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Making Precarious Lives Visible: Imagining Europe's Marginalized "Others"

Margriet van der Waal

Introduction

In the early morning hours of 16 October 2012, two men, Radu and Adrian, entered through the unlocked fire escape of the Kunsthal, an art museum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, which at that moment was exhibiting artwork from the privately-owned Triton Collection, and took with them five paintings and two pastel drawings by Picasso, Matisse and Guigan, amongst others.¹ A friend in a getaway car was ready on standby near the museum, and within minutes after entering the museum drove them, and the works, away from the museum. After hiding the stolen goods in the house of Radu, the three travelled to Carcaliu in eastern Romania, where Radu and Adrian grew up. After unsuccessful attempts to sell the works, the seven "manageable sized" works of art - insured for about 18 million Euros² - were first buried, and later, allegedly, burned by Radu's mother, Olga, in a wooden stove in her home.³ Although it has not been established beyond doubt what had happened to the works of art, they have - until now - not yet been located, and their incineration remains a probable explanation of their fate so far.⁴

¹ The following works were stolen: Monet's *Waterloo Bridge, London* (1901) and *Charing Cross Bridge, London* (1901), Picasso's *Tete d'Arlequin* (1971), Gauguin's *Femme devant une fenetre ouverte* (1888), Matisse's *La Liseuse en Blanc et Jaune* (1919), Meyer De Haan's *Autoportrait*, (1898-1891) and Lucian Freud's *Woman with Eyes Closed* (2002).

² The paintings were insured for about double their market value, a standard practice when rare pieces in private possession are lent to museums. The theft and the subsequent pay-out by the insurer to the owners has been called "a stunning piece of business" (Ed Caesar, "What is the Value of Stolen Art?" *New York Times Magazine*, 13 November 2013).

³ Lex Boon, "Het kunst van het stelen," <https://www.nrc.nl/kunsthal/>, 2014, accessed 25 June 2017. See also Andrew Higgins, "A Trail of Masterpieces and a Web of Lies, Leading to Anguish," *New York Times*, 26 July 2013 (accessed 27 October 2017).

⁴ The mother, although having testified that she burned the works of art, later retracted her testimony (Boon, 2014).

Three years later, Romanian-Dutch author, Mira Feticu published the novel, *Tascha*, subtitled: "The theft from the Kunsthal". In this novel, she tells a hitherto obscured, second story related to the artwork theft. Whereas the media attention focused mainly on the logistics of the theft and the subsequent police investigation in the Netherlands and Romania, the much-speculated value of the specific artworks, and the possibility that Radu's mother had burned the artworks, the novel presents as its main story that of Radu's young girlfriend, who was one of the suspected accomplices to the crime, kept in custody by the Dutch police, and questioned in Romania about the whereabouts of the works of arts, rather than that of the robbery. The real-life Natasha remained more or less marginal in the media reporting on the theft and subsequent police investigation, with minor references to her mostly being about the aid she provided to her boyfriend's mother, Olga, to bury the artworks, and the fact that she worked in the Dutch sex industry.

In much of the media reporting on this widely discussed art heist, the coming together of crime, prostitution, and Eastern Europeans, got tied together in a productive and well-known social imaginary that construes Eastern Europe as a problem for Western Europe. This case of *Balkanism*⁵ functions as a good example of the one-sided and stereotypical representation through which Eastern Europeans are often homogenized and stigmatized as (one of) Western Europe's criminal and problematic others.⁶ In fact, in the Dutch media the thieves were described as offenders who were already known in Romania as "gangsters" before the Kunsthal robbery and who, while being involved in criminal activities (dealing in stolen goods, drugs and being involved in prostitution), were *living and working* in parts of Western Europe, implicitly referring here to the negative and often criticized effects of the intra-European free mobility of goods, persons, services and capital.⁷

The author, Feticu, however, makes a clear case of the "greater crime" that had been perpetrated by the thieves, namely that of sex trafficking.⁸ However, rather than simply confirming and perpetuating the existing circulation of *Balkanist* repre-

⁵ See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkan*, Oxford University Press, 1997 and Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Sissy Helff, eds., *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*, Rodopi, 2010.

⁶ Cf. Laura Moroşanu and Jon E. Fox. "No Smoke without Fire?: Strategies of Coping with Stigmatised Migrant Identities," *Ethnicities* 13, no. 4 (2013): 438-456 p. 442. See also Duncan Light and Craig Young. "European Union Enlargement, Post-Accession Migration and Imaginative Geographies of the 'New Europe': Media Discourses in Romania and the United Kingdom," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26, no. 3 (2009): 281-303.

⁷ See for example Corrb Vos Davidson, "Wie is wie in de Rotterdamse kunstroof?" *Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau* 11 August 2013. The populist right-wing party, Party voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party) opened a website where Dutch nationals could register their complaints about Central and Eastern European living in the Netherlands. (Reuters, "Dutch allow Wilders' anti-Pole website, EU critical," Reuters, 10 February 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-dutch-immigrants/dutch-allow-wilders-anti-pole-website-eu-critical-idUKTRE8191ML20120210>, accessed 30 October 2017.

⁸ This statement is made not only in the novel itself, but also in interviews given by Feticu to the media. See for example Renate van der Zee, "Als je arm bent grijp je alle kansen," *NRC Handelsblad* 20 June 2015.

sentations, her novel both documents the theft of the artworks and the official police investigation into the case, but also tells the story of a young (ca. 17-year old) woman, Tascha, who had been coerced by her pimp boyfriend Radu to move from rural Romania (Carcaliu) to urban Netherlands (Rotterdam), where she was to work in the sex industry to earn a living for both of them and other dependents by providing sexual services advertised on the internet.

With the question about the visions of Europe and Europeans being the focus of this publication, a careful reading of this literary text warrants our attention, not only because it tells the story from the unexpected and hitherto more or less “invisible” perspective of an accomplice to the crime, but also because the text renders imaginatively the life of a marginalized European, whose existence is seldom symbolically rendered, as it is in this case, through literary and fictional mechanisms employed by the novel.⁹ The literary text poses important questions about the effects European integration or Europeanisation processes have on those who are economically vulnerable and exploited, that is: living at the (both literal and figurative) margins of European society. In this literary rendition of historical facts, a severely exploited migrant woman working in the Dutch sex industry is made visible and thereby given subjectivity that transcends the stereotypical, shallow representation of her that existed so far. This contribution is an analysis of this subjectivity-rendering process in Feticu’s text and questions that were followed in the process of analyzing the novel were: How and where and who is visible or invisible in this discourse that makes sense of Europe and Europeanization? How does Feticu’s text help us ask questions about Europeaness?

In the remaining part of this chapter, I will, after a brief conceptual exploration of the notion “precarity”, turn to the novel’s imaginative engagement with Europe’s “own” precarious other to investigate how a fictional narrative such as *Tascha* gives voice and agency to the liminal experiences of precarious European subjects, whose visibility, if rendered semiotically at all, is oftentimes either as “spectacles” of misery or quantified as numbers in the form of numerical data.¹⁰ In

⁹ The field of sociology is better stocked with examples of research that pays attention to the lives of such marginalized persons. See for example Anna Triandafyllidou, *Irregular Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe: Who Cares?* Routledge, 2016, Agnieszka Rydzik et al., “Humanising Migrant Women’s Work,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 64, no. Supplement C (2017): 13–23.

¹⁰ Examples (albeit problematic ones!) of more qualitative, aesthetic representation exist, of course with regard to impoverished Europeans, although the question is to which extent and what kind of voice these representations have given the migrant/mobile vulnerable persons. I’m thinking here specifically of the 2017 project by Danish artist, Kristian von Hornsleth, entitled *Hornsleth Homeless Tracker* in which he fitted homeless people in London with GPS tracking devices which enabled them to be followed at about 28.000 euro per person. If they managed to maintain this GPS tracking process for a year, they would share in half of the proceeds (see <https://www.hornslethhomelesstracker.com/>). A second example, from 2014, is from Malmö where the Swedish collective, Institutet, exhibited two homeless Romani migrants from Romania in the Konsthall museum for a “fee” of 150 euro per day, as part of the exhibition “The Alien Within: A Living Laboratory of Western Society”.

my discussion I will show that what the novel does is to convey the situated knowledge of, to use Peter Brown's formulation, an otherwise "eminently forgettable person"¹¹ living marginally under precarious conditions, and as such stimulates the reader to critically rethink "Europe" and Europeanness.

Precarity

The various crises and transformations that Europe has had to face during the past years do not need to be recounted here extensively: from the global financial crisis of 2008, to the fiscal and Eurozone crisis soon afterward and the migration or refugee crisis on the one hand, to the current concerns about European transformation and possibly even disintegration, the breaking down of the European welfare state, the continued development of neoliberal, flexible labour markets, and the rise of illiberal democracy on the other hand. As a result Europe has been perceived to be under siege from all kinds of directions. Although analysts, politicians, and commentators pay much attention to the effects of these transformational processes on political institutions, attention is also being paid to the often-times negative effects (a form of "slow violence", to speak with Rob Nixon¹²) of these dynamic processes on the lived lives of Europeans, which have led to an increasing situation of insecurity, uncertainty, risk, vulnerability and dependence across a range of occupations and conventional economic classes.¹³ This situation is well contained by the notion of "precarity".¹⁴

It is beyond the purpose of this chapter to provide an extensive discussion of the concept's history, and a basic delineation should suffice. Millar, following Pierre Bourdieu, traces the concept's introduction and rise in the social sciences and points out its use as a reference to a particular "labour condition", characterized by job insecurity/unemployment, social exclusion and poverty, and caused mainly by neoliberalism and the decline of social welfare.¹⁵ The concept is, following the work done by Judith Butler¹⁶, for example, also used in another sense, to indicate the existential and ontological condition of vulnerability, exposure to pos-

¹¹ Peter Brown, "Remembering the Poor and the Aesthetic of Society," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (2005): 513-522.

¹² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹³ See for example Donatella della Porta, et al., eds., *The New Social Division: Making and Unmaking Precariousness*, Springer, 2016.

¹⁴ I opt for "precarity" rather than risk or vulnerability, agreeing with Louise Waite that using this term precarity enables one to "incorporate the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs. (Louise Waite, "A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?" *Geography Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 421). For an overview of the concept, see Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, Pelican, 2015.

¹⁵ Kathleen M. Millar, "Toward a Critical Politics of Precarity," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 6 (2017).

¹⁶ Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 134 – 151.

sible suffering, and risk of losing attachment to those social relationships that could provide care and protection.¹⁷

People experiencing or facing precarity (used in the first sense) often find themselves in volatile, insecure labour situations, which have received attention in scholarship often, although not exclusively, as research on the informal sector.¹⁸ Labour precarity traverses a range of economic practices, but has an evident relationship with the informal sector. The informal sector includes not only domestic work, service sector jobs in hotels and restaurants and the construction sector, to name but a few, but also the more shadowy side of the economy that includes illegal practices such as women's trafficking, prostitution and crime, although these practices are left outside of consideration in policy-based research, even though they constitute economic activity of some form or another. As Anca Parvulescu, in her study on trafficked women in Europe makes clear, the existence of such practices in the shadows of the economy should be understood not as "side-effects of Europeanization, but as some of the forms that Europeanization takes".¹⁹ The free movement of goods, services, money and persons, introduced by the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, has been an important driver of this Europeanization, and has become one of the hallmarks of Europe.²⁰

Given the novel's treatment of art theft and sex work in a European context, it is clear that it is exactly this mobile, informal sector of Europe that is being put imaginatively on the table. It might help us, therefore, to think here of Europeanization not exclusively in terms of official political-institutional integration and economic growth and development, but as a complex process with less visible and less desired (at least for some) dimensions too.

The novel

The purpose of my reading of this novel was to examine how literature engages with a precarious subject, specifically that of a trafficked Eastern European in a Western European context. How does the novel give voice and agency to the experience of such a precarious person who is economically and socially marginalized and vulnerable, and whose symbolic representation as an Eastern European woman seldom overcomes grossly simplified stereotyping? These questions are important ones to ask, because as Majorie Stone contends, literary and cultural studies have left the pressing and growing problem of trafficking more or less un-

¹⁷ For an example of this approach, see Kathleen Stewart, "Precarity's Forms," *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2012): 518-525.

¹⁸ Karin A. Siegmann and Freek Schiphorst, "Understanding the Globalizing Precariat: From Informal Sector to Precarious Work," *Progress in Development Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 111-123.

¹⁹ Anca Parvulescu, *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe*, University of Chicago Press, 2014, 2. For a discussion of the informal sector in Western Europe, see Dominique Boels, *The Informal Economy: Seasonal Work, Street Selling and Sex Work*, Springer, 2016.

²⁰ Ettore Recchi, *Mobile Europe: The Theory and Practice of Free Movement in the EU*, Springer, 2015.

touched²¹, while more attention has been paid to this global phenomenon among feminist social scientists.²² Furthermore, the attention that has been paid in literary and cultural studies to (the lack of visibility of) precarious and impoverished persons and the effects thereof on personhood is also rather scant.²³

In her fictive rendering of the historical facts, Mira Feticu presents in three parts the unsuccessful investigation by two Dutch police officers to investigate the case of the stolen works of art. For this purpose they travel twice to Romania, together with Tascha, the girlfriend of Radu (one of the thieves), who has been accused of complicity with the crime because she first hid the artworks in their home in Rotterdam, and later aided Radu's mother, Olga, to bury the paintings in the small town of Carcaliu in Romania. The narrative relates the investigation notably through the perspective of Tascha, but not exclusively, to achieve a form of polyphony in the narrative. Tascha's perspective is complemented with, even challenged by those of other characters, such as, for example, one of the two Dutch policemen ("the tall one", who "looked deep into your eyes when speaking to you", p. 9²⁴), Adriana, the curator of European art at Romania's national art museum who was brought along as expert by a potential buyer to verify the authenticity of the artworks, and who only later realized that she had seen with her own eyes two of the Kunsthal's missing artworks, and the uncle of one of the accused, *Ome* (uncle) Trăienica.

A secondary storyline, however, is also interwoven through flashbacks into the story. This story relates the personal history of Tascha: her youth in a rural backwater in Romania, the death of her sister because of a car accident, her parents' divorce, her strong emotional dependence on her father, her falling in love with Radu and her growing dependence on him, their move to Rotterdam, where she is forced into prostitution by her pimp boyfriend,²⁵ as well as her own decision, after she is released from custody in the Netherlands, to return to sex work to secure an income, which she was to save in order to pay the medical bills of her ailing father in Romania. Although Tascha in the novel has a real-life counterpart, the 19-year

²¹ The work of Barbéran Reinares and Parvulescu are clear exceptions (Laura Barberán Reinares, *Sex Trafficking in Postcolonial Literature: Transnational Narratives from Joyce to Bolaño*, Routledge, 2014, and Anca Parvulescu, *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe*, University of Chicago Press, 2014).

²² Marjorie Stone, "Twenty-first Century Global Sex Trafficking: Migration, Capitalism, Class, and Challenges for Feminism Now," *ESQ: English Studies in Canada* 1, no. 2 (2005): 31-38, p. 35.

²³ Some exceptions exist, of course. For example, Françoise Král, *Social Invisibility and Diasporas in Anglophone Literature and Culture: The Fractal Gaze*, Springer, 2014 and Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard, eds., *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*, De Gruyter, 2014.

²⁴ In-text references are to the novel, *Tascha* by Mira Feticu (2015). Citations are translations from Dutch by the author (Margriet van der Waal).

²⁵ The author's intention to make visible the "greater" crime, that of human trafficking compared to the stealing of the artworks, is echoed in the sentiments of a female police officer: "And she, the woman in the uniform, thought human trafficking (to be) worse than robbery, regardless of what had been stolen" (p. 42).

old Natasha, a migrant from Romania to the Netherlands, she also represents in many ways other “Natashas” who cross international borders every year to work, willingly or under coercion in the sex industries of Europe and America.²⁶

Marginal Europe

It is in this second storyline that the vulnerable and precarious Tascha is given a history and background that situates her as a marginal, European subject. The flashbacks to the past sketch the context of how Tascha ended up as a prostitute against her will in one of Rotterdam’s most impoverished regions, the neighbourhood of Rubroek/Crooswijk. These flashbacks create the social, economic and cultural context to Tascha the character’s decisions and actions.

The dual setting of the narrative, both in Rotterdam and Romania, not only connects the various locations and suggests meaningful but complex and complicated entanglements with each other, but also demonstrates the importance of seeing space as relational to the coming into existence of social subjects.²⁷ By using specific literary mechanisms such as flashbacks and focalisation by a specific character, the novel explores not only the art theft, but also the recent political and economic transitions in Romania. Thus, the end Ceausescu’s regime and political revolution is seen as a promise of the start of a new life (p. 96), while the contemporary dire living conditions in postsocialist, rural Romania suggests that the promise is yet to be fulfilled for many peasants living in rural areas. The part of Romania where Tascha grew up is depicted as a backwater that failed to catch up with postsocialist economic developments and socio-political transitions following the post-Ceausescu era.²⁸ Rather, the people of Carcaliu seem caught in the hardship of social, economic and cultural turmoil. A dire lack of employment (i.e. legal economic opportunities) resulted in all of the able-bodied people in the small, rural towns to move away to bigger urban hubs in Romania or further away across Europe (“The big thieves go to you. The real whores too”, says one of the local police commissioners to the Dutch police officers, p. 35) in search of “a better life” (performing seasonal labour, such as picking strawberries in Spain, p. 21, for example), where life itself might “begin anew” (p. 11). Those who are left behind seldom

²⁶ See in this regard the study by Victor Malarek on the global trafficking of women (Victor Malarek, *The Natashas: The New Global Sex Trade*, Viking, 2003). For another literary treatment of this topic, see Yelena Moskvich, *The Natashas*, Serpent’s Tail, 2016.

²⁷ In the burgeoning field of “studies on the relationship between space and literature, the notion of “spatialization” is used to denote this relationship. See for example Rob Shields, *Spatial Questions*, SAGE, 2013. See also Robert Tally, *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, Routledge, 2017.

²⁸ A factor that also alludes to the vulnerability and marginality of the community from which Tascha comes is their Lipovene background. The Lipovenes are a minority group from Russian descent living in rural parts of Romania. In a sense Tascha and her community is thus twice marginalized in Romania: not only as impoverished, rural peasants, but also as members of a cultural minority group that possesses very few forms of capital.

hear anything from these migrants (“how many didn’t hang themselves because of loneliness,” says the commissioner, p. 54), who are thought of as being dead: “But the ones abroad, once they have tasted from the good life, you never see them again in Carcaliu. Dead!”, explains Nicu, the commissioner’s assistant (p. 61). These economic migrants are as dead as the town itself (e.g. p. 20): the village is now one big graveyard (p. 85), where the dogs left behind die of hunger and despair (p. 54). The novel makes a strong case for the fact that labour migration unraveled the social fabric of the community (e.g. parents leaving a child behind to find seasonal labour elsewhere in Europe, p. 113), with few more persons remaining in the rural town than a hand full of severely impoverished individuals whose own vulnerability and precariousness is painfully evident in the absence of their support networks who moved elsewhere in search of income and the promise of a better life (e.g. Dănuț, who left his ill mother behind to earn a living in Hungary. Upon his return two years later she is dead, because “no one came by to bring food for more than one month”, p. 110).

Tascha’s hard life is rendered through passages that describe her youth and vulnerability as young woman in this rural context where there is little to be had except for a relationship with a man such as Radu; a man who, like his peers, has nothing beyond a criminal record and claims of ownership over women, their bodies and their lives (p. 48 and 49); bodies that signal the possibility of access to an income of some sort and attendant promises of material goods to be consumed (cars for example). The narrator makes clear to the reader how pivotal Tascha is for Radu’s own economic persistence: “everything, their house and Radu’s car, was being paid for by her” (p. 20, see also p. 168). Her own opportunities for an independent life were stifled when as a teenager she fell in love with Radu, dropped out from school, and was subsequently violently (e.g. p. 66, 88) pressured to go with him to the Netherlands, where she was to earn a living for both of them through sex work. Tascha complied in search of someone to love her (p. 89), a wish which is implicitly related to her experience of her family’s breaking up after the death of her sister and split-up of her parents. It is with this given that the precariousness of life (the other meaning of the concept, as used by Judith Butler, for example) is examined through scenes about the harrowing grief Tascha’s mother after the death of her eldest daughter (Tascha’s sister) because of a car accident (see for example p. 108) and which leads to the parents’ split-up.

Despite Tascha’s hardship, she is a naive and simple person, whose knowledge is gleaned from “the university of life” (p. 49), rather than higher-level formal education (such as Adriana, who also has a rural background, but completed university with flying colours, p. 79). Tascha is someone for whom all had to happen the way it did “because she still had skin over her eyes” (as one of the policemen had said) (p. 187). But, despite Tascha’s simplicity, she manages by the end of the novel to create a situation that enables her to earn a living for herself. Being certainly restricted in her range of options, she chooses to return to the sex industry (p. 173)

with the meaningful difference now being that the income she generates is her own, to spend as she chooses. The result suggested by the novel is that Tascha is now set *en route* to some kind of better life: “Just a short while and life could start” (p. 189), she muses at the end of the novel. The reader understands that her life is now, upon release from custody, not really *better* in a quantitative sense, but there is a strong suggestion that Tascha views herself as having more agency.²⁹ She daydreams about returning to Romania within a few months with a “few thousand euros on her account”, which she would use for the medical treatment of her father (p. 184) and of a subsequent blissful, but naive, domestic life together with him (p. 185), illustrating painfully the limited range of options available for marginalized, socially vulnerable persons like herself.

This harking back to a peaceful life in Romania is credible, if only because the situation in Western Europe is, at times, presented to be hard and relentless too, with the effect that easy binaries between here and there, us and them are problematized. Tascha’s sexual exploitation is not only caused by her own boyfriend, but the treatment by other men (in the Netherlands) show a similar disregard for women’s bodies: once back in the Netherlands and on the street again, she is groped by hairy arms, “thick fake tits” a male voice shouts at her (p. 173). Also Trăienica realizes that the “better life” in Western Europe is more of a shimmering dream than reality when he experiences severe hardship during his visit to his son in Manchester.

A final literary strategy is the game being played in the novel with “truth”. The text questions and problematizes clear-cut, but facile and problematic meaning-making structures as a strategy to present events not as objective, historical facts, *as is* or *was* through an omniscient narrator, for example, but as subjective experience. One means through which the novel achieves this complicating of knowledge is by relating the events of the plot as narrative in narrative. In other words, events are presented as specific people’s perspectives on events. In a number of cases characters relate the events that had happened as second-hand accounts to other characters, instead of being presented as narrated *facts*. For example the titular robbing of the artworks from the Kunsthal is related as second-hand narrative by an uncle (Trăienica) of one of the thieves to the police (p. 168 - 172), and an old woman on the ferry tells the art expert Adriana about the initial police investigation in the town and provides her perspective on the small community of Carcaliu (p. 66). Furthermore, the person Tascha is not only presented by the narrator and through thoughts, flashbacks and dialogue, as well as the interactions of other characters with her, but also by the problematic, denigrating semiotic representation of her on Dutch online discussion forums (p. 174-175), while Tascha’s account to the police

²⁹ For a valuable contribution that critically considers (and deconstructs), through reference to the categories of gender, sexuality and critical political theory, the conventions and practices that construe the practices through which we understand the sex industry, see Rutvica Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

of her involvement with the artworks is presented as the verbatim version of the interrogation as written down by Nicu (p. 15).

Discussion

Arundathi Roy once said that she thinks of globalization as “a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it's no longer possible to see it.”³⁰ This resultant invisibility because of the obscurity that cloaks our social and geographical margins is tackled head-on in Feticiu's novel, and makes visible the precarity (economic vulnerability) and precariousness (social vulnerability) of one particular, socially marginal, European individual. At the same time, the novel also asks us who we consider to be Europeans, and if persons such as Tascha (or Radu, for that matter) would qualify for this label, as opposed to the obvious Europeans such as the two Dutch policemen, representing the rule of law) and Adriana, embodying education and culture (at some point she reminisces about her visit to the Venetian Biennale, p. 62). How do the mobility of Tascha and Radu relate to the lifestyle movers, student-elite and professionals of all kinds that benefit from the intra-European mobility created by the Maastricht Treaty, whom we easily and readily designate as Europeans?

The novel *Tascha* problematizes a glib and easy success story about Europeanization and formulates questions about the extent to which a single Europe exists by suggesting that there are multiple Europes that hold different truths for those who live in it.³¹ This multiplicity also holds for how the notion of “Europeans” is being expanded to include marginal and marginalized subjects whose semiotic representation is often-times problematic and one-sided if present at all.³² The attractive cosmopolitanism embodied by Europe's successful mobile classes is juxtaposed here with the more gritty, “vernacular” cosmopolitanism of a different kind of mobile class who lives by the “slow knife” of everyday, structural violence

³⁰ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011.

³¹ The idea of multiple Europes is from Chris Rumford, “The Strangeness of Europe,” *Comparative European Politics* 14, no. 4 (2016): 504-522.

³² In a different context, the South African anthropologist Fiona Ross has used the binary “raw” and “respectable” to investigate the means through which marginalized (impoverished) persons in South Africa craft their lives in adverse contexts. With reference to Agamben's notion of “bare life”, she concludes that this kind of research enables one to understand the “genealogy of bareness that is deeply embedded in local ways of understanding persons, relationships, history's effects, and life's possibilities. In other words, rawness and decency are fully social modes of being, produced and lived in the ordinariness of everyday worlds as they are shaped under the press (sic) of different political regimes, historical processes, cultural models, and the everyday social interactions they make possible.” (Fiona Ross, “Raw Life and Respectability. Poverty and Everyday Life in a Postapartheid Community,” *Current Anthropology* 56, no. S11 (2015): S106). This conceptual pair might be a very useful heuristic to investigate the world making of a character like Tascha, but such an enquiry extends my purpose here.

- so aptly phrased by Das and Kleinman.³³ The novel asks us to consider the kind of subjecthood that is afforded to someone like Tascha who falls outside of the boundaries demarcated by conventional liberal-democratic notions of the individual and individual subjectivity. Apart from the obvious economic and physical hardships that Tascha experiences, there is also the matter of her socio-cultural exclusion. She seems to lack the kind of political agency that we conventionally associate with citizens of modern, liberal-democratic states and seem to have very few opportunities to participate in public life. Her most “public” participation is on a sex website and as the subject of media reports and harrowing, humiliating online comments about her involvement in the art theft and work in the sex industry (p. 174 and 184). Although it is not the topic of my contribution here, the possibility of political action, their limitations, and possible alternative political actions for a marginalized subject like Tascha to be undertaken is a pressing and urgent matter to reflect on further if we want to better understand the political implications of a broad range of social subjectivities at the cusp of our current times.

Aesthetic texts such as literary narratives, documentaries and non-fiction novels about European mobility and intra-European migration are important political sites through which we might reflect on the foundational and constitutional principles of “the social” of Europe. Specifically, critical engagement with such texts allow us to investigate the kind of knowledge yielded by the textual and aesthetic representation of those marginalized Europeans living in urban *and* rural precarity, and to consider how our cultural archive has captured and processed the effects of Europeanization and crises during the past decades. A few years ago, Rita Felski’s pessimistically diagnosed the state of European Studies as follows: “Anyone surveying the scholarship on the present and future of Europe cannot help being struck by the sovereignty of the social sciences (...) Where, in the debates about the present and the future of Europe, are the art historians, the literary scholars, the philosophers, the cultural critics? Not entirely absent to be sure, but their role remains modest, often marginal.”³⁴ By having turned our attention to the kind of knowledge (or at least a set of questions) about marginal and marginalized Europeans in *Tascha*, Feticu seems to have replied to Felski, by using literary means to imagine a life for Natasha, or as she puts it, “to give (Natasha) a voice”.³⁵

³³ Cited by Veena Das and Shalini Randeria, “Politics of the Urban Poor: Aesthetics, Ethics, Volatility, Precarity. An Introduction to Supplement 11,” *Current Anthropology*, 56, no. S11 (2015): s11. For more on a critical approach to cosmopolitanism in literary studies, see Kristian Shaw, *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, Springer, 2017.

³⁴ Rita Felski, “Introduction,” (special issue, entitled “A New Europe?”) *New Literary History*, 43 (2012): v.

³⁵ A Quattro Mani, “‘Há, ik heb je!’ Mira Feticu schreef roman over de schilderijenroof uit de Kunsthal,” *Cultuurpers* 3 July 2015. <https://www.cultureelpersbureau.nl/2015/07/ha-mira-feticu-schreef-roman-schilderijenroof-kunsthal/>, accessed 23 June 2017.

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