Chapter 4

Commodified Intimacy
in a Globalizing Europe

In *Flowers from Another World* (*Flores de otro mundo*; dir. Icíar Bollaín, Spain, 1999), Milady, a young Cuban woman, walks away from her life in a rural Spanish village where she had been living with Carmelo (see fig. 4.1). Carmelo is an older Spanish man who, in his words, brought her to Europe as his “girlfriend.” This image conveys a sense of both self-determination and vulnerability within this complex story about abuse, desire, and hope. Milady carries her belongings in one small bag on a country road with barely any traffic. The land looks inhospitable and oppressive—dry and barren grassland with gray clouds low in the sky. Milady walks away confidently from an abusive relationship with Carmelo in the hope of finding a self-determined life in a larger city, but she also leaves her friend Patricia behind. Milady appears isolated yet leaves with the hope and determination that she can build a better life elsewhere. Her departure marks a contradictory moment: it communicates a sense of agency and defiance but also signals a departure toward an unknown, insecure future.

Another Spanish film, *Princesses* (*Princesas*; dir. Fernando León de Aranoa, Spain, 2005), contains a similar image of departure toward the end of the film. Zulema leaves Spain to return to the Dominican Republic of her own volition, and not because she is being deported, as her friend and fellow sex worker Caye insists on pointing out to the border police officers at the airport. Zulema, too, leaves behind an abusive relationship as well as a close, supportive friendship.

In the third film we discuss in this chapter, the coproduction *Lorna’s Silence* (*Le silence de Lorna*; dir. Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, Belgium/France/Italy/Germany, 2008), walking away takes on new meaning as Lorna, the main character, escapes a likely violent death by running into the forest and hiding in a hut, where she is so desperately isolated that she imagines a pregnancy in order to have any sense of intimate connection.

All three films construct their intimacies outside—even against—the intimacies of heterosexual marriage that would have potentially secured the residency status of the characters in the films.
Commodified intimacy or intimate labor, whether in the form of sex work, marriages of “convenience,” or care work, exist as gendered forms of labor that are also deeply racialized. In this chapter we consider how these defiant gestures of refusal amid precarious intimacies might challenge any simplified understanding of commodified intimacies. We argue that the precarious intimacies we examine form potential avenues of imagining, however briefly, sustaining and sustainable connection in the face of a neoliberal economy that seems to completely commodify everything, including touch, bodies, and sex. Precarious intimacies further function in these films to show the intertwined forces of border control and commodified intimacy in marriages or, in other words, how border control functions to promote certain forms of intimacy and to prevent others. It matters, we suggest, to read these moments of “leaving” as defiance, rather than as mere reaction to the insecurity produced by neoliberalism. Defiance does not merely reject but also performs possibilities for other futures, if elsewhere. Especially when put in dialogue with each other, the women’s gestures of refusal in these three films pose important political questions about agency, labor, and exploitation in relationship to care work, sex work, and marriages for legal papers. How can we imagine sustaining intimacies, when intimacies are embedded in colonial thought and colonial histories that produce the racialized ideologies and economic conditions that promote sex tourism, feminized care work, and marriage migration? How do we discuss the unique vulnerabilities women face in these fields without resorting to a language of sex-negative victimhood? How do we avoid a false dichotomy between relationships embedded in a context...
of commercialization or “convenience” and perceptions of romantic love as more real, particularly when codified in a state-approved heteronormative marriage and in border regimes?

The complicated political terrain at the intersection of commodified intimacy, sex, and sexualized and racialized representation in Europe (in our examples, in Spain and Belgium) drives the narrative tension in all three films. The precarious intimacies in these narratives involve figures whose economic marginality, insecure residence status, and exposure to physical violence are exacerbated by the vulnerability produced by their participation in commodified intimacies. However, aside from depicting the violence and vulnerability that commodified intimacies produce, the films also stage diverging forms of intimacy and love that exist in spite of violent scripts and create ways to think of alternatives, however momentary or imaginary. We look for solidarity in touch, friendship, and community and for solidarities that work against structures of power, dependence, and violent exclusion.

Thus, by reading for precarious intimacies in films about commodified intimacies, we highlight the precarity and vulnerability that these intimacies produce and contrast them with emerging communities of support, care, and even joy. Communities of love and support give the characters the strength to walk away from violence in spite of their precarious legal, social, and economic positions. Caring touch in the face of vulnerability—for, as Judith Butler has suggested, “violence is surely a touch of the worst order”—functions as resistance to the precarity produced by the intersection of the near-total commodification of care workers’ lives marked by racialized forms of exclusion under neoliberal work and immigration regimes.

Investigating acts of “walking away,” of refusal and defiance, in the face of the commodification of intimacy illustrates another way to think about one of the major topics of this book: the tension between isolation and community as a feature of the precarious politics of intimacies within and beyond Europe. Isolation in these films is often a physical and violent experience, manifest in walls and borders; in depictions of small villages, small apartments, and hotel rooms; and in the tightness of the public and intimate spaces in which people live—sometimes illegally, sometimes as commodities, seen as objects with exchange value. Gendered and racialized boundaries enforce both isolation and claustrophobic confinement. Against isolation and confinement, community and connection form unexpectedly. Moments of friendship and love offer glimpses into how things could be different (and how they should be different). Films may show moments of community and support for sex workers that shift the focus to their agency, depict moments of solidarity in difference, and, in doing so, emphasize the need for intimacies that engender spaces for resistance. In these moments, imagining sustaining alternative community remains a project oriented toward transformative, just, futures.
Sex Work and Care Work in Europe and Neoliberal Intimacies

The discussion [about globalized sex and care work], as always, got good and complicated because it is true that there are just too many things: (1) the history of the sexual division of labor and its present configuration; (2) the feminization of migratory flows and the “passing along of inequality,” (3) the legal framework which fixes the status of domestic work as subemployment and that of women as subalterns, (4) the content of this work: its temporal, spatial, subjective and other limits and (5) the fronts open for struggle.

This statement by the Madrid-based research collective Precarias a la Deriva maps out a political discussion that is almost too complicated to tackle; to this list we must add the histories and realities of racialized sexualities and racialized labor. Narrative films such as those we analyze in this chapter present narratives that call for a careful study of agency, affect, and the politics of intimacy; but visual moments may also work at odds with narrative movement in significant ways. Further, we are interested in the imaginative work of cinema and of our interpretive practices vis-à-vis cinema, the possibilities for pointing to existing violence and imagining beyond it. Historical contexts, gender and racialized inequalities, shifting legal frameworks, and the understanding of sex and care work as temporary create varying conditions of precarity as well as new “fronts . . . for struggle,” to borrow the words of Precarias a la Deriva. The films we analyze create avenues for aesthetic intervention and demonstrate the limits of such intervention.

The precarious intimacies we describe in this chapter raise key questions about the complexities of conceptualizing sex and care work at a time when the valorization of “choice” and “agency” has become a way of obscuring systems of power and violence. In the words of Hester Baer: “Paradoxically, neoliberal policies create a situation of permanent insecurity that disproportionately affects minority groups, while at the same time neoliberal discourses of individual choice, flexibilization, and mobility offer unprecedented opportunities for destabilizing normative roles and eroding traditional social formations in ways that appear empowering.”

Sex work often serves as the example par excellence of precarious labor, given the inherent insecurity of its conditions; even in cases where it is legal, few labor protections exist, and the work is generally irregular. In cases where the worker is also without secure residency status, the worker’s insecurity is exacerbated. Sex workers of color further negotiate a complex set of conditions in which they have already been hypersexualized in popular discourse, regardless of their work; in which they also are often assumed to be without agency, mere exploited victims of global prostitution; and in which their lack of access to residency or citizenship prohibits access to protections that might ameliorate their vulnerability to violence.
Partially due to these complicated politics of representation, Isolina Ball-esteros observes that “films dealing with the . . . subject of prostitution, human trafficking, and the sex trade are in the minority” among fictional films depicting stories of migration. There are, however, a number of documentary films that explore sex trafficking. The more complex depictions in such films expose “a political double standard and a tragic irony” that, on the one hand, fosters fear of migrants and promotes tight border controls and, on the other hand, promotes the porosity of borders “to facilitate free flow of material and human commodities.” Neoliberalism, in other words, both stands in tension and collaborates with European border regimes in deeply gendered and racialized ways. Wendy Brown describes the dynamics of “neoliberal governance” as “processes that make individuals and other small units in workplaces responsible for themselves while binding them to the powers and project of the whole.” The three films about sex work and bodies as commodities that we analyze in this chapter depict the way in which neoliberalism complexly inflects intimate potentials for those who participate in sex work. Sex and care work and its varying relationship to governance are shown to isolate people while, at the same time, they bind them closely to institutions of power and control. Within this dynamic, the protagonists delineate spaces of intimacy; they generate close friendships and even communities of love and care that can construct spaces outside the commodification of intimacy. This is not to deny the ways in which love and care themselves function in commodified exchange as care work but rather to suggest that they cannot be entirely reduced to such commodification.

Sex work, care work, and domestic work compose an arena of migrant labor in high demand in Europe. This global gendering of migration, by which male and female migrant labor is geographically distributed in patterns, has been theorized by Arlie Hochschild as an extraction of emotional labor from south to north that follows patterns of colonialism while existing in a new relationship to notions of “choice.” Hochschild argues:

Women choose to migrate for domestic work. But they choose it because economic pressures all but coerce them to. The yawning gap between rich and poor countries is itself a form of coercion, pushing Third World mothers to seek work in the First for lack of options closer to home. But given the prevailing free market ideology, migration is viewed as a “personal choice.” The problems it causes we see as “personal problems.” But a global social logic lies behind them, and they are, in this sense, not simply “personal.”

These patterns of gendered labor migration intersect with complex European border regimes.

Legally, sex work is regulated variously among European countries, and national regulation is also affected by the particular ways in which local
communities implement such regulation. At the European Union (EU) level, there is no mandate for regulation of sex work, which can, however, be addressed in discussions of migration. As a consequence, EU policy discussions around sex work are largely reduced to discussions of sex trafficking, leading to a frequent conflation of all migration of sex workers with sex trafficking. In general, whereas prostitution is legal and regulated in some European countries (for example, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Denmark), it remains illegal in others (for example, in most Southeastern European countries such as Moldova, Croatia, and Albania). Other countries criminalize the buying of sex rather than offering of sex for sale (France, Iceland, and Sweden); and in yet other countries, the legal status of sex workers is unclear or simply not addressed in the law (Bulgaria and Spain). Although prostitution was legalized in Germany in 2002 in an effort to promote workers’ rights and regularize the industry, various barriers have prohibited these effects (including officials who attempt to charge back taxes if the prostitutes register and brothel owners who refuse to issue contracts that would require payment into health care and social security funds). The Netherlands legalized prostitution in 2000 and provided avenues for both business registration and labor protection. In Belgium, as was the case in the Netherlands prior to 2000, prostitution is illegal on the federal level but nevertheless tolerated in some cities.

This brief (and certainly not comprehensive) sketch indicates that while some European countries have legalized sex work in an attempt to reduce the precarious positions occupied by the workers, anxieties over sex as marketable exchange continue to drive policy discussions and continue to position sex workers precariously. The films we examine describe distinct kinds of relationships of intimacy and exchange, located in a tension between understandings of sex and care workers as exploited and objectified and as more or less autonomous economic agents. Fear of the agency of the sex worker and of the currency of sex work are closely tied to xenophobic and racialized discourses around sex trafficking and prostitution as drawing unwanted migrants and racial others into Europe.

Women involved in care work, including sex work, exist in a paradoxical situation vis-à-vis EU policies: even as the demand for domestic workers increases dramatically, the countries of the EU tend to ignore domestic work in recruitment policies as well as in legislation that seeks to regulate and regularize immigration. Visual culture participates in larger trends in which commodified intimacies are associated largely with Latin American women. At the same time, care work in all its forms often becomes the only available avenue for income for undocumented women workers, particularly those from Latin America.

These films must also be considered in light of the contemporary intrusions of the state into romantic, sexual, and legal intimacies that occur through the policing of marriages between citizens of EU countries and non-EU citizens.
via laws that regulate so-called marriages of convenience and set up state definitions of acceptable intimacy. Belgium, for example, created new laws that defined marriages of convenience and declared them invalid in 1999, around the same time that many of the debates around sex work and legality were intensifying in Western Europe. Furthermore, those who come to Europe hoping to enter into a relationship that might secure their residency status and their economic position face ongoing vulnerabilities, as many countries have laws that would make it difficult to leave such a relationship. Precarious intimacies thus allow us to interrogate how state interventions into sex work and marriage—as well as legitimation of other forms of low-paid and irregular care work—are marked by racism and xenophobia.

Spain: Histories and Contexts

The first two films we discuss are Spanish productions that depict female Caribbean migrants as Spain’s sexualized other. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Latin American refugees, arriving primarily from the Southern Cone as asylum seekers, were largely welcomed to Spain and seen as sharing Spanish cultural traditions. As the immigrant demographics changed with increased migration from Africa and as the EU began to “harmonize” immigration policies, attitudes toward later immigrants also changed. Questions around immigration did not really begin to appear on-screen until the early 1990s. Spanish films about migration in the 1990s and early twenty-first century attempted to counter racist media images and reflect an interest in stories about multicultural societies. Most of these films, however, were directed by nonmigrant Spanish filmmakers, and, as pointed out by both Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Daniela Flesler, reveal more about Spanish fears about a perceived other than about the lives of migrants in Spain. Flesler further shows that specifically intercultural romances in Spanish films from the 1990s often draw a picture of a developing Spanish identity that defines itself against a cultural other. In such films, romantic relationships between “North African or African immigrants and Spaniards . . . consistently end in failure,” as they often emphasize “Muslim men’s difference” and “blame them and their alignment with their ‘cultural traditions’ for the failure of the romance.” The Spanish films we examine in this chapter, Flowers from Another World and Princesses, were released in the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century, but they do not depict migrants from Sub-Saharan or North Africa.

Notably, the two Spanish films we discuss show Spaniards as rather culturally backward and contrast them not with North Africans or Muslims but with Caribbean others who are depicted as more urban and cosmopolitan than the Spanish people. This choice of characters evades the question of racism against African immigrants and places the emphasis on people from
the Caribbean, people who, as depicted in the films, could potentially lead Spain toward a more open and worldly society. This form of differential (or cultural) racism is not just a Spanish phenomenon; the creation of a hierarchy between imaginations of culturally helpful and culturally backward others is a key feature of European racisms.


*Flowers from Another World* predates most of the other films we discuss in this book. Icíar Bollaín’s success as an actress, director, screenwriter, and producer places her as one of the most important figures in the rebounding of the Spanish film industry beginning in the 1990s. Her second feature film, *Flowers from Another World*, earned the International Critics’ Week Grand Prize at Cannes and a number of Spanish national film awards. The film depicts a rural community’s attempt to attract women to counter the shortage of women in small farming towns at a time when rural areas were becoming increasingly depopulated in the wake of the rapid “modernization” that occurred after the end of the Franco period. It was motivated by an actual “singles party” that happened in the late 1980s as well as inspired by the fact that marriages between rural Spanish men and Latin American and Asian immigrants were increasing.

The film is set in a small town in the central Spanish province of Guadalajara. It starts and ends with a busload of women arriving in the town for a singles party organized to help the men in town meet women. The story line focuses on three sets of characters: Marirrosi, a divorced nurse and Spanish national who falls in love with the gardener Alfonso; Patricia, an undocumented immigrant from the Dominican Republic with her two small children who meets Damián, a farmer who still lives with his mother; and Milady, a young Cuban woman who comes to Spain with Carmelo, one of the wealthier residents of the town. At the end, Milady leaves Carmelo to go live in a bigger city; Marirrosi, unable to adjust to small-town life, returns to Bilbao; and Patricia remains in the town with Damián.

The film depicts the complex situations of three women and their relationships as they negotiate their legal status, choice, sexual intimacy, care work, and love. Except for her relationship with Alfonso, Marirrosi remains isolated from her surroundings and the other women. Patricia enters her relationship with a clear agenda: she needs papers and a safe space for her two children to grow up. The children’s father is Patricia’s Dominican husband, but she keeps this previous relationship a secret from Damián, since she forged the divorce papers and is still sending money to her first husband. In contrast, Milady does not arrive in town via the singles bus; she met Carmelo in Cuba, where he regularly goes on vacation. Carmelo does not describe his
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trips directly as sex tourism, yet he makes it clear to his friends that women in Cuba are eager to meet and please Spanish men, presumably in exchange for goods or money. Both Patricia and Milady voluntarily enter these relationships, and both are in precarious situations but for different reasons. The people in the town see Milady as an overly sexualized and flirty young Black woman and as “Carmelo’s woman.” At the end of the film, Milady leaves to escape the objectification and domestic violence she experiences in the small town. In contrast, Patricia, aware of the perception of her friend and the racist stereotypes about Caribbean women, casts herself as overly domestic and hardworking. She is a trained beautician who used to live in urban environments, and she tries to hide her trouble adjusting to rural life as a farmer.

As our discussion of the screen shot at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, the film’s complex narrative perspectives and depictions of precarious intimacies are embedded visually in long static shots of rural landscapes. Sometimes the camera slowly pans across the landscape as if to reflect a slow glance across the region and the town. The film is set in fall and winter; the landscape looks barren, brown, and gray, with muted green and rocky hills in the background. The landscape and nature shots are infused with symbolic meaning. The sequence during which Patricia’s daughter gazes at a herd of sheep—most of them white, with one or two black sheep scattered in the herd—for example, is mirrored when she and her little brother come running out of the schoolhouse, the only two Black children in what looks like a sea of white faces. Similarly symbolic, while they are talking in the greenhouse, Alfonso announces to Mairirrosi for the first time that he is trying to grow African orchids. She asks him if he thinks they will grow here, and he answers that “anything can grow with care.” The strange connections the film creates between animals, plants, and the women new to the town may reveal how the women from the “outside” are seen as other and how they also uncomfortably, visually and symbolically, replicate an often racialized, patronizing European “care” for an other. The film’s imbuing of plants and animals with symbolic meaning to address the problems of the notion of a stranger illustrates a key tension between the film’s critique of racialized precarities in intimate migration and its participation in racist tropes.

Music echoes the representations of animals and nature to both eroticize and exoticize women of color while at the same time emphasizing their voice and their community. Diegetic music creates contrasts between the rural Spanish community and the Caribbean women. The visitors are welcomed to town with traditional Spanish music played in the village square. This dance facilitates many awkward first interactions between the visiting women and the men of the village. Later in the film, Patricia and Milady play Caribbean dance music in their kitchens as they cook and dance with a group of friends who are there visiting. Their music illustrates their isolation in the town but also the way in which they bring their own sense of community, which already exists in the larger cities of Spain, into this little town. Extradiegetic music,
however, is disjointed and eerie, often accompanied by landscape shots that contribute to a feeling of dissonance.

Visually, the film navigates a similar tension. While the color scheme of the film is gray and brown—also reflected in the rural winter landscape—the women arriving by bus wearing colorful dresses and, later, Milady arriving in her bright red, white, and blue leggings (the white stars against a blue field indicate an American rather than a Cuban flag) literally bring color into the town. Patricia adjusts her clothing quickly and appears to blend in, while Milady continues to stand out by wearing tight, brightly colored clubbing outfits and skintight leggings. Her dress exoticizes her, highlighting the objectifying gaze of the village inhabitants but also inviting the viewer to visually participate in it.

The intimacies in *Flowers from Another World* occupy intensely gendered spaces. The bar and convenience store of the town, where the men gather to watch sports and sometimes soft-core porn movies, to drink, and to gossip, is a male space—except for the white female bartender, who is suspicious of Milady from the beginning. This woman is juxtaposed with the male bar owner, who later allows Milady to help in the bar mainly because, as he states, she is attractive. For Milady, this introduction into masculinized space offers a welcome change from the domestic prison of Carmelo’s house, but she quickly loses interest in serving as visual entertainment for the men in the bar. Carmelo’s house, clearly bigger than most other houses in the village, is filled with furniture and gadgets Carmelo buys to display his wealth and with the hope of entertaining Milady. This hope is futile and simply highlights his desperate attempt to “domesticate” her. The streets of the town are narrow and dusty, and the domestic spaces in the film, mainly bedrooms and kitchens with low ceilings and small windows, reflect the narrowness of life in this rural town. Indeed, Patricia’s ability to stay in the town seems partly linked to her ability to navigate between the domestic spaces of the home and the wide-open spaces of the fields.

Reading for precarious intimacy allows us to critically consider these visual and spatial tensions in relationship to the ways the characters are situated vis-à-vis sex work, sex tourism, care work, and border regimes. The tensions inherent in the precarious intimate relationships between white Spanish men and women of color are also inherent in the film’s perspective, the racialized gaze of its camera.

Even before Milady arrives in town, the film depicts Carmelo’s desire for her as desperate and embarrassing. Once she arrives, it becomes clear very quickly that she has no sexual interest in him and that his sexual advances and demands annoy her. *Flowers from Another World* includes only one sex scene between this couple, with both of them fully clothed, framed so that the key action is discreetly hidden behind Milady’s back. Right after Milady enters Carmelo’s house for the first time, she masturbates him by hand while sitting on top of him, quickly, as if to get it over with (see fig. 4.2). Her brief
moment of physical power and superiority over him does not last, but it demonstrates Milady’s ability “to defy norms . . . as a source of power.”26 This scene shows Milady in a position of defiant control. She uses everything at her disposal to illustrate to him that his desire for her is desperate and pathetic. As their relationship continues, he tries to reassert his power over her by resorting to violence. After he beats her when she returns from a spontaneous, short trip to the beach—where she happily dances in a club—she begins to plot her escape. She looks at her bruised face in the mirror to check her injuries. This close-up of her face, staring into the camera, shows her as vulnerable but determined. Any attempts Carmelo makes from this moment on to confine Milady to domestic space, and thus prevent her from leaving, fail.

From Carmelo’s and the other white Spanish men’s perspective, Milady is the immigrant other who is “both desired because she represents what is uncontrollable, especially in the context of potentially unleashing uninhibited lust, and feared because she cannot be controlled.”27 As the film’s perspective shifts to the friendship emerging among the women of color as the primary affective force of the film, the men’s perspective is revealed as deeply sexist and racist.

In contrast, sex between Damián and Patricia is tender, albeit awkward. In the only sex scene the films includes between these two, Patricia giggles and Damián worries that his mother will hear them. Covers drawn, in a dimly lit room, he climbs on top of her as the bed squeaks and creaks. Patricia, uncharacteristically loudly and defiantly, suggests that she does not care if his mother hears them. “Maybe she will go find a man and leave us alone. That would be nice,” she giggles. At this moment, Patricia seems exceptionally playful as opposed to her usually subdued behavior vis-à-vis Damián.
The cold or awkward heterosexual sex scenes depict relationships of power and dependency; the precarious intimacies for which we read emphasize joy, compassion, and friendship between women of color. Patricia and Milady, the only women of color in the town, almost instantly form a close friendship. While the film depicts Milady’s objectification and Patricia’s dependence on Damián, the camera also occasionally participates in a racialized gaze when focusing on the female characters of color in the film. Yet it also captures the importance of the friendship that develops between the two women; visually and narratively, we argue, the film undermines Milady’s objectification and Patricia’s subordination not just by critically depicting forms of racialized and sexist oppression but by, at certain key narrative moments, shifting the affective focus to the bond between the women of color in the film.

These friendships offer support, but they also highlight the vulnerability of the characters’ experiences in their domestic situations. As Milady and Patricia meet, Patricia appears protective and caring toward Milady; she styles Milady’s hair (see fig. 4.3) and offers her emotional support. In exchange, Milady helps Patricia on the farm. This instant friendship stands in contrast to Patricia’s interaction with the few white women the film shows, particularly the woman who works in the bar and convenience store in town, who is overtly racist. As their friendship evolves, Patricia and Milady go on car rides together, document their friendship by taking selfies, and share stories about their lives that they do not share with others in the village. The ease with which the two women interact stands in stark contrast to the stifling and oppressive atmosphere that dominates their interactions with the other characters.

Similarly, the film depicts a caring friendship between Patricia and her Dominican friends. When three of Patricia’s friends from Madrid come to
visit, they joke about entering through the dirty barn and then ask Patricia about Damián. They laugh and tease each other about sex; they cook and dance together; they also point out that Patricia is always welcome to return to their community should she choose to. Milady later joins them and again, instant friendship and trust appear to form. This community is juxtaposed with the isolating relationships within the town.

Milady, who had just been beaten by Carmelo for spending a night away without telling him, tries to hide the real reason for the bruise, but to no avail. As they say good-bye, Patricia’s oldest friend says, “This one cleans cow shit and that one gets attacked by cabinets. I don’t like any of this.” They all laugh, while the camera shows Patricia’s mother-in-law, watching them from the window. As the friends drive away into the darkness, Patricia and Milady wave, then turn and, for a moment, look at each other without saying anything. Then they simply say “see you tomorrow” and walk back to their respective “homes.” That rapid return to their relatively isolated lives highlights the importance of the evening of friendship and joy. It gives them the strength to return to their domestic lives but also emphasizes the fact that a different life is possible. It might even be a sort of moment that Sara Ahmed describes as “finding joy in killing joy”: the joyful evening does not obscure the violence faced by Milady and Patricia but creates an intimate space in which it can be named and resisted. The Madrid friends create a possible community in which solidarities can be formed, however temporary and shifting they might be.

Thus, these moments of connection to communities elsewhere, to joy and love, contrast and clash with (especially Patricia’s) desires to conform to expectations, to fit in, and to be a “model immigrant” who, ultimately, helps white, rural, Spanish people overcome their racism and their population crisis. Solidarity between the women is a source of resilience and strength; for Milady, this means the strength to leave, and for Patricia this might mean the strength to stay, for the time being, backed by the knowledge that she can return to Madrid should she decide to leave Damián. The final scenes imply that Patricia’s children find the safe (and potentially happy) childhood home she wants them to have. They play in the snow with the other children in the town and enjoy Christmas with extended family, and Patricia’s daughter receives first communion in the town’s church. Patricia’s friends from Madrid attend the celebrations and make it into the family photo, as they compose the chosen family that offers her emotional support. Friendship, in this film, is a form of intimacy that uncovers the precarious situations in which the female characters find themselves and that empower them to make choices; these choices do not necessarily end their precarious situations, but they shift the focus onto their agency in the process. Choice and solidarity are shown to always exist within the parameters of neoliberal precarity.

Patricia, an urban woman of color, settles and stays in this white, rural town, but she also brings with her a connection to another kind of community.
not otherwise found in rural Spain. In this way, *Flowers from Another World* rewrites questions of belonging (rural, Spanish, European). The farmhouse family table has changed; the village has grown. The film also poses questions about the meaning of marriage, family, and parental care. The image in figure 4.4, for example, depicts a seemingly normative, patriarchal family table. Rather than reading this image as simply illustrating how a marriage based on commodified exchange can become normal (and gender normative), we also read it as showing that “normal” marriage is—and always was—a form of commodified exchange. This reading is confirmed in the only open confrontation the film shows between Damián and Patricia, when Damián finds out about Patricia’s first husband. In his accusations, Damián mentions that he cannot trust her anymore, that for all he knows, she might have worked as a prostitute in Madrid. She, in response, admits to him that she only married Damián so quickly to get legal residency papers for herself and her children. This conversation, which takes place in the fields of their farm, in the gray, wide-open landscape, is the only moment in the film where their arrangements are openly discussed in terms of prostitution. Their relationship, however, continues after this confrontation; the open conversation about their arrangement has actually stabilized their relationship. By staying in the village and with Damián, Patricia is contributing to a national project of sorts: to the population growth in rural, farming communities. Additionally, she inserts and asserts herself and her children as belonging in this town, as she claims ownership of land and a place in the household. In this sense, she breaks through the borders of whiteness erected in this small town and insists on her belonging.
Milady, in contrast, leaves her life with Carmelo and the promise of material (and potentially legal) “safety” and comfort in exchange for sex with Carmelo. A close-up of Milady pulling a door shut behind her concludes her story in the film. Milady refuses to become part of the future of this village, and she refuses to enter a stable domestic arrangement of exchange of sex for financial security and legal residency papers. Leaving Carmelo is not a choice of convenience, since Milady’s financial and legal situation might become more insecure, but her gesture of refusal rejects Carmelo’s violence and abuse, which are integral to his fantasies of who she should be for him. While not embedded in the domestic life and patriarchal structure of a small town like Patricia, at no point does Milady imply that she plans to leave Europe; her talk of the future always includes European urban centers. With determination and defiance, she imagines her future somewhere else in Europe, while her departure points to how intimate violence produces precarity within Europe.

**Solidarity in Difference: Princesses (2005)**

*Princesses* is a story of friendship between two sex workers in Madrid: Caye, from Spain, and Zulema, from the Dominican Republic, who has no legal residency status. *Princesses* is León de Aranoa’s fourth feature film and the first produced by his own production company. It was received positively in the press, widely seen as the third in a trilogy of social-critical (even neorealist) films that address disadvantaged groups, if sometimes viewed as unrealistic in their depictions. León de Aranoa has since continued to direct and write scripts and has also published short stories, cartoons, and illustrations.

Similar to *Flowers from Another World* but released six years later, in 2005, *Princesses* shows prejudices that Spaniards have had specifically about Caribbean immigrants and illustrates the sexualized gaze on the Black, female, Caribbean, or Latin American body. This is a convention of representation that hypersexualizes migrants from certain countries and depicts other migrants as culturally and religiously different; narrative conflicts are often based on these conventions. Both depictions are familiar forms of racialization in a European colonial and postcolonial context.

The multifaceted intimacies of *Princesses* offer ways in which one can read this film as providing moments that question some of the sexualized depictions it perpetuates narratively and visually. Sex, physical proximity, and familial connection all exist largely without accompanying emotional intimacy in the film. Caye’s interactions with her family seem superficial and stifling. Zulema’s private apartment is time-shared with a young family from the Dominican Republic; yet because they suspect that she may use it for sex work, the family demands a strict separation—they do not ever want to see her. Because sex is work for Caye and Zulema, when they
become physically intimate with partners rather than clients, they express how they struggle with an implicit connection to and disconnect from their work.

The friendship between Caye and Zulema makes sustained intimacy possible, in a connection that both reaches across national borders and defies conventional narratives of intimacy. Gutiérrez Rodríguez reads this intimacy in *Princesses* as a “minor intimacy” and as a manifestation of transculturation, as the “simultaneous possibility and impossibility of reciprocal cultural and social transformation.” The potential of transcultural transformation is interrupted by the fractures produced by worlds in which social contact between European citizens and undocumented migrants is common but always marked by the existence of legislation and policing that limit such contacts. We further suggest that this “minor intimacy” is a precarious intimacy: an intimacy that can raise the potential for solidarity and highlight the conditions of precarity that endanger such solidarities. The intimacy formed between the two women reveals the conditions under which that intimacy must ultimately fail; even so, touch between the two serves as defiant gesture working outside of this failure.

Contact between Caye and Zulema is initially characterized by their competition for clients, marked by Caye’s racist remarks to Zulema about “jungle behavior,” a term that Caye uses to describe nonwhite prostitutes. Caye’s desire for Zulema’s black T-shirt with the words “sexy girl 69” printed in white on the back (see fig. 4.5) motivates the two women’s first encounter and, at the end of the film, when Zulema leaves Spain, she gives the shirt to Caye. Zulema has bought this shirt at the Latino markets, a space that she

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**Fig. 4.5.** The T-shirt Zulema gives to Caye hangs on a clothesline. Still from *Princesses* (2005).
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shows Caye on a joint shopping spree. The scenes at the markets mark a space within Europe that is unfamiliar to Caye; the Latino neighborhoods and markets of Madrid are Zulema’s space. It is in this space that their friendship begins to build. By being in a (to her) strange and foreign space, albeit in the heart of her capital city, Caye builds solidarity with Zulema, and, as Maria Van Liew observes, “it is the solidarity of mutual fascination and respect that leads them to new choices.”

As their friendship, solidarity, and mutual support develop, Caye introduces Zulema to her family (who know nothing about how they earn their livelihood). Zulema checks in on Caye, and Caye takes care of Zulema after a violent attack by an abusive client who had claimed that he could help Zulema regularize her residency status. In contrast to the violent, abusive, and demeaning intimate encounters during their work, the touch between the two friends is gentle, safe, and caring; they hug and hold hands as they reach across tables and often walk arm in arm. Their touch opens up the possibility for defiance against the many forms of sexual, racial, and state violence that structure their relationship and the filmic narrative, violence that haunts the edges of the film via brief references to Zulema’s residency status and, connected to that, her physical vulnerability and abuse.

Zulema becomes crucially important for Caye as a friend and confidante; in return, Caye helps Zulema after she suffers abuse and gives her money for her flight back home after she gets ill. The women do not receive any protection from policemen or other men, such as pimps or their boyfriends, who either cannot or will not “help.” Most men in the film are either clueless (in the case of the boyfriends) or they are clients and, particularly in the case of the man who promises Zulema legal residency papers in exchange for abusive sex, abusers themselves. For sex workers without proper papers, the police pose a threat to their livelihood rather than embody a symbol of protection. As their friendship develops, for Caye, police raids begin to signify a threat to her friend’s safety rather than a sign of the authorities protecting business for the white prostitutes.

Scenes of hair care in the film exemplify the way in which Princesses does not simply contrast intimate friendship with the precarities of legal and illegal sex work but complexly interweaves depictions of structural violence and of intimate touch that defies such violence. In Flowers from Another World, the fact that a small rural town in Spain does not have a hair salon for Black people is one of the reasons behind Patricia and Milady’s happy bonding: Milady cannot find any professionals to style her hair. In contrast, Princesses shows an urban environment where Caye spends much time in a hair salon, and when Zulema leads Caye through the Latino area of Madrid, one sees plenty of beauty salons, boutiques, and cafés frequented by mainly Black customers.

The hair salon Caye frequents is the place where white Spanish prostitutes meet and gossip, where they observe all the prostitutes on the streets, and
where they openly express their racism against sex workers of color. Their discussions often revolve around their perceptions of the foreign (i.e., Black or Brown) prostitutes as a threat to their business. Diana Palardy summarizes their perception:

As the foreign prostitutes charge less than the Spaniards, they get more business from the Spanish clientele, who in turn develop a preference for more exotic styles and looks. This is clearly perceived as a threat to Spanish female identity, at least for this marginalized group of women. In this way, the Other conquers territory that was previously occupied by Spaniards and consequently disrupts the illusion of a stable, homogeneous society.34

At the beginning of the film, the hair salon is therefore marked as an intimate, all-female, gathering space from which the white Spanish sex workers observe what they perceive as a takeover of the streets by others who threaten their livelihood.

Friendship between Zulema and Caye, however, is also mediated by hair. In Caye’s apartment, Zulema braids Caye’s hair (see fig. 4.6). The private hair care session, taking place in Caye’s apartment, is a form of safe retreat from the racialized spaces of the city and of the commercialized hair salon. This complex moment of intimate touch during braiding is a poignant counterpart to the earlier moment in the film in which one of the hairdressers in the beauty salon refuses “on principle” to do “African braids” shortly before she calls the police to report the undocumented immigrants across the street (Zulema avoids arrest because Caye warns her). Zulema reaches across the racialized borders policed by the everyday actions of the hairdressers through Zulema’s loving attention to Caye’s hair. At the same time, Caye both reifies Zulema’s exclusion from Europe and relocates those boundaries to the realm of fantasy when she declares Zulema to be “like a princess from another kingdom.”

During the braiding, Caye launches into one of her many monologues in the film. She chats about various career paths she attempted, childhood memories, and princesses. Zulema answers with one-word or brief responses, smiling behind Caye’s back as Caye explains that her clumsiness might be due to the fact that she is overly sensitive, just like a princess. Caye then comments that princesses are also supposedly so sensitive that they get sick when they are far away from their kingdom and even die from sadness. As she finishes this thought, the camera cuts back to Zulema who just says “finished,” having completed braiding Caye’s hair. In this statement, Caye compares both of them to, however different, sensitive princesses: Caye is the clumsy princess and Zulema, foreshadowing her illness and return home, is the princess away from her kingdom. While this comparison brings them closer together, it also clearly separates them as rather different kinds of princesses, a difference
left unacknowledged by Caye. This conversation takes place while they are connected through the touch of Zulema’s hand on Caye’s hair, even as Caye’s back is turned. Again, these scenes emphasize their deep emotional connection and their simultaneous difference due to their unequal status in Spain.\(^{35}\)

Aside from the intimacy depicted in the braiding scene, Caye’s braided hair subsequently triggers conversations about ethnic appropriation and sexualization. Palardy argues that in wearing the braids, Caye is wearing the guise of otherness and “simultaneously transforms into a source of desire and abjection.”\(^{36}\) While the film shows how Caribbean sex workers in Spain are subjected to both racialized desire and racist abjection, we also read the braiding scene and the following discussions among Caye’s colleagues as attempts to construct multiethnic solidarities among sex workers. The braiding, once it is clear that other white women admire Caye’s new style, then also happens in the hair salon that was exclusively visited by white prostitutes, the very space that was previously a white and racist space. Zulema, briefly accepted inside the salon as Caye’s friend, braids the hair of some of the other white Spanish women while all peer out through the window to observe the street prostitution scene (see fig. 4.7), accompanied by conversations that again reify Zulema’s status as other as well as her tentative and temporary inclusion. Thus, as often is the case throughout the film, the defiant gestures present in touch run against the representations taking place in words and in narrative movement.

Palardy reads Caye’s braids and the braiding scene inside the hair salon as a form of cultural appropriation by white Spanish prostitutes with the intent of making themselves more attractive to clients:
Initially, the braids are associated with conflicts between the two groups of prostitutes because they represent both the Spanish prostitutes’ disgust with foreigners and the Spanish men’s lust for them. The braids later become associated with economic opportunism, as the Spanish prostitutes’ conscious efforts towards self-exoticization help them to obtain more clientele.\(^{37}\)

We suggest that both might simultaneously be true: the acceptance of braiding relies partially on cultural appropriation and economic opportunism, but the touch through braiding illustrates how Caye and Zulema’s close friendship becomes a transformative force and a new solidarity. One could read Zulema, thus, as a simple device to help Caye—and potentially other white women—overcome their intense racism and their competitive spirit by developing a new business model based on cultural appropriation. The dynamic of the friendship between the two women, however, suggests a more complicated picture: Caye is increasingly emotionally reliant on Zulema, and Zulema, most clearly in the second half of the film, needs Caye’s help. Perhaps more importantly, braiding allows Zulema to demonstrate access to knowledge that the white women do not have, and to insist on the normalization of her presence in white spaces. Their emotional interdependency is noteworthy in that it is based on a sustaining, intimate friendship, not on romance or economic competition.

Ultimately, though, in spite of this friendship, the film shows the conditions under which their intimacy must fail. The question of agency, which forms the central narrative in *Flowers from Another World*, is the final
question in *Princesses*. Before Zulema leaves Spain, she gives the “SEXY GIRL” T-shirt to Caye. This clothing exchange, similar to the scene we described in chapter 2 in the film *Fraulein*, serves as a key symbol for intimate connection, a connection that will remain even after the two women have separated: Zulema’s shirt from the Latino market, the item of clothing that started their friendship, stays with Caye in Spain. In their final embrace, the camera focuses on Zulema’s face as she gently hugs Caye and strokes her hair, which hangs over the writing on the back of Caye’s shirt. After Zulema has passed through the security gates of the airport, Caye tells two surprised officers that Zulema left because she wanted to, not because she was kicked out. This encounter is remarkable in the context of European cinema representing relationships between citizens and undocumented residents precisely because there has been no contact between Zulema and police or immigration officials. Caye emphasizes Zulema’s agency as a defiant gesture against authority and (male) control over their lives. This emphasis stands in tension with Caye’s dominant voice and perspective in the film. Furthermore, the exchange between Caye and the border officers takes place after Zulema has already gone through the gate; it is mainly important to Caye, as it appears to give her a sense of continued connection to Zulema as well as the confidence in her own ability to make choices. For Zulema, agency means refusing to stay and, similar to Milady, Zulema turns her back on a situation of dependence and abuse. Throughout the film, though, both Caye and Zulema are also depicted as having made the conscious decision to work as prostitutes and, in the case of Zulema, to leave her son and work in Spain.

This final scene again stresses the tension between, on the one hand, taking a perspective that centers on the European subject who relies on the other to enable her own progress, and, on the other hand, depicting a sense of solidarity, friendship, and intimacy between Caye and Zulema that defies (male) control over their bodies and social policing, however tentatively and temporarily. Similar to *Flowers from Another World*, abusers do not prevail, although they are also not really challenged for their abuse. *Princesses* shows sex work as securely embedded in European hierarchies of gender, race, and economic exploitation. The legal precarity of racialized sex workers is thus uncovered as part of a system of neoliberal sexual exploitation. But rather than leaving the sex workers voiceless and victimized, the film develops narratives that allow for moments of defiance born out of genuine, albeit short-lived, friendship. Caye, learning from Zulema’s defiant departure, challenges Europe’s borders by acknowledging Zulema’s challenge. She thus recognizes their shared vulnerability in the context of sex work as well as their different positioning in relationship to European border regimes. Their precarious intimacy highlights what Van Liew calls “international inequalities and global hierarchies of power that disfavor them in different ways” and thus enables a solidarity in difference.
Commodification and Isolation:
*Lorna’s Silence* (2008)

While Spain is often seen as existing on the margins of the EU, our third film of this chapter, *Lorna’s Silence*, is set in Belgium, a country that occupies a particular place at the heart of the EU as part of the original European Community founding countries and as a de facto capital that hosts the major EU institutions. “Securely” located in the northern part of central Europe, it is only more recently—after the March 2016 attacks in Brussels—that Belgium also has become the center of discussions about terrorism and safety in European cities. Instead, at the time of the film’s production (and its setting), fears related to this part of the EU were often connected to a fear of the new Eastern European countries added from the eastern expansions in 2004 and 2008, often expressed in fears of sex trafficking. This dark and formally experimental film tells complex stories of the economy of arranged marriages in exchange for legal papers, locating such exchange in a continuum of care and sex work. In contrast to the first two films we have discussed, *Lorna’s Silence* is an experimental film that uses what Bert Cardullo calls a “distant, static camera” to create suggestive imagery and metaphoric meanings. The story is highly dramatic, but the tone of the film is understated. The film voices the potentially most radical, albeit more difficult to decipher, critiques of—not only or specifically European—economies of commodified intimacy. *Lorna’s Silence* follows the complicated story of Lorna, an Albanian woman living in Liège, Belgium. The film won best screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008 and addresses themes common in films by the Dardenne brothers such as despair, hope, and belief. Barbara Mennel argues that in the films of the Dardenne brothers, specifically in *Two Days, One Night* (*Deux jours, une nuit*; Belgium, 2014), the “precarious working conditions” of neoliberal capitalism are depicted through “a dispersed workforce with a range of time-limited contracts, of diverse genders and ethnicities, and in aspirational middle-class settings.” The prevalence of these themes in the Dardenne brothers’ films has inspired scholars and critics to focus on questions of morality and ethics. Joseph Mai, for example, reads *Lorna’s Silence* from the perspective of Levinasian ethics, arguing that Lorna’s developing moral consciousness and the subsequent phantom pregnancy demonstrate an alignment with the “possession by another” necessary for ethical engagement from the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s perspective. Mennel reads the Dardenne brothers’ film *Two Days, One Night* as “a gesture of resistance” against precarious work conditions. Lauren Berlant, in turn, examines their films of the late 1990s to explore how “the impersonal pulses of capitalist exchange have had devastating personal, including physical, effects.” Such an exchange in *Lorna’s Silence* revolves primarily around the commodification of Lorna’s body within and outside of her intimate relationships. Our reading for precarious intimacies in *Lorna’s Silence* allows us to...
highlight the brief moments of touch and connection that work outside this commodification of sex and intimacy.

The eponymous main character of *Lorna's Silence* has agreed to a marriage with a drug addict, Claudy, to legally reside in Belgium. Desperate to find ways to build her life and open a snack bar with her Albanian boyfriend Sokol, Lorna agrees to another marriage with a Russian (always called simply “The Russian” in the film) who will pay a lot of money in exchange. To enable the marriage, the deal’s broker, Fabio, plans to murder Claudy and make his death appear to be a drug overdose.

Lorna, however, has begun to care for Claudy and support him in his struggles to get and stay clean, imbuing both of these marginalized characters with a sense of humanity. She asks for some more time so that she can file for divorce instead of participating in an orchestrated murder. To speed up the divorce process, she hurts herself and claims that Claudy is physically abusive. At the same time as she fakes abuse, Claudy and Lorna start to develop a sexual attraction to each other and, one night, make love. The lovemaking scene emphasizes the vulnerability of their bodies in tender embrace.

The next day, Claudy is murdered. Lorna is emotionally deeply affected by Claudy’s death. After fainting and feeling ill, Lorna claims to be pregnant with Claudy’s child. Fabio pressures her to have an abortion, but she refuses. Since her (phantom) pregnancy means the deal with “The Russian” is off, Fabio demands the return of the money and sends her off with a man who is supposed to return her to Albania. This tense scene suggests that he was, in fact, charged with disposing of Lorna, whatever that may entail. Realizing this, Lorna escapes from the car, runs into the forest, and breaks into a hut. There, she promises her imagined unborn child that she will keep him or her safe.

Based on this quick description of a complex narrative, it is clear that loving intimacy in this film is brief and, in the end, exists only in Lorna’s imaginary love for her unborn child. The majority of the film focuses on the violence of debt, economic dealmaking, and exchange. The film begins with a close-up shot of money being deposited into a bank for Lorna’s snack bar (see fig. 4.8). Throughout the film, men treat Lorna’s body as a commodity to be exchanged and traded, as when she agrees to the scheme to marry “The Russian” (see fig. 4.9). In fact, the film often leaves us, Mai points out, “to encounter Lorna solely in the context of the scheme, in which others’ lives, even her own, are converted into money.” Due to her own precarious position and her hope for a better life in the future, Lorna at first willingly participates in these exchanges, but she seems to carefully guard secrets. The title references her silence, as seen in the many moments in the film when she does not speak, does not reveal her emotions or her agenda. She sometimes expresses her objections and defies some of the plans that others make for her, but it is not until the very end—and through her imagined pregnancy—that Lorna is able to escape.
Lorna’s Silence, however, is a radical film in that any attempts to create a future based on financial planning and imagined stability within existing national and EU political and social structures fail. The stark critique of neoliberal capitalism, as Martin O’Shaughnessy argues, lies in showing “how personal ties, precisely because they are not entirely subsumed within instrumental logics, can be powerful mechanisms for exercising evaluation and producing conformity.” The bank from the introductory shots, for example, appears again in a later scene when Lorna, after imagining her pregnancy,
wants to open an account for her unborn baby and save money for “him.” This attempt illustrates how she tries to hold on to the hope of stability based on long-term financial planning, which stands in stark contrast with her lived reality, wherein continuous legal and financial precarity create the conditions for ongoing exploitation. The bank clerk, however, tells her that one cannot open an account for a person not yet born. Such a path to stability, or to “a less-bad bad life” that Berlant sees expressed in the Dardenne brothers’ other films, is not accessible to Lorna.⁵³

Visually, the film is and remains dark throughout and often frames Lorna in tight, confined spaces. The camera shows Lorna as isolated, and close-ups of her body create a sense of loneliness. Often doors, tables, or window frames divide people on-screen, creating a sense of isolation. Lorna does not have a community or any friends she could confide in. The frequent close-ups of Lorna’s body visualize her objectification: Lorna in her underwear and in her nightgown, in the shower, at the doctor’s office, and as she exposes her skin to the eyes of others. Her body appears vulnerable and, after she fakes her abuse, broken. Brief moments of gentle and caring touch in the film contrast with how the bodies of the female migrant and of the drug addict function as commodities. The only form of gentle and mutual touch takes place between Lorna and Claudy, who have the two most vulnerable and abused bodies (see fig. 4.10). Even before they make love, her attempts to protect Claudy are against her supposed self-interest. When Lorna has sex with Claudy, their touch defies the commodified intimacies that dominate the film. Emotional attachment, symbolized in her imagined pregnancy, allows her to continue to defy the commodification of her body and her desires.

Fig. 4.10. Passionate intimacy between Lorna and Claudy is the only form of gentle touch throughout the story. Still from Lorna’s Silence (2008).
Lorna’s thought of pregnancy enables her to create an “us” based on her intimate connection to Claudy, a connection realized through touch. After the brief moments of loving and then passionate, sexual intimacy with Claudy, Lorna asserts autonomy over her body—an autonomy that is oriented toward an imagined future. Lying down at the doctor’s office for the exam to confirm and date the pregnancy, and, ultimately, to plan the termination of the pregnancy, Lorna suddenly jumps up and hugs the doctor. This is an awkward and unexpected display of affection, but narratively, this is the moment when Lorna’s relationship to her body’s exchange is transformed as she decides against being examined and refuses to continue to be a commodity. The baby Lorna imagines growing inside her body is a symbol of her determination to imagine a future that exists away from the exchange of bodies, residency papers, and money.

Not even her final escape, however, is visualized in a way that suggests hope. The final imagery of the film is eerie and strange. Lorna pretends that she has to go to the bathroom to escape the car and its driver. When Lorna crouches down in the bushes on the side of the road (see fig. 4.11), she talks to her imaginary baby and whispers, “They want to kill us; I will protect you.” She picks up a stone, gets back into the car, hits the driver over the head, and runs off into the dense forest. Freed from her physical dependence, Lorna is isolated and completely marginalized, removed from the economy of the European commodification market in which she had participated. In the forest, away from any form of human infrastructure or community, Lorna can neither be a temporary commodity for exchange nor participate in any long-term financial planning. This eerie space at the end of the film resembles a setting of a dark fairy tale, imaginary and unsettling, a space of momentary “transcendence,” “where the impossible new beginning with her child can take place, at least momentarily,” and where “Lorna begins being otherwise.” The music added to this scene, a rarity for the films of the Dardenne brothers, emphasizes, in contrast to the rest of the film, that this space remains imaginary and momentary; as Dillet and Puri point out, “there is no real future for Lorna outside this moment.”

In that sense, *Lorna’s Silence* is a more radical film than previous Dardenne brothers’ films, such as *The Promise* (*La promesse*; Belgium, 1996) or *Rosetta* (Belgium, 1999), two films Berlant explores as “engender[ing] new affective practices” within “the productive instabilities of the contemporary capitalist economy.” *Lorna’s Silence*, too, is a film about “understanding the difficulty of unlearning attachments to regimes of injustice” and about the power of the “normative promise of intimacy,” as Berlant observes. However, none of these attachments or promises materialize for Lorna; she does not conform to regimes of injustice or normative intimacies, nor does the film suggest any way for Lorna to find a sustaining space outside of these systems of exchange. Her precarious intimacies are situated at a complex nexus of
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power: as an Albanian woman who negotiates marriages for monetary gain and whose challenge to Albanian “traffickers” places her life in danger, she fulfills popular and demonized tropes of the trafficked woman from Eastern Europe or the woman entering into a marriage “of convenience.” Her willing engagement in the various exchanges confuses that trope, while her withdrawal into an imagined intimacy, rather than seeking recourse from national or EU institutions, emphasizes the ways in which “Europe” produces precarity.

Lorna, we argue, remains an ambivalent figure throughout the film. She is defiant but also melancholy, introverted, and often silent. Lorna’s longing for a different life only exists in the imagination. For the majority of the film, structures of violence and exclusion trap Lorna in narrow, dark, and dangerous city spaces, spaces of surveillance and mistrust. The spaces of “illegality” and of insecure residency work for and within European neoliberal economies. The ending, however unrealistically, allows Lorna to imagine beyond the market economy that has saturated European life in late capitalism. She escapes commodification only by leaving behind community and society altogether, and she finds this space of escape only in the mythical, imaginary space of a different kind of familial bond and a hidden life in a forest hut.

*Lorna’s Silence*, similar to *Flowers from Another World* and *Princesses*, builds narrative tension based on fear for the safety of the female migrant’s body and fear of the forms of violence she might face. Similarly to the main characters in the other two films, Lorna also, at least at first, participates in her body’s commodification and appears to hope that this participation might lead to a more autonomous life in the future. However, for Lorna, a
future of autonomy over her body can only be imagined outside any form or social context or civilization. Lacking any intimate connection other than with the imagined child, Lorna’s radical isolation only highlights the need for intimacies that can produce spaces for resistance. There appears to be no future space for Lorna within the social economy of the European city.

Resisting Racialized Economies of Intimacy

The three films of this chapter complicate depictions of the entanglements of European regimes with sex work, commodification, race, and legal status. These films write and then rewrite conventional narratives of sex and intimacy, of the cinematic tropes of prostitutes who surprisingly find love, or of an unexpected love story emerging from an arranged marriage or marriage of convenience. The three films resist such narratives of romantic love and tell stories of sex, affection, care, and marriage as commodities in another way: as complex and political stories of precarious intimacy.

Affective labor performed in sex and care work, especially by nonwhite migrant characters in Europe, creates a category of nonbelonging that is unique: while bodies become commodified in the European market and workers are often legal sex workers, their status, motives, and motivations are deemed dubious. This dubiousness is racialized differently, for example, for Eastern European, Latin or Caribbean, or African women and men. The idea that the other enters Europe in an attempt to marry white Europeans and stay illustrates this kind of dubiousness but also shows how being rendered dubious does not necessarily enable social or political transgression. On the contrary, the films show that being seen as suspicious functions as a key factor in the racialized economy of neoliberalism. The assumptions of “dubious motivations” make people vulnerable to exploitation, and their precarious status forces them to make arrangements—or choices—that reinforce their state of insecurity. Sex and commodification of bodies as economic exchange, in these films, is gendered, sexualized, racialized, and driven by global mobility, and neoliberal governmentality attempts to control the women’s bodies and their labor. However, the films we discuss show moments where, in spite of these economies, intimacies develop that run counter to determined paths. The intimacies in these films—as community between women of color in Flowers from Another World, as friendship between a white and a Caribbean prostitute in Princesses, and as imagined familial bonds and escape into nature in Lorna’s Silence—can neither be written into European forms of intimacy and belonging nor be controlled by institutionalized power. They describe acts of refusal, agency, and determination oriented toward a different future. Flowers from Another World shows the way in which such intimacies can undermine European social, domestic, and sexual economies; in Princesses, friendship between two prostitutes can defy, however momentarily,
the commodification of women’s bodies, but it cannot last; and in Lorna’s Silence, alternative forms of intimacies can only be imagined entirely outside the structures of social hierarchies and conventions. Aesthetically, the films embed these shifting meanings of intimacy in narratives about belonging and exclusion, visually represented in the desolate countryside of Spain, in the urban spaces of street prostitution in Madrid, and in the dark spaces of illegality and crime in Brussels. This aesthetic also speaks to the discomfort we address in this chapter’s three films: while the exchange of sex, care, or affection for money, safety, or papers is often highlighted, the way in which sustaining touch, (possibly) love, race, and racist and sexist assumptions play into these exchanges offers a more complex picture that uncovers the paradoxical workings of Europe.

Precarious intimacies, as a reading strategy, enable a shift in perspective that reveals the multiple meanings of intimacy in these films: sexual intimacy as commodity clashes with the refusal of touch and with the intimacy of community. When put in conversation with one another, these three stories of prostitution, marriage, and sex as global commodity, in the broadest sense, negotiate intimate relationships, physical vulnerability, and a search for self-determination. The films employ precarious intimacies to expose political double standards that inhere in border policies as well as imaginations of immigrants. European borders are both highly restrictive and porous, ever-transforming, and differentially accessible by certain groups and for certain commodities. In this context, the act of walking away that we highlighted at the start of this chapter is an assertion of agency but not an escape from precarity. For sex and care workers, the refusal to engage in touch is an act of defiance against the precarious commodification of their care and affection; but the characters in the films we examined who choose to leave or escape walk toward isolation and economic insecurity. The “choices” offered up to them are so limited that they destroy any fantasy of Europe as a space of free movement, gender equality, and social welfare. The other key act of defiance lies precisely in the touch, connection, and even solidarity between friends and in the attachments the characters form in spite of the racist and sexist exclusions they experience. Acts of leaving and moments of forming connections and community delineate the tension within which the characters in these films try to carve out spaces of resistance.

The precarity lies both in their economic and physical insecurity and in their “freedom” to choose, be it to move, leave, marry, or hide. To return to Isabell Lorey, in the neoliberal state, “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.” The films discussed in this chapter thus illustrate the paradoxical workings of neoliberalism that delineate the experience of economic vulnerability and produce the potential for new forms of resistance and transformation.
insist on the capacity—and necessity—for new or different spaces of social connection and community to emerge. Such spaces, however, can only be read beyond the narrative as they are not (yet) written or actualized: they are temporary, fleeting, and—as the three films maintain, within the narrative logic of European spaces of precarity—cannot (yet) last.