WHAT DOES IT MEAN to cross a border? The charged debates surrounding national borders have inspired a number of interpretations. Borders, often understood as imaginary constructs, are inherently problematic and evolving sites from which to reframe thinking about belonging. 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.”

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.

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.

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. 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 the Eastern and Western systems of 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 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. 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.” 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. Indeed, while critics of Italian “migration literature” have studied various writers from North Africa and the Middle East, Italophone women writers coming from East Europe and Italian transnational women writers coming from the Northeastern border of Italy have gone largely overlooked. 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. 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. 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

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NOTES
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.