The Chronotope of Immigration in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*

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ABSTRACT

Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* can be ascribed to many genres, one of which is the novel of immigration. Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested that each genre, indeed any literary motif, can be defined by its own chronotope, literally “time space,” “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” The essay discusses the chronotope of immigration in *Middlesex*, and looks at how four specific intersections of time and space, embodied by the four houses inhabited by the Stephanides family, contribute to the unfolding of this particular immigration saga. The four houses can thus be seen to represent the key elements of this novel’s instance of a chronotope of immigration, which brings up concepts such as assimilation, hybridity and “third space.” The essay also examines the relations of central characters to time, space and each other; the upstairs/downstairs and inside/outside dichotomies within each house providing interesting keys to inter-gender and inter-generational alienation within this chronotope of immigration.

Key words: Eugenides, *Middlesex*, novel of immigration, chronotope, hybridity, Bakhtin, Bhabha
“Here was my home, Middlesex.” (519)

Tracing the journey of the Stephanides family, from Bithynios to Grosse Point, *Middlesex* is—in addition to Bildungsroman, comic epic, tale of bimorphic sexuality and everything else this rich story can claim to be—a novel of immigration, extending as it does over generations and geographical borders. The rendering of the basic themes of immigration—the progression of a family saga, the memories of an existence lost, experiences/trials in the present and hopes (or lack thereof) for the future, not to mention conditions of doubleness or hyphenation—necessitates the linkage of time with space. In *Middlesex*, the complexities of that connection are apparent—as biographical time moves forward, different temporalities are invoked (the could-have-beens, the later-to-be-shown-to-have-beens, etc), and different locations are inhabited, both literally and figuratively.

For the above reasons, I would suggest that Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope concept provides a useful way of looking at a novel of immigration in general and *Middlesex* in particular. In his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin defines a chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). He goes on to say that “[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). According to Bakhtin, the significance of chronotopes is to be found in their meaning for narrative, in that they work as “the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel” (250). Esther Pereen, who has looked at diaspora from a spatio-temporal perspective, puts it the following way:

The chronotope’s primary function, as explicated by Bakhtin, is that of combining particular types of space and time into a world where only certain subjects, narratives, practices, and, I may add, identities and memories, can legitimately take their place. (71)
Thus, the chronotope can be seen as an instrument to help the reader see and understand the literary genre at hand; to identify key points in the narrative where time and space work together to structure the unfolding of the story. A guiding idea in this essay is that the houses inhabited by the Stephanides family constitute such critical intersections of time and space in Middlesex, thus chronotopical in themselves and giving form to an overriding “chronotope of immigration.” I will look at how each house, hosting various interactions with historical time, different temporalities and spatial surroundings—and not least, between the characters of the novel, who themselves are chronotopical—can be read as representing a certain, perhaps inevitable, stage in this particular novel of immigration.

The interest of looking at the houses in particular is related to the simple fact that Middlesex, as indeed most other novels of immigration, is very much the story of a family—and, as we know, critical family developments tend to take place inside houses. Another reason to use the houses as focal points: Gaston Bachelard has shown in his The Poetics of Space that the house is the setting above others for memories and daydreaming, activities which to me seem especially pertinent to an immigration narrative: “Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another” (6-7). Bachelard offers a whole array of poetic images regarding the “oneiric” (dream-like) aspects of houses (images of “felicitous space,” attic/cellar, inside/outside), which, while often not directly applicable to the analysis, in a simplified manner have served as inspiration to this essay (xxxv-xxxvi, 6-7, 17-18, 24-27, 211-212). For it does seem that certain houses, or spaces within them, are more accommodating than others to different temporalities.

Also, in the context of immigration, the house assumes the symbolic value of settlement, of being resident in the host country—of being “at home,” then; home being, of course, a complex concept for the immigrant. Jopi Nyman, who has studied home, identity and mobility in contemporary diasporic fiction, draws our attention to the fact that the idea of home is “not necessarily a stable issue or a merely positive and empowering site” (24). He goes on to quote Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who in their influential critique of home distinguish between “being home” as “the place where one lives within the familiar, safe, protected boundaries,” and “not being home,” that is, understanding that home is an “illusion of coherence and safety based on [...] the repression of differences even within oneself” (qtd in Nyman
In a study of a novel of immigration, then, the house merits attention by virtue of hosting these simultaneous conditions of being/not being home.

Bakhtin puts it to us that it is the chronotope that defines the literary genre (85). Thus, it makes sense to clarify exactly which genre is intended here. The field of ethnic/immigrant/diaspora writing has become the object of a plethora of literary research over the past decades, resulting in a multitude of frameworks and terminologies. I have chosen to use the term *novel of immigration*, a choice that calls for a brief discussion. One possible perspective, when dealing with timespace in a novel such as *Middlesex*, is to look at the chronotope of *emigration*, as a “passing moment and the moment of passage,” delineating “a new spatio-temporal horizon inhabited by images of dispersal and of passages *from old times to new times*” (Fortier 45). Whereas emigration can justifiably be seen as such a moment “where time is frozen in a static place,” “the zero moment” in Anne-Marie Fortier’s terms, it would seem that looking at an entire family saga necessitates a more extended view of time and place. Fortier talks about *migration* as a “state of endless wandering” and “perpetual homelessness”; while the Stephanides family do, of course, settle down and have homes, this sense of temporal and spatial progression is appropriate here. However, I have chosen to use the related term *immigration*, which also captures the crossing of national borders and the ethnically tinted implications thereof, which to my mind are important elements in *Middlesex*.

When drawing up a typology of *immigrant fiction*, David Cowart focuses on literature written by actual immigrants, that is, persons who have actually immigrated, to be distinguished from their American-born offspring, to which Jeffrey Eugenides would be counted. For the purpose of this essay, it is not the origins of the author but the telling of the story that is of interest. However, some of the characteristic motifs of immigrant fiction that Cowart mentions can be recognized in especially Lefty’s experiences in *Middlesex*; the travail in school undertaken learning English; the sense of cultural doubleness and the dealing with prejudice (excited to “be American” already on the deck of the boat, job-hunting in a “blue Protestant suit,” yet retreating to backgammon and singing kleftic songs when not accepted (131)); immigrants exploiting immigrants (being forced into Zizmo’s sordid dealings); and not least, the mature immigrant finally re-entering childhood. In Cowart’s schematic picture, however, the protagonists all “proceed through a *Bildung* that culminates in a more or
less successful acculturation,” finally empowered with an American identity; Lefty, however, remains an outsider. (Cowart 2-7, 207)

A more process-oriented perspective is that of William Q. Boelhower, who proposes that the immigrant novel can be defined by varying combinations of a set of narrative constituents related to expectations, contacts with the “new world” and separation from the “old world,” and, finally, resolution, where varying combinations of spiritual adjustment and material status in varying historical contexts result in either assimilation, hyphenation or alienation (Boelhower 5, 11). It seems to me that these are useful themes to look at, which fit well into the idea of a chronotope of immigration extending over a series of time/place intersections.

Worth mentioning is also certain scholarship on diaspora and its relation to timespace. While, as Jopi Nyman points out, the term diaspora implies “communities resisting traditional patterns of assimilation and immigration,” diaspora research naturally touches on issues related to immigration which makes it relevant here (14). Esther Pereen, a diaspora scholar whose thoughts can also be applied to literary studies, discusses the diaspora chronotope and how it—in art as in life—is characterized by its “need for negotiation between different types of time and space, different chronotopic values, different constructions of identity, and different mnemonic structures” (71). Pereen reminds us that diaspora is about temporal distance just as much as it is about spatial displacement, “the homeland is not only distant; it is also past or passed”—hence the relevance of using the chronotope framework in a diaspora/immigration context; she also makes the important point that a chronotope can comprise multiple locations (70-73).

Also relevant here, Dalia Kandiyoti, who has looked at American diaspora fiction in relation to place, points out that the “spatial nature of diasporas seem to be problematized infrequently” (37). She emphasizes the idea that places of resettlement are just as important for identity-building as places of origin. With the term migrant sites, Kandiyoti seeks to express how places in migrant narratives “are informed by what lies outside their boundaries with the languages, spatial memories, and histories of other places,” creating a tension between enclosure and translocality, that is, “‘here’ is permeated with a consciousness of ‘there’” (5, 37-38). While the Stephanides family does not live in typical diaspora settlements (no Greektown or the like), their houses in America can, to varying degrees, be seen as the micro migrant
sites of their family’s immigration story, in their containment of multiple times and places.

From a different angle, Gilbert Muller highlights the performative aspect of contemporary American immigrant fiction, where the immigrants represented “espouse unique mythologies of the self and of their community that enrich and expand the social order,” thus altering the horizons of American experience (Muller 234, 236). With this reasoning in mind, it might then be that a story of immigration culminates not in the being able/ unable to find one’s place—but in slightly changing the place one has come to.

Finally, the notion of hybridity, that is to be found at the core of virtually any discussion on inter-cultural differences, is of course of singular importance in the case of a novel such as Middlesex where both title and protagonist are so explicitly “mixed.” In his influential collection of essays, The Location of Culture, post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha highlights how the “non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (312):

Such assignations of social differences—where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between—find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is […] an interstitial future, that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present. (313)

Time in relation to hybridity is an important part of Bhabha’s argument; he discusses the “indeterminate temporality of the in-between” and how it helps “newness [come] into the world” (326). Highly relevant as an alternative to a more rigid polarity between assimilation/alienation, we can anticipate that such a “third space” will be a defining element of the chronotope of immigration in Middlesex. For while Milton’s choice to settle his family in Middlesex—a house that, although in the “right” area, so obviously states its difference—is admittedly driven by the desire for assimilation rather than any acknowledgement whatsoever of hybridity, Cal comes to read the same house as an opening to the type of doubleness/newness she finds in herself.¹

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to Cal as “she”/”her” throughout, apart from the instance when “he” returns to Middlesex as a male.
Bithynios

The chronotope of immigration necessitates a time and place of origin, which will later become the point of reference, the image of the “old world.” We are only some twenty pages into *Middlesex* when we are transported backwards in time from the moment of Cal’s birth to the tiny Greek village of Bithynios:

Built along a gentle slope of the mountain, Bithynios wasn’t a precarious, cliffside sort of place. It was an elegant, or at least harmonious, cluster of yellow stucco houses with red roofs. The grandest houses, of which there were two, had *çikma*, enclosed bay windows that hung out over the street. The poorest houses, of which there were many, were essentially one-room kitchens. And then there were houses like Desdemona and Lefty’s, with an overstuffed parlor, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a backyard-privy with a European toilet. (28)

An integral part of the surrounding village, horizontal in its structure, with no stairs leading up or down, and with a minimum of rooms/walls to separate its residents from each other, the Bithynios house gives us a feeling of wholeness and grounded belonging. It could be said to represent an *idyllic chronotope* in that it is so harmoniously rooted in its relations to nature and in its link to the past. Bakhtin speaks about time’s special relationship to space in an idyll, a “grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory,” where “all temporal boundaries are blurred and the rhythm of human life is in harmony with the rhythm of nature” (225, 229). Desdemona hears the wind rustling the pine trees and feels it blow through the windows “as it [does] every afternoon,” nature repeating itself in this particular place in a circular time; the murmuring voices of neighbors are heard through the walls showing us how this community is intertwined in place and time; also, the silkworm cocoonery forms a very concrete tie to the work of generations past (29). Bakhtin describes the idyll as follows:

> Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live. This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. (225)

Situated a thousand feet up on the mountain top above Bursa, this house has, to some degree, been cut off from historical time. As Debra Shostak puts it in her essay on hybridity in *Middlesex*, the life of the Stephanides’s on the mountain in Bithynios forms something of “a golden past, untouched by modernity and materialism” (394).
Yet in 1922, this idyllic time is nearing its end with the diminishing village population; historical time imposes itself with the recent wars with the Turks in which villagers have been killed (for example the parents of Desdemona and Lefty) or forced to flee their homes.

Biological time also interferes with the idyll. The siblings Lefty and Desdemona have grown up almost forgetting that they are separate people. As they approach young adulthood (and marriageable age), however, their respective relations to time and space start to diverge. Gender divisions dictate that Lefty go to Bursa’s cocoon market, where women are not allowed, while Desdemona remains at home. When Lefty starts wandering down the mountain, his becomes a chronotope of the present, the future and the rest of the world—though assuredly a very small part of it. As for Desdemona, she has entered the chronotope that will bear similarities to the coming chronotopes of her life, in the house (although the houses will vary), “imprisoned by the past,” mourning her parents, and taking refuge, in this case in her cocoonery where she can “[forget] about the world outside” (21-22).

Historical and biological time running their course, the chronotope of the Bithynios house becomes one of finality; there will be no reproduction of the idyll, no future in this place. Upon leaving Bithynios, Desdemona says goodbye to “this feeling of living above the world” (43). In Shostak’s words, “[w]hen they come down the mountain to Smyrna [...] they fall into history” (394). It is not the act of leaving, though, that puts an end to the idyllic time in the Bithynios house; it is the end of idyllic time, caused by the intervention of both historical and biological time, that prompts Lefty’s and Desdemona’s emigration. In terms of Boelhower’s framework, Lefty, who has already embraced American music and clothing styles, seems to be open-minded in his expectations of the new world. Desdemona’s reluctance is overcome only when she can bring along her old world, embodied in her dream book, her silk-worm box and her worry beads. Indeed, the Bithynios house, with its cocoonery and grape arbor easily imagined as oneiric “centers of boredom, centers of solitude [and] centers of daydream,” will remain a key image of the past in the Stephanides’s future dreams and memories (Bachelard 17).
Hurlbut

With Bithynios and Greece a boat journey behind, the house on Hurlbut Street represents the Stephanides family’s point of entry to American society:

The East Side of Detroit was a quiet neighborhood of single-family homes, shaded by cathedral elms. The house on Hurlbut Street Lina drove them to was a modest, two-story building of root-beer colored brick. (88)

Surrounded as it is by a new, largely unwelcoming world that Lefty and Desdemona do not yet understand and of which they are not yet a part, this house could be said to represent a chronotope of not yet belonging, of striving, hoping and of feelings of uncertainty about the future; of being, in a sense, both spiritually and materially “on hold.” Lefty and Desdemona have yet to form the experiences that will shape their view of the new world and their own place in it. This is a transitory home, a space of impermanence, a radically different chronotope than that of the Bithynios house. If the Bithynios house stretched out comfortably towards the past in its horizontal closeness to the ground and the village community, the Hurlbut house wavers uncertainly in its small space in the present, its inhabitants isolated from the flow of time of the world outside, their “here” and “now” being something other than that of the inborn Detroiter.

Bachelard alerts us to how “outside and inside form a dialectic of division,” asking us to take note of how the space between the two concepts is charged with a tint of “aggressivity” that goes beyond simple formal opposition (211-12). In terms of the chronotope of the Hurlbut house, it seems that there is a doubly negative sense to “outside”: the figurative coldness of the streets outside the door, and the fact that the Stephanides, even when inside the (relative) comfort of their house, remain outsiders to American society. In this time and place, they are both “home” and “not home,” to paraphrase Martin and Mohanty.

On the inside, the house in Hurlbut is something of a safe haven, allowing for some continuity with the time and life Desdemona and Lefty have left behind in Bithynios. Cousin Sourmelina is there, “a little piece of Bithynios still intact” (90), the pantry is filled with recognizable provisions and there is a vigil light in the hallway. Greek gender divisions are familiar as well: “The house was sex-segregated like the houses in the patridha, the old country, men in the sala, women in the kitchen” (92). Desdemona rarely ventures outside the house, not wanting to be reminded of the
distance to her origins, but instead spends her time inside, remembering Bithynios, “suffering the homesickness that has no cure” (98). As they will continue to do throughout the novel, the nostalgic Desdemona’s key memory-bearing objects—the worry beads, the dream book and the silk-worm case—represent a tangible link to the past. As in Bithynios, Desdemona stays inside the house, clinging to the past and shutting out both the world outside and the progression of historical time, thus resisting assimilation.

Although Lefty, set as he is on an American future, gets a factory job and takes English classes at night—the new country and language helping him to “push the past a little bit further behind”—it seems that the restrictions of this time and place simply leave no room for Lefty to be assimilated (99). Lefty and Desdemona cannot yet act to improve their position; they lack the necessary cultural understanding and economic means to have full agency in contemporary Detroit. The world outside the house is unquestionably hostile, not only as manifested by the cold winds blowing through the windows—having nothing in common with the harmonious contacts with the elements back in the village house—but at virtually every point of contact with American society. Detroit at this moment in history leaves little room for difference. We witness Lefty’s futile efforts at integration; the factory job where his ambitions do not count for anything, the humiliating and intrusive visit from the Ford Sociological Department and the ludicrous episode with the “Ford English School Melting Pot” pageant. The experience of being made redundant and subsequently failing to get a job as a Greek instructor seems to finally discourage Lefty from pursuing an immigrant Bildung geared towards assimilation.

It is significant that Lefty can assume control over his situation only by moving his income-bringing activities inside the house, back into the timespace continuity with Bithynios. In this chronotope of “not yet belonging,” he is now learning the rules he needs to play by. No longer seeming to believe in an all-American future, but instead embracing and capitalizing on his hybridity, he uses exotic artifacts to decorate the first Zebra Room, an underground speakeasy where the patrons “descended out of the America of factory work and tyrannical foremen into an Arcadian grotto of forgetfulness” and where Lefty himself could “[channel] his intellectual powers into the science of mixology” (132).

When it comes to gender division, we see not only the distinction between the inside and outside of the house in Hurlbut, but also between its upstairs and
downstairs. It is upstairs that Desdemona and Sourmelina raise their children, where Milton and Theodora grow up together “in the traditional Stephanides way,” and it is downstairs in the basement that Lefty conducts his shady bar business, exiled from his family, and thus from the re-enactment of memories that we are led to believe takes place upstairs (133). Fortier discusses women migrants as “agents of cultural reproduction and stability,” with female presence configuring “the promise of continuity” (50). We rarely, if ever, witness explicit myth-making and nostalgic remembrances of Bithynios, yet Desdemona’s recurring use of Greek words and the presence of her meaning-bearing objects serve the same purpose of “looking back.”

With regard to Bachelard’s thoughts on felicitous spaces conducive to daydreams, the feeling is that they are not provided within the walls of this timespace; relations to the past appear to be conflicted rather than harmoniously integrated into the present.

Whether inside or outside, upstairs or downstairs, Desdemona and Lefty are simply unable to harmonize their life together in the chronotope of the Hurlbut house. Relevant here is Pereen’s discussion on how diasporic subjects are affected simultaneously by both home, host, and “thirdspace” journey chronotopes, and how this produces hybrid identities with multiple norm systems “which may be kept rigidly apart—segregated in terms of the different spheres of everyday life—or more or less integrated [...] requiring efforts of negotiation” (71). While Pereen intends the internal conflict created hereby, by extension this also highlights the nature of the tension we witness between Lefty and Desdemona. Shostak pinpoints the problem at hand: “There is no inhabitable middle between their divided loyalties, Desdemona to the Greek past, Lefty to the American future” (395). When Desdemona temporarily leaves the house to become part of the city outside, taking on a silk-weaving instruction job at the Nation of Islam Temple, the alienation between herself and Lefty is further accentuated. In fact, on a very concrete level, they now share neither time nor space: “When Desdemona went off to Temple No. 1 in the morning, Lefty was asleep, having kept the speakeasy open all night. He disappeared into the basement before she returned home” (157).

I can feel how the house changed in the months leading to 1933. A coldness passing through its root-beer colored bricks, invading its rooms and blowing out the vigil light burning in the hall. A cold wind that fluttered the pages of Desdemona’s dream book, which she consulted for interpretations to increasingly nightmarish dreams. (157)
Of course, Desdemona’s nightmares can be attributed to the incestuous transgression she will not be released from. Yet there is also the sense that the links to the old world are threatened. Perhaps this is a reflection of the disharmony incurred by Desdemona’s being forced out of the house—although, paradoxically, it does seem that her silk-weaving episode in Hastings Street brings her the satisfaction of a temporary connection both to present-state Detroit and to her silk-weaving heritage from Bithynios.

Eventually, when prohibition is lifted in 1933 and when Lefty has saved the funds needed, he “dismantle[s] his underground speakeasy, and emerge[s] once again into the upper atmosphere,” moving his operations from the Hurlbut basement to commercial premises in a white middle-class area. In this new setting, he is daily exposed to the current conflicted state of affairs in Detroit, thus reinserted into the present. For Desdemona, by contrast, now back in the house, “the world remain[s] out of focus” (171). However, Lefty too remains something of an outsider—like the symbolic zebra head outside the entrance, he does not choose between black and white; “[h]is job was to listen, nod, refill, smile” (169). Yet at one point, he does take a stand and says “[t]his is my country,” and it does seem that leaving the clandestinity of the house and entering the city on its own terms has brought him closer to the place and time he is actually in, the chronotope of not yet belonging thus nearing its end (168-69).

By way of summary, then, the “chronotope of not yet belonging” of the Stephanides couple’s years in the Hurlbut house, is characterized mainly by the tension and disharmony brought about by Lefty’s and Desdemona’s orientations towards different times and places, and, of course, by their newcomers’ lack of understanding of and access to Detroit. As he did in Bithynios, but now “in place” (literally if not figuratively), Lefty aspires towards a “modern American” future; Desdemona, now “out of place,” maintains her connection to the unbroken past of Bithynios.
Seminole

As the Stephanides family saga continues with the first American-born generation, the house on Seminole Street captures the next step of the overriding chronotope of immigration. This house, that Milton buys once his diner business has taken off, is a world apart from the Hurlbut, not by way of actual distance, but in its manifestation of economic success—and aspirations:

The neighborhood of Indian Village lay just twelve blocks west of Hurlbut, but it was a different world altogether. The four grand streets of Burns, Iroquois, Seminole, and Adams (even in Indian Village the White Man had taken half the names) were lined with stately houses built in eclectic styles. Red-brick Georgian rose next to English Tudor, which gave onto French Provincial. The houses in Indian Village had big yards, important walkways, picturesquely oxidizing cupolas, lawn jockeys (whose days were numbered), and burglar alarms (whose popularity was only just beginning). (204)

Clearly, the move to this “impressive new home” brings the young Stephanides family a step upward on the economic ladder of American society. Yet it seems they are still on the threshold. The showy exteriors and the diversity of styles in their new neighborhood indicate that this is not quite the “true” America that Milton wants to be assimilated into. For unlike Lefty, Milton has no desire to embrace his hybridity. Instead, it is understood that he will move to a more homogenous suburban environment as soon as he has the financial means. A casual way of putting it could be that this is the chronotope of wanting more, a station on the road to something better. And of course, “more” and “better” in Milton’s mind is about material status rather than spiritual adjustment, to use Boelhower’s terminology. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, who has written about cultural hybridity in *Middlesex* in relation to American politics and ambivalent identity, suggests that Milton has “fallen in the trap of cultural (pseudo-)assimilation propitiated by the old metaphor of the melting pot,” and that his American dream has been “reduced to a mere economic wish that does not bring about any real happiness” (Collado-Rodríguez 77, 79).

If the Hurlbut house was a temporary residence, so is the one on Seminole Street. Both are “migrant sites” to borrow Kandiyoti’s terminology, combining enclosure with translocality, holding a “‘here permeated with a consciousness of ‘there’” (38). But where the “here” of Hurlbut was unstable and unclear to its residents, and its “there” most obviously linked to the Bithynios past, the “here” of the
Seminole house and its inhabitants seems to coincide more with that of their surroundings. Milton is no stranger to American society; he understands the rules and plays by them, successful entrepreneur that he is. As for the “there” of Seminole, the memory of Bithynios is certainly still alive in the attic with Desdemona and Lefty, but above all, there is a pulling towards a space in the future; the idea in Milton’s head of total assimilation with a non-pluralistic America.

Children of immigrants, eager to embrace the American Dream, Milton and Tessie surround themselves with American artifacts; their bedroom is furnished in Early American reproductions offering them connections “with the country’s founding myths” (235). With this, they are linking themselves to the progression of American historical time; and, to some extent, disconnecting themselves from the origins of their parents—although not completely renouncing the old world, maintaining as they do regular visits to the Orthodox church and Greek movies, as Vicky Johnson Gatzouras points out (194-95). But for the most part, the past has been pushed back to make room for the present and the future.

Interestingly, Milton’s budding success seems to anchor Desdemona in time. She remains in the private sphere, but is now able to shift her attention from the past to the present, or at least merge the two. Presented with a television, she can stay inside, but keep in touch with world outside.

Though she had lived in America as an eternal exile, a visitor for forty years, certain bits of her adopted country had been seeping under the locked doors of her disapproval (222). Also, we now witness Desdemona dreaming about the future, looking at brochures from the Smyrna Beach Chamber of Commerce—and not entirely dismissing it for not being the original Smyrna.

For Lefty, on the other hand, Milton’s economic success, with the Seminole house as its foremost symbol, instills no such harmony. Instead, he is silent when touring the house, and we see him driving past it, unwilling to enter. Once a stranger to Detroit, then relatively comfortable in his doubleness, Lefty is now alienated from the existence his son is building for himself, more at home in the city’s back streets than in his son’s American house. It seems that, contrarily to Desdemona, Lefty is not synchronized with the timespace zone his family has now entered, but has been left behind; his moment has passed, biological time also taking a toll on his being:

His clothes had gone out of style, so that he looked like an extra in a gangster movie. One day, appraising himself with severity in the
bathroom mirror, Lefty realized that he had become one of those older men who slicked their hair back in allegiance to an era no one could remember. (205)

Lefty’s solution to this predicament is to reconnect with the time and place of his origins. Going back—in a sense wandering down the hill once again—to the underworld, this time in the shape of the gambling den at Rubsamen Medical Supply, he feels “a quickening of the pulse he hadn’t felt since descending the mountain to explore the back streets of Bursa” (205). From now on, we will follow Lefty in his movement “backwards” in time, and it is thus that his and Desdemona’s paths in time and space cross again. His loss of speech will eventually seal his condition of alienation; his memory, symbolically, remains intact.

The gender divisions, so obvious in Bithynios and Hurlbut, are no longer as pronounced, although the women still congregate in the kitchen, while the men talk politics in the living room (no longer called the sala in this assimilationist household). Instead, the chronotopical disconnect in Seminole is mainly to be found between the generations. This house has not only an upstairs and downstairs, but an attic, at the top of a hidden staircase, which becomes the quarters of the retiring grandparents: “Up in the attic, Desdemona and Lefty came back to where they started” (209). As in Hurlbut, upstairs symbolizes the connection backwards in time to Bithynios, although now it is not the women but the members of the older generation who inhabit this space; the younger generation downstairs passing freely in and out of the here and now of Detroit.

Bachelard gives us the image of attic stairs bearing “the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude” (26). Indeed, it is as though Lefty and Desdemona have found peace in their alienation. Of course, the Seminole attic is firmly segregated from the rest of the house; the grandson dares hardly venture up to this strange museum of the past, and, assimilated American son of assimilationist father, has no relation to it other than a feeling of apprehension:

At the far end was a nearly invisible door, wallpapered over like the entrance to a secret passageway. Chapter Eleven located the tiny doorknob with his head and, using all his strength, pulled it open. Another set of stairs lay behind it. For a long moment, my brother stared hesitantly into the darkness above, before climbing, very slowly now, up to the attic where my grandparents lived. (4)

Grandson of the two former silk-farmers (with chalkboard and worry beads), he has never had to help in the cocoonery. He has never been to
the Koza Han. Environment has already made its imprint on him. He has the tyrannical, self-absorbed look of American children (225-26)

When riots hit the streets of Detroit, however, Tessie retreats up to the attic with the children. As Cal notes; “[m]aybe it was a vestige of our arboreal past; we wanted to climb up and out of danger” (239). Just as Desdemona once watched Smyrna burn from her mountaintop, her family now observes the burning streets of Detroit on television. With Detroit historical time thus imposing itself, it is as if the original Greek connection is stronger after all; Milton’s family do not feel that the local conflict is any of their business; this historical time is not theirs (although it will, as it turns out, affect them).

With the burning of the second Zebra Room—and the insurance money that follows—the Stephanides’s go “from being a family desperately trying to stay in the middle class to one with hopes of sneaking into the upper, or at least the upper-middle” (252). Milton shaves off his beard—back on track towards an American future—and a new house in “the affluent lakefront district of the auto magnates: Grosse Pointe” is to mark the next, and final, part of the family’s upward mobility (254).

Middlesex

Middlesex! Did anybody ever live in a house as strange? As sci-fi? As futuristic and outdated at the same time? A house that was more like communism, better in theory than reality? The walls were pale yellow, made of octagonal stone blocks framed by redwood siding along the roofline. Plate glass windows ran along the front. Hudson Clark [...] had designed Middlesex to harmonize with the natural surroundings. In this case, that meant the two weeping willow trees and the mulberry growing against the front of the house [...] a midwestern horizontal, opening up the interior spaces [...] Middlesex was a testament to theory uncompromised by reality. (258)

Architecturally, this house is all about the future, a challenge to convention as symbolized by the neighboring houses. In spite of the house’s origins in bygone dreams, I would suggest that its futuristic features inscribe this final step of the *Middlesex* chronotope of immigration with a sense of *newness*. For although “outdated” in the sense of a modernist future never realized, there is a promise, even a
commitment to tolerance here; the lack of internal boundaries in the form of stairs, superfluous walls or doors, paired with an almost exaggerated openness to the outside in the form of the large windows and the many skylights. Unlike the family’s two previous houses in America, Middlesex has the feeling of a permanent residence. This is no “migrant site,” the fundamental openness of Middlesex eliminates the need for border-based notions such as enclosure and translocality.

“Everything about Middlesex [speaks] of forgetting”—perhaps this is part of its attraction for Milton, although the past, of course, will not allow itself to be forgotten (273). Desdemona, as always, clings to remembering and continues her “time-capsule life,” while Lefty continues his path of regression. As for Cal, she does not seem to attach any particular drama to her “discovery” of being “ethnic,” nor to the observation that “I’m not sure, with a grandmother like mine if you can ever become a true American” (298, 524).

It is impossible not to see how the image of this house keeps bringing back the reflection of the Bithynios house. It is as though we have been brought full circle; both houses are assertedly horizontal rather than compressed into limited vertical windows of time; where Bithynios demonstrates an unbroken link to the past, so Middlesex suggests an unbroken flow of time forward. Both houses harmonize with their natural surroundings and have courtyards in which to wander and daydream; both are yellow with red roofs—Middlesex a “meditative pastel, yellow cube” (260). This could certainly be the place for a new harmony, a reinstated idyll, a belonging once again.

However, when contemplating the possibility of harmony, we cannot disregard the fact that Middlesex stands out rather overtly as a statement against the more conventional neighboring houses. Needless to say, living in a house such as Middlesex makes it impossible to fulfill Milton’s desire for assimilation. Paradoxically, if he wants to live in this upscale suburbia, segregated from mixed Detroit, he has no option but do it with a difference. The “Point System,” designed to ensure that houses in Grosse Pointe are sold to “the right sort of people” and limiting his choice to the “least-desirable houses,” prevents him from melting in (255-257). As Cal notes, “for those problems there was no remedy” (257). Yet, if Middlesex represents the way forward in terms of a new openness or tolerance for the hybrid, Milton doesn’t see it that way. Instead, he continues to renounce his own difference or
hybridity, as in his “[t]o hell with the Greeks”—but without ever reaching the point of total assimilation that he seeks (363).

For Cal, on the other hand, this is the moment when her biological time in the form of the deviant gene catches up with her; a time of transformation, to say the least. Thus, her coming-of-age and awakening to a sense of hybridity is two-fold; a matter of both gender and ethnic belonging. In the realization of her difference, Cal enters a chronotope containing not only the past—but also the viability of a future:

Though we had ruined it with our colonial furniture, [Middlesex] was still the beacon it was intended to be, a place with few interior walls, divested of the formalities of bourgeois life, a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world. I couldn’t help feeling, of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me. (529)

Middlesex seems to tell its inhabitants that they have the right and duty to be different, thus perhaps helping “newness come into the world.” But how do we understand the fact that they cannot stay? Is it just the unfortunate turn of events, or do we read it as the impossibility of a new harmony? Shostak maintains that “no matter how generous and optimistic Eugenides’ novel is, it demonstrates the virtual impossibility of such a “third space” except as a utopian fantasy” (386-87). It is true that this house does prove uninhabitable for the Stephanides family (and, apparently, unsellable to “pure” Americans…). Still, I would rather go along with Collado-Rodríguez, when he suggests that Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel “sides with the hybrid” in taking a stand against categorical thinking, and that it “finally demands the opening of a borderland or ‘third space’ where mixed races and intersex identities can coexist” (73-74). For we cannot ignore that the house is there, in all its stubborn insistence on openness and tolerance. It is, I would say, in Cal’s response to Middlesex, as in the above quote, and in how it speaks fundamentally to his body and soul—“[h]ere was my home, Middlesex,” that we can find a key to the significance of this chronotope as the promise of a future where belonging has a meaning beyond being one or the other (519).

Yet while Middlesex as the final step in this chronotope of immigration seems to suggest the possibility of such a landing in a “third space” as far as ethnic difference is concerned, it is Cal’s intersexual difference that neither she, her family, nor American society of the 1970’s—as embodied by Dr. Luce—are ready to embrace—the time is simply not yet right.
Concluding thoughts

To recapitulate the key elements of the chronotope of immigration in *Middlesex*, we see how the journey starts with the uprooting from the *idyllic chronotope* in Bithynios; the next step the confused experiences within the *chronotope of not yet belonging* in Hurlbut; followed by the assimilationist urge and material striving of the next generation, the *chronotope of wanting more* in Seminole; finally Middlesex itself, the *chronotope of newness*, which, though its “reality falls short,” as Shostak points out, nevertheless represents the promise of a future where belonging can be found beyond divisions and categories, beyond here or there, past or present (397).

There is a certain symmetry to the image of the four houses; Bithynios horizontally stretched out backwards in time, an oldness, a harmony that comes to an end; Hurlbut and Seminole two vertical and highly divided houses, the latter slightly more confident in relation to its surroundings than the first, but both fundamentally unstable; finally the potential beginning of a different harmony, with Middlesex stretched out towards the future in its newness.

Inevitably, the chronotopes of the different characters are in varying accordance with the chronotopes of the houses they inhabit. The borders and divisions of the houses—upstairs/downstairs, inside/outside—give concrete shape to the relations to past, present and future for the different characters, and to the tensions that arise as a consequence thereof; each individual limited in relation to the others by his/her own chronotope. It seems that the chronotope of immigration necessitates a certain alienation of the family members in relation to space, time and—the obvious consequence of living in different temporalities—each other.

With regards to the different steps in the chronotope of immigration, if we look at alienation as more or less willingly keeping (at least) one foot in the past thus limiting one’s agency in the here and now (Desdemona and Lefty), and total assimilation as an impossible dream (Milton), it seems that the opportunity to at once integrate and go beyond the ties to the past and the demands of the present is not open until after some generations (Cal).

Finally, the chronotope of immigration sketched above must not be read as a formula; there is no inevitability here. If, for example, Milton’s restaurant had not
burned down, he would not have been able to move his family to Middlesex. There will be different characters and different fates, individuals that may or may not be brutally uprooted, may or may not face hostility upon arrival, may or may not succeed in the new country, may or may not long to go back; many different courses of action, in short. What we can assume is that there will be a “here” permeated with a sense of “there,” as well as a disjunction within and between family members with regards to time, place and their respective visions of how and where to belong. And, certainly, reading Middlesex through the lens of the succession of house chronotopes that help structure the novel, we experience the particular unfolding of one family’s immigration saga, which may precariously but vividly stand for many others.
Works Cited


