

Greek-American Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*

Self-Transformation through the Lens of Ethnicity

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Summary

The thesis “Greek-American Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, Self-Transformation through the Lens of Ethnicity” examines how three generations of a Greek-American family reinvent their identities in a lengthy process of assimilation and acculturation within modern industrialism. The novel is largely about the metamorphosis of each generation, and I have explored the extent to which the protagonists incorporate their cultural past, in particular their ethnicity, into their new lifestyles and new, hybridized identities. I have examined the impact of ethnicity in the novel in relation to social forces that influence the form and content of ethnicity, as well as through the three institutions that served as the pillars of traditional society and of the ethnic community – the family, the church, and the local community. In my exploration through close reading of the novel, I have relied on theories of ethnicity as well as studies in the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and gender identity to support my ideas and arguments. They have also proved useful for tackling the issues of immigration and assimilation as they pertain to modern American society in general. I have incorporated into the thesis the ideas of Milton Gordon, Richard Alba, Werner Sollors, Rey Chow, Ruth Frankenberg, Stephen Steinberg, Miranda Joseph, John Hartigan and Judith Butler. When it comes to sociological studies that helped me better understand the Greek-American identity, I have relied on the research of acclaimed anthropologists and sociologists of Greek-American origin.

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The reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'
- Aristotle, *Poetics*

Chapter One: Introduction

Jeffrey Eugenides' second novel, *Middlesex*,¹ is an epic multi-generational tale of a family of immigrants, who trace their origins from Asia Minor and redefine their identities in new circumstances on the American soil. It is a complex saga that spans an 80-year period in the twentieth century, and describes three generations of the Greek-American Stephanides family in a lengthy process of assimilation and acculturation within modern industrialism. The tale involves multiple settings: war-ravaged Smyrna in 1922, Detroit during the Prohibition era and the ghetto upheavals in the 1960s, Detroit's private school suburban settlement at the end of the decade, San Francisco during the mid-1970s and modern-day Berlin. The novel is thus largely about the metamorphosis of each generation, and a suitable ground for exploring the extent to which the protagonists incorporate their cultural past, in particular their ethnicity, into their new lifestyles and new, hybridized identities. In more particular terms, there is a tendency of a decline in the three institutions that served as the pillars of traditional society and of the ethnic community – the family, the church, and the local community.² Ethnicity represents ways of thinking, feeling and acting that constitute the essence of culture.³ Since culture does not exist in a vacuum and is a part of a larger social process, any examination of ethnicity must be done in relation to social forces that influence the form and content of ethnicity.

The twist in the novel lies in the hermaphroditic gene which is a result of inbreeding within the family. Most notably – the main protagonist's grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty, are brother and sister. The gene does not get active until it reaches Calliope Stephanides, the youngest of the third generation and the novel's extraordinary narrator. She is identified and brought up as a girl until male traits of her body start emerging in puberty: muscular body and an emerging penis, or a "blooming crocus," as the narrator explains (376, 386-88). It leads to Callie's puzzling discovery of her dual physical nature. Callie flees and creates a new identity as a male Cal, who is narrating the story for us as a 41-year old man from the perspective of a present-day Berlin. The novel may, therefore, be considered as a bildungsroman of the main protagonist.

¹ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003). All further references in the thesis are to this edition and the page numbers will be placed parenthetically in the text.

² Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 57.

³ Steinberg, p. xiii.

In my exploration and interpretation of the ways in which the protagonists of *Middlesex* redefine their identities and integrate their ethnic past in this process, I have relied on theories of ethnicity as well as studies in the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and gender identity to support my ideas and arguments. They have also proved useful for tackling the issues of immigration and assimilation as they pertain to modern American society in general. I will therefore incorporate into the thesis the ideas of Milton Gordon, Richard Alba, Werner Sollors, Rey Chow, Ruth Frankenberg, Stephen Steinberg, Miranda Joseph, John Hartigan and Judith Butler. When it comes to sociological studies that helped me better understand the Greek-American identity, I have relied on the research of the following anthropologists and sociologists of Greek-American origin: Alice Scourby, Chrysie Constantakos, Giorgos Anagnostou, George Kourvetaris, Spyros Orfanos, and Sam Tsemberis. My methodological approach is close reading.

Design of the Thesis

The thesis consists of four Chapters. The first one is the introductory Chapter, while the other three Chapters explore different ways in which three different generations of the main protagonists of Greek-American origin incorporate their cultural past and immigrant ethnicity into their new identities. The focus is on the process of the metamorphosis of each generation. Chapter One is, first of all, aimed at presenting information about the life and works of Jeffrey Eugenides, about his prize-winning novel *Middlesex*, the critical reception, as well as works written on the novel. I further present the concept of Ethnicity as a theoretical basis for this thesis, bearing in mind that ethnicity and diverse ethnic origins are an important part of the novel and of American life. A word about Greek-American ethnicity is a useful supplement to this chapter with respect to the main protagonists' origin, as well as a word on the concept of hybridity in relation to cultural identity. By explaining the main characteristics of Immigrant Writing in America, I place *Middlesex* in the same context. I offer a brief explanation of Historiographic Metafiction in Chapter One, since postmodern elements of fiction are at play with psychological realism within *Middlesex*.

Chapter Two explores the way in which the immigrant generation in *Middlesex* deals with re-inventing their cultural identity, from the very fact and reasons for immigration and through the process of adjusting to the new circumstances on the American soil and in a time of modern industrialism in the 1920s and 30s. For this purpose, I have chosen to examine four episodes from the lives of the first generation protagonists: the voyage of the grandparents

from Smyrna to Detroit, during which they “shed” their sibling relation and became husband and wife; Lefty’s brief employment in the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, where he is “educated” into casting off his immigrant roots; Desdemona’s engagement in The Nation of Islam, for the purpose of which she poses as a Muslim woman; Fard Muhammad’s transformations from a Greek Orthodox brother-in-law to a Muslim prophet.

Chapter Three examines how the second generation immigrants mould their cultural identity by adopting the all-American traits of the 1950s and 60s and moving upwards on the social scale on the one hand, and on the other by rejecting most of their parents’ immigrant background for the purpose of becoming completely assimilated. Milton Stephanides becomes a successful businessman and family provider, following his version of the American Dream, while his spouse Tessie grows up as an Americanized woman with special respect for Orthodox faith and family traditions. The family is also involved in the Race Riots in Detroit, the event which provides an opportunity for examining the relations of whiteness and discrimination in the novel and in reality.

Chapter Four explores to what extent Cal Stephanides and his brother Chapter Eleven, as third generation immigrants and fully Americanized protagonists, relate to their ancestors’ ethnicity. Some of the questions that the novel tackles and I further explore in this Chapter are the following: Is “everyone ethnic” in America or does it matter where your immigrant ancestors came from? Do ethno-religious customs, like funerals, play a significant role in shaping one’s personality or do they contribute only to a symbolic meaning one attaches to ethnicity? I also explore the way the main protagonist Cal comes to terms with his hermaphroditism after he has explored his family’s past.

The Life and Works of Jeffrey Eugenides

American novelist Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1960.⁴ The youngest of three brothers, he spent his childhood in Grosse Pointe, a wealthy suburb of Detroit. His father, Constantine was a mortgage banker and the first member of a Greek immigrant family from Asia Minor to be born in the United States, while his mother, Wanda, is of Anglo-Irish origin. Jeffrey Eugenides attended both public and private schools, and from an early age he showed love for books and language. He studied Latin for eight years at a preparatory school, forming in this way a strong foundation in classical literature. Eugenides graduated magna

⁴ Jeffrey Eugenides, Literature Online Biography.

cum laude from Brown University in 1983. Already during his college days, he aspired to become a writer. During his studies, Eugenides worked as a taxi driver in Detroit, and engaged in voluntary work with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Upon his return to the United States, he lived in San Francisco for a year editing a yachting magazine, and then went on to achieve a Master's degree in English and creative writing from Stanford University in 1986. Eugenides draws plenty of material for his novels from his own life. An insight into his biographical data is therefore of relevance when it comes to reading his works. The experience of having immigrant grandparents, growing up in a Detroit suburb, and having high quality education in both private and public institutions feature greatly in *Middlesex*.

Eugenides' first published work was a short story, "Capricious Gardens," which appeared in a periodical *The Gettysburg Review* in 1989. At the time of his engagement as a secretary at the American Academy of Poets in New York, the novelist wrote for his amusement without thinking much about publishing until he began working on his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*. When it comes to Eugenides' novels, the opinion of many literary critics is that he is at his best when portraying the coming-of-age aporias. We may say with certainty that all three of his novels are rich in descriptions of young American protagonists who experience difficulties in growing up and forming stable identities. In both of his first novels the author shows his remarkable ability to create an unusual narrator, nothing short of extraordinary corporate voices, the "we" of *The Virgin Suicides*, and the male/female Cal/Callie of *Middlesex*.

The inspiration for writing his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, emerged after a conversation Eugenides had had with the family babysitter, who revealed that she and her sisters had all, at one time or another, contemplated suicide as a way of escaping "pressure."⁵ The writer George Plimpton published the first chapter of the novel in his magazine, *The Paris Review*, which led to Eugenides winning the journal's Aga Khan Prize for fiction for that year. The completed book was published two years later in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and it received positive reviews as a strong debut.⁶ Eugenides' fond childhood memories of growing up in Grosse Pointe proved a useful personal experience for constructing a 1970 suburban Detroit setting from a teenage perspective in both his debut and the second novel, *Middlesex*. He describes the city as "emblematic of so many American realities that seem so important" to him, and confesses he is very connected to it emotionally

⁵ Mick Brown, "Jeffrey Eugenides: Enduring Love," Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides. *The Telegraph* (5 January 2008).

⁶ Literature Online Bibliography.

with vivid memories.⁷ *The Virgin Suicides* examines the mysterious lives and deaths of the five Lisbon sisters, aged 13 – 17, brought up by a rigid and overprotective Catholic mother and a disengaged father to experience literal and symbolic oppression, some instances of which are strict curfews and propriety in clothing, or being locked into the house and forbidden to communicate with the rest of the world. After the first of the sisters commits suicide, the remaining four are subjected to even stronger isolation in the parental home, which brings about an immense adolescent tragedy when, one by one, all the girls eventually take their own lives. The story is told 20 years in retrospect by a corporate narrator, the collective voice of anonymous men who shared the neighbouring boys' infatuation with the Lisbon sisters: "[A]s we were slowly carted into the melancholic remainder of our lives (a place the Lisbon girls, wisely, it began to seem, never cared to see), we would stop, mostly alone, to gaze up at the whited sepulchre of the former Lisbon house."⁸ The boys' longing for the sisters they loved has haunted them and survived till their adulthood. The narrator - "We" - analyzes items thrown away by the sisters, like photographs, newspaper articles on the events, and has undertaken interviews in an attempt to explain the adolescent tragedy. After the success of *The Virgin Suicides*, Jeffrey Eugenides was pronounced by *Granta* and *The New Yorker* to be one of America's best young novelists. Sofia Coppola's critically acclaimed adaptation of the novel into a major motion picture of the same title in 1999 turned the novel into a cult.⁹ *The Virgin Suicides* has been translated into 34 languages so far, and it has continued selling in large numbers and new editions.

Eugenides went to MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, considered to be a retreat for artists, to work on his second novel. This is where in 1995 he met his wife Karen Yamauchi, a photographer and sculptor. The couple married and left New York in 1999 to live in Berlin, where the novelist received fellowships from the Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD and the American Academy in Berlin. During this period, they got a daughter, Georgia. They settled in an apartment in the city's vibrant Turkish quarter, and this is the place where Eugenides completed *Middlesex*. The first edition was published in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2002. The complexity of the novel brought about significant critical acclaim, and it was awarded a prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2003, the WELT-Literaturpreis of Germany, and the Great Lakes Book Award. It was also shortlisted

⁷ Literature Online Bibliography.

⁸ Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (New York: Picador, 2009), p. 239.

⁹ Jeffrey Eugenides, Macmillan Online Bibliography and Movie Database

for the National Book Critics Circle Award, France's Prix Medici, and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

A portion of time between the publishing of his second and third novels, Eugenides devoted to editing an anthology of love stories - *My Mistress' Sparrow is Dead: Great Love Stories, from Chekhov to Munro*. It was published in 2008 by Harper Collins Publishers. All proceeds from this publication are designated for 826CHI, a Non-Profit Writing and Tutorial Center in Chicago for young people, set up by a friend, and fellow author, Dave Eggers. By 2008, Eugenides returned to the United States with the family to pursue a teaching career at Princeton University, Lewis Center for the Arts. His third novel, *The Marriage Plot*, was published in October 2011, during my work on this thesis. As Lucy Daniel would have it, Eugenides currently publishes at the unhurried pace of one novel a decade.¹⁰ This time, the author focuses on the universal struggle between heart and reason, as the protagonists in the novel, three college graduates and bright Ivy Leaguers, employ them in making important decisions on entering adult life. Eugenides draws once again inspiration from his first hand experience as a college graduate from Brown University, and difficulties one faces in establishing a new social life on leaving the college campus, attempting to choose a proper career direction, and most importantly – the right partner. It is also a modern college romance of the early 1980s intertwined with the way love affairs and plots are presented in Victorian novels. Madeleine Hanna, a talented and beautiful WASP and English major, is given more space in the novel than her “suitors,” Leonard Bankhead, a charismatic science student who is “brilliant and historically hilarious,”¹¹ and who struggles with clinical bipolarity, and Mitchell Grammaticus, a well behaved boy, fascinated with the philosophical aspects of religion and with Madeleine. The novel's narration shifts between the three perspectives of the protagonists, slowly building the tension in the plot. Once she becomes a devoted spouse whose husband's illness becomes more severe with time, Madeleine continues to be a heroine who struggles between her affection for the concept of love and marriage expressed in the novels of Jane Austen and Henry James on the one hand, and on the other with the rise of the feminist-era viewpoints: “How would Isabel Archer's marriage to Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a pre-nup?”¹²

During my work on this thesis, Eugenides was among the nominees for the US National Book Critics Circle Award in 2012.

¹⁰ Lucy Daniels, “The Marriage Plot by Jeffrey Eugenides: Review,” *The Telegraph* (11 October 2011).

¹¹ Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 107.

¹² *The Marriage Plot*, p. 22.

Middlesex

In the opening pages of the novel, Cal, the extraordinary narrator and main protagonist who belongs to the third generation Stephanides family, announces his double birth only to postpone the narration of his own story until page 215 – almost till the middle of the book: “I was born twice: first as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974” (1). In addition, the narrator at the beginning of the story briefly announces his 5-Alpha-Reductase pseudo-hermaphrodite condition, a recessive mutation as the result of the family inbreeding that causes the birth of a boy who looks like a girl. With such a powerful opening, the readers are immediately assured about a complicated plot ahead, a remarkable change in the narrator’s life that is bound to happen somewhere along the novel’s progression, whereas the author in this way acquires an audience with a growing curiosity, eager to follow the “roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time” (4). Obviously, the recessive hermaphroditic gene was in the family for two and a half centuries and gets exacerbated by siblings getting together.

Calliope Helen Stephanides, according to the birth certificate, narrates the story as a grown up Cal, an employee of the U.S. State Department stationed in Berlin. He is named after Calliope, the Greek muse of epic poetry, often referred to as such by the narrator in the first half of the novel, Books One and Two. In invoking his female muse, the narrator alludes to himself as well. The entire novel consists of four Books that contain four to ten Chapters respectively. The narration is non-linear: it moves back and forth in time. For example, the novel starts in the present, than moves to the time when the narrator is still pre-fetal, whereas the ultimate chapter of *Middlesex* marks the end of Cal’s search for social identity while he is still in puberty. At one point in the novel the author also introduces a style of citation in the form of a lengthy clinical report. The point of view shifts from the first to the third person throughout the novel.

The novel has a dual plot: when it comes to its structure, apart from the family saga there is an overarching story in the present: the beginnings and parts of chosen Chapters in all four Books are dedicated to the events Cal experiences in present day Berlin, where he begins a romantic involvement with a Japanese American artist, Julie Kikuchi. The author also makes an explicit, though brief, reference to Michel Foucault's introduction to the journals of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, who had lived in the 18th century as a woman until her male physical traits were discovered at the age of 33. A possibility for borrowing for

Eugenides' narrative is open in this way. However, the narrator claims that Barbin's memoirs, "make unsatisfactory reading, and it was after finishing them years ago that [he] first got the idea to write [his] own" (29).

Cal's tone of narration is pompously epic, though humorous, with many allusions to Greek classics and Greek mythology. Epic and novelistic styles are blended skillfully. Cal is endowed with alleged narrative omniscience that enables him to describe the thoughts of other protagonists in the novel: "I alone, from the private box of my primordial egg, saw what was going on" (206). Another instance is the following: "These scenes ran through my mother's mind during the interminable Sunday service" (13). In his interview with British novelist Geraldine Bedell, Jeffrey Eugenides is open about struggling with voice in the first years of his work on the novel: "I had to get into the grandparents' heads, little extra omniscience [...] The voice had to be capable of telling epic events in the third person and psychosexual events in the first person." In addition, the author had felt that the voice in *Middlesex* should "render the experience of a teenage girl and an adult man, or an adult male-identified hermaphrodite."¹³

I have chosen to refer to the narrator and main protagonist Cal/Callie as "he," since the narrator Cal refers to himself as male. For Calliope's young age, before the discovery of her dual physical nature, I will use the feminine pronoun "she," since in this period she behaves and is perceived by others as female. In this way, I am avoiding general confusion that may arise from the multiple uses of personal nouns Cal/Callie, or Cal/lie, as well as pronouns he/she and s/he.

Apart from the main protagonist and narrator, I briefly present here the other characters whose reconstruction of identities I will explore in this thesis:

Cal's grandparents on the paternal side are immigrants from Smyrna, who were forced to leave their homes and settle in Detroit. They are Desdemona Stephanides, the precious "yia yia" (grandmother in Greek), and Elefterios (Lefty) Stephanides, Cal's "papou" (grandfather in Greek). As I have mentioned before, they are brother and sister, and in extraordinary circumstances of war and immigration they took the decision to create a marriage bond in order to save themselves. Desdemona is the most important protagonist in terms of keeping alive the ethnic customs of the Old World, whether they involve religion, language or community.

¹³ Geraldine Bedell, "He's not Like Other Girls," Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Guardian* (6 October 2002).

Cal's grandparents on the maternal side are also immigrants from Greece. They are Sourmelina, a closeted lesbian, and her husband Jimmy Zizmo, a bootlegger and fantastic re-inventor of his many identities. At one point in the novel, he disguised himself as a Muslim prophet, Fard Muhammad, who historically existed. Sourmelina and Jimmy are already highly assimilated American citizens at the time when "the Smyrna grandparents" arrive in America.

A very important character within the immigrant generation is Dr. Nishan Philobosian, an "elderly family physician [...] with ancient diplomas behind him" (13). As we later learn, he delivers Callie and fails to establish that the baby's genitalia are anything other than female.

Cal's American born parents are a second generation immigrants (the children of the immigrants) and share more American values as the result of successful assimilation. They have little or no relation to the Old World their parents come from. Cal's father is Milton Stephanides, Desdemona and Lefty's son, a successful businessman and an all-American man. Cal's mother is Theodora (Tessie) Stephanides, the daughter of Sourmelina and Jimmy Zizmo.

Cal and his brother belong to the third generation immigrants. Cal's brother is Chapter Eleven.¹⁴ As we conclude from the narrator's account, Cal's parents make an insignificant effort to bring the Old World closer to their children. They rather leave it to the interplay of social forces and conscious choice that children may make in deciding whether to incorporate the ethnic heritage into their identity or not. The language spoken at Cal's parents home has always been English, and there is no insisting that Cal and his brother learn Greek, in particular since the parents made little effort to do so themselves.

Callie's first sexual experience is with a female classmate, whom we know only as the "Obscure Object" and on a different occasion with the Obscure Object's brother, Jerome. The affair with the Obscure object remains secret due to its lesbian character.

Julie Kikuchi is a Japanese-American photographer with whom Cal at the end of the novel establishes an open emotional and sexual relationship.

Critical Reception of *Middlesex*

Quite a number of reviews and critical texts have been published about Eugenides' second novel. The reviews are mixed though, some literary critics pointing to "incongruity" between

¹⁴ We never really get to know Cal's brother's real name, but the connotation becomes apparent once the family business run by Chapter Eleven goes bankrupt. I will explain it in more detail in Chapter 4.

the two narrative frames within the novel, as if the family saga and the hermaphrodite story formed a “disjoined” hybrid. Stewart O’Nan, for example, acknowledges Eugenides’ “prodigious talent,” yet claims that the novel is “off proportionally, both section-to-section and overall, its two halves at odds.”¹⁵ Daniel Mendelsohn is of the opinion that Eugenides stylistically and intellectually failed to render the “middle” to which the novel’s title refers. He asserts that the “hermaphrodite part” of the novel lacks credibility, and favors the “old fashioned family saga,” or the part that “has to do with Greeks – and, in a way Greekness,” as far more colorful and successful. Mendelsohn also finds Calliope and Cal to be “unformed,” and with “surprisingly little personality [...] as if having been both male and female has depleted, rather than enriched” the narrator.¹⁶

On the other hand, *Middlesex* is triumphantly acclaimed for its complex narrative voice, the engaging nature of the narrator, rich storytelling and the employment of humor and irony. Comparing the first two Eugenides’ novels in *The Guardian*, Mark Lawson concludes that they both reflect the novelist’s skill of finding new ways of telling the story in terms of the voice: after a corporate narrator in *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides “continues to be the Joyce of the personal pronoun in *Middlesex* by bringing into play an “I” that is both female and male.”¹⁷ Professor Robin Warhol points to the universality of the narrator’s emotional life as “a magnificently complicated mélange of masculine and effeminate feeling, defying clear gender categorization as [...] nearly all human personalities ultimately do.” Warhol praises the author’s artistry of subverting stereotypes in the novel: Cal’s personality remains largely unaltered after the shift of the bodily sex from female to male, in spite of his gender performance.¹⁸ In his contribution to *The New York Observer*, Adam Begley writes favourably about *Middlesex*, finding the narrator’s voice to be “relaxed, wry, sympathetic,” without any trace of self pity, “despite the ordeal of intersexual adolescence.”¹⁹

When it comes to the scope and size of *Middlesex*, several critics associate and compare the novel with the work of Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace, “brilliant members of Eugenides's cohort,” as Laura Miller opines. Regarding the capaciousness of *Middlesex*, Laura Miller writes that “the book's length feels like its author's arms stretching

¹⁵ Stewart O’Nan, “Review of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 2002).

¹⁶ Daniel Mendelsohn, “Mighty Hermaphrodite,” Review of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, *New York Review of Books* (7 November 2002).

¹⁷ Mark Lawson, “Gender Blender,” Review of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, *The Guardian* (5 October 2002).

¹⁸ Robyn Warhol, “Physiology, Gender, and Feeling: On Cheering Up,” *Narrative*, 12.2 (2004), pp. 227-28.

¹⁹ Adam Begley, “Hermaphrodite’s History Is a Storyteller’s Bonanza,” Review of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, *The New York Observer* (9 September 2002).

farther and farther to encompass more people, more life.”²⁰ Alexander Linklater of the London *Evening Standard* considers that Franzen’s *Corrections* and Eugenides’ *Middlesex* are “heaving social and family chronicles,” with the effect of “snuffing out the memory of postmodernism.” If Franzen and Eugenides are “useful indicators,” Linklater continues, then “American fiction is right back home to full-scale realism.”²¹ Andrew O’Hehir of the *Salon Review* concurs with other reviewers on the matter of similarities between the *Corrections* and *Middlesex*, but only within “broad contours” of “the full-scale realistic novel” and “critical examinations of 20th-century America.”²² O’Hehir does not see Eugenides as a satirist at all, asserting that he portrays “America, his much-maligned hometown of Detroit and even the most ridiculous members of the Stephanides family with unreserved and compassionate sympathy,” or, as Mark Lawson would define it, “sardonic empathy.”²³

Critical works on *Middlesex*

Critics have produced a considerable number of texts that analyze Eugenides’ Pulitzer Prize winning novel. Most of these texts deal with gender identity and psychosexual narrative in the novel, and therefore address themes other than my own. There are only a few texts that analyze the same perspective that I present in the thesis - ethnicity. I have chosen the most interesting ones that analyze the immigrant and ethnic discourses, and they will be incorporated in my discussion.

Aristi Trendel explores the way in which the three generations of the Stephanides reinvent their identity on different levels in American society where forces of assimilation contrast considerably with the ideas of multiculturalism. In his essay “The Reinvention of Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*” he argues that there is “no celebratory, aggressive multiculturalism” in the novel. Eugenides prefers, according to Trendel, a middle rooted cosmopolitan way in his construction of ethnicity and the second generation is pivotal in this process by adopting American values, while preserving a native heritage under the strain of conflicting demands. I will return to Trendel’s analysis in the chapter where I discuss the second generation in the novel.

²⁰Laura Miller, “My Big Fat Gender Identity Crisis,” Review of Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*, *The New York Times* (15 September 2002).

²¹ Alexander Linklater, “Life as a Girl When You’re a Boy,” *Evening Standard* (23 September 2002).

²² Andrew O’Hehir, “*Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides,” *Salon Review* (5 September 2002).

²³ Lawson, “Gender Blender.”

In her essay “Theory Uncompromised by Practicality: Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*” Debra Shostak analyzes the metaphor of hybridity, as it applies to the formal structure of the novel and to the construction of ethnic and gender identity. I have found several of Shostak’s ideas and conclusions useful for my discussion of the first and second generations, in particular that the process of cultural hybridization, as a premise of the immigrant self-invention, does not lead to the ideal of the middle, the possibility of a both/and choice, but rather to the either/or option. Immigrant figures that are a part of the narrative of geographical dislocation in the end do not achieve cultural in-betweenness, as Shostak argues.

In her unpublished Ph.D. thesis “Transgender Transnationalism: Representations of Immigrant Genders and Sexualities in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century American Literature” Stephanie Hsu analyzes *Middlesex* through different perspectives: not only as a text that popularizes intersex as an identity with distinctly North American origins, but also as a tale of immigration that places its characters in the Fordist and post-Fordist era of modern capital accumulation where they have only an illusion of choice in shaping their social identity. In such circumstances any human activity may become a site of production, the benefit of which is not necessarily aimed for the ones who produce, whether they are Cal’s grandparents working for others, or Cal himself writing a biography. I will return to and further explore Hsu’s analysis in all three of the remaining chapters.

I have enjoyed reading Suzan Frelich Appleton’s essay, “Contesting Gender in Popular Culture and Family Law: *Middlesex* and other Transgender Tales.” However, I could not successfully incorporate it into this thesis as it explores other points of view on *Middlesex*, unrelated to my thesis: the effects *Middlesex* has on our understanding of sex and gender and the way the law approaches these categories.

The Concept of Ethnicity

Ethnicity has come to be regarded as a mode of action and of representation: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity.

- Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*

Ethnicity and diverse ethnic origins are an important part of American life. Their constant reassessment is even more so. The debate about ethnicity no longer deals with the simplistic dualism between the melting pot and cultural pluralism. A hope of the assimilation of ethnic Americans along the lines of an Anglo-American prototype is a matter of the past, and

scholars have since the late 1970s emphasized either the staying power of ethnicity or its permanence. There are traditional and modern definitions of ethnicity, depending on the schools of thought dominant in the respective periods of time. The line along which they mainly differ is between the engagement of the rhetoric of inclusion, or exclusion. I will present here the main aspects of ethnicity theories and their practical employment in modern America, as I find them relevant for the discussion of ethnicity in *Middlesex*.

Dictionary entries state that the word “ethnicity” is rooted in the Greek *ethnos*, meaning nation or people.²⁴ In the past, the word had religious connotations and it was used to signify someone other than Jews and Christians, that is, pagan. The term lost its meaning over many centuries. Only since the nineteenth century the word “ethnicity” has been used to refer to the more familiar characterization of cultural, linguistic, racial or national communities with particular traits. In other words, it acquired a generic meaning and it is used today to signify a group of people with a shared identity.²⁵

The fundamental theoretical concept of ethnicity is related to Max Weber. He characterizes ethnic groups as social groups whose members believe in common real or presumed ancestry and history, and share a consciousness of kind: an ethnic group is one whose members “entertain subjective belief in their common descent because of memories of colonization and migration [...] it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists.”²⁶ Weber considers the past as a central agent in an ethnic group’s self-definition. It is, therefore, a family ancestry and *a sense of common history* that sets an ethnic group apart from other types of social groups. Richard Alba also ascribes much importance to history – family ancestry and group history – in defining an ethnic group.²⁷ It is the past and the collective memory that in part characterize ethnic group belonging.

Werner Sollors explains that ethnic groups are typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units. They seem to be always already in existence. As a subject of study, each group yields an essential continuum of certain myths and traits, or of human capital. The focus is on the group’s preservation and survival, which appear

²⁴ *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 80-84.

²⁵ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 27; Ray Chow, *Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 24.

²⁶ Max Weber, “What is an Ethnic Group?” in *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Eds. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex (Oxford: Polity Press, 1997), pp. 18-19.

²⁷ Richard Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). pp. 299, 313.

threatened.²⁸ On the other hand, Frederik Barth has directed us to focus on the *emergence* of ethnic consciousness rather than on the survival. He has made the *boundary* and not the *cultural stuff* that it encloses the central feature of ethnic divisions.²⁹

If ethnicity has a definite appearance but indefinite substance,³⁰ how shall we define the substance of ethnicity in America? More important, we ought to address the question of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) line of thinking – whether it is still dominant, or its importance has waned in favour of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism.

First of all, I propose that we acknowledge the actual fact of the rhetoric of exclusion in defining the “ethnic.” In other words, defining the “dominant culture” as opposed to “otherness,” is still widespread in our everyday experience.

Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex explain it in the following way:

[T]he term “ethnic” group may be used only to classify minorities and inferiors, whereas majority and dominant groups do not see themselves as ethnic at all. Thus, in Britain, the term “ethnic minorities” is used to refer primarily to non-white immigrants, while in some other countries the term refers to such groups as the Australian Aborigines, the Sami in the Scandinavian countries, Roma or Gypsies, or the First Nations (Native Americans) of North America who seek to live outside the modern economy and polity.³¹

“The WASP definition of ethnicity,” as Ulf Hannerz terms it, is applied in the same manner in the United States to refer to the non-white groups. Ethnicity is “a quality which is absent among Anglo-Saxons; which [...] increases among Americans of European descent as you pass over the map of Europe from the northwest toward the southeast; and which is very strong among people of non-European ancestry.”³² Sollors agrees that many people experience the notion of ethnicity as connoting minority status, lower class, or migrancy. He advocates against this discriminatory view of ethnicity that translates into “not completely American.”³³ In a quite opposite manner, ethnic awareness increases with the level of education. As Richard Alba demonstrates in his analysis of ethnicity among intellectuals and in academic milieus, the notion “that education should have a negative impact on ethnic

²⁸ Werner Sollors, “Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity,” in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, Ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. xii-xiv.

²⁹ Frederik Barth, “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, Ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 300.

³⁰ Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 21.

³¹ Introduction, *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Eds. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex (Oxford: Polity Press, 1997), p. 4.

³² Ulf Hannerz, “Some Comments on the Anthropology of Ethnicity in the United States,” in *Theories of Ethnicity*, p. 417.

Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp. 25, 39.

³³ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp. 25, 39.

identity is also bolstered by the common view of education as an agent of assimilation. But, on both counts, the analysis disappoints: the higher the level of education, the more likely is the expression of an ethnic identity.”³⁴

Second, I perceive ethnicity as a matter of subjective interpretation, and in this respect agree with Guibernau and Rex.³⁵ Namely, when discussing ethnicity, an important factor to take into account is that there is a difference between ethnicity that people claim themselves, and ethnicity that others may attribute to them. It is a subjective interpretation that characterizes the underlying differences in both cases and not “some scientific sociological truth.” What we also need to take into consideration is that any subjective interpretation may further be influenced, and in this way complicated, by the way a group of people perceive themselves, and how they are viewed by others. The criteria of others in perceiving us may be a particular cultural or physical aspect. We, on the other hand, may engage other criteria in distinguishing ourselves. Indeed, it is not any a priori cultural *difference* that makes ethnicity. Although I feel the need to delve deeper into this issue, I remain here with a conclusion that a plethora of possible inconveniences may overflow the Pandora’s Box of any subjective interpretation.

I find Werner Sollors’ and Richard Alba’s studies, conclusions and proposals related to American ethnicity as future-oriented and flexible, albeit from the white perspective, and I will present them here in brief, as appropriate for my discussion on the interplay of self-invention and ethnicity in *Middlesex*. Sollors moves radically from the outmoded accounts of ethnicity, implying a family ancestry and a sense of common history, towards a free choice - the invention of ethnicity. As such, ethnicity embraces the notions of *consent* and *descent*. Descent is a non-changeable, fixed category and refers to our lineage by blood; whereas consent implies the voluntary aspect of other relations of ours. Regarded from this perspective, we are “mature free agents,” and “architects of our fates to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems.”³⁶ Sollors’ approach has thus shifted from the conservative aspect of ethnicity to the cultural construction of “the vocabulary of kinship” and “cultural codes” of consent and descent, the emphasis being on *invention*:

By calling ethnicity – that is, belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group - an “invention,” one signals an interpretation in a modern and postmodern context [...] [According to] newer anthropological, sociological, and historical thinking [...] ethnicity is not so much an ancient and

³⁴ Alba, p. 55.

³⁵ Guibernau and Rex, p. 3.

³⁶ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 6.

deep-seated force surviving from the historical past, but rather the modern and modernizing feature of a contrasting strategy that may be shared far beyond the boundaries within which it is claimed. It marks an acquired modern sense of belonging that replaces visible, concrete communities whose kinship symbolism ethnicity may yet mobilize in order to appear more natural.³⁷

“Symbolic ethnicity” is a different aspect of the same argument. Herbert Gans argues in favour of the new immigrant ancestors’ choosing a few symbolic items of their ethnic heritage to cherish their ethnic feeling. The most important factor in the development of symbolic ethnicity is probably the awareness that neither the practice of ethnic culture, nor participation in ethnic organizations is essential to being and feeling ethnic.³⁸ The second generation of the new immigrants has reached this kind of awareness. By the fourth generation, as Gans asserts, symbolic ethnicity will prevail as a form of self-expression in relation to ethnicity.³⁹ Guibernau and Rex see the essence of the so-called “ethnie” in a similar manner – some of its characteristics are through myths and specific symbols attributed to wider social circles, thus claiming the presence of actual kin.⁴⁰ However, both Sollors and Alba agree that the fact of ethnicity does not lie in the content, but in the importance one ascribes to it.⁴¹

Alba points with regard to the ongoing process of the transformation of ethnicity in contemporary America to the emergence of a new ethnic group, the “European Americans.”⁴² Since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, more than 20 million legal immigrants have settled in the United States, and more than 80% are from countries outside Europe. The fact that most contemporary immigrants come from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean has stimulated the reinvention of ethnicity among the Americans of European background in general. The ethnicity of the new group of European Americans is characterized by its own myths about its place in American history and American identity, and it is based on “ancestry” from anywhere on the European continent.⁴³

Ray Chow situates ethnicity in the context of increasing capitalist commodification. She argues in favour of re-examining the concept of ethnicity in the modern world by giving

³⁷ Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, pp. xiii-xiv.

³⁸ Herbert J. Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” In *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2:1 (1979), p. 14.

³⁹ Gans, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Guibernau and Rex, p. 3.

⁴¹ Alba, p. 49; Sollors, *Theories of Ethnicity*, p. xviii.

⁴² Alba, p. 292.

⁴³ Alba, pp. 292-93; Victor Nee and Richard Alba, “Toward a New Definition,” in *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What it Means to be American*, Ed. Tamar Jacoby (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p. 87.

new meaning to Max Weber's theory about the Protestant work ethic and capitalism – a secular belief in salvation that goes effectively hand in hand with the interpellation, disciplining, and rewarding of subjects constituted by specific forms of labor. Although it is a concept that illuminates the existing hierarchy within the multicultural ethos, ethnicity is virtually society's mechanism of marking boundaries by way of labour. Chow argues that the notion of ethnicity as it is currently used is theoretically ambivalent, confusing, and self-contradictory. As compared to conservative views of ethnicity, Chow's applies effectively to the present day: "everyone is now considered to be ethnic in the sense of belonging to one or another grouping."⁴⁴

"Ethnic identity" is a term of recent origin: it shared some of the same roots as the term "new ethnicity," in that its focus is on a subjective individual's search for self. New ethnicity in this context is seen as a means of coming to terms with who an individual is.⁴⁵ Ethnic identity is both a psychological and a sociological term.⁴⁶ On the one hand, it helps a person to produce order in her or his own individual life. On the other, it helps to place that individual within a group, or involves "identification" with a collectivity. Both forms of identity may be accomplished through the use of symbols, and they vary independently of each other.

The social dimensions of identity and identification may be either chosen (by an individual) or imposed (by political communities to instigate a sentiment of belonging and a belief in a common destiny). The apparently generalized character of ethnicity at the collective level does not preempt the continual reconstruction of ethnicity at a personal level.⁴⁷ The acceptance of multiple identifications at a collective level does not mean a loss of identity at an individual and psychological level. It is simply a fact of human existence that human beings live within, and identify with, a multiplicity of groups according to occasion.⁴⁸

Race is in many instances defined as a part of, or in contrast to, ethnicity. Milton Gordon diplomatically argues for a broad definition of the term "ethnic group," that signifies a common sense of peoplehood running through race, religion or national origin.⁴⁹ Gordon holds that there is a common social-psychological core to these three categories, and the term

⁴⁴ Chow, pp. 35, vii-viii.

⁴⁵ David L. Salvaterra, "Becoming American: Assimilation, Pluralism, and Ethnic Identity," in *Immigrant America. European Ethnicity in the United States*. Ed. Timothy Walch (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), p. 38.

⁴⁶ Guibernau and Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader*, p 4.

⁴⁷ Cohen, p. 120.

⁴⁸ Cohen, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life. The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 26-28.

“ethnic group” is a useful one for the designation of this common element. By no means do these concepts carry the same meaning. However, through historical circumstances all of them serve to create a sense of peoplehood for groups within the United States, and more often than not, in interchangeable mode. And they are a matter of invention:

The forces of modern life embodied by such terms as “ethnicity,” “national origin,” or “race” can indeed be meaningfully discussed as “inventions.” Of course, this usage is not meant to evoke a conspiratorial interpretation of a manipulative inventor who single-handedly makes ethnics out of unsuspecting subjects, but to suggest widely shared, though intensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented.⁵⁰

Greek-American Ethnicity

Greek-Americans are today an overwhelmingly urban population. They perceive themselves as an ethnic group, but at the same time, they feel very American, with a dual, hyphenated identity. Greece is considered to be a nation of diaspora,⁵¹ and the largest Greek presence outside of Greece proper is in North America – United States and Canada – and Australia. Up until 1900, most Greeks lived outside the Greek Nation state.⁵² Immigrant Greeks in this way claimed Greek nationality while living in other countries. George Kourvetaris concludes that in the first and second immigrant generations “Greek ethnicity and Orthodox Christianity converge, but by the third and subsequent generations of Greek Americans, the secular component of Greek ethnicity prevails.⁵³ By the third generation, as Kourvetaris further asserts, “Greekness” – as measured by language, secular traditions, and Greek values in general – becomes replaced with “Americanness.”⁵⁴

Along with other Southern, Eastern, and Central European immigrants, Greek expatriates belong to the group of “new” immigration to America, in comparison to earlier settlers from Northwestern Europe. As a social phenomenon, every new generation of immigrants faced discrimination by the predecessors, as well as racism and xenophobia. Along this line of thought, immigrants from South Eastern Europe and Asian countries were not “desirable” by the “old” European immigrants. Hence, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act was passed to restrict by national origins quota the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States.

⁵⁰ Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, p. xi.

⁵¹ George A. Kourvetaris, *Studies on Greek Americans* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1997), Introduction and Chapter 1: Early and Late Immigrants, pp. 2-34.

⁵² Kourvetaris, p. 185.

⁵³ Kourvetaris, p. 52.

⁵⁴ Kourvetaris, p. 52.

The era of mass migration, 1890-1920, is also the period of industrial capitalism in America, when the doors opened for more than 487 000 Greek immigrants.⁵⁵ The Great Depression in 1929 and the failed Greco-Turkish war, a conflict that arose from “the dream of Greater Greece,” resulted particularly in massive repatriation and immigration. Early immigrants from Greece, the first generation, were mostly of rural and working class origins and came from small agricultural communities. Like most of the Southeastern European immigrants, they did not come in family units, but rather as single males, expecting to return home after acquiring economic power. Both early and late immigrants from Greece brought with them a traditional lifestyle that reflected the village subculture in Greece: they were folk-oriented, ethnocentric, familial and traditional.

As opposed to expatriates from Northwestern Europe who settled mostly in small towns and rural America, Greeks were attracted by employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in large cities. They were mostly interested in the service industry and “middleman” roles. Consequently, Greek restaurants flourished as a phenomenon of the first generation Greek immigrants. In many cases, they also became real estate agents and rentiers. In his study of Greek-American professionals, Kourvetaris found that the story of the successful Greek in the United States is that of the Greek economic entrepreneur and not of the Greek-American professional. Greek people have a cultural tradition of entrepreneurship dating back from the nineteenth century in the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, and South Eastern Europe. Kourvetaris points out that Greeks tend to be non-assimilative, the reasons being partly the host country’s hostility and economic position. Diaspora Greeks tend to occupy a social category of “middleman minorities.” There are two main aspects of this group: “its members are engaged in small commercial enterprises,” and “middlemen minorities have somewhat tense relations with the majority population.”⁵⁶ Confronted with systematic discrimination and exclusion in the general labour market, ethnic members take a collective or family, rather than individualistic, approach to establishing and managing a business. Kourvetaris also notes that between 1908 and 1918 the population of Greeks in Asia Minor was about two million, and that the city of Smyrna was a seat of lucrative commerce for them, especially in the wheat and silk trades.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Spyros D. Orfanos, “The Greek American Dance of Continuity and Integration,” in *Reading Greek America*, Ed. Spyros D. Orfanos (New York: Pella, 2002), p. 364.

⁵⁶ Kourvetaris, pp. 25-26, 179-80.

⁵⁷ Kourvetaris, p. 180.

Spyros Orfanos explains that traditional Greek culture, primarily rural in comparison to the urban culture of the present Greece, is collectivistic. Its emphasis on in-group/out-group psychology is much higher than in mainstream American culture. Generally, an in-group in Greece is defined as “family and friends and other people potentially or obviously concerned with my welfare,” and these people are treated with profuse benevolence. There is a striking difference in treating out-group members, and it is marked with suspicion and distrust. Orfanos sees collectivistic and individualistic orientations as major differing dimensions of Greek and American culture in that self-realization and individuality are not recognized and hard to achieve in collectivistic cultures.⁵⁸ The most important character trait for Greek people is the concept of “philotimo,” the highest virtue - self-esteem, love of honour - if literally translated. To lack this quality is to be seen as less than human. This quality is also associated with proper “in-group behaviour.”⁵⁹ It is clear that, eventually, the immigrant families take some of these concepts with them.

Having collectivistic orientation in mind, family is viewed in traditional Greek culture as a “lifelong system of emotional support, and of economic assistance, if needed.” Chrysie Constantakos notes that in America as well “Greek culture has been characterized, at least on the ideal level, by intergenerational cohesion, collectivism, subcultural continuity, and high levels of support for older parents, especially in their later years. Moreover, adults, and especially elderly, were to be respected.”⁶⁰ This is a result of elders’ continual roles within a family, and due to the status that a family associates with older age. Filial obligations, as Constantakos defines them, are very strong among Greek-Americans and arise from traditional Greek morality. She also suggests that the enduring strength of filial obligations today may partly be a result of ethnicity renewal, the recent shift from a negative to a positive view of ethnicity.

When it comes to family organization, for earlier immigrants the marriage arrangements were usually a matter of matchmaking. If the family stayed in America, Greek women played an important role in both the familial and the church setting. As a rule, early Greek women did not work outside the house, regardless of their marital status. In quite opposite a manner, the post World War II Greek immigrant women worked either in the family restaurants (which may be considered as an extension of the family zone), or in some

⁵⁸ Orfanos, pp. 367-69.

⁵⁹ Orfanos, p. 369.

⁶⁰ Chrysie M. Constantakos, “The Interplay of Ageing and Ethnicity: Filial Responsibility and Greek Americans” in *Reading Greek America*, Ed. Spyros D. Orfanos (New York: Pella, 2002), p. 214.

other occupation. When it comes to gender roles, Alice Scourby points out that the “overall image that emerges of Greek women through the eyes of novelist, therapist, the ethnographer, and the social scientist is that of good wife, good mother, and good housekeeper whose needs are always subservient to those of her husband and children.”⁶¹ Kourvetaris reminds us of the discrepancy between the “ideal” and “real” aspects of the husband-wife and mother-father gender roles:

The image of the Greek husband’s authority and gender-roles was a carryover from Greece, but they were not unique to the Greeks alone [...] ideally, the Greek father was considered the head and authority figure of the family unit, and he expected the respect and cooperation from his wife and children. In reality, however, his authority was contingent upon his ability to prove himself and be a good provider for his family, a compassionate husband, and an understanding father [...] in the public/social sphere [...] Greek wives-mothers, however, are expected to behave in a modest and submissive manner, particularly in public places when their husbands are present.⁶²

In more informal family settings, the Greek wife-mother was the most dominant figure in the Greek immigrant family and her influence was felt in the larger ethnic community. It is important to note that in Greek social organization, there is a high emphasis on motherhood, and families without children were and still are looked upon as incomplete. Motherhood is highly esteemed in the Greek orthodox faith as well. In the Greek-American community, childless couples are made uncomfortable, in particular the husband.⁶³ The contemporary Greek-American family still places a profound emphasis on the male norm, as Spyros Orfanos concludes, explaining that the ethnic roots behind such gender arrangement can be traced back to Greece: “Patriarchal prejudice and pride are institutionalized in Greece and are responsible for the low status of women.”⁶⁴ Endogamy used to be an important aspect of Greek ethnic groups. Recent studies show that the rate of intermarriage between Greek and non-Greek partners in America grows higher every year. It is interesting to note that the non-Greek partner is in most cases brought to the Greek-American community. Greek-Americans are less likely to enter other ethnic communities.

Finally, when it comes to adolescents and young children, their autonomy and individuality are made difficult in a traditional Greek setting. Families are highly cohesive, and “the freedom to choose one’s path and destiny in life has been virtually nonexistent in

⁶¹ Alice Scourby, *The Greek Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 130.

⁶² Kourvetaris, pp. 102-03.

⁶³ Kourvetaris, pp. 103-04.

⁶⁴ Orfanos, p. 370.

Greek life.⁶⁵ Recent studies of Greek-American families show that significant issues arise in cases of separation-individuation of young Greeks from their families, which in mainstream American culture is described as a normal young adult developmental stage.⁶⁶

The Concept of Hybridity

The term “hybridity” is widely used today and generally refers to the cross-breeding of two different species or the combining of two entities into a third that would share common characteristics with both of these entities. In post-colonial theory, the term hybridity generally refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.⁶⁷ In other words, in post-colonial discourse, hybridity has frequently been used as denoting cross-cultural “exchange.” However, this use of the term has been widely criticized as it usually implies neglecting the inequality of the power relations it refers to.⁶⁸ Hybridity occurs in colonial societies, as well as in independent societies. In the first case, it results from cultural suppression when the colonial power asserts political and economic control, or when settler-invaders force indigenous peoples to “assimilate” to new social patterns. In independent societies, new transcultural forms are a consequence of global migration.⁶⁹

I am using the idea of post-colonialism in a very wide sense, as today there are different connotations of what was meant at first by the term “post-colonial.” The hyphen in the term denotes the material effects of the historical “fact” of colonialism. “Post-colonial” in this way signifies “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.”⁷⁰ On the other hand, the new term “postcolonialism” (without the hyphen) represents “an increasingly indiscriminate attention to cultural difference and marginality of all kinds,” whether in a particular case colonialism is a historical fact or not. In this sense, the idea of postcolonialism is applicable to the discussion in my thesis. Hybridity in the case of the novel I am discussing refers to the narrative – a tale of

⁶⁵ Alice Scourby, quoted in *Reading Greek America*, p. 369.

⁶⁶ Sam J. Tsemberis & Spyros D. Orfanos, “Greek Families,” in *Reading Greek America*, Ed. Spyros D. Orfanos (New York: Pella, 2002), p. 272.

⁶⁷ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 118.

⁶⁸ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 119.

⁶⁹ Introduction, Part Five: Hybridity, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 137.

⁷⁰ John Thieme, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary* (London: Arnold, 2003), p.123.

immigration and a coming-of age story blended together, the non-normative body of the main protagonist, and new cultural identities of all protagonists involved.

For Robert Young there are two contrasting ways in which hybridity is formed and operates: by disruption and forcing together a single entity is made from two distinct things, and in an opposite process, by force a single entity is made into two or more parts. Hybridity “thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference.” However, in this process “the same” and “the different” are altered and have a different quality than before the “hybridization.”⁷¹ In this sense Young relates his thinking to Derrida’s notion of “brisure,” which implies breaking and joining at the same time and in the same place, “difference and sameness in an apparently impossible simultaneity.” This double logic excludes the rational either/or choices which Young finds characteristic of the twentieth century thinking. Hybridity has recently gained currency with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who believes that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity.⁷² Bhabha sees the importance of hybridity not in locating two “originals” from which the third is formed, but in recognizing a contradictory and ambivalent “in-between” space which enables other positions to emerge. Cultural identity, that is all cultural statements and systems, is constructed in, as he names it, “Third Space of Enunciation.”⁷³ The process of cultural hybridity produces something new and different, a new site of “negotiation of meaning and representation.” The importance of hybridity is in the fact that other meanings and discourses merge within the subject, and therefore the subject is influenced by the intervention of that otherness. There is no authority in the sense of being prior, original, since original is never complete in itself.⁷⁴

The concept of hybridity today emphasizes relations within a field of study, as opposed to the earlier definition, where the focus was on an object or a specific event. This follows the general pattern of structuralism and post-structuralism: instead of studying an object or an event, it is more relevant to look at how the processes or different structures of society and culture work.⁷⁵

“Liminality” is a term related to hybridity. The term “liminal” denotes a sense of an interstitial or “in-between” space. It derives from the word “limen” which means “threshold,”

⁷¹ Robert Young, “The Cultural Politics of Hybridity,” In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 158.

⁷² Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space,” Interview with Homi Bhabha, in: *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 211.

⁷³ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 118.

⁷⁴ Rutherford, p. 210.

⁷⁵ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 121.

a term particularly used in psychology.⁷⁶ It is related but differs from the more definite term “limit” which denotes a clear boundary in space or comprehension.⁷⁷ In cultural anthropology “liminality” refers to a transition or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person’s life. In post-colonial theory this term is important since it refers to the space where cultural exchange may occur. It is “the transcultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated.”⁷⁸ Hybridity and liminality go hand in hand for Bhabha who, in defining liminality, refers to African-American art historian Renee Green’s architectural metaphor – the stairwell. Green compares a stairwell as a liminal space between upper and lower areas that becomes a symbolic space of interaction.⁷⁹ According to Bhabha this “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.”⁸⁰

Debra Shostak points to Antony Easthope’s critique of Bhabha’s “interstitial passage” metaphor when it refers to a cultural subject who lives in “difference” and in the absence of “fixed identifications.” Easthope argues, and I agree with him, that “to try to live in difference, in a state of pure hybridity, actually in the ‘interstices’” is “too like the state of psychosis.”⁸¹ Easthope further advances that a coherent speaking subject cannot live in the gaps between identities.

Immigrant Writing in America

There are several main aspects that American ethnic literature has in general, as well as notable differences between the writing of earlier and later immigrants. I will present them here together with the recurrent themes in these works that I find appropriate for the discussion. As a starting point, I am referring to Sollors’ definition of ethnic literature as works “written by, about, or for persons who perceive themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups, including even nationally and internationally popular texts.”⁸²

⁷⁶ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 130.

⁷⁷ Oxford English Dictionary Online.

⁷⁸ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 130.

⁷⁹ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 130.

⁸⁰ Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, p. 131.

⁸¹ Debra Shostak, “Theory Uncompromised by Practicality: Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides’ Middlesex,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Fall 2008), p. 391; Anthony Easthope, “Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity,” *Textual Practice*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1998), pp. 344-45, 347.

⁸² Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 243.

David Cowart, on the other hand, argues against the segregation of immigrant fiction from the mainstream literature and literary analysis, since many themes this fiction deals with, and its strategies, can be situated within a larger societal context and conversation. Cowart points out that the new immigrant writers, for example, engage innovative treatments of the family romance, of madness and its representation, and of economic and artistic ambition. In addition, he acknowledges the “seismic rapidity with which American culture is moving away from its historically Eurocentric bias,” and proposes a new, *post* post-colonial criticism, “more answerable to real-world politics and American history,” that the new immigrant writers may benefit from (emphasis in the original text).⁸³

As discussed above, Sollors relates ethnic writing with the “invention” of ethnicity. In his view, ethnic fictions are continually reinvented, thus reinventing ethnicity. Sollors here refers to the following interpretation by anthropologist Michael J. Fischer: “What the newer works [of American Ethnic literature] bring home forcefully is [...] the paradoxical sense that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control.”⁸⁴ Laura Browder views American ethnic literature as works that describe the experience of belonging to a minority group in the United States. These works “have traditionally been written and read as a means of helping frame the complex cultural relationships in a multiethnic society.”⁸⁵ Rey Chow considers ethnic biography as a product of a “need to write about something whose existence has nonetheless been placed out of reach, [in order] to grope for a ‘self-regard’ that does not yet exist.”⁸⁶

The works of American ethnic writers of earlier immigrant waves – immigrants of mostly European origin – reflected the immigrant state of mind, burdened with, as Timothy Walch describes, a fundamental conflict between the predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture of the landed generations and the diverse European cultures of the newly arrived immigrants.⁸⁷ In particular Eastern and Southern Europeans – Jews, Poles, Italians and Greeks – did live through a sense of marginality similar to that faced by today’s minorities. Economic security

⁸³ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 3.

⁸⁴ Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory” in *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 195, quoted in Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, p. xi.

⁸⁵ Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁸⁶ Chow, p. 142.

⁸⁷ Timothy Walch, “Introduction,” *Immigrant America: European Ethnicity in the United States*, Ed. Timothy Walch (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), p. ix.

was a pervasive theme in most ethnic novels: authors wrote of American cities, farms, factories, and families from a working-class point of view. “They were the sons and daughters of working-class men and women, and they wrote of the sweatshop, the street, the saloon, and the tenement.”⁸⁸

Many of the novelists began their working lives alongside their fathers in the factory and the union hall, and correspondingly wrote of hardship, violence, early death, and the struggle for a better life. Cowart reminds us that in the earliest written literature “the new world became what various sets of European eyes and various European pens said it was.”⁸⁹ Many of these authors were included in the first pages of American school anthologies as, for example, John Winthrop, with his 1630 sermon “A model of Christian Charity,” conveying to the future Massachusetts Bay colonists that their new settlement would be a metaphorical “city upon a hill,” or William Bradford with his famous manuscript *Of Plymouth Plantation*, describing the founding of the Plymouth colony and the lives of the new settlers from 1621 to 1646.

A common feature in American ethnic writing is the search for identity of individuals caught between two cultures: What constitutes the category of American? Am I an American? Where do I fit into American society? Burch concludes that the immediate impact of earlier ethnic fiction was as marginal as the writers themselves. Although these works were reviewed, the literary critics and general readership often missed their major theme – the search for personal identity – until considerable time would pass after the publication.⁹⁰ Some authors wrote about the way their own people perceived and reacted to American society. Others dealt with the warmth and love of their extended immigrant families, describing the establishment of personal foundations for the survival of marginal minorities in contemporary American society.

Unlike mainstream American literature, earlier and first-generation ethnic writings are rarely focused on a lone hero who proves his manhood in a life-and-death struggle. An ethnic hero of the period is a marginal man, the son of an immigrant family struggling in a new country. He is hopeful and enthusiastic, as well as full of self-doubt. The protagonists of such ethnic novels are never alone: even after they leave the parental home, they join extended

⁸⁸ Betty Ann Burch, “Us and Them,” in *Immigrant America. European Ethnicity in the United States*. Ed. Timothy Walch (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), pp 17-18.

⁸⁹ Cowart, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Burch, p. 60.

families of friends or fellow compatriots.⁹¹ Strong female characters are another important element of American ethnic works. Women are portrayed working both inside and outside home, just as everyone in the immigrant community worked to support their families.

Apart from ethnic literature, public debates in America also included the issue of “Americanness,” and who belongs to the group of ethnic writers. Sollors concludes that frequently the ethnic writers’ answer was: “We are Americans.” Writers like Jacob Riis from Denmark, with his autobiography *The Making of an American* (1901), or Louis Adamic from Slovenia, with *My America* (1938), already in the title of their works expressed where their loyalty stood, despite the fact that their place in the American culture was widely disputed. Sollors explains that ethnic writers “were not always equally at home in America,” and the reality differed largely from the “utopian notion of what the country might become: in an age of racial definitions of U.S. citizenship, racist immigration restrictions, and eugenicist thought, ethnic writers often invoked America as an ideal while the real United States was not yet claiming diversity in the spirit of multicultural pride that was to prevail only later.”⁹²

A “homemaking myth,” or a special claim that ethnic groups have made themselves at home in the new world by emphasizing their “early arrival” or a shared war experience, is another feature of ethnic writing. “Both the reader and the writer of an ethnic autobiography understand the implied contract: the memoirist is not telling his or her own story as much as the story of a people.”⁹³ In order to be heard, Laura Browder claims, the ethnic autobiographer must often conform to his or her audience’s stereotypes about that ethnicity. Some authors therefore avoid writing about possible personal fears or failure in the new country. Instead, they ascribe accomplishments and upward mobility to the achievement of the respective ethnic group as a whole, and also with America. In this way, ethnic heroes and some autobiographers made themselves “at home in America” by emphasizing an assumed unity between the respective culture and the dominant culture.⁹⁴

Many representative ethnic texts are typically written by American immigrants and their descendants and by members of minorities who not only claimed America but also stressed that they had “made it” in pursuing the American dream and successful acculturation. A writer whose work is representative of the genre is Mary Antin, a Russian Jewish immigrant, with her autobiographic work *The Promised Land*, published in 1912. It is

⁹¹ Burch, p. 56.

⁹² Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 13.

⁹³ Browder, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism*, pp. 44-45.

possibly the most famous immigrant novel and widely quoted by scholars. Its popularity, as Oscar Handlin asserts, was due to the relationship of the book to its times: for the readers it was both reassuring and representative.⁹⁵ Its message is that the new immigrants could and would be remade in the same manner as Antin claims she has been remade from an immigrant into American: “I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over.”⁹⁶ Antin’s work incorporated the traditional notion or “straight-line” scholarly view of assimilation, in the “new world” equivalent to Americanization.

In his work *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*, David Cowart analyzes the characteristics of contemporary immigrant fiction since 1970, referring to the fact that these writers operate in a distinctive, transformative social and cultural climate and differ from earlier arrivals. Cowart points out that among earlier immigrants comparatively few became successful English-language writers due to the historical circumstances – the lack of education and economic power. Some writers who, nevertheless, showed it could be done are Anzia Yezierska (Polish), Abraham Cahan (Lithuanian), Mary Antin (Russian), Henry Roth (Ukrainian), to name but a few. The fact that there are so many immigrant writers now, in the present day, Cowart ascribes to the changed perception of ethnicity, freshness of their vision, and the extraordinary quality of their writing that make them move swiftly towards national and international awards and appraisals.

[F]rom a quality needing to be burned away in some refiner’s fire of cultural homogenization, [ethnicity] has acquired distinction, cachet, and a quite literal marketability. Increasingly congenial to evolving literary taste, the fictions of immigrant literati fill display tables in bookstores and often vie for space on college syllabi with the literary fruit of homegrown ethnicity [...] Whether they distill America on the printed page or spin tales of an exotic homeland, immigrant writers compel the attention of a burgeoning readership.⁹⁷

The younger generation of immigrant authors identify themselves as artists first, immigrants second, and rarely directly denigrate or praise America. Instead, one of the things they take to is “the American privilege of criticizing American institutions [...] by interposing flawed or immature narrators (or viewpoint characters) between themselves and their readers.”⁹⁸ Contrary to some of the first-generation writers, they seem more aware of what constitutes the relationship between a societal center and its margins.

⁹⁵ Oscar Handlin, Foreword in Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. vii.

⁹⁶ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. ix.

⁹⁷ Cowart, p.206.

⁹⁸ Cowart, p.207.

By invoking Nabokov into his work, Cowart wishes to suggest some continuity between literary immigrant generations. He sees Nabokov's *Pnin* as a text that is "highly representative of the travail of the displaced, engaging the immigrant experience most directly and therefore suitable for introducing and illustrating a tentative anatomy of immigrant narrative."⁹⁹ Unfortunately, I do not have the space to present specific exemplifications in *Pnin* here, so I will only mention that the work contains some of the general features of immigrant fiction as Cowart introduces them: narrative fragmentation; remembered scenes of awkwardness in the American classroom; the reversal of generational roles (as children master the language and customs of the new country in less time, they take on responsibility for their suddenly infantilized elders); immigrants' struggle with a sense of psychological and cultural doubleness or "double consciousness" (point of view often shifts: the same character can be both narrator and object of third-person narration, teller and told); views of what makes the original home country unlivable; old world sex prohibitions versus new world freedom.¹⁰⁰

Some of the above mentioned features of immigrant narrative Cowart further explains in the following way: In most cases immigrant protagonists resemble their creators: born in another country, they come to America with their parents, or alone. The younger ones proceed through a *Bildung* that results in a more or less successful assimilation. There are also subjects that remain marginalized or isolated. Cowart points to Bharati Mukherjee and some of her characters that, like Professorji and his circle in *Jasmine*, "gravitate to some ghetto or ethnic enclave and permanently postpone immigration of the heart, mind and spirit." Other characters more successfully acculturate and reach the sensation of "double consciousness," or experience problems translating marriage customs from one world to another. Few immigrant fictional characters completely abandon their prior national identity: "However heartfelt naturalization and whatever the scale of brutality, suffering, and poverty left behind in the old country, the self remains sporadically subject to often painful nostalgia."¹⁰¹ Through the eyes of the immigrant, the country of origin is often nostalgically represented with the motifs of old folk-tales, village life, or a parent left behind, along with ancestral graves.

Many earlier immigrant writers describe in their works the scenes of arrival to the Ellis Island (Angel Island in some Asian-American immigrant works) and the first-hand experience

⁹⁹ Cowart, p.4.

¹⁰⁰ Cowart, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰¹ Cowart, p. 208.

of the actual Statue of Liberty. These scenes are charged with symbolism and the spirit of New World freedom, to which most immigrants so heartily aspire. As a conclusion to this section, I refer here to a paragraph from an essay by Bharati Mukherjee describing the naturalization ceremony at which, in 1988, she herself became an American citizen:

The old pieties of immigration no longer hold. A Norman Rockwell would have been hard-pressed to find the immigrant icons of an earlier era – the hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked were not in evidence. There was a notable lack of old ladies in black babushkas, with wrinkled, glistening cheeks. (Their closest ethnic embodiment, a beautiful Russian woman sitting in front of me, was reading Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* during the long waiting period.) A Dominican man next to me joked as we sat down after pledging allegiance, "Hey, now we can make a citizen's arrest!" Behind me, Chinese teen-agers passed copies of *The New Yorker*. I don't think we're on Ellis Island any more.¹⁰²

Historiographic Metafiction

The author of *Middlesex* does not see himself as postmodern, although he acknowledges the features of postmodernism in the novel: "I've blended postmodern and traditional [...] I want, in a way, a Classical shape to my books and a pleasing and elegant form to them, which is old-fashioned. But within that, I still have a lot of postmodern play without the continuing sense of relativism that... I got so tired of."¹⁰³ Since postmodern elements of fiction are at play with psychological realism in *Middlesex*, I am presenting here the essence of historiographic metafiction and the way it is applied within the novel's narrative. In addition, I will briefly touch upon the concept of "metahistorical romance," recently introduced by Amy Elias.

Postmodernist ideas deny the existence of "universal truth." Francois Lyotard argues that in postmodern societies power is closely linked with the decisions about knowledge. Therefore, we should ask ourselves the important question – Who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided.¹⁰⁴ Contemporary historical novels tend to challenge the veracity or objectivity behind historical narratives, urging a reader to question their representation of events in terms of – who is telling them? Furthermore, the reader is expected to differentiate "the world of discourse" in which a text is situated (or the world of

¹⁰² "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" In *New York Times Book Review* (August 28, 1988), quoted in Cowart, p. 211.

¹⁰³ A quote from Jeffrey Eugenides' interview with Bram van Moorheim, "3 am Interview: The Novel as the Picture of its Era," *3am Magazine* (September 2003), unpaginated.

¹⁰⁴ Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 119.

texts and intertexts), from “the world of ordinary reality.”¹⁰⁵ “The world of discourse” is directly linked to the world of empirical reality, but it is not itself empirical reality.

According to Linda Hutcheon, one of the paradoxes that characterize all postmodern discourses today is that they reinstall historical contexts as significant, and even determining, and in this way they problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge. In this respect, she argues for the need to distinguish between traditional historical fiction and postmodern fiction that includes a self-conscious dimension of history represented through language. By introducing a concept of *historiographic metafiction*, she has sought to describe the late twentieth century fiction that is both self-reflexive and historical, in that it raises the question of its own representation of truth. Such fiction is a potentially subversive form of cultural critique and therefore bears social responsibility.

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (“exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination”). In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past “events” into present historical “facts.” This is not a “dishonest refuge from truth” but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs (emphasis in the original text).¹⁰⁶

Another view of postmodern historical fiction is offered by Amy J. Elias in her work *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Elias offers a new way of engaging history, referring to the postmodern fiction as “metahistorical romance,” an heir to the classic historical romances of Sir Walter Scott, “reshaped by the postmodern desire for history.”¹⁰⁷ Metahistorical romances acknowledge the impossibility of accessing history. However, they express a “desire for an alternative to history in the form of the aesthetic of historical sublime.” Elias asserts that history is sublime because “it is both unknowable and unrepresentable in discourse [...] the space of the chaotic, and hence to rational beings, the terrifying past.”¹⁰⁸ Drawing on Fredric Jameson's pronouncement in *The Political Unconscious* that “history is what hurts,”¹⁰⁹ as well as on the ideas of Hayden White, Elias defines

¹⁰⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory and Fiction* (London, Routledge, 1988), p. 125.

¹⁰⁶ Hutcheon, p. 89.

¹⁰⁷ Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001) p. xviii.

¹⁰⁸ Elias, p.42.

¹⁰⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 88.

postmodern metahistory as attempting by ethical action to reach a position outside or beyond history defined as “hurting.”¹¹⁰

A general characteristic and also value of historiographic metafiction is in its bringing forward the understanding that ideology and selection are always behind the representation of history. There are events that will be taken into account when writing a historical or fictional narrative text, and there are other events that will be omitted, depending on the creator of the text who decides. Historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon asserts, self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we constitute them as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning.

When talking about *Middlesex*, Eugenides explains that his first idea of writing a fictional memoir of a hermaphrodite got realized in practice as a family story and a historical story with a hermaphrodite narrator:

The book is not conceived as a historical novel. I always think a historical novel continuously remains in the past. This book tries to explain the past and comes up to the present day. There are several historical sections in it, and that is because I'm writing about generations. If you write about generations you have to consider the history generations are living through. So, in a way, that comes with the following of the gene through time.¹¹¹

What we experience in *Middlesex*, is a case of a skillful author who selects and creatively positions some of the events of modern American history, offering them through a playful and allegedly omniscient narrator Cal for us to dwell on and re-think. With his frequent metafictional asides, commentaries of a unique sort, Cal, the narrator, is spurring the readers' imagination and bringing them to enjoy his, at times, playful unreliability: “Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can't be entirely sure about any of this” (9). There are often mocking, almost childish, and comic asides throughout the narrative, but also explicit attempts of the narrator to connect with the reader by stepping out of the narrative and addressing him/her directly: “I feel you out there, reader. This is the only kind of intimacy I'm comfortable with. Just the two of us, here in the dark” (329).

The subversive tactics are further enhanced by the narrator's claim that he is “apolitical,” but only insofar as the reader grasps that the context the narrator alludes to is membership in groups and/or political parties: “[W]e hermaphrodites are people like everybody else. And I happen not to be a political person. I don't like groups” (106). The

¹¹⁰ Elias, p. 61.

¹¹¹ Jeffrey Eugenides' Interview with Bram van Moorheim.

lines that most of all assure the reader of the metafictional character of the novel, and creative intelligence of the authorial presence behind the novel's first person narrator's voice invoke T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" with the description of Cal's grandparent's ancestral home, and subtly coincidental Mr. Eugenides, the namesake of the novel's author:

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant / Unshaven, with a pocketful of currants / C.i.f. London: documents at sight, / Asked me in demotic French / To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel / Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. Everything you need to know about Smyrna is contained in that [...] the most metropolitan city in the Near East. (50)

This author's subversive cultural and at times political critique is, in the manner of historiographic metafiction, played out by selecting and describing in his own way historical events and situations like the 1922 massacre of the Greek population in Smyrna by Turkish forces, the mistreatment of new immigrants on entering America at Ellis Island, Prohibition, the Henry Ford era and its ideological treatment of Detroit workers, The Great Depression, World War II, the black and white relations and street riots of 1967 in Detroit, and the 1974 Cyprus crisis. Therefore, the author engages history while telling a family story, and in his telling he also reveals the impact of particular historical events on the lives of the family members, some of whom may have crossed the same kind of paths as James Joyce's Dedalus to come to the same conclusion: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."¹¹²

¹¹² James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 42.

Chapter Two: The First Generation – Desdemona and Lefty Stephanides

The act of expatriation is almost never a happy event. In essence, it is a tremendous change in one person's life. It is emotional, involves uprootedness and new beginnings, and demands strong personal traits in order to overcome the obstacles that such a change implies. The narrator and main character of *Middlesex*, Cal, sees himself as the final clause in a periodic sentence that started long ago, in another language. He suggests that we should read the sentence from the beginning, to meet his immigrant ancestors, and understand him completely (20). In a case of "an inbred family" (4) like the Cal's, all the ancestors matter. However, he reveals only the most important ones. Within the immigrant generation, these are two sets of grandparents, the Stephanides and the Zizmos. In this Chapter, I will focus on three-fourths of them, with more attention dedicated to the Stephanides, the reinvention of their identities and their incestuous relationship. "The members of my family have always had a knack for self-transformation," (312), Cal tells us.

Although the Stephanides go through the process of cultural hybridization in the new geographical circumstances, they do not achieve cultural in-betweenness, but rather remain faithful to their immigrant origins. For instance, Desdemona never learns to speak English, whereas Lefty on the other hand, "accustomed to the multifarious conjugations of ancient Greek verbs, had found English, for all its incoherence, a relatively simple tongue to master" (99). In the end, however, he never succeeds in the self-assigned task of restoring the poems of Sappho, due to "slow but inevitable dissolution of his mind" (222, 267). In addition, the Stephanides grandparents are completely broke at their elderly age and move in with their son's family. It is with warm heart and sadness that the narrator describes them at this point. Intimations of mortality are brought on by aging family members, as he explains (234). He will remember his grandfather as a silent, old, tall gentleman, who in another life might have been a professor (261-62). The signature of his grandmother and the Greek ladies of her generation is "the kindliness of their despair. How they moaned while offering you sweets! How they complained of physical ailments while patting your knee" (273).

The Voyage of Sibling Metamorphosis

Extraordinary circumstances are to blame for this brother and sister's forced immigration to America and their unusual relationship leads them from best friends into marriage.

Desdemona and Lefty belong to Greek stock in Asia Minor and live above the Ottoman city of Bursa, in a village of scarce population that mainly harvests silkworm cocoons and lives off the silk trade. Their parents were killed in the recent Greco-Turkish war, a conflict that arose from “the Big Idea, the dream of Greater Greece” (21) that never came true and caused mass casualties and tragic migration of Greek and Turkish populations under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In chapters “Matchmaking” and “An Immodest proposal” at the beginning of the novel we are gradually introduced to the family history, as well as social and political circumstances in Asia Minor at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the narrator’s account of the past events the author skillfully sets the stage for the siblings’ especially close relationship. He alludes to the “sameness” and coherence of the siblings from Desdemona’s point of view in the following descriptions:

Early on, the emotional sympathy she’d felt with Lefty had been so absolute that she’d sometimes forgotten they were separate people. As kids they’d scabbled down the terraced mountainside like a four-legged, two-headed creature. She was accustomed to their Siamese shadow [...] and whenever she encountered her solitary outline, it seemed cut in half. (25)

We further learn about the mother’s legacy at her death bed that the sister should take care of her brother and find him a wife (23), and of Desdemona’s appealing sexuality at the age of 21, her “voluptuous figure” and powerful braids “possessing a natural power, like a beaver’s tail” (24). Lefty is one year younger, very handsome, and attracts great attention from females. Despite his affinity for gambling and his looks, “like underworld figures he idolized [...] Lefty was in fact no gangster but the pampered, bookish son of comfortably well-off parents” (24). As the war progresses, brother and sister develop a weakness for each other and enter a romantic relationship, though of a platonic nature. It happens in part because they are orphans and gather their forces to overcome difficult circumstances, but also for one more reason – the scarcity of eligible mates due to a small population, in particular for Lefty: “The lack of romantic possibility had created a vicious cycle. No one to love: no love. No love: no babies. No babies: no one to love” (35).

Due to the chaos of the Great Fire of Smyrna, the siblings are forced to flee home. By employing irony and antiphrasis, the author describes the reserved position of the British navy forces, anchored close enough to observe the situation ashore without getting “caught up in these Byzantine struggles:”

“Jolly crowded, what?”

“Looks like Victoria Station on Christmas Eve, sir.”

“Will we be evacuating refugees, sir?”

“[...] I’ve spent years in the Near East. The one lesson I’ve learned is that there is nothing you can do with these people. Nothing at all! [...] Nice cigar, what?”

“Awfully good, sir.”

“Smyrna tobacco. Finest in the world. Brings a tear to my eyes, Phillips, the thought of all that tobacco lying in those warehouses out there.” (52)

Desdemona and Lefty manage to board a French ship instead with falsified French documents, and sail off, first to Athens’ port of Piraeus and then to America. They also manage to assist a new friend whose family was massacred, Armenian physician Nishan Philobosian, to join them in this travel and begin a new life. Since they are unknown to other passengers, the siblings reinvent their identities for the first time in “The Silk Road” chapter, during the course of the journey onboard the cruise liner *Giulia*: “In its heyday [...] boasting modern conveniences (*lumina electrica, ventilatie et comfort cel mai mare*), it had traveled once a month between Trieste and New York” (emphasis in the original text) (66). The ship is now packed with anxious travelers who have left their homes for good and extra cargo of food supplies, canned delicacies and spices. “In those days,” the witty narrator explains, “you could identify a person’s nationality by smell” (65). The overall atmosphere on the ship is permeated by hope in new possibilities and a sense of freedom to play with one’s identity:

Sailing across the ocean among half a thousand perfect strangers conveyed an anonymity in which my grandparents could recreate themselves. The driving spirit of the *Giulia* was self-transformation. Staring out to sea, tobacco farmers imagined themselves as race car drivers, silk dyers as Wall Street tycoons, millinery girls as fan dancers in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Gray Ocean stretched in all directions. Europe and Asia Minor were dead behind them. Ahead lay America and new horizons. (emphasis in the original text) (68)

For all passengers on the ship the travel itself stands as a metaphor for journeying through a middle space towards novel circumstances and identities. As for the brother and sister, they start off their biggest and, as it turns out, life-long act that continues on different stages beyond the duration of the voyage. At first, they pretend they have only recently met, and start rumours of a budding romance through the ship. They enjoy their “simulated courtship” (66), making small talk during short encounters onboard. They overtly invent their personal past histories and imaginary family members. Lefty takes great pleasure in his new identities and envisioning himself as an American citizen. “My grandfather, on the whole, came in for better treatment,” the narrator informs us:

He was said to have been a silk merchant from Smyrna who'd lost his fortune in the fire; a son of King Constantine I by a French mistress; a spy for the Kaiser during the Great War. Lefty never discouraged any speculation. He seized the opportunity of transatlantic travel to reinvent himself [...] Aware that whatever happened now would become the truth, that whatever he seemed to be would become what he was – already an American [...]. (67)

After a short courtship and like Hera and Zeus, the siblings become husband and wife in a ceremony performed on deck by the ship captain and his crew. The narrator points with regard to Greek ethnic and Orthodox customs towards the marriage ceremony:

Desdemona and Lefty circumambulated the captain, once, twice, and then again, spinning the cocoon of their life together. No patriarchal linearity here. We Greeks get married in circles, to impress upon ourselves the essential matrimonial fact: that to be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began. (69)

We are encouraged by the narrator to ask ourselves whether the act of marriage onboard is a necessary one. Plenty of other possibilities are available to publicly explain this relationship. For instance, the couple could have made up a story of an already performed engagement or arranged marriage. However, not only does a marriage certificate at the time facilitate easier entry into the United States, but the siblings feel a strong need to convince themselves that their act is justified: “[I]t wasn’t the other travelers they were trying to fool; it was themselves” (68).

The narration moves towards an intimate moment in a lifeboat, where the newlyweds attempt to consummate their marriage for the first time. The prevalence of darkness interrupted by occasional rays of moonlight helps them hide their conflicting emotions. As much as their desire for each other is innocent and stems from unusual circumstances, it is socially restricted and considered as transgression. Desdemona is “not herself” and she is guilt ridden by the wrongness of the act. She wears a wedding corset, a gift from her mother and a powerful symbol of social laws and the past. In its symbolism, it appears to dismember Desdemona: “[T]he corset absorbed all available moonlight, with the odd result that Desdemona’s face, head and arms disappeared. She looked like Winged Victory, tumbled on her back, being carted off to a conqueror’s museum” (70). Lefty is on thin ice as well. Although he is in love with his sister and has so far enjoyed only the company of the “ladies of pleasure” who looked like her, now he finds it “easier to pretend that she was a stranger,” and feels glad that he cannot see her face (70). The new identities they have put on during the

initial process of immigrant self-invention seem to be unstable and troublesome, and a poor basis for a fully accomplished culturally hybridized identity later on.

Just like the rest of the passengers, the newlyweds spend the rest of the voyage practicing the art of yet another deception. Since American authorities transfused the fear that the “inferior peoples from southern and eastern Europe threatened ‘the very fabric of our race’” into the Immigration Act of 1917, the passengers are anxious to find their way around the immigration restrictions and avoid being counted as one of “thirty-three kinds of undesirables [barred] from entering the United states” (73). To “finagle their way through Ellis island” (73), Desdemona and Lefty will cheat on the mandatory English literacy test, which is a part of the entrance examination. It consists of translating a chosen biblical passage, though different for each nationality. Although it will lead to an official citizen status in the New World, Desdemona finds it upsetting to translate the lines from the King James New Testament about sexual “otherness” of eunuchs - the biblical text that foreshadows the sexual condition of the narrator Cal. Desdemona still makes the effort and memorizes the English text without understanding every word. On the other hand, Lefty is fully inspired by the same text to spill jokes: “The Americans let in everyone [...] Eunuchs included” (75). In addition to many discovered restrictions, Lefty comes to the conclusion that “incestuous relations” are qualified as “moral turpitude” and would disqualify him and Desdemona, the narrator’s grandparents, from entry, had their documents not been falsified (74).

The “tall geometric forms” of New York take time to get used to but look promising, and so does the welcoming Statue of Liberty, “crowned with her own sunrays and dressed like a classical Greek” (76). No “domes” and “minarets” in the skyline. A painful process of assimilation and acculturation starts in the immigration inspection office at Ellis Island, where Desdemona, to her utter dismay, gets a proper makeover and a “denuded scalp,” void of heavy immigrant braids. “Amerikanidha” (82) is decidedly not what she wants to look like. Moreover, her anticipation of a prosperous silk farming business in the new country gives way to thorough frustration, as silkworm eggs are classified as parasites and cannot be imported. A transitional period between two different worlds and their values becomes easier to cope with due to the fact that Desdemona and Lefty settle in Detroit with their highly assimilated cousin and sponsor Sourmelina, who “now took in her new conspirators” together with her husband Jimmy Zizmo. “Sourmelina of the precarious cigarette ash” and climbing behind the wheel of a “black-and-tan Packard” makes a great impression on the new-coming cousins, as well as on the passers-by. “A woman driving was still a scandalous sight in 1922”

(83-87). The fact that Sourmelina has been full of her own secrets as a closeted lesbian in early twentieth century America means that Desdemona and Lefty can count on her discretion about their incestuous relationship.

Lefty in the Ford Melting Pot

During the period of the mass migration 1890-1920, most European immigrants settled in the industrial U.S. North, looking for employment opportunities. For the same reasons internal migration took place from the American South to the North. Working class African Americans joined in the Great Migration from the Southern states starting in the 1910s. Detroit was an exemplary destination for both African Americans and white settlers, regardless of ethnic origin. Taken from a broad and neutral perspective, ethnicity is a universal condition that everyone has. It is not necessarily linked to labor. However, in the contemporary world ethnicity often indicates foreignness, and is referred to as social inferiority, thereby reinstating its connectedness to specific types of labor. In her work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Ray Chow places ethnicity in the context of ever expanding capitalist commodification. She proposes the view of ethnicity as social inferiority, regardless of the fact of migration.¹¹³ Capitalism is not the only mode of production. However, it is dominant today, and therefore capitalist world economy is a suitable framework to analyze ethnic assimilation and social arrangements in America, both in *Middlesex* and in real life conditions.

Low paid, basic service labor is in all wealthy nations provided by “ethnics” today. The “ethnic” as such stands “in modernity as a sight of foreignness that is produced from within privileged societies and is at once defined by and constitutive of that society’s hierarchical divisions of labor.”¹¹⁴ In other words, it is not only by uprooting from a foreign society that a laborer becomes ethnicized. The process takes place within a privileged society because the ethnic is commodified in specific ways, and reduced to an outsider by performing low paid or underestimated labor. Ethnicization of labor takes place even if there are no migrants in society, and, what is more important, even when migrants have already become citizens, as Lefty and Desdemona have after passing all the examinations by the immigration authorities. From this perspective, Lefty and his co-workers in Ford Motor Company’s famous River Rouge facility in Detroit remain ethnic, despite the absurdist model of Ford’s

¹¹³ Chow, pp. 30-36.

¹¹⁴ Chow, p. 33.

melting pot by which they are supposed to assimilate into the mainstream. They represent a workforce, the members of which have become legal American citizens who actively contribute to the accumulation of capital while receiving little reward for it.

As a distinct stage in capitalist production, Fordism is symbolically presented in *Middlesex* in the chapter called “Henry Ford’s English-Language Melting Pot,” in the form of the River Rouge facility, and Lefty’s employment, albeit brief, on the assembly line. “My grandfather’s short employ at the Ford Motor Company marked the only time any Stephanides has ever worked in the automobile industry [...] Still, those twenty five weeks gave us a personal connection to that massive, forbidding, awe-inspiring complex we saw from the highway” (93). This is one of many cases in the novel where in the manner of historiographic metafiction the author reinstalled a historical context in his work and blended it with fictional discourse. In this way, he urges the reader to question the representation of truth behind the real world events and persons.

The period of capital accumulation and mass production is depicted in the novel as having a deep impact on human consciousness ever since. Day after day, ethnics cease talking at the entrance of the factory as: “beyond those doors language wasn’t allowed” (94). Hour after hour Lefty, performs a job for which he was trained “in seventeen minutes [...] Part of the new production method’s genius was its division of labor into unskilled tasks. That way you could hire anyone. And fire anyone” (95). And *every* fourteen seconds “Wierzbicki reams a bearing and Stephanides grinds a bearing and O’Malley attaches a bearing to a camshaft” (95). By the use of repetition, in particular of the previous sentence over three pages, the author masterfully conveys the gloominess of the industrial order and the monotony of the River Rouge assembly line, and of any assembly line in the industrial world for that matter. In the world of the novel, the one in the River Rouge is occupied by immigrant ethnics and capitalist ethnics at the same time. Technological change has turned people from humans into bare mechanism and it is symbolically depicted through the assembly line of Ford’s car factory in Detroit. In Cal’s words:

Historical fact: people stopped being human in 1913. That was the year Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and made his workers adopt the speed of the assembly line. At first, workers rebelled. They quit in droves, unable to accustom their bodies to the new pace of the age. Since then, however, the adaptation has been passed down: we’ve all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joysticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds. But in 1922 it was still a new thing to be a machine. (95)

There are plenty of African American workers in Detroit as well. Desdemona and Lefty refer to them as “*mavros*,” which means “black” in the Greek language when literally translated. Segregated working conditions in the factory imply that African American workers are not on the assembly lines. They are hired only for the Foundry, “the deepest recess of the Rouge” to “feed iron ore into the Blast Oven and pour molten steel into core molds from ladle” (96). On the way to and from work, they do not ride with Lefty and other immigrant employees in the street car, “Apollo’s own chariot, only electrified,” but instead ride by “standing outside on the runners, holding on to the roof” (94). However, they are a part of the same plight in the “controlled Vesuvius,” as the narrator describes the plant (93).

By the power of contemporary analogy, human in the novel is turned into machine, and race into ethnicity. As Stephanie Hsu asserts, drawing on the work of Miranda Joseph, blackness is literally written over in ethnic terms within the text.¹¹⁵ Joseph holds that contemporary analogies, or “*analogics*,” as she names them, are a type of political rhetoric that has replaced binary logics constituting “a discourse of exclusion, a simple determination of us and them, a mode of self-definition by abjection” (emphasis in the original text).¹¹⁶ The way in which analogics work is exactly the opposite: they include “the other,” and in this way make the other known or recognized. When we apply analogics to the narration, the seemingly excluding attitude between the African American and European immigrant workers is thus erased to emphasize the condition of interconnected oppression that both groups are exposed to under the capitalism of labor. Their symbolic liberation is therefore possible only if their social differences are erased by the analogy of one mutual implication and interconnectedness. There is neither abjection, nor exclusion: one group makes the other “knowable”.

Analogics go hand in hand with advanced capitalism, since they can interpret any social formation as a site of production and consumption. As Miranda Joseph further explains: “While the binary logic that establishes national boundaries was a particularly prominent narrative structure in the era of Fordist nation-based mass production and consumption, in our post-Fordist era of ‘globalization’ and niched production and consumption, analogy has

¹¹⁵ Stephanie Hsu, *Transgender Transnationalism: Representations of Immigrant Genders and Sexualities in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 148.

¹¹⁶ Miranda Joseph, “Family Affairs: Discourse of Global/Localization,” in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, Eds. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan (New York: NYUP, 2002), p. 85.

emerged as the dominant narrative structure.”¹¹⁷ *Middlesex* faithfully records the family fortunes during both stages of capitalist production and tremendous differences between the eras. Lefty eventually becomes the owner of a family restaurant, and thereby socially mobile in the upward direction, leaving behind the inhuman working class conditions he was exposed to in the Rouge.

One more trait of the Fordist era lies in shaping its constituents into production-consumption subjects to support the accumulation of capital. The Rouge ethnics attend the Ford English School every night after the working hours. It teaches them virtues of American life in the form of language classes: “In rows around [Lefty], men sat over identical workbooks. Hair stiff from dried sweat, eyes red from metal dust, hands raw, they recited with the obedience of choirboys: ‘Employees should use plenty of soap and water in the home.’ ‘Do not spit on the floor of the home’” (97). Jimmy Zizmo is completely against such a system of brain-training and appeals to Lefty’s consciousness: “They want to turn you into a Protestant. Resist!” (102). Not only are the workers of the Ford factory under tight political control, but they are also gradually turned into a vehicle for sustaining the very capitalist order they inhabit by eventually holding a mortgage on a house, and buying a car from the same factory. Inspections and reports about the employees are thorough: “I should advise you, Mr. Stephanides, that in my report I am going to make a note of your social relations. I’m going to recommend that you and Mrs. Stephanides move into your own home as soon as it is financially feasible” (102).

The Ford Sociological Department, in the form of the inspectors for applied ideology, is in charge of random unannounced house visits to exert the measures of control over the ethnic employees: “Management has foreseen [...] that five dollars a day in the hands of some men might work a tremendous handicap along the paths of rectitude and right living and might make of them a menace to society in general” (100). As appalling as it may sound, the Department inspects the most private aspects of their employee’s lives, like bed linen, the toilet seat, and trash bins, as well as how many times a day personal hygiene is performed: “‘How often do you bathe Mr. Stephanides?’ [...] ‘How often do you brush your teeth’” (101)? There is no positive response by the inspectors to any of the discreet protests Lefty makes. Or, is it this ambivalent attitude that, in spite of the common heritage, American people and institutions have had towards succeeding generations of immigrants: “The Founding Fathers have frequently referred to the new nation as an asylum for anyone seeking

¹¹⁷ Joseph, p. 86.

equality of opportunity and freedom from tyranny. Yet, none of these White Anglo-Saxon Protestant men ever envisioned a nation of multiple cultures and religions.”¹¹⁸ After all, Lefty is an immigrant and how else would he be treated than according to the strict host country rules. The illusion of choice means that he may comply with the rules, or leave the country:

“We come from Bursa,” [Lefty] explained. “It’s a big city.”

“Brush along the gum lines. Up on the bottoms and down on the tops. Two minutes morning and night. Let’s see. Give it a try.”

“We are civilized people.”

“Do I understand you to be refusing hygiene instruction?”

“Listen to me,” Zizmo said. “The Greeks built the Parthenon and the Egyptians built the pyramids back when the Anglo-Saxons were still dressing in animal skins.” (101)

Lefty engages his utmost efforts to become white enough or, in the words of John Quincy Adams, “cast off the European skin” and become American.¹¹⁹ Being among the top in his class, he is invited to participate in the graduation performance of the Ford English School Melting Pot,¹²⁰ the most popular segment of the annual pageant. John Hartigan Jr. sees the Melting pot as a “long-active paradigm of Americanization that envisioned a continuous stream of conventionalized, homogenous products/citizens.”¹²¹ Lefty’s striving for homogeneity is in this way literally staged, as the pageant is put on by the graduating class of immigrant employees for their families and Henry Ford Himself. One-by-one, ethnically dressed students, marked by their country names descend into a “giant grey cauldron:”

A European folk melody begins to play. Suddenly a lone figure appears on the gangway. Dressed in a Balkan costume of vest, ballooning trousers, and high leather boots, the immigrant carries his possessions bundled on a stick. He looks around in apprehension and then descends into the melting pot [...] Now SYRIA descends into the pot. Then ITALY, POLAND, NORWAY. PALESTINE. And finally: GREECE. (104)

As the company’s English teachers stir the air above the “pot” with giant spoons, Lefty and his co-workers change into grey and blue suits, waving American flags to the “Yankee Doodle” tune. By “shedding their immigrant skin” and becoming uniformed model American

¹¹⁸ Walch, p. ix.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Walch, p. ix.

¹²⁰ The images of the Ford English School and the actual Ford Melting Pot performance available here: http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Labor/L_Overview/FordEnglishSchool.htm

¹²¹ John Hartigan Jr., “Locating White Detroit,” in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 204.

citizens, the workers have symbolically undergone a process of successful compromise and assimilation, a mode of self invention in line with Ford's accumulation of capital.

As if the audience seats provide a completely opposite perspective of the pageant, the spectators, Desdemona and Jimmy Zizmo, have a different feeling about the whole thing. They see through the authoritative pressure exerted by the company and through the modes of cultural assimilation attuned to the standards of the Anglo-American industrial North, where labor segregation is prevalent. Zizmo finally pronounces it nationalistic "propaganda" (104).

Milton Gordon reminds us with regard to the concept of the original melting pot in Israel Zangwill's play that there are no exceptions or qualification of the ethnic stocks that merge in the great crucible around the turn of the century: "[T]he melting pot idea was embedded in the rhetoric of the time as one response to the immigrant-receiving experience of the nation."¹²² As for the industrial Detroit, the seat of the River Rouge, John Hartigan is of the opinion that this is the city that put the idea of the melting pot on the map of America's cultural imagination.¹²³ And if so, the metaphor works for Lefty only for a very short time span: immediately after the pageant he is fired by the inspectors of the company's Sociological Department who have, in his case, established a tremendous handicap along the paths of moral rectitude and right living in the form of Jimmy Zizmo's police record. Despite high scores at the final exam, Lefty is informed by the inspectors that "Mr. Ford can't have workers maintain such associations," (105) and Lefty will not need to come down to the plant anymore. Interestingly enough, the bribe in the form of the finest "Old Log Cabin," that the manager of the Rouge Personnel Department took from Zizmo, has been all but enough to keep Lefty in the plant.

And thus the rites of passage at Ford's factory are an impasse for Lefty. As it turns out, he never informed Jimmy Zizmo of the reasons of his dismissal from the Ford Company, though the brother-in-law felt he should make some kind of "restitution" for the lay-off. This is how Lefty gets introduced to the bootlegging business during the Prohibition and profitable trips over the Canadian border with car trunks filled on the way back. At first reluctant out of a concern not to be expelled, Lefty gets used to the job over time and makes the best of it, "expending his English vocabulary fourfold" in terms of occupational slang (112). After all, there are no better job opportunities on the horizon, and children are on the way. The Ford Melting Pot never quite manages to transform him into a completely white and acceptable

¹²² Gordon, p.121.

¹²³ Hartigan, p.204.

ethnic subject. However, everything that happened before and after the Ford Melting Pot contributes to the Stephanides family's success story, albeit illegal. Not only did Desdemona and Lefty secure their entry into America and hide their incestuous relationship by falsifying the records for their immigration documents, but Lefty later on managed to wash the unlawful investment of capital through the Prohibition-era speakeasy, that eventually became a fast-food restaurant chain on a regional level. At the time it was managed by Desdemona and Lefty's son Milton, who named it Hercules Hot dogs. I will analyze it in more detail in Chapter Three.

Desdemona in the Nation of Islam

While the Ford Melting Pot symbolizes the illusion of choice for Lefty associated with the creation of his own version of Greek-American identity, Desdemona is also offered an illusion of choice in defining her own identity when she decides to work for the Nation of Islam. They both settle for a hybridized ethnic identity that is influenced by circumstances and the non-assimilative features of Greek ethnics in that they never become completely white. Moreover, Desdemona's ethnicity is defined in the narrative in contradiction to blackness. Her concern with the purity of the Greek bloodline and possible cases of covert miscegenation is first shown in her conversation with cousin Sourmelina (Lina) immediately after arriving in Detroit. Upset about the ambiguous identity of Sourmelina's husband, Jimmy Zizmo, Desdemona addresses her doubts:

"An Arab? [...] Is that why you didn't tell us about him in your letters?"

"He's not an Arab. He's from the Black Sea." [...]

"Pontian!" Desdemona gasped with horror [...], "He's not a Muslim, is he?"

"Not everybody from the Pontus converted," Lina scoffed. "What do you think, a Greek takes a swim in the Black sea and turns into a Muslim?"

"But does he have Turkish blood?" She lowered her voice. "Is that why he's so dark?" (89)

This conversation illustrates just how little importance Sourmelina ascribes to ethnicity,¹²⁴ as opposed to Desdemona. For the latter, "Greekness" is a concept not easily washed off with embedded rules about boundaries, such as endogamy. By referring to her brother-in-law as "Pontian," she implies his spoiled Greek "purity" as a result of unlikely crossbreeding of ethnic Greeks and Muslim Turks who inhabited Asia Minor. On the other

¹²⁴ Alba, p.49; Sollors, *Theories of Ethnicity*, p. xviii.

hand, Sourmelina has completely re-invented herself in America, left the village behind her and keeps rejecting any hint of the importance of Greek ethnicity in her life: “In the five years since leaving Turkey, Sourmelina had managed to erase just about everything identifiably Greek about her, from her hair [...] to her accent, which had migrated far enough west to sound vaguely “European,” to her reading material [...], and finally to her clothes” (84). As it ironically turns out, it is Sourmelina’s husband, Jimmy Zizmo, who establishes traditional Greek gender-role division in his house, where women are placed in the kitchen and men in the living room (“sala”), and Desdemona and Lefty are not exempt from obeying. Even though they are accustomed to their own living space and not so strict a gender division, they comply with Zizmo’s house-segregation rules: “This is not America,” Zizmo instructs Lefty, “This is my house. We don’t live like *Amerikanidhes* in here. Your wife understands. Do you see her in the *sala* showing her legs and listening to the radio?” (99-100).

Traditional ethnic gender roles put Lefty in the position of a family provider who, having continued the speakeasy business by taking it over after Zizmo’s unfortunate death, “worked sixteen, sometimes eighteen hours a day” (136). Desdemona is the traditional model housewife and mother until the Great Depression settles and gender roles move far from conventional lines. The narrator vividly portrays the misery of the experienced poverty that has changed his grandmother’s life forever:

Desdemona still cried fifty years later, describing those years. Throughout my childhood the slightest mention of the Depression would set my *yia yia* off into a full cycle of wailing and breast-clutching. (Even once when the subject was ‘manic depression.’) She would go limp in her chair, squeezing her face in both hands like the figure in Munch’s *The Scream* – and then would do so: “*Mana!* The Depression! So terrible you no can believe! Everybody they no have work.” (emphasis in the original text) (135-36)

Circumstances beyond their control once more bring about the scarcity of money in the grandparents’ household. Due to the Great Depression, and also due to marital problems, in the 1930s, Lefty delivers an ultimatum to Desdemona to get a job. We read about it in the chapter “Marriage on Ice.” A newspaper add asking for a silk worker brings her to the Black Bottom ghetto for the first time: “[T]hey make me go to work for those *mavros*. Black people! Oh my God” (136).

While traveling in a street car towards her destination, Desdemona, as our focalizer, first reminds us of the signs of the Depression around her: “Passengers’ clothes, still dressy in those days, nevertheless showed wear and tear: hats gone unblocked for months, hemlines

and cuffs frayed, neckties and lapels gravy-stained” (139). Then she spots the policemen, “60% of whom were secretly members of the white Protestant Order of the Black Legion, who had their own methods for disposing of blacks, Communists, and Catholics” (140), while the real shock of a “different world” is yet to be experienced. Passengers are fearful that the streetcar is even stopping in the Black Bottom ghetto, in “the gloom of front porches and apartments without electricity,” where “nearly a half million people squeezed into twenty-five square blocks” (141). The feeling is nothing short of that provided by a ride to Hades itself.

Desdemona witnesses housing segregation as apparent as the labor segregation in the River Rouge plant. She is appalled by “the thundercloud of poverty” that hangs over the neighborhood (141). Her shock is enormous, as can only be experienced by a first-time visitor to such a ghetto. The living conditions are appalling: there are “red bricks crumbling off a stoop, piles of trash and ham bones, used tires.” In other words, it is a world so different from the one in which her immigrant family lives. At the sight of many children cheering and playing with the street car Desdemona does not feel so cheerful at all. On the contrary, she “put a hand to her throat. *Why do they have so many children? What’s the matter with these people? The mavro women should nurse their babies longer. Somebody should tell them*” (emphasis in the original text) (141).

The reader is aware that Desdemona is but a silent observer with her own mission to obtain a job and too frightened to offer any alternative solution to the social injustice she witnesses, as for example who would be able to tell the African American population about birth control and do something about their ill-fated living conditions. Therefore, “the ghetto with its shantytown porches, unpaved streets, and disconsolate laundry” (164) remains a reality Desdemona accepts and ignores on a daily basis in pursuit of her personal task to bring additional means to her family’s budget. The narrator’s observations about these events for a moment play forward into the future when “the so-called ghetto would become the entire city itself [...] the no-tax-base, white-flight, murder-capital Detroit” (142).

An enterprise that stands out to a great degree from the whole setting of the Black Bottom ghetto is Desdemona’s exact destination – Temple No.1 of the Nation of Islam. It is an African American venture that produces silk, independent in economic terms and hosting lectures of its infamous leader, Minister Fard Muhammad, a person who actually existed and established the Temple in Detroit in 1932. Fezzes are on the heads of “two young black men standing at attention outside the front door,” and Cal contemplates that Desdemona “must have felt the contrast between the young men’s confident air and that of the downtrodden

neighborhood” (143). The chadors women in the Temple wear “started at their chins and hung all the way to their ankles,” and the mosque she is lead into [is] redecorated according to a Moorish theme,” the setting that Cal is expecting the reader will associate with the ideology and religion of his “grandparents’ former tormentors” (143).

The Nation of Islam is highly gender segregated, and gender roles Desdemona has learned in the old country and complied to in Zizmo’s household have prepared her for the moment when Sister Wanda, a senior officer at the enterprise, tells her that “Islam means submission” (147), the emphasis being on the ideal female role as “submissive.” Desdemona also grasps the fact that the job of raising silkworms is within reach if she would only be able to renounce just about everything she stands for - ethnicity that comprises religion, loyalty and Greek national identity, and instead take up the performance of just enough blackness and Muslim religion to be qualified for “only hire. No fire,” by Sister Wanda:

“We got a problem. What you is?”

“I’m Greek.”

“Greek, huh. That’s a kind of white, isn’t it? You born in Greece?”

“No. From Turkey. We come from Turkey. My husband and me, too.”

“Turkey! Why didn’t you say so? Turkey’s a Muslim country [...] So you probably mixed up a little bit, right? You not all white [...] But what you is? Greek, Turkish, or what?”

Again Desdemona hesitated. She thought about her children. She imagined coming home to them without any food. And then she swallowed hard. “Everybody mixed. Turks, Greeks, same, same.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” Sister Wanda smiled broadly. “Minister Fard, he mixed too.” (144-45)

Sister Wanda assists Desdemona in creating her “mixed up” identity in order to fit the requirements of the Nation of Islam. In doing so, Sister Wanda does her utmost to conceal her own Christian upbringing, since it is “unfit” for the organization. She reveals it without intention and only for an instant, while complaining about dying silkworms: “Ooowhee, what a stink! My sweet Jes—” She corrects herself immediately, assuming she can count on Desdemona’s solidarity: “Just an expression. I was brought up Sanctified” (147).

In an act of practicing military-like discipline over the employed girls, Sister Wanda introduces Desdemona as “a mulatto like Minister Fard” (148), and a lady who will teach the girls how to make silk. Desdemona accepts a newly acquired Muslim identity by renouncing her ethnicity, and starts sharing her knowledge of silk farming with Muslim girls. After a

while, she gets used to the circumstances and even feels at ease and nostalgic while showing her precious silkworm box to the girls:

One morning she brought in her silkworm box for show-and-tell. She passed the box around, telling the story of its travels, how her grandfather had carved it from olivewood and how it has survived a fire, and she managed to do all this without saying anything derogatory about the students' co-religionists. In fact, the girls were so sweet and friendly that Desdemona remembered what it had been like in the times when the Greeks and Turks used to get along. (150)

Being surrounded by African American people, Desdemona experiences a world full of novelties, some of them with shocking effect, so she must share them with her husband and Sourmelina. "Inside the hands [...] the *mavros* are white like us," or "[t]he *mavros* don't have scars, only bumps" (emphasis in the original text) (150). The first week's pay "hidden under the mattress" is a proper boost for accepting the circumstances: "So much happened in that fifteen-by-twenty-foot space," the narrator describes, "God spoke, my grandmother renounced her race; creation was explained; and that's just for starters" (151). Desdemona gradually gains respect for the enterprise. In a complete contrast to the Black Bottom, things are different inside the temple. "The men worked hard and didn't drink. The girls were clean and modest" (150). Her employment goes on until Minister Fard gets arrested for serious accusations in May 1933. Stephanie Hsu is of the opinion, and I agree with her, that Desdemona's performance of ethnicity is related to blackness or whiteness, only to such an extent as they represent forms of status that can always be modified and disputed.¹²⁵ As I will show in the following chapters, both Cal's parents and Cal himself are involved in interaction with the African American population in Detroit, with the result that they follow the prevailing social currents and align themselves with the majority of the white population in pursuit of improving their social status. In this respect even later generations of the Stephanides define themselves against blackness while they formulate their own Greek-American ethnicity.

A Paradigm of Reinvention: Fard Muhammad

A complex protagonist who plays a significant role in the lives of the Stephanides family is both the narrator's maternal grandfather, Jimmy Zizmo, and a self-proclaimed Muslim prophet, Fard Muhammad. In a manner of true Magic Realism, the author of *Middlesex*

¹²⁵ Hsu, pp. 153-54.

interweaves the strips and strands of one fictional character in the novel and a person who existed in real life. Desdemona is the only person to witness Jimmy/Fard's confession before he disappears forever:

On the empty stage, the Prophet, the Mahdi, Fard Muhammad, stands behind the podium. [...] "Hello Desdemona."

[...] "We thought you died Jimmy! In the car. In the lake."

"Jimmy did."

"But you are Jimmy [...] Why you leave your wife and child? What's the matter with you?"

"My only responsibility is to my people."

"What people? The *mavros*?" (163-64)

It is worth re-reading chapters "Henry Ford's English-Language Melting Pot," "Marriage on Ice" and "Tricknology" to establish all the "facts" that the narrator presents us with when it comes to this complex character and a powerful metaphor for self-invention and the lack of fixed identity. The marriage between Jimmy and Sourmelina was a matter of arrangement by means of written correspondence between him and the bride's parents. In the same manner, so many marriages were agreed on between Greek bachelors in America and future brides in Greece proper.¹²⁶ The custom implied the exchange of photos of the prospective bride and groom, as well as a process of bargaining for dowry that the bride's family would invest into the marriage. In order to appear desirable on photos, future grooms of Greek origin would showcase their material success as signs of competitive masculinity for domestic visual consumption. It all served as a performance of immigrant encounter with American modernity. An example available for the public today is an archival photograph exhibited in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, featuring coal miners from Crete and shot in Utah in 1911. It shows immigrants who have scrubbed off the markers of hard labour, and defiantly gaze at the photographer while showing their "prized possessions" - elegant suits, pieces of weaponry and bottles of alcohol.¹²⁷

The narrator informs us that a photograph in the novel showed "a tall, handsome man with a virile mustache, holding a pistol in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other" (86), and that it was in sharp contrast to a short figure with labourer's dark complexion, who greeted his bride-to-be at the Grand Trunk station a couple of months later. A hard bargainer

¹²⁶ Scourby, p. 130; Kourvetaris, pp. 102-04.

¹²⁷ Giorgos Anagnostou describes in detail the photograph and controversy around it in the introduction to his work *Contours of White Ethnicity: Popular Ethnography and the Making of Usable Pasts in Greek America*, (Athens and Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009), p. 45.

as he was, Jimmy “had negotiated the amount of the dowry in the formal language of the barrister, even going so far as to demand a bank check before the wedding day” (86). What we encounter here and further on in the novel is a ruthless and calculating character with many selfish intentions, mostly on the other side of the law, that he realizes at the expense of other people. His bachelor looks and scheming mind enabled him to be plenty of things at once: “antisuffragist; big-game hunter; ex-con; drug pusher;” and so on. It is no wonder, therefore, that he is able to stage his own death in a car accident with Lefty as a witness, and appears later as a completely new person, Fard Muhammad.

Since the author borrows historical facts to create the character of Muhammad, he is giving us the sources for the borrowed material. One of them is C. Eric Lincoln’s *The Black Muslims of America* (146), from which he takes quotes as well. It seems that Muhammad came to the United States in 1907, at the age of thirty. At one point he was just a faintly mysterious peddler who appeared in the Black Bottom ghetto in Detroit and managed to easily manipulate his “culture-hungry African American customers” (146) into buying silk and artifacts from their ancestral land, and attending his sermons. This master of self-invention used many different names and points of origin:

Sometimes he called himself Mr. Farrad Mohammad, or Mr. F. Mohammad Ali. Other times he referred to himself as Fred Dodd, Professor Ford, Wallace Ford, W.D. Ford, Wali Farrad, Wardell Fard, or W.D. Fard. He had as many origins. People claimed he was a black Jamaican whose father was a Syrian Muslim. One rumor maintained that he was a Palestinian Arab who had fomented racial unrest in India, South Africa, and London before moving to Detroit [...]. (146)

Minister Fard’s lectures at Temple No. 1 in the Nation of Islam are portrayed in the narrative in both a serious and a humorous manner. The messages that the prophet conveys to his followers are serious and encouraging the self-esteem of African American population, while being derogative for white people. We learn about them through Desdemona who hears the sermons unintentionally (she is aware that it is forbidden) while she works in the Silk Room above the sermon hall: “My grandmother was the only white person who ever heard W. D. Fard sermonize, and she understood less than half of what he said. It was a result of heating vent’s bad acoustics, her own imperfect English, and the fact that she kept lifting her head to hear if anyone was coming”(153). Fard refers to himself as a mulatto with a special task. His skin colour allows him to deal “justly” and righteously” with people of both black and white colour. “So I am here, a mulatto, like Musa before me, who brought commandments to the Jews” (152). Among other identities, Fard invents his semi-noble Muslim background for the

purpose of attracting followers: “I was born in the holy city of Mecca, on February 17, 1877 [...] My father was Alphonso, an ebony-hued man of the tribe of Shabazz. My mother’s name was Baby Gee. She was a Caucasian, a devil” (152).

Further on, he completely transforms the dominant ideology of white people at the time and reverses it into African American supremacy over white people. In his preaching, Fard turns them into second-class citizens, violent, homicidal and ill-mannered, while he portrays African Americans as “the original people,” intellectually and physically dominant over the whites:

“Now let us make a physiological comparison between the white race and the original people. White bones, anatomically speaking, are more fragile. White blood is thinner. Whites possess roughly one-third the physical strength of blacks. Who can deny this? What does the evidence of your own eyes suggest? [...] The brain of the average white man weighs six ounces. The brain of the average black man weighs seven ounces and one half. (155-56, 160)

The ideas for his sermons are based on a systematic oppression of the African American population in the United States and unequal opportunity for any prosperous life for them, due to a large number of immigrants and the era of Great Depression. His words are manipulative to the extent that they highly appeal to the oppressed community and secure him a stable number of followers. He even points to the Darwinian Theory of Natural Selection, which an “evil scientist by the name of Yacub” twisted into unnatural selection that resulted in the appearance of genetically different white race: “Like can only come from like. Yacub had created the white man! Born of lies. Born of homicide. A race of blue-eyed devils” (155). The white race, as Fard claims, has come to dominate the race of the original people through “tricknology” (154), which involved the Europeans bringing “the original people from Mecca and other parts of East Asia,” turning them into slaves and murdering them. As a reaction to these circumstances, Fard suggests drastic measures: that “all Muslims will murder the devil.”

Desdemona passes through three different stages of reacting to the sermons. At first, she contemplates Fard’s words with interest, but later on she ridicules him and pronounces him a charlatan. At last, she feels sympathy for the African American population, and looks at her own life in the Black Bottom ghetto in a different way: she sees blue-eyed devils all over town and blames the city authorities for not picking up trash from the streets. However, besides solidarity for the oppressed, Desdemona feels renewed pricks of conscience about the nature of relationship with Lefty: “Plagued by the sense of sin,” the narrator speculates, “did she feel that Fard’s accusations had weight?” (156). The effect of the sermons is so strong that

Desdemona becomes guilt ridden all over again and shares the burden with Lefty: “What’s the matter with us? How could we do what we did?” Although she may have taken Fard’s “racial denunciations personally” and translated them to her marriage, Lefty is not troubled at all and has a reassuring point of view: “The children are fine. We’re happy. That’s all in the past now” (156).

Unfortunately, the illusion of peace and family harmony, if it has ever existed, does not last long among the Stephanides of the immigrant generation. They soon grow cold and distant to each other. Obviously, the Jimmy/Fard character with his different identities has had a deep impact not only on the African American population, but also on the immediate family whose interests he hardly acknowledged. Although his self-invention produces personalities with negative and manipulative characteristics, this character is more complex than any other character in the novel. The sermons we read about in the novel point to racial subordination and the racialized character of American and European history.

The author has done a tremendous job, presenting in the above mentioned chapters of the novel how not only ethnicity but also race operates in webs of social relations of early twentieth century America, as well as in the 1960s and 1970s in the later course of the narrative. I will provide more analysis on this topic, with regard to the main theme of the thesis, in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: The Second Generation – Tessie and Milton Stephanides

The protagonists of the second generation in the novel – the children of the immigrants – show a remarkable will to achieve. Milton Stephanides is a particularly impressive character in this respect with his entrepreneurial and strong-willed mind of the pursuer of the American Dream. The influence of the like-minded prosperous Greek-American community is an important factor in Milton's journey to prosperity. His success as the second generation Greek-American comes at a price, though, as I will show in this chapter.

Sociological studies, in particular Bernard C. Rosen's "Race, Ethnicity and the Achievement Syndrome" from 1959, show that Greek-Americans have the highest achievement motivation in comparison to white Protestant Americans and selected other ethnic groups in America.¹²⁸ Charles C. Moskos supports this study by a careful examination of the relevant data in the 1960 and 1970 U.S. Censuses. These data show that second-generation Greek-Americans had the highest level of education of all, and were exceeded in average income only by Americans of Jewish origin. The 1970 Census shows that Greek-Americans are 70% more likely to have completed college than the native white population.

As high as the importance of the church as a component of ethnicity may be for the Greek-American community, its pull fades with subsequent generations. There are numerous episodes in the novel describing religious customs practiced in the family, and I will refer to some of them in this chapter and in Chapter Four. In this chapter, I will show that Milton's break off from religious ancestry, together with his preference for the secular component of ethnicity, is particularly strong.

Tessie and Milton Stephanides enjoy the middle class status that their parents have achieved, and continue the upward mobility to the upper-middle class. The manufacturing of the sense of inclusion and exclusion, to borrow Ruth Frankenberg's words, is instrumental by WASPs.¹²⁹ This process is portrayed in the novel as the enforcing of the ownership of nation or neighbourhood, no matter how symbolical, when Milton attempts to buy a house in an exclusive white neighbourhood in Detroit. While describing this process in the novel, the author tackles the question whether the white middle class ethnic group, as well as the African American one, represents a desired form of normativity in America.

¹²⁸ Bernard C. Rosen, "Race, Ethnicity and the Achievement Syndrome," *American Sociological Review*, 24, No. 1 (February 1959), pp. 47-60, quoted in Charles C. Moskos, *Greek Americans, Struggle and Success* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 111.

¹²⁹ Ruth Frankenberg, "Local Whiteness, Localizing Whiteness." In *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 13.

We witness the formation of Tessie and Milton's identities in relation to the African American population. It is obvious that the social status of the white middle class ethnics is, to a certain degree, more favourable than the position of the African American ethnic group in the novel, as well as in reality. In two different episodes in the narrative, where we encounter African Americans – Lefty's employment in the Ford Motor Company that I analyzed in Chapter One, and the Detroit Race Riots of 1967 that I will present here – we get a glimpse of the Stephanides' viewpoints on African Americans, as well as different positions in the society when the two groups of ethnics, African American and white, are compared to each other.

Milton – Pursuing the American Dream

In that optimistic, postwar America, which I caught the tail end of, everybody was the master of his own destiny, so it only followed that my father would try to be the master of his (9-10).

If true liberation involves coming to a point where all structure is taken on by choice and one's life is self-created, then Milton Stephanides, is an epitome of a self-made business-oriented American man who achieves what his immigrant parents could not: the "American Dream" of freedom for all its immigrants. He obtains academic education, serves his country as a Navy officer, takes over his father's business and turns it into a fast-food empire, and moves his family from impoverished inner city Detroit to its segregated and affluent suburbs. Moreover, he manages to achieve all this alone and against the scarcity of money in his family. Milton's actions and mindset symbolize a complete break off from any traditions and customs of the "Old World" that his parents represent, in order to achieve successful cultural assimilation.

Debra Shostak argues that in *Middlesex* the identity that the first post-immigrant generation realizes is not a hybridized version of two influences. It is rather a completely new form based on the rejection of the past.¹³⁰ We witness the chasm between the immigrant and the second generation of the Stephanides in a series of anecdotes and events throughout the novel. Every time the modernism of Milton's viewpoints overpowers his mother's influence, her heart breaks into pieces, although one cannot say that she ever gives up her efforts. One such episode occurs very early in the novel, when after "twenty-three correct guesses" of the

¹³⁰ Shostak, p. 396.

sex of babies still in their mothers' wombs, Desdemona fails to pronounce the true sex of her own grandchild. "Maybe you should try guessing the weather," she is teased by Sourmelina (222). Since there is no ultrasound at the time, a traditional custom of spoon swinging over the bellies of pregnant women is the "next best thing" (5, 17). Milton, on the other hand, is quite confident that his child will be a girl. He introduces to his wife Tessie a thermometer for basal temperature and scientific predictions about the endurance of "male" and "female" sperm, all in an effort to implement a bit of control into the planning of their second child. In response to his mother's suspicion about so much knowledge, he reacts in the way "many Americans of his generation would have: 'It's science, Ma'" (6). After all, these are the 1960s, the era of the belief in progress prompted by the lurching of Sputnik and the Salk Vaccine that conquered the outbreaks of Polio (9).

Desdemona "dangled a utensil over my mother's belly," Cal informs us, and to the audience of many women compatriots in the same room she pronounces the child to be a boy. She takes the news personally and feels humiliated that, despite her prediction, the newborn child is a girl: "Her American-born son had been proven right and, with this fresh defeat, the old country, in which she still tried to live despite its being four thousand miles and thirty-eight years away, receded one more notch" (17).

Marcus Lee Hansen's widely criticized viewpoint on ethnicity may be of relevance here, in particular in the claim that the second generation denies its origins for the sake of assimilation into the American society: "[W]hat the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember."¹³¹ Aristi Trendel also advances that "[a]ssimilationism does seem a challenge to descent, and Hansen's law, the transcendence of ethnicity through the proclivity of the second generation to deny its origins, dubbed as treason, is precisely a moral appraisal of such a challenge."¹³² Translating Hansen's view of the second generation as traitors and the third generation as redeemers to the novel appears a bit far-fetched. However, I conclude that Milton lacks ties to the main factors of ethnicity: he prefers the English language in everyday communication and only occasionally speaks Greek; he is neither interested in religion nor in corresponding customs and refuses almost all suggestions related to the church sermons; finally, although he respects his parents' background, he generally avoids incorporating any traits of ancestral roots into his being except for minor instances. We may view this attitude as

¹³¹ Marcus Lee Hansen, "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, Ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 215.

¹³² Aristi Trendel, "The Reinvention of Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*," *European Journal of American Studies*, Oslo Conference Special Issue, 2 (2011), p.4.

a rebellion against restriction and old patterns of behavior that have unnecessarily limited him.

George Kourvetaris directs his conclusions more specifically towards progressive assimilation that Greek families experience in America.¹³³ His opinion is that the second generation, the children of immigrants, identify with both Greek Orthodox religion and American nationality. In *Middlesex*, Milton and Tessie identify only to a symbolic extent with Greek Orthodox religion, while their sense of “Greekness” – as measured by language, secular traditions, and Greek values in general – becomes replaced for “Americanness.” For instance, Milton does not attach too much importance to being literate in Greek, and neither does Tessie. Despite his efforts and promises to Desdemona, Milton never manages to learn speaking nor writing in proper Greek. There are rare cases when he does try, but over time, he forgets even a few ancestral language skills he has acquired.

A noteworthy exception is the secular component of Greek ethnicity that Milton incorporates into his personality: he highly values family ties and the ethnic community, and assumes the traditional ethnic gender role of the breadwinner for his family, including his parents. Formal patriarchy implies that women are highly unlikely to work outside their home. This, of course, puts Milton’s wife Tessie in a secondary position. Dr. Luce, a physician who views Tessie as “a friendly, intelligent, and caring person,” who consents to “the subservient wifely role typical of women of her generation” (436). On the other hand, Dr. Luce views Milton as “a dominating presence, a ‘self-made’ man and a former naval officer” (436). What truly matters to Milton is to define his own version of “Americanness” that bears no association with his parent’s ethnicity. This is a particularly amenable context for Hansen’s view of the immigrant son who wants to be away from all physical reminders of early days, in an environment so American that he will be considered as American as his associates.¹³⁴

Military engagements are the events in the American history where so many ethnics have achieved a sense of loyalty and belonging to their country, as well as recognition by it. Although Milton enlists in the navy in order to shuffle off his feelings for Tessie, this move marks the beginning of his Navy career and opens the door towards his college education at the Annapolis Academy. Moreover, it helps him claim his own sense of Americanness. His name also bears potential for personal transformation, and prefigures his service in two wars America is involved in: World War II, against the Japanese, and the Korean War: “The boy

¹³³ Kourvetaris, pp. 52, 114.

¹³⁴ Hansen, p. 204.

was named Miltiades after the great Athenian general, but would be known as Milton, after the great English poet” (125). Desdemona’s heart palpitations and dissatisfaction with the war are human, but also a reflection of the Old World. One more clash between the two generations is inevitable. “The Statue of Liberty’s gender changed nothing. It was the same here as everywhere: men and their wars” (171). It is difficult for Desdemona to grasp the reasons of World War II, and it hurts to know that her son will fight the Japanese people, since she feels a lifelong gratitude towards them: “At Smyrna the Japanese had been the only country to send ships to rescue refugees” (171).

The time Milton spends in the Navy is portrayed in the novel with a dash of irony, in particular the outcome of his great desire to feel accepted by his peers. He is overwhelmed with their “backwoods lubricity and knucklehead talk,” and wonders if joining the Navy was a mistake. The narrator is quite explicit about it: “He had always wanted to be an American and now he got to see what his fellow Americans were like” (186). On the other hand, the Navy seems to have had a crucial influence on the formation of Milton’s character, which enabled him to find concrete ways of expressing himself more closely to his true nature. Milton’s viewpoint on other races, as given here, echoes Social Darwinism, and represents a reversed position in comparison to Fard Muhammad’s preaching about the superiority of the black over white people due to their stronger physical abilities and higher brain weight (160). It also foreshadows Milton’s relation with African American fellow citizens while he manages the Zebra Room and during the Race Riots of 1967. I will analyze both episodes later in the same chapter.

The U.S. Navy was responsible for the precision with which Milton Stephanides ever after parted his hair, his habit of polishing his belt buckle with his shirt sleeve, his “yes, sir”s and “shipshape”s, and his insistence on making us synchronize our watches at the mall [...] The Navy gave him his love of sailing and his aversion to waiting in lines. Even then his politics were being formed, his anti-communism, his distrust of the Russians. Ports of call in Africa and Southeast Asia were already forging his beliefs about racial IQ levels. (200)

Choosing Tessie Zizmo for his wife is one more act of Milton’s rejecting the Old World traditions. For American-born Greeks, such as this couple, ethnic identification is rather a matter of cultural choice, than a constraint of social culture. Their sensibility is that of American ethnics, participating in American history, rather than that of Greeks “transplanted” from the homeland, such as their parents.¹³⁵ Milton prefers Tessie’s “all-American looks” to

¹³⁵ Moskos, pp.144-146.

those traditionally brought-up girls from the Greek community. Still, Tessie is keen on practicing ethnic and religious customs of the Greek ethnic community and shares the traditional superstitions, but does not insist on Milton joining her. The narrator ponders some universal truths by asking: “Is there anything as incredible as the love story of your own parents?” (173). Still, with plenty of love and the wisdom of a grown-up, he tells the story of how Milton and Tessie came to be his parents.

It happens to the horror of Desdemona, “after she had turned her marriage into an arctic wasteland” and had tubal ligation surgery, all in an effort to make amends for her “crime” (172). She ends her maternal role contrary to Greek tradition. Unfortunately, Desdemona realizes that consanguinity does not finish with her, which prompts her to resume the matchmaking activity, another of the Old World traditions, in hope that Milton would choose another wife. It is commonly held among Greeks that the sharing of a common Greek background is a necessary requirement for a better marriage. Charles Moskos reminds us that the initial edict of the immigrant parents was to tell their children that all Greek spouses were better than all non-Greek ones.¹³⁶ A typical reaction of immigrant parents in the face of the intermarriage of their child would be to cut off any social relations with their offspring and eventually become compassionate after the arrival of a grandchild. Milton does not go so far as to choose an American-born partner of another nationality and we may interpret his choice as a conservative one. Still, he makes no efforts whatsoever to bring up his children in the same manner, as there are no such references in the novel. Having checked all relevant statutes, Milton and Tessie conclude that, as second cousins, they are allowed to marry. The truth about their being related much closer than that, and the recessive gene hiding in both of them, is known only to Desdemona, who finally gives up her matchmaking efforts and lets the events take their course. Everyone’s emotional turmoil is enhanced by the circumstances of war:

In my family, the funeral meats have always furnished the wedding tables. My grandmother agreed to marry my grandfather because she never thought she’d live to see the wedding. And my grandmother blessed my parents’ marriage, after vigorously plotting against it, only because she didn’t think Milton would survive to the end of the week. (195)

As opposed to Milton, Tessie is very attractive. “If Sourmelina had always been a European kind of American, a sort of Marlene Dietrich, then Tessie was the fully Americanized daughter Dietrich might have had” (174). Finally, Tessie’s mainstream “all-

¹³⁶ Moskos, p. 94.

American looks” stirred mutual attraction between the American born couple (174). An important episode for the novel, and beautiful at the same time, refers to Milton’s unconventional seduction of Tessie when he plays his clarinet against her body. In the chapter “Clarinet Serenade” Milton presents an admirable repertoire of big band jazz while playing. The fact that both Tessie and he enjoy this kind of popular music during the 1940s is a testimonial of their successful cultural assimilation:

And so it began. He played “Begin the Beguine” against Tessie’s collarbone. He played “Moonface” against her smooth cheeks. Pressing the clarinet right up against the red toenails that had so dazzled him, he played “It Goes to Your Feet”...Tessie allowed Milton to press his clarinet to her skin and fill her body with music. At first it only tickled her. But after a while the notes spread deeper into her body. She felt the vibrations penetrate her muscles, pulsing in waves, until they rattled her bones and made her inner organs hum. (176)

In the sphere of romance and sexuality, I agree with Stephanie Hsu in her contemplation that Milton’s clarinet on Tessie’s body opens up the possibilities for creating pleasure without reproductive intercourse.¹³⁷ The clarinet prefigures Callie’s blooming crocus. We are thus able to relate the parents’ romantic experiments with Cal’s need to redefine his zones of pleasure as a person with ambiguous genital attributes.

The Churchgoers Versus The Inn-Keepers

The church as the component of ethnicity is omnipresent in *Middlesex*. Its primary purpose is the preservation of the Greek ethnic community in the novel and in addition, it becomes an agency of the reinvention of ethnicity. In his study on Greek-Americans, Charles Moskos reminds us that despite the glories of the classical Greek monuments and the beautiful sea and mountainside, Greece was a “harsh land from which to wrest a living” during the Era of Mass Migration. The part of the Greek population engaged in entrepreneurialism in the cities of the old Ottoman Empire was slightly better off. In such circumstances, the Greek Orthodox Church embodied not only religious experience, but historical, cultural and social experience as well.¹³⁸ This society was characterized by strict sexual segregation and parental authority. During the Ottoman Era, Greek Orthodoxy and nationalism became closely linked, and the church was considered the main factor for the preservation of Hellenism. For the American born generations, Moskos advances that the church community became the prime definer of

¹³⁷ Hsu, p. 141.

¹³⁸ Moskos, pp. 8; 66-67.

Greek ethnicity. Although the immigrant past fades, through the church the new generations form a sense of sharing a destiny with other Greek-Americans.

In the world of the novel, Desdemona is the most important character in this respect as the promoter of both secular and religious ethnic traditions. She carries them from the Old World and strongly hopes that the subsequent generations of the Stephanides will adopt them and practice in the same way. It is of utmost importance for her that the family observes religious holidays, among them Easter and Christmas, and that they celebrate a proper Orthodox baptism, wedding, and funeral. At one point in the novel, Cal prides himself with his connection to the Orthodox version of Christianity:

I was baptized into the Orthodox faith; a faith that had existed long before Protestantism had anything to protest and before Catholicism called itself catholic; a faith that stretched back to the beginnings of Christianity, when it was Greek and not Latin, and which, without an Aquinas to reify it, had remained shrouded in the smoke of tradition and mystery whence it began. (221)

The church buildings are portrayed in *Middlesex* with beautiful and rich descriptions. For the church authorities, however, the author does not employ favourable terms. It is a rather realistic narrative without overt criticism, but with a twist of irony. This is some information that Cal, our narrator, provides about the authorities of Assumption Greek Orthodox Church he frequents as a child in Detroit:

Assumption with its revolving priests, each sent to us via the Patriarchate in Constantinople, each arriving in the full beard of his authority, the embroidered vestments of his sanctity, but each wearying after a time – six months was a rule – because of the squabbling of the congregation, the personal attacks on the way he sang, the constant need to shush the parishioners who treated the church like the bleachers at Tiger Stadium, and, finally, the effort of delivering a sermon each week twice, first in Greek and then again in English. (12)

The character of father Mike Antoniou is an exception to the rule. The narrator describes him with a lot of sympathy and gives him some more space in richly comic episodes. There is a mention of corruption as well. No expense is spared for a religious temple in the Greek tradition, whether in Greece or in America: “The motives behind building the new church were twofold: to resurrect the ancient splendor of Byzantium and to show the world the financial wherewithal of the prospering Greek American community” (220). Unfortunately, the remaining cash after the purchase of low quality building materials for this particular church is transferred to private bank accounts, while the lack of quality foundation causes the ceiling leakage and cracks in the wall (220).

As opposed to Desdemona, Milton is the one who constantly challenges and, at times, even ridicules religious authorities and customs. It happens despite of all Desdemona's efforts to mould her family into "proper Orthodox believers," or true copies of her own self. Whenever Desdemona takes the family to the church, Milton refuses to join, "having become an apostate at the age of eight over the exorbitant price of votive candles" (11-12). Lefty is even less enthusiastic about church sermons, although at the sunset of his life he realizes he has always believed in the soul, "in a force of personality that survived death" (263). He prioritizes gambling or intellectual pastime at home, such as "working on a modern Greek translation of the 'restored' poems of Sappho" (12), Tessie is not portrayed as a firm believer, but she continues to be a "pious churchgoer." Cal conveys that only on one occasion does Tessie turn to God, the reason being her emotional turmoil about Cal's conception: "[M]y mother, who tried all her life to believe in God without ever quite succeeding, looked up at him for guidance" (12).

The journey back to the immigrant point of origin, the country known as the "Old World," is a recurrent motif in the novel. It corresponds with one of the main characteristics of immigrant writing in general, and Greek-American ethnicity in particular, according to which the protagonists reclaim their roots by a trip back to the Old Country. Desdemona and Lefty never manage to make this trip. The mother instead translates her desires to the son, in expectation that he will be the envoy who reclaims the parents' roots. The trip is closely related in her mind to the church, and more specifically to Saint Christopher, whom she prays to rather often (191, 207, 241). In the best-case scenario, Milton would travel to Turkey where his parents came from, and help the refurbishing of the church of Saint Christopher in the village of Bithynios. In turn, the saint will be Milton's guardian from harm, especially at war times: "St. Christopher had kept his word during the 'police action' in Korea and Milton hadn't been so much as fired on" (207). "The promise to a saint" or "tama" is a common spiritual vow among the Orthodox believers. Over time, "the promise" became interpreted as a form of material offering to God or a Saint. The possibility of making the trip to the Old World is repeatedly mentioned along the course of the narrative, although Milton keeps this prospect indefinitely on hold.

"The church, you have to fix it."

[...] From time to time Desdemona would remind her son about his outstanding obligation to St. Christopher, but my father always found an excuse for not fulfilling it. His procrastination would have disastrous effects, if you believe in that sort of thing, which, for some days, when the Greek blood is running high, I do. (196)

Although the trip has become forever suspended, there is a point in the novel when Milton actually makes a plan to visit Bithynios. It is in 1974, and the trip would have happened, had it not been for the Cyprus crisis. This event causes a deep division in the Greek-American ethnic community and I will deal with it in more detail later in this chapter.

There is no mention of the details of Milton and Tessie's wedding in the novel, so the reader is left to speculate whether the couple gives in or not to Desdemona's insisting on respecting the church tradition. Although the grandparents themselves do not receive a proper wedding in Orthodox tradition on their way to New York, Desdemona does not insist on it and covers this fact in her contact with the Church authorities since she "had grown up believing that priests could tell whether someone was telling the truth or not" (103). However, she makes sure that the couple registers as Orthodox Church parishioners in Detroit, and receives a house blessing from the head priest. By reciting the blessing and shaking holy water on the threshold, the priest performs the ceremony in the house on Hurlbut, where the grandparents first live with cousin Lina and Jimmy Zizmo. This custom is not performed when, years later, Milton moves his family into new houses, first in the Indian Village and then in Grosse Pointe.

Milton's aversion to the church authorities and customs is particularly enhanced in his contacts with father Mike Antoniou, his own brother-in-law and Tessie's previous suitor. Tessie decides "she doesn't want to be a priest's wife or move to Greece" (193), so the matchmaking custom gets directed towards Milton's sister Zoe. After years of serving in Greece, father Mike returns to Detroit and takes up a post of an assistant at Assumption Greek Orthodox Church. Cal remembers that his aunt "never missed the chance to lament her marriage" (13). The following words are bursting with dissatisfaction: "My husband. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride" (13). Milton cannot help underestimating the establishment that father Mike represents, while at the same time belittling the Old World his parents come from. In the case of Tessie and Milton, immigrant rural nationality has evolved towards a middle-class ethnic identity. Milton therefore feels a strong need to distance himself from the Old Country localisms of the immigrant generation and present his own Greek-American identity of the offspring:

"I guess it must be a lot harder to be a priest over here in America, huh? [...] I just mean that over in the old country people aren't too well educated [...] They'll believe whatever stories the priests tell them. Here it's different. You can go to college and learn to think for yourself."

“The Church doesn’t want people not to think,” Michael replied without taking offense. “The Church believes that thinking will take a person only so far. Where thinking ends, revelation begins.” [...]

But Milton persisted, “I’d say where thinking ends, stupidity begins.” (179)

Father Mike is the priest who performs the ceremony of Callie’s baptizing. Orthodox baptism is a matter of a harsh debate in the novel. Desdemona is appalled by the fact that “her own Greek son” refuses to provide his daughter with a proper Orthodox baptism. Milton is explicitly against it, finding it nothing more than “a bunch of hocus-pocus” (219), while Desdemona firmly stands behind her convictions: “Holy Tradition that the Church keep for two thousand years is hokey pokey?” The situation calls for Panaghia in all her names: “All-Holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorified Lady, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin, do you hear what my son Milton is saying?” (219). After a lot of persuasion, Milton gives in eventually and requires to know the price of the ceremony of baptism. At the news that it is free of charge, his business mind calculates what may be hiding behind the no-charge policy: “Figures. They let you in for free. Then you gotta pay for the rest of your life” (220).

The description of the ceremony is rich in emotion and details like the cutting of baby-Callie’s lock of hair and her submerging into the baptismal pool. It is also charged with humour as, for instance, the experience of “the green, scummy, holy water,” the bottom of which displays a considerable collection of bits and bobs, like coins, hairpins and somebody’s old band-aid (221). The climax of the ceremony is Callie’s “reverse baptism,” in which Callie pees in the upward direction directly to father Mike’s face. This hilarious act foretells Cal’s status with the “blooming crocus” later in the novel. Father Mike is expected never to forgive Callie for his utter humiliation. “I had indeed been reborn: as a fountain,” the narrator plays with the scene, and pronounces that due to the fuss that followed the incident “no one wondered about the engineering involved” (222). Although the prevalent feeling among the family members swings back and forth from entertainment to embarrassment, Milton is proud of his daughter: “That’s my girl [...] Pissed on a priest” (222).

The members of both second and third generation Stephanides have heard a lot about the burning of Smyrna from Desdemona and Lefty. They experience several episodes of Desdemona’s post-traumatic fear of fire at her later age, as well as the stirring up of her religious feelings whenever there is some association to that particular armed conflict between the Greeks and the Turks. Cal is playful about his grandmother’s religious artifacts related to this conflict: “Desdemona had six atrocity fans. They were a collector’s set” (219). The “Turkish Atrocities” fans contain a full record of the details of the events, such as the number

of casualties on the side of the Greek population and the number of destroyed churches and graves. The narrator shows us in this way that a tight hold onto the knowledge of the past events may be used as a means of preserving an ethnic group. It is experienced on both a personal and a collective level in the case of Desdemona and the Orthodox Greek authorities: “Each year she sent a contribution to the Patriarchate in Constantinople, and a few weeks later a new fan arrived, making claims of genocide and, in one case, bearing a photograph of Patriarch Athenagoras in the ruins of a looted cathedral (219). Desdemona’s viewpoint of Milton’s defiance to religious customs is noteworthy. Her feeling of frustration caused by her son’s denial of Orthodox religion is equally strong as the frustration with “her former Tormentors:” “Not appearing on Desdemona’s particular fan that day, but denounced nonetheless, was the most recent crime, committed not by the Turks but by her own Greek son, who refused to give his daughter a proper orthodox baptism” (219).

While Desdemona nurtures a lifelong love and attachment to the Orthodox religion, Lefty and Milton, as I have previously concluded, mostly avoid engagements of a religious nature. They are focused on the favourite Greek entrepreneurs’ business: the restaurant ownership. “Lefty has dreamed about opening a casino, and the Zebra Room was as close as he came to it” (133). His preferences seem to be in such a sharp contrast to Desdemona’s traditional viewpoints. In the initial Era of Mass Migration, in the period around World War I, all immigrants were in the same position on the bottom of the social scale, and they started from scratch. Since Lefty’s knowledge of several foreign languages does not enable him to obtain a job in an institution, and society does not provide the immigrant generation with opportunities for further education, he successfully channels his intellectual powers into the “science of mixology” (132). This is as close as he can get in achieving his version of the American Dream. After Jimmy Zizmo’s death, Lefty takes over his bar, redecorates it and, with the help of “his connections in the rum-running business,” turns it into his full time engagement in 1924 (132). In this basement speakeasy, he “acquired the attributes of the barkeep he would be for the rest of his life,” a real professional towards his customers, without getting involved in eventual skirmishes among them (132). He reacts, however, on the news that an African American man is attacked severely. It is the one case when he confronts the patrons, and at the same time claims his sense of “Americanness:”

He said nothing in 1943 when talk at the bar turned ugly [...] But when a group of men came in, boasting of having beaten a Negro to death, my grandfather refused to serve them.

“Why don’t you go back to your own country?” One of them shouted.

“This is my country,” Lefty said, and to prove it, he did a very American thing: he reached under the counter and produced a pistol. (169)

Lefty’s business diversified eventually with a steady income, since he found the way to provide models for Plantagenet’s auto-erotica photographs. In the middle of the Depression, “when people had no money for food,” men somehow found money for the photographs of the girls “dipped to get a tire iron out of the trunk,” and Lefty provided himself with opportunities for extra-marital affairs (159). The reader is invited to speculate with the narrator on the reasons for Lefty’s “searching for blondes with thin lips,” be they “Mables and Lucies and Doloreses” (159). The lack of emotional closeness introduced by his wife may be one of the reasons. The guilt for having a marriage based on an incestuous relationship could be another. Speculations aside, it was happening, and had an impact on Desdemona and Lefty’s marriage.

At his later age, Lefty assumes his passionate love for gambling. He once left it aside for the sake of running the business and raising the family. Cal seems to be neutral about it in stating the obvious: “Once you visit the underworld, you never forget the way back” (205). Desdemona’s adherence to superstition for once proves useful to him, since he takes to consulting her Dream Book to obtain the winning numbers. The following narrator’s statement is bold and yet self-ironical, since it contains the truth about the lack of involvement of the white immigrants in general, and the Greek immigrants in particular, in reducing the plight of African American population:

Many of the Negroes [...] noticed my grandfather’s preoccupation with the dream book, and after he won for two weeks in a row, word spread. This led to the only contribution Greeks have ever made to African American culture (aside from the wearing of gold medallions) as the blacks of Detroit began to buy dream books themselves. (206).

Unfortunately, Lefty “walked out of the bank into his penniless old age,” since he had squandered his entire savings in a gambling spree (207-209). By taking his parents under his roof, Milton proves once again to be an irreplaceable provider for the entire family. This move comes as no surprise. The respect for elders in general is an integral part of both Greek and Greek-American cultural norms.¹³⁹ Filial loyalty is highly valued. As opposed to the usual practice in American society, the second generation Greek-Americans are highly likely to take care of their parents, also by moving them into their household.

¹³⁹ Moskos, p. 92.

Cal believes that this was a good move for his grandparents:

[Desdemona] enjoyed the attic because the vertigo of living up there reminded her of Mount Olympus. The dormer window provided a good view (not of sultans' tombs, but of the Edison factory), and when she left the window open, the wind blew through as it used to do in Bithynios. Up in the attic, Desdemona and Lefty came back to where they started. (209)

Lefty's different businesses allowed his family to step up from the working class into the middle class. His immigrant success story is based on legalizing unlawfully acquired capital from the Prohibition era bar and the production of photographs into a profitable and taxable diner. The fact that at the later stage of their lives, Desdemona and Lefty are completely broke and dependant on their children symbolizes their incomplete transition from the immigrant into the fully assimilated American citizen status. At the end of their life journeys, their identities are everything but endowed with the beauty of doubleness, of a successful blending of their Greek heritage with the American traits. There is no successful cultural hybridity in their case, as they are forever torn in the interstitial space they occupy between the wishes and the actual achievement. Moreover, Lefty loses his power of speech and never regains it after a series of strokes. Anthony Easthope's claim is a point in case here in that a coherent speaking subject cannot live in the gaps between identities.¹⁴⁰

Milton's successful business enterprise, "Hercules Hot Dogs", symbolizes his reaching beyond the limits of ethnic definition in the fulfillment of the American Dream of prosperity. In this case, there is no renouncing of the immigrant past for the sake of successful cultural assimilation, but rather a "business-oriented" version of cultural hybridity. As previously mentioned, Milton takes over the family business from his father Lefty. It comes at a price for the father, who feels pushed out of the daily operations in the Zebra Room (204). It is obviously a necessary step for Milton in order to feel self-reliant and unrestrained by the immigrant generation his father represents. At that moment, everything is a mishmash of vivid colours and artifacts at the diner when it comes to decoration. It is a sort of less successful, but romantic blend of Greek and American influences:

Athena olive oil tins lined the front window next to a bust of Donizetti [...] grandmotherly lamps stood next to el Greco reproductions; bull's horns hung from the neck of an Aphrodite statuette. Above the coffeemaker an assortment of figurines marched along the shelf: Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Mickey Mouse, Zeus, and Felix the cat. (203)

¹⁴⁰ Easthope, p. 347.

The diner worked well during Milton's management. Prosperity conjoined with a little luck in the form of insurance money after the Race Riots of 1967, enabled Milton to advance his business even further and pursue his version of the American Dream. The Hercules Hot Dogs chain is located "anywhere from Michigan to Florida [...] where real estate was cheap and a lot of cars or people passed through" (275-276). Financial success comes with both the branding and actual flexing of hot dogs after they are grilled - the latter turns out to be Chapter Eleven's contribution. This time, Milton manages to blend the most famous American food with Greek mythology and turn it into an empire located in several cities. The brand is in fact an Americanized version of the original culture. Milton's immigrant ancestry proved to be a useful source of ethnical references that are widely recognizable and profitable at the same time. There is no room for ethnic Greek food whatsoever in this business:

The bright white neon pillars [...] flanked my father's chain of hot dog restaurants. The pillars combined his Greek heritage with the colonial architecture of his beloved native land. Milton's pillars were the Parthenon and the Supreme Court Building; they were the Herakles of myth as well as the Hercules of Hollywood movies. They also got people's attention. (275)

The Stephanides wholeheartedly enjoy the fruits of their family business, since Milton's empire enables them to climb the social ladder even higher, into the upper middle class. They move to a new house, Callie is enrolled into a private school, Chapter Eleven into college and Milton continues to enjoy his passion with obtaining different models of Cadillacs almost every year (Cal claims that it is possible for him to chart his life "in relation to the styling features of [Milton's] long line of Cadillacs" (253)). However, the obvious incompatibility of the fusion of myth and fast food, of the Old Country and America, suggests hierarchical binaries and the failure at the middle, and prefigures the end of the hot dog empire when later Milton's son Chapter Eleven takes over the business and destroys it.

Detroit Race Riots

It was convenient to call them snipers, because if they weren't snipers, then what were they? The governor didn't say it; the newspapers didn't say it; the history book didn't say it, but I, who watched the entire thing on my bike, saw it clearly: in Detroit, in July of 1967, what happened was nothing less than a guerrilla uprising.

The Second American Revolution. (248)

We may interpret a simile and a metaphor that Callie uses to describe her view of the Detroit riots of 1967 as the author's message to the reader, conveying the complexity of one of the major events that has led to the change of American consciousness. As Werner Sollors explains: "We may date the origins of a characteristically American sense of selfhood to [...] historical moments such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, or World War I as having given birth to a uniquely American cultural idiom."¹⁴¹ The Detroit riots are one of the instances in contemporary American history that Eugenides playfully questions, and to which he devotes a significant portion in his novel. In a manner of historiographic metafiction, the event is named and constituted as a historical fact and presented in the novel through Callie's personal experience and the first person account.

The view of the official establishment greatly differs from the way the characters in the novel experience the Detroit riots. In this way, the author shares with us his urge for questioning the veracity of the events, and provides his own material for the verification. Callie is adamant: "I was seven years old and followed a tank into battle and saw what I saw. It turned out that when it finally happened, the revolution wasn't televised. On TV they called it only a riot" (251). By comparing disturbing shooting scenes during the Detroit riots to Vietnam, Callie introduces yet another historical conflict behind which there is "truthfulness" to question: A real battle is under way now, a firefight, a little bit of Vietnam brought back home. But in this case the Vietcong are lying on Beautyrest mattresses (247).

In order to understand properly the involvement of the Stephanides family in the Detroit Race Riots of 1967, as presented in the novel, it is important to know the social context in America in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the relation between African American and white populations at the time. In brief, the "black America's anger" and the "white America's resentment" were mounting as the net migration of black people from the South to the North totaled more than 3 million. In pursuit of better lives, the majority of newcomers settled in metropolitan areas where they were met with overcrowding and job discrimination.¹⁴² De facto residential segregation characterized all northern cities. Poverty dominated the lives of non-white people. City after city erupted in violence as young African American radicals, inspired by African American Muslim leader, Malcolm X, advocated resistance and

¹⁴¹ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 6-7.

¹⁴² In 1966, only 32% of white workers held blue-collar jobs, as compared to 63% of African American workers. The same year statistics shows that 42% of nonwhites in urban America were below the federal poverty line. Paul S. Boyer, *Promises to Keep* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), pp. 254-57.

separatism, a rhetoric essentially different from that of the peace apostle, Martin Luther King, Jr. Ghetto upheavals came as no surprise.¹⁴³

At the time of residential segregation in America, the Stephanides belong to the white middle class population in Detroit. It is a city where racial themes differ from the nationwide trend. John Hartigan defines Detroit as a black metropolis and quite the opposite of the United States at large. “Whiteness may be hegemonic nationally, but that condition is bracketed in this city where blacks form 76% of the population.”¹⁴⁴ Based on his sociological research, Hartigan concludes that within the city boundaries, “blackness” is hegemonic when it comes to politics and culture, while the surrounding suburbs are predominantly white.

The Stephanides are not directly involved in the riots, except for Milton, who is guarding the family diner alone, and Callie, who joins him in the end. The black-and-white television set that the family uses to obtain information symbolizes a raging conflict outside their home between the black African American population and the white establishment. The family remains in the attic of their house without any news from Milton: “For three days all the normal rituals of our life were suspended, while half-forgotten rituals, like praying, were renewed” (241). No family members fully understand the nature and the agenda behind the riots, and they are experiencing the conflict on a personal level, guarding their lives and properties. Callie’s contemplations are of a child that has, until this particular experience, been sheltered from harm: “To live in America, until recently, meant to be far from war. Wars happened in Southeast Asian jungles. They happened in Middle Eastern deserts. They happened, as the old song has it, *over there*” (emphasis in the original text) (242).

Eugenides portrays symbolically the relations between African American and white people at the time through Callie’s encounters with an African American man called Marius Wyxzewixard Challouehliczilczese Grimes in the Zebra room. This place symbolizes coziness and safety for Callie because it is family owned, and it is difficult for her not to communicate with Marius. He does spend considerable time around the diner and, in addition, he is very polite with her. However, Callie is not allowed to speak to him. “Milton considered Marius to be a troublemaker, a view in which many Zebra room patrons, white and black both, concurred” (229). Marius transgresses strict social boundaries that existed at the time, first by communicating with a white minor, and then by pointing to a case of possible miscegenation between their ancestors: “He called me ‘Little Queen of the Nile.’ He said I

¹⁴³ For more information on the Civil-Rights Movement and Radicalization, see Boyer, Chapters 8 and 9, pp 220-274.

¹⁴⁴ Hartigan, pp. 184-86.

looked like Cleopatra. ‘Cleopatra was Greek,’ he said. ‘Did you know that?’ ‘No.’ ‘Yeah, she was. She was a Ptolemy. Big family back then. They were Greek Egyptians. I’ve got a little Egyptian blood in me, too. You and me are probably related’” (229).

Marius represents a new kind of awareness and activism in the African American population. He is a law student at the top of his evening class at the University of Detroit and carries along his paramilitary beret in a Ché Gevara manner. He “stood on the corner waking people up to things. ‘Zebra Room,’ he pointed a bony finger, ‘white-owned [...] TV store, white-owned. Grocery store, white-owned’” (229-230). His political activism is taken high, as he is planning to “sue the city of Dearborn for housing discrimination,” and so are his subversive tactics when he mentions to Callie the “three big fat officers of the so-called peace,” always at her dad’s counter: “I’ll tell you. He’s paying protection money. Your old man likes to keep the fuzz around because he’s scared of us black folks” (230). Callie is quickly reprimanded by her concerned father for communicating with Marius: “You are never, ever, to talk to strangers like that. What’s the matter with you? [...] You stay away from people like that” (231). Furthermore, Lefty is ordered not to bring Callie anymore for lunch, as her father considered African American people a threat for her.

Neither the Stephanides, nor other characters in the novel have friends in the African American community. Once Milton has taken over the business from his father and turned it into a diner, the circumstances force him to acknowledge the changes that have happened over the years and that may influence his financial success. As Callie comments: “When my grandfather opened the bar in 1933, the area had been white and middle-class. Now it was becoming poorer, and predominantly black. In the inevitable chain of cause and effect, as soon as the first black family had moved onto the block, the white neighbors immediately put their houses up for sale” (201). In these lines, the narrator foreshadows the moving of his family to a prominent Detroit suburb and Milton’s concern about running business in what has gradually become a predominantly black neighbourhood. The concern generates racial intolerance on his part, as compared to his father, Lefty, who remains more neutral when it comes to racial themes and protecting the business.

By employing different images and indirect references, the narrator announces that riots are expected to happen in the Detroit area. Once again, we witness his playful aspect through several enjoyable descriptions and associations. At first, he refers to the “national turmoil” consisting of similar conflicts that occurred earlier in other towns, Newark and Watts. Then on, he reminds us of “the all-white Detroit police force [...] raiding after-hour bars in the

city's black neighborhoods" (236). Furthermore, Milton's gun is metaphorically introduced to signify the use of weapons later on during the riots. "[S]omething lumpy" under Milton's pillow gradually develops into "the imprint of a gun barrel" on Milton's cheek after waking up (235-238). Finally, the narrator invokes Chekhov to relate how Milton's gun is in a "ready-for-use" state and hint at the events placed ahead in the narration:

Chekhov's first rule of playwriting goes something like this: 'If there's a gun on the wall in act one, scene one, you must fire the gun by act three, scene two.' I can't help thinking about that storytelling precept as I contemplate the gun beneath my father's pillow. There it is. I can't take it away now that I've mentioned it. (It really was there that night.) And there are bullets in the gun and the safety is off...(236)

Eugenides engages a direct association between Milton's penis and riots, parodying the terrifying experience of the event. Callie's father suddenly wakes up during the early morning to take a phone call from his friend who informs him of the riots. The daughter sees the father naked for the first time: "So it was that the Detroit riots will always be connected in my mind with my first sight of the aroused male genitalia. Even worse, they were my father's, and worst of all, he was reaching for a gun. Sometimes a cigar is not a cigar" (238).

For the immigrant generation, Desdemona and Lefty, the riots are even more difficult to bear. History as the spectacle of life is repeated for them in all its absurdity: "Oh my God! Is like Smyrna! Look at the *mavros*! Like the Turks they are burning everything!" (240). Nevertheless, the Stephanides are evidently in different circumstances now. They are on the side of the societal majority, which implies a certain degree of privilege, as compared to the conflict in Smyrna where their ethnic group was oppressed and brought to the point of extinction. However, the narrator juxtaposes and compares the two conflicts in his own way, and employs irony in order to portray looting during the Detroit riots:

It was hard to argue with the comparison. In Smyrna people had taken their furniture down to the waterfront; and on television now people were carrying furniture too. Men were lugging brand-new sofas out of stores. Refrigerators were sailing along the avenues, as were stoves and dishwashers. And just like in Smyrna, everyone seemed to have packed all their clothes. Women were wearing minks despite the July heat. Men were trying on new suits and running at the same time. (240)

Despite the shooting snipers in the buildings all around, machine guns and advancing soldiers, Milton guards the Zebra Room. He briefly encounters Morrison, who appears in the diner

amidst the chaos just for a pack of cigarettes. The scarce words two men exchange under difficult circumstances reflect the essence of the conflict that inspired the Detroit riots:

“What you doing here, man? You crazy? Ain’t safe for no white people down here.”

“I’ve gotta protect my property.”

“Your life ain’t your property?” Morrison raised his eyebrows to indicate the unimpeachable logic of this statement.

[...] “What’s the matter with you people?”

Morrisson took only a moment. “The matter with us,” he said, “is you!” (246)

This powerful statement may serve to sum up the consequences of the actions and regulations by the white establishment in America that brought about the marginality of African American citizens and the outburst of violence in the cities in the 1960s.

The author presents the status of the African American population in the novel as way lower on the social ladder, and their marginality is particularly problematized by the racial aspect. They are a racialized collective subject that occupies the inferior position on the outskirts of American society, and have a reduced access to the pool of possibilities for social success. Just as Desdemona in the past defined her ethnicity in contradiction to the “blackness” of the members of the Nation of Islam, all members of the Stephanides family now define their ethnicity and social status in opposition to the ethnicity and status of the African American population. The Stephanides, as white middle class immigrants, do struggle with forces of assimilation in American society. Still, social and cultural conditions provide them with more opportunities for successful assimilation than what is available for people of African American origin.

If we pay close attention to the way Cal presents a predominant view in his family of the behavior of the African American population before the Race riots, we could conclude that it reflects the position of the white middle class America as a whole, in its nature exclusionist at the time. The Stephanides’ viewpoint denotes a self-conscious white claim of superiority:

Up until that night our neighborhood’s basic feelings about our fellow Negro citizens could be summed up in something Tessie said after watching Sidney Poitier’s performance in *To Sir With Love*, which opened a month before the riots. She said, “You see, they can speak perfectly normal if they want.” That’s how we felt. (Even me back then, I won’t deny it, because we’re all the children of our parents.) We were ready to accept the Negroes. We weren’t prejudiced against them. We wanted to include them in our society *if they only act normal!* (240)

The ironic emphasis in italics is the narrator's reference to the issue of social normativity in America in the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, it subtly invokes the theme of social normativity in the case of the main protagonist Cal. Through the described uprising, the members of the African American population look for a way out of the "un-inhabitable social space," just as Cal strives for a choice to occupy an "inhabitable social space" that is denied to him. Social forces behind the realm of the "habitable" are in both cases the same.

As for our main protagonists, they benefit financially from the destruction of the Zebra Room and join other families in the white flight. In this way, they also climb the social ladder. The diner burns up completely in a fire started by none other than Callie's "friend" Marius, who engages in a verbal play with Milton: "Opa, motherfucker!" He throws a Molotov cocktail through the front window in an ecstatic moment followed by "the well known cry of Greek waiters," (249) while Milton tries to save the place with a fire extinguisher. The riots obviously have little impact on the change of the family's mindset. The following paragraph describes Milton's reservation from any responsibility for other people's condition. It symbolically illustrates the white America's position in tackling society's issues, and invokes the ideas of hard line assimilationists (stemming from sociobiology and primordialism) in their claims that the failure of non-assimilative groups lies on them, rather than on society,¹⁴⁵

"The matter with us is you." How many times did I hear that growing up? Delivered by Milton in his so-called black accent, delivered whenever any liberal pundit talked about the "culturally deprived" or the "underclass" or "empowerment zones," spoken out of the belief that this one statement, having been delivered to him while the blacks themselves burned down a significant portion of our beloved city, proved its own absurdity. (246)

What have the "rioters" achieved according to the narrator? These matters are quite puzzling for a young Callie and she admits that it is difficult to understand them. "Sure, buildings were burning, bodies were lying in the street but [...] I'd never seen people so happy in my entire life [...] It looked more like a block party than it did a riot" (240). The adult Cal's comments flash back and forward. Earlier in the novel, he was in a conversation with Desdemona about the conditions in the Black Bottom ghetto in 1932 and in the whole city after the riots: "by the 1970s, in the no-tax-base, white flight, murder-capital Detroit of the Coleman Young administration, black people could finally live wherever they wanted to" (142).

¹⁴⁵ Richard H. Thompson, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 73.

The House in Middlesex and the Ethnic In-Group

The Stephanides' house bears a name after its position in the affluent Detroit suburb Grosse Pointe. It is located on Middlesex Boulevard and symbolizes duality and in-betweenness, the past and the present: "The architecture of Middlesex was an attempt to rediscover pure origins," (273) as compared to the "impurity" of the Stephanides family's past. The name of the house signifies the illusion of an opportunity that its inhabitants occupy both physical and psychological "middle space" by renouncing the hierarchical binaries. It is a "strange house," both "futuristic and outdated at the same time" (258). This object, "better in theory than reality," opens up for the possibility of a complete reinvention of the Stephanides' identities. Instead of living in the so-called Greek Town of Detroit, they are finally able to cast off their immigrant past and assume the same position as their well off WASP neighbours. Successful cultural assimilation in such circumstances would require the rejection of the past, instead of achieving a comprehensive middle ground in the form of a hybridized identity. The house looks promising for this purpose. Distancing themselves from the past works just fine for Milton and Tessie, who seize this opportunity for assimilation through residential integration. However, Cal perceives a different tendency with his grandmother who, as many of our older relatives do, locks herself into a particular period in the past and rarely succumbs to progress. There is no forgetting for her. Cal remembers that "[e]verything about Middlesex spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering" (273).

American born Greeks join the permeating trend in the 1970s of the suburbanization of the middle class in America. Charles Moskos points to a dramatic change of the city proper in Detroit, where the events of *Middlesex* are mostly settled.¹⁴⁶ Some of the movement is inevitably the consequence of the rising affluence, but the change in racial structure due to the Riots of 1967 seems the main reason. Eugenides does not give Milton an easy ride to affluent Detroit suburbs. Moneywise, the insurance obtained after Milton has allowed the Zebra Room to be destroyed proved a useful asset. "Shameful as it is to say," Cal admits openly, "the riots were the best thing that ever happened to us" (252).

When it comes to ethnic minorities, there is an unspoken rule that the all-white residential areas protect themselves from the newcomers of non-WASP origin. In chapter "Middlesex" we are able to follow Milton in a painstaking negotiation with a real-estate agent

¹⁴⁶ Moskos, pp. 65-66.

Miss Marsh about buying the house. “Community standards” and “selling to the right sort of people” remind Milton of his previous neighbourhood in Indian Village, as one “didn’t want what was happening in Detroit to happen out here” (255-56). By placing Milton into this position, Eugenides illustrates for us how difficult it was in the 1970s for a representative of an ethnic minority to obtain “admission” to such a neighbourhood. Again, the notion of an ethnic being “not white enough” is introduced as an undesirable trait, regardless of one’s available financial assets. Prospective buyers of immigrant origin are either rejected, or kept from choosing from the best available real estate: “Yes, Miss Marsh feels sorry. *I mean, really. Look at this house! Who’s going to buy it if not an Italian or a Greek*” (emphasis in the original text) (256). The most obvious instrument of discrimination towards American ethnics in pursuit of residential appropriation is the point system they have to satisfy in order to be eligible for buying a piece of real estate. During the “white flight” after the Race riots, buyers interested in the suburban properties are evaluated from many different aspects. Provided that they gather enough points, the prospective home owners obtain an opportunity for purchase. All of a sudden, nationality, religion, occupation or the choice of a spouse gain different significance. “Miss Marsh begins to add it all up. *Southern Mediterranean. One point. Not in one of the professions. One point. Religion? Greek church. That’s some kind of Catholic, isn’t it? So there’s another point there. And he has his parents living with him! Two more points! [...] Oh, that won’t do at all*” (emphasis in the original text) (255). Finally, Milton’s business mind calculates the way around the discriminative system – he exploits the inadequacy of the system and offers cash money for the house. After all, “no one is going to tell Milton Stephanides where to live” (257).

Moving into a new house provides more space for traditional post-prandial Sunday gatherings at the Stephanides’. There are several references to such episodes in the novel, portraying Milton and Tessie’s Greek-American friends and cousins visiting their home, as well as the nature of their conversations, such as “revamping of the tax code or philosophical fights about the role of government, the welfare state, the Swedish health system,” and so on (7-8, 362-64). Milton’s in-group is very important to him, and consists of “restaurant owners and fur finishers,” as well as a physician and a chiropractor (8). It is almost certain, based on empirical evidence, that immigrant Greek-Americans will have closest personal ties with fellow Greeks, both relatives and non-relatives.¹⁴⁷ In the novel there are, to mention but a few, Jimmy and Phyllis Fioretos, Gus and Helen Panos, uncle Pete Tatakis, dr. Philobosian, and

¹⁴⁷ Moskos, p.147.

many more. This network of people is an extended “comfort zone” which begins with the closest family. It is also a definer of ethnic affirmation for Milton, since he does not associate his ethnicity with the language or religious aspect.

As casual as they may be, the gatherings in the novel are not without a dash of patriarchal traces. Cal remembers house segregation masked by a different choice of conversational topics for different sexes. Thus, men discussed politics in the living room, while women were in the kitchen or salon, tackling every other topic. There is no mention of other nationalities the couple associates with, except for the Orthodox Jew neighbours, Sam and Hettie Grossinger. Cal describes them as Midwestern “low key” assimilationists who also paid cash for their house (281). Mutual interests and the common denominator of their foreign ethnicity in America are good grounds for the friendship between these two families. The narrator tops it up with humour by referring to one more trait the families had in common, as opposed to their WASP neighbours, and that is the Greek and Jewish tendency to verbalize success in a regular communication. Grossingers “talked about money without thinking it was impolite, and so we felt comfortable around them” (281).

The crucial redefining moment of Milton’s relationship with the Greek-American community occurs in 1974, on the occasion of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. The event causes a strong debate among the gathered Greek-American friends at Middlesex and Milton makes a choice to align himself with American “national interest.” Just like that, he announces his betrayal of the ancestry – “To Hell with the Greeks” (363), and cuts himself off from the community. Cal’s comment on the outcome of the debate is a significant clarification of Milton’s attitude: “In 1974, instead of reclaiming his roots by visiting Bursa, my father renounced them. Forced to choose between his native land and his ancestral one, he didn’t hesitate” (363). Once more, the impossibility of occupying the middle grounds is obvious, since Milton chooses one hierarchical binary, and in this way proves the inescapability of the either/or option in the process of immigrant self-invention. Milton’s decision marked the end of Sunday debates at the Stephanides’, but more importantly, the loss of his tight-knit group of friends. They gathered again for the first time much later, to show support for the family after Callie went missing from home.

Chapter Four: The Third Generation – Cal Stephanides and Chapter Eleven

The protagonists of the third generation in the novel – the grandchildren of the immigrant generation – have no direct ancestral memories of the Old World. Their cultural references are 1960s and 1970s, and they have been exposed entirely to American education. Cal and Chapter Eleven speak English as the exclusive language of communication and have no knowledge of Greek, as the native tongue of their ethnic group. The exceptions are just a few everyday words and phrases they are able to catch from their grandmother. The breakdown in the language transmission is the result of the fact that their parents do not make any significant effort to speak the native tongue themselves, nor do they aspire to pass it on to their children.

Chapter Eleven shows no signs of interest when it comes to ancestral culture. He goes through several transformations of identity in the course of the novel, but they are related to cultural and social influences at the time he grows up. The whirlpool of the Vietnam War is one of the examples. His loyalty to the family is questionable as well, as he shows no interest in the family business and at one point of his rebelliousness rejects family values completely.

Cal becomes simultaneously aware that his ancestral roots are different from mainstream America, and that he is a person of a dual physical nature. His road to self-discovery and self-invention is not an easy one, and it has both a physical and a psychological aspect: he journeys across America and to different countries, as well as to the past, in order to formulate his own version of “Greek-Americaness” by incorporating the “otherness” of his ethnic ancestry into mainstream environment. Cal goes through enormous changes of his personality as well, in an attempt to accept his cultural and physical hybridity.

In order to support my claim, I have chosen to explore in this chapter several different aspects of Cal’s life and how he incorporates them into his personality: his education at a posh private school, his view on ethno-religious customs related to funerals in his family, a prospect of gender reassignment surgery and the process of forging his new gender identity. Cal’s choice shows that he accepts his hybrid nature in private, but he chooses a binary for his modus operandi in society, due to the fact that there is no societal recognition of his hybridity.

Callie in Baker & Inglis Private School – Everyone is Ethnic

All of a sudden America wasn't about hamburgers and hot rods anymore. It was about the *Mayflower* and Plymouth Rock. It was about something that had happened for two minutes four hundred years ago, instead of everything that had happened since. Instead of everything that was happening now. (298)

Callie would never have attended a private school had it not been for extraordinary social circumstances to influence her family's lives. In theory, Callie can only benefit from attending public school since the centralized school system in America is an institutional means of assimilation for the descendants of immigrants. However, a historical moment occurs when white America is concerned about the safeguarding of identity – the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling is handed down in 1971 and the implementation of bussing programs starts for the purpose of desegregating Detroit public schools. As I have mentioned in Chapter Three, Milton joins the culture of white flight and moves the family into the affluent suburb of Grosse Pointe, enrolling Callie into a private school to avoid the bussing program: “You see, Tessie? You understand why your dear old husband wanted to get the kids out of that school system? Because if I didn't, that goddamn Roth would be busing them to school in downtown Nairobi, that's why” (281). Nevertheless, Callie is quite unhappy to attend the admission interview and declares that she would rather be “bussed” than go to a girls' school (292).

According to the founding charter, Baker & Inglis private school is a place “to educate girls in the humanities and sciences and to cultivate in them a love of learning, a modest comportment, an amiable grace and an interest in civic duty above all” (293). The atmosphere in the school is charged with the sense of Anglo-Saxon tradition, manners, sports and a syllabus that includes famous Englishmen of letters, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, Wordsworth, Dickens, and others. The school architecture pleases Callie's parents who are hungry for recognition and assimilation into the mainstream and now can even afford private education: “long echoing hallways and churchy smell,” the “Gothic gloom,” (293) as well as “the emerald grass [and] blue slate roof and ivy” (337). Everything this spectacle stands for is now available for their daughter. At the same time, the narrator declares that “[i]n America, England is where you go to wash yourself of ethnicity,” which makes this school even more attractive for Callie's parents (337).

Callie experiences many things for the first time at Baker & Inglis. She becomes aware of her ethnicity, her non-normative body, reaches puberty and has her first crush and sexual

experience. She becomes conscious of her hybrid identity and her hybrid sexuality at the same time. Whether she learns to accept them both is not yet clear at this point of the narration. Prior to being enrolled in this school, Callie learns about her family's ethnicity through ethnic and religious customs performed by the female members of the family. There is only one instance when she comments amusingly on her father's efforts in this respect:

The only way my father could think of to instill in me a sense of my heritage was to take me to dubbed Italian versions of the ancient Greek myths. And so, every week, we saw Hercules slaying the Nemean lion, or stealing the girdle of the Amazons ("That's some girdle, eh, Callie?"), or being thrown gratuitously into snake pits without textual support (123).

There are two important characters at Baker & Inglis who, both in their own way, stimulate and increase Callie's awareness, as well as questioning, of ancestral culture: Mr. da Silva, the English teacher of Brazilian origin who "encourages [Callie] in feeling Greek" (322), and The Obscure Object, a beautiful red headed school mate of WASP origin, one more character in the novel whom we know only by a nick name.

Mr. da Silva's English class which consists of only five students is an extraordinary experience for a twelve year old Callie and her "academically inclined sisters," the lovers of literature. It is described in the chapter "The Wolverette." The syllabus analyzed is carefully chosen for advanced students and the class meets in a rather unconventional space, the school greenhouse with vines and geraniums hanging from the glass roof (321, 323). Callie's knowledge of literature before Mr. da Silva's class, as she amusingly describes, is related only to the series of one hundred and fifteen Great Books that her parents obtain "to round out their education [while] canon-bashing wasn't in vogue yet" (302). The family happily concludes that "the Great Books began with names not unlike [their] own (Thucydides)," and therefore the Stephanides feel "included" (302). Literature classes at school and the fact that the family is now in the possession of so many highly estimated authors have a stimulating influence on Callie. She begins to imagine herself as a writer and forms the ground for the biographical endeavor the grown-up Cal has taken up in his quest for identity: "Great books were working on me, silently urging me to pursue the most futile human dream of all, the dream of writing a book worthy of joining their number, a one hundred and sixteenth Great Book with another long Greek name on the cover: Stephanides" (302).

Mr. da Silva is yet another character who has reinvented himself, and Callie portrays him only with positive epithets. A liberal democrat now, his Latin background is barely noticeable since it "had been erased by a North American education and a love of the

European novel” (321). And yet, a person who has taken up a new identity is the one to influence Callie in being proud of her family’s cultural ancestry. A lover of ancient Greece, Mr. da Silva has travelled to modern Greece for a holiday and enjoys talking about it. For the first time Callie hears about the Old Country from someone else than her grandparents or family friends and this generates in her the wish to pay a visit herself. The works analyzed in Mr. da Silva’s literature classes are also a boost for Callie’s feeling of ancestry, as well as pride. At one point she becomes fascinated with no other than Homer’s *The Iliad*,

It was a paperback prose translation, abridged, set loose from its numbers, robbed of the music of the ancient Greek but – as far as I was concerned – still a terrific read. God, I loved that book! From the pouting of Achilles in his tent (which reminded me of the President’s refusal to hand over the tapes) to Hector’s being dragged around the city by his feet (which made me cry), I was riveted. Forget *Love Story*. Harvard couldn’t match Troy as a setting, and in Segal’s whole novel only one person died. (322)

In addition, the teacher highly motivates Callie to contribute in class: “Miss Stephanides [...] since you hail from Homer’s own land, would you be so kind as to read aloud?” (322). The narrator makes the same allusion to his ancestry at the beginning of the novel to announce humorously the tone of the narration and trick us into believing that he is a fan of genetic determinism: “Sorry if I get Homeric at times. That’s genetic, too” (4).

Apart from ancestral culture and literature horizons, Mr. da Silva’s class is a gate for another new experience for Callie. She becomes smitten with one of the students. She explains that it is tolerable “at Baker & Inglis to get a crush on a fellow classmate,” since in the absence of boys emotional energy turns into the friendships of girls (327). Callie refers to this girl only as the Obscure Object, according to the surrealist touch she liked about Luis Bunuel’s *That Obscure Object of Desire* from 1977. There are two reasons for Callie’s infatuation with the Obscure Object. Obvious physical and emotional attraction comes from the fact that this is a girl unlike any other Callie has met before, with “gold highlights in the strawberry hair,” beautiful facial features, and an unfocused expression (324). On the other hand, The Obscure Object wears an antique ring on her finger with real rubies, and has personal habits “coming from old money,” like “chewing on the antacid tablets” (336). While Callie enjoys reading in class and the attention she receives in this way, she realizes that The Obscure Object reads even better, with “concentrated dignity [and] good reading voice, picked up at home from poetry-reciting uncles who drank too much” (324, 326, 336). She is a descendant of the Founding Fathers and represents an America that is out of Callie’s reach.

The Obscure Object is a member of the group of popular girls called Charm Bracelets. Their popularity is not in itself a reason for other girls to feel left out. It is the feeling that, due to their background and upbringing, they lay stronger claim to America: “Until we came to Baker & Inglis my friends and I had always felt completely American. But now the Bracelets’ upturned noses suggested that there was another America to which we could never gain admittance” (298). The “well-bred, small nosed, trust-funded schoolmates” who are the “rulers” of Callie’s new school are neither particularly gifted students, nor hardworking girls committed to Protestant work ethics. Yet, they are something else, signifying the other end of the binary to which Callie now compares herself and feels at a loss. These girls are the children of wealthy industrialists and, seemingly, life treats them well; well enough for them to spread the air of easiness and slight boredom, and the sound of their bracelets full of little charm figures, freshly brought from their fathers’ latest business trips.

From the perspective of other schoolmates it looks like the Charm Bracelets have attended this private school since “prekindergarten,” or as if they own the school for that matter (296). At first, Callie seems to be very impressed with them, but at the same time recognizes for the first time the feeling of minority, exclusion and lower class. To borrow the words of Werner Sollors, for the first time she feels “not completely American.”¹⁴⁸ Callie’s frustration is also of an intellectual nature, as she is a good student while the Bracelets are the type that sits at the back and does not study. She contemplates that “maybe the Charm Bracelets understood more about life than [she] did. From an early age they knew what little value the world placed in books, and so didn’t waste their time with them” (297). On the contrary, Callie believes in gaining knowledge through education and bearing its fruits later on. She openly distances herself from these girls, except for the Obscure Object.

As time passes Callie and the Obscure Object, the girl with “the appetite for sophisticated ruin” become very close (336). It is the transgression of class and social boundaries and happens despite the girls’ different backgrounds and upbringing. Their friendship and romance are described in chapters “The Obscure Object,” “Tiresias in Love,” “Flesh and Blood” and “The Gun on the Wall.” This period is also the time when Callie realizes that she is not a girl but “something in between” (375). During the school year they both take part in Mr. da Silva’s staging of *Antigone*:

“I’m really glad we’re in this play together,” the Object said [...] “I would’ve never talked to a kid like you.” She paused, realizing how this sounded. “I mean, I never knew you were such a cool kid.”

¹⁴⁸ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp. 25, 39.

Cool? Calliope cool? I had never dreamed of such a thing. But I was ready to accept the Object's judgment. (335)

The Obscure Object takes on the role of the "avenging sister" and Callie, conveniently, the role of Tiresias. There are plenty of references to Greek mythology in the novel. The narrator openly boasts of knowing both sexes, like the mythical figure Tiresias, the blind soothsayer who "was first one thing and then another" (3). Tiresias is one of the most important prophets in Greek mythology, and a figure that symbolizes both the hermaphroditic condition of the narrator and his narrative omniscience, since the mythological figure was able to experience the world both as a man and a woman. He is present in the Oedipal myth and the Theban cycle. A myth about the cause of his blinding says that once, when he was young and walking on a mountain, he came upon two mating snakes. He separated them and got punished for it by being turned into a woman. Seven years later, he encountered the mating snakes again, repeated his action, and got turned back to his original sex.¹⁴⁹

While in the beginning Callie does not feel at ease in the Object's upper-class house with a black maid waiting on the girls, she gradually becomes fascinated with the Object's way of life. Even though she is proud of her ancestry, Callie opens up to the possibility that this is exactly what her family needs in order to feel completely American. In comparison to the Stephanides' house in Middlesex, the Object's house is carelessly "messier," but at the same time the furniture is "impressively old, heavy, and [sends] out signals of permanence and settled judgment" (341). During the summer holiday the girls spend time together as well, mostly in the members-only Grosse Pointe Club, property on the lake with a swimming pool and paddle tennis courts. In Callie's eyes there is a striking difference between her family and people who attend the club, and she starts questioning the acquired family values: "Was this the place to mention St. Christofer? My father's war stories? My grandmother's superstitions?" (343) She is also less keen on visiting the homeland or spend the summer painting a church, and contemplates: "What did they have to do with me? I'd just discovered a whole new continent only a few miles away" (341). Now that Callie, one of the "ethnic" girls in Baker & Inglis, feels a part of a posh environment where everything she orders is taken care of by the Object's father, she enters a phase when her ancestral culture is not that attractive any more. Due to naivety characteristic for her age, Callie does not ponder the reasons for the "sudden intimacy" between the two girls, but Adult Cal is now aware that the Object's motivation is founded on the "love vacuum," set off by the absence of busy parents.

¹⁴⁹ Sophia Souli, *Greek Mythology* (Ilioupoli: M.Toubis Graphic Art S.A., 1995), p. 61.

“The WASP definition of ethnicity,” as Ulf Hannerz calls it, is applied in the same manner in Baker & Inglis to refer to the non-white or not-white-enough schoolmates. Ethnicity, as “a quality which is absent among Anglo-Saxons” is attributed to all the girls attending the school who were not of Anglo-Saxon origin: the Indian, Muslim, Czech, Latina, a girl of multiracial identity and Callie. She struggles, contemplates, and applies a grown-up logic to her twelve year old reasoning in order to come to terms with the experience of being labeled in this way and the feeling of exclusion: ““Ethnic” girls we were called, but then who wasn’t, when you got right down to it? Weren’t the Charm Bracelets every bit as ethnic? Weren’t they as full of strange rituals and food? Of tribal speech?” (298).

The narrator ponders the question of the importance of decent in America: Who is ethnic? Baker & Inglis seems to be an institution where it matters where the students’ parents come from. But even the representatives of the dominant culture have ancestors who come from a place other than the American continent and show particularities that may be “labeled” ethnical, such as vocabulary, types of food and kinship related only to one group of people. As time progresses Callie will learn to accept her hybrid identity, part Greek and part American. While she is at Baker & Inglis, she lays ground for it. In order to accept her ethnicity in comparison to the Americanness of the Charm Bracelets, she subversively locates their weakness in the quest for the purity of the origin: the fact is that even the Braceletts would like to be more mainstream and American than they are, which implies being from the American East:

They lived near the water and had grown up, like all Grosse Pointers, pretending that our shallow lake was no lake at all but actually the ocean. The Atlantic Ocean. Yes, that was the secret wish of the Charm Bracelets and their parents, to be not Midwesterners but Easterners, to affect their dress and lockjaw speech, to summer in Martha’s Vineyard, to say “back East” instead of “out East,” as though their time in Michigan represented only a brief sojourn away from home. (296)

Chapter Eleven

Cal’s older brother, whom we know only by his nickname that signifies bankruptcy,¹⁵⁰ goes through several transformations of identity during the course of the novel. We read about his

¹⁵⁰ Dictionary entries state that in certain circumstances bankruptcy is declared under Chapter 11 of the Statute of the Bankruptcy Reform Act of 1978 – the Bankruptcy Code - which governs corporate reorganization (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online* [Accessed 9 November 2012]). It means that partnerships, corporations and municipalities in financial difficulties are reorganized by debtors and creditors. There is no mention of the reorganization of the Stephanides family business, which leads us to the conclusion that under Chapter Eleven’s mismanagement the business goes bankrupt.

encounters and explorations in most of the chapters, whereas the one that describes his rejection of the family values is “Waxing Lyrical.” The reader perceives Chapter Eleven from Cal-Callie’s point of view and we are aware of the probability of an unreliable representation of Chapter Eleven’s character. Nevertheless, we perceive his character as a contrast to the rest of the Stephanides: although he grows up in a home environment where female members value and pass on ethnic customs, and is frequently surrounded by an ethnic in-group, he shows no interest in the ethnic heritage of his family and his transformations are therefore related to other cultural influences. Like so many other American boys, Chapter Eleven is a child of the 1960s and 1970s, and faces the draft for the Vietnam War.

Cal (Callie at the time the children grew up) uses plenty of stereotypes to describe his brother. “Because he was my older brother, I admired him; but because I was his sister, I felt superior” (278). The advantage the sister feels comes from the fact that she values her own skills and abilities as superior to those of her brother, claiming that “all the important ones” have been endowed upon her by God: verbal aptitude, imagination and looks (278). The interests and appearance of the siblings obviously differ to a large extent. Chapter Eleven does not pick up on styles, he is gifted for mathematics, fix-it handedness and music, so Callie finds him “geeky” and “nerdy” (277-78), and in physical appearance he is very skinny, so he reminds her of a “stalk supporting the tulip of his brain” (277). His friends share the same aura of “geekiness,” and enjoy competing with each other in general knowledge or exchanging philosophical arguments: “But how can you *prove* you exist, Mr. Stephanides?” (277).

As I have explained in Chapters Two and Three, Chapter Eleven’s grandparents brought into America the notion of a traditional society in which they had been brought up. Like in all traditional societies, a family and a group of friends are societal units, and there is no emphasis on individualism. On the other hand, Chapter Eleven grows up in an individualistic society that places importance on personal achievements and Cal finds him having “the tyrannical, self absorbed look of American children” (226). It is yet another stereotypical characterization, but it also portrays Chapter Eleven as completely detached from the family ancestry. We realize further on that he makes no effort to incorporate it into his personality. The ancestral cultural distinctiveness is irretrievable for him. For example, a family vacation that may include a trip to the Old Country is of no interest for him, since he finds tourism to be “just another form of colonialism,” and prefers “chemical trips of his own” (317). He feels no *aporia* over eventual dual loyalty towards the country of origin and the

present environment. In a few words, he is a part of mainstream America. A “grandson of the two former silk farmers [...], he has never had to help in the cocoonery” and the imprint the present society has made on him prevails.

Chapter Eleven’s loyalty to America and to his family is also put to the test when he goes to college, joins the antiwar movement and changes his viewpoints as well as his appearance “from science geek to John Lennon look-alike” (312). Cal speculates that under the influence of drugs her brother examines how much the notion of a chance is present in our lives: a draft number for the Vietnam War decided by lottery, or a possibility of being born into an economically mobile family like the Stephanides, whose upper-middleclass lifestyle Chapter Eleven now rejects as materialistic and a result of capitalistic exploitation. Contrary to his father’s expectations and deep sense of duty towards the country, Chapter Eleven plans to escape the draft by leaving for Canada (376). Callie (at that time) is very compassionate about her brother who faces the draft (301). However, Chapter Eleven’s rejection and dismissal of the family values is aggressive and heartbreaking for his parents:

Chapter Eleven said he was against materialism. “All you care about is money,” he told Milton. “I don’t want to live like this.” He gestured towards the room. Chapter Eleven was against our living room, everything we had, everything Milton had worked for. He was against Middlesex! Then shouting; and Chapter Eleven uttering two words to Milton, one beginning with *f*, the other with *y*; and more shouting, and Chapter Eleven’s motorcycle roaring away [...]. (317)

Without intention and just by chance Cal’s brother makes a valuable contribution to the family business, for which he has no interest otherwise. At one point a hungry 17-year old boy goes down into the kitchen to make himself some late-night snack, and just for fun produces many different shapes of hot dogs on a sizzling pan. Those that bulged in the middle and flexed became a successful part of Milton’s hot dog brand (276-77). Chapter Eleven’s interest in the family business ends with inventing Herculean frankfurters as he considers himself “an inventor” and not “a hot dog man” (277). The comfortably wealthy lifestyle of the Stephanides lasts only until Chapter Eleven takes over the business and, true to his nickname, runs it into the ground.

Ethnic Customs: Funerals

Funerals in the adopted homeland are almost always events where immigrants reaffirm aspects of their fading ethnicity. There are three funerals in *Middlesex*, and they are

performed according to Greek Orthodox tradition on the occasion of the passing away of the male members of the Stephanides family. In addition, the narrator frequently brings up Desdemona's long and thorough preparation for her own funeral that actually never occurs. In Greek tradition funerals are treated with much respect and attention to detail. The entire funerary service is an expression of the collective consciousness of the Greek community. Preparation before the act of interment and the aftermath are rich with symbolism, and bear great importance for the family. Cal has no direct memory of grandfather Zizmo's funeral and he narrates it from his omniscient perspective, whereas he is involved in the preparations for the funerals of grandfather Lefty and his father Milton. Certain details are mentioned repeatedly, such as symbolic displays of grief by the family, the dark decoration at home, the custom of not shaving after a death in the family, and the custom of blocking the entrance door in order to prevent the spirit of a deceased to reenter the house after death and before the funeral.

Charles Moskos has gathered plenty of details about Greek-American life in the past and today, and he concludes that there is no better illustration of the coexistence of Greek and American customs than in Greek-American funerals.¹⁵¹ I am presenting some of the details of his work here, as they correspond with the funerary practice in the novel. It is a custom that someone in the extended family scans the daily obituaries in the press and informs by telephone of a person's passing away, unless the family has already notified people, also by telephone. Wakes, as an important part of the funeral, used to be held at the home of the deceased before World War II. Nowadays, the wake is held at a funeral home, usually Greek-owned. If the family engages an American undertaker, it is considered as a definite sign of assimilation. Moskos further concludes that the Greek-American wake is more attended than the funeral itself. In practice, it means that all relatives and friends of the departed are supposed to appear. A day after the wake, service is held at church, followed by the interment at the cemetery, and a post-funeral meal is served. In the past, female members of the family typically made a memorial meal of fish for the mourners and it was served at home after the funeral. Today, the post-funeral meal is served at a restaurant. Wailing during the funerary event used to be an important tradition not only in Greece, but also in rural and smaller communities all over South Europe. We are unlikely to hear wailing at a Greek-American funeral today, and if it does occur, it will embarrass the American born. As for the symbolical

¹⁵¹ Moskos, p. 97.

expressions of grief, nowadays only the closest members of the family wear black clothes for a limited time.

In the world of the novel, grandfather Zizmo's funerary event is described in more detail than the two other funerals (126-129). We read about it in chapter "Marriage on Ice." The richness of the depiction is related to the importance of paying respect to the deceased within the immigrant generation. The following paragraph is an illustration:

For nearly two weeks the family stayed at home, polluted by death, greeting the occasional visitor who came to pay respects. Black clothes covered the mirrors. Black streamers draped the doors. Because a person should never show vanity in the presence of death, Lefty stopped shaving, and by the day of the funeral grew nearly a full beard. (126)

Further on, the narrator's sardonic pen is dynamic again, portraying the most Americanized of all Greek characters in *Middlsex*, Sourmelina, as she takes on the role of a very traditional conservative wife who performs the funerary activities. Surprisingly, "[her] anguish at her husband's death far exceeded her affection for him in life" (127). The display of both American and Greek flag by her husband's coffin is an even greater irony, considering Zizmo's conservatism and aversion to anything American. To name but a few examples, his strong displeasure of women's right to vote and the sex-segregation at his house, just like in the *patridha*, the Old Country (92). At the time of the event, Zizmo's body has not been located yet after a dubious accident, but the family is granted an Orthodox funeral by the church authorities. Sourmelina chooses a seven-day wake at home, although at the time "immigrants were beginning to use funeral parlors" (127). Numerous mourners therefore come to the darkened living room, *sala*, to pay condolences, stand for a moment above the coffin and sit among other visitors. According to the tradition, Sourmelina unties Zizmo's wedding crown from her own and places it in the coffin together with his picture. Lina's public display of grief, her wailing over her husband's death, is very impressive for all the visitors. Not only that it is performed in a true manner of the ancestral culture, but it is also a matter of approval by the community that embraces the Old Country customs:

For ten hours over two days she keened over Jimmy Zizmo's empty coffin, reciting the *mirologhia*. In the best histrionic village style, Sourmelina unleashed soaring arias in which she lamented the death of her husband and castigated him for dying. When she was finished with Zizmo, she railed at God for taking him so soon, and bemoaned the fate of her newborn daughter [...] The older immigrants, hearing Lina's rage, found themselves returning to their childhood in Greece, to memories of their own grandparent's or parent's funerals, and everyone agreed that such a display of grief would guarantee [his] soul eternal peace. (127)

A close friend of the family has been chosen to guard the doorway after the wake is finished and keep Zizmo's spirit from reentering his house until the church ceremony is over. Since Sourmelina and Zizmo are the characters who do not qualify as "regular churchgoers," the service is not as attended as the wake, and most of the mourners at the church are old ladies and widows who attend funerals for entertainment (128).

Another funeral rite refers to the 40-day custom of mourning: "After death, the souls of the Orthodox do not wing their way directly to heaven," Cal explains, "They prefer to linger on and annoy the living" (128). During this period it is considered that any accident can be attributed to the haunting spirit, until it is finally put to rest with a symbolic cake, *kolyvo*, in another church ceremony. As soon as this period is over, the Americanized wife, Lina, is back on the stage again, taking off her dark clothes and scandalously putting on a very lively orange dress to show that life goes on. Desdemona's strong reaction against it comes from her traditionally rigid ethno-religious standpoint, but it brings no change in the cousin's behaviour: "What are you doing? [...] A widow wears black for the rest of her life," to which Lina patiently declares that forty days are sufficient time for her public display of grief (129).

Grandfather Lefty's funeral is briefly mentioned in chapter "Middlesex." A victim of several brain strokes late in his life, Lefty was mute when Callie was born and he remained so till passing away. Cal is very fond of his "Chaplinesque papou," and finds the grandfather's speechlessness to be "an act of refinement" (261). This time the narrator describes his bereaved family at the post-funeral meal with whitefish and Greek wine served. Desdemona sits "in the widow's position of honor at the head of the table" (269), while everyone is preoccupied with their philosophical thoughts that only a funeral can bring about. The descriptions of the emotional connection between Callie and her grandparents prior to the event are more emphasized than the funerary custom itself. This is one more instance within the novel when the narrator boasts of his omniscience, while describing his relation to the grandparent:

From the beginning there existed a strange balance between my grandfather and me. As I cried my first cry, Lefty was silenced; and as he gradually lost the ability to see, to taste, to hear, to think or even remember, I began to see, taste, and remember everything, even stuff I hadn't seen, eaten, or done. Already latent inside me [...] was the ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both. (269)

After her husband's death, Desdemona takes to bed and remains there for the next ten years, claiming that "the woman's life was over once her husband died" (271). Although the family is very supportive and nurturing, it looks like she has given up. The grandmother does not like being left on earth, nor in America, and she is tired of living. Depression and withdrawal take over for a while, in spite of an encouraging tone by Father Mike, who believes it is just a temporary phase and has this kind of experience "with widows all the time" (271). As soon as the emotions quiet down, Desdemona's "lifelong hypochondria" intensifies and never disappears. The woman who used to be very active in the past years out of the necessity to look after her husband is now free of any spousal duty and does not take it well. A special connection of an emotional nature intensifies between Callie and Desdemona: during many following years the granddaughter manages to cheer the grandmother up for brief moments when she visits her "perpetual sickroom" (522), so that Desdemona is "cooing endearments in Greek" (273) while fondling Callie's hair. She puts on a mask for the rest of the family to make them believe she still has the will to continue, but with Callie she is completely honest and without any pretence shows her that she has had enough of life: "Pray for me to die," she asks Cal, "Pray for *yia yia* to die and go be with *papou*" (272).

Although an array of physicians examine her over time, Desdemona is diagnosed over and over as being all right. Still, she begins with serious preparations for her own funeral by ordering her son and daughter-in-law to perform different tasks. She expects them to manage the burial plot, give away the belongings and choose a specific kind of coffin: "Miltie [...], you bought for me the place next to *papou*? [...] I want you go put sign it says, this place is for *yia yia*" (274). Desdemona picks even a mortician although she is very much alive and well. According to the tradition, he is Greek. Death for Desdemona seems to be "only another kind of emigration," and she would be sailing to heaven to join the husband who "had already gotten his citizenship and has a place waiting" (275).

The third funeral in *Middlesex* is Milton's, and it is described in the final chapter of the novel. During Callie's absence from home and her change of gender, Milton gets into a car accident from which he never returns. Once more, it is a full Orthodox funeral, attended by family and close friends. The high moral significance of the Greek-American community is obvious, as the family's in-group gathers for support both after Callie has gone missing from Middlesex, and for Milton's funeral, despite of the falling-out caused by the Cyprus crisis. Traditional decoration is placed around the house, reminding of the funeral of grandfather Zizmo. The grandmother is always on watch, to keep the tradition going:

Middlesex, too, was in mourning. The mirror in the den was covered by a black cloth. There were black streamers on the sliding doors. All the old immigrant touches. Aside from that, the house seemed unnaturally still and dim [...]
Suddenly there was a strange noise, like an eagle's cry. The intercom on the living room wall crackled. A voice shrieked [...]
The immigrant touches, of course, weren't around the house because of Tessie. The person shrieking over the intercom was none other than Desdemona.

His father's funeral is very symbolical for Cal, as it marks the end of his quest for social identity. He arrives at Middlesex from San Francisco, where he took part in a sex club entertainment show as "The God – Hermaphroditus." During the funeral two important things happen with Cal's involvement. First of all, he obtains an explanation for his dual physical nature from his grandmother who, seeing that Calliope is now a boy, fights her way through senility and turns their chat into her confession (527). She tells Cal the story that her mother passed down about babies in the ancestral village who looked like girls and during teenage years turned into boys, as well as the true relation with her husband. This old wives' tale is mentioned in more detail in the first half of the novel, prefiguring Cal's condition, but it remains a secret in Desdemona's thoughts only until the end of the novel.

Second, Cal presents himself to his family and friends for the first time as male. The reunion is not so easy after his change of gender. In time, they learn to accept him and realize that gender is "not all that important," (520) though it takes more effort on his mother's side. Cal is assured that she is doing her best to accept his decision: "She was picking up the cue from my brother that this thing that had happened to me might be handled lightly" (521). Still, there are doubts and concerns that trouble Tessie:

"Why did you run away honey?"

"I had to."

"Don't you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?"

I lifted my face and looked into my mother's eyes. And I told her: "This is the way I was." (520)

As for his late father, Cal believes it would have been hard for him to accept the daughter's change of gender. In the penultimate chapter, Cal explains the details of his father's death and further develops the theme of acceptance while referring to himself as a Greek-American, and therefore hybrid. The time reference is present: "A real Greek might end on this tragic note. But an American is inclined to stay upbeat" (512).

These days, whenever we talk about Milton, my mother and I come to the conclusion that he got out just in time [...] without ever seeing me again. That

would not have been easy. I like to think that my father's love for me was strong enough that he could have accepted me. But in some ways it's better that we never had to work that out, he and I. With respect to my father I will always remain a girl. There's a kind of purity in that, the purity of childhood. (512)

Now that Cal "qualifies as male," he embraces his Greek ancestry and immigrant touch within the funeral arrangement and incorporates it into his identity by remaining in the front doorway during the church ceremony. Religion is now an agency for Cal to accept his ethnicity, and furthermore, ethnicity is a means for Cal's reinvention of identity: "And so it was I who, upholding an old Greek custom no one remembered anymore, stayed behind on Middlesex, blocking the door, so that Milton's spirit wouldn't reenter the house. It was always a man who did this" (529). With this rite of passage, Cal leaves his teenage years behind and confirms both his gender and ethnic hybridity. His new complex identity is born out of the fusion of gender and ethnicity, and I will explain this in more detail in the next section, where I explore Cal's transformation.

Cal's Metamorphosis

As I have mentioned earlier in this Chapter, it is in the course of her puberty that Callie becomes aware that she is morphologically different from other girls. There are numerous instances when she compares herself to other schoolmates and marvels at how "girls are becoming women," while she feels being left behind due to the "Mediterranean diet" served at her home (286-89). She wonders if "the omega-3 fatty acids and the three-vegetables-per-meal" she eats are in some way "retarding [her] sexual maturity." In a dialogue with nature, Callie expresses her anxiety: "Remember me? [...] I'm waiting" (286). Although not very keen on religious customs, in this period she also resorts to praying "to receive womanly stigmata" (353). Once when the physical changes finally begin to take place, their nature takes a different direction than expected and Callie obtains the features of a boy. Her problematic body is inhabited with "anarchists" squatting illegally in her abdomen, her frame lengthens and her voice matures while she grows facial hair and remains flat-chested without menstruation (294, 304). Once she has started to define herself in conventional terms of maleness and femaleness in an adolescent body, she feels at a loss for not belonging entirely to either of the binaries and she starts hiding under her abundant hair. At the same time her genetic predisposition towards crookedness comes to the surface. Eugenides on this occasion introduces a famous philosopher into the narrative to refer to Callie's Greek heritage:

To paraphrase Nietzsche, there are two types of Greek: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. I'd been born Apollonian, a sun-kissed girl with a face ringed with curls. But as I approached thirteen a Dionysian element stole over my features. My nose, at first delicately, then not so delicately, began to arch. My eyebrows, growing shaggier, arched too. Something sinister, wily, literally "satirical" entered my expression. (294)

Although in the early seventies "[a]ndrogyny was in," Callie feels that even her parents' love for her, though unchanged, showed a touch of anxiety over her future. Apprehended by this strange transition in puberty that happens against her will and, while she is unaware of the maverick gene that dictates the most of it, Callie refers to herself as "a freak," which is, together with its synonyms, a recurrent symbol in the narrative: "Beauty may always be a little bit freakish, but the year I turned thirteen I was becoming freakier than ever" (304).

There are some predictable as well as surprising circumstances that lead to the fact that Tessie and Milton discover Callie's hermaphroditism so late. Eugenides makes the plot uncomplicated in this case: conservative parents and the old family physician with bed eyesight, or in Cal's words, "[t]hanks to Dr. Phil's decrepitude and my mother's prudishness, I arrived at puberty not knowing much about what to expect" (283). Birds and bees are never mentioned between Callie and her parents and bodily matters are carefully avoided, just like in so many conservative families in reality, so it is shocking for the family with a fourteen year old child to be directed to a Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic in New York. The methods of scrutiny at the clinic are quite extensive and in retrospect Cal finds the whole experience humiliating. It is described for the reader in chapters "The Oracular Vulva" and "Looking Myself Up in Webster's." The clinic and its founder, Dr. Peter Luce, will remind an up-to-date readership of the negative legacy of Dr. John Money, influential psychologist and sexologist, and the co-founder of the Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins University where sex reassignment surgeries were performed between 1966 and 1979.

Callie is practically turned into a guinea pig during her visit to the clinic. The findings are transformed into scientific information and in this way Callie's private parts and their characteristics are publicly served up in medical journals, such as *Genetics and Heredity*, and *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology*, of which Cal informs us in the opening page of the novel: "That's me on page 578, standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes" (3). Thorough medical examinations of Callie's body are performed by physicians over and over, while at the same time Dr. Luce carries out psychological evaluation and gathers all possible information about the family. One of the requirements in

this respect is that Callie should produce a psychological piece of writing about her likes and dislikes. This can be considered Cal's first literary work, even though it becomes a part of the medical documentation about the case. The significance of this narrative for the final recommendation by Dr. Luce is immense, since Callie senses that he is interested in "the gender giveaways of [her] prose," and therefore purposefully fabricates facts of her life in support of her femininity, "pretending to be the all-American daughter" of her parents.

The medical report with the title "Preliminary Study: Genetic XY (Male) Raised as a Female," that Callie gets hold of and reads on her own is presented in the novel as a postmodern literary pastiche in the form of a long type-written document. A reader therefore has a possibility to place him-herself in Callie's position and imagine her feelings while reading the whole of it. All the evidence of the virilizing process in her body and the family's past notwithstanding, the physicians declare Callie to be a girl (with "unfinished" femaleness) because she has been brought up as a girl.

[T]here is no preordained correspondence between genetic and genital structure, or between masculine or feminine behavior and chromosomal status...It is clear by this that sex of rearing, rather than genetic determinants, plays a greater role in the establishment of gender identity. As the girl's gender identity was firmly established as female at the time her condition was discovered, a decision to implement feminizing surgery along with corresponding hormonal treatments seems correct. (437)

Callie's ethnicity is mentioned in this report, and it seems to be of relevance for the final recommendation that she is "raised in the Greek Orthodox tradition, with its strongly sex-defined roles" (436). Consequently, Dr. Luce opines that "[t]o leave [Callie's] genitals as they are today would expose her to all manner of humiliation," as he places importance on Callie's "ability to marry and pass as a normal woman in society" (437). The report in addition presents in a derogatory way the cultural difference that ethnicity entails in the case of Tessie and Milton: "In general, the parents seem assimilationist and very "all-American" in their outlook, but the presence of this deeper ethnic identity should not be overlooked" (436). What ethnicity comprises in Callie's case and medical establishment easily dismisses, is the practice of endogamy within a small ethnic community that the Stephanides inhabited in the past, and the secret incest that carries Callie's recessive gene. This fact leads further to Callie's hermaphroditic condition, or in Dr. Luce's words, simplified for the parents, "Callie is a girl who has a little too much male hormone. We want to correct that" (428). As if the matter is not complicated enough, the poor girl senses "[w]ith the unerring instinct of

children” that her parents wish for her to stay the way she is now” (434). The “sex of rearing” officially wins in the battle of “nature versus nurture,” where sex is biological and gender a matter of up-bringing, but only until Callie decisively asserts individual choice as her preference.

Frustration over the non-normative body Callie inhabits never truly takes place, as one would expect. She is rather frustrated with the medical establishment that, in partnership with her parents, recommends a corrective surgery in support of her female attributes and to discard any biological signs of maleness that bloom in her puberty. She is also angry at society after looking up her condition in Webster’s dictionary, and finding that the synonym for “hermaphrodite” is “monster” (431). Nothing is the same after adolescent Callie has realized that culture gives such a verdict “on a person like her,” and this period marks the start of Cal’s life-long abstention from showing his body in public and avoiding any deeper relationship with women (431).

Eugenides makes a great effort to emphasize free will and choice for his characters. I wish to explore Callie’s choice here from several perspectives. In refusal to undergo surgery, Callie exercises her free will as well, and decides to flee from the clinic and her parents, leaving them just a short note about it. Nothing compares to a teen-runaway’s feeling of, at least temporary, liberation. She ends up in San Francisco, choosing to live as a non-assertive male without any contact with the family: “My grandparents had fled their home because of a war,” Cal contemplates, “Now, some fifty-two years later, I was fleeing myself. I felt that I was saving myself just as definitively [...] and under the alias of my new gender” (443). The trip to the west of the country is a giant leap in Cal’s quest for identity, in comparison to Milton’s trip to the Old Country that never takes place, and it also parallels the grandparents’ trip from the flames of burning Smyrna into the new life in America. On the other hand, this act of desperation that for a brief period leads Callie away from anything familiar in her life, and after which she returns to her family as a “he,” stands against the values of the Greek-American community that does not harbor individualistic choices so easily and, to a certain extent, still supports traditional gender roles. With this self-ascribed gender transition Callie conveys that one is entitled to subjective agency in forming one’s own social identity and bearing responsibility for it:

In the twentieth century, genetics brought the Ancient Greek notion of fate into our very cells. This new century we’ve just begun has found something different [...] [F]ree will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind (479).

Cal's engagement in the peep show of a night club in San Francisco marks, first of all, the beginning of his adulthood, as he makes his living out of it now that he has abandoned his home in Detroit, while at the same time he goes through the process of understanding and accepting his condition through the companionship of another hermaphrodite, Zora. By acting out for the spectators of a night club the ancient Greek myth of the unity of Hermaphrodite and Salmacis in one body, Cal reconciles his femininity and masculinity in a staged enchanted pool.¹⁵² Ethnicity and gender identity in this way stand in metonymic relation with each other, as the mythic potential of Cal's ethnicity is a vehicle for him to accept his dual nature. He claims his unity openly in the act of writing and producing his ethnic self: "despite my androgenized brain, there's an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell" (20).

Later in the narration, Cal declares that "desire" and "the facticity" of his body "made [him] cross over to the other side" (479). If Cal refers to a desire for a female that makes him change gender, then the narrative supports his statement as the author makes clear that, ironically, Callie and the Obscure Object do not actually have a same sex relationship, and that Callie is not a lesbian. If it is desire for recognition, as Judith Butler points to the Hegelian tradition, in that "it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings," then the reader should have in mind Butler's observation that the viability of our individual personhood, the terms by which we are recognized as human, are socially articulated and changeable.¹⁵³ The "facticity" of one's body is also a matter of social construction, as Callie experiences at Dr. Luce's clinic. Having all this in mind, does it mean that Cal rather chooses to be a man with a crocus-penis instead of a girl with ambiguous genitalia because the dominant modus operandi in the western society is hetero masculine? The obvious answer is – yes. The grown-up Cal who narrates the story for us accepts his ethnic and gender hybridity, he is aware of the nature of his sexual duality, but in accepting for himself social identities, such as cosmopolitan, successful, American, he gives way to a hetero-masculine norm that still shapes these identities. There is no living in the vulnerable state of liminality, as he moves from one end of the gender-normative binary to the other by choosing to perform masculinity. This is why Cal, supported also by his chromosomes, "operate[s] in society as a man," who is "not androgynous in the least" (41). With this act of self-determination Callie becomes a matter of the past and a marginalized voice, and at the same time she gives space to Cal, who allows her to surface from time to

¹⁵² Souli, p. 40.

¹⁵³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

time “like a childhood speech impediment” (41). Callie does not hamper Cal in any way, as one may think; she rather enriches his personality with a double perspective.

Cal offers himself to his readership as “what’s next,” and this claim is premised upon his ability to reconcile the dualities he embodies, as well as the present with the past (490). Through the novel’s story in the present Eugenides introduces a “strange new possibility” of a happy ending of *Middlesex* around which a prospect of a romantic affair for Cal and a lot more of reconciliation may be plotted. Ethnic and gender hybridity make him a perfect cultural envoy of his government abroad, the position in the U.S. Foreign Office that brings along high socio-economic status and plenty of female admirers he refrains from. The fact that Cal is an ethnic-American obviously does not prevent him from having the feeling of national belonging and patriotism towards America, but quite on the contrary. It is also significant that Cal is now living in Berlin, the place where a Detroitter like him feels hope for the future, having saved himself from unnecessary surgical cutting and at the same time “[c]oming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred” (106). The city is also a mirror to the dichotomies Cal embodies and his quest for harmonization: a “once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einheit*.”

For Cal’s narrative of self-invention to be successful, our narrator is also compelled to experience a meaningful relationship. After all, there is no full circle without love. At long last, Cal meets a woman whom he wishes to know better and openly courts - Julie Kikuchi, an artist, and another ethnic American expatriate living currently in Berlin. Her Asian-American body significantly reflects the vagueness around Cal’s sexual preference. Cal’s fear of disclosing his “peculiarities” to women he dates results in the typical behavior of a detached male who uses avoidance tactics to exit a date: he never gets undressed, makes excuses to leave and does not call back. Nevertheless, there is potential of a romance and happiness for Cal, since he changes his typical behavior in order to spend time with Julie. By living in the Turkish quarter of Berlin surrounded with hard working *Gastarbeiters*, and dating a Japanese-American woman, Cal puts an end to traditional antagonisms of his family as well, and opts for the rehabilitation of “diplomacy” on a personal level. In other words, Asia is no longer an enemy, whether it concerns the descendants of his grandparents’ archenemies from Asia Minor, or a descendant of the enemy of his father’s generation in World War II. The mutual attraction that brings together Cal and Julie in the first place is yet to be put to the test, since this narrative frame in the novel remains open. There is hope.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored how characters in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* develop their sense of Greek-American identity in the modernized American society. The reinvention of identity and coming to terms with one's own hybridity are central concerns in this novel, and my focal point has been to delve into the way ethnicity is incorporated and expressed as an integral part of the newly formed identities. Each of the three generations in the novel shows a different way of integrating its ethnic past into the sense of identity and belonging to society.¹⁵⁴ The author's own hybrid background, part Greek, part Irish, as well as the way he grew up in the "Motor City" of Detroit, has clearly influenced his work on this novel.

I have examined how much importance the protagonists of the novel attach to the three institutions which supported traditional society and the ethnic community – the family, the church, and the local community. The authority of these institutions over the lives of individuals is fairly strong for the immigrant generation only, whereas it matters much less for the subsequent generations. The immigrant protagonists, the Stephanides, as the "purveyors of authentic culture" in the novel at first find themselves on the social marginality as a result of "uprootedness."¹⁵⁵ They carry to the new country the experience of a threatened survival of their ethnic group, as well as a continuum of particular myths and traits which inspire them to be surrounded only by the people who share the same ethnic awareness.¹⁵⁶ Between the Scylla and Charybdis of assimilation and acculturation, they face a crisis of values after the act of immigration, and show different degrees of adaptability in order to achieve immediate economic survival and further advancement.

The immigrant generation feels different forms of alienation. Grandmother Desdemona is the "keeper" of ethnic and religious customs in the family, and she perpetuates folk prejudices and Old Country localisms, as well as antagonisms. She feels as "an eternal exile" in America and "a visitor for forty years" (222). The "locked doors of her disapproval" remain closed too tightly for modernity to "seep in," except for certain elements. "With a grandmother like mine," the narrator contemplates, it is uncertain if one "can ever become a true American, in the sense of believing that life is about the pursuit of happiness" (524). For grandfather Lefty, assimilation works only to a certain extent and for a limited period of time. His different businesses, due to which he "worked seven days a week," come with a price

¹⁵⁴ Steinberg, p. 57.

¹⁵⁵ Guibernau and Rex, p. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, pp. xii-xiv.

though: in order to provide for his family, “he had to be exiled from them” (136). All his different endeavors notwithstanding, close to the end of his life Lefty is penniless and speechless due to multiple strokes. Cultural hybridization therefore fails in the case of the immigrant generation of the Stephanides, as they do not succeed in achieving a new site of “negotiation of meaning and representation” in the adopted country.

Characters that belong to the second generation experience ambivalence towards their ethnic roots as they grow up in a hybridized environment. To pursue the American Dream, they are required to become Americanized and “shed” most of their immigrant past, while the family and the ethnic community continue to be highly valued. During the process of the reinvention of their identities and assimilation into American society, Tessie and Milton Stephanides encounter different obstacles than their immigrant parents. The most obvious difference lies in the fact that they do not start from the bottom of the social ladder, but rather continue the upward mobility from the middle to upper-middle class. They also face a manufactured sense of inclusion and exclusion, put into effect by the WASPs,¹⁵⁷ when Milton goes through a process of choosing a new family house in an exclusive white neighborhood in Detroit.

Milton, “the child apostate,” is the biggest skeptic towards religion in comparison to other protagonists in the novel (529). He makes a radical detachment from his mother’s religious beliefs and opts for the secular component of ethnicity. Torn between the immigrant ancestry of his parents on the one hand, and progressive social environment of the post World War II America on the other, he makes radical choices that reflect the problem of achieving a hybridized identity. His choice of occupying the hierarchical binary instead of the coherent middle space is inevitable. The pull of the religion fades with Tessie Stephanides as well; although she observes religious holidays and events, she never becomes a true believer in God. Her preference of the secular component of ethnicity prevails, and she combines it successfully with her American upbringing. As American born, the second generation Stephanides shows a heightened sense of loyalty and belonging to their country of origin, that is – their feeling of Americanness prevails over the immigrant ancestry.

The third generation protagonists are fully assimilated Americans. The fact that the second generation in the novel shows remarkable signs of economic and social mobility means that their children can reap the benefits of it: they grow up in a prosperous environment as American children. They are exposed only to a symbolic extent to ethno-religious customs

¹⁵⁷ Frankenberg, p. 13.

in the family. Chapter Eleven's several reinventions of identity are not based on his interest in the family's ethnic background at all. The America of his childhood is swerving with unrest due to the Vietnam War and he joins the anti-war movement in an act of protest. At the same time, he radically rejects the family values as well, and leaves home abruptly in order to explore other identities.

The narrator and main character of *Middlesex*, Cal, shows a renewed interest in his ethnic roots and makes the past usable in forging his identity in terms of both gender and ethnicity, as they go hand-in-hand in the novel. He is a migrant himself, moving in spatial terms across America and Europe, as well as through the process of redefining his identity. Since Cal is also a character who "ambivalently embodies both the aesthetic legacy of an idealized Hellenism in the west and the discourse of civilizational progress it reflects,"¹⁵⁸ he travels through space and time, looking for answers in his family's past, traditional customs and stories, mythology, religion (albeit symbolically), and genetics. Ethnicity comprises all of these concepts together, and therefore a consideration of them is a powerful instrument in the process of his comprehension and reinvention of identity.

The main character's road to self-discovery and self-invention is therefore a complicated endeavor, but a fruitful one: in the process of cultural hybridity, Cal manages to reach the "Third space of Enunciation" by making his ethnicity instrumental in accepting his dual physical nature, and in re-inventing his gender identity.¹⁵⁹ Cal's ethnic feeling is, finally, of a symbolic nature, as he chooses concrete aspects of his ethnic heritage to cherish his ethnic feeling.¹⁶⁰ Cal accepts his hybrid nature in private, but he chooses a binary for his *modus operandi* in society, due to the fact that there is no societal recognition of his bodily hybridity.

Middlesex is an important novel for several reasons. The rich family saga that many readers will find enjoyable to read offers social critique of the marginality of social groups in America. Most notably, by portraying Cal's aporias, the author points to the lack of societal recognition of persons with a hermaphrodite condition. Eugenides reminds the readership that something ought to be done about it by creating an atmosphere in the novel in which Cal presents himself as "what's next." The house in *Middlesex*, a mirror to Cal's condition, is "a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new word," and Cal

¹⁵⁸ Hsu, p. 145.

¹⁵⁹ *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, p. 118.

¹⁶⁰ Gans, p. 14; Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, pp. xiii-xiv.

openly declares: “I could not help feeling of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me” (595).

Another social critique that the novel puts forward refers to the marginality of social groups in American society if based on ethnic and racial criteria. All three generations of the Stephanides are portrayed in situations where their ethnic background is seen as non-normative. In two different episodes the author also portrays the Stephanides, the immigrant and the second generation, in an interaction with the African American population, the status of which is presented as much lower in society.

Ideally, in a modern industrial society, such as the United States, it is inappropriate to occupy positions based on ethnic and racial criteria. Assuming that meritocracy is necessary for a progressive development of a modern society, the criteria to be taken into consideration are personal qualities based on education and achieved skills.¹⁶¹ The world of the novel and that of reality challenge these assimilationist assumptions.

¹⁶¹ Thompson, p. 73.

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