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BORDER-CROSSINGS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST EUROPE

BY RENATA REDFORD

“People? ... [Y]ou never know where to find them. The wind blows them away. They have no roots, which hampers them a good deal.”

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,
Le Petit Prince, 1943

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to cross a border? The charged debates surrounding national borders have inspired a number of interpretations.¹ Borders, often understood as imaginary constructs, are inherently problematic and evolving sites from which to reframe thinking about belonging.² Ultimately, according to John Agnew, borders matter because “they have real effects and because they trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms.”³

In 1987, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, my family left Transylvania under the Ceausescu regime to seek political asylum in the United States. As an ethnic Hungarian and dissident living under the Romanian regime, my mother envisioned a different mode of reality from one colored by darkness and silence.⁴

Upon landing at John F. Kennedy Airport on Thanksgiving, our lives seemed to unfold in Technicolor. Vibrant candy wrappers and Western advertisements reflected the morning light as people pushed past us. As a child, the colors blurred and became aggressive reminders of a new dimension of reality. As time passed, however, memories of food shortages and living under the protection of the American Embassy would fade into oblivion. What we could not know at the time would be how narrowly we had escaped the chaos that would follow Ceausescu’s assassination. Although having lived in Transylvania we were not strangers to the equivocal nature of borders, it would be decades before we would be ready to return to Romania or reconcile our own border-crossings.⁵ Yet ours is but a small chapter in

the same narrative that has defined humanity throughout millennia.

During the twentieth century, Europe's borders violently transformed. Between the end of the First World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of Europe's borders were redrawn and reinforced with concrete.⁶ The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires both fell, while various countries either contracted or expanded in size. Although migration was understood as a political act during the Cold-War era, post-1989 the Eastern and Western systems of migration merged in a way that led to the massive migration of people, predominately women, across borders.⁷ In *Women Migrants from East to West*, oral historian Luisa Passerini emphasizes the need for scholars of European migration to study its recent feminization. In this context, Italy's historic location between East and West Europe positions it as a crucial, yet problematic site of migration. As several critics have observed, the borders between the East and West of Europe were always vague and contested as Italy's history of its Northeast border reveals.

As the borders of Europe relaxed, Italy experienced an unprecedented influx of migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and East Europe. In doing so, Italy became a destination culture rather than a country from which people generally migrated.⁹ Seen as threats to an already fragile national identity and to "authentic" Italian culture, migrants are discriminated against in an effort to maintain Italy's imagined cultural and religious homogeneity. Despite Italians' complex history of external emigra-

tion and internal migration – Italian identity itself ethnically defined well into the 1960s – Italians seem to have participated in a collective act of forgetting that suppresses their own history as an *other*.¹⁰ Today Italy represents a receiving culture in which the "category of the 'migrant' is used to redefine Italy's place within Europe from marginal to central as boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are shifted, from Southern Europe to the East."¹¹ In this light, the movement of women from East Europe reflects not only a dynamic set of relations between places and cultures, but also has the potential to reconfigure thinking about gender and identity.

Despite much excellent work on themes of migration, however, Italian scholars have not thoroughly explored the positive role of migrant women writers from East Europe.¹² Indeed, while critics of Italian "migration literature" have studied various writers from North Africa and the Middle East, Italoophone women writers coming from East Europe and Italian transnational women writers coming from the Northeastern border of Italy have gone largely overlooked.¹³ I work from the concept of a "feminization of migration" throughout the breadth of my research in order to examine how intra-European migration plays a pivotal role in the "consolidation of... [an] emergent new European political and cultural space" and transgresses older divisions between the West and the East of Europe.¹⁴ Partially inspired by my private history, my current research projects examine how mobility between the

East and West of Europe gives rise to new forms of writing with a larger project in mind – one that configures new possibilities not only for literature but for the ways in which humans are connected across borders.

During 2011, 2013, and 2015, I interviewed writers Ingrid Beatrice Coman, an Italo-Romanian, and Jarmila Očkayová, an Italo-Slovakian.¹⁵ As two women writers living between both the East and West of Europe, their work represents a new form of writing that exists beyond both their countries of origin and destination. In effect, their work overlaps the memories and cultures of both countries while reimagining new ways of thinking about belonging and identity. Jarmila Očkayová's *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi* (*The essential is invisible to the eye*) (1997) examines a Slovakian woman's desire to find the source of her mysterious illness, conceived during her experience of crossing the border. It is only when she learns to reconcile her Italian and Slav selves that she can expunge her visceral sense of dislocation. In contrast, Ingrid Beatrice Coman's *Per chi crescono le rose* (*For whom roses grow*) (2010) revisits the history of the exploitation of women's bodies under the Ceausescu regime and indirectly creates parallels with the experiences of Italian women under Mussolini.

Aware of the current discourse regarding the feminization of migration, Coman and Očkayová both seek to uncover the private history of the East European female body in Italian. As Coman stresses, "In some way, who has moved across the

rivers of pain and estrangement ... perceives the world more profoundly... To forget is to expose oneself to the [dangers] of the mechanisms of power and violence.”¹⁶

Author's Note: I would like to thank Professor Lucia Re whose early critical readings of this project and rich discussions have been fundamental. I critically examine the style and critical implications of the transnational texts mentioned in this essay elsewhere in my dissertation, tentatively titled “Cartographies of Estrangement: Transnational Italian Women’s Identity between Italy and East Europe,” as well as in several forthcoming articles.

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NOTES

1. See political geographer John Agnew’s “Borders on the mind: re-framing bordering thinking,” *Ethics & Global Politics*. Vol. 1, No. 4, 2008, pp. 175-191, for an extensive discussion of the border studies and current debates.
2. Agnew, “Borders on the mind,” p.2-4.
3. Agnew, “Borders on the mind,” p.1.
4. See Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu’s Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
5. For a discussion of the equivocal nature of borders, see Etienne Balibar’s *Politics and the other scene*. London, Verso, 76.
6. See Richard Robinson, *Narratives of the European Border: a history of nowhere*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
7. See Luisa Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Enrica Capussotti and Ioanna Laliotou, eds. *Women Migrants from East to West: Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe*. Oxford: Brghahn, 2007, p.4 and 9.
8. Ibid. See also Richard Robinson’s *Narratives of the European Border: a history of nowhere*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; for a discussion of the Italian northeast border and the Wilson line’s role in the Cold War, see Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Works on Eastern Europeans as the other of Europe are vast. See Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; Larry Wolff’s *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
9. See Graziella Parati’s *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Although traditionally defined as a culture to which migrants move, Parati extends the notion of a destination culture and refines it as a “new hybrid culture that is the result of both the changes brought to a local culture by incoming people and the influence of that [new] culture on incoming cultures” (70).
10. The research on Italians’ racialization is vast. See Lucia Re’s “Italians and the Invention of Race: the Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913,” *California Italian Studies Journal*, 1(1). 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/96k3w5kn>. Fred L.Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998; Marco Jacquemet, “The
- Discourse on Migration and Racism in Contemporary Italy,” in Salvatore Sechi, ed., *Deconstructing Italy: Italy in the Nineties*. Berkeley: International and Area Studies, 1995; Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.
11. Passerini, *Women Migrants From East to West*, p.8. Although traditionally defined as a culture to which migrants move, Graziella Parati redefines the notion of a destination culture as a “new hybrid culture that is the result of both the changes brought to a local culture by incoming people and the influence of that [new] culture on incoming cultures” (70).
12. There are a few exceptions regarding the study of Italophone writers from East Europe: namely Sonia Sabelli, Nora Moll, and Emma Bond.
13. In my forthcoming article, “The Peculiar Case of Italian Migration Literature,” I offer a more nuanced view of the current debate on migration literature in Italy, which I suggest is a product of an inherited critical framework from fascism.
14. My study is partially a response to Luisa Passerini’s focus on women’s migration in her introduction to *Women Migrants from East to West: Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe*. Oxford: Brghahn, 2007.
15. I carried out this research thanks to the gracious financial support of the UCLA Center for European and Eurasian Studies and the UCLA Center for the Study of Women.
16. Interview with Ingrid Beatrice Coman, summer 2011. Italics are her own.