition naturalizes the kind of synthetic hormone use that is becoming even more central to trans medical care than top or bottom surgery: the availability of puberty-suppressing hormone therapy is making it possible for the most privileged trans-identified youth to actually grow up in the bodies they desire (Gridley et al.).

It is a sign of our ecological interdependency, however, that greater access to synthetic hormones has also inspired “sex panic” or, better yet, “intersex panic” within anti-toxics discourse, with its particular fixation on environmental exposure to endocrine-disruptors (Di Chiro). While Eugenides’s novel imagines the global migration of the SRD5A2 gene, Gill-Peterson has proposed that the synthetic hormone molecule now belongs to an “emergent ecology” of its own. Citing details worthy of another Eugenides-style epic on the molecular scale, Gill-Peterson notes that a 2008 investigative report on pharmaceutical drugs in drinking water found low concentrations of anti-anxiety meds in Southern California’s water supply. In upstate New York, heart medication and estrogen were detected, both presumably traceable to an aging population in the region; and San Francisco’s tap water contains what is sensationally referred to as just a “sex hormone.” As Gill-Peterson reflects, “the neoliberal rationality according to which synthetic hormones are prohibited as performance enhancement for athletes, require years of prohibitively expensive medico-psychiatric diagnosis for transgender

patients and yet already permeate the environment in a geopolitics of toxicity suggests the concrete utility of ecological experimentation with a politics of hormones” (415-16). The ecological or “trans-corporeal” condition of the human being, in Stacy Alaimo’s coinage, means that there is no original, untainted, or unmodified body, but rather that the body possesses an “originary technicity,” in Gill-Peterson’s terms, or a capacity to shape and be shaped by the social and physical world (407). To deny the body’s capacity to change, he continues, is to condone a baseline form of transphobia. Likewise, to panic about medically insignificant concentrations of “sex hormones” in our drinking water is to deploy cisgender/cissexual privilege in a conjuring of ecological crisis that denies the reality of our ecological interdependency.

Ecological crisis, Slavoj Žižek has argued, corresponds to a clash between a set of classic psychoanalytic dispositions, or “three forms of avoiding an encounter with the real,” a reference to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the Real as that which remains inaccessible to consciousness (35). The first of these dispositions concerns the fetishistic disavowal or repression of knowledge of the planet’s changing ecologies, as seems to characterize most consumer mentalities today. Secondly—and keeping in mind that Freud regarded neurosis as essentially normal—there is the neurotic or obsessional ethos of environmental activism, which seems to drive us by instinct, as if by saving the planet we might defer or defy our own individual deaths. The final manner of avoiding the real is to regard ecological change as an “answer of the real” or a psychotic projection of meaning onto Nature personified. By Žižek’s account, this is how the religious Right reacted during the AIDS crisis, in believing that a divine and deserved punishment was being delivered upon people who engaged in sinful sexual acts. In the context of social crisis, psychosis implies a fixation on causality, but because the real in fact displays “indifference to its [own] mode of symbolization,” Žižek concludes that “we must learn to accept the real of the ecological crisis in its senseless actuality, without charging it with some message or meaning” (36).

Middlesex may indeed take the intersex body as an answer of the real since the gene’s immigrant itinerary represents a psychotic projection onto the realities of intersex and trans lives. That Calliope fulfills her genetic destiny by becoming a white man is both a biopolitical and a psychotic solution to the problems of immigrant and women’s lives. The novel’s first-person narration style depicts fate as teleology, not fate as interdependency, leaving Cal unable to account for his new place in Detroit’s “crippled ecology” (see Anderson in this special cluster): that is, leaving him unaccountable for his White masculinity and its impact on the psychic life of any Black man on the street. The notion that willfulness or intention always drives the consumption of synthetic hormones is likewise a psychotic claim, where the reality seems closer to Gill-Peterson’s understanding of the hormone’s molecular animacy, or its circulation through social and scientific frameworks of meaning in a way that constitutes an ecology in itself. Given that Freud himself associated psychosis with the desire for transgender embodiment, however, “intersex panic” also proves psychotic in a discursive sense, suggesting that the notion of ecological crisis will inevitably draw upon the concept of gender transition in ways that represent “a flight from the intersex body” (see Breu in this special cluster).

Together, these eco-critical readings of *Middlesex* seek to return the “senseless actuality” of the real to both the intersex and the immigrant narrative, aiming for what Mazzolini (in this special cluster) describes as a non-paranoid relation to the hard sciences that might allow us paradoxically to reject genetic determinism, for instance, while insisting on climate change. But if, as Alaimo muses (in this special cluster), the natural variation of Octopussy’s garden is indeed “what’s next,” then Calliope is a crucial reminder of what has happened. I wish to suggest that Calliope’s ethnic girlhood is overwritten in a way that resonates with how racial justice gets subsumed by eco-justice, or why the environmental movement, like Cal on Motor City’s streets, *looks so white*. Take, for example, how global warming is becoming synonymous with “crisis” itself, as progressive activists are identifying ecological collapse, from famine to flooding, as the root cause of humanitarian disasters and an exacerbating factor in decades-long geopolitical conflicts. As climate change rhetoric becomes concerned with material resource redistribution, it appropriates the claims of environmental racism articulated by people of color in cities like Detroit, and by Indigenous peoples over occupied lands (like Detroit). When climate change deniers seek to reverse this discourse, they end up redeploying elements of antiracist critique in the form of so-called economic nationalism, whereby the immigrants who have always been blamed for stealing jobs in the U.S. become co-extensive with the countries now accused of tricking American industry into wasting money on “weather.” This psychotic denial of global interdependency reinforces the racialized triangulation of White, Black, and Brown interests that keeps Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous folks forever foreign. Notice, however, how climate change rhetoric also keeps Brown people in the subaltern position of victim, if not villain.

The “senseless actuality” of the real stands to disrupt every representation of ecological crisis, from formulations of intersex panic to conversations about climate change. It does, however, take a certain kind of vigilance to keep our reality empty of meaning: the same kind of vigilance, I would suggest, that it takes to safeguard the dignity of individuals who are intersex and the self-determination of people of color in ecological and environmental justice discourse.

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