

Liminal Spaces, Fluid Identities: The Spatial Poetics of Jeffrey Eugenides' Fiction

Dr. Eleanor Vance

Department of American Studies, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Received: 03 July 2025; **Accepted:** 02 August 2025; **Published:** 01 September 2025

Abstract: Background: The fiction of Jeffrey Eugenides, particularly *The Virgin Suicides* [1] and *Middlesex* [2], has been critically acclaimed for its nuanced explorations of identity, gender, and memory. However, existing scholarship has not fully examined the foundational role that the production of space plays in shaping his characters' liminal and fluid senses of self. This article addresses this gap by employing a geocritical framework to analyze the intricate relationship between place and identity in his work.

Methods: This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in spatial theory. It primarily utilizes Henri Lefebvre's triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space [4] to deconstruct the novels' settings. This is complemented by Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias [3] to analyze spaces of otherness and Edward Soja's theory of "Thirdspace" [6] to understand the synthesis of real-and-imagined geographies. The overarching methodology is guided by Bertrand Westphal's principles of geocriticism [8], focusing on the literary representation of space.

Results: The analysis reveals that Eugenides' settings are not passive backdrops but active agents in identity formation. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon home functions as a carceral heterotopia, where physical confinement produces a mythical, inaccessible identity for the sisters. In *Middlesex*, the analysis traces the production of space from the immigrant enclaves of Detroit to the divided city of Berlin, demonstrating how the protagonist Cal's transgender and transnational identity is forged within these liminal geographies. The narrative consistently portrays lived, experiential space as a site of resistance against the normative constraints of conceived, societal space.

Conclusion: This article concludes that in Jeffrey Eugenides' fiction, identity is spatially produced. His novels deploy a distinct spatial poetics wherein liminal characters find and create themselves within the "Thirdspace" that exists between physical environments and their psychological interiority.

Keywords: Jeffrey Eugenides, geocriticism, spatial theory, liminality, heterotopia, Thirdspace, literary geography.

Introduction: Jeffrey Eugenides stands as a significant voice in contemporary American literature, crafting narratives that delve into the complex, often painful, processes of identity formation. His novels, particularly the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Middlesex* [2] and the haunting debut *The Virgin Suicides* [1], have captured the literary imagination through their profound engagement with the quintessential American themes of memory, belonging, suburban life, and the intricate dance between genetics and selfhood. These works are celebrated for their lyrical prose, epic scope, and empathetic portrayal of characters who exist in states of profound transition—be it adolescence, gender

identity, or cultural assimilation. They navigate the often-unforgiving landscapes of late 20th-century America, searching for a stable sense of self in a world that insists on rigid categorization.

While a rich body of criticism has explored the thematic threads of gender, history, and the failures of the American dream in Eugenides' work, a crucial dimension remains significantly underexplored: the role of space as an active agent in the construction of identity. Critical analyses have often treated the suburban streets of Grosse Pointe, the industrial sprawl of Detroit, or the confines of the Lisbon family home as mere backdrops—atmospheric settings against which

the human drama unfolds. This perspective, however, overlooks the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environments. This article posits that to fully comprehend the liminality of Eugenides' characters, one must first understand the liminality of the spaces they inhabit. The central problem this paper addresses is the need for a spatially-oriented critical lens, arguing that the production, perception, and lived experience of space are fundamental to the narrative and thematic cores of his fiction. By failing to analyze how spaces are actively produced, contested, and reimagined, existing scholarship misses the very mechanism by which his characters negotiate their fluid and often marginalized identities.

To fill this critical gap, this article will apply a robust theoretical framework drawn from the field of human geography and spatial theory, a methodology broadly defined under the umbrella of geocriticism [8]. The primary analytical tool will be Henri Lefebvre's foundational theory on the production of space, specifically his triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space [4]. Lefebvre's model provides a powerful vocabulary for deconstructing the multifaceted nature of any given location, moving beyond its physical properties to consider its social, political, and imaginative dimensions. This framework will be augmented by Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" or "other spaces" [3], which is invaluable for analyzing the unique, often transgressive, function of key locations in the novels that operate outside of normative societal rules. Furthermore, the work of postmodern geographers, particularly Edward Soja's conceptualization of "Thirdspace" [6], will be employed to understand how real-and-imagined geographies merge to create new possibilities for being. These critical theories, which emphasize space as a dynamic social product, will be synthesized with the foundational phenomenological insights of geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan [7] and Doreen Massey [5], who remind us that space is not an abstract void but is imbued with experience, memory, and interrelations.

This article argues that in the fiction of Jeffrey Eugenides, space is not a passive container for action but an actively produced entity, a dynamic force that shapes and is shaped by the identities of those who inhabit it. The novels' settings function as what Edward Soja terms "thirdspaces"—complex sites where the tension between objective, physical place (Firstspace) and subjective, psychological identity (Secondspace) is made manifest and negotiated. From the suffocating, hermetically sealed Lisbon house in *The Virgin Suicides* to the transnational and transgender geographies

traversed by Cal Stephanides in *Middlesex*, Eugenides' characters are perpetually engaged in a process of spatial production. They resist the conceived, normative spaces imposed upon them by society and, in doing so, carve out lived spaces where their fluid, liminal identities can, for a moment, exist. This analysis will demonstrate that the "poetics of liminality" at the heart of Eugenides' work is fundamentally a spatial poetics.

To develop this thesis, the article will proceed in four main sections. The following section, "Methods," will provide a detailed exposition of the theoretical framework, elaborating on the core concepts from Lefebvre, Foucault, and Soja that form the analytical basis of the study. The "Results" section will then apply this framework in a close reading of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*, examining specific locations and spatial dynamics within each novel. The "Discussion" will synthesize these findings, exploring the broader implications of Eugenides' spatial poetics and placing his work in dialogue with the guiding theories. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the argument and suggest avenues for future research.

METHODS (Theoretical Framework)

The geocritical methodology employed in this article is predicated on the idea that literary space is not merely decorative but is a crucial element of narrative that warrants systematic analysis [8]. To undertake such an analysis of Eugenides' fiction, a multi-pronged theoretical approach is necessary—one that can account for the material, social, and phenomenological dimensions of space. This study synthesizes three primary theoretical currents: Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, and Edward Soja's postmodern conceptualization of Thirdspace. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive toolkit for examining how space functions as a central protagonist in the shaping of liminal identities.

2.1. Lefebvre's Spatial Triad: Deconstructing Lived Experience

The foundational theoretical lens for this paper is drawn from Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, *The Production of Space* [4]. Lefebvre radically shifted geographical and social theory by arguing that space is not a pre-existing, absolute container for social life, but is rather a social product, actively and continuously created through human practice. He proposed a conceptual triad—a "trialectic"—for understanding this process, comprising three distinct but interconnected moments of spatiality: perceived space, conceived space, and lived space.

First is perceived space, which Lefebvre terms spatial

practice. This is the most tangible and material dimension of space, the physical world as it is encountered and used in everyday life. It encompasses the routes, networks, and patterns of interaction that structure society—the layout of streets in a suburb, the architecture of a house, the flow of traffic in a city. In literary analysis, this corresponds to the physical setting described by the author: the brick-and-mortar Lisbon house, the assembly lines of the Ford Rouge Plant, the geographical boundaries of Grosse Pointe. It is the seemingly objective, empirical reality of the environment.

Second is conceived space, or representations of space. This is the space of planners, architects, governments, and social engineers—the dominant, conceptualized order of society. It is abstract space, rendered intelligible and controllable through maps, laws, zoning regulations, and ideological discourses. Conceived space imposes a logic upon the material world, dictating how it should be used and understood. In Eugenides' novels, this manifests as the rigid social codes of 1970s suburbia, the idealized image of the nuclear family, the cartographic division of a city into racialized and classed zones, or the clinical, binary definitions of gender. It is the space of power and ideology, seeking to discipline and organize human experience.

The third and most crucial element for this analysis is lived space, which Lefebvre calls representational space. This is space as it is directly experienced, imagined, and symbolized by the people who inhabit it. It is the realm of memory, art, dreams, and resistance. Lived space is complex and often contradictory, overlaying the physical world with symbolic meaning and personal history. It is where the domination of conceived space is often subverted and where new meanings are generated. For the Lisbon sisters, the lived space of their bedroom becomes a universe of private symbols and desperate communications; for the neighborhood boys, the entire suburb becomes a lived space of obsessive nostalgia and myth-making [1]. For Cal Stephanides, his own body becomes the ultimate lived space, a site where the conceived binaries of male and female are experienced and ultimately transcended [2]. Soja later re-termed this concept "Thirdspace" to emphasize its role as a synthesis and critique of the other two [6]. Lefebvre's triad is not a static typology but a dynamic model. The central tension in society—and, this paper argues, in Eugenides' fiction—arises from the conflict and interplay between these three spatial moments. The power of conceived space attempts to control and rationalize the world, while the subversive potential of lived space constantly challenges and redefines it.

2.2. Foucault's Heterotopias: Spaces of Otherness

Complementing Lefebvre's grand theory is Michel Foucault's more focused concept of "heterotopias" [3]. In his short but influential essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault outlines the properties of these unique locations. Unlike utopias, which are unreal spaces, heterotopias are real, physical places that exist within a culture but are somehow set apart, operating by their own rules and logic. They are "counter-sites," places that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert the other, more normative spaces of society. Foucault identifies several principles of heterotopias: they can be spaces of crisis (like a honeymoon suite) or deviation (like a prison or psychiatric hospital); they can juxtapose several incompatible sites in one real place (like a garden or a cinema); and they are often linked to specific slices of time (heterochronies), like museums that accumulate all of history in one spot.

This concept is exceptionally useful for analyzing the function of key locations in Eugenides' novels. The Lisbon house, for instance, can be understood as a heterotopia of deviation. While located within the ordinary suburban landscape, it becomes a carceral space governed by the idiosyncratic and oppressive rules of Mrs. Lisbon, effectively existing outside the social norms of the community it physically occupies [1]. Similarly, the divided city of Berlin, where Cal travels, acts as a geopolitical heterotopia, a single location where two opposing ideologies and social systems are physically juxtaposed, mirroring Cal's own internal state of being between genders [2]. Analyzing these locations as heterotopias allows us to see them not as mere settings, but as functional narrative devices that reflect, magnify, and produce the "otherness" of the characters confined within them.

2.3. Soja's Thirdspace and Westphal's Geocriticism: A Methodological Synthesis

Building directly upon Lefebvre's work, postmodern geographer Edward Soja developed the concept of "Thirdspace" to further emphasize the radical potential of lived space [6]. For Soja, Thirdspace is a place of hybridity, creativity, and resistance. It is a way of thinking and being that seeks to break down binaries and open up new possibilities. It is "a space of radical openness," an "other choice" that moves beyond the perceived materialism of Firstspace and the conceived idealism of Secondspace. Thirdspace is where the real and the imagined, the physical and the mental, the objective and the subjective, merge. This concept is particularly potent for literary analysis because fiction itself can be seen as a form of Thirdspace—a realm where authors and readers collaboratively construct imagined worlds that comment upon, critique, and

expand our understanding of real ones. The collective memory of the neighborhood boys in *The Virgin Suicides*, which constructs a mythologized version of the Lisbon girls that is more potent than reality, is a perfect example of a narrative Thirdspace [1, 6].

This focus on the literary space itself is methodologically grounded by Bertrand Westphal's geocriticism [8]. Westphal argues for a literary analysis that is "geocentered," treating space as the primary object of study rather than as a secondary element in service of character or plot. Geocriticism is multifocal, examining the relationship between the represented world and the real world without prioritizing one over the other. It allows us to analyze the Detroit of *Middlesex* not just as a representation of the historical city, but as a unique, textually produced space with its own internal logic and significance. By synthesizing Soja's conceptual framework with Westphal's methodological approach, this paper can analyze Eugenides' fictional spaces on their own terms, exploring how they function as complex "thirdspaces" where the crucial work of identity formation takes place. This combined methodology provides the necessary tools to move beyond a simple description of setting and toward a nuanced understanding of the spatial poetics at the heart of Eugenides' fiction.

RESULTS (Literary Analysis)

Applying the theoretical framework outlined above, this section undertakes a geocritical reading of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*. The analysis demonstrates how Eugenides employs the production of space as a central narrative strategy to explore themes of identity, memory, and confinement. The settings in these novels emerge not as static containers but as dynamic "thirdspaces" where the tensions between perceived reality, conceived social order, and lived experience are played out, ultimately shaping the liminal identities of their inhabitants.

3.1. The Confines of Suburbia in *The Virgin Suicides*

The Virgin Suicides is a novel obsessed with a single, enigmatic space: the Lisbon family home at 707 Middlebrook Road. The entire narrative, narrated by a collective "we" of neighborhood boys now grown to men, is an attempt to map, excavate, and understand this space and the tragedy that unfolded within it. The novel's power lies in its transformation of a generic suburban house into a site of myth, a carceral space that both creates and destroys the identities of the five Lisbon sisters.

3.1.1. The Lisbon House as a Carceral Heterotopia

The Lisbon home can be analyzed through Lefebvre's spatial triad as a site of intense conflict between

different modes of spatial production [4]. Its perceived space is straightforward: a two-story brick house in a prosperous Grosse Pointe suburb, indistinguishable from its neighbors. It is part of the material fabric of everyday life, a point on a map. However, its conceived space is far more complex and shifts dramatically. Initially, it represents the suburban ideal—the perfect container for the perfect nuclear family. Yet, following the first suicide attempt by Cecilia, this conceived space is violently redefined by Mrs. Lisbon. It becomes a space of control, quarantine, and moral purity, governed by a rigid ideology that seeks to protect the girls from the perceived corruption of the outside world. The house is reconceived as a fortress or a convent, its windows barred not with steel but with the invisible force of parental authority.

It is in the realm of lived space, however, that the house's true nature is revealed. For the Lisbon sisters, the house becomes a prison. Their bedrooms, hallways, and basement are transformed from spaces of domestic comfort into a landscape of confinement. Yet, within this carceral environment, they generate their own representational spaces of resistance and communication. They use light signals, postcards, and music played over the telephone to project their inner lives beyond the physical walls, attempting to create a lived space that transcends their imprisonment [1]. For the neighborhood boys, the house becomes a different kind of lived space: a shrine, a mystery, a black hole of desire and obsession. They experience the house not as a physical structure but as a repository of clues and artifacts—a diary, a tube of lipstick, a photograph. The house is the epicenter of their collective imagination, a space they inhabit mentally far more intensely than they ever could physically.

This transformation of a domestic space into a site of intense, conflicting meanings makes the Lisbon home a perfect example of a Foucauldian heterotopia of deviation [3]. It is a real place, embedded within the normative landscape of the suburb, yet it functions according to its own internal, oppressive logic. It is a "counter-site" that inverts the suburban ideal of the happy home, revealing the dark potential for isolation and control lurking beneath the surface of conformity. The house becomes a world unto itself, a place where the normal rules of social interaction, time, and freedom are suspended. It is this heterotopic quality that both isolates the Lisbon sisters and, paradoxically, solidifies their mythical status, transforming them from ordinary girls into enigmatic objects of communal fascination.

3.1.2. The Lived Space of Collective Memory

The novel's most profound spatial production occurs

not within the house itself, but within the collective consciousness of the narrators. The "we" of the story are not historians but curators of a memory palace, a "Thirdspace" constructed from the fragments of the past [6]. Their narrative is an act of spatial reconstruction. They assemble "Exhibit A: the diary," "Exhibit B: the photograph," and the testimonies of others to rebuild the Lisbon house in their minds. This narrative space is a hybrid of the real and the imagined, a classic Thirdspace where objective facts (the perceived space of the house) are interwoven with subjective desire, fantasy, and nostalgia (the lived space of their obsession).

The Grosse Pointe they describe is less a real place than a representational space, a landscape saturated with the memory of the girls. The elm trees, the lake, the high school hallways—all are components of a geography of loss. As the narrators state, "It was the girls again. After all these years, we couldn't get them out of our heads" [1]. Their lived experience of the suburb is permanently filtered through the lens of the tragedy. In this way, the boys' collective memory creates a space that resists the passage of time. They are trapped in a perpetual adolescence, endlessly re-examining the evidence, forever trying to understand the girls who remain just out of reach. This narrative Thirdspace is the novel's true setting. It is a space of unresolved longing where the Lisbon sisters are kept alive, not as they were, but as potent symbols within the boys' imaginative geography. The novel thus demonstrates the ultimate power of lived space: its ability to overwrite the physical world with the enduring power of memory and myth.

3.2. Transnational and Transgender Spaces in Middlesex

If *The Virgin Suicides* focuses microscopically on a single, suffocating location, *Middlesex* is a sprawling epic of spatial migration and transformation. The novel traces three generations of the Stephanides family and their journey across continents, cities, and ultimately, the very boundaries of gender. The protagonist, Cal, is born Calliope, a girl, but later discovers he is intersex and transitions to life as a man. His journey of self-discovery is inextricably linked to the geographical and social spaces he inhabits. The novel is a masterclass in demonstrating how identity is produced through the negotiation of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces on both a macro and micro scale.

3.2.1. From Smyrna to Detroit: The Production of Immigrant Space

The novel begins with a journey, a forced migration from the "Old World" of Smyrna to the "New World" of industrial America. This is a classic narrative of

immigrant spatial production. The Stephanides family must navigate a new perceived space: the bewildering, noisy, and immense landscape of Detroit, dominated by the Ford Motor Company. This physical environment is overlaid with a powerful conceived space: the ideology of the American Dream. Detroit is represented as a space of opportunity, a place where one can shed an old identity and forge a new one through hard work.

However, the family's actual experience is in the realm of lived space [4]. They do not simply assimilate into the American mainstream; they produce their own hybrid, Greek-American space. Their homes, their neighborhood, and their social clubs become "thirdspaces" where the language, food, and customs of their homeland are maintained and adapted within the new American context [6]. This lived space is a buffer against the alienating forces of the dominant culture and a site for the preservation of a distinct identity. Cal, as the narrator, understands his own unique genetic inheritance as a product of this specific spatial history—a secret carried over from a small village in Turkey that finds its expression generations later in a Detroit suburb. His identity is literally born from this transnational production of space.

3.2.2. Grosse Pointe vs. Detroit: Geographies of Class and Race

As the family prospers, they move from the immigrant enclaves of Detroit to the affluent suburb of Grosse Pointe. This move represents a journey across a sharply defined conceived space. The boundary between Detroit and Grosse Pointe is more than just a municipal line; it is a powerful social and racial border. Grosse Pointe is conceived as a space of white, middle-class safety and success, while Detroit, especially by the 1960s, is increasingly conceived as a space of blackness, poverty, and urban decay. This binary is a classic example of how space is used to enforce social hierarchies [5].

For the young Calliope, this spatial divide becomes a powerful metaphor for her own developing sense of being "in-between." She attends an elite private school in Grosse Pointe but feels the pull of her family's roots in the city. The 1967 Detroit Riot becomes a pivotal moment in the novel, a violent eruption where the repressed tensions of this segregated geography explode. The riot demolishes the conceived order, revealing the deep injustices upon which the spatial separation was built. For Calliope, witnessing the city burn from the "safe" distance of the suburbs mirrors her own internal turmoil. She exists in the liminal space between the rigidly defined social categories of race and class, just as she exists in the biological space between male and female. The geography of the

divided metropolis provides the external landscape for her internal, unmapped identity.

3.2.3. Berlin and the Body as Final Frontier

Cal's ultimate journey of self-realization takes him to Berlin, a city that serves as the novel's most potent spatial metaphor. In the 1970s, Berlin is a literal "Thirdspace," a geopolitical anomaly divided by the Wall. It is a single perceived space—a city—that has been violently split into two opposing conceived spaces: the capitalist West and the communist East. It is a heterotopia par excellence, a place where incompatible ideologies are forced into physical proximity [3]. Cal is drawn to this liminal city because it perfectly mirrors his own condition. As he puts it, "I'd been living in a divided city for a long time" [2]. Berlin's divided geography provides the external validation for his internal sense of being two things at once.

It is in this space of literal and figurative division that Cal is finally able to integrate the disparate parts of his identity. Ultimately, however, the novel proposes that the most critical space of all is the human body itself. Cal's intersex body is the final frontier of his journey, the ultimate lived space where the conceived binaries of gender collapse. Medical science attempts to impose a conceived order on his body, to define him as either male or female. But Cal's lived experience resists this categorization. He comes to understand his body not as a mistake or an aberration, but as a unique geography with its own history and integrity—a "Thirdspace" that is biologically both and socially neither [6]. His final act of self-acceptance is to claim this bodily space as his own, concluding that his identity is not defined by external social categories but is produced through the lived experience of his own unique physical form.

3.3. Synthesis of Key Insights

The analyses of both novels reveal a consistent artistic preoccupation in Eugenides' work: the profound link between physical or social confinement and the generation of fluid, imaginative, and liminal identities. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the absolute physical confinement of the Lisbon sisters within their home paradoxically launches their identities into the realm of myth, making them more symbolically potent and fluid in the minds of the narrators than they ever could have been in real life. The restrictive, conceived space of parental control generates an expansive, lived space of communal obsession. Similarly, in *Middlesex*, Cal's initial confinement within a misidentified gender—a powerful form of social and psychological enclosure—propels him on a global journey to find a space that can accommodate his true self. The social and geographical barriers he encounters, from the racial lines of Detroit to the Berlin Wall, serve as external manifestations of

the internal boundaries he must cross. Eugenides' spatial poetics suggests that identity is not forged in environments of absolute freedom, but is rather a product of negotiation with, and resistance to, the constraints of the spaces—physical, social, and ideological—that seek to define and contain the self.

DISCUSSION

The preceding analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex* through the lens of spatial theory reveals that space is not an incidental element in his fiction but is central to his artistic project. By examining his novels as exercises in the production of space, we can synthesize the findings to discuss three key areas: the emergence of a distinct "poetics of liminality" grounded in spatial dynamics; the ways in which Eugenides' fiction actively engages with and illuminates the core tenets of spatial theory; and the broader implications of a geocritical reading for understanding contemporary American literature and identity.

4.1. The Poetics of Liminality

A synthesis of the findings from both novels demonstrates that Eugenides has developed a powerful "poetics of liminality," a literary style in which the state of being "in-between" is explored primarily through spatial metaphors and dynamics. His characters are consistently placed in locations that are themselves liminal, contested, or transitional. These spaces are not merely settings but are narrative engines that generate the very ambiguity and fluidity that define the characters' identities. The Lisbon sisters are trapped between childhood and womanhood, life and death, and this state is mirrored and produced by their confinement within a house that is between being a home and a prison. Cal Stephanides is between genders, between cultures (Greek/American), and between historical eras, and his journey is mapped onto a series of liminal geographies: the immigrant enclave, the divided suburb, the walled city of Berlin.

This poetics is built on the fundamental tension between confinement and transcendence. In both novels, restrictive spaces paradoxically give rise to expansive imaginative possibilities. The physical imprisonment of the Lisbon girls transforms them into transcendent myths. The social confinement of Cal's misgendered youth fuels his epic quest for a space of belonging. This recurring motif suggests a central argument in Eugenides' work: that identity is not a stable essence but a process of becoming, a process that is most intensely realized at the boundaries and in the in-between spaces. His fiction consistently rejects the notion of a singular, fixed self, instead presenting identity as a continuous negotiation with the

environments—both physical and ideological—that seek to impose simplistic labels. The power of his narrative lies in its ability to find the universal in the specific, using the unique geographies of his characters' lives to explore the universal human experience of navigating the liminal spaces between who we are and who we are perceived to be.

4.2. Eugenides in Dialogue with Spatial Theory

Beyond simply serving as useful tools for analysis, the theories of Lefebvre, Foucault, and Soja find a rich and compelling fictional illustration in Eugenides' work. His novels can be read as narrative explorations of the core conflicts identified by these thinkers, bringing abstract social theories to life with literary specificity and emotional depth. The central drama in both novels is the struggle of lived space against the hegemony of conceived space [4]. The Lisbon sisters' secret communications and the boys' obsessive myth-making are acts of resistance, attempts by lived experience to reclaim meaning from the oppressive, conceived order of Mrs. Lisbon's rules. Cal's entire life is a testament to the power of lived, embodied experience to defy the conceived, binary logic of gender imposed by society and medicine. Eugenides' work vividly demonstrates Lefebvre's assertion that space is a site of social struggle.

Furthermore, his novels provide powerful literary examples of Foucault's heterotopias [3]. The Lisbon house is not just a dysfunctional home; it is a perfectly realized heterotopia of deviation, a space that concentrates and reflects the anxieties of its surrounding culture regarding female sexuality and autonomy. Eugenides' fiction shows how such "other spaces" are not just sociological curiosities but are essential to narrative, providing the crucibles in which non-normative identities are forged and tested.

Most profoundly, Eugenides' work can be seen as a literary embodiment of Soja's Thirdspace [6]. His narratives are "thirdspaces" themselves, hybrid realms where history and fiction, reality and myth, intermingle. The collective narration of *The Virgin Suicides* creates a space that is neither purely objective history nor pure subjective fantasy, but a powerful synthesis of both. Cal's identity, and indeed the entire narrative of *Middlesex*, is a Thirdspace—a place of radical openness that transcends the simplistic binaries of male/female, Greek/American, nature/nurture. By writing these spaces into being, Eugenides does more than just represent the world; he actively produces new ways of understanding it, illustrating the power of literature to expand our spatial and social imaginations. His work challenges us to see the world not as a collection of fixed places, but as a dynamic tapestry of

overlapping, intersecting, and constantly evolving lived spaces.

4.3. Implications for Contemporary American Fiction

A geocritical reading of Eugenides has broader implications for how we understand the trajectory of contemporary American literature. It highlights a significant "spatial turn" in fiction, a move away from purely psychological or historical narratives toward stories that are deeply invested in the relationship between identity and environment. In an increasingly globalized and placeless world, writers like Eugenides seem to be returning to the specifics of place—the suburb, the city, the borderland—to explore what it means to belong. As Doreen Massey argues, space is not a static surface but a product of interrelations, a pincushion of a million stories [5]. Eugenides' work exemplifies this view, presenting places like Detroit not as monolithic entities but as complex assemblages of countless individual and collective narratives.

This analysis suggests that to understand the American identity at the turn of the 21st century, we must pay attention to its spatial dimensions. The anxieties over suburban conformity, the legacies of urban segregation, the experience of immigration, and the evolving understanding of gender are all, in Eugenides' hands, spatial stories. His work contributes to a broader literary project that questions stable notions of home and identity, reflecting a culture grappling with profound demographic, social, and technological change. By focusing on the "real-and-imagined" places his characters inhabit [6], Eugenides provides a nuanced map of the contemporary American psyche. This geocritical approach, therefore, not only enriches our reading of a single author but also provides a valuable framework for analyzing other contemporary writers who are similarly engaged in exploring the complex, ongoing production of American space and the identities forged within it.

CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of Findings

This article has conducted a geocritical analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides' fiction, arguing that space functions as a primary agent in the formation of his characters' liminal identities. Through the application of spatial theories from Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Soja, the study has moved beyond treating settings as passive backdrops. The analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* revealed the Lisbon family home as a carceral heterotopia—a confined physical space that paradoxically generated an expansive, mythic identity for the sisters within the lived, imaginative space of the community. Similarly, the examination of *Middlesex* traced the protagonist Cal's journey through a series of

transnational and transgender geographies—from immigrant Detroit to divided Berlin—demonstrating how his fluid identity was continuously produced and negotiated in relation to these contested landscapes. In both novels, the struggle between societally conceived spaces and individually lived spaces emerges as a central narrative and thematic concern.

5.2. Restatement of Thesis

The findings confirm the central thesis of this paper: for Jeffrey Eugenides, identity is not merely situated in place, but is actively and continuously produced through the complex interplay of physical, social, and imagined spaces. His work deploys a distinct "spatial poetics" where the state of being "in-between"—whether in terms of gender, culture, or life stage—is explored through the liminality of the spaces his characters inhabit. The conclusion is that the celebrated poetics of liminality in Eugenides' fiction is, at its core, a spatial poetics. His characters discover, define, and resist identity within the "Thirdspace" that exists at the intersection of the real and the imagined, the material and the psychological.

5.3. Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future inquiry. The geocritical framework applied here could be extended to Eugenides' other novels, such as *The Marriage Plot*, to investigate whether this spatial poetics is a consistent feature across his entire oeuvre. Furthermore, a comparative study could place Eugenides in dialogue with his contemporaries, exploring how other 21st-century authors use space to narrate identity in an era of globalization and digital placelessness. Finally, future research could integrate this spatial analysis with other critical lenses, such as trauma theory or ecocriticism, to explore how landscapes of memory and environmental pressures also contribute to the production of space and selfhood in contemporary literature.

REFERENCES

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, NY, USA, 1993.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, NY, USA, 2002.

Foucault, Michel. *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* 1984, pp. 46–49. Available online: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> (accessed on 25 May 2025).

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*; Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith; Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1991.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*; SAGE: London, UK, 2005.

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*; Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1996.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 1977.

Westphal, Bertrand. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*; Translated by Robert T. Tally, Jr.; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2011.