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The Ethics of Hermaphrosthetics

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[slide 1] This paper follows a rather unusual format for me as I usually deal with close readings of texts or archival research. I wanted to pause and conduct a self-reflexive observation, to be critical of my own work that I call “hermaphrosthetics”. I am so grateful to be able to present my work to this panel, especially since the question of intersex touches upon so many disciplinary fields. With this project I incorporate yet another perspective in the study of intersex, that of its representations and metaphorical uses in cultural productions. In particular, and this is what my paper wrestles with, it touches upon questions of ethics, and asks what relationship literature has to ethics. Today I want to explore the ways in which the representations of intersex in cultural productions may “carry the trace of an agenda from somewhere else<sup>1</sup>”, in Morgan Holmes’ words.

[slide 2] Why study intersex? Because it questions the male-female sex and gender binary, challenging conceptual categories upon which the social construction of gender, sexuality and the body is based. Only by categorizing intersex bodies as such, as non-normative, are we able to construct the definition of what we deem “normal” as within the limits of this (binary) category, female and male. According to Dreger, the history of intersex reveals “the history of struggles over the 'realities' of sex - the nature of 'true' sex, the proper roles of the sexes, the question of what sex can, should, or must mean<sup>2</sup>”. The study of intersex is thus fundamental for anyone interested in feminist, gender and sexuality studies, and queer theory.

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<sup>1</sup> *Critical Intersex* 2

<sup>2</sup> *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* 8

What does it have to do with literature? There is a large corpus available that has displayed its fascination for the idea of the “hermaphrodite” by representing it, and used it metaphorically as a subversive, creative and culturally progressive symbol. To name but a few examples, from fantasy and sci-fi to more realistic genres, there is Ursula Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Balzac’s *Sarrasine* and *Séraphita*, or Julia Ward Howe’s *The Hermaphrodite*. Of particular interest to me are texts like Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *L’Enfant de Sable*, or *Zami* by Audre Lorde, and many other texts by mixed race women in which the fluidity of race, sex and gender overlap and interact. In most of these texts, the figure of the “hermaphrodite” follows the archetypal model of the two-sexed cosmic being found in most mythologies and creation myths, as described by the historian of religion Mircea Eliade. The “hermaphrodite” represents a primordial unity in its fusion of opposites (the “coincidentia oppositorum”<sup>3</sup>), attained through different symbolic means, representing the idea of hermaphroditism rather than the fact of being it.

[slide 3] This concept lies at the heart of what Anzaldúa’s in *Borderlands/La Frontera* theorizes as the “*mestiza* consciousness”. To explain the faculties she has acquired as she inhabits the borderland between Mexico and the U.S, she uses the image of the coincidentia oppositorum, embodied in an intersex woman who lives in her neighborhood and is called the “half and half” or “*mita’ y mita*”. This consciousness transcends duality and occupies an in-between space she calls “*nepantla*”. It emerges from multiple sites of cultural identification, highlighting how racial formation and gender/sexual formation offer parallel concerns and modes of identification, often intersecting. It also translates intersex onto a metaphorical plane, suggesting an idealization that enables a “reclamation of agency and identity”<sup>4</sup> transcending fixed notions of identity categories.

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<sup>3</sup> Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*

<sup>4</sup> Choy, *Mixed Race is an Inbox* 32

Anzaldúa writes: “There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within<sup>5</sup>.” It is no surprise that the concepts of hybridity and fluidity embodied by the hermaphroditic entity she describes here find resonance within queer theory. By destabilizing normative binary thinking, queer theory favors models of identity as shifting and fluid, thus moving away from an essentialist identity towards a constant state of becoming and questioning of norms, facilitating self-fashioning and agency. Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness and Queer of Color theory have largely inspired my theoretical framework, to analyze texts that don’t necessarily register as queer at first (or by queer authors).

[slide 4] These texts are *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides; *The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Hong Kingston; and *Caramelo*, by Sandra Cisneros. In this comparative study I argue that these three novels challenge essentialist categories of sex, gender, race/ethnicity and nationality/cultural belonging, by using what I call “hermaphrosthetics”.

My presentation will follow two main points: first, I will present my theoretical framework, and give a couple of examples of how I apply it. Second, I will turn to the problems that it raises, and expose the criticism directed at it and some questions to wrestle with (with you).

[slide 5] What is hermaphrosthetics? It is a theoretical framework by which one can analyze a piece of discourse – more specifically here, literary works of fiction – in which there is a

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<sup>5</sup> *Borderlands/La Frontera* 41

conscious or less conscious attempt to construct an idea of an identity that is ambiguous, undetermined, fluid, hybrid in terms of gender **and** racial/ethnic characteristics. In this way my work resembles Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, which reflects upon the ways the structure of a text is speculative of its theme of gender and sexual ambiguity. This is represented in the texture of the novels; through symbolism, figures of speech, manipulation of narrative voices, temporal construction, etc., but also through the novels' intertextual connections to other texts that deal with gender ambiguity. More broadly, this theoretical framework belongs to what Lopez-Varela has identified as "hermaphroditic thinking", within and outside the intersex subject. It does not only concern itself with the biological definition of intersex; it also manifests through expressions of ambiguity, cross-dressing, passing, and various forms of hybridity and fluidity. Through these tropes, ethnic and racial self-invention, just as much as sexual or gender identity, can be attained, in order to avoid essentialism. Though I provide a close analysis of how this translates as formal experimentation, I also show how these narrative strategies involve a conscious self-fashioning; and a political/social aspiration.

[slide 6] Let me give you a couple of examples of the formal strategies that I identified and analyzed in the three novels, where hermaphroditism is translated into the texture of the text. The first obvious one is the use of symbolism that represents the coincidentia oppositorum. The title of Kingston's memoir, the "woman warrior", and its attendant representations, encapsulate the paradox in terms of gender identity. In *Middlesex*, Eugenides' use of Berlin as a once divided city now reunited also lends its symbolic manifestation to signify the narrator's gender ambiguity. Second, since we are dealing with the immigrant novel, there are multiple border crossings, both literal and metaphorical, expressed through the use of mixed race characters, and linguistic hybridity.

The novels also play with the fragmentation of voices, and their fluid transitions between each other. They may shift between feminine and masculine voices, or between narrators in general, against the generic conventions of the memoir. Eugenides argued that for his narrator, “the voice had to be elastic enough to narrate the epic stuff, the third-person material, and it had to be a highly individualized first-person voice, too<sup>6</sup>”, so that his choice appears to be generic and esthetic, rather than simply based on the gender indeterminacy of his narrator. A last example is focused on how genre bending mimics gender bending, for instance with the blending of autobiography and myth (*The Woman Warrior*), epic and memoir (*Middlesex*), and memoir and historical novel (*Caramelo*). Through these strategies, these novels utilize similar tropes as Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a hybrid text, in terms of linguistics, genres (poems, essays, autobiography), cultural hybridity, gender and sexual hybridity.

[slide 7] A note about terminology. I have been wondering whether “hermaphrosthetics”, was a term appropriate to use. “Hermaphrodite” is a term that has been claimed by some members of the intersex community: see for instance the newsletter and slogan “Hermaphrodites with Attitude” by Cheryl Chase herself. Although the term is disappearing today in favor of “intersex”, it was still in use in the 90s, perhaps similarly to the recuperation of the term “queer” previously a slur. (With today’s shift of terminology towards “DSD”, some activists warn against the risk of disappearance of the intersex identity.)

I also use the term to signal the long cultural history associated with it, which the texts I’m studying reference; especially its mythical iterations since they are so present intertextually and conceptually (I am recuperating Eugenides’ strategy which he defends in the novel and in interviews).

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<sup>6</sup> Foer interview 79

Alice Dreger explains the different terminologies, and both are useful for my study: “they do signal different ways of thinking about the sexually ‘ambiguous’ body. ‘Intersexed’ literally means that an individual is *between* the sexes - the s/he slips between and blends maleness and femaleness. By contrast the term ‘hermaphroditic’ implies that a person has *both* male and female attributes, that s/he is not a third sex or a blended sex, but instead that s/he is a sort of double sex, that is, in possession of a body which juxtaposes essentially ‘male’ and essentially ‘female’ parts<sup>7</sup>”. In other words, “intersex” connotes “fluidity”, while “hermaphrodite” connotes “hybridity”. These are essential concepts for Queer and QOC theory, in conjunction with postcolonial theory and poststructuralism. This is essential to think identity formation in terms of non-essentialism, non-binary or third space, etc.

[slide 8] I want to address critics on 3 levels. The first criticism is addressed at Eugenides’ (problematic) representation of an intersexed character. Graham and Holmes denounce the erasure of lesbian desire and rejection of a potential queer identity in favor of a distinct male gender identity and heterosexuality. Graham also bemoans how the “novel continually expresses anxiety about sexual ambiguity by associating such hybridity with monstrosity and freakery<sup>8</sup>”, especially through the intertextual use of Greek mythology and using the term “hermaphrodite” (always associate with monsters and transgressive behaviors) and the tropes of the American “freak show”. Then there’s the critique provided by Thea Hillman who deems Eugenides’ novel voyeuristic and inauthentic, and resents his metaphorical use of intersex (Eugenides himself said it’s a good representation of the transitional state of adolescence. But also of racial, national conflicts etc.). In the same vein, Holmes writes that creative writers “would call upon their hermaphrodites to carry whatever pieces of cultural baggage they might be trying to address in

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<sup>7</sup> *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* 31

<sup>8</sup> ""See Synonyms at Monster": En-Freaking Transgender in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*" 2

their writing<sup>9</sup>”, which ends up erasing the reality of the intersex experience and neutralizes the disruptive potential of intersex. Finally, I want to question my own recuperation of the condition as a concept, a theoretical framework. I am wrestling with the idea that I might be, in Morgan Holmes’ terms, “appropriating”, “recuperating”, “displacing” the fact of intersexuality to make it a theoretical framework, and making it stand for “something else” (in the form of racial and ethnic indeterminacy, hyphenated identities, etc.). My work does not condone or praise this usage; it is merely observing and analyzing these works of fiction. Yet it recuperates a feature and makes it a theoretical framework for the analysis of other works that don’t exhibit this particular feature explicitly (*The Woman Warrior* and *Caramelo*). Holmes questions this usage. Intersex can never be “reduced to a pure, embodied state nor to a simple cultural rendering in which ‘intersex’ is whatever we want it to be<sup>10</sup>”. Intersex should not be used in place of something else, or as pretext for artistic imagination.

[slide 9] Questions.

1. Identity politics: who gets to speak about what? The main critics of this use of intersex don’t deal with fiction. They are sociologists (Holmes), poets & activists (Hillman). They also speak from personal experience, from their own subject position. While Thea Hillman resents Eugenides speaking on behalf of intersexuals, Holmes disagrees with Hillman’s “identity-based proposition that the stories of intersexed people were far more moving and powerful than any fictionalized account<sup>11</sup>”.

2. Are there subjects that fiction should refrain from representing, or do so only in certain ways? What about creative freedom?

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<sup>9</sup> “Cal/liope in Love: The ‘Prescientific’ Desires of an Apolitical ‘Hermaphrodite’” 224

<sup>10</sup> *Critical Intersex* 2

<sup>11</sup> “Cal/liope in Love: The ‘Prescientific’ Desires of an Apolitical ‘Hermaphrodite’” 229

3. Can imaginary/creative representations change people's outlook on certain ideas, and encourage a change in attitudes and policy?

Dreger argues that *Middlesex* had a lot of impact on the public, including on doctors whose minds were finally changed when they read the book. She writes: "Here we had been feeding them real stories, but it was this novel that convinced them they needed to change their practices<sup>12</sup>". Olivia Banner agrees that the "aesthetic accessibility<sup>13</sup>" of the novel helped foster change in the medical profession<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, Thea Hillman is deeply troubled by the fact that Eugenides managed to pose as an expert for millions of people despite having "never actually talked to an intersex person before he published that book (...) and that (she) couldn't get an op-ed published<sup>15</sup>". According to Debra Shostak, "the act of description, with its concomitant act of theorizing, does not necessarily support activism in the world, a politics of social change that might alter the lives of those who live on the margins<sup>16</sup>". Eugenides' novel "demonstrates the virtual impossibility of such a "third space" except as a utopian fantasy<sup>17</sup>".

4. This takes us back to the point of origin of "hermaphrosthethics", Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" or "nepantla", and begs us to ask: what of utopian representations?

[slide 10] Going back to the opening remarks on what hermaphrosthethics is, especially true for Anzaldúa, we can retrace the logic at stake here, and wonder if hermaphrosthethics can inspire social and political change. Perhaps the main problem lies in using the figure of the intersex 1) in a fictional context and 2) outside of one's subject position. When Gloria Anzaldúa creates the hieros gamos, the mita y mita, it is a fantasy, a conceptual construct, and though informed by her

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<sup>12</sup> *Galileo's Middle Finger* 45-6

<sup>13</sup> "'Sing Now, O Muse, of the Recessive Mutation': Interrogating the Genetic Discourse of Sex Variation with Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*" 843

<sup>14</sup> Especially since the novel was reviewed in a journal issue that called for the suspension of surgery!

<sup>15</sup> *Intersex (For Lack of a Better word)* 25

<sup>16</sup> "'Theory Uncompromised by Practicality': Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*" 383

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 387



own experience, it is not about intersex itself. But she is someone who is speaking from the borders, from the margins. The same applies for Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros. On the other hand, *Eugenides* reinforces a heteronormative and dual-sexed system, and thus fails to fulfill its promise to attain a real “Middlesex”. Olivia Banner points to the work that lies ahead for feminist, queer, and intersex activists. We can only hope that literary representations of intersex, and the use of hermaphrosthethics, may take us there.