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# European Kinship: Eastern European Women Go to Market

Anca Parvulescu

In short, feminism must call for a revolution in kinship.

—GAYLE RUBIN, “Traffic in Women”

An episode in Cristian Mungiu’s 2002 film, *Occident*, presents us with a scene in a matrimonial agency in Romania: a worried mother is searching for a husband for her twenty-four-year-old daughter, Mihaela. The conversation in the waiting room informs us that she has brought the necessary bribe because the agency offers good choices: “They have doctors and Americans.” Once inside, she is asked what nationality she is looking for. She would prefer “one of ours” but is told the agency only deals in international marriages. Europe, America, and Asia are on the menu. The mother prefers Europe. The agent shows her a slide with a number of photographs. “Don’t you have anything younger?” the mother pleads. The agent rolls his eyes and pulls out another slide. With an almost scientific gesture, he points to one photograph: a distinguished gentleman from Saudi Arabia. “He’s ugly,” argues the mother. She takes the initiative and points to another face—also a distinguished gentleman, from Cyprus, a sailor. The mother shows her disappointment. “Don’t you have a doctor?” The agent is irritated; one is ugly, the other one is a sailor. We are not at the market, he protests, the men are human beings, and there is no bargaining. The mother is asked to pay the fee and leave a picture and her daughter’s details. The agent will get back to her. She complies and adds a poem to the package; the bride-to-be is a poet.

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A series of amusing encounters follow, with Mihaela meeting caricatured older, working-class, uneducated European men. “I write poems,” she says in French to a man who smiles encouragingly but to whom Baudelaire’s name sounds only vaguely familiar. “Money is not important to me,” she says in English to a man who gesticulates back that he does not have it anyway. “I like to travel . . . not to cook, wash,” she adds for another one. She is clearly not interested in these men, not only because they are utterly uninteresting but because she is in love with a young Romanian man, who has just been left by his fiancé, Sorina, for an overweight, middle-aged Belgian businessman.

Mihaela’s mother is persistent and soon finds her a good match, a well-situated Italian. He runs a publishing house and has read and liked Mihaela’s poems. This last detail catches Mihaela’s attention. There is no photograph, but on the phone he passes all the tests; he apparently is young, tall, even has hair. “If he publishes my poems, I’m going with him,” Mihaela declares. The Italian is invited to visit. The house is cleaned, local wall art is replaced by sketches of Roman figures, furniture is moved around, pasta is cooked. Finally, the big moment comes. The father opens the door and freezes. “Ciao, sono Luigi,” says a young black man. The family is in disarray. “Nu corespunde” (literally, “he does not correspond”), the father declares. And yet all the prerequisites are there, and the daughter wants to marry. The black Italian is a European impossibility they could have not anticipated. The film’s three alternative endings (in the tradition of *Run, Lola, Run*) play with variations on whether the two Romanian women, Mihaela and Sorina, take the European road to marriage or, in the case of one, immigrate without marrying or, in the case of the other, settle for the local husband.

What these scenes in *Occident* offer us are snapshots of a new Europe.<sup>1</sup> I want to raise the question of how this film and others like it prompt reflection on the European Union predicament and the circulation of women it seems to facilitate, but challengingly reverse the terms of the discussion to explore the formation and sedimentation of “Europe” made possible by the circulation of women. Beginning in the early 1990s, but especially after

1. *Occident* is the word Romanians used during the cold war to refer to the West. The term is synonymous with a certain use of the word *Europe*: Europe as the West.

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the recent round of European “enlargement,” Romanian and other Eastern European women have become hot objects of exchange, packaged in a variety of wrappings, whether as domestic servants, nurses, nannies, prostitutes, or wives. Structurally, I will argue, marriage continues to underwrite other forms of exchange, and I will focus on it here. It will be an occasion to revisit the feminist traffic-in-women argument and reconsider its implications for the European Union.

Thirty-five years have passed since Gayle Rubin published “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.”<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in various anthologies, the essay has become a feminist classic, having maintained its urgency and having been repeatedly used as a springboard for the reconsideration of its arguments in light of new configurations of *traffic*, *economy*, *political*, and *sex*. Ironically enough, alongside Luce Irigaray’s articulation of the argument for the French side of second-wave feminism, Rubin’s essay can offer an entry point into the transnational traffic in women in the current European moment. I will retrace the archeology of the argument here before I return to *Occident*. It will be a somewhat convoluted journey, one, however, that will offer a framework within which to understand what a film like *Occident* is saying about the European Union.

The precedent for Rubin’s essay, and an enduring reference point in the conceptual combination known as traffic in women, is a short article with the same title written by Emma Goldman in 1910. Goldman writes: “it is merely a question of degree whether she [woman] sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men. Whether our reformers admit it or not, the economic and social inferiority of woman is responsible for prostitution.”<sup>3</sup> “The traffic in women” is the phrase Goldman uses to describe the circulation of women between men *in general*. Rather than referring to exceptional cases of human trafficking, the traffic-in-women concept describes an economic continuum to which both prostitution and marriage belong. The difference between prostitution and marriage is one of degree, a question of how many men participate in the transaction. Scandalous here is to propose that marriage, the respectable form of women’s circulation, is a variation on the economic theme of prostitution. In the modern world, this is a scandal for men, who would prefer to have this truth veiled; and it is a scandal for women, who would prefer to think they enter marriages by virtue of a love choice. Goldman, however, insists that love and

2. See Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Two and an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), pp. 157–210.

3. Emma Goldman, “The Traffic in Women,” *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader*, ed. Alix Kates Shulman (New York, 1983), p. 175.

marriage belong to two separate registers. In another essay, she declares that “Marriage is often an economic arrangement purely, furnishing the woman with a life-long insurance policy.”<sup>4</sup> Love is largely irrelevant to the question of marriage, as it only works to obscure the fact that the system that circulates women both in prostitution and marriage is an economy and that this economy should be scrutinized. Goldman thus expressed skepticism vis-à-vis the feminist movements of her day and the quest for women’s rights. She came to speak of “the tragedy of woman’s emancipation,” the title of another essay. Emancipation, carrying the etymological baggage of a release from the power of the *manus* (the hand of the *pater familias*), soon leads to woman being “confronted with the necessity of emancipating herself from emancipation.”<sup>5</sup> Emancipation becomes all too familiar, remaining within and sustaining the horizon of the family as the horizon of politics.

Rubin acknowledges her debt to Goldman, but in fact Goldman remains on the margins of her argument throughout, as she develops her own notion of traffic in women. Rubin not only places it on the continuum between prostitution and so-called normal forms of exchange, marriage in particular, but she also describes “a set of arrangements,” which she calls “the sex/gender system,” through which sex is translated into gender, the performance of a set of social relations. Her project is to come to a better understanding of the arrangements that produce women’s position in society. In the course of her analysis, she will show not only that marriage is always “arranged” but that marital arrangements serve as a foundation for other forms of societal exchange. Where does one begin such a project? Rubin proposes we read closely the overlap between Claude Lévi-Strauss’s and Freud’s descriptions of the social apparatus and women’s place in it but only after she puts aside her hope in Marx.

Capitalism, the Marxist argument goes, is in the business of extracting unpaid labor from the laborer, which it turns into surplus-value, the difference between the value of what the laborer produces and his wages, which are not in any direct correlation to this value but are set in light of the conditions of production. For Marx, these conditions include commodities like food, clothing, housing, and so on. Wages are meant to cover these costs and help reproduce the conditions in which the laborer does more work—from day to day and from one generation of workers to the next. Rubin, alongside other materialist feminists of her generation, interrupts Marx at this point to emphasize that such commodities come in an

4. Goldman, “What I Believe,” *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 57.

5. Goldman, “The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation,” *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 160.

unprocessed form, and they require labor in order to reproduce the laborer. The food is cooked, the clothes washed, the house cleaned, budding future laborers looked after, and so on. This is “housework,” and it has traditionally been the labor of women. Women are indispensable to the reproduction of labor, hence to the production of surplus-value, hence to capitalist economy. In fact, it can be argued that women’s unpaid labor within the household is the first source of surplus-value.

How did we get here? In some noncapitalist economic regimens, women have occupied similar locations, which shows that they in fact might come before and exceed capitalism. If we are dealing with an economy here, it is not strictly economic, but rather a function of a wider cultural heritage, a deeper history.<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, went a step further than Marx in his analysis of a second type of production, that of human beings themselves. Engels dissociated the reproduction of the conditions of production (cooking, cleaning, and so on) from the reproduction of human beings and located the latter firmly within the institution of the family. His insight is to have proposed that it is only through a focus on the family that we can hope to make visible the network of relations within which women live, including economic relations. He showed that the first “class” to be economically oppressed are women within kinship structures, and their oppression remains at the basis of other forms of economic exploitation. Rubin finds Engels invaluable for having emphasized this point and for having produced a major methodological shift towards kinship, but she also finds that he has not pursued the implications of his insight or not sufficiently. This is where she turns to Claude Lévi-Strauss and his magisterial *Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

The fabric of a society, Lévi-Strauss has famously explained, is formed by a series of cyclical, obligatory, and reciprocal exchanges among kinship groups. Society is in fact nothing else but this network of exchanges. Lévi-Strauss draws on Marcel Mauss, who argued, against political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, that there has never been a state of nature because any society we know of has had a market form, with its networks of exchange functioning as a rudimentary social contract. This market is not strictly an economic market because what are exchanged are not solely economic goods but, in this order in Mauss’s *The Gift*, “banquets, rituals,

6. For a sketch of where capitalist notions of economy intersect this deeper history, see Linda Nicholson, “Feminism and Marx: Integrating Kinship with the Economic,” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Nicholson (New York, 1997), pp. 131–45.

military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs.”<sup>7</sup> This network of exchange is a social contract *avant la lettre* and is something like an anthropological first principle.

In an attempt to move from the disjunctive logic of Mauss’s list to a more systematic description of societal exchange, Lévi-Strauss sifts through the “inessentials” on this list to argue that there are three levels of communication in any given society, corresponding to the circulation of three sets of interrelated objects: “the rules of kinship and marriage serve to insure the circulation of women between groups, just as economic rules serve to insure the circulation of goods and services, and linguistic rules the circulation of messages.”<sup>8</sup> The three categories of exchange are goods and services, signs, and women. The relation among the three goes beyond mere analogy as Lévi-Strauss makes it clear that women in fact *are* goods; and women *are* signs. The circulation of women in marriage becomes the arch form of exchange. At the beginning there is the exchange of women. The incest taboo is the structure’s limit because, according to Lévi-Strauss, by its means a whole clear-cut network of relations is formed; a woman a man cannot marry under the incest taboo is necessarily a woman he must offer to another man.<sup>9</sup>

The question that interests Rubin is how to *read* this system of exchange. Most importantly, how immutable is it? (Or, which is the same thing, how structuralist?) What exactly does feminism set out to change and how? If one agrees that the exchange and circulation of women constitute the very fabric of culture, is it possible and desirable to fight culture? At stake, Lévi-Strauss argued, is the very security of the collective, its principle of organization: “It is no exaggeration, then, to say that exogamy is the archetype of all other manifestations based upon reciprocity, and that it provides the fundamental and immutable rule ensuring the existence of the group as a group” (*ESK*, p. 481). Is feminism struggling against society’s “fundamental and immutable rule”? Important for Rubin’s stakes is Lévi-Strauss’s argument that the exchange of women leads to a network of reciprocal relations among brothers-in-law: “the brother-in-law is ally, collaborator and friend” (*ESK*, p. 483). This is the fabric of what Mauss celebrates under the rubric of solidarity—a solidarity of brothers, collab-

7. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (1950; New York, 2000), p. 5.

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, 2 vols. (New York, 1963), 1:83; hereafter abbreviated SA.

9. See Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham, ed. Needham (Boston, 1969), p. 51; hereafter abbreviated *ESK*.

orators, and friends. The exchange in women is not only what founds community but also solidarity, the very foundation of politics. In a long tradition from Aristotle to Carl Schmitt, politics is a game played among brothers and friends and brothers qua friends.<sup>10</sup> If this is the case, the feminist predicament is profoundly paradoxical because it implies the project of articulating a politics against politics.

For her part, Rubin concludes that, while the traffic in women has a lot of explicative power (“our sex/gender system is still organized by the principles outlined by Lévi-Strauss”),<sup>11</sup> structuralist kinship is itself a myth, a fiction of origins, and a very powerful one at that, as it has added apparently incontestable scientific backing to its many, already seductive folds. Mauss wrote about *The Gift*: “We have no wish to put forward this study as a model to be followed. It only sets out bare indications.”<sup>12</sup> Lévi-Strauss spoke of the goal of his project in terms of it aspiring to be “real, simplifying and explanatory” (SA, 1:35). How, then, does one interrupt a myth that presents itself as “mere indications” and “real, simplifying and explanatory”? Rubin insists we need to read symptomatically, and she describes her own reading practice as “freely interpretative, moving from the explicit content of a text to its presuppositions and implications.”<sup>13</sup> It also means to read exegetically, at the same time acknowledging the undeniable force of Lévi-Strauss’s work (it is scripturelike) and calling for interpretation. After all, exegesis often unnoticeably slides into blasphemy.

What results, then, can such a reading practice yield? First of all, it can provide a few “mutations” in our reading of Lévi-Strauss.<sup>14</sup> In Rubin’s wake, at least two points would be worth revisiting. One is the context in which Lévi-Strauss—in describing the analogy between words, goods and services, and women—allows that women occupy a paradoxical object-position: “Words do not speak, while women do; as producers of signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens” (SA, 1:61).<sup>15</sup> Since kinship is a symbolic structure and ultimately a linguistic structure, the conflict over the very meaning (and immutability) of kin-

10. Somewhere else Lévi-Strauss puts it in even more nonambiguous terms: “a certain kinship tie, the brother-in-law relationship . . . is both sexual and political-social; and, owing to its complexity, the brother-in-law relationship may perhaps be regarded as an actual institution” (quoted in Marcela Coelho de Souza, “The Future of the Structural Theory of Kinship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss*, ed. Boris Wiseman [Cambridge, 2009], p. 86).

11. Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” p. 198.

12. Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 78.

13. Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” p. 159.

14. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, 1970), p. 25.

15. Another version of this statement reads: “what is communicated in marriage is



ship is fought in language. Moreover, the reproduction of the myth at the individual level occurs in language, through the Oedipal reiterative socialization of new generations on their way, as Rubin puts it, toward the missionary position. Women speak and the language they produce circulates, often on unpredictable trajectories. As producers of signs, they can rewrite the signs they are. Women are producers of literature in the broadest sense, and literature is the space in which relation, including that of an exchange between author and reader, has been challengingly rethought, such that literary signs do not necessarily travel on a traffic-in-women model.

The second point is the juncture where Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that kinship is a symbolic structure and thus “an arbitrary system of representations,” but he insists the system is gendered in a unidirectional way: “could we not conceive of a symmetrical structure, equally simple, where the sexes could be reversed [a traffic in men]? . . . This is certainly a theoretical possibility. But it is immediately eliminated on empirical grounds. In human society, it is the men who exchange the women, and not vice versa” (SA, 1:51, 47). Lévi-Strauss would later renounce this formulation in favor of what he acknowledges here only as a “theoretical possibility.” Allowing that traffic can be a two-way street, he would come to say that “groups consisting of both men and women exchange among themselves kinship relations.”<sup>16</sup> Further responding to his insistent critics, an exasperated Lévi-Strauss would eventually exclaim: “How many times will I have to repeat that it makes no difference to the theory whether it is men who exchange women or the opposite?”<sup>17</sup> Lévi-Strauss is acknowledging two things: the initial statement in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was an infelicitous formulation; but the theoretical apparatus of the book stands even if we agree that today both men and women participate, as exchangers, in the circulation of kinship relations. These days anybody can play the wife, but the system of exchange is itself gendered, and there is always a wife.

Judith Butler revisited this conversation in *Antigone's Claim* in an attempt to update Rubin's argument and offer a queer theory of kinship for the contemporary world, accounting for the fact that today it would seem that men and women exchange kinship relations in nontraditional ways.

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almost of the same nature as those who communicate (women, on the one hand, men, on the other)” (SA, 1:297; my emphasis).

16. Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss (Chicago, 1992), p. 60.

17. Quoted in Coelho de Souza, “The Future of the Structural Theory of Kinship,” p. 93.

Butler's entry point into the conversation is the figure of Antigone, whom she places on a philosophical continuum between G. W. F. Hegel and Lévi-Strauss/Jacques Lacan. Butler agrees with Rubin that Lévi-Straussian moments like the one quoted above are symptomatic of structuralist theories of kinship and their own investment in the immutability of what they purport to merely describe: "And to the extent that the symbolic reiterates a 'structural' necessity of kinship, does it relay or perform the curse of kinship itself? In other words, does the structuralist law report on the curse that is upon kinship or does it deliver that curse?"<sup>18</sup> Butler brings Lacan's formulations on the symbolic into the conversation, which the latter developed in an explicit engagement with Lévi-Strauss. Given Lévi-Strauss's analogy between women and linguistic signs, Lacan posits that kinship structures, insofar as they are linguistic structures, underwrite the symbolic. Oedipus and the incest taboo offer us linguistic positions that render culture intelligible. The engagement with Lacan takes the feminist predicament Rubin identified to yet another level of paradox, as kinship becomes the presupposition of intelligibility, which for Butler also implies livability because only intelligible lives (and loves) are deemed livable. The question becomes, is feminism struggling not only against society's "fundamental and immutable rule" but against the very premise of cultural intelligibility?

In the philosophical tradition Butler traces, Antigone's name is synonymous with her act of defiance whereby she buries her brother, Polynices, despite her uncle's edict that he is to remain unburied. Against Hegel, for whom Antigone represents kinship at the moment when it is superseded by the state, Butler argues that Antigone does not act in the name of kinship because her act has only one application. If for Lacan Antigone's brother is "pure Being," a structural/linguistic position within kinship, which anyone can occupy, Antigone insists that this particular brother is irreplaceable; he is Polynices, in all his radical singularity. Rather than act as a guardian of the law of kinship, Antigone acts in the name of (incestuous) love, which, given the incest taboo's place at the heart of kinship, cannot be assimilated to a symbolic order and thus remains incommunicable. In being an attack on the incest taboo, Antigone's act, Butler proposes, is in fact a transgression of kinship "that gives kinship its prohibitive and normative dimension but that also exposes its vulnerability" (AC, p. 10). Butler focuses on "prohibition" here to draw attention to the dialectic

18. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York, 2000), p. 66; hereafter abbreviated AC.

of prohibition and transgression. If prohibitions trigger their own transgression, they also reveal the vulnerability of the law being transgressed.

As with Rubin, the question becomes, what to do with this inheritance? If Lévi-Strauss seems to be our destiny, how does one face the structuralist curse? Butler's solution to the conundrum of immutability (whose symptom is figured as the necessity of Antigone's death) is to insist, against "the Lacanians," that the symbolic is not inseparable from the social and that change is possible in the field of the social: "Antigone represents neither kinship nor its radical outside but becomes the occasion for a reading of a structurally constrained notion of kinship in terms of its social iterability, the aberrant temporality of the norm" (AC, p. 29). Kinship is a function of its iterability in a social world, and, as we know from all of Butler's work, iterability allows for perversity and aberration. Butler's way of dealing with the structuralist inheritance is to foreground its being an inheritance and to propose Antigone as a figure of the heir. Antigone is what comes *after* Oedipus; she is post-Oedipal and poststructuralist, as it were.

In the essay Butler wrote to elaborate on the notion of kinship at work in *Antigone's Claim*—"Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?"—she describes and analyzes the transformation of kinship studies, while criticizing the lack of any apparent parallel progress in psychoanalysis. Butler argues that structuralist notions of kinship developed by Lévi-Strauss and his commentators have become anachronistic in the contemporary world of transnational migration and reproductive technologies.<sup>19</sup> She proposes we live in a postkinship moment, in which kinship, defined as "a set of practices that institute relationships of various kinds which negotiate the

19. In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler describes our historical predicament:

I ask this as well during a time in which children, because of divorce and remarriage, because of migration, exile, and refugee status, because of global displacements of various kinds, move from one family to another, move from a family to no family, move from no family to a family, or in which they live, psychically, at the crossroads of the family, or in multiply layered family situations, in which they may well have more than one woman who operates as the mother, more than one man who operates as the father, or no mother or no father, with half-brothers who are also friends—this is a time in which kinship has become fragile, porous, and expansive. It is also a time in which straight and gay families are sometimes blended, or in which gay families emerge in nuclear and nonnuclear forms. [AC, pp. 22–23]

The irony in Butler's formulation is that the family literally seems to have proliferated and multiplied. But the fact that there is a family for every taste and need (according to class) does not mean that the institution is in crisis, only that it can elastically adjust to pressures. Indeed, this is perhaps most visible in global situations of migration and displacement, as a film like *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* (dir. Nilita Vachani, 1995) shows. When it comes to the effects of globalization on children, it is not that children globally have access to a non-Oedipal, queer socialization; it is only that the privileges of the normative family are unevenly distributed globally.

reproduction of life and the demands of death” and that “address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few),” is inseparable from community and friendship and knows a multiplicity of nontraditional sites in addition to Oedipal reproduction and heterosexuality.<sup>20</sup> While the political project of imagining a post-Oedipal and poststructuralist kinship is laudable, and in the best tradition of radical feminism, how will it account for the fact that, despite and perhaps within the horizon of what Butler describes as the crisis in the family, the traffic in women seems to have gone global but otherwise goes on undisturbed? Alongside the institution of the brother-in-law and homosocial exchange, the traffic in women is left behind as anachronistic in Butler’s postkinship framework. Is it, however, anachronistic to argue, as I will, that the scene in *Occident* with which I began dramatizes the traffic in women in the contemporary moment and thus asks us to rethink what critical use we can still make of the concept? *Antigone’s Claim* is perhaps most productively read at the level of tone (*Stimmung*). Butler is tired of structuralism, of hearing the sentence, “but it’s the law!” In the face of neoformalist defensive mechanisms against the purported threat of psychic disarray (change leads to trauma), Butler’s voice retains the urgency of change in kinship even as she agrees that Antigone cannot be romanticized or taken as an example.

Two years after the publication of Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women,” on the other side of second-wave feminism, Irigaray published *This Sex Which Is Not One*, which included two suggestive chapter titles: “Women on the Market” and “Commodities among Themselves.” Looking back at 1970s Western feminism, it is striking to note the overlap between Rubin and Irigaray, an overlap that today appears as an invitation to reconsider what for a long time seemed to be two incompatible faces of second-wave feminism. Traffic in women is a point where the two feminisms almost seem to agree on a common radical project. There is a bit more work to do, then, before we return to *Occident* and the European Union.

Irigaray begins with a matter-of-fact statement: “The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women. Without the exchange of women, we are told [*dit-on*], we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom. The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among

20. Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” *Differences* 13 (Spring 2002): 14–15.

themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo.”<sup>21</sup> Irigaray mimics the language of Lévi-Strauss. She does not seem to question the first apparent truth here: society as we know it is based on the exchange of women. When it comes to where we would be *without* this exchange, however, mimicry doubles as incredulity: “we are told” (by whom? in the name of what interest?) that without the exchange of women “we” would regress into two related forms of monstrosity—anarchy and animality. Irigaray’s question marks punctuate the irony that, as Lévi-Strauss knows, neither of these are unproblematically presocial in any strict sense.

What is clear for Irigaray, as for Rubin, is that the exchange of women “is an economic issue, perhaps even subtends economy as such?” (*TS*, p. 172). Irigaray turns to Marx to do the work of exegetical reading that Rubin does with Lévi-Strauss to conclude that in capitalism men “exchange their women-commodities among themselves” (*TS*, p. 173). Irigaray reads Marx’s *Capital* by way of “going back through analogism” (*TS*, p. 174 n. 3), the analogy between women and commodities, to focus on Marx’s use of prosopopeia, whereby in his account commodities are dressed and undressed, step forth, stand on their heads, and, indeed, speak. Irigaray’s “women-commodities” name the more-than-analogy already at work in Marx’s description of how commodities (those enigmatic things) acquire value. There is no going back to women-commodities’ use-value because they are always already caught in an exchange in which they have value only insofar as they are compared to other women-commodities as objects of a potential exchange. A woman has value insofar as she channels the homosocial desire between at least two men.<sup>22</sup> Thus the virginal woman is pure exchange-value until she is “consumed,” after which she becomes reproductive use-value as mother. The prostitute is something of a glitch in the system, as she is in fact a combination of the two, exchangeable use-value.

Irigaray draws attention to Lévi-Strauss’s explanation of the exchange of women through their scarcity: “the deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient. Let us add that, even if there were as many women as men, these women would not all be equally desirable . . . and that, by defini-

21. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), p. 170; hereafter abbreviated *TS*.

22. See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1965). For an account of the volatile historicity of homosocial desire and a historical anchoring of homosexuality on the male homosocial spectrum, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985).

tion . . . , the most desirable women must form a minority” (*TS*, p. 170). In other words, men are by definition polygamous, and, faced with this “fact,” there simply aren’t enough women to satisfy their desire. Women are a minority in the face of men’s insatiable desire. Moreover, men desire many women, and not just any women, only desirable women. Desirability is posited as a property of the object (women’s bodies), which in its turn is desirable by virtue of being desired by men. It is clear for Irigaray that economy has a libidinal core.<sup>23</sup> The desire that moves it is infinitely polygamous, as any man desires to capitalize more women than the others. It follows that women are strangely equal: “the equality of women among themselves, but in terms of laws of equivalence that remain external to them” (*TS*, pp. 184–85). Women are equal, insofar as they are separated from each other by the “general equivalent” (“the sublime standard,” Irigaray calls it) that functions as the measuring stick according to which they are compared (*TS*, p. 181). Women’s separateness guarantees that they cannot exchange themselves among themselves. Structurally, the argument goes, women cannot desire each other because desire itself flows within an economy in which women are strictly/structurally objects of desire.

Irigaray too reaches a point where the question of immutability imposes itself:

For, without the exploitation of women, what would become of the social order? What modifications would it undergo if women left behind their condition as commodities—subject to being produced, consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone—and took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges? Not by reproducing, by copying, the ‘phallogocratic’ models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire. [*TS*, p. 91]

And: “*But what if these ‘commodities’ refused to go to ‘market’? What if they maintained ‘another’ kind of commerce, among themselves?*” (*TS*, p. 196). It is not an easy thing to do, this refusal. Irigaray anticipates the response: “Utopia? Perhaps. Unless this mode of exchange has undermined the order of commerce from the beginning . . . a certain economy of abundance” (*TS*, p. 197). Irigaray’s vision is not a utopia if one strategically posits sexual difference and thus the fact that the male commerce in women has been paralleled by another kind of commerce from the beginning.

23. It is Irigaray’s take on what Jean-François Lyotard condenses in the question, “What Is the Desire Named Marx?” See Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), pp. 114–15.

The question is, where does one look for traces of this other commerce in the folds of a culture predicated on its nonexistence? The last chapter of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” is Irigaray’s literary experiment, an attempt to stage a different kind of commerce. Here, an unidentified *I* speaks to an unidentified *you*. *I* and *you* are a *two* that cannot be separated into *ones*. There is a continuous exchange, but no transaction, no contract, no traffic in women. The sense of touch offers Irigaray a way to envision this other commerce, beyond both gift and debt. “I touch you” carries the possibility of being at the same time transitive and reflexive (*se toucher toi*). One touches the other and oneself at the same time: “I’m touching you, that’s quite enough to let me know that you are my body.” Touch is also the only sense that can function as a guarantor of existence: “I/you touch you/me, that’s quite enough for us to feel alive.” There is no organ of touch to channel the sensation on striated paths; touching is experienced by the surface of the skin as a whole: “you are there—like my skin” (*TS*, pp. 208, 209, 216). This is a form of circulation that does not distinguish between subject and subject and between subject and object: “Exchange? Everything is exchanged, yet there are no transactions. Between us, there are no proprietors, no purchasers, no determinable objects, no prices. Our bodies are nourished by our mutual pleasure. Our abundance is inexhaustible: it knows neither want nor plenty. Since we give each other (our) all with nothing held back, nothing hoarded, our exchanges are without terms, without end. How can I say it? The language we know is so limited . . .” (*TS*, pp. 213–14). And yet Irigaray insists one needs to struggle to wrest the intensity of this *feeling* from language. The other commerce has been there all along from the beginning; one is in touch with it, even if there are no words for it. “Let’s hurry and invent our own phrases” (*TS*, p. 215). Irigaray’s hope is that we will be able to say “I love you” on the model of “I touch you,” eventually bringing love back to a scene Goldman imagined as incompatible with it.

Irigaray’s *you* opens into a relation with a reader. One of the most challenging “dialogues” has been that between Irigaray and Italian feminists, the Milan Bookstore Collective in particular.<sup>24</sup> The bookstore itself (the Milan bookstore opened in 1975) is a “practice of relationships among women” that performs a form of commerce, circulating signs, desire, and

24. The question of whether there can be a “dialogue” without a traffic in signs modeled on the traffic in women imposes itself here. Poststructuralist notions of literature towards which Irigaray gestures were developed in response to Habermasian theories of communication as a form of trading in signs. See especially Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al., ed. Connor (Minneapolis, 1991).

commodities.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, the Milanese women refuse the equality offered them through the traffic in women. The practice of what they call “the symbolic mother” assumes that one woman can *learn* from another, with whom she has an asymmetric, unequal relationship.<sup>26</sup> The Milanese women refuse the proper name, publishing their book collectively. They also refuse property, offering the space of the bookstore to all who enter it. Beyond any calls for emancipation or rights, the bookstore is a “theoretical practice” that effectively rewrites the traffic in women.<sup>27</sup> Irigaray’s utopia is read by the Milanese women as a very concrete starting point of practice.

Another “dialogue” would be one that would assume Irigaray’s *you* finds an oblique echo in Jacques Derrida. Ultimately, the different “I love you” Irigaray is after would have to contaminate the notion of friendship that functions as the foundation of politics. Derrida takes up the issue, making sure we remember that “the figure of the friend, so regularly coming back on stage with the features of the *brother* . . . seems spontaneously to belong to a *familial*, *fraternalist* and thus *androcentric* configuration of politics.”<sup>28</sup> Before being properly political, the politics of friendship is always already haunted by kinship. It is important to emphasize, however, that one is not born a brother: “Do you not think, dear friend, that the brother is always a brother of alliance, a *brother in law* or an adoptive brother, a *foster brother*?” (*PF*, p. 177). In the context of a book on touch, Derrida elaborates, drawing attention to the fact that “the word [fraternity] privileges some ‘virility.’ Even if he is an orphan, a brother is a son and therefore a man. In order to include the sister or woman or daughter, one has to change words—generously—and then change the word ‘generosity’ itself while one is at it.”<sup>29</sup> For Derrida, too, it is clear that this is our inheritance, a testament Europeans inherit from their Greek forefathers. In that, however, it is also an opportunity: “the testament is the Bible of

25. The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), p. 50.

26. “Naming the fact of disparity among women was certainly the decisive step. It meant breaking with the equalization of all women and their consequent submission to the distinctions set by male thought according to its criteria and the needs of men’s social intercourse. It meant that among women there can and must be established a regime of exchange to make that plus of female origin circulate, that plus which acknowledged inequality introduces among them. From being objects of exchange, as they were in the male world, women can and must become subjects of exchange” (*ibid.*, p. 112).

27. The female sociality the Milanese women envision is premised on the debt a daughter has to repay to her symbolic mother. Gratitude is a necessary ingredient of this payment, arguably bringing reciprocity back at the level of affect.

28. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (1997; London, 2005), p. viii; hereafter abbreviated *PF*.

29. Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, Calif., 2005), p. 22.



hermeneutics" (PF, p. 177). Reading the testamentary inheritance in an attempt to denaturalize the figure of the brother and especially Carl Schmitt's pretense that his placement of the friend/enemy distinction at the heart of the political is a mere "diagnosis," Derrida finds in the same "tradition" the graft for a "friendship without friendship," beyond friendship qua brotherhood, an an-economic friendship based on an asymmetrical, unequal, but also nonreciprocal and nonprofitable relation with an other. The relation is imagined by Derrida as a mixture of friendship and love in the middle voice, *aimance* he calls it, borrowing from the literary field. This loving friendship allows for a woman-friend; a woman can be a partner in relation rather than a conduit to it. For Derrida, this means to move beyond the exemplary figure of the prostitute (Georges Bataille's Edwarda)<sup>30</sup> to a new figure of the sister who is not only not a variation on the brother but also not the sister of a sisterhood. We are beyond the traffic-in-women concept here because we are beyond community as we know it. The sister is the "ally, collaborator and friend"—the new comrade, if you will.

For Lévi-Strauss, while kinship remains linked to the family, it is still a symbolic system. It is a "system of attitudes" resulting in a range of affects (SA, 1:38). What it does is "'pump' women out of their consanguineous families to redistribute them in affinal groups" (SA, 1:309). The notion of affinity opens the gate for the term *kinship* to describe affective relations among a variety of groups. We can thus move from Lévi-Strauss's "elementary structures of kinship" to ever more "complex structures." Most importantly, the nation can be imagined as a community of "affines," a brotherhood or fraternity brought together by the affective mix called patriotism. The nation is an affective economy; in Benedict Anderson's words, it is a "deep, horizontal comradeship . . . a fraternity."<sup>31</sup> What theorists of nationalism often do not pursue is the implication that the brothers whose connections form the fabric of the nation are brothers-in-law, brothers by virtue of an ever more diffuse and largely imaginary exchange of goods and services, signs, and indeed women. The nation is predicated on the *possibility* of an exchange among the brothers of the imagined fraternity.

Today a film like *Occident* challenges us to ask, is it possible to think of a transnational entity like Europe as a "complex structure" of kinship? In

30. See, for example, Lyotard's recourse to Edwarda in *Libidinal Economy*, pp. 135–43.

31. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1989), p. 16.

order to begin to answer this question, one has to enter the terrain of European studies and its modes of discourse.

Although not aspiring to nationhood, the European Union often falls back on the archaic language of the family.<sup>32</sup> But whether with recourse to the familial structure or not, the European Union imagines itself as a community. The “European market” was instituted in 1957 under the name of the European Economic Community. The 1992 Treaty of Maastricht shifted the name to the European Union and performed an unprecedented transnational double move: it created “European citizenship” and the conditions for the euro. As a market, the European Union is a system of exchanges. The most visible objects of exchange are economic in nature—goods and services. But the European Union also circulates signs within a structure imagined as a public sphere. Significantly, Jürgen Habermas has revisited his theory of the public sphere in light of the perceived urgency to think the European Union as a public sphere.<sup>33</sup> At the most basic level, the European Union circulates languages and translations. It is the job of European media, like Euronews, to facilitate linguistic exchange. Although they have not achieved the status of pan-European sources of information and continue to be sifted through global networks, these media are instrumental in at least building the *illusion* of a common European public space.

An important dimension of Europe’s network of circulation is education. The Erasmus Program is a highly successful *exchange* program, circulating students on their way to becoming European citizens.<sup>34</sup> European tourism is in close proximity to educational programs. Europe sponsors a number of cultural events that mobilize large numbers of bodies to move across its erased borders. Most successful among them has been the European Capital of Culture program, designed to “help bring European citizens closer together” (“W”). In 2007 the European Parliament started the European Film Prize (LUX), which facilitates the subtitling of the winning

32. The 2007 European Union “enlargement,” for example, was announced under the banner of “Romania and Bulgaria join the European Family.” The first Romanian European commissioner, Leonard Orban, described the moment: “The fifth round of enlargement is now complete with Romania and Bulgaria’s accession to the EU. This is a historic moment, both for the EU and for the new member states. Most Romanians believe that EU accession represents the moment when their country has returned to the European family” (quoted in “Romania and Bulgaria Join the European Family,” *The Parliament*, 15 Jan. 2007).

33. See especially the essays collected in Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, Mass., 2009).

34. The European Commission’s Education and Training webpage quotes an exchange student, Stefanie Bakelandt: “I realized that the experience made a whole new person of me and that I would never look at the world and Europe, my home, like I did before” (quoted in “Who Is the 2 Millionth Erasmus Student?” European Commission Education and Training, [ec.europa.eu/education/news/news1813\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news1813_en.htm); hereafter abbreviated “W”).

film into all European languages and makes it available in all member states. In 2009, the European Union Prize for Literature was inaugurated to “promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works” (“W”). These programs are conducted under the large umbrella of culture, and their explicit goal is the circulation of the signs that form culture.

To slowly make our way back to *Occident*, the question is, how do the beneficiaries of the European Union’s eastward expansion fare in this exchange? The essence of the kinship structure described by Mauss or Lévi-Strauss is that the relations it entails are reciprocal (I throw a party for you; you throw a party for me). But in the economic desert that was most of Eastern Europe of the 1990s, one could hear a recurrent complaint: “We have nothing to sell.”<sup>35</sup> The countries of Eastern Europe had few desirable commodities for the consumer heavens of glitzy Western Europe. As for the public sphere, there has not been much of an exchange in signs either, as European intellectual exchange is most often a one-way street. With the exception of a few émigrés from the cold war era, who tend to reproduce cold war narratives in neoliberal garb, few Eastern European voices are part of a genuine intellectual exchange across the East/West European divide.<sup>36</sup> In many ways, the current situation continues a cold war pattern

35. This was a striking line in Andrei Codrescu’s *Romania: My Old Haunt* (2002).

36. The by-now locus classicus for this debate is the appeal Habermas and Derrida cosigned in 2003 (which Habermas alone wrote) in response to the invasion of Iraq. See Habermas and Derrida, “February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe,” trans. Max Pensky, *Constellations* 10, no. 3 (2003): 291–97. Habermas expresses his hope here that 15 February 2003, the day of mass demonstrations in major Western European capitals against the war, could be seen as a sign of “the birth of a European public sphere” (p. 291). Given Central and Eastern European nations’ alliance with the U.S. on the issue of the Iraq War, this is a suggestive choice of a birth date. Habermas’s appeal is for a Europe “beyond any Eurocentrism,” one, however, that begins in something called “the core” of Europe (p. 291). Habermas does not entertain the possibility that there is Eurocentrism vis-à-vis other Europeans and that this “core” (even as the technocratic *Kerneuropa*) is its symptom. Habermas is explicitly nostalgic for the good old days of pre-1989 European prosperity. The European identity he calls for, elsewhere flavored by a specifically European patriotism, is articulated primarily against an American other, but also disruptive Central and Eastern European others. Habermas’s explanation for these latter countries’ support of the war is that “while certainly working hard for their admission into the EU, [they] are nevertheless not yet ready to place limits on the sovereignty that they have so recently regained” (p. 292). The thought that the support of the U.S.-led war might be a reaction against “the core” of Europe and its patronizing attitude does not find its way into this incipient “dialogue.” Instead, Habermas continues, “Taking a leading role does not mean excluding. The avant-gardist core of Europe must not wall itself off into a new Small Europe. It must—as it has so often—be the locomotive” (p. 292). As Europe has indeed often done in the past, it should simply take on a leadership role in the shaping of world history. While Habermas’s intention to intervene in the urgency of the political moment is laudable (see Derrida’s signature), it is difficult to imagine a European public sphere birthed in this 2003

of Western European intellectuals whispering into Eastern ears the secret to their emancipation.<sup>37</sup>

But if Eastern European goods and services, on the one hand, and signs, on the other, seemed to be scarce as objects of European exchange, what the countries of Eastern Europe in the wake of 1989 did have were women. It was often said that they were “good women”—good for taking to the market, that is. Among other things, they were thought to be untainted by feminism. Having passed through the “real-existing socialist” experiment, they have nonetheless come out as traditional women, who cook, clean, and smile. Matrimonial agencies promise they would be “grateful.” They are often referred to as “model-looking,” a euphemism that describes the fact that their bodies do not carry (yet) traces of what Europeans dread under the name of “McDonaldization.” Within the global market of women, they are also white and therefore can pass for European wives.<sup>38</sup>

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document. The very spectacle of the public sphere Habermas orchestrated on this occasion, the concomitant publication of a number of articles on Europe signed by his friends and collaborators (Umberto Eco, Adolf Muschg, Gianni Vattimo, Richard Rorty, Fernando Savater), did not include any Eastern European intellectuals, not to mention a woman. Significantly, Habermas would dismiss such objections as unproductive sensitivities. See Gustav Seibt, “Please Don’t Be So Sensitive: Jürgen Habermas Continues Arguing for Europe in Berlin,” *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War*, ed. Daniel Levy, Pensky, and John Torpey (London, 2005), p. 132. Habermas would return to these formulations to say that a European policy of gradual integration (premised on a core and a periphery) assumes that Eastern European countries can “align themselves with the center . . . have the option of *joining* the centre at any time” (Habermas, “European Politics at an Impasse: A Plea for a Policy of Graduated Integration,” *Europe*, p. 103; my emphasis). Habermas seems to assume that the Eastern European response to his proposal should be: thank you very much. If historical events have their moments of farcical repetition, from this perspective European unification promises to be the farcical repetition of German unification.

37. Étienne Balibar writes: “In the second half of the 1980s, several among us had seen or heard, in Prague and elsewhere, Western intellectuals and politicians ‘selling’ (against the recognition of anticipated debt) the ‘bright future’ to dissidents, to resisters who were preparing, morally and politically, the end of dictatorship. The bright future was contained in three words: market, democracy, Europe” (Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson [Princeton, N. J., 2004], pp. 78–79).

38. Although they can pass, Eastern European women are not quite “white.” Rosi Braidotti writes: “peoples from the Balkans, or the South-Western regions of Europe, in so far as they are not yet ‘good Europeans,’ they are also not quite as ‘white’ as others” (Rosi Braidotti, “On Becoming Europeans,” in *Women Migrants from East to West: Gender, Mobility, and Belonging in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Luisa Passerini et al. [New York, 2007], p. 34). Balibar also notes that in the European Union cultural difference can easily slip into racial stigmatization. He specifically warns against the risks of a new apartheid, itself historically dependent on a racialized distinction between Europeans, non-Europeans, and not-quite-Europeans (see the situation of Polish immigrants in South Africa). The idea of Europe suddenly having to deal with race as a result of immigration is, of course, misleading. Europe has failed to face the racialization of its Roma population for centuries. That in the current European moment the

They can reproduce white children in a Europe worried about the birth rate among its “native” population. They raise these children dutifully, disseminating the motherly love that, it is argued, has become scant in the Western world in the wake of second-wave feminism. Eastern Europe is a fresh reservoir of love.<sup>39</sup>

Since one cannot forever live on credit, not responding to the economic “gifts” coming from the wealthier members of the European Union, lest one loses face (Mauss’s word for status and honor), Eastern European countries export women. In return, one does not get other women (it is not a trend, as far as I know, for, say, French women to marry, say, Bulgarian men), but goods and services. Any marriage comes with gifts, Lévi-Strauss knows. This is an oblique, fragile form of reciprocity and an unequal one, an ironic comment on Lévi-Strauss’s warning that there will always be those who try to acquire more wives, aesthetically or economically more appealing. Unequal exchange is a sign of what Derrida fears under the name of generosity, which translates into political prestige for the party who offers more than can be reciprocated. It is the privilege of the Big Man—and First World nations.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to transnational European marriage, as a rule Eastern European women marrying on the European market marry down, according to what sociologists call the marriage gradient. This is the very eloquent class- and gender-determined principle according to which men marry down economically and socially while women marry up. Eastern European women thus marry the “undesirable” men of Western Europe.<sup>41</sup> They

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Roma have become visible as Eastern European shows that they are now doubly racialized: once as Roma and once as Eastern European.

39. On the global dimensions of this phenomenon, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Love and Gold,” *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Hochschild (New York, 2002), pp. 15–30.

40. Péter Esterházy asks rhetorically, in response to the Habermas/Derrida affair: “What is this EU expansion for? Out of altruism, out of courtesy?” (Péter Esterházy, “How Big Is the European Dwarf?” trans. Judith Sollosy, in *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe*, p. 77).

41. It will be asked, what of cases when women marrying transnationally marry men they love? Lévi-Strauss’s argument is that in modern societies the networks of exchange might be more ambiguous, hybrid marital forms might have appeared, conceptual personas might have shifted (in *Occident* the mother does the “courting”), often systems that regulate marriage operate strictly through negative injunctions, but the structural channels of exchange are still in force. Modern women might “choose” by way of love, but choice is never free choice. Marriage is a communication game with strict rules. What we call choice is a function of when a given player can make one move but not another. There is no society, however progressive, Lévi-Strauss feels the need to repeat, in which one can marry just anyone. Laura Kipnis notes the consistency in our love choices, which visibly bear the signs of racial, class, and other “affinal” appurtenances; see Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York, 2003). We are very

marry the men Western women for one reason or another do not want, the odds and ends of the national marriage market. Europe in fact performs a gendered redistribution of class across the West/East divide. An Eastern European woman marries up simply by virtue of marrying a Western man, even if he would not be a match for her locally.

What is exported through women is affective labor. Nannies, maids, and nurses care for their employers in wealthy European nations. Wives do the same kind of labor, except that they are not paid and do not benefit from labor protections. It is a much better economic deal for a German working-class man to marry a Romanian woman than to hire a domestic servant to take care of his house, a nurse to attend to his elders, and a prostitute to have sex with occasionally (the question of whether he could manage these tasks by himself is beside the point). The Romanian wife brings it all in one package.<sup>42</sup> That there is emotional attachment in the mix only reinforces the point that affect and sex-affective labor is being circulated. The labor involved in affective labor, as Michael Hardt and others have argued, has as its stakes the production of a relationship, in this case a marital relationship. Laura Kipnis's recent polemic argues that all contemporary domestic relationships require a lot of

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predictable in our freedom. The counterpoint to Kipnis's argument is a book like Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York, 2005). Coontz writes: "Today most people expect to live their lives in a loving relationship, not in a rigid institution. Although most people want socially sanctioned relationships, backed by institutional protections, few would sacrifice their goal of a loving, fair, and flexible relationship for those protections" (p. 10). The point Kipnis is making is precisely that love has "conquered" marriage—leading to what Coontz calls "the love revolution." Today it is through love that the institution of marriage does its economic and political work. What Coontz does not consider is the fact that there is, of course, love and love.

42. Needless to say, Eastern European women are not traditional brides-in-waiting, though internet descriptions market them as such (in *Occident*, Mihaela insists she does not cook, wash, and so on). Traditional women do not marry foreigners through matrimonial agencies. These women are active and knowledgeable in marketing techniques and do what they deem necessary to sell. Indeed, one could say that they are career oriented, except that (for now at least) marriage is the only career available to them. They present themselves as prefeminist ideal wives in order to have a chance to attract attention on a very busy market. But a lot of aesthetic labor (in some ways similar to that done by models to which they are likened) goes into the production of organic femininity. See also Svitlana Taraban, "Birthday Girls, Russian Dolls, and Others: Internet Bride as the Emerging Global Identity of Post-Soviet Women," in *Living Gender after Communism*, ed. Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson (Bloomington, Ind., 2007) pp. 105–27. Among other things, marriage to a Western man is appealing to Eastern European women precisely because they imagine the Western world to be one of gender egalitarianism. This is a global variation on the motif of "marriage envy"; if in the postfeminist American context the phenomenon unfolds under a cynical refrain ("But I want to get married"), the marriage envy of Eastern European women, while not naïve, belongs to a disjointed feminist and postcolonial time. On marriage envy, see Suzanne Leonard, "Marriage Envy," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34 (Fall–Winter 2006): 43–64.

labor (we are forever working on them), but it is important to emphasize that affective relationship labor can take many forms globally. Likewise, if, as Hardt argues, immaterial affective labor has become generalized through the post-modern, informational economy and “women’s work” is a model for this larger trend, one still feels the need to distinguish among acutely gendered labor situations in which “the division between economy and culture begins to break down.”<sup>43</sup> In the imaginary case above, the Romanian woman in the German household is both at work and at home, participating around the clock, in both production and reproduction, creating life and community, in a precarious labor situation with no labor rights, no protection, and no guarantee of remuneration. This is immaterial affective labor, but it also needs to be rethought as “women’s work” in a European and international frame.

It is clear that we are dealing with a new form of imperialism; Arlie Russell Hochschild calls it “emotional imperialism,” whereby emotional resources are extracted from poor countries. Ironically for feminism, this is emotional caring work (which does not preclude physical work) that compensates for the labor many Western women do not do anymore, having become suspicious of their traditional roles as caretakers.<sup>44</sup> The message seems to be that any household will have its women, even if they have to be outsourced. Eastern European women do the housework that was the center of debate for second-wave feminism. Rather than have it redistributed between the men and women of wealthy nations, it has been outsourced to economically less fortunate women. Among the successes of second-wave feminism one needs to list the situation in which an Italian female academic hiring a Romanian nanny to care for her children while she is working (for example, writing an article) occupies the structural position of exchanger, while at the same time reinforcing the gendered structure of exchange. To push this to a Goldman-like level of scandal, there are indeed women pimps.

The European Union has encouraged the mobility of labor since its inception. What is new in the recent predicament is the large number of women who, although theoretically European, travel *to* Europe for work and marriage. It is a larger phenomenon that has led critics to talk about

43. Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *Boundary 2* 26 (Summer 1999): 96. On the overlap between the feminization of labor understood on a traffic-in-women model and the autonomist Marxists’ theorization of “immaterial labor,” see also Sianne Ngai, “The Zany Science,” lecture presented at the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., 2009.

44. Western women are not as emancipated as this scenario makes them sound. Enrica Capusotti writes about “Italian women’s renegotiation of their position within contemporary transnational processes: women migrants are exploited for the self-representation of Italian women to finally become modern, emancipated and fully Western” (Passerini et al., “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Women Migrants from East to West*, p. 13).

the feminization of migration tout court.<sup>45</sup> Despite the focus on the aggressiveness of the “Polish plumber,” what circulates is a feminized labor force. This is not an issue for debate in the European public sphere because it is often invisible labor—housework. But even when this labor becomes visible and audible, this issue still does not become in Habermas’s framework for the public sphere relevant enough for European debate. One of the functions of the public sphere is to filter public discourse, which also means to foreclose certain dialogues.<sup>46</sup> It is unlikely that the traffic in women in all its ramifications will be on the European agenda in the near future. After all, no family washes its dirty linen in public.

*Occident* makes it clear that for a Romanian the European is not a foreigner in the same way a Saudi man is.<sup>47</sup> There are some affinities among Romanians and Belgians or Italians. They too were once structurally impossible matches, but not anymore. Mihaela’s parents, very much of the generation that lived the “real-existing socialism” experiment in isolation (a famous actor of socialist-realist films plays Mihaela’s father), are willing and proactive in securing a European marriage for her. But, according to their logic, there are no black Europeans. Europe is a function of a set of languages (a lot is made of Romanian and Italian being Romance languages or sister languages); tradition (see the sketches of Roman profiles and their physiognomic assumptions); culture (pasta, music, but also an assumed layer of shared civility as mannered behavior, exploited for comic effect but also doing ideological work). Europe is also the performance of exclusion on tacit racial and religious grounds, as evidenced in *Occident* by the black Italian and as the debates about Turkey’s candidacy to join the European Union demonstrate. Although he is both an Italian and a European citizen, Luigi is still not European, which is why he does not “corre-

45. See Ehrenreich and Hochschild, introduction to *Global Woman*, p. 5.

46. On the public sphere’s filtering function, see Habermas, “Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Have an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research,” *Europe*, p. 159. The literature of the feminist critique of Habermas is extensive. See especially *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, ed. Johanna Meehan (New York, 1995).

47. Irigaray writes: “Exogamy doubtless requires that one leave one’s family, tribe, or clan, in order to make alliances. All the same, it does not tolerate marriage with populations that are too far away, too far removed from the prevailing cultural rules” (*TS*, p. 172). At stake is a distinction between global kinship markets and European markets. While the European Union, despite vocal insistence to the contrary, is among other things also a symptom of globalization, Europe remains a cultural entity with pervasive effects for kinship. In terms of marriage markets, this means that for the Romanian mother in *Occident* the European husband has become in a certain sense “one of ours” in ways that a Saudi man has not. For the purposes of this argument, an American can be “one of ours” in this sense, insofar as he is of European descent (white).



spend” (friends “correspond,” in that they are a symmetrical match for each other; they “answer” to each other). He thus cannot participate in the European traffic in women. For Mihaela’s father, who would need to accept him as a partner in exchange, he is African. And Africa is not even on the global map offered by the Romanian matrimonial agency, that is, before Mihaela’s options are narrowed to the familiar European marriage.

Mihaela’s parents put pressure on her to marry (she is twenty-four and they fear she is getting old), but they do not force her. They would in fact rather not have her marry this particular man. Nor is there an immediate economic pressure, as Mihaela has a relatively comfortable life with her parents. But stories circulate about a certain Emilia who married abroad and now lives comfortably doing nothing as a housewife and living a life of glamour in the Occident with daily trips to McDonalds. These rumors produce their own pressure, they create desire, and thus migration leads to further migration. Mihaela too can do what these other women have done, proving her worth as a woman. Besides, she wants a better life, and she wants to publish her poems (one wonders who reads Romanian poetry in Italy). Mihaela is not a victim; a European marriage is what she wants. This is also what she has been induced to want both by the long history of the cold war with its glimmers of a forbidden heaven in the West and by the post-1989 predicament, with its deferred promises of democratic consumerism. Mihaela is a subject, in both senses of the word, which is not in contradiction with the fact that, at a structural, systemic level (“European kinship”), she is also an object of traffic.<sup>48</sup>

What is the situation of Romanian men in this predicament? In *Occident*, Lucian is representative of a confused sense of masculinity. He is a researcher, but he has a job in advertising, walking around the city as a mascot. (“Commodities have a soul, too,” he is told. His job is to give soul to a beer bottle.) It is clear that the future has nothing bright in store for him. In his personal life, he is confronted with oppressive poverty. At the very beginning of the film, Lucian and his fiancé, Sorina, find their things in the middle of the street, as they have just been evicted from their apartment. The viewer is unsure whether this is good or bad because the building in which they lived (the literal ruins of “real-existing socialism”) looks hardly livable. Their only hope is an old aunt, who owns an apartment in

48. I am responding here to a wave of feminist scholarship over the last decade that revolved around the often unilateral insistence that women have agency. In terms of the conversation here, this scholarship has meant to argue that women being trafficked, most often into prostitution, are agents in their own right, and that to claim otherwise is to risk a moralizing stance that attempts to rescue them from their choice. It would seem like choice makes a parody of itself in situations in which one sells oneself because there is nothing else to sell.

another decrepit building. The aunt would have to die to make space for the new generation, and yet she does not because she is waiting for her son, who has disappeared in Germany. As Lucian and Sorina discuss their future, he is literally knocked down, hit by a bottle, and throughout the film he does not seem to be able to overcome something like a permanent headache, the immediate source of his confusion.

Sorina has reached the point at which it seems like the only solution to their problems is emigration. For reasons that are not completely clear, Lucian resists. "This is our home," he reminds her timidly. It is not an argument anymore. "Why should I go," he asks a friend, "to clean toilets there?" Besides, he thinks it is his duty to care for the dying aunt. But Lucian finds himself in the paradoxical position in which he cannot "compete" for his own fiancé. The "best women" have become "export material."<sup>49</sup> The result is a clear sense of emasculation. This loss of masculinity is not necessarily something to be deplored, as Romanian culture has a significant macho dimension in need of a more balanced gender dynamic. But if change is to have lasting effects it should perhaps not be the outcome of transnational humiliation.<sup>50</sup>

*Occident* is ultimately an ironic comment on the Golden Age of "real-existing socialism." In a central scene in the film, Lucian and Mihaela struggle to remember an old song from their childhood. They are surprised when the tune and the words come back to them, as if from another life. It is a pioneers' song about the year 2000, the projection for the millennial coming of communism. The generation we have been following had the glorious mission of bringing the dream to fruition in the year 2000. But the century of communism has become obsolete, and it has abandoned its children. They now have a choice between giving life to global capitalism locally or exporting their labor power into the new promised land of the Occident. "Is this how you imagined the year 2000?" Lucian asks.

The traffic-in-women concept continues to have a weak explanatory power when it comes to contemporary kinship structures, however altered and diffuse. It helps understand the networks of exchange within the European Union, which it makes visible as an anthropological structure, and can function as a starting point for a possible critique of its underlying political economy. If *Occident* indeed offers a genuine critique of European

49. "Export material" is a line in another Romanian film on the traffic in women, *Asphalt Tango* (dir. Nae Caranfil, 1996).

50. This argument parallels accounts of African American men in the wake of slavery, which did not allow them rights of circulation over African American women. On the one hand, the situation has tragic consequences for the African American community; on the other, one is less inclined to champion men's rights to the benefits of masculinity; see AC, p. 73.

kinship, the impact it could have is diminished not only by the fact that most Eastern Europeans (including Romanians) have never seen it, having only circulated on international film festival routes, but also by the fact that in public interviews Mungiu often denies the political implications of his work. In the Romanian political landscape, the European Union can only be embraced. Only the nationalist right is critical of “integration,” and any critique risks the embarrassment of this association. The same neoconservative predicament has made *feminism* an insult word, and Mungiu would not want to be thus labeled. As a result, he insists he makes comedies, and, indeed, during the screening of *Occident* the movie theater is filled with laughter. But we have come to know that there is laughter and and then there is laughter, and the long, hysteric bursts that punctuate the film’s marriage market scenes offer their own logic of critique.<sup>51</sup>

Film might have become “the most important art” in Eastern Europe once again. Today it is a medium to have politicized European kinship.<sup>52</sup> It is as if film comes to remind us that critique—if possible, without its paranoid dimensions—is the proper business of European intellectuals in Eastern and Western Europe. The European Union is still in the making, and, for a while at least (how long?), it remains a promise that we might want to pursue in order, not to create a more symmetric, equal structure of exchange, but precisely to rethink exchange and, alongside it, community and solidarity.<sup>53</sup> Europe is an opening/opportunity to play with kinship such that the black Italian is not a structural impossibility and Eastern Europe is not the handmaid of Europe. In the meantime, an arranged “marriage” between Luigi and Mihaela does seem a good idea, if it is understood as a comradeship/*aimance* between South and East on European territory, but only insofar as the two work against the mediation of Europe, which has historically predetermined their relation, for the sake of Europe.

As of yet, Mihaela’s story seems to confirm the European traffic in women in the global European moment. Mihaela is sad as she leaves, saying good-bye to the man she loves, who in his turn is mourning the loss of his love-object bound for Europe. “We do what we have to do,” she tells

51. I elaborate on laughter in my forthcoming book, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

52. A number of Romanian films have explored the traffic-in-women concept: Caranfil’s *Asphalt Tango* (1996); Didi Danquart’s *Offset* (2006); Cristian Nemescu’s *California Dreamin’* (2007); and Bobby Păunescu’s *Francesca* (2009).

53. It should be possible to speak of promise in relation to Europe while engaging the actual politics of the European Union, however vulgar they might seem from the standpoint of a strictly philosophical perspective. For the risks of the latter choice, see Rodolphe Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept* (Stanford, Calif., 2009).

him. Her parents retire and return to the village from which “real-existing socialism” took them. The experiment is over, they have just exported their offspring, and there is nothing else to do.<sup>54</sup> The young Romanian man has been quiet all along and is left in a sad, deserted industrial landscape. He can go back to his beers with his friends and talk infinitely about the ones who left and the ones who are preparing to leave (an estimated three million out of twenty million Romanians work abroad).<sup>55</sup>

As the film ends, there is no reason for the viewer not to go on speculating on what will happen to Mihaela in the Occident. I see two scenarios, but will propose only one: Mihaela writes day and night, slowly moving away from the poems of her youth, to test possibilities for relation at the (if possible, unromanticized) limits of literature.<sup>56</sup> Sooner or later she meets a version of a “symbolic mother” (it could be a man), who invites her to join a contemporary variation on the feminist bookstore. In time, they disseminate a new writing and its accompanying practices in a Europe in which the narratives of women’s exchange and the Europe created in their folds slowly become unrecognizable. “Communities,” Benedict Anderson writes, “are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>57</sup> If Europe is not to miss its chance, it needs to find a new style for collective imagination. Mihaela has a lot of work to do. But I have high hopes for her.

54. An important dimension of becoming European across the East/West divide would seem to still necessitate, twenty years after 1989, a European conversation on “the end of communism.” On the one hand, 1989 made “unification” possible; on the other, as Balibar argues, Europe and communism have profoundly intertwined histories and “the end of communism,” understood literally, might put the very idea of Europe in crisis. Habermas himself lists “solidarity” as one of the elements that binds Europeans together. Western Europe’s disdain for Eastern Europe suggests, among other things, a disdain for the failures of European communism in the East and the West alike. Europe would have to account for “real-existing socialism” not as some oddity from the East, with perhaps the implication of some eccentric Western intellectuals, but as a thoroughly European phenomenon. This cannot mean condemning it unequivocally (communism is not fascism), but actually processing the history of what Balibar calls “the two circles” (state communism in the East/communist movements and parties in the West). Once this happens, perhaps even the unfortunate phrase “real-existing socialism” will slowly fade out of use.

55. Some estimates go as high as six million. The number of tax-paying, working Romanians is only three million. The rest of the Romanian population is made up of children, retirees, and the unemployed.

56. The privileging of literature as an experimental space for the thinking of relation has often been justifiably critiqued, most recently in talks by Catherine Malabou. It is important to note that the poststructuralist notion of literature at work here comes from a tradition suspicious of literature itself; see Georges Bataille, *The Impossible: A Story of Rats, Followed by Dianus and by the Oresteia*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, 1991). It is therefore often divorced from the literary and is generous enough to include, among other forms of “writing,” Malabou’s work in neuroscience.

57. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.