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## **‘Refugees Welcome’, including in (gay) porn: violence under the mask of liberation**

### **Abstract**

In 2017, the porn film *Refugee’s Welcome* was released, directed by Canadian pornographer Bruce LaBruce. Using the ‘Refugees Welcome’ slogan, popularised in Germany following the arrival of a growing number of refugees, LaBruce individualised the narrative through the fictional story of Moonif, a young gay Syrian refugee who explores his sexuality upon arrival in Berlin. Indeed, a broader porn genre has emerged involving the depiction of refugees. In this article, I argue *Refugee’s Welcome* perpetuates the trope of queer refugees having a sexual awakening upon migration, whereby the West is positioned as liberating refugees from the alleged homophobic Global South. Not only does this trope allow the film to directly focus on saviourism, the queer refugee becomes imagined as inherently vulnerable by contrasting them to the imagined hypermasculinity of heterosexual Arab refugee men. This article thus explores the obscenity of demanding queer refugees only becoming intelligible through narratives of liberation.

### **Key words**

refugee, migrant, liberation, LGBT, queer, porn

## Introduction

In 2015, Angela Merkel welcomed around one million refugees into Germany under what she called extraordinary circumstances, prompting many people across the country to begin voluntarily gathering to support the new arrivals (Köttig and Sigl 2020). Two years later, Swedish pornographer Erika Lust produced *Refugee's Welcome*, a porn film directed by Canadian pornographer Bruce LaBruce. Using the 'Refugees Welcome' slogan, popularised by the humanitarian response in Germany, LaBruce individualised the narrative through the fictional story of Moonif, a young gay Syrian refugee who explores his sexuality upon arrival in Berlin. Following its release, the film appeared on popular porn sites such as *Pornhub*, alongside other films that claimed to depict refugees. Indeed, a genre of refugee porn has emerged, which largely depicts the figure(s) of the refugee in heterosexual porn, although gay porn exists too, as made clear in *Refugee's Welcome*. This article thus follows in the footsteps of scholars paying attention to the figure of the contemporary migrant in porn (Casaglia 2020; Dhawan 2019; Rodríguez 2014). Ultimately, I argue *Refugee's Welcome* perpetuates the trope of queer refugees having a sexual awakening upon migration, whereby the West is positioned as liberating refugees from the alleged homophobic Global South. The refugee becomes imagined as inherently vulnerable, justifying their need to be saved from extreme violence. Not only does this trope allow the film to directly focus on saviourism, the queer refugee becomes imagined as inherently vulnerable by contrasting them to the imagined hypermasculinity of heterosexual Arab refugee men. Recognising the importance of studying porn as embedded within specific social histories (Schaefer 2005; Williams 2008), this article explores such narratives of liberation in *Refugee's Welcome*. Like the teacher and the student, the prison guard and the detained, it appears the citizen and the refugee has come to designate a power asymmetry that can be sexually consumed.

In this article, I analyse the plot and depictions of the refugee and citizen protagonists in *Refugee's Welcome*, in addition to giving attention to the broader production of the film and subsequent interviews given by LaBruce. I also situate the film within theoretical frameworks on queer migration, recognising how sexuality intersects with race, class, gender, and other factors to shape migratory experiences and the control of mobility (Cantú 2009; Luibhéid 2008). As such, this article contributes to the growing analysis of the visual economy on queer migration (Williams 2020), especially the intersecting forms of oppression that subjugate queer refugees to violence on both the material and discursive level. Not only is the queer refugee depicted across television, cinema, documentary, and photography; porn has become another domain of interest.

Considering porn is another cultural product where depictions of the refugee are reproduced, I analyse what is depicted in *Refugee's Welcome* within larger structures of violence on and off-screen.

My positionality is thus important to consider here; as a white queer western academic living in a country where I hold citizenship, I have to recognise the place of privilege from which I seek to analyse the visual economy of queer migration. This is especially important considering the violence reproduced in *Refugee's Welcome*, including racial violence, physical beatings, and gang-rape. My relative privilege of not experiencing much of the violence allowed me to detach from the depictions thereof. I came across *Refugee's Welcome* not through following the work of LaBruce or Lust but instead media reports of 'refugee porn' circulating on porn sites. My interest in this specific porn film thus stems not only from my existing work on queer migration but the (once) relatively controversial position of porn within academia, especially as it relates to performances of race, class, sexuality, and gender. Recognising the impossibility of objectivity, it must be stressed I initially remained sceptical about the figure of the migrant in porn. Such a viewpoint means I did not immediately celebrate *Refugee's Welcome*, even if I understand porn not to be inherently violent. This may appear paradoxical, but my experience researching the visual economy of queer migration suggested I proceed with caution. That being said, my viewpoint softened overtime; instead I began wondering what violent representations might tell us about queer migration, indicating their transformative power. I also began following number of scholars who recognise the ability for porn to illuminate social histories. In sum, I felt that studying porn had something to add to queer migration studies, and that queer migration studies had something to add to studies of pornography. *Refugee's Welcome* thus came to represent the converging point for these two areas of inquiry. I made an attempt not to speak for queer refugees who may find themselves represented in porn but instead provide a critique of how they ended up being represented in the first place, as well as what these representations do for understandings of queer migration.

This article begins by discussing the existing literature on the narrative of liberation to contextualise the social histories in which the film is situated. Part two explores the emergence of refugee porn, as well as background information on LaBruce and Lust. Part three explores the depiction of liberation in *Refugee's Welcome*. Part four discusses how this narrative depends on the queer refugee being saved from violence. Part five puts *Refugee's Welcome* into conversation with existing debates on race within gay porn before discussing the racialisation of migrants in Germany. I conclude by looking towards the potential for porn to challenge the narrative of liberation, recognising it is important to critique not only how the queer refugee is depicted within porn, but how porn influences the broader narrative, knowing just how "violent sexual

representations of racialized bodies have far-reaching political ramifications” (Dhawan 2019, 11). In this way, we have to recognise how violent depictions within porn may have material and discursive effects on refugees, indicating that porn is not just another erotic practise (Dhawan 2019). Despite being in the realm of fantasy, porn can play a role reinforcing power dynamics existing within society, hence it is necessary to pay attention to how the visualization of power in porn may reinforce social hierarchies between citizens and refugees.

## **I. From Repression to Liberation**

A growing number of refugees (and displaced persons more broadly) have arrived in Europe over the past couple of years. In Germany, 1.6 million people arrived between 2015 and 2018, including at least 60,000 people who identified as LGBTIQ+ (Tschalaer 2020). Despite little attention being paid to sexuality and gender-based asylum claims in the past, there is growing awareness of the harm queer people face in certain countries—for example, where same-sex sexual activity between consenting adults is considered a criminal act or where the state fails to protect queer people from persecution by other actors (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011). In Europe, most people seeking asylum because of their sexuality or gender must base their claim on membership to a ‘particular social group’, one of the main grounds for claiming asylum under international refugee law. However, as Alif Sari (2019, 8) has argued, proving membership to a designated social group is problematic because this “search for innate, fixed, and visible sexual categories neatly divided between homosexual/heterosexual and outed/closeted sexuality... is often unable to capture the lived experiences of refugees”. Moira Dustin and Nina Held (2018) have also argued that in Germany, this focus on claiming membership to a particular social group has resulted in people seeking asylum having to conform to narrow and unidimensional understandings of their sexuality and gender, many of which are based on Western stereotypes of the white ‘gay’ subject—such as going to bars, joining queer groups, and attending pride events. This means refugees must show they are out of the closet if they want to get their asylum claim approved, even if uncomfortable when doing so (Berg and Millbank 2009; Murray 2014).

To add context, there has long been rising homonormativity in the West (Duggan 2003), referring to the way individuals seek to uphold heterosexual ideals such as the granting of marriage equality and adoption rights. These understandings of sexuality and gender in the West are intimately linked to homonationalism, a term coined by Jasbir Puar (2017, 228) to refer to “how lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that

continue to accord some populations access to cultural and legal forms of citizenship at the expense of the partial and full expulsion from those rights of other populations”. There is a long history of defining a sense of European belonging based on gendered and racialized lines (Yuval-Davies 1997), yet now cultural hierarchies have become imbued through alleged queer liberalisms that privilege the white homonormative gay subject (Puar 2007). The growing attention to asylum claims based on gender and sexuality therefore mostly stems from the assumption that migrants need to be saved into Western queer liberalisms. In this way, the West is said to play a role in “re-educating” the refugee into “progressive sexual mores” (Giametta 2017, 17). As David A. B. Murray (2014) argues, queer refugees are expected to arrive in the West with the ‘happiness duty’, an idea coined by Sara Ahmed (2010), meaning the refugee should be grateful to be living somewhere modern. Such trope is common in Germany where queer refugees have been shown as needing to recreate Western queer liberalisms (Tschalaer 2020).

Yet this is not the only factor that contributes to the framing of the queer refugee. The narrative of liberation also demands the queer refugee is depicted as being saved from certain kinds of violence, which pushes forward the idea that queer refugees are powerless, agentless, and inherently vulnerable (Saleh 2020; Bayramoğlu and Lünenborg 2018). As several scholars have pointed out, there is an expectation that queer refugees must express pain and suffering in order to be viewed as deserving recipients of asylum or humanitarian assistance more broadly (Giametta 2017; Ticktin 2011; Sari 2019). For example, Mert Koçak (2020, 4) discusses how deservingness can be constructed as a “gendered performance of persecution” through queer refugees rehashing how much they have suffered in order for their claim to be understood. As such, the performance of persecution may prompt “human suffering [to] contribute to producing, or reinforcing, conditions of subalternity” (Giametta 2017, 151). In some cases, this risks certain kinds of violence, such as domestic violence or female genital mutilation, becoming associated with the alleged backward nature of the country of origin—or at least to such violence being deemed unacceptable in the modern West (Ticktin 2011; Giametta 2017). In fact, the entire notion of Europe being modern is built upon imagining the Global South as backward (Said 1978; McClintock 1995). Such notions end up perpetuating the framing of the global South as homophobic, meaning the refugee comes to embody the alleged backward nature of their home country. It is thus expected the refugee denounces their country along such lines, prompting the necessity of escaping violence, if they want to be recognised as fitting within the mould of Western queer liberalisms (Luibhéid 2008; Giametta 2017; Sari 2019). In this way, the queer refugee is denied agency to speak for themselves, instead having to conform to what is expected of them lest they want to risk being denied asylum. The refugee is thus expected to reproduce the proud queer subject because they

have moved from repression to liberation. As will be shown, the denial of agency to refugees has transcended into not only the broader visual economy of queer migration but specifically the sexual imaginary and pornographic realm (Casaglia 2020). Before proceeding with the analysis of *Refugee's Welcome*, it is necessary to situate the film within the emergence of refugee porn.

## II. The Emergence of Refugee Porn

The growing popularity of refugee porn is made evident through the increased searches for the keyword 'refugee' on popular porn websites (Amjahid 2018). According to Mohamed Amjahid (2018), the number of searches for refugee porn peaked during important political debates in Germany, such as when the government allowed refugees to move onwards from Hungary and prior to the national election in 2017, reflecting an anxiety over the arrival of refugees and what the government was doing in response. Similar trends were found across Hungary, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Austria (Amjahid 2018). Yet the question remains as to why refugees have become a fetishised object for sexual consumption. Although this article does not intend on fully answering this question, Jakob Pastötter (cited in Amjahid 2018) offers some insight by arguing refugee porn may be a 'method' to deal with the heightened presence of refugees in the media, politics, and society across Europe, recognising porn is one of many industries that play on the emotions of the audience. Sertan Sanderson (2019) also notes that xenophobic and racist comments on the films "betray a certain eagerness to see... degradation, subjugation and visually depicted exploitation", indicating the increased popularity of refugee porn may be linked to anxieties surrounding desires to control the refugee. That being said, depicting various categories of 'forced' or 'irregular' migrants in porn is not new. For example, porn involving 'illegal female migrants' depicts them as having sex for survival at the border between the United States and Mexico (Casaglia 2020; Rodríguez 2014). As Juana María Rodríguez (2014, 155) argues, "[p]ornography, like other forms of cultural production, emerges in a social context wherein preexisting narratives circulate around available forms of representation, forms that must be legible in order to acquire social meaning". Nikita Dhawan (2019, 4) elaborates by suggesting "racist, sexist, and orientalist 'worlding'" is perpetuated in refugee porn, which results in "certain privileged citizens enjoy[ing] sexual entertainment by consuming violent representations of vulnerable (non)citizens" (10). In this way, *Refugee's Welcome* must be analysed within the material reality of queer migration.

Keeping this in mind, *Refugee's Welcome* is far from mainstream pornography, meaning it is important to reflect on how refugee porn has entered the domain of what could be considered alternative pornography. The producer Lust is a famous Swedish porn director, screenwriter, and producer known within the feminist porn movement for pushing boundaries while using porn as a means of education for viewers. On the other hand, LaBruce has been known for pushing boundaries in another way, mostly through producing films that transgress cultural norms, such as amputee fetishism and BDSM. Recognising this, neither Lust nor LaBruce should be considered mainstream pornographers in content or style, recognising how their films mostly adopt alternative film techniques. This means *Refugee's Welcome* was made by two provocative pornographers whom have contributed to the development of alternate pornographies that challenge the hegemon of mainstream pornography. Yet despite this history of crossing boundaries, there are limitations of relying on alternative pornographies as immediately challenging stereotypical depictions of marginalized populations. Even if LaBruce insists *Refugee's Welcome* humanises migrants (cited in Morrish 2017), we have to recognise employing the narrative of liberation may risk doing the opposite.

### III. Depicting the Narrative of Liberation

“He helped me find completeness. I'd always had to hide my sexuality where I came from, but in this new place, with this new man and these new friends that I was gradually accumulating, I felt so free, so welcomed. Home. Now the phrase Refugees Welcome has an entirely new meaning for me”

– XConfessions Webpage (Erika Lust 2017)

This section explores how *Refugee's Welcome* relies on the narrative of liberation. The above quote features at the beginning of the film, allowing the viewer to understand the potential backstory of the protagonist. The point is not to argue that such experiences do not exist but to caution against allowing such narratives to tell the whole story. This framing of the refugee as having their sexual awakening attempts to make their subjecthood become intelligible to the viewer. It must be noted that the above quote does not come from one of the protagonists of the film, but instead one of the anonymous stories received by *XConfessions*, an assortment of fan-submitted erotica curated by Erika Lust. Whether an ‘actual’ refugee submitted the story, or it was somebody else who desired



such a film, is immaterial. Instead, it is important to recognise how dominant this narrative has become.

*Refugee's Welcome* employs the narrative of liberation by focusing on the experience of a young gay Syrian refugee named Moonif (played by Jesse Charif) meeting Von Roháč, known as Pig Boy (played by Ruben Litzky, who also goes by Pig Boy in other porn films). The story begins when Moonif emerges from the exterior of an actual refugee centre in Berlin (LaBruce in Cové-Mbede 2018) and begins walking around the city. The scenes are shot in ways that allow the viewer to feel as if they are stalking Moonif, such as through placing the camera behind a set of metal bars, allowing for immediate voyeurism of his pending exploration. Eventually, Moonif stumbles upon a café on a quiet street, implied at the end of the film to be located in the supposedly hip and multicultural Kreuzberg district. He looks through the window and notices Pig Boy speaking in front of an audience. Before walking into the café, a 'Refugees Welcome' sign is shown hanging from the door. Moonif stands at the back of the audience and begins listening to Pig Boy read poetry in his native Czech. Despite not understanding what Pig Boy is saying, Moonif continues listening and catches the attention of Pig Boy. They begin staring at each other from afar—sharing an extended moment of intimacy. Although they keep looking at each other while Pig Boy finishes the reading, Moonif grows increasingly uncomfortable once the audience begins applauding, prompting him to dart his eyes around the crowd and abruptly leave the café to continue walking around the neighbourhood. Once it gets dark, he stumbles upon a group of neo-Nazis lurking on another quiet street filled with graffiti. They taunt Moonif about his presence in Germany, yelling that he must be a 'paki'—the racial slur used against those of Pakistani or perceived South Asian origin. In response, Moonif angrily states he is Syrian.<sup>1</sup> The taunting continues with racist and homophobic slurs. During the abuse, Moonif eventually switches from speaking English to speaking German. Despite his attempt to show he speaks the language, an indicator of assimilation, that does nothing to help him—instead the neo-Nazis keep taunting him. Eventually, they end up violently beating and raping him. Despite a warning at the beginning of the film about a simulated rape scene, the brutality of the rape remains shocking. I will discuss the significance of the neo-Nazis in more depth in the next section, but for now it suffices to say that such violence appears necessary to justify the narrative of liberation.

In the middle of the scene, Pig Boy appears out of nowhere to save Moonif. He beats up the neo-Nazis in comedic superhero fashion. After pulling his pants up and checking for signs of

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note there has been frequent media attention to Pakistanis being deported from Germany (Kushner 2017).

life, Pig Boy carries away an unconscious Moonif on his shoulder. He keeps walking throughout the night until they eventually arrive at his apartment. Once inside, Pig Boy lays Moonif down on his bed before getting a first aid kit and nursing him back to consciousness. Moonif wakes up appearing confused, asking if he is one of the neo-Nazis. Pig Boy sarcastically asks if he looks like one of them, indicating a separation between himself and the neo-Nazis. Nothing is said as Pig Boy begins cleaning his face, apologising because of the pain he is causing him. Moonif whimpers, but Pig Boy keeps his hand on his chin to comfort him. While continuing to address his wounds, Pig Boy eventually asks him where he is from. Moonif says Syria, which prompts Pig Boy to ask if he is a refugee. Given the number of Syrian refugees in Germany, this is perhaps unsurprising, but this only goes to reinforce that the ‘refugee’ is the figure that problematically occupies Syrian identity, including Syrian queer identity (Saleh 2020). In response to being asked if he was a refugee, Moonif says nothing. Pig Boy remarks that he is also a foreigner ‘but not quite as foreign’. This appears as a bid to recognise their shared experience of migration, but also to reinforce an imagined common European identity (Pig Boy is Czech, not German) against a Syrian (or Middle Eastern) identity. Yet it must be recognised that Pig Boy does not attract racialized attention because of his white skin, nor would he become subject to the asylum regime as Moonif does. Eventually, Pig Boy says he needs to take off Moonif’s singlet to address his wounds. By saying it could have been much worse, Pig Boy reinforces his saviour role. The audience can shift their gaze away from the violence just enacted by the neo-Nazis to instead focus on how Pig Boy saved and continues to help Moonif, even if Moonif appears in discomfort through constantly turning his body away and looking in the opposite direction.

Although Moonif remains hesitant, the flirting begins. Pig Boy takes off Moonif’s shoes and begins massaging his feet in a tub of water. After expressing their joint love of poetry, Pig Boy requests Moonif recite poetry for him, which he does despite continued hesitancy. After Pig Boy begins sucking his toes during the recital, they have passionate sex. Although comments on the video left by anonymous users on the Erika Lust website (2017) question the realistic nature of Moonif having sex after being gang-raped, we have to recognise the fantasy element of porn here. Whether the production team of *Refugee’s Welcome* considered the possibility of consent being an issue is uncertain—the film itself does not raise this implication, instead juxtaposing the rape scene with the sex scene shortly after. That being said, some positive reviews of the film skip the rape scene and instead write that Moonif was merely ‘jumped’ (Powell 2017). By contrasting the gang-rape with the sex scene shortly after, we see a heightened contrast between how the neo-Nazi and the regular white European treat the refugee. Neo-Nazis gang-rape, but regular white Europeans make love. If we remember the opening quote at the beginning of the film, we can understand

that it only became possible for Moonif to no longer hide his sexuality upon moving to Germany. Yet his exploration demanded being protected and subsequently penetrated by Pig Boy. Although sex positions should not be seen as defining broader subject positions, such a stereotype remains not only within pornography but common understandings of anal intercourse (Ravenhill and de Visser 2018). Under such binary, the insertive partner (the ‘top’) is understood as being masculine and the penetrated partner is understood as being feminised (the ‘bottom’). The narrative of liberation relying on Moonif being penetrated thus becomes especially problematic considering the sexual awakening is only possible because of the gang-rape, whereby the refugee becomes depicted as an object that can be violently acted upon with little consequence. The protection of Moonif from violence thus makes possible his liberation. In this way, *Refugee’s Welcome* bounds his sexual awakening with the necessity of being saved.

Yet as the initial quote reminds us, Moonif fled an environment where he had to hide his sexuality. Although the film does not focus on his prior life, there are hints of religion being one repressive factor. The following morning, Moonif wakes up and begins cuddling and kissing Pig Boy. Now, Moonif has the confidence to act upon his desires. Once they begin making love in the morning, another man wearing a long white robe and a big beard (depicting Jesus) appears at the bedroom door. Moonif stares at him with a confused look. Daydreaming, he imagines calls to prayer and church bells growing louder as flashing images of mosques and churches move in rapid succession onto the screen. Whereas Islam is the religion most commonly equated with homophobia across Europe (El-Tayeb 2011), and Arab refugees have often been associated with Islam, religion more broadly gets painted in a similar negative fashion. *Refugee’s Welcome* thus not only positions Moonif fleeing Syria because he had to hide his sexuality, the scene indicates Moonif is struggling with religion and sexuality too. This is another common trope—queer refugees have had to occasionally distance themselves from religion in order for their sexuality to be believed (Giametta 2014). Yet despite causing Moonif this initial tension, the daydream abruptly ends. The man depicting Jesus is just a housemate, or a friend. He asks Pig Boy about the blood on the shirt before telling them a neo-Nazi was found dead in Kreuzberg. Pig Boy and Moonif jump out of bed and begin trying to hitchhike on the side of the main road, albeit where they are going is not made clear. To Kreuzberg? To escape? It doesn’t seem to matter—they end up having sex in the bushes. Now Moonif can have public sex too!

Out of Syria, free from religion, we can see how Pig Boy helps Moonif feel a sense of freedom. The supposed sexual awakening that Moonif experiences ends up perpetuating the idea that Syria is only homophobic. As Saleh (2020) reminds us, by only focusing on narratives of the

‘suffering Syrian gay refugee’, the possibility of queer life in Syria is completely discounted, showcasing how porn may play a role in shaping imaginaries of the global South. Such narratives are linked to how Nicholas Radell (2001) analysed the depiction of white eastern European men in porn, arguing that Western audiences became aroused by the notion of these men experiencing a queer sexual awakening after being liberated from the former Communist part of Europe. Hoang Tan Nguyen (2014) has also shown how even when one particularly famous Asian-American male actor played the ‘top’ in some porn films—which some might say challenge the depiction of Asian men as passive in porn (Fung 1991)—he was mostly designated as the ‘American’ that penetrated foreign and immigrant Asian men, in effect welcoming them to the United States. By observing the way Moonif explores his sexuality, *Refugee’s Welcome* thus relies on positioning the citizen as bringing the refugee into the realm of liberation. As might be expected, this becomes an inherently violent process.

#### **IV. Masking Violence**

I continue the argument by exploring how this narrative of liberation depends on the necessity of saving the queer refugee from violence. Mimi Thi Nguyen (2012) analyses how this ‘gift of freedom’ links the granting of refugee status to the possibility of deciding upon the terms of freedom. I draw upon Nguyen to understand the narratives expected of queer refugees. Understood this way, *Refugee’s Welcome* depicts the terms of freedom as relying on the citizen saving the refugee. The point is not that the violent beating and rape of Moonif does not reflect what may happen to a refugee (although some might argue such violence taking place in Kreuzberg is unlikely); in 2019 alone, the German authorities recorded 1,600 violent attacks on refugees and people seeking asylum (Deutsche Welle 2020). Instead, I want to stress that depicting such violence makes possible the subsequent narrative of liberation, which allows Pig Boy to play the saviour role. As Nguyen (2012, 141) elaborates, this is not to deny the possibility of the refugee finding safety in the West, but instead to recognise what this act of saving does. Such saviourism masks the violence of the queer refugee becoming the prop for Western propagation of itself as the place of liberation.

Importantly, the refugee must only be saved from the kind of violence that allows their supposed liberation to remain unchallenged. In one sense, the beating and rape of Moonif obscures other forms of violence that refugees may experience, such as the difficulty of assimilation or being tied to the ‘refugee’ label (mentioned above). Yet this act of saving becomes

complicated because Moonif is saved from neo-Nazis. Falling short of depicting Moonif fleeing homophobic violence in Syria, or the alleged homophobia of Arab migrants within Germany that often gets propagated (Haritaworn 2015), *Refugee's Welcome* instead demands Moonif is saved after being beaten and raped by neo-Nazis. Does this change the narrative? Although I would argue such narratives may prefer the idea of saving the queer refugee from violence coming from an imagined elsewhere or Other, the broader narrative is not undermined by the violence coming from the neo-Nazis. This is because neo-Nazis are not considered 'regular' white European citizenry but instead a group on the far-right—who end up enacting a form of violence not deemed acceptable in the West. Whereas Muslims become typically associated with the violence of radical Islamic terror groups, the white European citizen is depicted as being far removed from neo-Nazis. As such, there is an affordance given to the white European citizen that allows them to be imagined as not being responsible for violence stemming from neo-Nazis. The West is not like *this*, but the West will save the vulnerable refugee from such violence. It is important to note that the narrative of liberation is centred on the ability for the West to save the queer refugee, as opposed to only centring on whether the violence comes from the global South, migrant communities, or neo-Nazis. Although the violence happens within Germany, the violence becomes necessary to allow for the regular white European citizen to save the day. This reflects the continued attempt of the film to distinguish between Pig Boy and the neo-Nazis. Before they have sex, Moonif tells Pig Boy he was told to look out for the skinheads before arriving in Germany. He continues by saying he had never seen one up close before, remarking they look like monsters. Pig Boy asks Moonif if he looks like a monster too; Moonif replies he looks like a good monster. By narrowly focusing on the violence of the neo-Nazis, *Refugee's Welcome* ignores how racism is not exclusively the domain of the far-right across Europe (Haritaworn 2015). Yet not only this, *Refugee's Welcome* depicts the white European citizen as the savior of such racism—the 'good' monster.

How can we make sense of this desire to have Pig Boy quite literally and figuratively save Moonif? As Calogero Giannetta (2017, 20) says, although there may be compassionate action to correct situations of vulnerability, such actions may be more narcissistic than initially seemed, "becoming a solidarity that puts 'our' acting on the suffering of others as a way of further talking about and focusing on the self". Thus, the protection of Moonif not only influences how the recipient of 'help' is viewed, representing refugees more broadly, but also how the 'giver' of help perceives themselves. The story becomes less about Moonif than about Pig Boy saving him. Pig Boy protects Moonif from the neo-Nazis, that is not being argued against, but what is Pig Boy saving him into? And what does Pig Boy save him for? The entire film is arguably about Pig Boy

welcoming Moonif to Germany, as opposed to Moonif discovering his sexuality. Moonif becomes the prop used to showcase the white saviour narrative. Not only does the narrative of *Refugee's Welcome* encourage this depiction, it must be recognised how Pig Boy is the famous porn actor, whereas Lebanese-born Jesse Charif had never starred in porn before, indicating the possibility of Pig Boy drawing interest to the film and hence becoming its dominant actor. Bruce LaBruce even says his idea for *Refugee's Welcome* came after meeting Pig Boy (LaBruce in Cové-Mbede 2018). In this case, it appears LaBruce had an idea for a porn film that coincided with one of the fantasies submitted to Erika Lust. LaBruce (in Cové-Mbede 2018) further explains: "... I came up with the refugee concept... having become aware of the situation in Berlin and seeing the 'Refugees Welcome' signs in the windows of certain cafes and bars. So I cast Pig Boy as the poet who saves the refugee from the racist neo-Nazi skinheads. But then I had to cast the refugee". The desire to depict the refugee came from desiring to cast Pig Boy saving the refugee.

On the other hand, LaBruce had intended on finding somebody from Syria to play the role of the refugee, yet claims he could not find anybody (Cové-Mbede 2018). This shows how despite the figure of the 'suffering Syrian gay refugee' being everywhere (Saleh 2020), the possibility of them being featured in their own narratives is problematised. It remains uncertain as to why LaBruce could not find somebody from Syria to play Moonif. Regardless, Moonif becomes the character that needs to be filled only after finding Pig Boy. If *Refugee's Welcome* is about Pig Boy, we have to recognise how the figure of the queer refugee needs to be filled to legitimise the act of saving, or how this figure is used to bolster the notion of the West as saving the (queer) world. The figure of the refugee thus comes before the actual refugee, and the notion of saving comes before the figure. Ultimately, this not only blurs the line between liberation and violence, but also shows they can become intimately dependent on each other. The representation of Pig Boy saving Moonif reinforces the narrative that refugees are vulnerable subjects who need to be saved, whereby the 'act' of saving takes dominance over 'being' saved. The narrative of liberation thus not only blurs the everyday violence of assimilation or the labelling of someone as a legal category; liberation is used as a mechanism to bolster the notion of the West being modern. *Refugee's Welcome* is thus arguably part of the broader visual economy of attempting to make the Western audience feel good about how they are protecting queer refugees from violence—even if such protection depends upon violence. The figure of the queer refugee is thus produced to allow the West to imagine itself as saving somebody into such queer liberalisms.

## V. Hypermasculine Arab, Vulnerable Gay Refugee

Yet I want to further complicate the narrative of *Refugee's Welcome* by considering the interplay between racialization and liberation. I have already discussed the white saviour narrative, but now I seek to situate Moonif within broader depictions of Arab men in gay porn and discourses of race within Germany. Although it might be possible to understand the power dynamics within *Refugee's Welcome* as relying on the white gay man liberating the Arab gay man for their own white saviour narrative, I suggest the film requires deeper consideration. I begin this section by exploring the colonial entanglements over the depictions of Arab men in gay porn. There is a long history of colonial fantasies surrounding homosexuality in North Africa and the Middle East—configured as spaces free from the rigidity of European society (Aldrich 2003; Massad 2007; Boone 2015). North Africa and the Middle East were mostly viewed as being weak, emotional, irrational, and feminised, thereby standing in contrast to the alleged rationality and sensibility of Europe (Said 1978). Such alleged traits also led to attempts to distinguish between Europeans and colonial subjects through violent, sexual, and intimate means (Chari 1991; McClintock 1995). Ann Laura Stoler (1995) thus argues that understandings of sexuality within the West are linked to colonialism. Such alleged differences prompted Arab men to be viewed as hypersexual, an object of both fear and desire (Boone 2015), whereby diverse forms of sex and sexuality were more broadly understood as being part of what made North Africa and the Middle East exotic compared to Europe. Nowadays the reverse is claimed to be true through Europe fostering an image of itself as being sexually tolerant in relation to the Global South. Whereas homosexuality was viewed as backward from the European perspective during the formal colonial era, it has since become viewed as a sign of being modern (Massad 2007).

Despite the changing landscape, Arab men continue to be fetishised in diverse forms of porn. The longer history of Arab men in porn has often involved depicting the white man travelling to North Africa and the Middle East to have sex with Arab men, who appear as aggressive and sexually available for consumption (Cervulle and Rees-Roberts 2008; Mahawatte 2004). In more recent representations, the location becomes less important (although not always), yet the alleged hypersexual nature of Arab men remains. Within porn, Arab men are stereotyped as hypermasculine (along with Latino and Black men), in addition to being dominant and often controlling white men (Bishop 2013; Mahawatte 2004; Ortiz 1994). It could even be said Arab men in gay porn feminise the white performers through their hypermasculinity (Bishop 2013). Although there is growing diversity in the representation of Arab men in porn (Tziallas 2015; Cervulle and Rees-Roberts, 2008), the hypermasculine stereotype remains. Such depictions allow the (white) Western audience to objectify the Arab man through an adoration of hypermasculinity. Yet what happens when the alleged hypermasculine (gay) Arab man is forced to travel to Europe?

*Refugee's Welcome* does not rely on the stereotypes of Arab men in porn. I argue the challenge to racial stereotypes depends upon Moonif being a gay refugee. Not only his sexuality, not only his 'refugeehood', but a combination. If anything, Moonif challenges the representations of Arab men in porn. He speaks softly, he is gentle, and he does not dominate Pig Boy in any way. He attempts to explore the city on his own, but relies on Pig Boy to explore his sexuality. Nor does he display any sense of hypermasculinity, instead Moonif embodies the 'vulnerable' gay refugee who must be liberated. In this way, a distance is created between Moonif and other Arab refugee men across Germany based on his sexuality. The welcoming nature of Germany towards refugees was seriously challenged by the New Year's Eve attacks across 2015/16, when around two thousand men allegedly of North African and Middle Eastern descent were accused of sexually assaulting and raping over one thousand white German women across Cologne and other major cities (Tschalaer 2020). The attacks were quickly linked to the growing number of migrants in the country, which resulted in heightened public attitudes against migration, especially Arab men. In sum, the attacks were used to stigmatise Arab men as misogynistic, allowing the (white) German woman to be viewed as becoming victim to predatory forms of Arab hypermasculinity (Dhawan 2019)—not radically different from the hypermasculine representations of Arab men in gay porn (who are sometimes configured as heterosexual, see Bishop 2013). Such framing of Arab men as dangerous has even led to the creation of erotic literature that reproduces the rhetoric of the hypermasculine Arab migrant—often using racist and dehumanizing depictions (Ludwig 2017). An Other-ness is fetishized by the erotic authors, who continue to claim that migrants are threatening to the white German woman by exploiting the narrative of sexual violence, which is specially problematic considering the increasing anti-Arab sentiment (Tschalaer 2020). As Köttig and Sigl (2020) describe, "Muslim men were constructed as belonging to a foreign and backward 'culture', in line with the Islamophobic discourses in large parts of the 'Western world'". Although Arab populations had already been framed as 'European Others' (El-Tayeb 2011), the situation has only become more hostile based on the new danger their alleged hypermasculinity poses. If the gay refugee is supposed to be vulnerable, yet the Arab refugee is supposed to be dangerous—where does this leave Moonif?

As mentioned, *Refugee's Welcome* has opted for the former representational cliché. Neither the hypermasculine Arab refugee nor the hypermasculine Arab gay porn actor, Moonif is stripped of hypermasculinity through becoming a gay refugee. This allows Moonif to escape the problematic labelling of being backward through reproducing the narrow and unidimensional understanding of the gay refugee subject, who can allegedly fit into the world of Western queer liberalisms. As Meghia Tschalaer (2020) elaborates, if the gay Arab refugee can adopt the



stereotypes linked to Western queer liberalisms, they stand the chance of creating a moral distance between them and the stereotypical hypermasculine-cum-dangerous Arab man. The gay Arab refugee must not only be saved by the white gay man, they must display visible signs of distancing themselves from what may be considered dangerous. Without doing so, the refugee is doomed to remain associated with the alleged backward nature of their home country. Arguably, *Refugee's Welcome* may thus herald the arrival of the demasculinized Arab migrant within porn. On the one hand, this could be considered subversive. On the other hand, this reproduces the norm of the vulnerable gay refugee. Instead of relying on a binary opposition between subversion and reproduction when analysing porn, we have to play with such tensions. Ultimately, it is not possible to collapse *Refugee's Welcome* as just another instance of racialized porn—the ‘refugeeness’ deserves critical attention, recognising that race is only one factor that contributes to porn tropes. Following Royce Mahawatte (2004, 135), “[t]he spectre of gay orientalism is still with us; it has simply changed its medium”. Indeed, perhaps the gay Arab refugee has become configured as a vulnerable subject that can be dominated throughout the visual economy of queer migration.

### **Conclusion: Is Refugee Porn Doomed?**

Refugee porn plays a role further distinguishing between the citizen and the migrant. In an attempt to distinguish between legal status on-screen, there becomes a fetishization of the relationship between the citizen and the foreigner. In this way, *Refugee's Welcome* appears to reinforce the singular depiction of refugees needing to be sexually liberated by the citizen of the West, which becomes wound up with a desire to perpetuate the alleged vulnerability of the refugee, allowing for the control of their narrative upon arrival in the West. Such depictions fail to capture the different experiences of an individual, instead placing their experience within a broader framework designed to become intelligible to the Western viewer. This depiction is linked to the way colonial histories mark refugee bodies as being less modern than the (white) bodies in the West, meaning they must present their narrative in accordance with the ‘queer’ norms expected of them if they want to find acceptance. Not only does *Refugee's Welcome* bound Pig Boy and Moonif to the social category designated to the citizen and the refugee, the narrative seems to *rely* on such power dynamic, reproducing the norm but now within the sexual imaginary. Depicting the queer refugee needing to experience their sexual awakening in the West risks losing the nuance of experience; individuals are framed as not having their own particular desires but instead conforming to the homogenous

idea of being liberated in the West. Yet despite *Refugee's Welcome* focusing on the act of the West saving the refugee, that does not mean the narrative of liberation is impossible to defy.

I want to finish by exploring the possibility of such narratives being challenged. If the narrative of liberation focuses on the gaze of the viewer enjoying the refugee having their sexual awakening—one possible way of exposing such violence would involve turning the attention towards the violence of the West demanding the refugee show gratitude for being liberated. Understood this way, porn videos can have the potential to expose the violence of the narrative of liberation. As Rodríguez (2014, 163) explores in ‘illegal migration’ porn, there is “an almost campy feel to how racial stereotypes and the iconography of the border are portrayed”, allowing for the hierarchy in power to become exposed as the fetish. In the porn videos examined by Rodríguez (2014), there are migrant women engaging in theatrical interactions at the border between Mexico and the United States, which not only expose the violence of the border in an obscene way but also showcase the violence that perhaps cannot be shown elsewhere. Drawing upon the word ‘obscene’, Linda Williams (2004, 3) coined the term ‘on/scenity’ to refer to “the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene”. In this way, by presenting the obscene reality, the use of “hyperbolic representations of racialized sexuality... have the potential to undercut the symbolic state violence being depicted” (Rodríguez 2014, 164). The depiction of violence is different in *Refugee's Welcome*, as the fetishization of the power between Moonif and Pig Boy is not made clear, instead focusing on the way Pig Boy saves Moonif. If the figure of the refugee persists within porn, the type of violence being depicted could highlight problems surrounding the narrative of liberation.

Not only this, but it has been shown how racial stereotypes can be challenged within porn through showing how such stereotypes are constructed. In their analysis of how Arab men are depicted in French gay porn, Maxime Cervulle and Nick Rees-Roberts (2009) argue the studio *Citébeur*<sup>2</sup> provides more nuanced depictions of Arab men in their films, showing how “[t]his obtrusive masculinity is close to drag in that it artificially reveals its own construction, especially in the use of male accessories: the car, the bling, the gear and the cute white boy. This is less a reproduction of straight virility, and more a form of queer subcultural practice similar to drag king performance that is said to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity”. In this way, *Citébeur* challenges the hypermasculinity depicted of Arab men by exposing how such hypermasculinity is merely

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<sup>2</sup> Beur is a colloquial term in French used for those born in Europe but with North African parents or grandparents.

constructed. By becoming obscene, the gendered and racialized expectations of how bodies are expected to appear in certain ways is exposed (whether hypermasculine or vulnerable, and so on). Cervulle and Rees-Roberts (2008, 197) continue: “[w]orking within and against the colonial legacy that fixes ‘otherness’ as erotic and exotic, the *Citébeur* production sees the focus shift from the naked *beur* male bodies to the exposed racial desire of gay audiences”. Whereas Moonif challenges the hypermasculine depiction of Arab men through being depicted as vulnerable, he still reinforces the depiction of the vulnerable queer refugee. Depictions of the queer refugee must go beyond their alleged vulnerability, whether through shunning that marker or throwing its construction into the face of the audience.

Despite the potential for violent depictions within refugee porn, it would be wrong to only criticise the porn industry for representing the violence found across society. As much as the desire to fetishise the actual or imagined subjugation of a refugee in porn is inherently violent, there must also be critical attention paid to where the narrative of liberation comes from. By only vilifying the porn industry, this detracts from the actual violence refugees face. This demands critical analyses of how liberation and violence become blurred—not only in the visual economy but also upon refugees navigating humanitarian regimes throughout the world, claiming asylum, and finding a sense of home in destination countries, allowing for further exploration into how refugees are subjected to control under the guise of protection. By continuing to analyse the depiction of migrants, it may be possible to explore how porn can play an important role challenging cultural scripts, exposing the obscenity of demanding that queer refugees can only become intelligible if their narrative adheres to the trope of liberation in the West. Yet we have to recognise that cultural scripts are subject to change, meaning it will always be necessary to explore the connections between the violence of porn and the violent realities faced by migrants. Moving forward, we should pay attention to how such narratives on migration are filtered into porn, but also how such narratives are challenged. Such an ongoing critique will hopefully allow for resistance against the discursive and material violence faced by migrants.

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