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MISSING IN ACTION

On Eastern European Women and Transnational Feminism

BY DENISE ROMAN

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM and discoursing about gendered practices of globalization appear to be the most widespread feminist theoretical frameworks in women's studies departments across North America. To the student of Eastern Europe, however, this is a closed scholarship, limited only to histories and geographies that circumvent Eastern Europe, as if communism did not fall there seventeen years ago, as if women from Eastern Europe do not have an existence or a voice. I am not talking about the absence of a voice in general, since rigorous studies about Eastern European women's lives do exist in some departments of anthropology, sociology, history, political science, and Slavic studies. I am talking about those very institutionalized outlets (women's studies departments) that should have embraced and encouraged the expression of Eastern European women's issues and narratives through transnational feminism, after more than fifty years of confinement behind the Iron Curtain.¹

The dominance of transnational feminism in women's studies departments across North America today is already a reality—which, since I am also using transnational feminist concepts, I celebrate, although from an Eastern European standpoint. Still, I cannot keep from noticing that the version of transnational feminism prevalent today seems to merely rearticulate, in more sophisticated forms, a postcolonialism of earlier times. Clearly, the topics studied are narratives belonging to the women/gender/sexualities of those nations that have come out of colonialism in the twentieth century and can be located exclusively on the continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Virtually absent are the problems of Eastern Europe, as are those of a modern Europe as the European Union. Is transnational feminism just another name for postcolonial feminism in North-American women's studies departments today? Is it the right time for feminists to regain transnational

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feminism by making it more inclusive and thereby addressing not only the problems of the postcolonial world but also those of Eastern Europe, of Europe as the European Union, and of multicultural Europe? In other words, the problems of a Europe that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains? Otherwise, whose transnational feminism are we talking about?

To date, the East-Central and Southeastern European states have joined or are about to join the European Union. Geopolitically, there are almost no separations from Western Europe—other than the historical treatment of Eastern Europeans as “lesser” Europeans, and Eastern Europe as the traditionally “backward,” “uncivilized,” “other,” “Oriental” half of Europe. Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova’s works represent luminary introductions to this (mis)representation.² Here the author’s positionality seems to be crucial. Apparently, it takes an Eastern European to notice what Europe is or is not about. While an Eastern European will immediately see herself as a peripheral European, or a “minor” European—to apply one of Rosi Braidotti’s figurations³—a Western European will almost never see herself as a Western European, but as the European par excellence.

For me, the main source of Eastern European women’s exclusion from transnational feminism as of 2006 is linked to the fact that the transnational feminism prevalent today draws its origins, as stated above, from postcolonialism and its critique of eurocentrism, which targets Western Europe exclusively. Yet this restrictive definition of Europe excludes Eastern Europe altogether. Moreover, it puts the critique of eurocentrism at odds with Eastern Europe’s postcommunist discourse of “return to Europe,” of imagining Europe as a model to be emulated, of a home lost under communism and Soviet political and Russian cultural colonialism.

For historical and geographical reasons, East-Central and Southeastern European states never participated in the history of worldwide colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, as Western European states did. It is true that they practiced ethnic discrimination and a serf-based class system throughout their history, as well as the racial politics of WWII and the Holocaust—inside their borders (as a matter of policies, legislation, or old customs). The only sound international politics these states practiced during most of their history up to modern times was defending, more or less successfully, their frontiers against great historical powers—the Czarist Empire (later the Soviet Union) and the Ottoman Empire. Hence, if one looks for eurocentrism in Eastern Europe, one must locate it in the inner fascisms and racisms, not in colonialism, which is a mark of Western European history.

It is Eastern Europe’s task in postcommunism to positively valorize and rescue, on the democratic side of a multicultural European Union, its discourse of “return to Europe.” Braidotti discusses such democratization of the European Union as a decentering of Europe’s historical role as center, or “major,” into a “minor” European Union belonging in a world of “flexible citizenships.”⁴ Eastern Europe should address this new, inclusive definition of Europe, otherwise its own “return to Europe” could turn to an outright “return to eurocentrism,” and should be countered for the sake of not repeating sad histories.

Nevertheless, for transnational feminism to enter into a dialogue with Eastern European women and a democratic notion of the European Union, first it must be ready to open a discussion and make these distinctions, and not simply spread an indiscriminate and collective politics of “European guilt” from West to East.

Ultimately, it is history that may represent the crux of the problem. As it stands now, transnational feminism appears as a dehistoricized and geographically amorphous theoretical framework. It seems to have in mind a romanticized, generic notion of Europe, as if taken from some prudish nineteenth-century British novel. It may not even be the fault of transnational feminism altogether, since it may unconsciously reproduce, without subverting (which should be at the very essence of postcolonial theory) the dominant European discourse of “Europe as Western Europe exclusively.” It may also be so because transnational feminism in North America comes mainly out of departments of English literature and film studies.

The result is nevertheless the same: the exclusion of Eastern European women’s problematic from transnational feminism, and, insofar as transnational feminism is dominant today, from the majority of women’s studies departments across North America. Another result is blindness to the current transformation of Europe into a multicultural “minor” one, as the European Union—in other words, of redefining Europe in postmodern terms.

Many other issues arise in the process of integrating the problematic of Eastern European women into transnational feminism. Some of them are empirical. For example, albeit within the feminization of poverty, Eastern Europe’s postcommunist marketization was favorable to small and even middle-size businesses led by women. On the contrary, according to postcolonial/transnational feminism, while integral to globalization, marketization hurts small, women-led businesses in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Women are faring better in postcommunism (than women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America) at the mid-sized entrepreneurial level, and one of the reasons is the hard

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school of the communist double and triple burden.⁵ Another may be the absence of full-blown globalization and large-scale industrial and agricultural takeover by multinational corporations.

The problems of Eastern European women are not so much about the veil and female genital mutilation—dominant in postcolonial and transnational feminisms.⁶ Nor are they about regions ravaged by war and militarization. Although the wars in former Yugoslavia have brought these issues to light, they surfaced under the rationale of a nationalism ensuing from the fall of communism—not from Western colonialism. There are no great religious divides between Muslims and Christians, especially regarding the position of Muslim women, or between Arabs, Christians, and Jews, as these stem out of postcolonial and transnational feminisms—although ethno-religious minorities of these faiths do live throughout Eastern Europe.

Besides marketization, the problems of Eastern European women are those of unprecedented consumerism. Only recently has the trafficking of women from and through Eastern Europe made it into academic research.

Theoretically, as stated before, there is first and foremost the discourse of “return to Europe.” Thus, there is no antagonism and no anti-European politics or activism comparable to that emanating from the transnational/postcolonial discourse. Marxism is virtually rejected across Eastern Europe because of an identification of Marxism with communism and with the repressiveness of the gulag. But Marxism and post-Marxism stand at the core of postcolonial and transnational feminisms.

In the vein of the postwar, anti-fascist discourse of Europe, Eastern Europe talks about “ethnicity” and “ethno-religious identity,” not about race or color, which is the discourse of the U.S. civil rights and postcolonial movements—and now of transnational feminism. Both the Jewish and the Roma minorities were persecuted in Europe (and in Eastern Europe) for most of their existence on that continent because of their “alien” and “diasporic” nature and due to commercial competition. Yet should we disregard them now simply because they live in the “arrogant” colonizing European subject, which stands at the core of the critique of eurocentrism? In other words, can transnational feminism dialogue with minorities? Are those minorities dwelling within a powerful major subject, such as Europe (or, for a theoretical extension, the U.S.), not worthy of intellectual interaction? Are other “minor Europeans,” such as Eastern European women, not worthy of discussion simply because their assumed Europeanness is stained by the heritage of a colonialist (Western) European past to which they do not belong?

There is also a problem of methodology. As I mentioned before, even when taught in women’s studies departments, scholars from English literature and film studies are the ones predominantly authoring transnational feminism. Granted that these departments were the places propitious to the flourishing of postcolonial literatures in the first place. But Eastern European women’s problematic, on the other hand, is authored by scholars who have predominant social sciences backgrounds (anthropology, sociology, history, political science). Although there are scholars who study Eastern European literatures, this happens only in historical and national contexts, usually focusing on pre-communist times or dissident literatures under communism. Hence, there is no postcolonial approach to Eastern Europe as a region that, for more than 50 years, was under Soviet political and Russian cultural colonialism. This also has an explanation in the preeminence of Russia and the Soviet Union in Slavic studies in North America (that, to this date, continue to incorporate even such non-Slavic cultures in their departments as Romanian, Hungarian, or Albanian).

Ultimately, is the Eastern European discourse of “return to Europe” irreconcilable with the postcolonial/transnational feminist critique of eurocentrism? Braidotti suggests that a sense of dislocated European identity—which the democratic notion of the European Union as “minor” Europeanness provides—can counter the resurgence of fascism and racism on that continent. Since Eastern Europeans are the traditional “European Others” of Western Europe, then Eastern European women’s function becomes crucial for a democratic redefinition of Europe: By assuming and valorizing their historically dislocated Europeanness into an empowered “minor” European identity devoid of racism, fascism, and sexism. It is on these premises that a dialogue between Eastern European women and the European Union is possible, as well as between Eastern European women and transnational feminism. The invitation is hereby extended.

Notes

1. I wrote this article after teaching a few courses in various departments (women’s studies and sociology and anthropology) at institutions in Massachusetts and California. There I discovered that some courses and syllabi, although organized as transnational feminism and critique of eurocentrism, did not include any topics on Eastern European women, the European Union, or any modern definition of Europe other than as perennial colonizer. I began looking at what was being taught in other women’s studies departments and found a similar situation: the near exclusion of Eastern European women as of 2006. True, I did find some isolated courses on select topics about Eastern European women at the women’s studies departments at Stanford University and Bowdoin College, for example, but these represented rare cases, while their course

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titles showed that they still functioned under the logic of postsocialist/Eastern European Studies and not of transnational feminism.

2. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) and Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: Of Nomadic Ethics* (London: Polity Press, 2006), 70.

4. Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 70, 79.

5. See also Denise Roman, *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and Kristen Ghodsee, *The Red Riviera* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

6. A stereotypical representation that Chandra T. Mohanty also criticizes in her “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, & Postcolonial*

Author’s note: Article © by Denise Roman. Please send comments by email to denizr@ucla.edu. An extended version of this article will appear in Denise Roman’s revised paperback edition of *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania* (Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).



A native of Bucharest, Denise Roman has published articles about Eastern Europe in various North American, French, and Romanian journals, such as Nationalities Papers, Balkanologie, Women’s Studies International Forum, Balcanii, and Sfera Politicii. Dr.

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◉► Faculty Curator Grants

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Deadline is December 15 ◀◉



Notes by Katie Oliviero

“Freedom has a sexuality, and it is not queer,” Janet Jakobson observed in her keynote address opening UCLA’s 2006 Queer Studies Conference. With this concluding statement, Jakobson, a professor of Women’s Studies and director of the Center for Women and Research at Barnard College, succinctly braided together the themes of citizenship, heteronormativity, performance, the state, and queer possibilities in a post-9/11 world that threaded through the two-day conference.

In her address, Jakobson described the interplay between religion, morality, and gender in order to explicate how the Bush administration’s rhetoric of freedom ties protestant understandings of heteronormative sex to ethics of war and neoliberal capitalism. She argued, for example, that U.S. aid given to relieve AIDS and malaria epidemics in the world deploys a language of “reducing suffering” and a strategy that when examined more closely, is less about trying to contain the AIDS epidemic than it is about reducing opposition to the U.S. military agenda. “Reducing AIDS suffering” becomes a strategy for—in the wake of 9/11—shrinking potential recruiting zones for terrorism. When that objective is pursued through AIDS policies that evangelize protestant notions of marriage rather than use of condoms and ignore different cultural attitudes towards marriage and chastity, heteronormativity becomes a U.S. military export—and a mandate. In a highly polarized international relations logic configuring a nation or citizen as either “for or against” U.S. military policy, it is also profiles one’s proximity to either terrorism or devout U.S. citizenship. Like unquestioning support for the war itself, marital heterosexuality stages one’s devotion to American notions of freedom and democracy: the good citizen is emphatically straight, and marriage is positioned as a watchdog of core American values.