

VIOLA AMATO (†). *Intersex Narratives: Shifts in the Representation of Intersex Lives in Northern American Literature and Popular Culture*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016. 304 pp.

The success of Jeffrey Eugenides's 2003 novel *Middlesex* directed attention to intersex as a topic in American Studies. At the time of its publication, this coming of age narrative of the Greek-American intersex protagonist Cal\_ lie was received against the background of poststructuralist approaches to gender and sexuality that had gained prominence within American Cultural Studies since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990. At the time of its publication, *Middlesex* was the first American novel with an intersex protagonist, and even today, 14 years later, there are still only few fictional narratives with intersex characters. Prior to the success of *Middlesex*, the emerging intersex movement of the 1990s paved the way for fictional representations of intersex and the academic debates that followed. Viola Amato's insightful monograph *Intersex Narratives: Shifts in the Representation of Intersex Lives in North American Literature and Popular Culture* (2016) deserves credit for honoring and emphasizing the importance of the pioneering intersex movement. In her study, she contextualizes Eugenides's representation of intersex with other texts of different media and genres that negotiate "intersex persons, intersex communities, and intersex as a cultural concept and epistemological category" (13); she includes memoirs, novels, and TV-series that came out between 1993 and 2014. In addition to an extensive reading of *Middlesex*, she provides analyses of the following shorter autobiographical texts from the intersex movement, Thea Hillman's memoir *Intersex (For Lack of a Better Word)* (2008), Kathleen Winter's novel *Annabel* (2010), and four episodes from the TV-series *Chicago Hope*, *Emergency Room*, *House*, and *Grey's Anatomy*. Amato classifies her diverse corpus of texts as belonging to both "hegemonic intersex discourses and 'counternarratives'" (14), but she does not claim that both stand in monolithic opposition to each other. To the contrary, she convincingly demonstrates how hegemonic discourses and counternarratives influence each other or to what degree they are interrelated. Her thorough contextualization of these different realms of intersex discourses will necessarily

lead to more nuanced academic readings of intersex representations in the future.

Amato's study builds on the observation that the year 1993 marks a paradigm shift in discourses on intersex. This shift occurred because persons with intersex variation started to organize politically and publish their writings in small publications. Next to chronology, the important reason for Amato to begin with these intersex voices is to put first-person-narratives of intersex writers at the center rather than to set the tone with analyses of texts by non-intersex writers. Also for this reason, she discusses Hillman's memoir *Intersex* and its critique of *Middlesex* from an intersex perspective before her analysis of Eugenides's novel, even if the memoir was published five years later than the novel. Amato highlights the crucial importance of the founding of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) and the publication of its newsletter *Hermaphrodites with Attitude* (1994-2005) and the special issue of *Chrysalis*, 'Intersex Awakenings' (1997/98). Her analyses of sixteen autobiographical texts published in *Chrysalis* and in *Genderqueer* (2002) and her reading of Hillman's memoir form the background against which she reads the fictional intersex narratives in the subsequent chapters. Analyzing these largely unknown writings of the intersex movement, she sheds new light on well-known cultural images of intersex, such as the one depicted in *Middlesex* and popular TV-series. In addition to the textual level, Amato pays attention to the material conditions that enable intersex persons to speak their own voice to contest earlier medical and pathologizing narratives. Her analyses of the autobiographical texts and Hillman's memoir provide the reader with new and important insights in the process of the forming and self-actualization of the movement and belong to the most original parts of Amato's study.

Many of Amato's analyses are based on what she calls "ethical implications" (17). Because of the long history of medicalization and pathologizing of intersex and ongoing worldwide political struggles concerning issues such as forced genital surgery, human rights violations, and legislation, she wants her study to be understood as a contribution towards the emancipation of intersex persons. She clearly states her indebtedness to emancipatory political movements that aim at human rights and legal recognition of intersex persons. In Western societies with a rigid

two-gender system, intersex subjectivities are invisible and often inconceivable. If intersex is addressed at all, the only language available emerges from a history of medicalization and pathologizing of persons with intersex variations. It is because of these difficulties to bring intersex into representation that Amato builds on Judith Butler's theory of intelligibility as a theoretical foundation for her study. The term "intelligibility" refers to categories and norms that enable and restrict the self-expressions of human beings. In a society whose norms enforce a rigid gender binary of male and female, intersex identities are rendered unintelligible. Throughout her study, Amato discusses how the different representations and negotiations of intersex variations relate to conditions of intelligibility and asks to what degree these conditions are contested or reaffirmed. She takes the brevity of the early autobiographical texts of intersex writers as an indication for the lack of words to describe intersex variation and demonstrates that these accounts often rely on the medical vocabulary of the decades before. The term "intersex" itself is a case in point. Rather than using a new term to refer to their subject position, intersex activists take the medical term and invest it with new meaning. The semantic change of this term is one example of a shift in representation, which makes room for intersex subjects to become intelligible.

Whereas Amato's clear political positioning is one of the strong points of her study, it simultaneously effects conclusions and analyses that sometimes tend towards the formulaic. For example, prior to her analyses of the novels *Middlesex* and *Annabel*, she formulates a catalogue of questions to guide her readings of these novels. All of these questions concern intersex intelligibility and focus, for example, on the novels' negotiations of the intersex characters' subjectivity and gender, the ways in which the inner conflicts of its protagonists are dealt with, the providing of narrative spaces "for acting out alternative, affirmative concepts of intersex" (162), or the novels' self-reflexivity of the ways in which they might perpetuate norms that affect the characters negatively. Whereas this catalogue of questions lead Amato to conclusions about the degree of the novels' emancipatory potential concerning intersex intelligibility, other aspects of the novels, such as form, language, or symbolism tend to move out of the focus of critical attention.

There is no abundance of intersex representations in American culture or in other parts of the world. Because of the very few existing intersex narratives and the still emerging language to speak about intersex, Amato discusses the authors' responsibility for their strong influence on the ways in which intersex subjects become intelligible. Accordingly, she devotes subchapters to the questions: "Is there a Moral Obligation to Write a Particular Story of Intersex?" (199) and "Does an Intersex Story Have the Obligation to be Subversive?" (236). With regard to *Middlesex*, for example, she discusses the moral implications of its ending. Granting that the novel makes room for its intersex protagonist to become intelligible, she criticizes the narrative closure that constructs and normalizes Cal\_lie as male and heterosexual rather than imagine an intelligible subject position beyond the gender binary. Amato extends this critique by arguing for an interrelation of fiction and the material world. She makes the strong claim that "this gender assignment [...] made by non-intersex authors iterates the non-consensual gender assignment made by doctors (and parents) with the aim of 'normalizing' the intersex subject" (239). In contrast to the ending of *Middlesex*, she states that *Annabel* "defies a narrative closure [...] that is reached by establishing the intelligibility of the intersex character by assigning a clearly defined male or female gender" (238). A reading with a stronger focus on other elements of the novels, such as setting in the case of *Middlesex*, might have added a productive additional perspective to this conclusion. After all, Eugenides negotiates Cal\_lies's intersex variation by symbolically juxtaposing a segregated Detroit at the beginning of the novel with a unified Berlin in the end, which suggests a reconciliation of estranged parts and might arguably be read as a critique of the gender binary.

One underlying assumption of Amato's study is that negative depictions of intersex characters carry "narrative violence," or, in the case of television programs, "violence of representation" (243). There is no doubt that the use of language can hurt people. Still, it would have made Amato's line of argument stronger, had she explained if and where she sees differences between narrative violence and actual violence together with the ethical implications that follow from both forms of violence. Without such an explanation, some of her conclusions appear not as persuasive as they could

be. For example, with regard to one episode of the TV-series *House*, she states that its representation of intersex characters “results in narrative violence, which translates in actual violence against girls/women whose bodies do not conform to cultural norms of femaleness, also called intersex misogyny” (302). This assumption of an easily predictable causal relation between fictional representations and physical violence grants the viewer little agency in their own reception of a TV-program. Amato’s reading of *House* is a good example to question her own assumption, because her viewing of the episode does not lead to physical violence on her part but the opposite, it becomes an incentive to argue in favor of intersex emancipation. Some of Amato’s ethically informed readings would become more nuanced if she granted average readers and viewers an ability for a critical engagement with the texts they

read and the films they watch. After all, cultural expressions such as camp aesthetics and drag have emerged from subversive readings of heteronormative narratives.

Despite my few critical remarks, I consider *Intersex Narratives* a groundbreaking study that clearly closes a research gap in American Studies. I know of no other systematic study to thoroughly investigate such a diverse body of intersex narratives. It is particularly Amato’s rootedness in poststructuralist theories of sex and gender and her awareness of the indebtedness of academic discourse to the largely underrepresented history of the intersex movement that lets the better-known intersex narratives appear in a new light and provides a new ground for nuanced future readings of intersex narratives.

Simon Dickel (Berlin)