Chapter 2

Touch as Narrative Disruption

Race, Gender, and Queering Intimacy

Images from two films discussed in this chapter illustrate touch and connection in the face of the constant threat of deportation: in the case of *A Little Bit of Freedom* (*Kleine Freiheit*; dir. Yüksel Yavuz, Germany, 2003; see fig. 2.1), for both Chernor and Baran, and in *The Edge of Heaven* (*Auf der anderen Seite*; dir. Fatih Akin, Germany/Turkey/Italy, 2007; see fig. 2.2), for Ayten. Baran and Ayten are Kurdish characters and Turkish nationals in Germany without legal residency status. The films are set against the backdrop of the past and ongoing societal, political, cultural, and economic discrimination of Kurds in Turkey; Turkey’s attempt to enter into negotiations to join the European Union; and debates about refugees claiming asylum on the basis of discrimination against groups within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community. The moments of touch in the films defy the narrative move toward a seemingly inevitable expulsion of the refugee characters from Europe. Touch anchors the characters in the here and now of Europe and of shifting debates about what Europe means in the face of the rising displacement of people worldwide, suggesting a political potentiality that inheres in their intimacies. Yet their intimacies are also marked by tremendous violence at the hands of European Union (EU) and national border regimes, generating the keenly felt pain of separation and loss. The queer, precarious intimacies of this chapter thus reveal the particular intersections of racialized and sexualized norms, constructing potential for their transformation and revealing the limits of such potential.

Writing about queer intimacy and touch in European cinema evokes seemingly contradictory political discourses. One such discourse assumes that queer intimacies enable possible challenges to dominant sexual, familial, and reproductive norms and conventions; indeed, some of the films we discuss in this chapter have been productively read in this way. Another discourse evoked draws on Jasbir Puar’s, Jin Haritaworn’s, and Fatima El-Tayeb’s analyses of the ways in which LGBTQ-friendly policies are appropriated by the state to claim a position of progressiveness, particularly over and against
non-Western states and peoples, often in the name of promoting depoliti-
cized, homonormative, neoliberal models of queer positionalities. A notion
of “gay-friendliness,” as Puar describes in her work on homonationalism,
becomes a measure of access to national sovereignty and locates progressive
positions on sexuality in Europe while ascribing homophobia to immigrants
and Muslims. As the films we discuss imply, certain kinds of queer intimacy
and love are not easily incorporated into desirable forms of “European” inti-
macy. In particular, when figures occupy a precarious position, especially one

Fig. 2.1. Chernor makes a gentle advance on Baran. Still from A Little Bit of Freedom (2003).

Fig. 2.2. Lotte connects with Ayten through touch. Still from The Edge of Heaven (2007).
that includes an insecure residency status, resulting in economic insecurities, queer intimacies are complexly located as transformative, sustaining, but also dangerously unassimilable into the nation-state or, for that matter, into Europe. Racism, Islamophobia, and persistent homophobia in Europe work against possibilities for queer love, friendship, or family. The precarious intimacies we discuss in this chapter exist in the tension between fantasies of multicultural incorporation and moments of defiance.

It is in this context that we offer readings of the films as doubly defiant: they defy the expectation that Europe in the twenty-first century produces inclusive spaces for both queer intimacy and refugee rights, but they insist on the possibility of love and intimacy as a politically disruptive and personally sustaining force. We focus on four films from 2003 through 2007: *The Edge of Heaven, Unveiled (Fremde Haut;* dir. Angelina Maccarone, Germany, 2005), *Fraulein (Das Fräulein;* dir. Andrea Štaka, Switzerland, 2006), and *A Little Bit of Freedom.* All four films, released within just five years of one another, reveal the conflicts inherent in struggles for European belonging in their depictions of romantic relationships or close friendships between legal residents of European countries and undocumented migrants or between two or more undocumented migrants. Our analysis centers on moments of intimacy that include undocumented immigrants, mostly refugees. These moments that defy the narrative movement of the film, which would render their intimacies impossible, are doomed to failure: in all cases, the films’ undocumented characters, most of whom seek asylum, either are deported or voluntarily leave. Our use of the notion of precarious intimacy, including but not limited to sexual intimacies, emphasizes that we are interested in moments of and with political and affective force that challenge the narratives of inevitable exclusion and of relegation to another time and place. While the outcome of the relationships depicted is rarely a “happy ending,” stubborn and defiant depictions of intimacy and love on-screen work against what might appear as inevitable outcomes. By claiming spaces in the here and now of Europe, these characters construct precarious intimacies as queer spaces that cannot easily be appropriated for national or Eurocentric agendas.

The decade during which these films were made (2000–2009) was a time of uncertainty for the EU. The attempts to pass an EU constitution failed in 2005. At the same time, the EU continued to expand; many Eastern European countries joined the EU in 2004, and discussions of a unified border policy continued even after the rejection of the EU constitution. Enabled by the guidelines set out by the Treaty on the Functioning of Europe (2007) and the Lisbon Treaty (2009), a series of directives and policy statements developed the framework for a common border policy and institutionalized EU-wide police cooperation through the establishment of Europol. Politically heated discussions about the place of Islam in Europe that had already polarized the public in the 1990s intensified in post-9/11 Europe and have led to the strengthening of far-right parties across the continent. Within this context,
the films present precarious intimacies as deeply desirable intimacies that are only fleetingly possible. They uncover the complex workings of Europe as a space of violence and exclusion but also as a space of encounter that potentially enables other kinds of belonging. Touch breaches gendered expectations, racialized boundaries, and political divisions. Moments of intimate touch are defiant gestures against forms of violence structuring the relationship of Europe to its migrants and refugees, struggling to offer up fleeting intimate potentialities marked by connection, affection, and even love.

The precarious intimacies of this chapter queer intimacy not only because they narrate eroticized same-sex friendships but because they build what El-Tayeb calls “a community based on the shared experience of multiple, contradictory positionalities,” positionalities that are racialized in complex ways. Queering acquires an important valence as a verb, El-Tayeb points out—as an active challenge to heteronormative and homonormative understandings of citizenship and European belonging, which often construct a spatial and temporal longing linked to whiteness and reliant on essentialized notions of nation. Precarious intimacies in these films queer Europe in their challenge to the racialization of Europe as white, a racialization that occurs by locating liberal democracy and human rights as the sole provenance of Europe.

We must, however, also address the limitations of engaging El-Tayeb’s concept of queering here. El-Tayeb develops her ideas in relationship to activists who queer ethnicity, mostly acting deliberately against racism and xenophobia in contemporary Europe. The filmmakers whose work we analyze occupy a much more ambiguous and potentially ambivalent position vis-à-vis the films they create and rarely understand their films as explicit, political interventions. Their fictional characters only tentatively gesture toward the more radical community building of the activist-artists whose work El-Tayeb explores in her research. Partly in order to press for political potential where it is less explicit, we mobilize precarious intimacies as both aesthetic strategy and practice of interpretation.

The defiant connections we examine as queer precarious intimacies are deeply uneven. The representation of Baran and Chernor in A Little Bit of Freedom, for example, problematically reduces Chernor’s story to that of an “African refugee” with virtually no backstory. As a Turkish Kurd, Ayten of The Edge of Heaven occupies an especially ambiguous relationship to Europe and to Turkey as a European border space. The intimacies of Fraulein occur between two characters who occupy a different kind of ambiguity vis-à-vis Europe, as refugee migrants from Europe’s southeastern margins. The failure of interracial relationships involving white characters runs a risk of replicating existing racist discourses that mark bodies of color as contagion or threat. Interpretive strategies that examine such intimacies must explicitly address this unevenness, even as we read for moments that undermine, challenge, and defy narratives of failed connection.

Fatih Akın’s film *The Edge of Heaven* is the second in a trilogy that thematizes love, death, and the devil, respectively. Akın was born in Hamburg, where his parents had arrived as so-called guest workers from Turkey in the early 1970s. After his fourth feature film, *Head-On* (*Gegen die Wand*; Germany/Turkey, 2004), received international critical acclaim, Akın emerged as one of the most internationally successful German filmmakers of his generation. His film *The Edge of Heaven* confronts questions of intimacy and precarity rather directly. In line with several of Akın’s other films, the three interwoven narratives in the film connect Turkey and Germany by showing various travels back and forth between the two countries.

*The Edge of Heaven*, as Barbara Mennel argues, depicts the spatial and temporal disorientations of globalization, but it also addresses a specific historic moment in the relationship between Turkey, Germany, and the EU. Accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU began in 2005 after Turkey implemented a number of EU harmonization laws intended to align Turkey with EU democratic norms. The ongoing conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurdish population is one important reason why negotiations between the EU and Turkey stalled after 2005. This conflict and its connection to EU negotiations form the political backdrop for one of the three narrative strands of Akın’s 2007 film, in which defiant gestures inhere in brief visual moments that confront the narrative failure of the EU.

At the center of our analysis stands the relationship between Ayten and Lotte. Ayten is a political refugee from Istanbul who is staying in Germany illegally to escape persecution as a Kurdish activist and member of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Turkey, but also to find her mother, Yeter, a sex worker. Lotte, a university student, invites Ayten into her home and her life. Their touching skins (seen earlier in fig. 2.2) demonstrate rare connections in a film in which, as David Gramling argues, relationships seem to be constantly interrupted by moments of mutual incomprehensibility. A rapid sequence of their first day and night together reveals sexual, spatial, cultural, and political intimacies as entwined. The easy intimacy offered up by Lotte includes lending Ayten her clothing; shortly after, they dance, kiss, and ultimately become increasingly more physically and emotionally intimate. In a following scene in which they wake together, the camera focuses on their skin, their touch, and the sheets as they fold over the bed. As Ayten and Lotte lie next to each other in bed, Ayten reveals her real name and her status as an undocumented migrant in Germany. Their physical touch becomes the beginning of a solidarity that will inspire both Lotte and her mother to work as advocates for Ayten.

This easy intimacy and almost immediate trust contrasts with Ayten’s initially tense interactions with Lotte’s mother, Susanne. Their conflict comes to
a head in a strange convergence of dissenting views of appropriate domestic behavior and the potential and possibility of the EU. In this scene, Ayten and Susanne argue in the kitchen when Lotte is absent. Ayten bustles about making espresso while Susanne prepares cherries for a pie against the backdrop of a bright, spotless kitchen as they argue about cleanliness and the European Union. Ayten refuses to acquiesce to Susanne’s requests for neatness and order and also rejects Susanne’s faith in the German asylum system and insistence that the EU will “make everything better” for Turkey. Ayten’s angry responses to Susanne link European colonialism and globalization, declaring in English: “Who is leading the EU? . . . All colonial countries! This is globalization . . . fuck the European Union!” When Susanne responds that “I don’t want you to talk like that in my house,” she also rejects the possibility of a shared space between the two even as she insists on an ongoing optimism that the EU will bring about a more just Europe. Her rejection of Ayten’s presence in her house is juxtaposed with the broken relationships between both mothers and daughters in the film, relationships cut off precisely by the European institutions in which Susanne places so much faith; indeed, the sequence anticipates the permanent end of their relationships, as the viewers already know that Ayten’s mother has died and Susanne will shortly be confronted with Lotte’s death. Cut in throughout this sequence, however, are several moments of touch that defy the narrative motion toward the film’s unhappy endings.

These moments include the shots of the pair in bed and when Ayten wears Lotte’s clothes, as well as a short moment when Ayten and Lotte reach for each other’s hands across a starkly bare room where Ayten has been interned while waiting for her asylum hearing. In this brief image, Ayten and Lotte must stretch to touch each other (see fig. 2.3).

This brief touch is followed immediately by the scene in which a German judge denies Ayten’s claim for asylum in Germany. The viewers hear the judgment read aloud while the camera cuts repeatedly between Lotte, Ayten, and Susanne’s stunned faces. In her ruling, the judge declares that although the threat of Ayten’s imprisonment is real, Turkey’s desire to enter the EU must be seen as reason enough to assure Ayten’s physical safety and therefore to deny her asylum.

This double exclusion of Turkey from Europe—the deportation of Ayten as a Turkish citizen, and Turkey’s status as never quite allowed into the EU—is defied by Ayten and Lotte’s touch across the empty room immediately prior to the judge’s decision. The desire and connection embodied in this touch offer up a hope not entirely crushed by Ayten’s deportation, nor even Lotte’s death. Instead, their touch establishes the pattern by which first Lotte, then Susanne will travel to Turkey in the hopes of reestablishing a relationship with Ayten. Connections, networks, and new intimate personal and political spaces re-form despite national and EU borders and outside social norms or biological family ties. Such spaces form outside the borders of the EU and
on the edge of Europe, in tension with a fantasy of Europe as an inclusive, multicultural space. As Daniela Berghahn has argued, the diasporic families in the film (as various family members construct new families in relationships that extend across national borders) contest notions of otherness, while “queer diasporic identities” further challenge “the hegemony of white heteronormativity and, by implication, the foundations of the family and the nation.” The precarious intimacy between Ayten and Lotte, however, does something further. The German state interrupts their connection in the name of the EU in a way that reveals how those deemed other to Europe are made doubly vulnerable: by ideas of the nation and of Europe that intersect to exclude them. Ayten and Lotte’s defiant touch thus functions to work against heteronormative, white forms of Europeanness by contesting the assumptions about Europe’s progressive values and their supposed embodiment in the form of the EU. The touch is brief, replicated only in a similarly fleeting touch across a table in the Turkish prison where Ayten is interned when she returns to Turkey.

In this film, many intimate, familial, connections form outside the EU, taking place instead in Turkey, which serves as a European border space. Indeed, all the major characters in the film will end up in Turkey by the end of the film. While still in Germany, Nejat, the son of the man who marries and then accidentally kills Yeter, connects with Ayten; against all odds they appear to form a friendship. Yeter’s death prompts Nejat’s journey to Istanbul in search of Ayten. After Ayten’s deportation from Germany, Lotte lives with Nejat in Istanbul while she tries to help Ayten get out of prison; both Ayten and Nejat find a mother figure in Susanne, who in turn finds new “children” to care for.
after Lotte’s death. In its conclusion, the film returns to the very first scenes, when Nejat leaves Istanbul, presumably to reconnect with his father, who has been deported to his hometown on the Black Sea after serving time in prison in Germany for killing Yeter. Yet sustained connections are always interrupted: even though Nejat is looking for Ayten, and Lotte lives in Nejat’s flat, they appear never to realize that Lotte is visiting the woman he is looking for. In the final scene, Ayten and Susanne reconnect in Nejat’s shop, while Nejat stands on the beach, his back turned to the viewers and his eyes scanning the ocean horizon for his father, emphasizing again that ultimately, this is a film about loss and longing. This emotionally intense narrative about missed connections and political exclusion, on the one hand, and trust, intimacy, and newfound connection, on the other hand—the latter mainly outside the boundaries of the EU—mirrors a debate about Europe as offering a desired yet ultimately impossible connection.

Ayten and Lotte’s intimacy is a unique one in the film, one between a woman whose position is particularly precarious and a woman whose life, at least while in Germany, is particularly secure. The touching of their skin and the exchange of their clothing construct an intimacy that functions outside the narrative movement of the film. Through the stories of their mothers, they gesture to the contemporary political conditions of their intimacy: Susanne’s success as a professional single woman and confidence in both contemporary Germany and a progressive EU relies much on the labor performed by the immigrants who rebuilt Germany after World War II. Through Hanna Schygulla, who plays Susanne, The Edge of Heaven also becomes an intertextual corrective to R. W. Fassbinder’s The Marriage of Maria Braun (West Germany, 1978), whose title character was also played by Schygulla. In The Marriage of Maria Braun, although Schygulla’s character is an active and successful businesswoman during the time of the economic miracle, immigrant labor is virtually absent from the film. Schygulla’s iconic role in the critique of the reinvention of the German nation after World War II in The Marriage of Maria Braun thus becomes a critique of the reinvention of Europe in the guise of the EU in The Edge of Heaven.

In contrast, Yeter’s career first as a sex worker and then as a paid wife in The Edge of Heaven calls the viewer’s attention to the limitations of upward mobility for many of her generation. Yeter’s and Lotte’s stories do not exist separately from each other; they produce each other in ways that Susanne cannot recognize. Nejat’s status is exceptional: as a second-generation immigrant, he has achieved a position as a professor of German literature in a country where professors of Turkish heritage are rare, particularly in the field of German literature. Other immigrants in the film, including Yeter and Ayten, remain outside the narrative of the successful immigrant for whom life in Germany provides access to better rights and economic conditions. They are further unable to fulfill the expectation of the “good” immigrant who enriches German society with cultural diversity and makes productive
contributions to a neoliberal global economy. Contemporary liberal democracy and successful immigrant stories exist simultaneously with powerful forms of exclusion, particularly for women of Turkish heritage in the film. Ayten and Lotte’s touch, which exists outside their mothers’ stories, both evokes such exclusions and works outside and against them. Through their touch they also form a new family that continues through the relationship between Susanne and Ayten after Lotte’s death. This new family, located in the space of Turkey, faces ongoing state violence—Ayten must renounce her relationship to Kurdish groups to get out of prison. As Nejat searches for his father, Susanne asks Ayten to join her while she stays at Nejat’s apartment, implying the possibility of a future family that queers precarious intimacies and serves as a space for multinational, multiethnic solidarities. This suggestion of the possibility for a multinational, chosen family cohabiting in an apartment in Istanbul twists the fantasy of an inclusive, multiethnic Europe in various ways: Europe’s politics of exclusion as well as Turkey’s national politics have marginalized these characters and bring them together in mourning.

Strange Skins and Defiant Desires: *Unveiled* (2005)

We now return to *Unveiled*, the film that contains the scene we presented to introduce our book. Unlike *The Edge of Heaven*, in which defiant gestures relentlessly insist on the entanglements of various intimacies, in *Unveiled*, desire is queered in such a way as to render the distinctions between physical, emotional, cultural, and political intimacies nonexistent. Since the mid-1990s, Angelina Maccarone has directed, written, and cowritten a range of feature and TV films, TV series, and TV episodes. The main actress Jasmin Tabatabai was nominated for best actress for the Deutscher Filmpreis (German Film Award), and *Unveiled* won awards for best actress in feature, best director, and best film at the Cyprus International Film Festival.

The film must be understood in the context of an increase in the number of Iranian migrants—primarily in the form of asylum seekers—in Germany following the 1979 revolution. In addition, for the first time in history, a significant percentage of women were immigrating from Iran. The German government did not recognize persecution based on sexual orientation as a reason for asylum until a law passed in 2004, the year during which the film is set; however, the law did not go into effect until 2005. Even then, claiming persecution as a lesbian required conforming to Eurocentric and essentialist understandings of lesbian identity that are thwarted by the character of Fariba. Until the European Court of Justice overturned such practices in 2014, in some countries, including Germany and Austria, for example, a person had to demonstrate the “irreversibility” of their same-sex desire, while in most EU states, a person would have to prove that they would be persecuted even if closets.
Unveiled’s protagonist, Fariba, has come to Germany to seek asylum after imprisonment in Iran for having a sexual relationship with another woman. However, perhaps because she is suspicious of the presumably Iranian interpreter, she refuses to name the precise reason for her asylum claim in her intake interview, leading to the denial of her claim. When her friend Siamak, another Iranian held in the airport processing center, takes his own life, Fariba dons his clothing and takes his passport, assuming Siamak’s identity to take advantage of his temporary residency permit. In his clothes, she literally and figuratively wears the skin of the other, requiring constant vigilance (applying daily masculinizing makeup and avoiding shared shower rooms, for example) to fit the frame of binary gender identities. With this step, Fariba is able to avoid speaking out loud her real reasons for fleeing Iran but is also forced metaphorically to cover her own skin in Germany. Her “disguise” is successful until she falls in love and becomes physically intimate with Anne.

The title of the film in German denotes strange, or a stranger’s skin, but it does so by using a word that serves as the root for “foreigner,” or stranger (Fremde). The multivalent title points to the complex intimacies present in the film: it refers to the skin of the foreign other, who must take on the identity of another—a “strange skin” that estranges clearly bounded gender identities. The veil of the English title Unveiled—a title presumably chosen for its marketing draw—refers to the head scarf that Fariba discards on the flight to Germany and then dons again when deported to Iran at the end of the film; this “veil” also suggests a foreign skin. At the last moment, she again “unveils,” choosing instead to reenter Iran as Siamak.  

A key scene in the development of the relationship between Anne and Fariba/Siamak involves Anne inviting Fariba/Siamak into her domestic space, where she asks her guest, “Will you tell me now?” As an audience, we expect that “telling” to involve Fariba’s “coming out” as a woman. Instead, Fariba reveals the potential treatment she could receive in an Iranian prison and the fact that she cannot prove her asylum claim and thus needs false papers. Their touch at this moment remains mediated by their layers of clothing, Fariba still wearing Siamak’s clothes. Later, in the scene that leads to Fariba’s arrest for asylum fraud, Anne and Fariba undress each other. As Anne undoes the cloth binding Fariba’s breasts, she expresses little surprise at what she sees (see fig. 2.4). In this remarkable scene, this “strange skin” and its removal, Fariba’s unveiling, reveal nothing. Instead, this act remains one in a series of defiant gestures enacted through touch in the film, a series defined less by any relationship to discovering gender, as the narrative might lead us to suspect, and more by an insistence on constructing sustaining human connections in spite of forms of exclusion that work against such connection. A space is created for desire outside the normalized and violent space in which the characters in the film are ascribed either as the “foreign other” or as a particular gender. In this way, a defiant desire also emerges.
The sex scene between Fariba and Anne is much anticipated in the film, but rather than displaying Anne’s surprise or Fariba’s anxiety, the scene simply depicts intimate touch and tender love. Fear and violence enter this relationship from the outside, eerily paralleling Fariba’s experience in Iran. Anne’s male friends, including her ex-lover, reject Siamak as Fariba and as Anne’s lover. When they attack both Fariba and Anne, Anne’s son calls the police to protect them. Intimate touch between Anne and Fariba is defiant and determined, yet fragile and impossible; as intimate partners, they are not safe in Germany, which provides an uneven parallel to the persecution of Fariba for the queer desire that led her to flee Iran. Petty jealousy and heteronormative forces intersect to activate the state’s desires to protect its borders. As Faye Stewart describes, Iran as a space is not the main focus of this film; *Unveiled* “may implicitly reflect on Iran’s failure to guarantee the civil and human rights of marginalized and persecuted individuals, but it places heavier emphasis on Germany’s shortcomings, underscoring anti-gay and anti-foreigner sentiments.”

Intimacy is marked by neither nation, Europeanness, nor gender—or rather, gender, national, and racialized ascriptions are constantly undone. The cloth and skin contact do not perform as the viewer is led to believe they will, nor does the “unveiling” of the English title. There are at least three unveilings in the film—the removal of the head scarf upon leaving Iranian airspace, the removal of clothing in the lovemaking scene with Fariba and Anne, and Fariba’s removal of her head scarf again as she decides to enter Iran as Siamak. None of these “unveilings” performs the associated path to freedom common in European filmic tropes of unveiling, which often use unveiling to signal freedom from Muslim violence and gender roles. Thus,
the film in fact—maybe ironically—subverts the suggested “unveiling” of its English title. Instead, the unveilings function to signal the precarity of Fariba’s situation in Europe and the failure of Europe to live up to the promise of rights in two of the cases, while the middle “unveiling” simply proves not to be an unveiling at all, allowing this moment of skin contact to come into focus. This defiant gesture works against the expectations of the veil as a purported marker of Muslim backwardness and questions the assumption of Europe as a progressive space of free and open sexual expression. Indeed, as Stewart shows, symbols of Islam in the film, including the palm-shaped hamsa, a hand-shaped amulet associated predominantly (though not only) with Muslim and Jewish communities and traditionally seen as a symbol of protection against the evil eye, open up possibilities for intimacy.\(^\text{17}\) The scene reveals the ways in which Europe participates in exposing Fariba to ongoing political and homophobic violence: as a target of homophobic violence at the hands of Anne’s ex, as an asylum seeker deported from Europe, and as a woman returning to a country in which queer intimacy is policed and criminalized.

**Chosen Family and Disrupted Intimacy: *Fraulein* (2006)**

In the film *Fraulein* by Swiss director Andrea Štaka, the scenes of touch are notable in their rarity. The women who make up the milieu of the film are always physically slightly apart; they touch for only the briefest of moments, a touch often mediated by clothing. Clothing is also exchanged in a brief scene that is key for our discussion. Ruza, a Yugoslav woman legally present in Switzerland for several decades, gives a blouse as a gift to Ana, a homeless woman from Sarajevo, after fixing its buttons (see fig. 2.5). It is a traditional blouse that Ruza took with her when she left the former Yugoslavia more than twenty years earlier. This gesture seals the gentle and almost motherly relationship that Ruza has formed with Ana, a relationship that grows slowly and tentatively but that carries the narrative arc of the film. Rather than depicting moments of touching skins between the two women, the visuals of the film create a sense of their intimacy with close-ups that often focus on the back of the neck as if looking over the characters’ shoulders as they learn about each other’s lives, thoughts, and struggles.

*Fraulein* is Štaka’s most critically acclaimed film to date.\(^\text{18}\) Her more recent feature film, *Cure: The Life of Another One* (*Das Leben einer Anderen*, Switzerland/Croatia/Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014), also focuses on the effects of the Yugoslav wars by depicting the story of two teenage girls who struggle with questions of exile, identity, and belonging. By addressing the history of the wars in the Balkans, *Fraulein* anchors its story in some of the darkest, most recent history of Europe; in *Fraulein*, details of the characters’ pasts and of their legal status in Switzerland, however, remain vague. People from
the Balkans appear as a community-in-exile that is both always outside and at the same time of Europe. The “neutral” status of Switzerland—in Europe and as European, but not as a part of the EU—is implied in the way in which the film avoids reference to Swiss state power or authority. In fact, Switzerland as a space appears strangely undefined. The two main characters in *Fraulein* exemplify two people who have made radically different life choices, explained in the film not as resulting from their legal statuses but from their contrasting personalities. Ruza is a regularized immigrant who has internalized and lived out a narrative of a “good” immigrant, one who is hardworking and productive, prioritizing work over fun or social relationships, with a carefully ordered and controlled life. Ana, in contrast, appears spontaneous and without any clear goals for her future; her legal status in Switzerland remains unclear. She goes to dance clubs, seeks out sex for pleasure, and playfully and openly approaches the people she meets.

The tension between their emotional closeness and their distance, their desire and inability to care for each other, also embodies the connection and disconnection to another space in other times. Both come from a nation that no longer exists, Yugoslavia; they come from different generations and sides of the wars in the former Yugoslavia: Ruza is a Serb from Sarajevo and Ana is scarred from her experience of the war in Bosnia as a child. Ana’s defiant

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**Fig. 2.5.** Ruza gives a blouse to Ana. Still from *Fraulein* (2006).
joie de vivre first irritates Ruza. She is particularly critical of Ana’s refusal to adhere to disciplined conventions around earning and saving money, prioritizing work, finding regular accommodation, and desiring upward mobility. In stark contrast to Ruza’s structured life, Ana seems to exist in a “queer time and place,” to use the title of J. Halberstam’s 2005 book. Indeed, both defy reproductive time, which “connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability.”19 Ruza in particular seems to inhabit queer time, by living “outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production.”20

The exchange of the blouse is a key scene for their connection, the acknowledgement of a shared past space and their willingness to give and receive. In this case, the gift is not rejected, nor does it pose any threat or danger to their relationship; rather, the gift of the shirt solidifies their intimacy not just as motherly touch but also as close connection to another past space: Yugoslavia. The intimacy of the gift of clothing, a hand-me-down shirt worn more or less directly on the skin, is a symbolic gesture that recalls the iconic gift of a shirt in the Weimar classic *Girls in Uniform* (*Mädchen in Uniform*, Germany, 1931), directed by Leontine Sagan.21 In this film, the student Manuela interprets the fact that her teacher, Fräulein von Bernburg, gives her one of her old blouses—a *Hemd*, which was a type of undergarment—as a sign that they share erotic affection. While the exchange in *Fraulein* does not contain erotic undertones, it suggests their close familial and cultural connection, a gift of intimacy, care, and trust. Their exchange of this traditional item of clothing, however, is located in a queer time and place, as a result of the fact that their shared reference point, their “nation,” is gone but not mourned. The diffuse contours of the nation in which they live, Switzerland, also remain unimportant and undefined.

Two other exchanges, in which Ana attempts to offer a gift in return—joy, through touch—mirror the exchange of clothing. First, Ana stages a birthday party for a reluctant Ruza, and only Ana is able to get Ruza onto the dance floor by pulling her to her feet and into the crowd. It is on that night that Ruza finally takes physical affection into her life via Ana, and into her bed by responding to the romantic advances by one of her customers in the cafeteria, Frank. The touch between Ruza and Ana proliferates touch and intimacy in Ruza’s life.

This extended touch is initially deeply awkward. In a scene mirroring the initial scene of the film, Ruza wakes up next to Frank the morning after the party, then hastily prepares for work. She rejects his suggestion that he give her a ride to work and leaves him, covering his naked body awkwardly after she has pushed back the covers, and instructing him to properly close the apartment door. The camera does not follow her but focuses on the sheets and the half-naked man left behind in the bed they shared. Yet, as the film continues and Ruza is able to open her life beyond being a productive worker, Ruza
and Frank appear to develop a loving, sexual relationship, though Ruza’s relationship with Ana remains the focus of the film.

In a further scene of exchange, immediately after the gift of the blouse, Ana takes Ruza to a casino. Ana guides Ruza’s resistant hand at the betting table, leading Ruza to express frustration with the way Ana “wastes” money. As Ruza flees from the casino, confused by her feeling of disgust with Ana’s financial promiscuity and, presumably, her enjoyment of the frivolity, Ana follows her into the parking garage. It is in this anonymous space, lit in blue neon light, that Ruza tells Ana how difficult it was for her to build a life in Switzerland and critiques her careless way of life; Ana, in turn, finally tells Ruza that she is scared and sick with leukemia. It is notable that when the two women speak of intimate experiences and fears or when they reveal their pasts to each other, they converse in their native language. Their relationship takes shape as they share their experiences of joy, fear, and loneliness and their stories of past hardship and pain. Ana’s often joyful embrace of life triggers Ruza’s ability to accept physical affection, enjoy friendships with her coworkers, enter a sexual relationship, and become less rigid and structured in her approach to life and work in general. By the end of the film Ruza takes time off work for the first time to accompany Ana to the doctor. The willingness to move away from a life defined by order and productivity is echoed when Ana rearranges her room in the concluding scene, disturbing the bare walls with pleasure by pinning up a chaotic collage of photos that reestablish a network of relationships that had been banished.

Ana thus floats into Ruza’s life, disturbs her, invites her to enter a queerer space and time, and, as fast as she appears, she disappears, presumably with the blouse that Ruza gave her in her luggage. Ana is uprooted and she uproots. Similar to the two films we discussed before this one, the process of becoming familiar is a process of unveiling evolving capacities for love, joy, friendship, and intimacy in the face of experiences of war, fear, pain, and violence. In this sense the difference between the two—one a regularized resident, the other undocumented—recedes. And like the other films, these moments of touch must be read against the narrative drive of the film, which, because of Ana’s departure, could be interpreted as ending with the restoration of a heteronormative space.

Ana’s body becomes a site of disrupted intimacy, even for herself. Her recurring nosebleeds and nausea cross the boundary of her skin in disruptive, unpleasant ways. Bosnia, for her, is associated with tremendously destructive psychic trauma, yet better physical health: her disease was under control with relatively minor interventions (pills). In Switzerland, her health deteriorates, and it is in confiding in Ruza about her illness that their closeness shifts from a sense of friendship to something like a mother-daughter relationship; Ruza begins to take care of Ana in much the same way as a mother might care for a sick child, often without Ruza realizing what is happening to her. While their relationship begins in mistrust and even slight resentment, it moves toward
a tentative form of friendship as an almost familiar bond between the two women begins to form. As soon as there are ways in which Ana could not only enter the space of legality in Switzerland but also possibly stay and find a form of family (possibly a mother figure) in Ruza, Ana decides to leave. Her departure is a defiant gesture; the sticking out of her hitchhiker’s thumb is a refusal to accept reality “as is,” to accept any of her lovers as permanent, or to allow Ruza to take care of her. Her departure implies Ana’s rejection of a diasporic community of ex-Yugoslavians, and beyond that, it offers a critical perspective on the possibilities of Europe’s inclusivity. European spaces here are ambivalently European: Switzerland is outside the EU; Ana and Ruza both hail from the margins of Europe. The multiethnic community that would connect them has violently broken apart and the new space of a Yugoslav diaspora, a space located in Europe, proves undesirable for Ana.

Ambiguous Touch and Narrative Disruption:

The film *A Little Bit of Freedom* tells the story of two young men, both residing in Germany without legal papers, who form a friendship and, in the second half of the film, share a flat and a bed. The film is a low-budget production by the Kurdish-German director Yüksel Yavuz. *A Little Bit of Freedom* is Yavuz’s second feature film after his 1998 *April Children* (*April-kinder*; Germany). *A Little Bit of Freedom* was praised by critics in Germany and Turkey, especially for its depiction of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and the performances of its lay actors. Deniz Göktürk suggests, “Films such as *A Little Bit of Freedom*, which are produced on the platform of European media networks, provide an important forum for articulating the complexities of minority identities and for imagining new alliances and new modes of resolving conflicts in a new land.”

Racist European discourses about threatening nonwhite and male masculinity, however, limit the range of possibilities for depictions of defiance in intimacies between male protagonists. *A Little Bit of Freedom* exists in the context of films that depict male intimacies or friendships almost exclusively in the face of racist exclusion, such as *Lola and Billy the Kid* (*Lola und Bilidikid*, Kutluğ Ataman, Germany, 1999) or *Hate* (*La Haine*, Mathieu Kassovitz, France, 1995), just to give two examples. Similar to *Hate*, *A Little Bit of Freedom* navigates cliché depictions of criminal male migrant youth. In its portrayal of the two main characters, however, the film replicates some of these clichés as well as the conditions under which precarity functions. Chernor is a Black man, vaguely described as being “from Africa.” His country of origin is unspecified, and he has almost no story within the film other than the narrative that emerges through his encounter with Baran. In what might appear as another cliché depiction, Chernor lives in close quarters with
other African men and works for them as a drug dealer, selling drugs on the streets of Hamburg-Altona. At the end of the film he is caught by the police. This differential experience of the conditions of precarity is hinted at but also somewhat obscured in the film.

_A Little Bit of Freedom_ is set in and around Hamburg’s famous red-light district. In the title, “little freedom” offers a play on words that references the famous side street in Hamburg “Große Freiheit” (big freedom). Both protagonists entered Germany as unaccompanied minors, Baran after the violent death of his parents. By the time they reach sixteen, however, they have to apply for asylum. The film depicts their lives after their claims for asylum have been rejected and they are living without legal papers on the margins of society.

The plotline in the film is not driven by Baran’s coming to terms with the violence his Kurdish family suffered in Turkey. Baran works without papers as a bike deliveryman for a relative’s kebab restaurant and encounters a man he believes he recognizes as the person who betrayed his family. He plans to kill him, but the moment he has a chance to shoot him, he spares his life instead. At the end of the film, the police arrest and, presumably, deport both Baran and Chernor. The film visually centers Baran’s character rather than the men’s friendship, expressed, for example, when Baran stands, stares, and contemplates while the camera either observes him statically or slowly and closely circles him, mainly in dark or poorly lit urban spaces.

_A Little Bit of Freedom_’s depiction of intimacy, an intimacy that is never explicitly thematized in the film nor developed narratively, offers a striking moment of disruption of the overall narrative movement toward arrest and deportation. As the image at the beginning of this chapter in figure 2.1 shows, Baran and Chernor contrast like a picture and its negative: Chernor’s bleached hair and brown skin are the opposite image of Baran’s dark hair and pale skin. Their friendship is, from the beginning, driven by erotic tension expressed through looks stolen at each other while speaking to a third person. From the beginning, the threat of arrest influences their friendship. After they are first introduced by their mutual friend, a poetic homeless man and former ship captain they call “Käptn,” a police car driving by immediately triggers fearful flight away from the police. The constant threat of deportation, combined with Baran’s pursuit of revenge for the death of his parents in Turkey, constitute the primary narrative tensions in the film.

The space of Hamburg St. Pauli, the famously seedy red-light district, as well as their mutual friendship with Käptn’, enables their encounter and their (however brief) loving and intimate friendship. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez describes their encounter as “minor intimacies,” as a transcultural encounter against the backdrop and in the face of the violence of the nation-state. Here she implicitly plays with the title of the film, which in English could actually mean “little freedom” or “minor freedom,” as well as the fact that the two young men are minors. She suggests that this film shows, “on
the one hand, that friendship can develop between members of disenfran-
chised groups” but “on the other hand, that these friendships are impossible
to maintain due to migration policies, which open up an unbridgeable gap
between the protagonists.”26 “Contact zones” that “transgress . . . national
and ethnic boundaries” are enabled by this very space of the global, neolib-
eral city, where “cross-cultural encounters are an ordinary feature of social
life but are restricted or denied by legislation and policing, producing an
ambivalence that is also articulated in the film.”27 Intimacy between Chernor
and Baran is “sporadic” and “precarious,” Gutiérrez Rodríguez observes, and
the film’s emotional emphasis on their moments of intimacy and touch can-
not change the narrative trajectory; however, their friendship and connection
points to the potentiality of disruption, although this is a potentiality denied
by the narrative.28 This denied potential also refuses the viewer the fantasy of
a postracial European multiculturalism; the film evokes the fantasy only to
thwart its realization.

Gutierrez Rodríguez’s work unpacks the potential transformative force
of “transculturation” in the form of a minor intimacy. We read with her, but
from another angle, so to speak. Let us return briefly to an ambiguous scene
of sexual intimacy, in which Chernor makes an advance, and Baran’s reaction
is unclear. This series of key scenes occurs in the last third of the film. Chernor
knows of Baran’s plan to kill the man Baran suspects is his family’s murderer
and tries to stop him, demanding that Baran get rid of the gun he has just
procured at a shooting in the restaurant in which he works. In Chernor’s
absence, Baran indeed threatens the man but then walks away and disposes
of the gun. At the same time, Chernor discovers Käptn’ dead on a bench.
Chernor arrives at Baran’s apartment as Baran emerges from the shower.
After a brief and cryptic conversation about the gun and Käptn’s death as
they get into bed, Chernor gently touches Baran and his hands glide under
the covers. Baran turns away from Chernor, seemingly lost in thought, as the
light fades to black. The next scene shows Baran on his delivery bike and
for a brief moment, as a shaky camera follows his ride through the streets of
their neighborhood, his face lights up with a rare and bright smile. Yet this
seemingly happy moment dissolves immediately in the face of the threat of
police and deportation. Baran observes a police raid on the brothel next to
the kebab shop where he works; his boss immediately tells him that he no
longer has a job because his employment has become too much of a liability.

The friendship, and then gentle passion, between the two men offer rare
moments of emotional connection for Baran, who otherwise remains haunted
by his past, dependent on his cousin Haydar for housing and employment,
and hunted by police. The film does not end with Baran murdering his
family’s traitor, nor does it show Baran and Chernor happily in love in a mul-
tiethnic and sexually tolerant Hamburg. Instead, the film closes with Baran
and Chernor’s arrest and presumed deportation, thus adding a further twist
to the narrative expectations built throughout the film. Baran’s relationship
with Chernor is not allowed to develop into a sustaining form of emotional connection, and his plan for revenge does not give him a sense of closure. The men’s intimate connection is a moment of disruption of the narrative flow that proves powerless in changing the story’s trajectory.

*A Little Bit of Freedom’s* emotional depth relies on the relationship between Chernor and Baran. First their unlikely friendship and then their brief physical intimacy defies racial and ethnic boundaries, but they also foreclose other, heteronormative, forms of belonging and security offered up to Baran. At the beginning of the film, Baran seems to have ambivalently ended a relationship with his boss’s daughter, whom he still sees and who continues to pursue him. His boss, however, wants Baran to date his niece instead; she also appears interested. Either possibility might have offered him a way toward more permanent employment and even residency, as Baran’s boss points out. Having met Chernor, Baran remains relatively disengaged from both women. Instead, he spends more time with Chernor, and their friendship grows. The heteronormative relationships that might have offered a claim to stability in Hamburg are rejected, but the relationship between Chernor and Baran, as two young men who live in Hamburg without secure residency and who come from different countries, remains impossible. Hamburg, thus, does not emerge as a space for refuge or multinational, potentially queer solidarity. Rather, it is the very space that is shown to first enable and then threaten these forms of solidarity.

In the last scenes of the film, Baran will be haunted by the more acceptable intimacies offered up to him. As he and Chernor sit comfortably and companionably side by side on a bench, joking around with Baran’s video camera, two police officers suddenly come up behind them and ask for their IDs. The friends run in opposite directions, but Baran observes from his hiding place as Chernor is taken into custody. Unsure what to do, Baran returns to his apartment, where he encounters his boss’s niece. As he frantically spins around the apartment, she attempts to calm him by trying to kiss him. He desperately runs away and out to the street, where he retrieves the gun from a garbage container. As he runs on, both the niece and the daughter of his boss call him to stop. Instead, he runs to Chernor, who is emerging from the police station, and demands that Chernor be released. The film then ends with his arrest.

Similar to depictions in many coming-of-age narratives, intimacy in *A Little Bit of Freedom* sustains and threatens. In the film, this tension becomes decidedly political. As racialized ideologies, enforced through the limiting of asylum claims, produce precarity, the intimacy between Baran and Chernor serves to sustain the men but is also the moment of threat. Their touch queers their relationship to both time and place by removing Baran from the entangled intimacies of the service economy and heteronormative reproduction, bound up in the relationships with his boss’s niece and daughter and aligned with a path to legal German residency.
Queer European Intimacies and Defiant Gestures

The migrant figures in these films are what Sara Ahmed has termed “melancholy migrants,” whose unhappiness reveals the effects of racism and xenophobia that cannot be “wished away by happiness”; they also embody another one of Ahmed’s figures: the “unhappy queer.” The visual representations of touch between these melancholy migrants and their partners enable moments of mutual friendship, passion, or joyfulness, and in some cases a sense of recklessness and defiance, expressions that do not appear to conflict with but rather coexist with their melancholy. Generic expectations may lead the audience to expect that these transnational intimacies should resolve toward happy (or happier) ends and create a sense of belonging and connection. To read the ending as “unhappy,” however, as Ahmed suggests, runs the risk of setting up norms of “good” and “bad” lives that relegate queer figures, or unhappy queers, to the bad life. While fostering connection and moments of joy, the migrant characters in these films remain melancholic and defiant; and then they leave or are forced to leave. This tension between the lost connections of the narrative and defiant gestures illustrates their conflicted fit within Europe. At the end of each film, none of these intimacies last and none of the characters stay; as the narratives develop, however, they leave their impressions, literally—in touching skins—and emotionally.

Narratives of intimacy lead us to expect that intimacy will stabilize our human connections, but they are also always haunted by the failure of that stabilization. In the films we examined in this chapter, intimacies between undocumented migrants and European citizens have contributed to narratives in which conventional patterns and norms are evoked but also thwarted and defied. The Edge of Heaven shows a range of interactions that result in loss and missed connections; Fariba and Anne’s and Baran and Chernor’s intimacies are interrupted violently; and the sustaining familial connection between Ruza and Ana ends shortly after it emerges. Lauren Berlant, speaking of interpersonal intimacies, argues that intimate attachments raise expectations of shared narratives that will have particular endings. Yet, intimacy’s “potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity.” She argues: “The point is double: to seek to open up understanding the relation between conventional patterns of desire and the way they are managed by norms, and to focus on patterns of attachment we hadn’t even yet known to notice, patterns in which sexuality and intimacy are enacted in a broad field of social relations that anchor us to life.” Touch and fabric mediating touch link a queering of gender, ethnicity, and Europe itself to enable fleeting but defiant gestures that challenge and reveal unjust political and economic structures. They further question the very ways by which economic and political success is defined: as arrival into Europe, as successful productivity, and as the attainment of savings or improved socioeconomic status. The crossing of normative expectations for
intimate relationships is also a crossing of normative expectations for so-called better lives.

These films further illustrate the struggle to find a terrain on which to represent intimacies against homonormative discourses that arose at this time in Europe and that produced decidedly “Western” gay and lesbian subjects in the service of the neoliberal consumer as well as in the service of excluding racialized others. This production of the queer “Western” against the homophobic “Eastern” other focused almost exclusively on gay men. In the early twenty-first century, a number of prominent conservative male public figures in Europe such as Pim Fortuyn, Theo Van Gogh, and Peter Tatchell asserted their gayness as part of a Western, democratic identity defined against Muslim men, who were seen as homophobic, violent, and dangerous. Puar describes how these notions of sexuality are used to construct categories of belonging and exclusion: “Lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to cultural and legal forms of citizenship at the expense of the partial and full expulsion from those rights of other populations.”

The films we discuss evade such narratives that privilege a certain kind of “modern” queer subject by focusing on relationships of citizens with migrant, transitory protagonists whose legal residency status is insecure. None of the intimacies depicted lasts; cultural or legal citizenship in Europe is inaccessible.

Sexuality and intimacy are complex assemblages of multidirectional forces, forces that are sometimes tentative, always precarious, and never stable. This tentative and fleeting touch defies appropriation into Western narratives of belonging and citizenship and rejects appropriation as the threatening, non-Western subject; however, the intimate connection to the other in these films does not and cannot last. It is through this very precarity that the films express something inherently political: a longing for a “Europe” that does not and maybe cannot ever exist since structures of exclusion define the project of Europe at its core.

Our hope for defiant gestures aligns with Claudia Breger’s call for imaginative reading practices (following Eve Sedgwick) that do not set interpretation of narrative in opposition to those of emotions, affect, or desire, and that do not rely exclusively on a negative stance. The intimacies we examine are defiant gestures that, rather than following the patterns of “cruel optimism,” uncover the mechanisms of such attachments. They create spaces in which feeling, sensing subjects temporarily escape the isolating conditions of neoliberal precarity by forming attachments in spite of the fact that these attachments do not and cannot promise “the good life.”

If skin itself can be conceptualized as the fluid boundary by which an uncontained self opens up to other bodies, if difference might be conceptualized as uncontained by the skin, then these moments of touch we’ve examined—of shared skin and shared fabric that allow touch to continue beyond physical proximity—become themselves moments of defiance that
reconfigure norms and narratives. Defiant gestures in these films thus rearrange the meanings of intimacies produced by skin contacts and, to speak with Breger, rearrange “established meanings and thus contribute to ongoing affective orientations in the (larger) world.” They often offer such moments of reorientation in their visual depictions that counter overarching narrative movements of the films, narratives that offer cliché understandings of the struggle of the other who cannot or will not ever truly belong, of cultural differences that cannot be overcome in Europe, and of well-known stories of economic hardships and racialized exclusion.

The defiant gestures we identify in these cinematic examples illustrate how this mechanism of constructing (white) Europe works and dismantle it by rearranging affective connections and signposts. In this process of rearranging—or in such attempts to rearrange—unhappy effects become visible, but glimpses of other kinds of connections also surface. The precarity in these moments of touch, and the narrative destruction of the intimacies they create, do not renounce optimistic perspectives on this future. Rather, following Ahmed, “it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life.” Such defiance does not undo the violence of exclusion and racism but constructs moments, images, and gestures of refusal to cooperate in its perpetuation. These gestures defy narratives about difference and about who or what belongs to a certain national space or who has access to these spaces, about whose bodies touch and how. This defiance gestures to futures inspired by nonnormative intimacies, futures that challenge their appropriation for exclusionary fantasies of Europeanness. Queer, defiant intimacies gesture toward futures that are not yet possible—futures, as Gayatri Spivak has called them, in the “future anterior.” We must call these futures of shared solidarity into being despite their current impossibility.