Precarious Intimacies

Stehle, Maria, Weber, Beverly

Published by Northwestern University Press

Stehle, Maria and Beverly Weber.
Precarious Intimacies: The Politics of Touch in Contemporary Western European Cinema.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/77022.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77022

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2679453
Precarious Intimacies
Introduction

Politics of Intimacy in Contemporary European Cinema

Feminist emotions are mediated and opaque; they are sites of struggle, and we must persist in struggling with them.
—Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)”

To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment.
—bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*

Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die.
—Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

Precarious Intimacies

In the 2005 film *Unveiled* (*Fremde Haut*, literally “A Stranger’s Skin”; Germany/Austria) directed by Angelina Maccarone, the central female character, Fariba, passes as her male friend Siamak to remain in Germany after she has been denied temporary residence as an asylum seeker. In a central scene that takes place in a produce-processing plant, Fariba/Siamak’s German coworker Anne flirts with Fariba/Siamak in the changing rooms after she/he has had to hide during a check for illegal workers. Still wearing her hairnet, Anne makes stereotypical small talk about head scarves and veils in Iran that is interwoven with Fariba/Siamak’s explanation of why their employer cannot legally
employ Siamak. As Fariba/Siamak lights Anne’s cigarette, the camera frames the two tightly for a moment of tense, awkward intimacy that excludes the sights and sounds of the others in the changing room. “We must all look completely naked to you,” Anne suggests. “Not completely,” Fariba/Siamak drily remarks, pointing to Anne’s hairnet. Now in complete silence Fariba/Siamak moves to pass by Anne; a series of over-the-shoulder shots from two rotating cameras are edited together rapidly even as the silence intimates slowness, creating a brief sense of disorienting attraction and closeness as the pair gaze at each other (see fig. 0.1).

This sudden intimacy functions as a visual and aural interruption of the narrative that is proceeding to its seemingly inevitable conclusion of deportation. Fariba/Siamak’s remarks undo Islamophobic discourses that often reduce engagement with gender and Islam to assumptions about Muslim violence enacted via veiling and familial violence. The erotics of the scene, which is the first of several that will portray their unfolding relationship as friends and eventually lovers, briefly suspend the narrative tension that relies on the viewer’s assumption that Fariba’s “hidden” gender will matter in the film. Yet their intimacy is deeply precarious, as indicated by the encounter’s context. It follows directly after a raid for undocumented workers, during which Anne helps hide Fariba/Siamak in a bin of shredded cabbage to avoid capture (see fig. 0.2). The fleeting moment of intimacy between Fariba/Siamak and Anne ends with a coworker’s “joke” when he grabs Fariba/Siamak’s shoulder to shout “Check, for illegal workers!” Intimate touch, in fact, is quickly intruded upon and interrupted by another more violent touch that links personal xenophobia and state exclusion.
We are intrigued by the possibilities for intimacy and solidarity that are raised by this scene and many others in the films we examine in this book. They point to a dilemma that forms the central task of this book: how to recognize, affirm, and value intimacies, love, touch, and care while at the same time challenging the racialized and gendered politics in which they are embedded; how to write about intimacy as a politically sustaining force while also acknowledging the fleetingness of intimate touch and the potential for violence in intimate encounters. We propose the idea of precarious intimacies to help us navigate this dilemma in two ways: first, by revealing aesthetic strategies that highlight moments of intimacy and the political possibilities they unfold, while also uncovering the structures of violence in which they are embedded; and second, by advocating a politics of interpretation that reads for the potential and possibility of intimacy. In other words, this book is about the politics and aesthetics of intimacy on-screen and about how to read intimacy politically. As an aesthetic strategy, precarious intimacies represent forms of connection, care, and solidarity as survival strategies and call attention to the forces that produce precarity: continuous economic, social, and political insecurity. As a reading strategy, precarious intimacies allow us to recognize and articulate how intimacies are always embedded in forms of violence, even as alliances and affinities may also present moments of defiance, resistance, and even sustenance. We argue here for a notion of precarious intimacies as critical and generative. They reveal regimes of sexual difference, border control, refugee policies, religious belief, and labor (including sexualized labor) that render certain groups differentially vulnerable to
the threat of death and violence, and generate strong affective responses, networks, and even new forms of political engagement and collectivities. In the following sections, we explore how the concept of precarious intimacies informs our theoretical positionings and approaches. We begin by locating our intervention within feminist intellectual genealogies, then we draw on postcolonial and critical race scholarship to theorize the precarious intimacies generated within western European contexts, and finally we define our intervention in the frameworks of scholarship on film and on European film specifically. Our aim with this book is to develop new ways of reading for emotional charges, triggered by narratives of intimacy. Such readings are not limited to European film or to the realm of scholarship; instead, reading for desirable intimacies and solidarities, in the face of all that is wrong, is a call for a shift in political perspective and a call for rereading and rewriting our stories for the present and for more just futures.

Feminist Legacies

Our approach to precarious intimacies is informed by feminist theories that have developed in response to activist movements such as Precaristas a la Deriva and SansPapiers, which mobilized new solidarities around precarity and insecurity. These theorizations focused on the impacts of informal, insecure, and feminized labor, including the profound destruction of social bonds and inadequate access to resources. As Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez explains, “To be precaria thus does not only mean that one has no job or just a panoply of bad, hourly paid, unsafe and temporary jobs without any kind of entitlement to social benefits, but it also means that one needs to create new survival strategies and solidarity networks in order to navigate through life.” Theorists and activists have expanded notions of precarity in fruitful ways to encompass differential exposure to injury, violence, and death. While social vulnerability may be shared by all humans, it is experienced unevenly, depending on hierarchies of power that accompany processes of “othering,” and it cannot be limited to the particular conditions of late capitalism. We thus understand precarious intimacies as intimacies embedded in the material conditions of precarity, marked as they are by racism, state violence, and economic and social insecurity.

Intimacies have complex relationships to such forms of power. While intimacy often may be thought of as a relationship that is deeply private, feminist and queer studies scholars have employed the concept of intimacy to understand domains of power and to analyze productions of unequal power relations. Feminist genealogies of intimacy allow us to conceptualize the intertwined manifestations of physical, emotional, and social closeness and proximity and how such proximities might function as analytical frames, as spaces of violence and resistance, and as moments of potential and hope.
Aside from examining power and violence in intimate relationships, feminist theorists and activists have developed political readings of intimacies, of bodies and touch, as ways of knowing otherwise. Such theorizing is not merely a philosophical-epistemological exercise but rather an attempt to understand how we can find new and less violent ways of being and acting in this world. Audre Lorde, for example, claims a set of emotions and intimacies as a political feminist force that she defines as “the erotic,” as an “assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.” Lorde understands the erotic politically as the powerful capacity for feeling and joy, a capacity any oppressive system seeks to control or suppress. The erotic, for Lorde, is an embodied potentiality and knowledge that refuses to exclude sensibility, sensuality, and emotion from ways of knowing. Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar also challenges Western epistemologies, particularly the various ways in which many Western epistemologies separate emotion from knowledge. Such perceived epistemological divides not only construct false binaries around male and female experience but also create a gendered dichotomy between an ethics of justice and an ethic of care.

Our approach to intimacy and our conception of precarious intimacies assumes the importance of an ethic of care in an ethics of justice. Following the work of Myra Marx Ferree and Fiona Robinson, we consider care as fundamental to human security, and human security as fundamental to justice. As Robinson argues,

The widely recognized aspects of human security—freedom from poverty, food security, health care and protection from disease, protection from environmental pollution and depletion, physical safety from violence and survival of traditional cultures—cannot be realized in the absence of robust, equitable, well-resourced relations and networks of care at the household, community, state, and transnational levels. Moreover, none of these “goods” are achieved or enjoyed by individuals in isolation from others and the networks of care and support they provide.

Our explorations of precarious intimacies press for an acknowledgment of the networks of care that emerge through intimacy. Intimacies neither guarantee nor assume such care; they may be marked by interpersonal acts of violence and are certainly informed by structural violence. Our attentiveness to care and intimacy is a call for ethical care in the service of justice. Robinson is writing about networks of care and support; Lorde is calling on a “we” and evokes an “us” in her plea to activate the power of “erotics.” When we describe intimacy, we emphasize the dimension of feeling, not as an individual emotion but as a communicative act, as a relationship. Intimacy as
an analytical frame “allows analysts to look at relational life, including the feelings and acts that comprise it, in relation to colonial empire or capitalist modernity.”

Intimacy presupposes relations that are never static; they evolve, shift, grow, or end. Intimacy, as Lauren Berlant describes, “builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation,” but “its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent act.” Intimacy is thus a process and an emotion, often a story to be told and a narrative in the making, and at other times a moment that interrupts narration. If it is, as Judith Butler suggests, our relationships to others that render us differentially vulnerable to social violence, the necessity of social relationships is also a source of potential for politics, solidarity, social connection, and shared resources.

Our interdependency requires sustaining intimacy, solidarity, and collaboration. As Butler articulated in conversation with Athena Athanasiou, “We are interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a sustained social world, a sustaining environment.” And as Anna Tsing starkly argues, “Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die.” These authors’ two very different books—Tsing’s tracing the resilience of the matsutake mushroom as a model for collaborative survival in the face of environmental precarity, Butler and Athanasiou’s considering the solidarities formed on the street in demonstrations that render protesting bodies even more vulnerable, but as necessarily so in order to challenge precarity—reveal the contours of our challenge: to imagine intimacy as a possibility that unfolds further possibilities toward solidarity and collaboration. Intimacy itself, our connections to other people and communities, our solidarities, and our sharings may (or must!) also be transformations-in-process, working toward justice.

Our readings of intimacy not only focus on sexual, romantic, or familial intimacy but also include notions of “alliance, affinity, and society among variously colonized people beyond the metropolitan national center.” Lisa Lowe emphasizes the processual and unstable nature of intimacy, in particular “in response to material conditions of specific historical forces.” These forces, in Lowe’s study, include various colonial formations of violence and power. Lowe reveals the emergence of bourgeois conceptions of intimacy, as they are inextricably linked to a notion of a private sphere and deeply embedded in larger sets of intimacies entangled in contacts between peoples, communities, nations, economies, and continents.

By creating new possibilities of intimacy, by foreclosing others, and by interrupting yet others, intimate relationships function in multiple and multidirectional ways. Our primary goal in this study is to develop reading strategies for film and cultural production that allow us to uncover the precarious politics of touch and intimacy. By reading for precarity, we recognize the complexities of developing ethical readings of intimacy and connection in the face of political realities and narrative currents that work against
imaginations of justice and of transformed futures; however, we insist that work for social transformation relies on new imaginations.

**Precarious Intimacies and Europe**

We focus on twenty-first-century Europe and the political realities and narrative currents that define the shifting ideas of Europe and Europeanness at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The films we draw on are specifically from Western European cinema (though many are coproductions that involve countries from outside this region), allowing us to make the best use of our training and linguistic competencies. Though such films make up our archive, the Europe represented in the films is much broader. What “Europe” is and means shifts historically; understandings of Europe’s borders change, and individuals and groups experience European inner and outer borders in varying ways. Similar to the “vacillating” borders of Europe that Étienne Balibar describes, Europe as a concept vacillates. It often works paradoxically, as an ideal to aspire to and as a failed project (whether connected to hopes for Enlightenment traditions, for the potential of the European Union [EU]—or both), but it continues to hold power and potential. The political tensions over the constitution and power of the EU as a political-economic entity also feed into these discussions. When we write about “Europe” in this book, we evoke this concept in all its complexities; our analyses track the shifting meanings of Europe as a geographic, historical, and political concept. We refer to the EU when we specifically address the politics of the EU as a governing entity and political community.

The lauded potential political intimacies created by various European projects are haunted by the pasts and presents of exclusions rooted in racisms, colonialisms, fears of immigrant others, terrorist attacks, intensified economic insecurity, the tightening of Europe’s external borders, and the threat of re-instuting internal borders. Such European intimacies are rooted in hopes for a European future that envision connections between and across internal European borders, stronger communities for shared economic futures, and renewed, even intensified attention to human rights. Yet, the very linkage of universal human rights, progressive knowledge, and democratic futures to the definition of Europe paradoxically produces precarious subjects excluded from the spaces that could grant those rights. As Hito Steyerl has written in a film treatment:

Behind all images of Europe is the legend of a woman from Asia Minor. She is abducted, raped, and abandoned. This continent is named after her. . . . “Europe’s dream” remains important in two senses: on the one hand as a democratic, universalistic utopia, on the other as a Eurocentric nightmare of imperial demands with a long
tradition of colonialism and racism. . . . This indissoluble connection between the European ideal of equality and the simultaneous reality of inequality [sic] is the dream Europe dreams about itself, and one that can turn into a nightmare at any time.  

In the Western European films we discuss in this book, Europe functions variously as a field of power, an exclusionary identity, an affective orientation, and even an ongoing project of worldmaking. All of these appearances are of a Europe ever-becoming and transforming, but always a Europe that has material effects on and power over the lives of the characters the films depict. Europe produces precarity even as it promises economic and political stability, but only for some; becoming European remains an impossibility for many, and often results in concrete, racialized disparities in access to social mobility, education, or public agency. The colonial foundations of European modernities fundamentally shape the condition of precarity we engage with in this book. As Fatima El-Tayeb describes:

Colonialism did not represent a clash of modern and premodern societies. Rather, the mass mobility that Foucault among others identifies as [the] central prerequisite for the change to modernity within Europe produced mass precarity, i.e., millions of uprooted people whose traditional relationship to the land had been transformed.  

Precarious intimacies in this book might thus be understood as imaginative ways of making legible the ways that racializations in Europe are rooted in the violences of Europe’s ongoing creation and definition. Conceptually placing colonialism in the center of any engagement with Europeanness and Europe thus pushes back against the “whitewashing” of Europe.  

Thus, our readings of a selection of European films through the lens of precarious intimacies contribute to critical scholarship about European identifications that emphasizes the centrality of race for the European Enlightenment project. We closely follow scholars such as El-Tayeb and Peggy Piesche in our theorizations of race and whiteness in the contemporary European political landscape. We develop readings that decenter European narratives of progress while revealing the continued centrality of racism in constructing Europe. Our theoretical approach is deeply indebted to critical readings of European border regimes and the legacies of European politics of racial exclusion articulated by scholars such as Gutierrez Rodriguez, El-Tayeb, Jin Haritaworn, Lowe, and others. Our search for consensual intimacies that challenge gendered and racialized boundaries of touch is deeply fraught and deeply political, especially in a time when we are (again) particularly aware of how state power is enacted through whose lives and bodies are allowed to touch; when, and where; whose bodily integrity is protected; and whose bodies and lives seem to matter. Forming community—which includes
physical proximity or attachment, or both—is a radical measure in isolating
times and a small gesture against the perceived impossibility of solidarity
under neoliberalism.\footnote{27}

In our chapters, we analyze films that bring the notion of precarious inti-
macies to a range of topics that have traction in European public discourse,
such as migration and asylum politics, religious identification, and sex work
and prostitution. Questions of whiteness, femininity, and the colonial gaze
are the focus of our final chapter. In each chapter, we analyze a set of films
produced and coproduced in Western Europe that take up these questions
by focusing on queer protagonists, asylum seekers, religious characters, sex
workers, or precarious sexual or economic situations. Questions of legal sta-
tus, mobility, and economic instability play a central role in all the films we
discuss in this study. Each film depicts certain and often specifically national
or local facets of these questions; but the range of films taken together illus-
trates that the idea of European stability and wealth stands in tension with
experiences of violence, exclusion, and precarity.

The films often contrast characters who are perceived as belonging to
Europe with Europe’s precarious others. By and large set in a specific region,
city, and nation-state, tenuous relationships are established with Europe
through, in part, multiple local forms of (not) belonging. Thus, Europe as a
political entity or as a place, or being European as a form of identification,
is not a concept beyond the nation but rather one that is constituted of and
by European nation-states.\footnote{28} National belonging as well as accompanying
nationalisms are always entangled with ideas of Europe, either as a form
of European nationalism or in opposition to what Europe stands for as a
transnational model “of border crossings, cross-cultural exchanges, hybrid
identities, exilic sensibilities, [and] cosmopolitan attitudes.”\footnote{29} Our readings
emphasize how and where intimacies are located and how they defy, ques-
tion, or transcend certain local, national, or European contexts.

The films we discuss in this study also describe a certain historical moment
in the development of the political-economic entity of the EU and the mech-
anisms of government in Western nation-states more generally. As Wendy
Brown argues:

Contemporary neoliberal governance operates through isolating
and entrepreneurializing responsible units and individuals, through
devolving authority, decision making, and the implementation of
policies and norms of conduct. These are the processes that make
individuals and other small units in workplaces responsible for them-
selves while binding them to the powers and project of the whole.\footnote{30}

We use the term neoliberalism throughout this book to describe this particular
aspect of capitalism, in which our lives are thoroughly saturated by mar-
ket logic, which leads to an emphasis on individualism, hyperindividualism,
self-maximization, potential, direction, goals, and increasing capacity.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, the logic of the market has come to be seen as an ethic, as Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff have suggested.\textsuperscript{32} Neoliberal governance emphasizes processes of inclusion, partnership and teamwork while excluding collective struggles for justice, ultimately promoting “cooperation without collectivization.”\textsuperscript{33}

Many of the feminist theorists whose work we draw upon think of precarity as the defining characteristic of neoliberalism. Precarity is not new—processes of racialization have long targeted specific groups of people who live particularly precarious lives—but what may be shifting is the role of states and of market logics in producing precarity. Both Aihwa Ong and Isabel Lorey have described the transformed relationship between the state and the market under neoliberalism not as “antagonistic” but rather as a relationship in which neoliberalism is functioning as a “technology of government”; individuals are urged to self-optimize in the face of decreasing state security nets, and economically disadvantaged countries are forced into “austerity measures” to participate in the global economy.\textsuperscript{34} Lorey argues that the relationship between freedom and security undergoes a foundational shift in the early twenty-first century: “When (primarily) internal security discourses correlate with normalized social insecurity, then freedom and insecurity form the new couple of neoliberal governmentality: freedom is not principally limited by the state, the state does not principally fight against insecurity, but rather both become the ideological precondition for governmental precarization.”\textsuperscript{35} This “process of normalizing precarization” does not lead to an increase in equality. The neoliberal logic does not strive for an end to inequality; rather, Lorey explains, “it plays with hierarchized differences and governs on this basis.”\textsuperscript{36}

The process Lorey outlines describes developments in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, when the future of the EU is uncertain and the European project is undergoing processes of redefinition in the face of nationalism and right-wing populism. European right-wing populism mainly organizes around anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments, but it also targets the EU as the entity that fosters migration and that is (and possibly paradoxically so) responsible for both neoliberalism and out-of-control regulations and bureaucracy. The Brexit vote in Britain in the summer of 2016 might be a culmination point of the success of the populist agenda, but fears of right-wing populists driving political agendas existed before this vote and continued to exist after. Beyond that, the consequences of the “Trump effect” for European politics remain unclear, as fears of US president Donald Trump and Trumpism as well as awe for his “style” of politics continued to drive transnational discourse in the wake of the 2016 US elections. Global political developments, such as the US elections but also wars and crises in the Middle East and North Africa and terrorist attacks in Europe and around the world, shape political discourse in and about the meaning of the concept of Europe and of the political and economic formation of the EU.
Responses to terrorist violence highlight these complex negotiations, as Butler wrote in the wake of the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015, when the state feels it should “restrict liberties in order to defend liberty” — and, we might add, often the liberties of European residents already at the margins of society. Responses to terrorist violence are intensely gendered, embedded in the ongoing racialization of masculinity by which men of color, Muslim men, and refugee men are marked as particularly dangerous and violent and as threatening from both within and without. Internally, in urban spaces perceived as diverse and multicultural, minoritized groups are often viewed as threatening and dangerous. At its margins the EU excludes its others through both the tightening of external borders and the creation of internal spaces of exception, most notably refugee camps or detention centers, precarious spaces in which access to prosperity, freedoms, and human rights is hindered. Europe’s others remain particularly vulnerable to forms of violence such as war, detention, and deportation but also sexual violence, racist violence, physical and economic exploitation, and displacement.

To bring the concept of precarious intimacies to Europe and Europeanness is thus a project that follows the lead of postcolonial and critical race studies scholars and seeks to create both “conjoined and disjunctive genealogies” that always emphasize the “fragmentary histories of human belonging.” In the films we analyze throughout Precarious Intimacies, we read for intimacies that generate radical, caring touch that are able to mitigate the violence of spaces that are created to isolate people, such as any kind of perceived “ghetto,” borders, walls, deportation camps, or, as the example of Unveiled illustrates, the hidden spaces of “illegality.” These intimacies transgress rigid categories of belonging and of gender, familial, national, or ethnic norms. Given the ongoing entanglements of racism, Islamophobia, and intimacy in much popular culture, it is possible that we can only gesture to the readings to which we aspire. The boundaries of accepted and acceptable intimacies maintain structures of power, oppression, and discrimination on the most intimate and personal levels. Any story of unwanted and violent touch is always a political story, infused with hierarchies and power, and with gendered inequality, sexism, racism, and classism. Thus, we cannot read these moments of touch without attending to the important critiques of the racialized politics of love (and hate). Haritaworn, for example, notes the importance of the “drama of queer lovers and hateful others” in contemporary imaginations. Narratives of the loving, queer figure threatened by the racialized, hateful (often Muslim) other correspond with tropes of the dangerous Muslim or Black man who threatens white women, a colonial narrative at the heart of modern constructions of race that extends to the antisemitism of the twentieth century and antirefugee sentiment of the twenty-first century. Similarly, Sara Ahmed discusses how love is mobilized by hate groups in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, when “acting in the name of love can work to enforce a particular ideal onto others by requiring that they live up to an ideal to enter
the community.” These political complexities of gestures and acts of love are precisely what interest us in the narratives we analyze in this book.

Paradoxical workings of Europe inflect the kinds of affective connections and intimacies that Europe as a space of encounter produces and precludes on interpersonal levels. If, as Lowe points out, the emergence of political liberalism was accompanied by violent intimacies between continents, these films track how neoliberal economies move such intimacies into European space and literalize them in the touch between figures marked as European and as not (or not quite) European. Cinematic narratives of intimacy, together with visual depictions of skin contact, highlight the contradictory fantasies of transnational intimacies and the structures of exclusion in Europe even as they offer glimpses into how intimacies are made (if momentarily) possible in the face of conditions that work against them. These moments of intimate touch work as defiant gestures against the forms of violence structuring the relationship of Europe to its others: to queer others, to migrants and refugees, and to religious others; these moments offer up fleeting intimate potentialities marked by connection, affection, solidarity, and even love.

**European Cinemas: Visual Politics, Genre Expectations, and Intimacies**

In the twenty-first century, many European films have portrayed forms of contact produced by various movements of peoples, whether due to displacement as refugees, work migration, or other forms of migration and immigration. Experiences of violence and precarity emerge in representations of interpersonal intimacy, often between European citizens and people with insecure residency status. These intimacies are visualized on film through skin contact and touch, acts of care for the body such as cooking and haircare, lovemaking, laughter, and storytelling. These are moments of sustenance and of constructing human networks and relationships in the face of the precarity produced in today’s world. Yet, intimacy is always deeply embedded in (if sometimes resistant to) a kind of racialized politics of the skin that would mark the skin of the other as the site of the abject or as providing access to easy knowledge of the racialized other by the white subject.

The embedding of representations of (and fantasies about) Europe’s others in cinematic narratives of intimacy is not new. What has changed, perhaps, are the kinds of gestures that the films we analyze make toward the future. They suggest a new engagement with lives made precarious by their exclusion from legal residency status, even as the films represent characters who are imagined as participating in the here and now of Europe, an imagination embedded in the conflicted hopes and desires for the EU and for Europe. As Sandra Ponzanesi points out about much of contemporary European “migrant” cinema, the films we discuss “illustrate the symptomatic, and
therefore significant, processes of recognition and differentiation, of inclusion and exclusion, of ideological constitution and deconstruction in the new Europe from a gendered postcolonial perspective.”

Precarious intimacies generate what Laura Marks has called “haptic visualities” in film, ways in which skin and touch on-screen create a sensual image for and an affective relationship with viewers. Skin becomes a crucial interface, a boundary-object, and a site of exposure or connectedness that invites the viewer to consider the unstable boundaries between bodies crossed by difference in a way that often transgresses social norms. Touching skin can signify a moment of genuine connection, albeit often tentative and short-lived, and always at risk of serving as a mere interface to knowledge about the other. Many, but not all, of these intimacies are sexual in nature. However, rather than constructing identities or defining sexual acts, some of these intimacies manifest themselves as “multidimensional . . . assemblages” of “sensations, affects, and forces” in queer spaces and times and as nonreproductive intimacies. At the same time, such on-screen touch points to the very precarities that neoliberalism and border regimes produce by making “visible . . . colonial and racist power relations.” Film as a medium, thus, allows the production of proximities deemed impossible by actualizing them visually and narratively both on-screen and between the spectator and the characters.

With the emergence of European film funding structures, scholars have attempted to characterize European (rather than national) cinemas in scholarship that explores the many themes and genres that comprise European cinema or in studies that trace developments and trends of European film industries. Randall Halle’s attention to the transnationalization of the European film industry as well as his notion of the interzone are foundational to thinking about how Europe exists as ideational space in film. Halle shows that the transnationalization of European film industries has often worked to preserve rather than undo national cinema. While European funding structures transcend national borders, the films produced often affirm and further reinscribe nation. European film thus functions within a nexus of forces that both transcend nation and constitute clearly delineated structures of belonging and identification.

Films that address questions of belonging or narrate stories of migration speak especially to these complex intersections of notions of belonging. Public policy, political discourse, and minority representations must be understood as existing in uneven relationships with one another, that also shape strategies of identification and disidentification in European cinema. Scholars in the fields of German, European, and cinema studies have provided various mappings of European cinema and migration (e.g., Guido Rings, Alex Lykidis, Sandra Ponzanesi, Isolina Ballesteros, and Rosalind Galt). In particular, we note Ipek Çelik Rappas’s work on the commodification of ethnicity in European film and Hester Baer’s studies on the new possibilities and challenges for
oppositional film in a neoliberal mediascape where “the question of whether films can create images of the present moment has as much to do with modes of production as with representational choices.” Baer argues that by “disorganizing conventional modes of representation,” contemporary German art films, mostly those of the so-called Berlin school, “create a critical space for reception.”

Barbara Mennel’s discussions of labor in contemporary European film provide important contexts for understanding representations of precarious labor in contemporary Europe. Mennel points out, for example, that the loss of a fantasy of feminist solidarity has been accompanied by feminist cinema focused on the precarious working conditions facing women under neoliberal regimes of labor. Women, she shows, “embody work on-screen” under what she calls “the neoliberal labor regime.” Over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, new cinematic narratives have emerged that advocate for new forms of depictions and resistances of women vis-à-vis capitalist labor and exploitation. Mennel also points out “the difficulty of advocating for an ethics of care without reproducing essentialist notions of femininity.” This difficult negotiation is at the center of our book as we specifically focus on questions of intimacy and care in the context of precarity and questions of social justice. We selected and grouped the films thematically, based on their narrative arcs and according to the intimacies that interrupt their narratives. We focus on films released from the very end of the 1990s into the twenty-first century, a time of intense geopolitical transformation in European governance, economic structures, and the notions of the boundaries of Europe. Europe has undergone significant changes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century as discussions about economic disparities, racial tensions, and global political conflict shape questions about Europe’s futures. Groups across the political spectrum call into question the validity of the European project and of the EU as a stabilizing political or economic structure. Our chapters focus on films that respond to these changes and challenges. Theorizing precarious intimacies as a political interpretive strategy applied to European film means paying close attention to what kind of narrative promises the films make and break. Some conflicts may arise, for example, as a result of a particular setting in a rural community while other conflicts might stem from a film’s setting in a European capital; the characters’ ethnic or religious background might evoke a set of expectations of the problems they might encounter as they travel to or through Europe; a character’s economically precarious situation has implications for their presumed agency. Such evocations, expectations, and implications, however loosely, define genres.

Genre expectations evoked by touch and intimacy on-screen play an important role in our analysis. We understand genre as what Lauren Berlant calls “a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take.” Touch on-screen is embedded in these expectations while it can also become a rather different kind of action; touch can
be out of character and out of genre; it can become a form of interaction or interruption. In such moments of generic discomfort, viewers may be forced to question how what they see relates to what they expect and how they understand themselves as relating to the worlds they see. We start with the “affectively invested expectations” in relation to both precarity and intimacy to get to the political-cultural work cinematic representations can do. Genre expectations enter along a range of topics, for example, sexual and gender politics, migration and race, terrorism, or religious orientation. While an increasing number of European films take up these questions, we are interested in how a focus on precarious intimacies breaks with a (however loose) “affectively-invested zone of expectations” for the narrative, political, and visual shape these “problem films” take.

Critical and deconstructive readings have a strong tradition in German studies and are our points of departure, but we do not remain there. While it continues to be important to critique how emotions, as Ahmed describes, become “good emotions,” and how “violence and power . . . are concealed under the languages of civility and love,” it is equally important, in the face of everything that is wrong, to try to search for moments where emotions, stories, and images, might create joy in a gesture toward solidarity. Emotions attach to different bodies in different ways. Narrative moments that try to shift those emotional charges, then, are forms of political intervention, and even though these moments are often fleeting, emotional engagement creates forms of relatability. The political surfaces in its most visceral form when emotional relatability becomes precarious. We start to care, we are forced to struggle, and in the best cases, we are forced to confront how solidarity must occur across positions that cause us to care differently. Reading for such emotional-political charge in the film as well as in the possible viewings of the film is always contentious, but it is necessary if we want to push back against inevitability and insist on the possibility of different outcomes.

We turn to feminist affect theory at various points in this book, as we grapple with how to make the affects produced by intimacies on-screen a productive concept for political readings. Theorists offer us numerous ways of engaging with skin (Jasbir Puar and Ahmed), colonial contact (Lowe), intimacy (Berlant), and notions of happiness and connection (Ahmed). Further, queerness (Haritaworn), willfulness (Ahmed), and defiance are concepts that weave through our discussions. In film, such concepts are developed narratively and visually into aesthetic form. We understand aesthetics as social, as defining our relationships with worlds in narrative forms and images that guide how we shape conceptual understandings of realities, boundaries, and identifications. Social aesthetics describe the ways in which we form communities and claim memberships and alliances. Understanding aesthetics as social in this broad way demands new “means of analyzing aesthetic experiences themselves.” Film as a medium confronts us with writings and rewritings of such social-aesthetic realities and gives us access to otherwise impossible,
affective intimacies. Cinematic representations of precarious intimacy do not simply represent but also bring something we would otherwise not be privy to intimately into the present, a process that Steyerl (following Walter Benjamin) describes as a process of actualization, a form of making present or represencing. Such represencing through representation shapes the ways in which we understand our relationships to the people around us and our positions within social-political realities, and it can shape our solidarities.

The awkward but thrilling closeness between Fariba/Siamak and Anne in the scene from Unveiled we describe at the beginning of this introduction, for example, plays with expectations and narrative tensions on a range of levels. Anne, a single mother in a low-income job in rural Germany, is intrigued by Fariba/Siamak. She projects her own desire for getting out of her close-knit community onto Fariba/Siamak. Fariba/Siamak, in turn, is attracted to Anne but fears the homophobia of their coworkers and Anne’s friends, as well as a discovery of both their illegal employment and their true identity. As viewers, expectations of intimacy between the two bring Fariba/Siamak’s precarious situation to the foreground while Anne’s presence reminds us of her desires and projections. As they engage in small talk and as the camera depicts Fariba/Siamak and Anne moving past each other awkwardly and closely, men dressed only in towels move across the screen in the background, exiting the shower after a day of work in the agricultural and food processing facility. Anne’s ex-lover, who becomes increasingly jealous of the closeness he senses between Anne and Fariba/Siamak, interrupts their moment of intimacy in the dressing room. His presence continues to drive the narrative trajectory of the film and leads to the exposure and, in the end, deportation of Fariba. What becomes present here is a possibility for connection that is thwarted and threatened almost at the moment it emerges. The momentary awkwardness highlights the political tensions in this intimate conversation. The possibility for intimacy is haunted by the assumption and the expectation of its impossibility.

Chapters and Trajectories

In this book, we develop readings of cinema located in a politics of touch and connection that can theorize the notions of care, connection, and love—even when such readings may at times work against the filmic representations themselves. We selected films that allow us to discuss such sites of contention in contemporary Europe: queer desire, migration, religious identity, sex work and prostitution, and finally, constructions of race, femininity, and whiteness. Historical connotations underpin the ways in which contemporary neoliberalism, globalization, and post–Cold War political transformation produce newly precarious forms of contact that, yet again, change forms of racialization, citizenship regimes, and economic exploitation.
In chapter 1, we set the stage by discussing films that depict migration to Europe from or via the Middle East, focusing on four films that span roughly a ten-year period: *In This World* (dir. Michael Winterbottom, United Kingdom, 2002), *For a Moment, Freedom* (*Ein Augenblick Freiheit* [dir. Arash T. Riahi, Austria/France/Turkey, 2008]), *Welcome* (dir. Philippe Lioret, France, 2009), and *Can’t Be Silent* (dir. Julia Oelkers, Germany, 2013). The desire for Europe as a "happy object"—that is, as an object toward which good feelings are directed—and as an object that provides a (perhaps unattained) shared experience drives the journeys. Yet, the films narrate stories of nonarrival that focus on revealing the unhappy effects of European border regimes. In spite of the fact that the desire for Europe is revealed to contribute to precarity, the films show moments of joy and human connection that happen in the face of violent exclusion. Precarious intimacies uncover how racializations in Europe are rooted in the violence of Europe’s ongoing creation and definition, but they also refract such violence through interpersonal intimacies. Thus, the films we discuss depict affects of intimate, proximal cohabitation in ways that pose questions about the possibilities and ethics of futures.

In chapter 2, we analyze precarious intimacies on-screen as moments of defiant—and queer—touch in Fatih Akın’s *The Edge of Heaven* (*Auf der anderen Seite*; Germany/Turkey/Italy, 2007), Angelina Maccarone’s *Unveiled* (*Fremde Haut*; Germany/Austria, 2005), Andrea Štaka’s *Fraulein* (*Das Fräulein*; Switzerland/Germany/Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2006), and Yüksel Yavuz’s *A Little Bit of Freedom* (*Kleine Freiheit*; Germany, 2003). Defiant touch does not undo the violence of exclusion and racism in these films, but it constructs moments, images, and gestures of refusal to cooperate in their perpetuation that also confront the viewer with their existence. These gestures disrupt narratives about difference and about who or what belongs to the space of Europe or has access to “Europeanness,” about whose bodies touch and how. Their futurity is not “restricted to generational narratives and reproduction,” as Berlant and Michael Warner have observed, but imagines queer, defiant intimacies as gestures toward not-yet-possible futures—futures, as Gayatri Spivak has called them, in the future anterior; futures of shared solidarity that we must call into being despite their current impossibility. This defiance gestures toward futures anchored in unconventional intimacies, futures that challenge their appropriation for exclusionary fantasies of Europeanness.

In chapter 3, we first broadly sketch the general context of representation of religion, faith, and intimate relationships in Western European cinema, in drama, comedy, and in the films of Akin. We then focus on two films by Karin Albou, *Little Jerusalem* (*La petite Jérusalem*; France, 2005) and *The Wedding Song* (*Le chant des mariées*; France/Tunisia, 2008). In a context in which faith and religion are mobilized as forms of racialization, Albou’s films are unusually complex representations of religion and faith. The films embed loving friendships in religious contexts and work against the multiple forces that
enact racialized difference through representations of religion. “Tradition” and “religion” are often seen as inscribing sexualities onto bodies and regulating sexual intimacy, touch, and familial affection. Albou’s films complicate this story by showing how intimacy and touch sometimes move in unexpected ways, contrary to the script, as disruptive or unexpected forces—in this case, via the relationships between sisters and friends that are actually inextricable from their religious contexts. Precarious intimacies in Albou’s films further serve to emphasize connections between religions perceived as incommensurate and to imagine alliances between different racialized groups.

Chapter 4 discusses three films that depict contrasting forms of commodified intimacy that, when put in conversation with one another, address a range of sex and care work: *Flowers from Another World* (*Flores de otro mundo*; dir. Icíar Bollaín, Spain, 1999), *Princesses* (*Princesas*; dir. Fernando León de Aranoa, Spain, 2005), and *Lorna’s Silence* (*Le silence de Lorna*; dir. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Belgium/Italy/Germany, 2008). These three films tell distinct stories of money and touch, and of gender, race, and location. They evoke a complex relationship with the viewer that is founded on emotional engagement with the precarious intimacies of sex work. The complicated political terrain of sexualized and racialized commodification and representation in Europe drives the narrative tension in all three films. Each film offers alternative forms of intimacies that disrupt the narratives through depictions of friendship, community, or imaginations of friendship and “family” in spaces that exist elsewhere or in spite of these structures of sexualized power and exclusion. In contrast to the European spaces that produce violent intimacies based on commodified bodies and sex, the films stage diverging forms of intimacy and love that exist outside the script of women’s bodies made available for male consumption, and thus they create ways to think of alternatives, however momentary or imaginary.

Chapter 5 highlights the limits of our concept of precarious intimacy through an investigation of the politics of whiteness, neoliberalism, and intimacy. The films we analyze here revolve around white women who fetishize brown male bodies in an attempt to escape their (however privileged) neoliberal and white spaces of and in central Europe. We start with a discussion of the Austrian film *Paradise: Love* (*Paradies Liebe*; dir. Ulrich Seidl, Austria/Germany/Italy, 2012), a film about white European women who travel to Kenya as sex tourists. This film makes white femininity uncomfortable, but yet, in the end, it affirms white women’s dominant position. This form of representation relates to films that depict white European women who help Black male refugees as they struggle for entry into or legal status in Europe. Two main examples of these depictions are offered in the French film *Samba* (dir. Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, France, 2014) and the German film *Color of the Ocean* (*Die Farbe des Ozeans*; dir. Maggie Peren, Germany, 2011). While trying to counter depictions of male sexual predators and white women as victims, these films continue colonial modes of representation by
fetishizing Black male bodies and by victimizing white women, not as sexual prey but as the ultimate victims of neoliberalism.

In the conclusion of our book, we highlight how whiteness and white femininity remain central to persisting forms of colonial violence and to neoliberal regimes of exclusion, and we acknowledge the political and personal limitations of our analyses. We also insist that research toward more just futures requires that we continue to push back against representations that are often made to appear inevitable. In our conclusion, we think through some of the political implications of these discussions: for thinking Europe, for thinking just futures, and for developing communities of solidarity, responsibility, and care. The arc of the stories about precarious intimacy that we trace in this book illustrates the way in which we can read human contact and cohabitation as avenues to develop an ethics of living together. Yet, this set of narratives also illustrates important limits; in the face of contemporary political realities, reading for love, care, and connection will and cannot become too positive a story. The barriers we encounter, however, cannot result in stasis. While it continues to be important to read for the ways in which racism, colonial thought, and neoliberal capitalism circumscribe the possibilities for intimacy, it is equally important, in the face of everything that is wrong, to try to search for moments where emotions, stories, and images might lead to productive ways of creating alternative, nonviolent futures.