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LAURA J. COLLINS

Beyond the Biography of a Gene

Cal Stephanides, the intersex protagonist of *Middlesex*, writes that although he is a member of the Intersex Society of North America, he “happen[s] not to be a political person” (Eugenides 106). Of course, Cal, as narrator, performs a political act in relating his story. The narration itself is an attempt to reveal his secret and account for his history. Nonetheless, Cal seems to draw a distinction between this act of self-narration and what he appears to envision as more “official” political activity: attending rallies and actively participating in groups (106). Cal seems to offer the qualification that he “happens not to be a political person” as an apology, almost as if he assumes that readers will insist that he *should* be involved in political advocacy. And perhaps given his professed and apparent shame and reclusiveness, we might think it would be better if Cal were “out” and advocating on behalf of other intersex people.

But I think Cal’s narrative also suggests one of the reasons he is not engaged in this work. He relates: “hermaphrodites are people like everybody else” (106). And though Cal presents his narrative as the story of how he was born twice—once as a baby girl and again as a teenage boy—it is also a wide-ranging family history that takes on the character of myth. In so doing, this mythology accounts for Cal’s singular and complicated personhood including, but reaching far beyond, the fact of his intersex condition. So, though Cal’s narrative includes a genetic explanation for his condition (see Alaimo, Hsu, and Breu in this special cluster), the more than five hundred pages of family lore constitute far more than the explanation of a genetic mutation. So, though this history does function as an explanation for Cal’s intersex condition, it also, perhaps paradoxically, functions as Cal’s refusal to be reduced to his intersex identity or experience and his insistence on his unique and irreducible personhood.

The first two paragraphs of the novel juxtapose Cal’s imposed identity as an intersex case study with his claimed identity as a singular individual, not unlike anybody else. In the opening paragraph Cal explains that readers may have “come across him” in Dr. Peter Luce’s article on 5-Alpha-Reductase or in chapter sixteen of the “sadly outdated *Genetics and Heredity*” (3). He claims his anonymous celebrity— “[t]hat’s me on page 578 . . . with a black box covering my eyes” (3)—suggesting his desire to be known as more than a faceless (mostly forgotten) medical fascination and perhaps laying claim to his part in developing medical knowledge. In the next paragraph, however, Cal undercuts this identity as medical marvel by introducing himself through a list of mundane personal details. He tells us he’s a “former field hockey goalie, long-standing member of the Save-the-Manatee Foundation, rare attendant of the Greek Orthodox liturgy, and . . . an employee of the U.S. State Department” (3)—a somewhat distinctive, though not particularly interesting, inventory of attributes.

The novel follows in this pattern, with Cal both embracing and resisting an identity as intersex case study. Cal traces the journey of his 5-Alpha-Reductase gene from Smyrna to its “discovery” in Dr. Luce’s clinic (see Alaimo, Breu, Hsu, and Mazzolini in this special cluster), commenting along the way about his status as object of medical (and cultural) fascination. But he also tells us about his father’s hot dog business, his braces, and his parents’ courtship via clarinet. In a way, all these details are connected to the epic story of the gene, but they are also part of Cal’s attempt to account for himself outside of and apart from the descriptions of medical journal articles (or perhaps of political rallies). As many in this special cluster observe, this account is sometimes frustrating and deterministic. Nonetheless, it is Cal’s attempt to narrate his own story and position himself within it. Accordingly, I read Cal’s quip that “hermaphrodites are people like everybody else” and his self-avowed apoliticism as a refusal to be reduced to gender or genes. In its way, Cal’s narrative beckons us to recognize and respond to him in his singularity, outside of medicine or politics: his is an ethical call rather than a political one.

I want to think briefly about this ethical call with regard to transgender advocacy in the United States, particularly around the so-called “bathroom bill” in the state of North Carolina. The “bathroom bill,” or *North Carolina House Bill Two: The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act*, was a reaction to a Charlotte, North Carolina ordinance that, among other things, allowed people to use bathrooms that comported with their gender identities. The bathroom bill invalidated that ordinance and required government facilities to designate bathroom use by birth certificate sex.

What’s particularly interesting (and relevant here) is that in the North Carolina General Assembly debates over the bill, both supporters and opponents relied on themes of discrimination, inclusivity, and progressive politics, resulting in a hyper-politicization of transgender identities. In these debates, transgender bathroom access was figured as part of a progressive (or radical) political agenda rather than a matter of necessity. For example, in the floor debates, one senator argued that in passing the ordinance, Charlotte had “bowed to the altar of radical political correctness” (North Carolina). Supporters of the bathroom bill positioned their stance less in opposition to transgender people than to “radical” political encroachments. Relatedly, opponents figured the bill as an affront to democratic ideals, arguing that the bill “fl[ew] in the face of inclusiveness” and urging others to join the progressive “fight.”

Because these debates were saturated with the language of discrimination and either radical or progressive politics (depending on the political affiliation of the speaker), there was little discussion of transgender people themselves. There was little recognition that transgender people are seeking to navigate sex and that this task is difficult in a society that continues to insist and rely upon discriminating on the basis of sex. This rhetorical framing of transgender bathroom access as radical (including progressive insistence that this is the next great civil rights battle) also depicts transgender people as warriors on the front lines of enlightened, liberal politics. While some transgender people might characterize themselves this way, others may be less interested in directly engaging the politics of sex (even if they must confront the politics of sex daily). And, as *Middlesex*’s Cal reminds us, it seems to me that our politics must

remain attuned to this hesitancy. We must remember that the problem of (or solution to) sex does not rest with transgender and intersex people: it rests with all of us. So, while the struggles of transgender people (and of intersex Cal) might highlight the problem of sex, it is for all of us to continually invent solutions and to resist the urge to enact our gender politics through others.

It is for this reason that I've focused on Cal's narrative as a personal account instead of on the novel's questionable gender politics or determinism. I don't disagree that the novel can be frustrating, but I think that the frustrating confines of this novel can be read as an allegory for the frustrating (though not impenetrable) bounds of our socio-political circumstances. Beyond that, as others in this special cluster point out (see Alaimo, Anderson, Breu, Sandilands, Seymour, and Singh), the novel's determinism is not so absolute. There are ways to read its setting, symbols, and surroundings as gesturing toward fluidity, even if Cal (and perhaps Eugenides) seems to mostly reject that fluidity. The novel reminds us, then, that with regard to gender politics there is possibility all around us, but there is also limitation, and within all this possibility and limitation we must each make a life for ourselves. And the ultimate goal of our gender politics must be rendering that life-making easier and more meaningful for everybody.

In this light, I want to think about Cal's narrative, overdetermined though it may be, as a gesture toward legibility and explanation. I want to use Cal to think about how an individual is always more than the gender politics he *appears* to represent, and about how each of us tries to make sense of our story and our identity, amidst confounding (often frustrating) socio-political circumstances. With its many mythical elements, the epic tale of Cal's life and family history resists both complete knowledge and, also, complete representation of some presumed universal intersex experience. Fictional Cal reminds us that our politics must always remain attuned to the ethical: to the situational, singular, particular elements of meaning, relationships, and behaviours. And the ethical is never a matter of pure knowledge or proper policy: it's what we do with and to each other in the absence of either.

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