WARWICK
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript
The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:
http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/160194

How to cite:
Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information.

Copyright and reuse:
The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:
Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

warwick.ac.uk/lib-publications

Beyond Intelligibility: The Hauntings of Queer Migration

Abstract

This article explores the haunting aspects of queer migration within two documentary films: *Season of Migration to the North* (2015), a film about a queer Sudanese migrant who fled to Norway after hosting a fashion show, and *Shelter: Farewell to Eden* (2019), a film about a Filipino transgender migrant navigating European borders. Instead of focusing on how the films make the protagonists intelligible, I focus on how absences are conjured to question the necessity of making the subject intelligible. This is important because queer migrants are often framed as only victims of persecution who must become intelligible to the demands of sexual humanitarianism. Disrupting the way visibility is heralded as an achievement for queer migrants, I explore the importance of unintelligibility in migration, especially when the terms of appearance are controlled by not only norms surrounding sexuality, gender, race, and class but the violence of European borders.

Introduction

This article explores absences within narratives on queer migration, especially how they challenge the necessity of making the subject intelligible. Analysing two documentary films, *Season of Migration to the North* (Laumann 2015) and *Shelter: Farewell to Eden* (Masi 2019), I argue absence as opposed to presence challenges the way queer migrants must prove their humanity to become intelligible subjects of Western sexual humanitarianism. Although Nicola Mai (2018) developed the term sexual humanitarianism within the context of migrant sex work, I suggest it may include the way migrants more broadly should appear as vulnerable along sexual and gendered tropes if desiring asylum. Whereas *Season of Migration* is about the experiences of Pepsi, a transgender migrant who fled the Philippines and subsequently Libya to live in Europe, *Shelter* is about Eddie Esmail fleeing Sudan for Europe after hosting a fashion

show in Khartoum. Both films disrupt the way not only asylum regimes but the visual economy of migration in Europe demands the intelligibility of queer migrants.

Intelligibility is important for queer migrants seeking asylum. Indeed, queer migrants must perform their sexuality and gender according to Western stereotypes to gain intelligibility–whether presenting a linear trajectory of sexuality, reproducing binary gender roles, or adhering to cultural norms of (white) queerness in the West based on visibility (Giametta 2017; Koçak 2020). However, claiming asylum demands queer migrants perform an idealised form of vulnerability to gain intelligibility too, whereby deservingness or victimhood becomes central to producing recognisable queer migrant figures (Sari 2019; Saleh 2020). Such intertwining factors have become the domain of sexual humanitarianism. Instead of accepting the complexity of migration, there is an expectation queer migrants reproduce certain norms to make themselves appear intelligible and therefore gain access to rights.

Rather than reproducing such figures of queer migrants, *Season of Migration* and *Shelter* explore the importance of absences. Drawing upon Avery Gordon (2008, 8), I engage with these absences through haunting, an attempt to understand 'how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities'. Haunting has little to do with the supernatural but instead social life, whereby 'the ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent' (Gordon 2008, 8). Yet rather than exploring absences to provide more nuanced understandings of queer migration, I am more concerned with how they disrupt the possibility of knowing more. I am not suggesting invisibility is the only preferred course of action but recognising how 'there is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal' (Phelan 1993, 6). As Peggy Phelan (1993, 7) argues, this is especially true if

the ‘terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of these identities’, which is highly evident within asylum regimes and the visual economy of migration.

Neither suggesting making migrants present is futile nor suggesting representation is always a problem, I explore the possibility of accepting uncertainty around making the subject intelligible. Such lack of knowing means absences do not become bridges between the knower and the known but disrupt the possibility of needing to know. The haunting becomes means of communicating not more about queer migration but the impossibility of knowing more. Hence not knowing may provide another avenue to approach queer migration. This article thus seeks to explore the (non)representation of queer migrants in *Season of Migration* and *Shelter*, including what is made absent. But more importantly I am concerned with what these absences do. By theorising alongside the films, I advance conceptual approaches to queer migration from a lens different to visibility. By focusing on such absences, I suggest the necessity of linking intelligibility to the possibility of humanising the subject is disrupted.

Unintelligible Humans

Humanisation depends on existing but varying norms of recognition (Butler 2004). Recognising the subject as human has thus demanded their intelligibility. Within the context of queer migration, humanisation depends upon sexual and gendered norms and their link to alleged vulnerability. Yet following Judith Butler (2004), the possibility of humanising the subject through intelligibility must be problematised because this demands ‘humanity’ be captured within something observable. The importance of unintelligibility rests within the possibility of not depending on certain norms surrounding the subject as constitutive of humanity. This leads us to debates between poststructuralism and humanism. A simplified Foucauldian approach would suggest norms precede and subsequently produce the subject, hence a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity would critique humanism by positing

the death of 'Man' (Foucault 1970). Yet as Butler elaborates (2015, 21), this still creates the assumption of there being something to act upon prior to its being produced: '[t]he language through which the body emerges helps to form and establish that body in its knowability, but the language that forms the body does not fully or exclusively form it'.

Conversely, other critiques of humanism stem from their attempt to challenge 'Eurocentric understanding[s] of what counts as the basic unit of reference for the human', recognising the way humanism has been defined by the racialised, classed, sexualised, and gendered Other (Braidotti and Gilroy 2016, 16). Ultimately, the attempt to transfigure humanism sought to go beyond Eurocentric frames of reference to disrupt power relations, as opposed to abolishing humanism altogether. Although Butler was believed to have shown scepticism towards humanism in their earlier work, owing to its alleged foundational universalisms, Sina Kramer (2015) has analysed the humanist stance taken by Butler in their more recent work. Poignantly, Kramer (2015) cites an interview given by Butler (2008), where the latter remarks:

> 'Humanness is not something given, it is a differentiating effect of power, but we need the term because without it we cannot understand what is happening. . . . Why go back to that which was? Why go back to humanness? Well, because these concepts, these really important ideals, have not left us, they continue to form us. And there is a new way of understanding them that starts with the idea that they do not have a single form and that, in fact, their regulation operates politically to produce new exclusions that we must challenge'.

According to Kramer (2015), Butler recognises the importance of humanism even if its terms constantly fluctuate; instead of dismissing its relevance, one must think through how it is operationalised to contend the way it is used in exclusionary fashion. Instead of grappling with what exists beyond the norms that produce the subject, I am more concerned with how unintelligibility allows one to keep the notion of the human open. Such an approach follows Homi Bhabha (2004), who in the foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon,

stressed the possibility of the human to come, an attempt to go beyond a humanist ideal of there being a preexisting human subject to instead the necessity of grappling with the human that is open to the future. Indeed, Butler (2004, 35) argues against foreclosing the possibility of what the human might become, an attempt to 'allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be'. This means destabilising the foundation of the human, as opposed to allowing the human to be prefigured without grappling with its constant (re)production. Such an approach aligns with the work of Paul Gilroy (2002) arguing for a form of planetary humanism orientated towards the future that might disrupt the way notions of identity, such as racial identity, displace the possibility of arriving at what might be considered the human. Hence assuming the queer migrant has a particular identity forecloses the complexity of the subject, which risks denying their humanity. The point is not ignoring the necessity of claiming rights through sexual and gendered norms, and alleged vulnerability, but questioning how the creation of an identity linked to such norms is problematically assumed as holding the only possibility of humanisation, especially within the logics of sexual humanitarianism.

Stressing the importance of unintelligibility opens the path for going beyond what is known about the subject, instead suggesting the importance of not knowing what shall arise. Although the notion of the individual subject having a particular identity has been disrupted within academic circles to instead focus on the subject as multiple, this may simultaneously still reproduce the individual as the effect of multiple aspects of identity (Sabsay 2018). As Leticia Sabsay (2018, 61) continues,

> '[even] when identity is conceived as an arbitrary product and claimed in defense of subaltern positions—amplifying the map of available categories with which one can identify—if we maintain the essentializing character of a transparent notion of identity conceived as the representation of a referent exterior to said representation, the power of its modes of regulation and exclusion will remain inevitable'.

This overt focus on attaching identity to the body might therefore be overcome through exploring how unintelligibility becomes the means of displacing what the human might be. This is ultimately why I will argue absences within *Season of Migration* and *Shelter* become paramount, allowing for humanity to exist beyond the observable. By opening the possibility of humanisation to exist within absences, I suggest *Season of Migration* and *Shelter* disrupt the way humanisation has become dependent on producing intelligible subjects, a challenge to the way sexual humanitarianism risks only imbuing humanity onto those inhabiting the normative frames expected of queer migrants.

The Impossibility of Knowing

Season of Migration to the North is a documentary film produced by Laus Maumann about Eddie Esmail, a queer Sudanese activist who moved to Norway. Mimicking the title of the postcolonial novel by Tayeb Salih (2003), the film similarly draws upon themes of racialisation and sexualisation. Instead of focusing on the experiences of migrants returning to Sudan, as the novel does, the film involves Esmail reading aloud several diary entry vignettes. Set against the visual backdrop of a fashion show staged in Khartoum, Eddie narrates pivotal aspects of their migratory experience. The police ended up crashing the party, separating those who appeared 'gay' from those who did not. After being arrested, Esmail sought asylum in Norway, where they encountered the complexity of belonging. In the same way the novel explores complex migratory experiences, Esmail invokes the possibility of migrating without adhering to expected norms. Despite such overt refusals, I want to linger on their refusal to speak about one experience: their arrest in Khartoum. Instead of giving details, Esmail remarks the arrest is too difficult to discuss. This refusal haunts not only their narrative but wider discourses on asylum that demand migrants confess their experiences of persecution. Such refusal invokes an absence.

How might a politics of asylum appear without demanding migrants constantly retell their persecution? In asylum interviews, queer migrants are expected to document their experience of sexual or gendered persecution such as being arrested (Giametta 2017). Even within the visual economy on queer migration, there are also expectations that migrants confess their horrors (Williams 2020). Not speaking about the horrors, or not speaking about them in particular ways, risks the possibility of lacking intelligibility. The demand for such narrative attempts to prove fear of future persecution by detailing past experiences, meaning one must prove not just that they faced persecution, but they risk facing persecution again. If the 'migrant' as the figure must prove their vulnerability and potential for suffering to become intelligible, Esmail disrupts the possibility of the viewer knowing about this aspect of their life. Such a disruption not only allows Esmail to maintain control over their narrative, but opens up the possibility of not knowing as signifying the horror. The refusal to speak becomes a noisy form of silence (Gordon 2008), allowing for an understanding without knowing what happened. Instead, Esmail becomes a subject not defined by their persecution but their wider plight. In this sense, there becomes a refusal to give oneself away to the demands of sexual humanitarianism. Such absences must linger within the imagination, allowing the possibility of confronting the horror of silence.

Indeed, the refusal to speak is one way of responding to violence. A similar absence occurs when Esmail speaks about their move to Norway. Instead of feeling liberated, they discuss how much racism they experienced. For instance, they discuss a message received on a dating application. Instead of discussing its content, they focus on how angry the message made them feel—neither sleeping for days nor being able to get over their rage. Esmail continues by explaining how being a migrant limited their ability to react to such violence; providing the example of somebody feeling their ass being squeezed in a nightclub but feeling nothing can be done. Esmail shifts the discussion from racist 'acts' to how such racism made

them feel. The affective response culminated into their fear of being seen as angry; the fear of reacting to racism becomes another modality of violence. Esmail elaborates by suggesting such violence may destroy them from the inside, whereby they risk becoming the ‘angry black man’ they do not want to become. Such racism left Esmail without the possibility of going to clubs and bars or using queer dating applications without being reminded of how they did not belong. These feelings amplified during public discussions on homosexuality and Islam during queer pride events across 2016, whereby the alleged homophobia of Islam was emphasised. Indeed, violence involves not only what is said, but importantly what cannot be said out of fear, anger, resignation, refusal, self-preservation, and so on. Hence there might be agency in refusing to say what is expected or required, but there may also be fear of speaking up when confronted with racism or xenophobia. These absences within narratives become means of understanding how migrants attempt to make a life for themselves amidst the violence being experienced. Ultimately, *Season of Migration* raises questions about what remains silent within accounts of migration. Instead of knowing more about the ‘migrant’, such absences are invoked throughout the narrative of Esmail to grapple with the present reality of racism and sexualisation. The absences within narratives must not be ignored but understood as forms of social violence that leave few traces.

Mystery Figures on the Runway

It is not only Esmail who conjures absences. Esmail is not shown reading their diary aloud, despite this being the audio component of the film, but many people are shown walking down the runway within the fashion show. Wearing a variety of outfits from shiny silver suits to sports attire, the fashion show seems an irrevocably queer space, which plays an important role disavowing the attempt to deny the possibility of (counter)public queer life in the global South, whether through immigration regimes or the visual economy shunning such possibility (Saleh

2020). The demand for queer migrants to become intelligible through sexual and gendered norms and alleged vulnerability shows the difficulty of discussing alternative spaces where queer life exists. Although the fashion show was shut down, its mere presence displays queer life in an environment dismissed as only homophobic or transphobic. Instead of focusing on persecution surrounding the fashion show, *Season of Migration* focuses on the events that existed before and after such violence, an attempt to explore what remains masked by queer migrants seeking asylum having to fit into certain norms. Rather than demanding such tropes, *Season of Migration* lingers with the existence of this vital queer space, even if the lives of those on the runway remain a mystery. Yet their fleeting presence on the runway demands grappling with their absence within the present and future.

Although Esmail mentions they feature twice on the runway—wearing clothes from *Diesel* and holding a basketball—their presence within the visual material of the film is no more significant than anybody else. Esmail is deemed important not through their physical presence but their narration. The repetitive nature of the runway, not based on the lack of diverse attire but the relatively formulaic modus operandi of runways, allows their voice to hold attention throughout the film. Yet I suggest not becoming overtly visually present has its own impact too; a way of understanding how the viewer becomes orientated to the subject they only briefly witness. In *Season of Migration,* the viewer loses the ability to keep their eyes on Esmail. Although they may continue to look for Esmail amongst the many individuals walking the runway, I suggest their ephemeral presence leaves open the possibility of challenging the way humanisation depends upon visibility. The attempt to challenge the anonymity of migrants by focusing on the presence of the individual represents a desire to cleavage the individual from the group to bestow upon them rights. It is only through getting familiar with such individual that allows for them to be recognised as deserving of humanisation. The problem with such an approach is that it seeks to define who belongs to a specific political community

as opposed to recognising the potential for solidarity amongst those governed not by a specific quality of the individual but instead shared recognition of being governed by political regimes (Edkins 2003).

Hence, instead of demanding the presence of their body to distinguish Esmail from the others, the refusal to be constantly identified allows them to become yet another body forming the relative anonymity of those marking their presence on the runway. By allowing Esmail to become just another relatively anonymous figure, they visually disappear on an individual level. Their refusal to become easily identifiable disrupts the desire for representation through exposure, despite them tempting the viewer to identify their presence. Yet this temptation also exposes the desire to visually witness the subject. If an initial step of understanding how to orient oneself towards others involves observation, *Season of Migration* disorients the viewer as means of putting not only Esmail but the anonymity of migrants on display. According to Sara Ahmed (2006, 11), '[i]f orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails'. The viewers' disorientation might thus be seen as a 'queer phenomenology' (Ahmed 2006), referring to the restructuring of social relations that takes place by allowing a politics of disorientation to put other objects or ideas into closer proximity. Instead of simply making the strange familiar in *Season of Migration*, there is an overt attempt to avoid the possibility of observing the subject. Such efforts reconfigure how, and what, one observes; and this may alter their orientation towards the queer migrant. The figure of the queer migrant as expected is displaced in such moments of disorientation. The refusal to become easily identifiable allows Esmail to narrate their personal experience without always being observed, which raises the possibility of other voices to emerge from such anonymity. What might these anonymous figures say once given the platform? Such reckoning is not built upon the temptation to focus on the individual but the plurality of voices that may emerge once conforming to the figure of

the queer migrant is disrupted. Esmail comes to represent only one voice as opposed to representing anybody else on the runway, or any group of migrants; but masking their body reminds the viewer of whom is ‘out there’ but has not yet been given the opportunity to speak beyond the presence of their indistinguishable body. Knowing there are a multitude of voices within anonymity, as opposed to one voice representing them, invokes this possibility of humanising the subject without relying on their intelligibility.

Even if immobility is important to grapple with (Schewel 2019), narratives on queer migration rarely discuss the lives of those who do not migrate. Without suggesting migrants are lucky (although cultural capital plays a role), Esmail comes to represent one of the few seeking to migrate to Europe that actually claim or are granted asylum. Although the viewer is offered fragments of Esmail, nothing is said about the fate of the other individuals walking the runway after the arrest. Although present within the film, they are absent from the present. If anything, they become the backdrop—the figures hinting at the possibility of continued queer life in Sudan but whose futures remain entirely unknown. Their absences become haunting because of the very uncertainty surrounding their presence, especially as they stand in contrast to Esmail being granted asylum. It would be wrong to suggest migrating represents the end point of any narrative, but I want to linger on these uncertain futures of those featured within *Season of Migration* who remain voiceless.

The viewer knows they exist, but their presence does not extend beyond the fashion show. Nothing is said about whether they migrated too, whether they are in prison, or whether they are planning another fashion show. Rather than suggesting *Season of Migration* skips their narrative, I suggest the film grapples with the tension of widening the frame beyond the individual. Esmail becomes the ‘migrant’, yet the impossibility of knowing about the lives of the others becomes central to making the narrative of Esmail appear exceptional. If queer migrants must prove their alleged vulnerability, it risks suggesting only fleeing is possible for

similar subjects. Yet had it not been for Esmail to migrate, the viewer might know nothing of the anonymous figures on the runway. Although this might easily slide into Esmail becoming representative of queer life in Sudan, I suggest the opposite is true. Esmail is not the rule but the exception. Their escape allowed them to move to Norway, but their presence amongst hose with uncertain presents and futures makes them stand out precisely because they left. Indeed, Esmail is not depicted amongst the relative anonymity of migrants arriving in Europe but queer life in Sudan.

The conjuring of absences invokes questions about not only those on the move but those who remain bound, willingly or not. As such, the figures on the runway have a haunting presence. On the one hand, it is their absence within Europe that is haunting because it has become problematically expected that queer subjects only desire to flee their home countries if facing persecution. A haunting takes place because discourses on queer migration seem to elide the fact that most people, willingly or not, do not migrate. That such individuals on the runway may not desire the alleged freedoms of the West is the haunting that takes place. Movement is not certain, but nor does such desire necessarily exist. But on the other hand, it is not only their absence within Europe but instead the viewer lacking knowledge about their presence within any temporal or spatial zone outside the ephemera of the runway. Stories of plight may be violent, but what about the stories of those who cannot speak, whether through being silenced, or death? In this way, we might understand *Season of Migration* as not only a tale of migration but a tale of those who remain outside the possibility of, or desires for, migration—in effect existing outside the temporal and spatial logics of queer migration that suggest persecution will always lead to movement. This is because the complexity of social life is reduced to what is known, which leaves the absences ignored.

Masked Migrant

Yet questions remain about what unintelligibility might tell us about the individual within the larger anonymity of groups. I turn towards *Shelter: Farewell to Eden,* a film about the experience of Pepsi, a transgender migrant from the Philippines navigating the violence of European borders. The title of the film suggests a 'farewell' takes place—not from the violence of persecution typically associated with asylum but from Eden, the biblical paradise. Paradise is being left, a clear departure from the notion of queer migrants finding liberation upon moving to Europe. Yet the other part of the title, 'shelter', does show there exists the possibility of protection, albeit where and from whom remains ambiguous. As will be explored, the location of shelter and the possibility of farewell becomes complicated throughout the film, which makes clear the paradoxes involved within sexual humanitarianism. Upon migration, where is shelter for queer migrants, and to what exactly does one farewell? Or more importantly, how might the paradoxes of fleeing violence only to face violence be explored?

Pepsi is one of the many aliases chosen by the protagonist while moving through the urban underground in Europe in their bid to claim asylum. They mention they have several names, but their eighth name (their real name) will not be used. By taking on the name of the commercial soft drink, the moniker highlights the nature of borders allowing goods but not individuals to cross—unless the individual is commodified, especially poignant considering high rates of Filipino labour migration to Western metropoles. Although Pepsi becomes the alias to maintain anonymity, I want to linger on this refusal to be known. Naming the subject is linked to intelligibility, but instead of adopting a typical Filipino name to produce familiarity within the imaginary of the viewer, Pepsi is chosen. Not by refusing to give a real name to protect anonymity but mentioning the use of several aliases risks positioning Pepsi as somebody playing with the truth. Although this may be understood as deception, the necessity of lying is encouraged when recognising that only certain individuals are designated as worthy of protection, especially poignant considering discussions on distinguishing the 'real' from the

'fake' queer migrant (Koçak 2020). Rather than *Shelter* depicting Pepsi as deceptive, however, the demands placed onto their subjectivity are explored.

Pepsi depicts the difficulty of adhering to the norms expected of transgender migrants. Neither finding liberation in Europe nor strictly having a straightforward trajectory of persecution, the messy nature of migration is explored through the brief nonlinear snippets Pepsi narrates about their life. To summarise, they grew up in the minority Muslim (Moro) community before joining the Islamic Liberation Front, a group seeking secession since 1978. Due to the impossibility of merging 'gay' with Islam, Pepsi remarks they fled the organisation. To maintain their livelihood, they began stealing weapons and grenades to sell to farmers before eventually making enough money to flee to Manila. Shortly after, they moved to Libya to work as a nurse for ten years while Gaddafi held onto power. After facing growing discrimination because of their gender, Pepsi joined the growing number of migrants fleeing Libyan shores for Europe. Whether Pepsi fits the definition of 'refugee' is hardly the point. *Shelter* instead explores the extreme difficulty of aligning the narrative of Pepsi with the norms of vulnerability expected of queer migrants. Pepsi destroys the possibility of aligning their narrative to familiar tropes by forgoing temporal and spatial linearity for something more complex. The potential for unintelligibility is important. Rather than attempting to squeeze queer migrants into monolithic depictions of plight, *Shelter* explores the life of an unintelligible protagonist with multiple names, encouraging an approach to the subject that does not require intelligibility in order to recognise their humanity.

Yet more than disrupting this figure, the imposition of such norms is explored too. Upon visiting a doctor in Paris, Pepsi is informed about the 'condition' of 'transsexuality'. It seemingly takes a doctor to inform Pepsi how they might identify, which suggests the difficulty of relying on this term, especially considering the imposition of Western epistemologies on sexuality and gender within discourses on queer migration discussed above. Neither shunning

the identity nor embracing it, their reaction is ambiguous. If anything, the scene may indicate such information being used to claim asylum. If the term 'transexual' is necessary to prove asylum, it opens the door for individuals to make use of such terminology to make their own sexuality and gender intelligible. This does not deny the possibility of Pepsi identifying as 'transsexual' but reflects how certain norms must be used to appear intelligible. Yet the demand for intelligibility reproduces the figure of the queer migrant as opposed to the individual subject, which risks becoming dehumanising. *Shelter* avoids such pitfall by not only allowing its protagonist to remain somewhat unintelligible to normative accounts of plight, but attempting to show how such unintelligibility is encouraged—a challenge to how humanisation is often seen as possible under this desire to become familiar with the subject.

Whereas humanity is often understood through representations of the individual subject, I seek to explore the possibility of masking the individual as means of humanising the anonymous. The demand that queer migrants produce intelligible narratives conjures the problem of only allowing certain individuals access to the realm of humanity, which risks denying such humanity to those failing to become present. The very desire to humanise the individual through representation risks suggesting they need to be humanised from the anonymous group—perhaps best made evident by critiques suggesting that representations of anonymous migrants as 'waves' or 'masses' is only dehumanising. Yet the desire to cleavage an individual from the group risks another dehumanising gesture, whereby it is only through such representation that the individual becomes endowed with humanity. To counter such rhetoric, I continue by exploring the way the individual becomes anonymous, as opposed to becoming representative of the group.

In *Shelter,* Pepsi not only hides their name but hides their face. Sometimes they are facing away from the camera, but other times they are wearing a mask, whether a bandana with sunglasses or a balaclava. Blurring the face in documentaries has long been a strategy to

maintain the anonymity of its subjects disclosing potentially damaging information. The mask on the other hand has long been considered one means of hiding the face for antisocial or 'illegal' behaviour. Although both considerations may be true for Pepsi, I suggest an alternate understanding of the mask by drawing upon the traditions of groups like the Zapatistas (an indigenous revolutionary group in Chiapas, southern Mexico) and the Indignados movement in Spain. Wearing masks has long been used by the Zapatistas to reject the representational logics of political visibility that depends upon the individual showing their face, instead favouring a modality of direct democracy focused on the group in their bid to challenge systems of power (Conant 2012). Rather than hiding the individual, the mask becomes the symbol of collective identity to indicate presence, not absence. As Jeff Conant (2012, 149) argues, the mask became the symbol of all of those whose identities are dismissed by the dominant culture. Anonymity, facelessness, is claimed with a ferocity and an intelligence that turns it from a deficiency into a source of power and a threat'. A similar logic was employed by the Indignados movement in Spain, where the Guy Fawkes mask was used not only to mask the identity of the individuals but to subsume the individuals into the collective. The mask thus became 'a mainstream cultural object that is mobilized by the indignados to symbolize their collective struggle and identity' (Rovisco 2016, 29). By wearing the mask, I suggest Pepsi conjures a sense of possibility, whereby the individual subject becomes blurred by their commitment to the anonymous group. The mask becomes linked not to individualising narratives but professing membership to those facing the violence of European borders.

Whereas *Season of Migration* was not only about Esmail but the haunting presence of those who remained absent beyond the runway, I suggest *Shelter* does not seek to make Pepsi representative of the migrants they encounter (and support) along the way, but instead uses such anonymity to conjure the possibility of humanising a group of migrants more broadly. Although their own narrative takes dominance, the refusal to be fully legible positions them

amongst anonymity. By inverting the desire for anonymity into the presence of the group, the wearing of the mask not only attempts to disrupt ideas of humanity belonging to the individual but becomes 'about a metamorphosis from collective silence to collective insurgency' (Conant 2012, 131). By focusing on the group, the desire for anonymity disrupts the gaze of the viewer that may otherwise demand the representation of the individual to understand their humanity. Diverting the gaze of the viewer onto the group challenges the subjugation of the individual to notions of sexual humanitarianism, instead prompting the need to critically reflect upon the anonymous migrants who remain stuck within the violence of European borders.

Disappearances at the Border

By recognising the humanity of those whose absences haunt *Shelter: Farewell to Eden*, I suggest paying attention to the plight of migrants crossing borders but lack individual representation. As I have suggested, there must be an attempt to recognise humanity beyond forcing an individual to prove their intelligibility, whether on the individual level or representing the group. Such possibility means grappling with how to ethically approach not only Pepsi but the anonymous migrants featured in *Shelter*. Although much of *Shelter* includes footage of Pepsi, there are many shots excluding them too, instead focusing on the anonymous migrants shuffling along the urban underground. The migrants are depicted not only by their presence but their absence within the landscapes they pass—long shots of mountainous regions and forests, mattresses and blankets left discarded on the ground, and eery dark nights where only mobile phones light the way. They do not always speak but they remain present through the film, yet their existence within the present and future remains ambiguous too. For instance, Pepsi bluntly explains there will be no investigation into the death of a teenage migrant hit by a truck. As Butler (2004) argues, the individual body never truly belongs to the self but instead becomes bound to social, political, and economic forces that mark bodies with certain levels

of greivability; only certain lives become imbued with the humanity that necessitates their protection. Although *Shelter* ends with uncertainty over the fate of Pepsi too, I want to resist thinking about what happened to them without equally thinking about what happened to the anonymous migrants.

Such migrants are consumed by the audience, yet they disappear once the documentary is over. Even if they are barely shown within the documentary, that does not mean their absences mean nothing. A few scholars have thus juxtaposed the life of subjects within documentaries and their subsequent deaths; for instance, Sima Shakshari (2014) has explored how the subject of a documentary on transgender women in Iran died after migrating to Canada, and how their death was not mentioned during the screening of the documentary. Yet I want to extend such analysis beyond the (potential) deaths of protagonists. Indeed, perhaps attention to such deaths is precisely because the protagonists gained intelligibility within the films, allowing their humanity to be recognised. Yet there must be a way of approaching those whose absences have a haunting presence too. If the anonymous are not worthy of mourning, there risks the possibility of denying their humanity. The point is not necessarily looking for these particular migrants but grappling with their possible continued (non)existence beyond being filmed. Kara Keeling (2019) thus suggests asking *when* the marginalised subjects of documentaries might be, as opposed to asking *where*, which in the case of migration, risks an enactment of border controls attempting to 'catch' migrants. When might these migrants be? When might they no longer need to prove their humanity? Migrants need more options than intelligibility because this inherently bars the unrepresented from humanity. Hence I am suggesting focusing on the way absences inform the possibility of humanity. By paying attention to those absences, I suggest we can also begin moving towards an ethical framework towards migrants beyond those being witnessed, whether through presence or absence.

Beyond representation, *Shelter* ultimately moves beyond individual narratives to focus on the violence of borders. This marks a shift from focusing on alleged vulnerability due to persecution and towards the many geopolitical factors that structure experiences of migration. Such focus becomes most clear when Pepsi describes the role of Europe causing reasons for plight. Although international refugee law says nothing about responsibility for reasons of plight (Hathaway 1990), Pepsi invites such an ethical possibility by discussing how many countries have been destroyed because of Western interventions, which led to the necessity of migrants fleeing. Ranging from foreign invasions, stolen minerals, human trafficking, and environmental destruction, Pepsi elaborates on such conditions on unlivability being inflicted by the West. The point seems not to provide an intimate portrait of any particular issue but instead raise the 'intimacy of four continents' (Lowe 2015). Despite this, European borders remain the physical barrier of inclusion into Europe. Such violence not only has the material effect of keeping migrants out but the symbolic effect of suggesting migrants have no basis crossing such borders. The uncritical maintenance of these borders actively denies their role confining migrants to conditions of unlivability. Perhaps an attempt to seek remedy from those who caused harm seems paradoxical—but this is the nature of postcolonial asylum, whereby the West plays roles causing reasons for plight while claiming to 'liberate' queer migrants. By disrupting the desire to produce migrants within the realm of sexual humanitarianism, *Shelter* offers a political statement that undermines the legitimacy of European borders without demanding the intelligibility of subjects within sexual humanitarianism.

Beyond challenging such violence of European borders, *Shelter* disrupts the very possibility of desiring to save migrants from persecution as long as borders continue to exist. Instead, the viewer must grapple with the disruption that migrants will play. Perhaps this is best bluntly summed up by Pepsi: 'You colonised the country, but we colonised you by refugee means'. Pepsi is not asking to cross the border but demanding to; an upending of existing

structures keeping migrants blocked from entry. The possibility of inclusion into the rights often discussed within discourses on sexual humanitarianism is challenged. Indeed, humanitarianism seeks to filter out those who remain threatening to the system. Fadi Saleh (2020) has thus explored how (Syrian) queer migrants must not only perform as intelligible vulnerable subjects, but also as nonthreatening; an attempt to distance themselves from security threats to make them appear as potential 'good' citizens. Only by disavowing national belonging, ethnic and religious backgrounds, problematic political stances, and other factors that appear threatening might queer migrants emerge as exceptional subjects worthy of being saved (Saleh 2020). Pepsi challenges such representations of the 'good' queer migrant by suggesting migrants will colonise Europe. Rather than performing as desirable, Pepsi embraces the negative connotations of taking over Europe, a common trope voiced by those against heightened migration out of fears of societal change. Embracing the negative is important considering the way alleged security threats have long been dehumanised too (Butler 2004). The possibility of humanity must thus exist for those seeking to disrupt the comfort that European borders provide for its citizens. Those who disrupt the system, even if threatening, may therefore become imbued with the humanity often only granted to those becoming intelligible within sexual humanitarianism.

Conclusion

Season of Migration to the North and *Shelter: Farewell to Eden* explore the possibility of going beyond sexual humanitarianism, allowing for an altered modality of politics that differs from the way queer migrants must become intelligible subjects to find acceptance within Europe. On the one hand, the protagonists disrupt the possibility of aligning their narratives with the norms expected of queer migrants. The disruption stems from not only their personal narratives but what remains absent both orally and visually. On the other hand, the protagonists have their

presence masked, instead allowing the absences of anonymous groups (of migrants and nonmigrants) to become visually present. Neither Esmail nor Pepsi become representative of anything; instead, their individuality is distinguished. Yet by placing this exceptionality amongst the absence of others, their narratives become vital to imbuing humanity onto the unknown migrants and nonmigrants. In this way, *Season of Migration* and *Shelter* refuse to allow for their protagonists to become the symbolic figureheads of queer migration. The unintelligibility of those who have the power to speak but also those who remain voiceless becomes means of challenging the dehumanisation of anonymous migrants, instead allowing humanity to be understood without an intelligible presence but the making presence of absence. Phelan (1993) has already discussed the trouble of an alleged binary of visibility being powerful in contrast to invisibility, but I suggest making absences visible becomes a powerful way of challenging the necessity of only becoming visible within certain frames of understanding. The representation of absence thus becomes powerful in its own right.

Indeed, presence does not always lead to intelligibility. Nor does presence alone grant acceptance within the marginal protections of rights based on intelligibility. Discussing the work of Gilroy, Tavia Nyong'o (2014) argues the point is not denying that rights are important (such as asylum), despite the potential for imperialist human rights discourses, but recognising how overcoming the barriers of accessing rights is built upon histories of colonisation, slavery, and other forms of violence whereby the right to be human was denied to many populations, as opposed to arbitrary denials to individual subjects. This article has thus sought to advance new understandings of how queer migration might be understood beyond demanding subjects to become intelligible. In this way, I have suggested *Season of Migration* and *Shelter* disrupt the possibility of sexual humanitarianism by formulating a critical perspective upon the experiences of not only Esmail and Pepsi but the anonymous migrants and nonmigrants featured in the films. Their presence is marked by their absence, which conjures a haunting of

not only European borders but attempts to humanise the individual by demanding their intelligibility. Although Butler (2004) warns against allowing representations to inform humanity, that does not mean representing absence falls into such trap.

By showing how humanisation can rely on not only presence but absence, the demand that individuals must perform their humanity is disrupted, along with desires for them to represent the humanity of wider populations. Beyond the individual, recognising absences allows for the potential of a coalitional politics to form that challenges the necessity of conforming to the figure of the queer migrant. This is especially important because 'the logic of visibility might constrain in advance the kinds of coalition which are possible' (Greer 2012, 15). Although the attempt to make visible through presence allows for the possibility of building community based on a shared affiliation of what is being made present (e.g., a 'gay' identity), Phelan (1993) notes how such desire may facilitate its own exclusionary logics based on those who remain unrepresented. Subjects do not always have the choice to determine their level of visibility, whereby some subjects are not afforded visibility and others are forced to become visible (Freshwater 2009). This is why I have stressed the necessity of reading for absences within what is being made present. By diverting the viewer towards such absences, a more nuanced understanding of the way humanisation has problematically come to depend on the individual being intelligible is possible. Focusing on absences involves grappling with the impossibility of knowing. As Kandice Chuh (2019, 95) suggests, this means recognising the potential for a 'world in which the misrecognitions naturalized by hegemonic sociality are apprehended as such; but the response to this phenomenon is not to strive for authenticity in an effort to correct misrepresentation. Rather, collectivity grows from the shared recognition of misrecognition'. Rather than trying to capture the migrants who become absent, there must be an attempt to play with the uncertainty, perhaps an attempt to explore how this uncertainty is more about fears of the unintelligible. Such reclamation of the narrative exposes the problem

of asylum and discourses thereof relying on figures of migrants, not individuals. By offering not just alternative but complex understandings of plight that do not fit into easy narratives, a more nuanced understanding of queer migration may become possible, one that does not rely on reductive notions of intelligibility. Paying attention to unintelligibility thus opens up the door for humanisation to exist without demanding proof, allowing the possibility of worldmaking practises that disrupt the necessity of intelligibility. Although the possibility of subjects becoming intelligible through visibility may be important in some aspects of life (Greer 2012), I argue for the importance of recognising the political force of grappling with unintelligibility. This does not mean denying voice, but does involve paying attention to the haunting aspects of what remains absent within presence. Such possibility allows one to grapple with the necessity of accepting that making the subject intelligible is not the only way to approach queer migration.

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bhabha, Homi. 2004. "Framing Fanon." foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, Judith. 2008. "Gender is Extramoral." *The European Graduate School faculty website*. Last accessed 16 June 2020: https://genius.com/Judith-butler-gender-is-extramoral-annotated

Butler, Judith. 2015. *Senses of the Subject.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Braidotti, Rosi and Paul Gilroy. 2016. *Conflicting Humanities.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Chuh, Kandice. 2019. *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man"*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.

Conant, Jeff. 2010. *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency*. Oakland, California: AK Press.

Edkins, Jenny. 2003. "Humanitarianism, Humanity, Human." *Journal of Human Rights* 2(2): 253-258.

Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Giametta, Calogero. 2017. *The Sexual Politics of Asylum: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the UK Asylum System*. New York: Routledge.

Gilroy, Paul. 2002. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Gordon, Avery. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP.

Greer, Stephen. 2012. *Contemporary Queer British Performance: Brief Encounters.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hathaway, James C. 1990. "A Reconsideration of the Underlying Premise of Refugee Law." *31 Harv. Int'l. L. J.* 129.

Keeling, Kara. 2019. *Queer Times, Black Futures.* New York: New York UP.

Koçak, Mert. 2020. "Who is 'Queerer' and Deserves Resettlement?: Queer Asylum Seekers and Their Deservingness of Refugee Status in Turkey." *Middle East Critique* 29(1): 29-46.

Kramer, Sina. 2015. "Judith Butler's "New Humanism": A Thing or Not a Thing, and So What?". *philoSOPHIA* 5(1): 25-40

Laumann, Lars. 2015. *Season of Migration to the North.*

Lowe, Lisa. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents.* Durham, United States: Duke UP.

Masi, Enrico. 2019. *Shelter: Farewell to Eden.* Filmotor Distribution

Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance.* London: Routledge.

Rovisco, Maira. 2016. "A New 'Europe From Below'? Cosmopolitan Citizenship, Digital Media and the Indignados Social Movement." *Comparative European Politics* 14: 435-457

Sabsay, Leticia. 2018. "The Subject of Performativity: Between the Force of Signifiers and the Desire for the Real." *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis* 5: 55-91.

Saleh, Fadi. 2020. "'Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence Of The Figure Of The Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee." *Middle East Critique*: 47-67.

Salih, Tayib. 2003 [1966]. *Season of Migration to the North*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, Penguin Classics.

Sari, Elif. 2019. "Lesbian Refugees in Transit: The Making Of Authenticity And Legitimacy in Turkey." *Journal Of Lesbian Studies* 24(2): 140-158.

Williams, James. 2020. *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema*. London: Routledge.