

“Furs are Like People, None is Alike”
Ennobling Pelts and Representing Labor in postsocialist Romania*

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ABSTRACT:

If we look at the conditions of production of objects, we can better understand formation of new types of subjects. The paper examines changes in the processes of production as well as new understandings of labor and personhood brought along by subcontracting activities, under which a large part of Romania’s ‘light’ industry presently operates. The paper investigates the ways in which labor becomes invisible by a manipulation of broader economic categories as well as local erasures within the processes of production. This invisibility of labor further transforms workers’ subjectivities and their position toward the coats they manufacture. Current conceptualizations of labor are compared to previous discourses and practices, formed in socialism.

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I've been in the factory for two weeks already, following the phases of production: from tanning, to dyeing, sorting, cutting. Today is the day of 'the sewing sector'. One of the managers told me to go and sit next to Maria, who has been working 'in the machine' for almost twenty years. The sector is formed of two long rows of women, sitting at their small sewing tables, surrounded by samples of pelts, and other accessories that will be put together to form a funky fur coat. The coats they are making have to look identical to the model brought by the Italian customer, which hangs in front of the sewing row. Maria gives me some chocolate and talks to me while sewing, as if her fingers are detached from her, like tiny machines having a rhythm of their own. There are a few boxes around every desk: two with pink and light blue dyed rabbit pelts, others with strips of leather, metal buttons shaped like flowers, embroidered pocket leather squares, tags with the Italian brand-name embroidered on them, funky textile strips, with stylized crosses on them, which will connect the blue and pink 'rabbits' together. It is like a multicolored puzzle of leather, textile, metal, and fur, waiting to be put together. The model is hanging in front of the row—it looks as if somebody took it from a glossy fashion magazine, so perfect in its funkiness and so remote from this place.

Ileana, the woman sewing in front of Maria's machine, is amazing. I look at her fingers in awe: in ten minutes, she put together everything and now she is applying the strips and pockets. I'm telling her: 'you make a piece of art here'; she looks back at me and starts laughing, so that others will hear it to: 'hear what this one said: I'm making a piece of art here!!!' Then she turns back to me and says: 'you should tell the ones from the upper [levels] ...they are just yelling at us.' Maria intervenes: 'this is how we learned to be: whipped! When the foreigners come and stand next to us, we start shaking so much that we can no longer work...' Ileana tells me she gets 30.000 lei (less than 1\$) for assembling all these pieces in a coat. Depending on how well she organizes her time, she works between one hour and one hour and a half on a coat.

From the price they get for assembling a coat, Maria and Ileana shift to the type of coats they are making. Maria says to me: 'Look, we make coats for Satanists. Don't you see the satanic cross?'—showing me the stylized motif in shape of a cross, which is embroidered on the pocket leather squares as well as the textile strip connecting the pieces of leather and rabbit fur together. She continues 'of course, if they [the foreigners] pay well, we [here, the factory] do everything...' And then, turning to me a piece of leather, with an English text and other motifs embroidered on it, Ileana asks me: 'here is it written in English?' and, after my nodding, she asks me to translate into Romanian. I say in Romanian—"Iadul e pentru eroi"—Hell is for heroes. 'God forbid!! And here?' showing me another piece, embroidered in a different style, but with a

similar text. ‘The same!’ They pass the word to other workers sitting in the front and in the back—now it is proved they are making coats for Satanists, or, as they put it, referring to the hair of the rabbit pelt, ‘the satanists’ rabbits’.¹

Maria is almost done with her boxes. She is assembling the last coat of this ‘satanist’ model. The last pieces come together; she is sewing the pocket squares, and connects the leather with the rabbit pelts by sewing the embroidered strip on their margins. She looks at the strip and says it won’t be long enough to cover all the margins length, but she is still trying to arrange it as such that it perfectly fits. She finally succeeds and tells me: ‘everything is set to come fix to a millimeter; nothing is left. They know everything!’ ‘They’ here stands for the people who ordered these coats and send all these embroidered pieces and tags from abroad. For a moment, I have the vision of an industrial global Panopticon, in which these workers and their labor are being ‘watched’ from a point far beyond the factory management. It is as if the place of the socialist state as a more personalized political site was taken by more invisible and thereby more subtle global sites of control.

The lunch break starts. Another worker comes by to say hi and brings a glass of water. She drinks and then looks in the glass: ‘I wonder how much I could fish from here’, meaning how many hairs are in the glass of water. Maria looks at me and agrees: ‘well, I guess we got to have a blanket inside [she shows me her chest] of how much hair we breathe.’ I’m thinking of the blanket growing inside me.

Various themes and images permeate this fieldwork narrative: issues of labor control, particular understandings of labor and products, relations the workers establish or cancel out between themselves and the products they are making, changing meanings of work, sensorial regimes surrounding formation of labor as practices and meanings. Starting from these analytical tropes, this paper will explore the formation of labor as a representation on the shopfloor of *Nurca*, the fur factory where I did my research. I suggest that a perspective on labor as representation opens up a framework of analysis in which one can better understand the connections as well as the ruptures between a locale of production and sites of consumption. I argue that one should consider labor as not a unitary category, but as a multi-tier representation, formed through distinct, but simultaneous processes of erasure, inalienability, and appropriation. I suggest that erasure becomes visible in the ways the workers talk about the coats they are making as being “coats for Satanists”; in the same time, however, they stress the effort and energy they

¹ I would like to stress that it was not I that changed their view by translating the text—they had figured it out from before by noticing the cross, but their belief was perhaps strengthened by my translation.

invest in the production process by using poignant remarks on poor labor conditions and harsh managerial practices. I see here a manifestation of the inalienability of labor, for, even though the workers ‘erase’ the labor from the Satanist coats, they ‘keep’ it by acknowledging their hard work. Appropriation represents another dimension in the formation of labor as representation. I consider appropriation as a analytical site in which one could link the regimes of meaning that inform the current architecture of ‘labor as representation’ to former economic and social configurations of socialism. In the second part of the paper, I look at the ways the erased labor, which I see manifested through the workers’ attributing immoral connotations to the fur coats they make, mirror in fact other erasures that take place through the politics of configuration of economic categories for the global market.

The factory

The fur factory *Nurca*² is located in one of the counties that had been heavily industrialized during socialism, the Hunedoara county of western Romania. As a result of political orders from the “center”, many branches of heavy and light industry had been developed in the area—e.g., steel, armament, chemicals, wood, fur coats, etc.—which determined the constitution of a large labor force. The fur factory held a significant prestige in the fur industry during socialism. Its products had been very well received abroad and were treated as high-demand commodities, i.e., rare and luxurious goods on the domestic market. When I asked a manager to tell me how it was “before”(that is, during socialism) he said: “before, one talked about the Western market versus the Eastern market. There was a high competition between them. The *CAER*³ fixed the terms ... we were not even able to produce as much as the market asked for back then.” That is, he stressed that, ‘before’, two main markets were competing for placing orders for fur coats produced by this factory. Even though these orders were regulated by a more powerful institution—i.e., COMECON, a certain prestige was reflected upon the producer as well. The factory was prized and therefore was *visible*. As that manager said, “when they

² This is not its real name.

³ C.A.E.R. stands for Consiliul de Asistență Economică Reciproca or Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). The creation of COMECON in 1949 was determined by USSR interest in maneuvering and controlling the economic exchange among the soviet satellites, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe included in Warsaw Treaty. Behind the ideology of economic and scientific collaboration between the socialist countries, there was clearly drawn economic and political hierarchy among these countries and their relationship to USSR. The COMECON was formed after the model of western Common Market. It was dissolved after 1989.

would look at the label and see our name, they would need nothing more [to be convinced of the product quality]”.

As workers and other told me, fur coats manufacture and trade represented a flourishing business in late socialism in the region. People with ‘connections’, that is, who belonged to the factory management or had key positions in the factory, would open up their small business. They would use the factory technology to manufacture their own produce. Small business flourished around the factory and, as I was told, there was a high demand of the fur coats on the domestic market.

However, in the summer of 2002, nobody was standing in any queue. The store of the factory was empty. The saleswoman told me that only foreigners passing through the town, on their way to Hungary, would come in and sometimes buy coats. Many other people I talked to, ranging from managers to workers, offered me a similar narrative: “Nobody wears fur coats in Romania now. What should people buy them when nobody wears them and they are so expensive? Only foreigners could buy them!” “Yes, they are beautiful, but nobody buys them anymore. People now buy winter coats, which are much cheaper. One can buy several coats with the money you pay for a fur coat!”

In 1996, the factory became privatized as a shared company with Romanian private capital, with the employers and pensioners owning 72% of the shares. In 2001, 90% or more of production went to export. There are two major lines of production: one that produces manufactured pelts and another, that is finite product-oriented. More specifically, the first line entails the same technological process, whereby the raw skins are transformed into the future texture for coats and other fur products; however, the process stops at the moment when the pelt is ready to be manufactured into products.

I will mention that the raw skins are sometimes imported from abroad (Turkey, Italy), and sometimes external customers place orders on manufactured pelts, and not the finite products. These customers represent intermediary points in a more global chain linking various sites and stages of production. For example, the Romanian fur factory imports raw sheep skins from Italy, a type of sheep skin which could not be found on Romania’s territory, treats them chemically during a very complex technological process, named “ennoblement” (verbatim translation), whereby the sheep skins are made to look as if they were of a more luxurious kind—i.e., more “noble”—animal (fox, etc.). As soon as these pelts are ‘ennobled’, being ready to take the form of coats and other products, external costumers—sometime the same who exported the raw skins, sometime others, from other countries—are taking them out of Romania, to be further manufactured somewhere else.

‘Ennoblement’ refers to the technological process whereby sheepskins are chemically treated in order that, after complex operations of cleaning, dying, stretching, etc., these skins would resemble more luxurious type of pelt (fox, for instance). Of course, no one would pretend that they *are* actually fox pelts, because one could pretty easily distinguish the texture of the hair. However, these ‘ennobled’ skins are transformed into products, which cannot be taken as authentic fox furs, but they no longer resemble a sheepskin texture.

In the same time, most of the fur coats produced in Vidra are not ‘real’ furs, that is, they are not made of wild animal pelts⁴. The fur coats produced here are based on sheepskins, which are further treated to look much nicer, even to transgress their belonging to the ‘sheep reign’. By undergoing the process of ennoblement, these sheepskins are made to look as if they were fox pelts, or some other wild animal. Still, notwithstanding their ennobled look, these fur coats are basically ‘a sheep in a fox clothing’. As I was told, this process of ennoblement is what makes the fur coats produced in Vidra of much higher quality compared to the fur coats produced in the local small entrepreneurial workshops. Since the privatization of the factory, this process of ennoblement has undergone drastic changes, as the foreign customers brought their expertise to the factory in order to make sure that the final products would meet the standards of the international market they are targeting. However, the process per se is not entirely new. (Old workers told me that Secheli, the man-legend⁵ who created the factory “out of scratch”, was the one who brought his knowledge of the fur craft to the factory, knowledge that he accumulated during his twelve years of traveling throughout Europe and learning the craft from foreign furriers). Even though ennoblement existed also privatization, it was done on ‘native’ skin, that is, on pelts not imported, but acquired from indigenous producers—e.g., shepherds, various agricultural organisms of the socialist planned economy, etc. Within the system, there was a specialized institution, DCA,⁶ which would collect all the raw skins and pelts from various producers and distribute them to be manufactured. As one of the former managers of the fur

⁴ In Romanian, a clear distinction is made between those two: *cojoc*/plural *cojoace* designates a fur coat, whose hair is worn *inside* the coat, whereas *blana*/plural *blanuri*, refers to a fur coat that has the fur on the visible surface of the coat.

⁵ I’m using this expression because everybody I talked on a subject related to the factory or to furs in general mentioned him. Moreover, most of the people, when talking about Secheli, put him in a kind of mythical framework, using tropes such as ‘the creator of the factory’, ‘he taught every fur craftsman the art of the fur craft’, “he traveled the entire Europe and came back to establish the factory”, “he was like a father”, “he was persecuted by communists”, “he died poor and forgotten by everybody” (fieldwork notes).

⁶ DCA stands for *Directia de Consum si Achizitii*-The Central Management of Acquisitions and Consumption

factory put it, “ ‘before’, everything was organized. Nothing would be thrown away. Now, there is no longer any kind of structure.”⁷

Along with the disappearance of this institution, the internal circuit of production and distribution of raw sheepskins broke. Particular shepherds prefer to ‘export’ the skins, i.e., commercialize them to foreign buyers, because those pay a better price than Romanian factories or private craftsmen.⁸ Also, in general, it is required that a certain amount of time pass between the acquisition of raw skins and their manufacture. Sheep are cut only during certain periods of the year, time when the manufactures do not plan to acquire new skins or, if they do, they do not have enough money to pay in advance for the raw products. Therefore, they need to be conserved for a few months, until acquisition. Raw skins need conservation and neither shepherds, nor the factories or particular craftsmen, could afford to conserve the skins. During socialism, the DCA was in charge with this type of conservation and it provided specific procedures and facilities for this conservation. After the dissolution of socialist centralized economy, the DCA included, the period of conservation is no longer covered by any intermediary economic agent. So, the circuit between indigenous producers of skins and consumers has been broken.

In these conditions, the skin consumers, in other words, the fur coats producers find themselves obliged to import skins from abroad (Italy, Mongolia, or Turkey). These skins are considered of a much higher quality than indigenous skins, being, as one factory supervisor described them, “lighter, more beautiful, with longer and smoother hair [because] Italian sheep are better bred and fed than Romanian ones”. As she put it, “the autochthonous skins are heavy, peasant-like looking, whereas skins taken from Italians are smooth and light. There are furs which one feels on one’s back and others which are like a feather when put on.”⁹

In a language of figures, this situation translates in the following: in the fur factory, if in 1989 the raw skins were 16% imported and 84 % taken from internal producers, in 2001 the figures shifted: 84% of the skins are imported and only 16% have an indigenous provenience.¹⁰ A significant percentage of the production forms the core of subcontracting operations or what the factory management (and not only)¹¹ calls “operations *lohn*”. The *lohn* designates those

⁷ Interview, June 28, 2002.

⁸ During a conversation I had with a shepherd, he told me he was often traveling to Constanta—situated to the Black Sea, one of the main Romanian harbors and important commercial knot, to sell skins to Arabs who would pay him on the spot. Thus, he no longer had to worry about preserving the skins. (Constanta is 15-18 hours of driving from Sibiu, his location)

⁹ Interview in the factory.

¹⁰ Interview with one of the factory managers.

¹¹ The term is widely known in Romania, especially in sectors related to industry. People, ranging from management to workers, know exactly what one refers to when using the term “lohn”. I haven’t investigated yet the sources of the import of the term into Romanian.

processes whereby external clients send their raw material, together with technology, know-how, sometimes their own experts and fashion designs, to be manufactured somewhere else, where the cost of labor is much cheaper. Thus, they have their products back on a price much lower than if the product had been manufactured in the country of provenience.

The line between *lohn* and a more “classic” process of production, in which the factory has an active role in procuring raw skins to be manufactured for external and internal consumption, is extremely blurry. Whenever I tried to elucidate status of *lohn* production in the factory, by asking the management, they would answer that *lohn* is not so important a segment of production. However, during my stay in the factory, talking with other people, workers and supervisors, situated in a lower hierarchical level, and noticing the production activities, I realized that the *lohn* represented a much more important percentage in the whole production than the management would have ever been willing to admit.

“Doing *lohn*” is a way of economically surviving on the market and existing as a factory. The internal consumption has dramatically decreased and the only way the fur factory can still function is by making contracts in regime of *lohn* with external costumers, who pay a negligible price for the products and the high-standards they require. Notwithstanding these high demands on quality, the products do not offer any trace of the production site—all the tags of these coats produced under *lohn* contractual conditions show only the brand-name of the Italian company that ordered them plus several tags with “instructions for consumers”. Part of this invisibility of production is acknowledged as well by the management. They kept telling me how they tried to shift from their position of sub-contractors to being main contractors, for internationally know companies. However, whenever they tried to make themselves known at international fur fairs, nobody would listen to them.

Also, characteristic to *lohn* structure is the diversity of products. If, before 1989, even though most of the production was already export oriented, the orders would comprise of massive amounts of coats following a limited number of models now, under the *lohn* system, there are much more orders consisting of many models, on different color patterns. As one of the main supervisors told me, “now is much more difficult than ‘before’. ‘Before’, Russians would place orders of 20,000 coats, of 4 models and 4 colors. Now, there are so many models and colors [and clients asking for a very limited number of models] that we end up by making one or two coats per model.”¹²

¹² Interview in the factory, July 20, 2002.

Frameworks: Fur as a Commodity

This part of the paper offers a starting point for interpreting the circulation of fur as a commodity in a global market. I start by outlining the framework usually referred to as the “fur trade literature”. I review briefly this body of work by pointing out its main themes and move then to a more general discussion on commodities and regimes of value, as they are approached by Appadurai 1986 and others. I complicate then the perspective on ‘the social life of things’ by bringing in the issue of circulation of value within an ‘open totality’ approach, which is reflected by new interpretations of Marx’s theory of value, such as Eiss and Pedersen 2002.

“The fur trade literature” has had as its main focus the commercial and social relations developed between the Native North American fur trappers and the European traders, and the contribution of the fur trade to the expansion of European political and economic domination. Earlier pieces offer detailed historical accounts of exchanges between Native North Americans and Euro-American traders, including that of Hudson’s Bay Company (E. Heidenreich and Ray 1976, Fisher 1943, Fuchs 1957, Greenbie 1929, Hamil 1951, Innis 1930, Lawson 1943, Norton 1974, Phillips 1961, Rich 1955, Rich 1966), of other fur trade international circuits (for instance, Russia’s economic relations with the Dutch West Indies Company in its Baltic foreign trade) (Fisher 1943, Rich 1955), as well as economic analyses of fur industry (Fuchs 1957). However, this body of literature has been criticized for being stuck within a economic deterministic approach and thereby not paying attention to the politics of the exchange underlying the fur trade. More specifically, the critique pointed out an eurocentric perspective informing these early works, which did not question and thereby reinforced categories such as ‘nativity’, ‘masculinity’, ‘economic development/backwardness’, ‘dependence’ (of Native North American people on European goods), etc., in their discussion of the trade relations between Native North Americans and Europeans. The insistence on an ‘indigenous perspective of the trade’ brought to the fore new analytical dimensions to be explored such as indigenous cosmologies (Krech 1981, Martin 1978), women’s participation in the trade and trapping expeditions (Mufford, Fiske in (Fiske 1998), the very nature of trade from the perspective on indigenous norms and customs of exchange (Bolus 1972, Brown, Eccles, and Heldman 1994, Cox 1993, Fiske 1998, Francis 1983, Jackson 1995, Martin 1978, Ray 1998, Ray and Freeman 1978, Reid 2002).

Even though fur trade literature has been permeated by the political economy perspective and thereby the economic questions underlying the movements of furs as particular trade goods had to be situated within the fabric of social relations, this body of literature has not clearly addressed the transformational processes these goods underwent during their move from one

symbolic and geographic site to another. Moreover, these studies have concentrated more on the historical fur trade between North America and Europe, without offering however an analytical space in which the specific materiality and semiotics of fur skins would be addressed. This is why, notwithstanding its breadth, this body of work has not helped me much in conceptualizing my argumentative framework.

As I was interested not necessarily in the fur skins and their circulation, but mostly in the circulation (or immovability) of their meanings, in their symbolic transformation, not only the technological one, I turned to studies that have concentrated in different ways on “the social life of things”. I found very helpful (to a certain extent) Appadurai’s perspective on commodities as stages in the life of things (Appadurai 1986), suggesting a break/shift from the political economy view characterizing former classic readings (such as, (Braudel 1967, Mintz 1985, Wallerstein 1974, Wolf 1982). Wolf and Mintz attempted in their work to uproot the perspective on capitalist economies as solely originating in European (western) soil at a specific time (the rise of industrialism in 18th century), by showing other (non-European) global circuits of goods and people being developed long before the textile mills started operating in 18th century England (Wolf), or non-European sites of capitalist production preceding the same European mills (such as sugar plantations of the New World in Mintz’s account of material and symbolic transformations of sugar (1985)). However, by their attempt to challenge the perspective on capitalism as confined to unique spatial and temporal European boundaries to the one seeing capitalism as a multisided phenomenon, originating in various settings at various times, Wolf, Mintz, and others associated to the political economy school, ended up essentializing capitalism, by seeing it as the sole (and sad) economic and political apparatus permeating the whole world and as an predestined end of every kind of current economic configuration.

Appadurai brings a more nuanced approach to the whole political economy trend, by looking at spatial and temporal fluidity of “commodity” as a status of things. Indeed, along the lines of the classic political economy view, he suggest that, in order to understand the “human transactions and calculations that enliven the things” (5), we have to look at the moving of these things and the moving of the meanings these things carry along. Therefore, commodities appear as “things with a particular type of social potential” (6). However, by stressing a possible understanding of Marx’s view on commodities as situated within a broader, cross-cultural and historical framework of analysis (8-9), Appadurai breaks through the association market—commodities—capitalism as opposed to barter (or other types of exchange)—gifts—non (pre) capitalist economies. Thus, he suggests that, if one understands a commodity as “any thing intended for exchange”, then barter would be also a special form of commodity exchange (9-10).

Also, he considers the distinction between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’ as having been exaggerated in the existent literature, where ‘gift’ only and always indexed a sort of subjective relation between people, whereas ‘commodity’ solely stood for “the drive...of goods for one another”(11). By looking at the same thing as moving in and out the status of ‘commodity’ and/or ‘gift’ during its social life, that is, its circulation, Appadurai thus fundamentally opens up the political economy perspective on capitalism as the only possible end and thereby acknowledges the variety of economic apparatuses and manifestations in which both ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’ are being used according to the politics of knowledge underlying such apparatuses. More specifically, Appadurai understands commodities as “very complex forms and distributions of knowledge”, knowledge that both involves the making of that commodity as well as the appropriate consumption of that commodity (41).¹³ Therefore, Appadurai suggests, following (Baudrillard 1975), demand should be understood within the framework of the political economy of societies(29), as determined by but also manipulating the social and political forces underlying the economic structures (31).

In order to explain how these specific types of knowledge are being constituted, Appadurai brings in—drawing upon (Simmel [1907]1978)—the concept of ‘regimes of values’, which are created by the circulation of objects through various political landscapes. Thus, he writes, exchange creates and is not the result of “mutual valuation of objects”(4). By talking about “regimes of value” instead of value in itself, Appadurai attempts to solve the problematic approach of looking at value as an abstract category, outside the specific configuration of the political domain.¹⁴ Thus, for Appadurai, a regime of value “is consistent with both very high and very low sharing of standards by the parties to a particular commodity exchange”(15). Therefore, by talking about commodities as “distributions of knowledge” situated within specific “regimes of values”, which are in fact politically formed, reinforced or invalidated, Appadurai shows how things can be both gifts and commodities, according to the politics of exchange at stake.

In this context, drawing upon Nancy Munn, Appadurai writes about paths and diversions in the commodization of things (18), which he terms *tournaments of value*, as “complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life”, involving a reconfiguration of “the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in

¹³ In this context, then, the trader appears for Appadurai as a translator between different forms and sites of knowledge, thereby having an important role in the creation of knowledge of consumption (42-43). Still, the trader cannot just translate, there are other factors molding this economic ‘translation’/transaction. I wish Appadurai developed this point further, talking about the politics of transactions as “translations”: what is kept hidden, what is emphasized, how do labor, age (of the thing), specificity or usage disappear or, on the contrary, are augmented within the transactions.

¹⁴ Appadurai criticizes Marx for doing so.

question”(21). This diversion is a major element that underlies the politics of fashion (cf. Bourdieu 1990); within this view, luxury goods should be understood as “*incarnated signs*”, whose main use is “rhetorical and social”(38). As Appadurai put it, “the necessity to which they respond is fundamentally political”(38). In this light, Appadurai’s view could still be put under the umbrella of political economy, as he stresses not transformation and appropriation of things, but the politics of these transformations and appropriations. However, the texture of this umbrella is not impermeable. For, if I understood it well, Appadurai talks about temporal and spatial regimes of value, as formed politically, without taking into account the subjectivity of things, be they gifts or constructed commodities. That is, he does not really talk about the ruptures that occur within these regimes of value, which are not necessarily politically dictated, but come in fact as reaction to these politics of regime of value—such as, subjective appropriations and interpretations of materiality that could be informed by former regimes of values, existing in the shadow of current politics of exchange. I would have liked to see Appadurai approaching the whole process of “tournaments of value” not as an unilateral diversion, but as relationally formed at the intersection between subjective interpretation of materiality, grounded *hic et nunc*, and broader politics of exchange.

However, his attempt to redefine ‘commodity’ as an analytical category, by focusing on the “commodity potential of all things”(13) and therefore stressing their more fluid semiotics acquired and/or left behind during their continuous moving, is crucial for an analysis that would break through the problematic separation—dichotomy?—between production and consumption. Thus, Appadurai makes an important move away from a framework which links commodity with the production site, by stressing an analysis of the “total trajectory” from production through exchange/distribution to consumption. Therefore, Appadurai, together with others (Bourdieu 1977, Miller 1987, Miller 1999) shows the other side of the coin, that is, the ways materiality can as well form and transform social worlds as much as the social world forms and transforms materiality. His pathbreaking piece triggered a whole set of literature stressing the importance of material culture (Carrier 1995, Haugerud, Stone, and Little 2000, Jameson 1991, Jeudy-Ballini and Juillerat 2002, Parkin 1999, Parry and Bloch 1989, Steiner 1994).

Notwithstanding this important point—of materiality as directly acting upon the social—Appadurai et al still operate within a very clear distinction between what “material” and “social” represent. Therefore, one could see his argument as still confined within semiotic/material division. He defines a commodity as “any ‘thing’ [whose] exchangeability ... for some other thing is its socially relevant feature”(13). The problem here is that, notwithstanding the brackets,

Appadurai still talks about any “thing”¹⁵, rather than *anything*. Even though he expands previous—rather dichotomous—approaches to exchange and objects, (barter vs. market, production vs. consumption, or gift vs. commodity) by stressing both the trajectory of commodities as well as the processes by which things move in and out these trajectories, Appadurai’s analysis is still confined within a specific domain of materiality, that is, the *things*. He does not really define what ‘things’ are and therefore his lack of clarity—or intention of clarity—is what makes his challenging points limited to a certain extent¹⁶. Also, he still sees *separate* regimes of value, which eventually come into contact by exchange, and not ‘value’ as directly formed through or assigned to things, and thereby does not broaden the concept.

In a nutshell, Appadurai’s focus on the trajectory of the things in their social life and thereby the trajectory of their meanings challenges former frameworks that operated within the unquestioned division between sites of market exchange, entirely structured around the production/consumption of commodities, and non-market sites, governed by barter and subjective circulation of gifts. By stressing the regimes of values underlying the politics of exchange, he shows how economies of gifts and economies of commodities are in fact interchangeable dimensions of various geopolitical structures. However, his attempt to create links where there had been boundaries is still informed by other unquestioned divisions: he is still drawing lines between different regimes of value and also between ‘things’ and anything, therefore still operating within a division semiotic/material.

It is here that new readings of Marx come to the fore, challenging and complicating Appadurai’s approach, such as the Cultural Anthropology issue (August 2002), entirely dedicated to the “values of value”(Eiss and Pedersen 2002). In their piece introducing the articles and their different take on value formation and metamorphosis, Pedersen and Eiss advocate for an understanding of Marx’s conceptualization of value as “subtle, tempest-tossed, and nonreductive”(2002:285). Thus, they try to break away from the unquestioned hierarchies underlying the multiplicity of ‘regimes of value’ in Appadurai’s perspective, and argue instead for an approach of ‘value’ within its encompassing totality, as circulating and connecting various sites through its very circulation(286). Therefore, by insisting on a revaluation of Marx’s understanding of value, the authors challenge former discussions of Marx’s analysis, as one grounded on an Eurocentric singularity that tries to account for universality, and propose instead

¹⁵ In fact, he forgets the brackets in the next sentence, which proves his concentration on a certain kind of materiality, still confined within the realm of “things”(cf. 1986:13).

¹⁶ Ironically, his lack of clarity on what are after all the “things” he writes about, with the “commodity as a stage in their social life, mirrors what Appadurai sees as Marx’s ambiguous definition of what stands as commodity (Marx 1971:67 in Appadurai 1986:8). For a different interpretation of Marx’s “vagueness” see for instance, Eiss and Pedersen 2002.

a take on value that “relates the analysis of particular places and moments to the social and historical totalities within which they are embedded” (287). It is this perspective of an “open totality”, within which various sites are connected and permanently reconfigured by and through circulation of value, that challenges Appadurai’s approach on the making and remaking of commodities¹⁷. For, even though he points out ‘their social life’, he still assumes a certain materiality of ‘things’, without paying attention to other social unities that are also in moving (such as language, concepts of ‘body’, ‘personhood’, ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’, etc). Furthermore, this materiality acquires value solely through exchange, as politics of exchange determine regimes and tournaments of value.

Therefore, an analysis of the metamorphoses of value in different social contexts and within these contexts, could also account for the unacknowledged (by Appadurai) subjectivity of things, those serendipitous ruptures that could challenge and redefine broader regimes of values. Moreover, I find the ‘open totality’ approach illuminating because it can help one integrate various regimes of meaning, therefore seeing not the boundaries, but the connections.

I will illustrate my point by concentrating on an episode and several discussions with the managers and workers of the sewing sector of the fur factory. I will focus on the workers’ narratives on the fur coats they were making, which show a straightforward critical position, that is, a complex understanding of the process of production and the transformation and alienation of their labor. By telling me how they were making “coats for Satanists”, showing me signs of the cross embroidered in the leather, they were ascertaining their critical position toward the coats they were making and therefore the sites of consumption these coats were marketed for. Other sensory regimes were brought into their narrative, complicating and strengthening their critique—the smell of the fur skin, the hairs that workers complained that they kept inhaling for years. Even though muted feelings of envy and other subaltern sentiments could have very well existed in the shadow of the workers’ disgust and critical position, I would still stress that the uttered collective representation of their position towards the coats they were making was one of disgust and harsh criticism. In various ways, they told me that they did NOT like the fur coats they were making, even though they looked very chic and funky—they were “coats for Satanists” and they would not ever wear such things.

¹⁷ Coronil complicates this perspective, by pointing out the need of a ‘theoretization of the domain of circulation itself’, as an analytical move whereby the ‘open totality’ will not stand as an empty all-encompassing framework of analysis, but it will be able to account for the historicity and specificity of various “circuits of circulation.”(Coronil’s comments on the panel “Values of Value”, AAA, 2002, New Orleans).

An important element that has to be mentioned here, even though it did not directly come up in workers' narratives, was the absence of the site of production on the tags attached to some of the coats. Most of these 'funky' fur coats were ordered by external clients, who brought everything in the factory—models, buttons, other accessories, as well as their tags, inscribed with the international company's brand-name. These tags offered information about the specific conditions under which the coats were to be preserved, but did not carry any sign of "made in Romania" on them. The labor these coats embedded was therefore erased and thereby these workers with their labor were to become invisible through exchange, in the process of moving of the coats from the factory to the international consumers.

In the same time, talking to the manager, I was told that a good worker takes up years of labor and investment. The quality of his or her labor is a major element in the making of these coats, because the "pelts are like people, none is alike". Therefore, a good worker is the one who can "feel" the pelt, who can "adapt him/herself" (that is, adjust his/her skills) to the uniqueness of the pelt she/he is cutting, thereby maximally using the qualities of the pelt in the making of the fur coat.

One notices here two opposing narratives and valuations of labor. While the management puts a high price on the labor invested in the commodities, the workers' position is much more complex and ambiguous: while they acknowledge the hard labor they put in the making of these coats, they are however very critical towards the products of their own labor, dismissing them as not-valuable and, moreover, charged with strong immoral connotations (see their remark on the devilish mark of the potential consumers). This ambivalence stands as a concrete critique of Appadurai's perspective on the specific regimes of values informed by politics of exchange. In this case, these regimes of value (the management's position) are directly challenged by local ruptures, that is, by workers' position and reinterpretation of the labor process as a questionable act of investment and of creation of value. Whereas, in the management's view, the labor the workers provide is highly valued, as the workers' skills in "feeling" the pelts and their unique characteristics is vital for the quality of the coats, the workers simultaneously do and do NOT value their own labor.

I see their ambiguous positions as crucial points in redefining the formation of 'labor' as understanding and practice. As I will discuss further, I understand these ruptures that take place at the locale of production as indexing both processes of erasure of labor as well as of keeping labor for themselves, as an inalienable possession. I also suggest that these specific ruptures could be connected to other processes of labor erasure, which occur at various levels in the circulation of

fur coats on global markets. I will concentrate in the next section on the first part of my argument and develop the second point in the last part of the paper.

The Formation of Labor as Representation

Taking the “open totality” approach as an analytical framework, my paper will show how various processes of labor erasure, separately occurring in different economic, political, and/or semiotic locales, directly inform and transform one another. More specifically, I will examine the ways labor becomes invisible not only through the circulation of commodities from the site of production to consumption¹⁸, but it is in fact already erased at the site of production. I will argue that the labor erasure occurs not through the tags of the coats, which do not carry any sort of information about the geographical and economic locale of production¹⁹, but also through the meanings the laborers themselves assign to the fur coats they are making and therefore to their labor. I will further argue that one should consider labor as not a unitary category, but as a multi-tier representation—such as labor that has value, that is, a moral value, and labor that has not. While they sell their labor, in the same time the workers appropriate both meanings and materialities. The labor that they sell does not have moral value, attitude that is visible in the ways they talk about the coats they are making as being “coats for Satanists”. Therefore, by questioning its moral value and social significance, this type of labor is already erased by the workers. It is in the process of erasure occurring both at the locales of production (workers’ position towards the products of their labor) and consumption (fur coats on which the site of production is not inscribed) that one can see how value in circulation, that is, “the continual metamorphoses of value”(Eiss and Pedersen 2002), link the Romanian factory and its workers at their little tables to luxurious boutiques in Italy or Germany and their customers.

My argument will be informed by Keane’s analysis of semiotics of transactions and representations, Weiner’s discussion on inalienable possessions, and Ferry’s interpretation of Weiner through the lens of Marx’s “open totality” and “value in circulation”(Ferry 2002, Keane 1997, Weiner 1992). Drawing upon Keane’s point that “words and things [are] transacted together”(20), I will suggest that the process of labor erasure indexes specific politics of

¹⁸ This will constitute the second part of the paper.

¹⁹ In general, for most of the fur coats produced for the export under subcontracting conditions, the tags attached show in general the brand-name company plus several others with “instructions for consumers”. No information that those coats are made in Romania is revealed.

representation underlying the politics of value. That is, the moral meanings the workers assigned to the fur coats are very much embedded in the economic context of poverty and cheap labor force. Tropes of manifested collective disgust could very well shadow tropes of muted individual envy²⁰. Or perhaps not! If one thinks of labor as indexing a specific morality—that is, labor as a fundamental means by which an individual becomes a person, as a way of relatedness and embeddedness in the social community—in the case of the fur factory workers, the labor they invest in the coats they make does not carry any moral significance²¹. The problematic morality of (the consumers of) the commodities they produce determines the workers to question the validity and social value of the labor they themselves invest in these products. In the same time, by saying that “this is how we learned to be: whipped!” they still treat it as labor—a harsh labor they have to perform. It is in this ambiguous semiotics of “labor” as both moral and immoral, performed and preserved, given and kept, that one can understand how processes of labor erasures take place at the locale of production.

First, following Keane, I will look at ‘labor’ as a *representation* that is formed at the intersection between opposite configurations of meaning—‘labor’[1] as carrying a moral value and ‘labor’[2] whose morality and therefore social significance is deeply questionable. I will argue that only by treating labor as a representation one could see the ways the workers talk simultaneously about labor as a moral category and products of their labor as deeply immoral. Keane analyzes representations “both as entities with their own, particular, formal properties and as kinds of practice, distinct and yet inseparable from the full range of people and everyday activities” (8). While “[i]t works at the unstable boundary at which the “material” and “symbolical” meet, reinforcing or undermining one another”, however, “a medium of representation is not only something that stands “between” those things that it mediates, it is also a “thing” in its own right.” (8). Therefore, by looking at ‘labor’ as representation, one does not reject an approach to labor as a commodity (Marx). Nevertheless, I would suggest, a perspective on ‘labor as representation’ could bring to light particular analytical and situational nuances that a view on ‘labor as commodity’ does not reveal. More specifically, following Keane (and others²², of course), I will suggest that labor is constituted not only through practices, but also through the meanings assigned to such practices, meanings that could reshape the social significance of such practices or erase it altogether. As Keane points out,

²⁰ For a discussion of “politics of envy”, see Steedman’s *Landscape of a Good Woman*.

²¹ This point is directly informed by Marx’s discussion of ‘social worker’ and “the socially necessary labor time” (see Amariglio and Callari in Pietz and Apter, 1993:207)

²² Bourdieu’s *Outline*, 1977, etc.

objects are *not* open to any arbitrarily imposed set of meaning...[T]heir very materiality makes a difference both in the sources of their meanings and in their destinations, such that they are subject to shifting physical, economic, and semiotic contexts. This means that it matters how societies invest themselves in things, which in turn...requires an account of how they speak of and to themselves with words.²³

[...]In asking what, and in what way, objects “represent”, we must also look at their production, the transformation they undergo, the vicissitudes to which they are prone, and the alternative trajectories against which representational practice seeks to confine them... [A] full account of the interrelations between words and things is not merely a matter of discovering a semantics of objects analogous to that of words. It requires looking at the multifunctionality of both speech performances and objects and their practical articulations.(Keane 1997)

How do workers think of themselves through the objects they make, since they see these objects as deeply immoral? What does make them to treat the fashionable and funky fur coats as objects for Satanists? How do they make sense of the labor they invest in the making of these coats? I have argued that a perspective on labor as representation could be instrumental in understanding opposing meanings as simultaneously occurring in the process of work. A semiotic cleavage occurs in the workers’ narratives and positions—one encounters here two kinds of labor, one that has a moral value and one that has not. It is here that I see a particular semiotic dynamics of labor as representation and transaction: while they give labor, they keep labor. They give away labor that does not have any social significance, as it is labor that directly contributes to undermining a structure of morality, but they do not alienate the kind of labor that gives them a sense of personhood and belonging. In a way, they erase their labor from the coats they make.

Furthermore, Keane’s further elaboration on ‘representation’ seems to directly address these processes of labor erasure as occurring within a system of competing and coexisting meanings.²⁴ He writes, “representations do not only include reflections of the actions they serve, they ... hint also at the nature and the sources of potential *failure* as well”(9). Thus, while the workers of the fur factory perform their labor by producing coats, they are nevertheless already inscribing failure in their actions by morally rejecting the products and therefore, to a certain extent, erasing their labor.

²³ [and not only societies but individuals, see a trace of appadurai’s politics of value, but not those semiotic ruptures, even though keane talks about the failure of meaning...see page 9]

²⁴ I paraphrase here Ferry’s formulation of “a system of competing and coexisting forms of value”. 2002: 332.

However, labor is not only erased, it is also kept²⁵. A labor that functions as a fundamental and direct way in constructing personhood by situating the individual within a network of social relations, seen as personalized exchange of labor power (Marx), is not given away. Therefore, two kinds of labor simultaneously underlie workers' position toward labor as representation: a labor that is deemed moral, which therefore must be kept, and a labor that is deemed immoral, and which therefore is both 'given' and symbolically erased. Bringing Keane's view on representation back in, we understand that "[t]he most powerful forms of representational practice hinge on the complex play between logical and causal relations and between what enters and what eludes signification"(1997, 22-23). If before I focused on the direct relation between semantics of words and semantics of practices—that is, the moral implications of making coats for Satanists determines a negation of the significance of labor invested in this process—I will concentrate here on 'what [directly] eludes signification'. I will argue that, within the framework of labor as representation, 'what eludes signification' is the inalienability of labor. I will suggest that labor is symbolically 'kept-while-given' and that the condition of inalienability makes a fundamental link between the workers' straightforward criticism towards the fur coats they manufacture and their narratives stressing the effort and energy they invest in the production process, a labor that, as they say, is not appreciated as such. I see a semiotic negotiation taking place here: they value their harsh labor, but they do take away this value from the products of their labor, by attributing them immoral connotations. In a way, then, workers 'erase' the labor they invest in the making of coats but also 'keep' it by stressing how hard they work and how little their harsh labor is in fact valued (as one of the workers tells me that she gets less than \$1 per hour for a tedious and minute operation of assembling fragments of pelts on a coat model²⁶). I would suggest then that, by considering the condition of inalienability of labor as underlying the way 'labor as representation' is being produced by workers through working and talking about work, one could identify a site of power negotiation between local actors and global forces of the 'immoral' market.

I find analytically useful the approach of 'labor as representation' because, while it encompasses and distinguishes both uttered and muted regimes of meaning—such as, inalienability of labor as well as its exchangeability(if we look at exchange as also a symbolic erasure)—it still can account for understanding labor as a semiotically unitary process, and thus

²⁵ My line of thought has been inspired mainly by Ferry 2002 and Weiner 1997. I decided however to start by outlining my argument before presenting Ferry's approach on/and Weiner's argument, in order to make the connection between 'labor as representation' (Keane) and labor as 'kept-while-given' (Ferry and Weiner) clearer.

²⁶ Conversation with a worker in the sewing sector.

see the connections(*pace* Appadurai) between different regimes of values. I suggest that the process of constitution of ‘labor as representation’ on the shopfloor of the Romanian fur factory might be taken as an illustration of how an ‘open totality’ could ‘work’ ethnographically. In order to develop my argument, I will need to outline first the theoretical framework that inspired it. Linking Keane’s discussion of representation to Ferry’s reading of Weiner and Marx, I will understand the conditions of inalienability and exchangeability (an exchange seen though as an erasure) as historically and geopolitically situated categories.

In her discussion of silver extraction in Mexican cooperatives and its commercialization on global market, Ferry analyses the local negotiation of competing regimes of value within the process of production and circulation (Ferry 2002). More specifically, she looks at the ways local actors simultaneously talk about silver as both a commodity and a national possession, as part of *patrimonio* (patrimony), and thereby subsume silver under a sole category of value. As Ferry points out, “[p]atrimony...in Mexico entails the notion of collective, exclusive possession by a social group,...[and therefore] works as an idiom and set of practices that constrain exchange by classifying patrimonial possessions as ideally inalienable”(2002:331). Ferry reads the tropes of patrimony as indexing oppositions and negotiations of the local people with economic and political agents that control the global circulation of silver. By talking about silver as *patrimonio*, that is, an inalienable possession, while simultaneously contributing to its exchange on the global market through their direct involvement in processes of production, the local actors ask for recognition of their right to power and resources (2002:332). To do this, they call on local definitions of property as directly related to the constituency of social groups and kinship relations. As Ferry shows, silver can exist both as a commodity and patrimony due to a specific configuration of the produced locally materialities: whereas the extracted silver is seen as a commodity for exchange, the silver left in the veins of the mines is considered part of patrimony. In the same time, the cooperative members could also take up profits from the commodification of silver for “solidifying family patrimony(by building a house, for example”(2002:333).

Ferry uses Weiner’s discussion on inalienable possessions as material representations of “the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners” (Weiner 1992). Weiner distinguishes between ‘inalienable’ and ‘alienable’ possessions in order to open up the theoretical framework that classifies all property into ‘movable’ and ‘immovable.’ In doing so, she shifts the focus from ‘portability’ to ‘identity’, by showing how a mobility confined within social boundaries(such as, a kinship group) in fact directly reifies the inalienability of a particular form of property. As Weiner puts it, “what makes a possession inalienable is its exclusive and cumulative identity with a

particular series of owners through time”(1992:33)²⁷. Therefore, if one gives a particular orientation to the way a form of property circulates, that property will be exchanged only to be eventually returned, therefore will be kept-while-given(1993:34). Ferry however criticizes Weiner’s approach for making “the distinction between categories [such as ‘inalienability’ and ‘alienability’] overly rigid”(Ferry, 2002:335). As she puts it, “[even though] Weiner and others... examine the socially constructed nature of these categories, [they do not consider] the process by which people sort things into one category or another and obscure the ways in which things may exhibit qualities of inalienability and exchangeability simultaneously”(ibid). Ferry takes the practices of extraction and circulation of silver in Mexico as a site where this division between inalienability and exchangeability is challenged by the local actors who look at silver as both commodity and *patrimonio* as part of a sole category of value. By doing so, Ferry sets up an analytical framework that considers the “coexistence of competing forms of value as a historical process rather than a fixed scheme of incompatible categories”(2002:333).²⁸

Drawing upon Ferry’s discussion of “inalienability” and “exchangeability” as historically situated analytical categories, I suggested that such a perspective could be useful in understanding workers’ paradoxical accounts in which they berate the Satanists that would wear the fur coats they are making while insisting on their high-quality labor that is paid so poorly. I argued that, in the processes of production, the workers symbolically ‘erase’ their labor by attributing immoral qualities to the product of their labor. In the same time, they stress the effort and energy they invest in the production process by using poignant remarks on poor labor conditions and harsh managerial practices (they feel “whipped”, they complain about their chest being alike blankets due to the hair inhaled through working with furs). I saw here a manifestation of the inalienability of labor, for, even though the workers ‘erase’ the labor from the Satanist coats, they ‘keep’ it by acknowledging their hard work. I also suggested that a perspective on labor as representation could be instrumental for both distinguishing the conditions of inalienability and exchangeability(as erasure) and showing the ways each inform and transform the other. I’d like though to complicate this picture by suggesting that a third dimension could be seen as part of ‘labor as representation’!

²⁷ It is interesting to notice that Weiner talks specifically about kin-oriented inabilities, without taking into account other type of making the social—such as friendships, work relations, etc.

²⁸ As a side note, I would however question Ferry’s assumption on silver being considered both commodity and *patrimonio* within the same category of value on the basis of the different substances it represents in the two situations—whereas it has a solid form while in the mine veins, it is commercialized in a fluid form as a commodity²⁸ (as if it literally takes on the fluidity of capital), and could be become again *patrimonio* under the form of houses through a shift back to solidity status(that is, the concreteness of the house).

Feeling Labor by ‘Feeling’ Pelts: The Cultural Politics of Smell or from The Mundane to Representation

Keeping in mind Keane’s discussion on representation(as an entity that is both “distinct and yet inseparable from the full range of people and everyday activities” (1997:8)) and Ferry’s argument on the historicity of the categories of ‘inalienability’ and ‘exchangeability’, I will draw upon Stoler and Strassler’s analysis of the ways work is remembered by Indonesian former servants that had been employed by Dutch colonial households(Stoler and Strassler 2000). Relying on the memories of the mundane and the uneventful, of smells, tastes, textures, colors, which keep coming through these workers’ narratives(2000:33), Stoler and Strassler attempt to unravel the muted broader social and political commentaries that underlie these seemingly unremarkable memories. As they put it,

[c]olonial domestic relations were invoked through recollections of the color and texture of clothes, the taste and smell of unfamiliar foods, the sound of partially understood conversations...and through reference to sweat, soaps, chamber pots and fragrances. Sentiments lay not outside of, nor behind tactile memories, but embedded within them. (2000:7)

If their analysis comes to supplement former research on colonial “technologies of memories” by looking at (how) ‘memory work’(s) from a different angle, that is, “the emotional economy of everyday”(6), my take is to look at ways the technologies of making and remaking labor, through meanings and practices, could in fact be directly informed by various materialities and sensory regimes surrounding them. Inspired by Stoler and Strassler 2000, I would like to bring in another dimension of labor as it permeates different sensorial regimes surrounding and constituting, in various ways, the process of production. I talk here about appropriation. I will argue that processes of *appropriation* occur during the process of making the fur coats, appropriation that is produced through various sensorial regimes(smell of the pelts, hairs inhaled during processes of sewing and cutting, patchwork of pelts remains adorning various chairs of the hierarchy of production, ranging from workers’ places in the sewing or cutting lines to bosses’ chairs).

I see these sensory regimes as playing a fundamental role in the formation of specific understandings and experiences of work. Most people I spoke to throughout my fieldwork in the factory kept bringing in their narratives tropes of various kinds of ‘feeling’: how is it like to ‘feel’ the pelts, by touching them, smelling them, smelling or getting burned by various color agent and pigments during the tanning and dyeing of pelts, inhaling hairs of the pelts during cutting or

sewing, sitting on it(on chaircovers made of pieces of pelt remains sawn together), in a word, having oneself deeply immersed in the substance of the labor products.

While I was in the tanning sector, one worker, Liliana, told me how much she enjoyed working there because she liked touching the sheepskins. By treatments of tanning and chroming, the sheepskins are ‘cleaned’, made more flexible and, most important, preserved from getting spoiled (as they are animal texture). It is these chromed sheepskins that Liliana loved to touch and talk about them; as she put it, “look at them, they are like some little buns(of bread)”, stressing their wet softness and inviting me not to be afraid and touch them as well. In the same time though, she talked about how “we[the workers, including herself] must be black inside[their bodies]” because of all the toxic tanning and chroming agents they have been inhaling throughout the years spent in the tanning. The issue of substance (as inhaled, touched, ‘felt’) permeates her account, making paradoxical associations to simultaneously occurring tropes of pleasure and disgust more visible and thereby stronger. One would notice here her comparison of sheepskins to little loaves of bread as an illustration of the ways work could be thought of as being substantially and bodily appropriated.

As I mentioned before, many workers used direct references to “feelings” when they described their work processes to me. They stressed their effort and energy, which, as they said, the managers do not fully appreciate. As another worker, Maria, put it, “this is how we learned to be: whipped and yelled at”, describing to me the hierarchical chain of ‘yelling’ that starts with an external client, who, unsatisfied with the quality of the products, would yell to the manager, who would further yell to the section manager, who in turn would come in the section to yell at workers. Also, directly referring to the coats she was making and the way they would get literally embedded in her body, Maria speculated that her chest must have transformed into a blanket of how much hair she had been breathing in twenty years of working in the factory. It is because of this hair that she and other workers kept telling me how beautiful is to work with leather because ‘it doesn’t have hair and [therefore] one can work it much easier.’

Managers too, used similar type of references to ‘feelings’ when they talked about work and working processes. For instance, the manager of the cutting section told me that a good worker should be able to feel the pelt, so that she/he would know how to cut it. As she put it, “furs are like people, none is alike”, pointing out that, whereas textiles can be put in a pile and cut at the same time, pelts should be cut one at a time, paying attention to the particularity of the pelt in order to maximally use its specificities for a high quality product.

As I noted before, workers’ accounts differ from managers’ in their analysis of the sensorial regimes and ways of talking about ‘feeling’ the pelts: whereas managers look upon

workers and the products as forming a unitary whole, by having the imagery of workers developing an almost organic connection to the pelts ('feeling' the pelt and adapt themselves to the particularity of it), workers show a much more complex and ambiguous attitude, in which tropes of pleasure and disgust are intertwined. It is in this ambiguity that I will understand these processes of appropriation as directly related and complementing the other two dimensions forming labor as a representation: erasure and inalienability. I saw labor erasure symbolically manifested through the workers' questioning the morality of the coats they make and of their potential buyers. I suggested that, by symbolically erasing the labor out the "Satanist" coats, they question the very morality of the act of investing so much effort and skills in a coat for which they are paid 1 dollar per hour and which, after all, does not carry any trace of their presence, any trace of their effort, as the tags do not reveal the site of production. In the same time, they make claims over the labor power they invest in it, which I saw as a manifestation of keeping their labor and trying to make it visible to others. Appropriation of labor via various sensorial regimes works in tandem with inalienability and erasure, complementing the first two and completing 'labor as representation' as revealed by practices and narratives of work.

From one point of view, appropriation could be viewed as indexing politics of envy formed in the shadow of straightforward critical narratives about the immoral orientation of the coats. The issue of attainability (of the products they make) comes thereby to the fore, by showing how the moral meanings the workers assigned to the fur coats might be very much embedded in the economic context of poverty and cheap labor force. In the same time, however, the ambiguity of meanings associated to various sensorial regimes through which appropriation of labor takes place, ranging from pleasure to disgust, which could occur in the same narrative simultaneously (see Liliana or Maria's accounts), could function—and it does!—as a major site in which ethical and political statements are made and negotiation of meanings and positionalities between global economic agents and local actors occur.

I would like to stress that these negotiations occur within a specific semiotic configuration of the fur production. Even though most of the production is oriented toward coats made of 'ennobled' sheepskins²⁹, the ennoblement process brings along the whole semiotic mechanism that constitutes fur as a unique sign in "the symbolic economies of desire and power" (Emberley 1997). Also, if it has not been noticed yet, most of the workers whose narratives I'm relying my analysis on are women. Therefore, an analysis of labor—as appropriation as well as erasure or inalienability—must consider the specificity of the labor product as well as the gendered regimes of work in which these products are made. Only by

²⁹ See my discussion on ennoblement in the first part of the paper.

taking into account the particularity of the regimes of meaning occurring in a site where eastern European women are making fur coats for western markets, we can understand the broader political implications that underlie the formation of ‘labor as representation’ on the shopfloor of the fur factory, while acknowledging the richness as well as the hazard of the local configurations.

I will discuss appropriation and erasure of labor through the lens of what Emberley calls “the cultural politics of fur”. She looks at fur not as a commodity, but as “an object invested with libidinal desires”, and therefore as a “multilayered object, sought after for both its desirability and its profitability”(Emberley 1997). In an analysis methodologically situated within a ‘cultural studies’ framework, Emberley uses various cultural narratives(such as, films, novels, illustrations) as snapshots onto the historical and political formation of a gendered libidinal apparatus that has informed the symbolic production of fur across time. She looks at the history of fur production and consumption as indexing broader histories of class exploitation, creation of gendered categories of consumers (by constituting fur as an essential feminine fashion commodity in 20th century(4, 15)), and formation of other types of essentialisms(such as, for example, dichotomies like woman/man associated to animal/human(6)). As she puts it,

[t]he material and symbolic history of fur and fur fashions has had an enormous impact on the lives of European, aboriginal, and immigrant women from all classes—laboring, aristocratic, and bourgeois—most notably in the dominant construction of female subjectivity as a sexual sociosymbolic prop for the edifice of imperial trade and colonization in the ‘New World’. (1997:17)

Therefore, Emberley contends, one should consider the economic and political connotations of the production of fur as not only an economic, but also cultural artifact. Thus, ‘the libidinal codification attributed to fur as a sexual fetish’(4) should be as well situated within the politics of imperial expansion. She writes:

The exchange value of fur exists in our ability to recognize or misrecognize its figuration as commodity, currency, sexual fetish, luxury good, article of clothing, animal hide, product. At a more general level of transaction, codes of exchange would include the larger categories of money, women, and natural resources. These categories, both the specific and the general, figure in material and discursive economies as the effects of exchange and the values necessary to effect exchange.”(5)

Trying to unpack her interesting statement, I will try to see here a possible application of the approach of ‘open totality’, that I have proposed at the beginning of this paper. Drawing on Eiss and Pedersen, I suggested that we can look at the formation of labor as a representation in a fur

factory in Romania as directly informed by the hazard as well as the historicity of local understandings of work, and also situated within a network of circulation of value, in this case, of the meanings of fur making and wearing, in global economic circuits. Relating this perspective to Emberley's discussion of fur as an index of a gendered imperial construction of politics of economic and cultural domination, I would suggest that 'labor as representation', as it emerges from the practices and narratives of Romanian women workers, should be understood through the specificity of its product and thereby taken as a *broader* political statement of alternative/opposite representations. For, if fur could be viewed as an important index of relations of power and domination, the meanings Romanian workers attach to it in the process of making fur coats could illuminate formations of alternative 'material and discursive economies', as Emberley put it, and thereby alternative categories of value.

In the same time, following Emberley's argument, we could see that the contest embedded in these peripheral regimes of meaning(of labor, of fur as product of labor) is in fact directly related to other types of contest, originating in metropolitan reimaginings of 'nature', 'environment', 'natural resources', 'animality' and 'sexuality', and also dichotomies such as woman/man or animal/human.³⁰ It is here that I see an illustration of an 'open totality' approach, for Emberley talks about precisely about negotiations as transformations and connections:

Sexual or anthropocentric differences that give relative value to these dualities can then be subject to a disassemblage whereby the imperial violence(specific to the history of the traffic in furs) that constructs *fine distinctions* is displaced and the fluidity and permeability of borders set in motion... The circulation of fur in the symbolic economies of desire and power further suggest a mode of symbolic agency in which subjects actively and strategically negotiate, acknowledge, and transform their appropriation of fur's value, individually or collectively.(1997:6)

In a nutshell, drawing upon Emberley, I would suggest that fur, seen as symbolically and politically formed at the crossroad of contestations, negotiations, transformations, and also

³⁰ Emberley writes:

"The attack on fur brought substance, content, and social significance to fur fashions. They were no longer mere symbols of wealth, decadence, and prestige. Fur and fake-fur industries embraced the social discourse on nature precisely in order to subvert its own culture.

The antagonism that surrounds fur in the late twentieth century provides an opportunity to trace the cultural materialisms that shape the social practices and activities of various libidinal, symbolic, historical, cultural, and material agents: white bourgeois and aristocratic women of fashion... South Korean fur factory workers... and many other faces of the fur-clad subject. By rediscovering the complex relations between and among words, things, and people, we may begin to see the validity of arguing for a much-needed ecological movement that... can no longer afford to overlook both the history of the construction of sexual difference and the history of imperialism(especially its relationship to the global trade in goods and natural resources)." (1997: xi, xiii)

appropriations, could thereby become a site through which one would look at formation of broader categories such as 'subjectivity' and 'labor'.

Intersections: Appropriation, Erasure, Ennoblement

Returning to the formation of 'labor as representation' as I see it articulated through different regimes of senses and meanings by Romanian women workers, I would like to bring back the issue of 'appropriation'. As I argued before, the appropriation of labor via different sensorial regimes (smell, touch, inhaling hair and toxic pigments, etc), should be seen as another dimension of representation of labor, distinct but directly related to inalienability and erasure, as they are revealed by practices and narratives of work. Thus, I have suggested that one understand 'labor as representation' as a sole semiotic configuration, formed however at the intersection of three analytical dimensions: labor as 'erasure', 'inalienable' labor, and labor that is differently constituted by workers through various kinds of 'appropriation'.

I would like now to explore how these three dimensions could further stand for different negotiations over power as meaning and resources between local actors, currently transforming global economies, and historical and geopolitical particularities stemming from socialist and pre-socialist past. At this point I would like to link Ferry's discussion of the historically situated assumptions of the analytical and economic division between "inalienability" and "exchangeability" to my overall argument on the simultaneous dimensions of inalienability, exchangeability, and appropriation in formation of 'labor as representation'. First, I will take appropriation as a site where one could link the regimes of meaning that inform the current architecture of 'labor as representation' to former economic and social configurations of socialism. Then, I will look at the ways the erased labor that I see as symbolically occurring at the site of production through workers' accounts of the immoral fur coats, mirror in fact other erasures, which take place through the politics of configuration of economic categories for the global market. I will then bring in the process of ennoblement, as it was discussed in the first part of the paper, and suggest it as a visible metaphor and a potentially powerful index for the framework of 'labor as representation' that I have proposed, as ennoblement brings together in a very visual way processes of erasure (cleaning the sheep to look like a fox), inalienability (a sheep will never be a fox), and appropriation (but it can resemble a fox). Therefore, ennoblement can stand as a vivid illustration of the competing and coexisting forms of value and regimes of meaning that inform labor as representation.

Furs and People in Socialism: Constructing Nostalgia with Animal Materialities

By inhaling hairs from the pelts they saw or cut or toxic pigments used in the tanning processes, getting burnt by acids in the processes of chroming, tanning, drying, touching the pelts and sawing chair covers out of pelt remains for themselves or their bosses, the workers embody and therefore appropriate their labor. Moreover, I would argue that it is in these processes of appropriation through various sensorial regimes that they find a way to connect current symbolic productions of labor to former social semantics of socialism. The ambiguity of the workers' accounts and practices, presenting a paradoxical combination of tropes of pleasure and disgust, could be read as evoking broader intersections of meaning, constituted through socialist nostalgias, local contestations of global economies, and the concreteness and hazard of a 'here and now' happening on the shopfloor of the fur factory.

Why one would see socialist nostalgia in bad smell, acid and hot air, and cushy multicolored chair covers? I will take up Emberley's point on the semiotics of fur as formed through not only an economic, but also a symbolic production, to inquire into the transformations of fur as a sign in socialism. If one looks at socialism as a unitary system of meanings as dreams and promises, then fur seems to be part of this imagery of prosperity socialism offered at the beginning. Thus, no longer representing a 'sign of wealth' (Flaubert in Emberley 1997), fur as a socialist promise was to shift to an index of social and economic equality and uniformity. Mueggler, in his discussion of the imageries employed by political discourses in socialist China (Mueggler 2001), cites one of the closest associates of Mao in his attempt of articulating a paradise vision of communism:

"what does communism mean?... First taking good food... Second, clothing... in the future, ordinary cloth will be used only for making working outfits. After working hours, people will wear silk, satin, and woolen suits... when all of the people's Communes raise foxes, there will be overcoats with fox furs..." (Tan Zhenlin in Mueggler 2001:179)

However, political imageries of socialism turned out to be kept only within the realm of official words and imaginaries. Contrary to the promise of equality and equity, the socialist apparatus relied instead upon a strategy of accumulation of resources at the center, which Verdery refers to as 'hoarding' (Verdery 1996). Moreover, as she notices, together with Humphrey (Humphrey 1998), these resources had to be worth something, otherwise no one would have had any interest in accumulating them. Thus, socialism formed itself as strategy and social configuration around the mechanism of hoarding of 'distributable resources', whose main aim was "to increase the dependence of those within" (Verdery, 1996:25). Resonating with 'capital',

‘resources’ here stand for whatever was worth something—goods, labor, people, relations, even words. Therefore, accumulation was not limited to a surrounding materiality but included also people who were in various ways connected to it. They were actors politically or economically invested with the right of *moving* various quantities from the collection of hoarded goods, such as party bureaucrats, managers of firms, clerks in food stores, or anyone who could ‘move’ something somebody else wanted. As Verdery put it,

[in a firm], hoarded material had two uses: it could be kept for the next production cycle, or it could be exchanged with some other firm for something one’s own firm lacked.

These exchanges or barter of material were a crucial component of behavior within centralized planning... With all this padding and hoarding, it is clear why shortage was endemic to socialist systems, and why the main problem for firms was not whether they could meet (or generate) demand but whether they could procure adequate supplies.

So... the chief problem for socialism’s economic actors was to procure things... The work of procuring generated whole networks of cozy relations among economic managers and their bureaucrats, clerks and their customers. (1996: 21-22)

Within the social landscape of a shortage economy which promoted not only the accumulation of goods per se, but in fact accumulation of connections through oriented circulation of goods, as the goods were moved by actors in key economic and/or political positions, the symbolic production of fur reflected this direction as well. Thus, having (access to) or wearing fur became an important sign whereby you could show your belonging to a network of connections or being a connection yourself. As somebody told me, wearing fur (be it as a coat, or even a collar or a hat³¹) in socialist Romania meant that one had a particular social status, that signified a specific opening to power as meaning and resources: “only engineers’ wives could wear a fox collar” (the implicature here is that a worker couldn’t). In the former Soviet Union, as well, as a Russian émigré remembers, mink signified prestige under communism: “Ordinary Russians would wear thickly lined cloth coats, while government wives often wore Persian lamb coats with blue mink collars” (Berger 2003). One can say then that fur, as a ‘sign of wealth’, was appropriated and became part of the semiotics of socialism as a political sign.

During my fieldwork in and around the fur factory, almost everybody I talked to told me: “then [during socialism] to have a fur coat from *Nurca* [the fur factory] meant something. It showed you were *somebody*.” In other words, wearing a fur coat manufactured by an export-

³¹ See Kundera’s image of a fur hat on the head of a party leader of socialist Czechoslovakia, which in fact had been given to him by his political colleague to protect him against cold. The party leader killed eventually his peer, and the latter’s memory was kept only through his own fur hat, in a now famous photography of the party leader wearing the fur hat.

oriented factory, famous across Romania, made one a person, it instantly offered him/her access to a specific social niche. Even though it was not officially allowed, some workers told me though that they had been able to buy a fur coat directly from the factory, by paying in rates that were subtracted from their monthly salary. However, they could not wear them too often, because “you wear it and then go on a bus so that everybody would rub your coat in various ways³². Besides, who would go to work with such a coat? People would say I was pretentious!”³³

One can read here an example of what kind of form the semiotics of fur took in socialism. The workers, even though sometimes were able to acquire a fur coat—in pretty difficult conditions however, because they had to ‘know somebody’ and also have sufficient resources to pay for it³⁴—socially were *not* allowed to wear their coats as an everyday item. Even if economically these coats could have been eventually acquired, the entitlement of wearing them was not as easy.

As I said before, current appropriations might reflect former ones: I am suggesting that workers’ material appropriations of the pelt remains, as multicolored patchworks to cover various chairs, their own and their bosses, could signify an attempt to reconnect to former representations of the social, as accumulations of things and hoardings of signs, and also to imagine an attainability, which, as a sign of prestige, was neither then, nor now fully possible. Also, one can read perhaps a muted nostalgia materially inscribed in tiny fragments of ‘ennobled’ pelts, nostalgia that complements and symbolically balances the tropes of all encompassing disgust that permeate workers’ narratives. Moreover, relating my remark to Ferry’s important point on a necessary scholarly awareness of the particular history of cleavages of categories, such as the analytical and economic division between “inalienability” and “exchangeability”, I would in fact argue that one should understand the appropriations, which could index nostalgia, and the disgust, which could stand for contestation, in their process of constituting and transforming each other and thereby as simultaneous manifestations of a sole semiotic formation of ‘labor as representation’.

³² In Romanian, *să tragă toți de tine*...

³³ Interview Marioara, July 2002. She lived in a nearby village and commuted every day to the factory in the town for more than 10 years.

³⁴ As I do not have any other data besides my interviews, I cannot say much about the exact situation of the sale and circulation of fur coats and fur items in socialist Romania. I hope to acquire more accurate information during this summer (2003) in Romania, through a systematic research at various archival sites (such as, (1) the archives of the National Institute for Textile and Leather Industries, Bucharest, Romania, (2) the archives of the former “Center of the management of Acquisitions and Consumption of leather, furs, and articles thereof”, Bucharest, Romania, (3) fashion magazines, which will offer another perspective on the cultural politics of the fur coats—for instance, what did the act of wearing such a furskin coat mean with regards to subject formation, cultural politics of needs and desire in a socialist state, etc.

Beyond Tables and Figures: Erasing Labor and History

If one looked at the map outlining the world's major fur trade associations and fur producers, organized as the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF), one would notice Italy and Germany, among others, as main member countries of the Federation and therefore of the global market of fur. Romania does not exist on this map.³⁵

In the same time, as international economic reports show, the majority of the products Romania exports to European Union is constituted of clothing and leather goods and furniture. As one of the reports mentions, these are "labor-intensive and low value-added products" that not only bring a minimal profit to Romanian national budget, but also determine a high demand of imports of specific accessories and goods, that are mandatory for high quality finite products for export. These accessories and other type of goods are costly because they are processed outward. In the same time, the exports of the Romanian 'light' industries (such as clothing, leather and fur goods and furniture) have to face a high competition on the global market from other low wage economies (for example, some of the Asian economies) (The Europe World Yearbook, 2002: 489). In 1997, the articles of apparel and clothing represented almost 1/5 of the total exports (19%). This large export surplus is however correlated with the largest deficit in the intermediate textile products (OECD 1998). As the report shows,

this [correlation] reflects the large subcontracting activities which are taking place with western European countries (mainly Italy and Germany)³⁶. The textile materials are imported, processed and then re-exported. More than 30 % of the trade turnover in Romania is done now via subcontracting to a dense network of small enterprises. These activities are widespread in Central and Eastern Europe but in Romania they have intensified over recent years because of the even lower wage costs. (OECD 1998:107)

In the same year, 1997, France, Korea, the Netherlands, Germany and USA figured as the top five countries by investment volume, while Italy and Germany were the leaders in terms of the number of investors. (114)

In the sector of manufacture of apparel, dressing and dyeing of fur (clothing and leather and fur goods), between 1992 and 1996 one notices a growth rate of 16% in employment, as the third sector in the hierarchy of highest net employment creation, with a net total growth of 28,000

³⁵ Source: the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF) web site. <http://www.iftf.com/about.html>

³⁶ OECD, 1998, p.36, Romania Foreign Trade by country 1996:

Exports: Italy 17.1%, Germany 18.4%, other OECD countries 23.9%

Imports: Italy 15.3%, Germany 17.6%, other OECD countries 26.4%

employees (compared to 1992). However, the highest difference is made by the sector of small to medium enterprises, whereas the larger companies definitely register a significant decline in employment. This indicates a burgeoning area of subcontracting in the leather and fur industry, which reproduces the economic and political patterns of the textile sector (that is, the leather and fur goods are being imported, processed on a cheap labor market and then re-exported).

Manufacture of apparel, dressing and dyeing of fur	Total growth	0-9 empl.	10-49 empl.	50-249 empl.	Over 250 empl.
No employees	28,000	3,500	7,400	24,500	- 7,400
No enterprises	1,599	1,028	340	221	10

Source: figures collected from table no 17, "Net job creation and destruction by enterprise size, 1992-1996" (The OECD Report 1998:109)

In 2001, the Romanian government announced the privatization process almost completed in the manufacturing of leather and fur products, among other sectors.³⁷ This shows a steady high interest in the sector of leather and fur. However, as another report shows, the foreign investors are much more interested in subcontracting than in direct investment in former socialist enterprises (Hanzl, Brenton, and Januskaite (contributors) 2001). They prefer instead to build their own factories or pursue subcontracting in the former socialist firms, now privatized, that survived the shift to a market economy. Moreover, a major problem that both the foreign and domestic companies are facing is the poor range and quality of supplies produced locally. Therefore, "companies have to import materials, mostly from Italy, increasing production costs and making products less competitive on international markets" (WIIW, 2001:69). The report suggests that, in order that the Romanian leather industry survive the high competition of the international leather market, it has either "to accelerate restructuring, create new joint-ventures and increase exports or on the other hand, to give-in to the competitive pressure, to orient towards lower quality and cheaper products or to increase subcontracting" (71).

As one can easily see, this is not an "either-or", but a one-way solution, a vicious circle from which one cannot so easily escape. For, what does "accelerate restructuring, create new joint ventures and increase exports" translate as when exports cannot increase unless the cost of production is lowered, which in fact mean that the mandatory suppliers for high quality products should be produced domestically, in the undeveloped supplier industries that do not have either

³⁷ http://www.traderom.ro/en/Business%20Environment/INFO/t1_envECONOMY.htm

know-how or technology at their disposal. The proposal could be taken as a bitter irony if it did not come from a 'serious' institution, specialized in studies of economic feasibility.

The report does not mention however that the international companies not only ask for quality in general, but for a *large variety* of specific types of supplies, ranging from specific pigments and color agents, to the raw material (be it leather or fur) that one cannot find in Romania (for instance, in the case of fur industry, the sheep type(s) the foreign firms ask for cannot be found in this geographical region). In these contractual conditions, one assists to a paradoxical situation of a firm having to invest much more in supplies than the budget and exports orders can allow in order not even to gain a profit, but just to survive on a highly competitive market. In the words of one manager of *Nurca*, the fur factory, "what today one gets on apples, tomorrow will pay on pears!"³⁸ Another major characteristic of international companies subcontracting in Romania is that their orders consist in general in small quantities of various models. In *Nurca*, lots of order files could very well fit the following example: X company placed the order of 1 model with 1 piece size X and 1 piece size M, 2nd model with 1 piece size L, 3rd model 1 piece size M, 4th model 4 pieces size M, 5th model 1 piece size XL. All of these should use the Y color agents for the dyeing of the sheepskins, color agent that is similar but not the *same* as the X color agent, which another company asks to be used for their order. (Being not the same means that an expert gaze would distinguish on the spot the difference between the color of type Y and X).

Not only that importing all these suppliers adds a significant toll to the costs of the production, but also the diversity of models in small quantity orders affects the rhythm of production and therefore lowers the cost of labor. More specifically, by bringing in the production line a new order every day or every other day, workers need more time to shift from one model to another and therefore have to have very good organizational skills to make this shift as smooth and rapid as possible. Moreover, this kind of shifts requires a broad knowledge of technicalities and specifics of various models and products. As Maria, one of the workers in the sewing sector, told me: "We have to get this model [which is hanging in front of them, at the beginning of the sewing row] into our heads and then in one day or two you are supposed to forget it, because you might not see it again. And then another one comes..."

Therefore, a crucial factor that these economic reports ignore is that, in general, processes of subcontracting stand for processes of *erasure*. Erasure could be indexed by the tags attached to the products that do not indicate the locale of production, as if these fur coats were made in a no man's land, but carry though the name of the famous company that ordered them as well as

³⁸ In Romanian, "*ce iau pe mere, dau pe pere!*". I am still looking for an appropriate translation of this ...

instructions of usage and preservation. Erasure could also occur, more abstractly and perhaps more subtly, under the form of the economic categories and indicators, which, by aiming to be as general and thorough as possible, fail to consider particularities of the local. In a way, then, processes of erasure connect abstract economic statistics and categories to these tiny and trivial tags, which, in their move from an Italian world famous leather and fur firm to a workshop or enterprise in Romania or somewhere else, and then, attached to the coats, thrown on global fur markets, have *no* sign of this specific move inscribed on them.

I argued before that labor as representation is formed as a semiotic category through symbolic processes of erasure, inalienability, and appropriation. I saw labor erasure occurring through the workers' questioning the morality of the coats they make. I suggested that, by symbolically erasing the labor out the "Satanist" coats, they question the very morality of the act of investing so much effort in products for which they are paid so poorly and which, after all, does not carry any trace of their work and skills. If the site of production missing on the coats' tags is one way of erasing labor, not recognizing the *quality* of this labor is another. Most of the reports (OECD, WIIW, etc.) use clearly defined categories for assessing the orientation of the economic and political structures under study. For instance, it is already a common agreement, which runs throughout these reports, that "Romanian foreign trade is characterized by a specialization in low-skilled labor-intensive products"(OECD, 1998:105). Likewise, other reports present similar assessments:

A detailed look at the employment skills composition of candidate countries' exports reveals a high and rising concentration on low-skill industries in exports of Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia and Lithuania whereas the importance of this group of industries diminishes in the rest of the region... On the other hand, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania increasingly specialize on labor intensive industries(which require mainly low skilled labor) whereas their exports of technology driven industries is minimal (Havlik 2001)(pp16-17)

The category of "low-skill labor-intensive industries" include what other type of reports refer to as the 'light' industries, based on, inter alia, manufacturing of clothing, leather and fur products, and furniture. In the language of these economic categorizations, cheap labor automatically translates as low-skilled labor. No one mentions here that a good worker is the one that could 'feel' the pelts, because "furs are like people, none is alike", as a manager of *Nurca* pointed out to me. At the locale of production, what reports call 'low skill labor' involves in fact well developed abilities to quickly adjust to the particularity of the pelt in order to maximally use

its specificities for a high quality product. It also involves good organizational skills to shift from the specific technology required by a model to another, sometime in the same working day. However, the label of cheap labor cancels out a local representation of work and skills.

Moreover, one would notice here a more fundamental type of erasure: an erasure of history, which done by ignoring to situate the current patterns of work within their historical formation. Many researchers have noticed a major shift in the economic structures of postsocialist Romania, shift that was characterized as a specialization in low-skilled labor-intensive segments that had been replacing the capital-intensive high-skilled ones (such as, high quality technological equipment for industrial usage) (OECD, 1998:111). More specifically, a structure of subcontracting activities oriented toward the textile, leather, and furniture sectors replaced a socialist economy that had concentrated on capital-intensive industries, represented by industrial mastodons such as iron or steel plants or petrochemical complexes. This specific concentration on 'heavy' industries was an effect of the centralized planned economy of socialism, a direct result of what Verdery calls "socialism's inner drive to accumulate... distributable resources" (1996:25). As she explains it further, "most valuable of all to the socialist bureaucracy was to get its hands not just on resources but on resources that generated *other* usable resources, resources that were themselves further productive" (1996:26).

In the conditions of the usable resources being hoarded and therefore not so easily attainable, managers had to either belong to networks of 'connections' or to invent alternative ways of meeting the plan. In most of the cases, they had to pursue *both*. The processes of finding alternative ways determined a particular structure of socialist *bricolage*, happening more or less in the shadow of official discourses and economic practices. An episode told me by an engineer, who had been formerly working in *Nurca* for more than twenty years, illustrates this mechanism of *bricolage*. He described to me the event that, as he believed, determined *Nurca* to tremendously expand its exports to West in a point crucial for the economic (and hence political) position of the factory in the hierarchy of industrial exporters at national level. It happened that once the factory received a batch of sheepskins that were extremely thick and therefore heavy and inaeasthetical, and moreover very hard to be processed (tanned, cut, sawn). He decided to see what happened if he tried to refine a sheepskin on an electrical machine³⁹. It turned out that the result was great, the sheepskin looking suddenly 'like velvet, soft and beautiful'.⁴⁰ It was then, he said, that *Nurca* 'broke the market', and started fulfilling export orders as never before, shifting from

³⁹ In Romanian, *polizor*.

⁴⁰ He said here, in Romania, *avea ape*. This is a specific expression used for textures to describe the nuances they get when a different shade of light is cast upon them (something similar to silk, for instance: it is of a certain color, but put under a specific light it can change visibly its nuance).

mainly exporting gloves for the COMECOM economic region to producing fur coats to the Western markets.

This phenomenon of *bricolage* underlying the official economic structure did not disappear overnight; on the contrary, I believe, keeps informing the current patterns of labor and employment of the Romanian postsocialist economy. Indeed, subcontracting activities that currently constitute the major part of the structure of production of the clothing and leather sectors mean clearer technologies, specific pigments, specific skin treatment, as the international companies are interested to have products of a *certain*, predicted quality. In contrast, bricolage represented just a way of *hoping* that that specific quality will be met. However, doing bricolage was not only a way of playing with and mocking the system and the socialist ideology that stated that ‘everything will belong to everyone’, but a major productive approach that determined a high flexibility and openness in performing labor, and thereby pressed the workers to develop skills that continue to permeate present practices of work. It is in this act of silencing the past,⁴¹ by not acknowledging former specific configurations of labor as still kept active within the current representations of labor, that I see other erasures taking place.

As if this has not been enough, erasures also could occur through the politics underlying patterns of formation and formulation of economic indicators and categories. I will be looking at the kind of tables and their categories that constitute a major part and methodology of the economic reports I have consulted, reports that stand to be among the most well-known sources for economical data. (I’m talking here about novices, such as some anthropologist or historian who does not know much about economics). This kind of tables is the most common in most of the research papers and economic reports I have consulted so far (OECD, WIIW, etc.). Very detailed tables, in which categories of products are treated separately could be found only in materials encompassing only statistic data (for instance, in the case of Romania, *Anuarul Statistic al Romaniei*, National Commission of Statistics). I am attaching two tables (1) and (2) (page 25 and 26) aggregated from *Anuarul Statistic al Romaniei*, The Statistical Yearbook of Romania for 1997 and 2000.

Table 1: Romanian Foreign trade of ‘Raw hides and skins, leather, furskins and articles thereof’

		1991 in USD mil	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999

⁴¹ A la Trouillot.

<u>Export</u>	<u>Raw skins and leather</u>	3	5	13	28	16	15	24	17	23
	Of which EU	2	2	8	17	12	12	17	14	19
<u>Export</u>	<u>Articles thereof</u>	17	17	18	23	29	31	37	40	39
	Of which EU	8	12	14	19	24	26	28	36	36
<u>Import</u>	<u>Raw skins and leather</u>	14	68	100	139	198	245	261	285	289
	Of which EU	4	44	71	111	180	224	239	274	279
<u>Import</u>	<u>Articles thereof</u>	3	4	9	7	9	10	10	13	9
	Of which EU	1	2	5	6	7	8	7	7	5

Source: The National Commission of Statistics, (Anuarul Statistic 1997 and Anuarul Statistic 2000). EU: European Union.

Table 2: Romanian Foreign trade of 'Raw hides and skins, leather, furskins and articles thereof' for Italy and Germany:

		1994 USD 1,000	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Export to	Italy	20,600	23,100	21,600	26,500	28,000	35,600
Import from	Italy	90,000	153,600	196,000	207,600	239,300	245,900
Export to	Germany	8,400	8,900	9,500	9,800	12,100	11,200
Import from	Germany	10,800	15,000	16,500	17,700	17,800	12,000

Source: National Commission of Statistics, 2000.data extracted from a larger table on Exports to and Imports from EU.

As the larger report registers, the countries with which Romania has the highest rate at imports and exports are Italy and Germany. However, while one notices a relative balance in the case of Germany, in which the imports and exports tend to even each other out, this is not the case with Italy. Italy stands for 82% of the total Romanian imports of raw skins, leather, and articles of leather and fur skins. In the same time, the export of the same type of products

represents only 1/7 of the imports, which makes one wonder where is the main part of profit on the Romanian side. If we examine tables (1) and (2), we see in fact that, when one comes to distinguish between raw fur skins and leather and manufactured products, the manufactured goods of leather and fur skins represent 63% of the total exports in this sector of fur skins and leather. In the same time, the total imports in this sector consist almost entirely (97%) of imports of *raw* fur skins and leather. We can therefore deduct that an important amount of fur skins and leather is manufactured in Romania.

However, this fact is hidden by formation of specific economic categories as well as the monetary exchange value these categories indicate. For example, when looking at a more compact statistical table, where manufactured and non-manufactured fur skins and leather are put together and treated as a sole category (as most of the research papers and economic reports I have consulted so far (OECD, WIIW, etc.) do), one would notice only the gap between imports and exports, where exports would represent only 20% of imports.

I suggested that the language of the market indicators and international economic reports ignore fundamental factors that form and inform the locality of production, such as characteristics of labor processes on the shopfloor under conditions of subcontracting, former patterns of labor. Moreover, through various congregations of various indicators and quantities under compact economic categories, labor, such as the labor of the workers of *Nurca*, is further erased from global markets. It is here that I see the connection between local erasures, as they occur symbolically at the site of production through workers' accounts of the immoral fur coats, and global erasures, determined by the politics of configuration of broader economic categories

Ennoblement as an open totality

In conclusion, I would like to use ennoblement as both an analytical category as well as a transforming materiality in order to wrap up my discussion of 'labor as representation'. I suggest that, by being already situated at the intersection of metaphors and things, as an unusual name defining a technological process whereby sheepskins get to look like more 'ennobled' fox pelts, ennoblement can be taken then as a visible metaphor and index of the framework of 'labor as representation', as it illustrates the whole formation of labor as representation through erasure, alienability, and appropriation. If ennoblement is transformation, then it can be divided into erasure (erasure of sheep skin look and replacement with a new one, fox like), appropriation

(attachment of a fox look to a sheep skin) and inalienability(a real sheep will never be a real fox no matter what). In the same time, these dimensions form a sole process, in the same manner that erasure, inalienability, and appropriation form labor as a sole semiotic category. Therefore, the processes of ennoblement can be taken as a material illustration of the competing and coexisting forms of value.

Also, ennoblement may be read as symbolically underlying the local politics of identity and representation. Since so many workers told me that the *Nurca* products are unique because of this ennoblement, I take it as their way of asserting specificity and unicity on a global market on which Nurca, as a site of production, is lost.

This paper made several points. It proposed a way of understanding ambiguous narratives and contradictory practices occurring on the shopfloor of *Nurca* within a larger context, which goes beyond the locale of production but which, in the same time, connects the everyday and hazard of this locale to broader semiotic configurations and regimes of meaning that labor as a category is taking. Thus, I suggested that labor as a representation is being formed through symbolic and material processes of erasure, inalienability, and appropriation, which are reflected by workers' narratives and rationalization of their work. Inspired by the 'open totality' perspective, within which various sites are connected and permanently reconfigured by and through circulation of value, I analyzed these processes by situating them within the historicity of the locale, showing the ways in which former patterns of work are still embedded in the current ones, as well as showing their direct connection to broader politics underlying economic categorizations of global markets.

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