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Chapter 5

White Fragility and the White Gaze
Race, Gender, and Neoliberalism

In a scene in the 2013 German documentary *Land in Sight* (*Land in Sicht*; dir. Judith Keil and Antje Kruska), the asylum seeker, Brian, acquiesces to his friends’ urging and visits a bar seemingly set up for African men to meet German women (see fig. 5.1); his claim for asylum having been rejected twice, a marriage seems to be his only path to legal residency in Germany. This part of the scene in the bar resembles scenes in the Austrian film *Paradise: Love* (*Paradies Liebe*; dir. Ulrich Seidl, Austria/Germany/France, 2012), a film about central European women who travel to African countries (in this case, Kenya) as sex tourists. There, too, white European women meet Black men in bars, at parties, or on the beach (see fig. 5.2). *Land in Sight*, however, focuses its camera exclusively on Brian as he looks around uncomfortably, only to leave the bar by himself, rejecting the idea of exchanging sex for legal papers as a form of prostitution. The film emphasizes Brian’s reactions, while the camera shies away from showing the women in the bar. Brian refuses to pursue an exchange of intimacy for the possibility of access to legal papers, and, as he confides to a friend, insists on the importance of feelings for any marriage. Brian’s refusal to offer himself up for marriage simply in the hope of accessing legal residency simultaneously complicates and solidifies the cliché of younger African men who are often depicted as “preying” on older white women—portrayed as unattractive—by exchanging sex for legal papers.

While *Land in Sight* focuses on Brian’s rejection of a form of commodified intimacy, *Paradise: Love* revolves around the emotional lives of characters who participate in an exchange of sex for money. Whereas Brian insists that sexual intimacy as well as marriage need to be based on love and affection, in *Paradise: Love*, Black men fake affection to uphold the white women’s fantasy that this exchange is rooted in mutual affection and desire. Kenyan men and white, female European sex tourists “date” for a few days—or even for the time of the women’s stay—and there is no agreed-upon price. Eventually the men in the film ask the women for help with medical expenses for family
members, support for local schools, or the like, to maintain the illusion that the money is not a payment for sex.

The starkest contrast between the two films and what sets the tone for this chapter, however, is not the fact that Brian rejects what he describes as prostituting himself but rather the way in which the films engage the racialized and sexualized gaze. The camera in Land in Sight follows Brian’s gaze and refuses to objectify and sexualize Brian’s body and the bodies of the women;
Paradise: Love enhances viewers’ discomfort through the way the camera follows the women’s gazes—not just their desiring gaze on the bodies of Black men but also the critical gaze on their own bodies as, potentially, undesirable to men. Paradise: Love thus uncomfortably highlights intersections between structural racist and misogynist violence and sexual intimacy.

We juxtapose these two examples precisely because the scene from Land in Sight provides a brief, unusual contrast to the depictions we analyze in this chapter. Paradise: Love, Samba (dir. Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, France, 2014), and Color of the Ocean (Die Farbe des Ozeans; dir. Maggie Peren, Germany/Spain; 2011) depict interactions or relationships between white European women and Black African men. The politics of intimacy play out in different ways in these three films, but the films share a heteronormative, racialized, gendered gaze. They largely replicate racist tropes of dangerous Black sexuality manifest here in the gaze at the white, female body; the objectifying gaze of the white woman at the Brown or Black body also remains “the imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize.”

Intimacies between the white women and men of color in this set of films do not function to challenge the racialization of precarity; indeed, they may well replicate it. Even at the moments when these films seek to offer up a critical perspective on the violence of neoliberalism and its totalizing market logic that commodifies all areas of life—including bodies and intimacies—the intimacies that animate these critical perspectives remain largely marked by the gendered dynamics of misogynist or imperialist gazes. We rely on the still-useful distinction here that E. Ann Kaplan makes between the look as a mutual process, moving from curiosity (which remains embedded in power, however), on the one hand, and the gaze as a one-way vision, on the other hand. By analyzing these coexisting gazes, we trace how the politics of whiteness in these films—specifically white femininity—construct intimacies that are deeply racialized and sexualized. White women, in the films we discuss here, are the primary emotional focus. Their precarious relationships to intimacy, often shown as resulting from internalized sexism, stress, or both, turn the focus to white women as (emotional) victims of capitalist modernity, thus whitewashing the dynamic of colonialist exploitation. The Black, mostly male, characters in these films thus become tools to expose and perpetuate white fragility. Reading for precarious intimacies here, therefore, does not open any spaces for community, solidarity, and connection outside the racialized gaze; on the contrary, it exposes the gendered dynamic of racism. Our readings attempt to disrupt these dynamics.

Our analysis of whiteness as a form of racialization is indebted to scholars in the field of critical race studies. In Europe, Black European feminist scholar-activists were and are on the forefront of the critical theorization of whiteness in the European context (for example, Hazel Carby, Sara Ahmed, Fatima El-Tayeb, Gloria Wekker, Peggy Piesche, Maisha Eggers). As Ahmed asserts, whiteness is an “ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space.” Whiteness

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works as a social structure and a set of somatic norms that allows some bodies to be more at home in the world than others and some bodies to move in the world more easily than others. In all three films we analyze in this chapter, moments of touching skins on film—of skin contact and sex—serve to illustrate the longing of white female characters for fulfillment, for escape, for tenderness, and for love. Skin, defined by Ahmed and Jackie Stacey as the “fleshy interface between bodies and worlds,” the “boundary object,” and the “site of exposure and connectedness,” has a cultural-political function here. The white female characters in these films, their gaze replicated by the camera’s perspective, fetishize black skin and the Black, male body as a way to seek attachment to something beyond the limited interactions offered by their everyday lives. The infusion of these desired relationships with power and the racialized gaze are papered over as the narratives revolve around white women’s search for love, meaning, and compassion. The way in which these films generate a “haptic visuality”—that is, an emotionally and affectively charged gaze of the spectator that “touches” objects on screen—relies on an affective identification between the viewers and the white female characters on screen. Applied to these films, reading for precarious intimacies means to question the emotional charges of white femininity that these films engender and to decenter their Eurocentric perspective by highlighting the violence these models of intimacy produce and reproduce.

**Whiteness, Colonialism, and Neoliberalism**

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, several historians and cultural studies scholars have explored the racialized politics of intimacy under colonial rule. As Lisa Lowe points out, colonial formations of violence and power were created in tandem with the production of notions of intimacy. Such notions of intimacy relied on a sense of interiority that could be possessed by a liberal subject, viewed as accessible only to the white subjects of Europe and North America. The intimacies of four continents of Lowe’s title, embedded in racialized violent colonial relationships, were sublated by the private notion of intimacy that racialized non-European populations, in part through a distancing from norms of family and reproduction as well as exclusion from processes of “freedom” and “progress.” As Lowe explains, racialized narratives prohibit the legibility of “emergent” intimacies that consist of the “implied but less visible forms of alliance, affinity, and society among variously colonized peoples beyond the metropolitan national center.” Progress is often seen instead as the result of a helping hand extended by the global north, whether in the form of charity, enlightenment, or education. Similarly, the legacies of colonialism include the pathologization of Black family structures and the romanticization and legitimation of nuclear family structures formed under capitalism.
The concept of “white fragility,” coined by Robin DiAngelo, finds an application here since white women’s tears or, more generally, white women’s emotional suffering and vulnerability in these films are privileged over critical reflections about racism, whiteness, and power. DiAngelo thinks of white fragility as a “lack of racial stamina” in the face of a challenge to white privilege, a fragility that exists because white people are not forced to confront the structures that produce racisms and white privilege. Although some of the films we analyze were possibly intended as depictions of related struggles against racism and sexism, the way in which the films privilege empathy for the fate of the white female characters stands in the way of addressing the persisting violence of racism. The white female characters desire intimacy, sexual and otherwise, with Black men; however, they are depicted as hurt or as getting hurt in the process, which in turn (re)focuses the narrative on their struggles. White fragility—a fragility depicted as enhanced by the pressures of neoliberalism—does not completely erase moments in these films that show the complexity of the intersections of racism, sexism, and economic and emotional exploitation. The films, however, focus the potential critique of the mutual imbrication of sexism and racism in the exploitations that occur as a consequence of neoliberal economies on white women. This focus obscures potential analysis of how sexism and racism also extend and rely on colonial violence. Black bodies, in this case male, are appropriated as tools to expose and, often just temporarily, cure the fragility of whiteness and offer relief from the pressures of (white, male-dominated) European societies.

Ultimately the white women of these films require emotional “rescue” from social isolation and emotional confusion in encounters with Black African men. Wendy Brown has described the “neoliberal homo oeconomicus” as taking “its shape as human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value, rather than as a figure of exchange or interest.” The demand of self-optimization—of making oneself attractive to and on the market—is also a demand on the female body, which these women hope to escape on their sex vacations as rescuers of Black men or in their relationships with men who are legally excluded from participating in European economies. At the moment that these white characters seek to escape the “competitive positioning” of their bodies, they participate in complex forms of colonialist exploitation of the other—a form of exploitation upon which white Europe is founded. If neoliberalism functions as a contradictory force that prescribes gender norms but also destabilizes them, as Hester Baer suggests, in these films moments of destabilization feed back into normative notions of femininity and whiteness.

We begin with the Austrian film *Paradise: Love* that we mentioned at the start of this chapter, a film about white European women who travel to Kenya as sex tourists. The central tensions of the film are negotiations of intimacy and desire, money, age, and privilege. The way in which *Paradise: Love* portrays white women as emotionally vulnerable and hurt in this economic
exchange exposes the internalized sexism of white women but privileges their struggles over the racialized sexual exploitation of Kenyan men. This narrative drive is mirrored, albeit in rather different kinds of stories with different outcomes, in two films that depict white European women who help Black male migrants as they struggle for legal status in or legal entry into Europe: the French film *Samba* and the German film *Color of the Ocean*. The films center on white women who “help” Black men, as well as on the emotional lives of these women—even when the title and marketing of *Samba* are meant, instead, to center on the male protagonist—and draw focus away from the legal, political, and economic precarity in which the African characters find themselves.

Our undertaking in this book has been to deploy interpretive strategies that read for intimate connection in the face of precarity and to describe aesthetic strategies that allow intimacies to reveal the conditions under which precarities are created. We have considered the possible political solidarities enabled by intimacies and questioned conventional emotional expectations of intimacy. This chapter challenges our own reading strategies and points to their limitations by acknowledging how intimacy is easily appropriated as a problematic metaphor for multiethnic or multiracial community. The three films we discuss here show how such appropriations can have diverse political effects: they can cover up the tensions and power dynamics that attach to such community; they can create an emotional focus on whiteness and white fears; and they can obscure aspects of structural racisms. We thus demonstrate that reading for precarious intimacy can also be an act of reordering the way in which emotions cling to bodies, challenging the viewers’ potential desire and hope for, even investment in, intimacies. Ahmed describes emotions as so “sticky” that “even when we challenge our investments, we might get stuck.” She emphasizes, however, that “there is hope, of course, as things can get unstuck.”18 Ahmed’s discussion of the stickiness of emotions to certain objects considers how such stickiness is informed by histories of contact, of contact we might identify here as histories of colonialism, imperialism, and globalized tourism.19 In this chapter, we employ precarious intimacies as a reading strategy to question the emotional charges put forth by the intimacies depicted in these films and to redirect the gaze. We read to uncover the politics that make emotions cling to certain bodies and that assume that certain stories make sense. We hope to “make sense” differently, to take apart the idea that racist stories of intimacy and emotional attachment “make sense” at all.

**White Women as Fragile Clients: *Paradise: Love* (2012)**

The fiction film *Paradise: Love* works with lay actors and actresses to develop a documentary-style narrative about white female sex tourists in Kenya. The
film appears to simply “document” Teresa’s experiences on vacation; however, Margarete Tiesel, who plays Teresa, is a professional actress while the men she meets in Kenya are mostly played by nonprofessional actors. This combination of professional actors and lay actors creates the confusing and intriguing style—a sort of fictionalized documentary style—that is characteristic of director Ulrich Seidl’s films but that also creates a distinction between the white woman “artist” and the “authentic” Black characters.

*Paradise: Love* starts with Teresa at home in Austria and at work as a social worker supervising adults with disabilities. A lonely, fifty-year-old single mother, she heads to Kenya for a vacation. Teresa arrives at a tourist resort that is set up for white tourists, mainly German-speaking, it seems; Kenyans appear at the resort only to serve and entertain the white tourists (see fig. 5.3). The fact that many single women travel there as sex tourists is not explicitly mentioned in the film nor made in any way explicit at the resort. The film, however, depicts Teresa meeting a range of men interested in exchanging sex for money or gifts; Teresa forms friendships with other single women staying at the resort who are clearly in Kenya to meet men and have sex, and they instruct Teresa on what to expect and how to approach the men. They openly share their frustrations with their sexual relationships at home and their insecurities about their own bodies, which they hope to overcome by meeting African men. They never address the fact that they pay for sex; rather, they describe the Kenyan men as less obsessed with women’s looks or age than white European men are. When the women talk about the men they meet on their vacations, they objectify and fetishize them using overtly racist language; they describe their smells, the texture of their skin, the build of their bodies, and what they interpret as the men’s “animalistic” desires for
white women. The film challenges the viewer’s participation in consumerist consumption of colonialist representations and reveals the fantasy of globalized good feeling. Yet, it does so without significantly challenging racist representations, allowing instead for the tourists’ racist views themselves to remain the only viewpoint in the film. If the film takes as its premise the mutual othering of the Kenyan men and the European women, ultimately, as Zoë Gross has argued, it is the “beach boys” who “are turned into the object of desire, fetishized commodities to be bought, consumed, and discarded at will,” while the women’s transgression of norms of femininity simply serve to reactivate colonial relationships.

In *Paradise: Love*, both the overt racism of the characters and the commercialization of sex are represented in such a way as to create discomfort and unease in the viewers. The “haptic visuality” of the film—defined by Laura Marks as the way in which sensual images of skin and touch create affective relationships for viewers—causes intense discomfort through the employment of a racialized gaze onto Black male bodies, and a gaze onto women’s bodies that exposes the materiality and supposed flaws of (female) bodies. Touch further disconnects the protagonists and leaves the white women vulnerable to schemes designed to maximize the extortion of their money. The focus on the female body directs affective energies in the film away from sex and erotics to vulnerability, exploitation, and objectification. The question of who has the agency over the gaze and who or what directs affective responses is central in any attempt to interpret this film.

Teresa’s desired relationships with Kenyan men structure the film. Teresa’s first encounter ends with her running away from a hotel where she went with a much younger Kenyan man to have sex. As he pledges his love for her (in English), she appears to get more and more angry and annoyed and tries to instruct him on how to touch her and how to talk to her, what to say and what not to say. When he does not appear to follow her instructions, she fights him off, telling him that she does not believe he loves her, and commands him to stop. Her struggle to stop him offers rather stereotypical images of a Black sexual predator who tries to force himself on a white woman. In this case, however, his forcefulness is portrayed as a need for successful economic exchange.

The second relationship also ends in a violent encounter. Munga first appears on the beach where he “protects” Teresa from other men who pester her to buy bracelets and other accessories. The upholding of a gendered relationship of protected/protector is experienced by Teresa as care and affection. In their sexual encounters, Teresa instructs Munga on how and where to touch her, slapping him when he touches her in ways she dislikes. A woman’s sexual autonomy is linked, in the film, with racist violence toward her lover, who is often treated like a child or pet in training.

Teresa’s exploitative behavior continues through her photography practices. She not only photographs buildings and people on the streets but also
Munga sleeping naked on the bed. When Teresa takes pictures of Munga, just as she photographs the beautiful beaches, the resort, and the poverty she observes in the town, their sexual relationship is highlighted as a part of Teresa’s tourist consumption; Teresa objectifies Munga’s body. The film, however, contrasts this scene with another that refocuses the gaze and the emotional charge. In this scene, Munga sits on the couch, looking at Teresa while she is sleeping, covered only with mosquito netting. In these scenes, both characters appear vulnerable. However, the fact that Munga is awake, staring at the sleeping, illuminated, and white body of Teresa shifts the viewer’s gaze to him. The question of what he sees and how he might see her body guides the narrative back to Teresa and her vulnerability. Teresa’s naked body and her body’s exposure to the male gaze give the film its narrative-emotional tension.

As soon as Teresa grows hesitant about handing out more money, Munga disappears. She looks for him, only to be mocked and then dismissed by his wife (whom he had introduced to her as his sister). Munga’s wife is the only Black female character introduced in the film. She remains a marginal character, appearing first as a tool to help Munga solicit money from Teresa and then as part of the trope of the “angry Black woman.” Other Black women in the film appear only on the margins, as greeters or performers to entertain the hotel guests. When Teresa finally finds Munga, rather by accident, on the beach with his wife and child, she attacks him, pulls his hair, and yells at him that he betrayed her. Munga tries to protect himself but does not fight back. This scene highlights Teresa’s violent frustration but also her naiveté; it becomes clear that somehow, emotionally, she not only pretended but actually believed that their relationship was more than the exchange of sex for money. Rather than focusing on the pain and humiliation Teresa causes for Munga by attacking him physically in public, the camera follows her back to the hotel.

When the camera shows Teresa in the guarded resort area, the images convey a sense of loss and loneliness. These shots appear throughout the film, but increasingly so after Munga disappears. Teresa is often alone in her room, almost always in her underwear; she appears lonely as she traverses the vast lobby of the hotel, as she walks the resort grounds or attends some of the activities offered at the resort. When she returns at night, the resort looks eerily empty (see fig. 5.4). This sense of isolation is enhanced by the fact that any of her attempts to connect with her teenage daughter at home continue to fail.

The friends that Teresa made while at the resort visit her in her room on the evening of her birthday to throw her a surprise party, which includes the visit of a male stripper and prostitute. As the man strips, the women start to taunt and touch him; however, in the end he fails to perform sexually and they ask him to leave the room. In this scene, again, the women allude to how his failure to perform could only be a result of them not being
attractive enough. However, they also mock him, giggle and laugh, treat him like an animal, and call him animal names, clearly assuming he does not understand anything they say—an odd assumption, since many of the other Kenyans they encounter seem to be proficient in German. The discomfort of this scene is multiple; first, the camera witnesses the discomfort of the stripper himself, who endures the women’s harassment and objectification; viewers, however, are then made complicit with the actions of the women—their discomfort—a as the camera lingers on the stripper’s body and highlights his “failures.” Again, the film’s emphasis on the discomfort of the women, who feel physically rejected and whose plans for a “fun” party prove inadequate, complicates the viewing perspective. The women are depicted as failing in their endeavors.

Teresa’s final “relationship,” in which the man she takes to her room—the shy barkeeper Josphat—refuses to perform oral sex on her, illustrates how this film builds the narrative of (aging) white women as ultimate victims. Teresa’s feelings are clearly hurt by his refusal; she first tries to emotionally manipulate him by telling him that this makes her sad, but when he continues to refuse, she asks Josphat to leave, yells at him not to steal her money, and rushes him out without giving him enough time to get dressed. This final and failed sexual encounter has a twofold effect. It shows how Teresa confidently orders the men around and aggressively gets rid of them if they do not meet her demands, but, again, it shifts the focus to her insecurity, perceived unattractiveness, and loneliness. Once alone, Teresa cries in her room. Scenes like these expose the emotional pain of internalized sexism the women experience;
however, they also perpetuate the idea that ultimately, however racist and exploitative these white women act, they leave as the primary victims of this sexual economy.

The implication is that the women’s access to money and global mobility, in the end, only hurts them emotionally. The image of Teresa crying as she lies on her hotel bed is one of the final images of the film, followed only by shots of the beach at night and Teresa’s lonely beach walk the next morning. The women’s struggle with their own, internalized sexism—the feeling that their bodies are not desirable to men, that they are too old and not slim enough to be attractive, and so on—is oddly highlighted by their access to sex tourism. The film, implicitly, contrasts this struggle with what viewers might imagine when they think about male sex tourism. While it is clear that the women try to dominate the men, sometimes mock them and treat them like children or pets, the viewer gets the sense that since there is no agreed-upon price for their sexual services, the men try to exploit their customers financially by manipulating them emotionally. The economy of the men’s sex work remains unexplored; the film does not narrate their lives beyond the lies they tell to solicit money. The women’s desire for intimacy and the disappointment of this desire are the driving force of the narrative and focus the spectator’s emotional engagement on white personhood, in this case on the fragility of the (aging) white female body.

The film privileges viewer empathy with the white women rather than the men targeted by economic and sexual exploitation by portraying the women in emotional, and sometimes physical, pain. Margarete Tiesel’s experience as a professional actress further directs attention to the vulnerable character she portrays so sensitively. While there are brief moments where the women appear to bond with one another, perhaps as a result of sharing experiences and, possibly, pain, they are, in the end, in competition with each other. All the gendered oppressions, beauty standards, gendered norms of dating, ageism, and the economic status of women in Europe continue to operate in spite of the fact that the women travel to Kenya to escape these regimes as clients, as sex tourists, and as economically in charge. Ultimately, the women appear to be as abused as the men they meet. Their quest for sexual and emotional fulfillment is futile.

White women are cast as precarious subjects because they suffer from the emotional effects of neoliberal gender politics; their desperate search for intimacy is a result of this precarity and, following the logic of the film, must fail. The film depicts racism, sexism and ageism without showing any way out. Victimhood serves as an affective charge that is attached to the white female body and emotionally overshadows the economic and sexual forms of exploitation in which the women participate; the camera and narrative arc of the film focus—particularly intensely in the concluding scenes—on white women as victims of neoliberalism and internalized sexism. Our readings for precarious intimacies in the case of this film highlight the ways in which
these cinematic gestures perpetuate racist, demeaning, and sexist perspectives while dressing up as socially critical.

In *Paradise: Love*, the “political economy” of intimacy, defined by Lisa Lowe as “a particular calculus governing the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy,” reproduces and centers whiteness by creating “asymmetrical and unevenly legible ‘intimacies.’”

23 *Paradise: Love* asks viewers to confront their whiteness through an experience of discomfort but then reaffirms white privilege by highlighting the vulnerability of white women.

In the following analyses, we trace how the “meaning of whiteness rests, in part, on the mobility of whiteness: whiteness moves” and whiteness “disaffiliates from ‘old’ racisms; cultural racism and neo-Nazism.”

24 *Samba* and *Color of the Ocean* appear to address racial difference by focusing on interracial relationships or encounters, but the emotional focus continues to rest on the fragility of white femininity. We read past the emotional precarity ascribed to the white female characters and expose how the depiction of intersections of racism and sexism in intimate encounters remains a tool for reaffirming (European) whiteness. Alternative connections that may lead to future solidarities emerge only when we critically dissect the way fragility emotionally attaches to white female bodies and follow the camera to the brief images that pose different questions, questions about possible futures beyond the racist politics of white fragility.

**White Women as Fragile “ Helpers”: *Samba* (2014) and *Color of the Ocean* (2011)**

While offering radically different narratives from *Paradise: Love*, two films from the 2010s, *Samba* and *Color of the Ocean*, also depict forms of white women’s vulnerability and narrate struggles for intimacy that embody personhood as female whiteness. In these films, the focus shifts explicitly to depictions of the kind of emotional abuse white women suffer by living in the contemporary, neoliberal economic climate of central Europe, which has created a sense of emptiness and loneliness in these women’s lives. Both films portray main characters who, presumably, have money and successful careers but who seem to suffer some form of emotional breakdown or crisis. They try to cure their emotional injuries, it seems, by trying to “help” African men. While the men appear to trigger empathy in the white female characters, the narratives prioritize empathy for the plight and struggles of white women. In both films, Black female characters are narratively and visually sidelined.

The connection between the white female protagonist and the Black man is depicted as a form of transgression in both films. The erotic tension of such (racially, nationally, and economically) “transgressive” encounters is a trope of romantic films, comedies and tragedies alike. This conventional narrative
trajectory, for example, is taken up in classics such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (*Angst essen Seele auf*; West Germany, 1974) and in films such as *Lila Says* (*Lila dit ça*; Ziad Doueiri, France/United Kingdom, 2004), where interracial relationships are shown as transgressing social, political, or economic boundaries. What is particularly interesting in the two films we discuss in this section—and what echoes Fassbinder’s classic and connects the two films to *Paradise: Love*—is the way in which they explicitly thematize unequal power relationships only to end up in a strange reversal: the drama lies in the fact that white women largely *fail*, in spite of their position of dominance and power, to establish possible political solidarities with Black men, while Black women largely fall out of the narrative altogether. This failure of their gesture of compassion and support affectively refocuses the narrative on white women. Rather than creating empathy for or a sense of solidarity with undocumented or refugee characters, the demand for emotional empathy attaches itself to the white female main characters. Our analyses offer a way to uncover how this kind of racialized and gendered empathy constructs and affirms European belonging as white. We also read for openings that allow us to challenge and rethink these emotional charges.

*Samba* is different from *Paradise: Love* in many ways. Directed by two filmmakers of Moroccan and Algerian heritage, *Samba* seeks to provide a relatively nuanced story for the undocumented Senegalese protagonist working his way toward becoming a chef. Samba becomes involved with Alice, a white female main character who suffers from burnout due to her corporate job and wants to engage in something meaningful by volunteering to help migrants obtain legal status in France. Alice’s first “case” leads to the encounter between Samba and Alice and an apparent attraction. She, prompted by him, immediately breaks the rules of encounter and slips him her phone number.

Beyond a sense of purpose, however, Samba appears to bring joy back into Alice’s life. When first introduced, Alice appears shy and awkward, clutching a purse full of sleeping pills; once she meets the life-affirming Samba, she starts to show courage, acts playfully, expresses her passions, and reduces her medication dosage. Despite the fact that he is constantly threatened with deportation and incarceration, has to take on new identities by buying fake IDs, and is continuously searching for employment, however precarious, it is ultimately *his* joie de vivre that supports *her*. He is caring and sensitive, always willing to attentively listen to Alice. While evident, this strange reversal is not problematized in the film.

Viewers learn little of Samba’s background, his reasons for coming to France ten years earlier, or his family situation. The film explores Alice’s story as one of emotional breakdown and suffering, while equating her emotional fragility with his legal and economic insecurity. This is particularly evident when Samba appears at the aid center after being released from prison. When he asks, “What should I do?” he is asking how he should survive, work, maintain housing, and manage the stress and constant fear of being caught.
After her repeated suggestions to avoid stations and spaces where he is more likely to be caught, his frustration gets the better of him and he begins yelling. She shouts back about her exhaustion and the difficulty of her job, where a document is always missing or a line empty. The film seems to set up their frustration as parallel: they scream for roughly the same length of time, apologize to each other, and then Samba expends additional energy ensuring that Alice is not mad at him.

During the ensuing conversation Alice confides that she suffers burn-out from long workdays without recognition, treated “like a slave.” Alice describes “losing it” and smashing a cellphone on the head of one of her colleagues and pulling his hair. She confesses that she started therapy and took time away from the corporate world. Her volunteer work with refugees is part of this attempt at therapy; however, she continues to complain of insomnia and still tends to lose her composure, even in her volunteer position. It is not until she becomes friends and then lovers with Samba that she starts to slowly heal. Maybe as an effect of this role reversal, Samba does not explicitly thematize Alice’s reactions to Samba as a white savior complex. From the start of the film, white women’s fragility is privileged over the precariousness of undocumented life in Europe. Samba appears never to lose his sense of joy and his will to keep trying, even after he is beaten up by another migrant he met while in detention and thrown into the Seine.

The relationship between Samba and Alice becomes cautiously romantic in the second half of the film. In a scene that strangely resembles Paradise: Love, Alice gives Samba directions on how to massage her shoulders (see fig. 5.5). Although Samba and Alice have hugged in friendship before, this is one of the first scenes of erotic touch between the two. Alice’s fragile, thin body and pale white skin are set in contrast with Samba’s tall, muscular frame, his strength, and his dark skin. The sequence starts with a conversation in Alice’s apartment the morning after a birthday party for one of Alice’s coworkers at the volunteer center. Alice and Samba sit on the sofa, rather far apart, and Samba starts the conversation by asking Alice if she is feeling better. The conversation focuses on her mental health and well-being as she points out that she was able to reduce her medications. They sit back down on the couch, closer together, and Samba starts to gently massage Alice’s arm. He asks her if she can feel anything. She then instructs him to try her shoulders instead and asks him to continue when he implies he might stop; they still address each other in the formal “vous,” but the camera emphasizes their physical closeness. Close-ups of his hands massaging her shoulders and arms and Alice closing her eyes and sighing as she enjoys his touch emphasize the erotic tension of this scene; she leans back to press against his body as she instructs him not to speak. The camera frames their faces together in a close-up, highlighting his attentive gaze on her and her closed eyes. A noise from the bathroom interrupts their intimacy. They run into the bathroom as cold water is spraying out of the broken showerhead. Alice screams hysterically and loses her
composure as he calmly tries to stop the water. The film then cuts to a scene where Samba instructs Alice to pet ponies in the city park to calm herself down, since petting horses and ponies, as he has pointed out before, has always worked for him if he needed to calm down.

This scene of evolving intimacy that relies on Samba’s care and worry for Alice’s mental health is followed by a scene where Samba and Walid run from the police during a raid of the construction site where they work illegally. Their legally precarious situation is highlighted and aligned with her mental instability, but, in a stereotypically gendered way, the men’s emotional resilience is contrasted with Alice’s emotional fragility. Even when Samba’s fear of heights threatens to overcome him as they try to escape the police over the Paris rooftops, the film emphasizes the humor of the situation rather than focusing on his vulnerability in that moment.

The fact that Samba manages to stay in Paris at the end of the film is enabled by a coincidence: he ends up with the jacket and passport of the man who beat him up, threw him into the river, then fell in himself and drowned. Due to the documentation they find in the jacket of the drowned man, the police assume that Samba is the one who is dead. The death of one migrant enables another one to stay, but this violent death of a migrant character is not the focus of the dramatic tension. Instead the film focuses on how Samba, finally, has a way to stay in Paris and to, presumably, continue offering emotional support for Alice. Alice, with Samba’s emotional support and wearing his favorite “good luck” T-shirt, secures a job in the corporate world. She can return to her life, possibly more productive and emotionally resilient. By taking on the identity of another African man, Samba can continue his life as a (now legal) African refugee in Paris.
The film ends with Samba dropping Alice off for her job interview. She enters the room confidently, wearing his T-shirt under her suit. The song playing is Syreeta Wright and Stevie Wonder’s cover version of the 1969 song “To Know You is to Love You.” Wright sings, “When I am down and feeling sad, you always comfort me. To know you is to love you,” as the camera cuts to Samba, petting ponies in the park, then confidently walking along the streets of Paris, disappearing into a crowd of Parisians on the busy sidewalks.

Reading for precarious intimacies in *Samba* exposes fragility, whiteness, and femininity as well as the affective responses this film attempts to trigger. Visually, the film emphasizes Alice’s fragility, her nervous gestures, her very pale skin, and her petite frame, especially by contrasting her to the tall and muscular Samba. In this film, arguably in contrast to *Paradise: Love*, the neoliberal reintegration of the white, female subject seems successful. The relationship ends “happily” as he stabilizes her emotionally. In the end, he can stay in France legally and they both secure jobs, as a chef and in management, respectively. Alice discovers the papers Samba uses to assume his new legal identity, but it was not her plan or her effort that saved him. He can stay in Paris—to be there for her, to help her function—because another person died. The film’s focus on Alice highlights the desire for intimacy as a need of white women in order to function in or in spite of neoliberalism. The way in which this film recenters whiteness also redeems a neoliberal logic of productivity by suggesting that women can live as neoliberal subjects as long as they receive intimate support to do so. In her new job, a confident Alice takes charge of a room full of men, while Samba departs for a successful day of work, petting the horses he sees along the way. Recentering whiteness (and curing white fragility) is symptomatic of an attempt to make the crisis of the white subject central for constructions of European intimacies; neoliberalism, then, is something white women simply need to learn how to (emotionally) cope with.

Only in the last moments of the film is this particular intimate dynamic potentially undone—by showing the two characters apart from each other: Alice in the boardroom and, in a much longer sequence, Samba leaving his new job. In these images, Samba appears to take ownership of Paris, confidently and with joy. In contrast to some of the other films we discuss in this book, the main character Samba is firmly a part of Paris by the end of the film. The film, however, does not show solidarity in intimacy; Samba claims space by reestablishing a heteronormative intimacy of black resiliency and white fragility. Indeed, the fact that Samba spends time petting horses at this point signals his earlier vulnerability as a psychological—rather than political—problem that can now be adequately managed.

*Color of the Ocean* returns to a European space of nonarrival similar to what we described in the film Welcome in chapter 1: the beaches and detention camps, here not of northern France but of the Canary Islands. The film follows the plight of Zola and his son Mamadou, who try to enter Europe
from Senegal but are captured on the beach and end up in a refugee camp on Gran Canaria without much hope for obtaining legal refugee status. Similar to the films we discussed in chapter 1, the focus of the story is not their arrival but their journey: their quest for legal recognition, their escape from bureaucracy into illegality, and the violent, tragic death of Zola, who does not survive an attack by traffickers who try to steal his money. Implied at the end of the film, Mamadou will be allowed to stay in Europe because his father died. *Color of the Ocean* intertwines Zola’s unsuccessful attempt to arrive in Europe with the dramatic story of a border police officer, José, who processes new arrivals, and the story of a German woman, Nathalie, who is on vacation on the island. As Nathalie plans to go for a swim in the ocean, she witnesses the arrival of people on a boat, among them Zola and Mamadou (see fig. 5.6). Nathalie is emotionally affected by what she sees and tries to help by bringing water and, similar to Alice in *Samba*, slipping Zola her phone number, which seems to give her the sense of purpose she appears to lack in her life. In trying to help Zola and his son with money for their journey to France, Nathalie defies her boyfriend, Paul, who advises her against helping the migrants. Ultimately, however, Zola falls into the hands of traffickers who beat him up to steal the money Nathalie gave him. Zola dies of the injuries he sustains in the attack and his son, now orphaned, will be allowed to grow up in an orphanage somewhere in Europe.

The white European characters—Nathalie as well as the initially stern, closed-off border officer José—undergo emotional development in this film. In the end, Nathalie appears guilty and confused, but possibly changed. Similarly, the border police officer has changed his attitude—not necessarily because of his encounter with Nathalie or Zola but by learning to express empathy after his sister, a drug addict, dies of an overdose. Zola, in contrast, does not evolve into a multidimensional character. He is driven solely by his
quest to safely arrive in Europe with his son. Even though he manages to protect his son on the dangerous journey across the ocean, the reasons why he left Senegal remain unclear, which, in turn, casts a shadow of doubt on his decision to leave and expose his son to these potentially deadly dangers in the first place.

The tension that carries the narrative derives from Nathalie’s defiance of her partner, Paul, and her determination to help Zola and Mamadou. Paul, in addition to trying to convince her not to get involved with helping refugees, orders her to turn off her cell phone, and Nathalie argues with him about empathy and guilt. In the first quarter of the film, the conversations between Paul and Nathalie take place online and over the phone. They mainly revolve around him pleading with her not to offer her help; he assures her that someone will take care of the migrants. She appears shocked by his cold detachment—a detachment that is mirrored in their relationship, in their mediated conversations, and then in their misunderstandings and awkwardly cold conversations in the dark hotel room when he arrives to join her at the hotel in Gran Canaria.

In one brief scene toward the middle of the film, for example, the camera moves from a close-up of his face in the foreground to Nathalie sitting on the bed dressed in a black minidress, putting on her shoes, as they get ready for a New Year’s Eve party. Paul looks down at her and she asks him, “Is everything ok?” The camera then focuses on her, with his back covering half the screen as he simply answers yes. Such conversations illustrate their lack of trust, the secrets she keeps from him, his suspicion of her, and the lack of compassion and passion between them. At the party, minutes before midnight, Paul tells her he loves her and that she can tell him anything. In response, she simply kisses him. This act of physical intimacy papers over their missing emotional and intellectual connection. Again, they are framed as distant from each other, filmed first through a mirror and then, as the camera shows a close-up of their faces kissing, in the cold, blue, flashing light of the techno club.

In contrast, Nathalie’s brief encounters with Zola emphasize their connection. The two do not exchange many words and they do not touch, but their conversations are intense and focused. In the short scene where Nathalie hands Zola the money she hopes will help him and his son reach the European mainland, the camera emphasizes their repeated eye contact. Nathalie’s attempt to help with this money, however, not only fails, it arguably is the reason the traffickers attack Zola, ultimately leading to his paralysis and death. When Nathalie visits Zola in the hospital (again, without Paul knowing), Zola lies in bed, immobile, and entrusts her with his thoughts: if he was dead, he knows that his son would be able to stay. Nathalie tentatively counters, saying, “Fortunately, you are not dead.” The camera shows close-ups of both their faces as they look at each other. José interrupts the conversation and orders Nathalie to leave. When she returns to the hospital, after
yet another fight with her boyfriend, she finds out that Zola has died. José’s response to this news is “Everything is good,” since Mamadou can now stay in Spain. Had Zola lived, he and his son would have been deported. Without her involvement, neither he nor his son would have been able to find a way to enter Europe. The film narrates Zola’s plight and death; however, this is done mainly through attention to Nathalie’s struggles, reactions, emotional breakdowns, and fights with her boyfriend.

Aside from Nathalie, the film introduces another legal European resident: the border agent José, who is depicted at first as an emotionally closed-off and stern man. In spite of the fact that he seems dismissive of and annoyed by the migrants who arrive on the island, José appears to develop a sense of connection to Mamadou, mainly after the boy’s father dies. Yet, his emotional development occurs not primarily because of his encounter with the child but because of his feeling of guilt for having been unwilling (and possibly unable) to help his drug-addicted sister. To further complicate José’s story, the film shows a conversation he has with his sister’s dealer, a man José knows to be one of the migrants who arrived on the island. Aside from confirming stereotypes of African drug dealers in Europe, the dealer character never takes shape in the film and mainly serves as a tool to illustrate José’s reform from a cold and closed-off man to a character who can express empathy. The shifted focus from the stranded migrants to José, who continues to sternly enforce the European border regime, further emphasizes how the film does not manage to create emotional depth in the African characters. Nathalie, after her failed attempt to help Zola, seems to bond with José in a scene that further emphasizes the importance of the European characters as the tragic figures in the film. Their failed attempts to find or maintain intimate relations, to “help” migrants, and to find meaning in life more generally bonds them together. Both are tragic figures in that their failures are explained as a result of the violent, emotionless structures of the neoliberal Europe they find themselves operating in and, maybe more important, that operate on them. The potentially “happy ending” for the child is eerily similar to the ending of Samba, where the death of one migrant secures the legal status of another. The fact that the child is now “safe” in Europe seems to give Nathalie and José a sense of satisfaction and purpose. By focusing on white characters’ emotional struggles and on the lessons they learn, as opposed to the migrant characters’ struggle over life and death, the film, in a perverse twist, recenters whiteness.

The water, as a metaphor in the film, though, remains ambivalent. The ocean water is a symbol for death—vast, threatening, and turbulent—but water is also a symbol for life and hope. Water in this film, reminiscent of the use of water in the French film Welcome, takes on a double meaning: the dry landscape, the threat of dying of thirst when the migrants arrive on the beach, and the threat of drowning in the ocean are contrasted with Nathalie swimming and diving in the ocean, the desire for an ocean view, and the beauty of the beach. The landscapes—mountains, dunes, dusty-looking cities, fences,
and temporary detention centers—stand in contrast with the sleek hotel, nice dinners, and dance parties the tourists enjoy. Similar to *Paradise: Love*, in *Color of the Ocean* the resort space illustrates the emptiness of the tourist experience and the missing connection between Nathalie and Paul. Yet, this safe space exists like an island on an island.

At the end of the film, all the characters look out onto the ocean. Nathalie, who seems to reconcile with Paul, moves into a much brighter room with an ocean view in their posh vacation resort. José’s journey with Mamadou is interrupted by yet another arrival of a boat full of migrants on the beach. He rushes there with Mamadou, who also helps to hand out drinking water to the migrants. The final sequence shows a parallel movement of José and Mamadou. The camera follows José as he walks down the beach toward the water; he appears to stop right where the waves come crashing to shore. The camera then cuts to Mamadou and follows him, walking down toward the water as well. In the final image, Mamadou is staring out onto the ocean as the image freezes and slowly fades to black. The ocean, for Mamadou, symbolized their journey, the threat of drowning and dying of thirst on a boat, and, ultimately, the loss of his father and family. At the same time, Mamadou staring into the distance is an image of a child looking toward his future. In this case, the suggestion is that Mamadou will have a future in Europe, enabled by the death of his father. While there is a way in which these final scenes can be read as a clear critique of how Europe processes migrants; how people are driven to lie, hide, risk their lives, and die; and how some Europeans’ “help” is clumsy and ignorant, the image also, however uncomfortably, suggests hope: at least the child has a chance for a better future. This hope redeems Nathalie, and the fact that José appears to have taken Mamadou under his wing seems to partially compensate for the racism and emotional coldness he displayed toward migrants at the beginning of the film. The ambivalence of the ocean spaces originates in the film’s focus on the struggles of the white, European characters. The white subject, a victim of neoliberalism and suffering from having to enforce or observe the coldness of the European border regime, remains the central affectively charged figure in this film.

In this way, *Color of the Ocean* contains moments that challenge the white savior complex in interesting ways. Trying to help is portrayed as both necessary and naive, and it is in this tension that the film develops its main white characters’ tragic journeys. The white Europeans protect fortress Europe, but they also appear to suffer from its effects. Being agents in this fortress, then, enables these intimate encounters with the other, in this case the African refugees, but the film also depicts these encounters as preventing any of these intimacies from being successful. In a strange twist, showing the white European subject as the (emotional) victim of fortress Europe—as the one who suffers from the way Europe enables but then thwarts encounters between European citizens and migrants—offers a telling insight into, again, a form of European racism: the construction of the privileged burden of being white.
Neoliberalism, Racism, and White Fragility

If we return to the central question of this book project—namely, how stories of intimacy can create a different matrix of connection and love that does not perpetuate the neoliberal, colonial regime of racialized and gendered violence—the films we discuss in this chapter do not offer any answers. In our analyses, we read for what is wrong; we are compelled to read as killjoys, for the feminist killjoy is, as Ahmed observes, “assembled around violence; how she comes to matter, to mean, is how she exposes violence.”

Reading these films for precarious intimacies exposes how the gendered politics of whiteness work for and with colonial and neoliberal structures. The emotional victimization and fragility of white women becomes visible as a racist and sexist trope (although we acknowledge, in the case of Samba, the ways in which the film challenges other racist tropes). In the three films we discuss, moments of touching skin or intimate contact refocus the narrative on white female fragility and vulnerability. Tellingly, then, the attempt to show the intersections of race and gender in these intimacies results in recentering whiteness and the “caring” white subject as female. This recentering is enhanced by the fact that Black female characters are absent, lack agency completely, or are depicted only on the margins of the narrative. Any critique of neoliberal economic structures, then, functions in gendered and racialized terms. First, white people (mainly women) appear as the victims of neoliberalism, ignoring a reality in which white wealth is built on the backs of Brown and Black people. Second, neoliberalism is mainly depicted either as a problem for white women or as something that, ultimately, white women can or must learn to cope with as long as they receive (emotional) “help.” At the same time, Black men develop strategies that exploit white women or transform the economic problem into a psychological one that can be managed with self-care and a productive chosen career. The three films capitalize on a double gaze: the male gaze onto white female bodies and the objectifying racist gaze onto the Black male body. Our readings uncover these kinds of political traps and read through them to expose the violent, gendered constructions of racism under neoliberalism.

It is in this context that we end this chapter by evoking images from all three films as possible ways to expose not only how whiteness and white femininity carry certain emotional, narrative charges but also how these emotional charges are part of the violent politics of European racisms. This means doing “violence” to the white characters in the films by reading them against their emotional charge. Images expose certain structures of violence but also offer glimpses into how they could or need to be different. In Paradise: Love, Teresa’s exploitative camera and her racist objectification of the Kenyan men she meets, her isolation in her hotel-resort, and her guarded walks on the resort beach expose her as just another white European tourist in a tourist resort: exploitative, sheltered, and isolated. Samba ends with
Samba confidently disappearing into the urban space of Paris. For the final minutes, Alice is not the focus of the film; he does not need her. The characters in *Color of the Ocean* stare out at the sea; Nathalie moves into her room with an ocean view as people continue to arrive, stranded at the beaches; Mamadou brings water to the new arrivals and looks toward an uncertain but European future. In these sequences, the perspectives of the white European characters appear limited. Moments in the films undercut and defy the emotional charges of intimacy in the service of whiteness. The characters of Teresa, Alice, and Nathalie call for emotional solidarity; they are depicted as vulnerable and fragile, but at certain moments, the films—and certainly our readings—expose their complicity in the violent regime of European racism.

In reading *through* these political-emotional structures, we try to read against the emotional charges put forward by these films. By redirecting the gaze (to return to the image of Brian in *Land in Sicht* at the beginning of this chapter) we deconstruct, while at the same time continue our search for openings that allow for different readings, for shifting and changing emotional directives. This practice of reading is an act of careful analysis but also an act of defiance against the politics of emotion put forth in these constructions of gendered whiteness.