

Queer Performance on the Border: Making Critical Fun of European Immigration Regimes

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Abstract

Queer migrants seeking asylum in Europe face both heteronormative and homonormative assumptions about their subjectivity. Yet these assumptions are not simply adhered to for the sake of intelligibility. This article will explore how cultural production challenges the heteronormativity and homonormativity of European immigration regimes in both *On the Bride's Side* (a 2014 documentary directed by Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, Antonio Augugliaro, and Gabriele del Grande) and *Moebius Stripping* (a 2019 filmed performance by the Istanbul Queer Art Collective). Drawing upon the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, I suggest these performances are *making critical fun* of European borders. Instead of only exposing the violence of hetero/homonormativity, making critical fun allows one to grapple with how such violence is being creatively manoeuvred. By displaying the border as porous and incapable of understanding migrant subjectivity, there is an imaginative reconfiguration of the border itself. Without denying the potential for European borders to force queer migrants into situations of vulnerability, the act of crossing the border, and performing the act too, can sometimes become an agentic sign of making critical fun that disrupts the sexual and gendered norms being expected by immigration regimes.

Keywords

Bakhtin, heteronormativity, homonormativity, migration, performance, queer

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Introduction

The past decades have seen growing attention given to the plight of queer migrants seeking asylum in Europe. Whereas the scholarly field of queer migration initially exposed the heteronormativity of borders (Luibhéid, 2008), more recent work has also explored the way queer migrants are interpellated through homonormativity (Giametta, 2017), referring to the policing of norms surrounding sexuality and gender that subsume queer subjects into the nation through classed and racialised logics (Duggan, 2003). On one hand, there have been heavy critiques of how European immigration regimes ignore the unique experiences of queer migrants – ranging from poor treatment within detention centres (Bachmann, 2016), deportations taking place in the middle of the night despite risks of persecution (Masoumi, 2016) and the necessity of proving sexuality and gender to sceptical adjudicators (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011). On the other hand, there have been heavy critiques of how public discourses imagine queer migrants as needing to be ‘saved’ from the alleged homophobia and transphobia of their home country (Giametta, 2017; Raboin, 2016). Many of these discourses rely on producing an economy of victimhood surrounding the queer migrant by emphasising their alleged vulnerability, whereby they should display victimhood if they want to be recognised by immigration regimes as worthy recipients of asylum (Koçak, 2020). As Saleh (2020) has shown, this becomes less about sharing nuanced understandings of subjectivity and more about adherence to the ‘figure’ expected of queer migrants. The alleged vulnerability of queer migrants not only ends up producing an image of Europe as playing the role of saviour, but masking the violence caused by the heteronormativity and homonormativity of borders.

Despite this, there has also been growing attention given to how such violence is resisted in Europe, including advocacy seeking to prevent the deportation of queer migrants (Lewis, 2013); ‘going public’ to allow for queer migrants to garner support for their case (Akin, 2017); the role of community and religious groups in fostering a sense of belonging (Dustin and Held, 2021); theatre groups offering a stage for queer migrants to express themselves in different ways (Giametta, 2017); the cinema providing counter-narratives to typical representations of queer migrants (Williams, 2020); and creative workshops allowing queer migrants to avoid the testimonial economy demanded in immigration regimes (Raboin, 2016). I situate this article within such body of work, not merely as an attempt to highlight queer migrant agency, but to explore imaginative reconfigurations of European borders; an attempt to grapple with how the hetero/homonormativity of European borders may be disrupted. As I will show, paying attention to how European borders are made to appear porous is necessary to ignite imaginative reconfigurations of how they might be otherwise. Drawing upon the notion of the carnivalesque by Bakhtin (1984 [1963], 1984 [1965]), I loosely term *making critical fun* to explore alternative responses to both the hetero/homonormativity of European borders. I elaborate more in the next section, but suffice to say, making critical fun not only exposes the violence of European borders but also highlights their failure to operate as intended.

This article draws upon cultural production to open the political imaginary. I begin by analysing *On the Bride's Side*, a documentary that uses a mock wedding party to disguise migrants trying to cross multiple borders between Italy and Sweden. Although

not focussed on the typical subject of queer migration studies – the lesbian or gay (and sometimes bisexual or transgender) migrant – I follow Eng and Puar (2020: 2) by recognising the need for ‘an expanded subjectless critique by interrogating not only the formative exclusions of queer studies but also the contingent material conditions through which “proper” queer subjects and identities emerge today’. Hence, the bride and the groom in *On the Bride’s Side*, the symbolic figures of heteronormativity, could be seen as *queer* through their carnivalesque subversion of crossing borders with the help of a wedding party. Disruptions to heteronormativity stem from multiple vantage points; hence, this documentary enables further discussion on the way sexuality and gender impact upon the lives of every migrant navigating immigration regimes. The second half of the article analyses *Moebius Stripping*, a performance by the Istanbul Queer Art Collective, which involves the cutting up of documents submitted to the British Home Office to extend their stay in the United Kingdom. I now return to the usual subject of queer migration studies (namely, the migrant with a non-normative sexuality and/or gender) to explore how their interpellation is disrupted. Indeed, *Moebius Stripping* makes critical fun of the demands for proof expected of queer migrants, especially given the difficulty of immigration regimes understanding their fluid subjectivity. Moreover, the durational aspects of the performance challenge the way (queer) migrants are left constantly waiting for answers by immigration regimes (Seitz, 2017). In this way, there is yet another carnivalesque subversion of the border by disrupting the claim of authority held by immigration regimes. Analysing both forms of cultural production together allow for an ongoing critique of both the hetero/homonormativity of European borders, which impacts not only queer migrants but migrants more broadly.

Making critical fun of borders

Developed by Bakhtin (1984 [1963]) in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and elaborated upon in *Rabelais and his World* (1984 [1965]), the carnivalesque draws upon the tradition of carnival across Europe. The carnival was a humorous gesture that allowed traditional feudal roles across many European societies to be reversed in a modality of celebration. Bakhtin took the traditions of the carnival to understand particular forms of literature, mostly exemplified by the writing of François Rabelais. The carnivalesque is a way of undermining the hierarchal structures of society through deploying humour. It is humour that gives people another life involving the disruption of power, which involves making critical fun of hierarchies – allowing the possibility of temporary freedoms from established truths, political orders, the legal realm, inequality, and acceptable public behaviour (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]). By removing such diktats, a carnivalesque sense of the world becomes possible, however temporary, whereby the barriers that normally divide any given society are removed. Society comes together by cooperating to denounce itself through humour, which becomes a way of subverting its norms. If the hierarchical order of society often speaks with a singular voice, the carnivalesque opens the possibility of heteroglossia, another term employed by Bakhtin to describe the multiplicity of voices expressed within cultural production. As defined by Bakhtin (1981: 291), heteroglossia refers to the merger of ‘specific points of view on the world, forms

for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values'. The carnivalesque allows such a multiplicity of voices to appear as another modality of dialogue to challenge power, which offers a radically different understanding of how public engagement takes place across society. Subsequently, heteroglossia may involve laughter at both the intentional humour and the societal norms being disrupted; both exposing and making critical fun of violence simultaneously.

Keeping this in mind, the carnivalesque may be problematised for legitimating norms of society by allowing only a temporary break from their imposition. The carnivalesque has been critiqued as merely humour being sanctioned by those within power (Eagleton, 1981), whereby its transgressive potential is undermined because only certain diversions from the norm are allowed. However, as opposed to an understanding of the carnivalesque that suggests it is merely sanctioned humour, Morson and Emerson (1990) have stressed Bakhtin was most interested in the idea of the carnivalesque as opening the door to the political imaginary. As Bakhtin (1984 [1965]) stressed too, the point is not that the carnival changed societal norms at once: instead, it invoked the possibility of gradual change by offering imaginative reconfigurations of how society could be. Thus, the carnivalesque not only temporarily disrupts societal norms but offers other ways of imagining society in the process. Stallybrass and White (1986) have also moved beyond suggesting the carnivalesque only exposes societal hierarchy to explore how the carnivalesque engages in transgression to reorder society too. This is because they approach the carnival through two domains: world upside-down theory and symbolic inversion (Stallybrass and White, 1986). Whereas the temporal limitations of the carnival may throw the world upside-down, there is an important symbolic inversion that simultaneously takes place. Indeed, this allows one to avoid merely discussing 'whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 26) to instead focus upon how cultural production ignites the political imaginary through the carnivalesque. Hence, despite the carnival declining in Europe, it could be said that its spirit continues within not only literature (Bakhtin, 1984 [1965]) but cultural production more broadly.

The question remains, what is the power of the carnivalesque to disrupt the hetero/homonormativity of European borders? I suggest the carnivalesque allows one to grapple with how making critical fun of European borders both exposes their violence and displays ways of manoeuvring such violence. Although making critical fun may not provoke immediate change, it does allow one to open the political imaginary, whereby instead borders are made to appear as porous. The carnivalesque offers not only a new political imaginary surrounding borders but an undoing of borders as they currently exist. Making critical fun through the deployment of humour therefore disrespects the violence of borders by showing their power is not all-encompassing, as opposed to only highlighting their devastating impacts. A response to the violence of the hetero/homonormativity of European borders lies with how the carnivalesque shows how such violence may be undone. The carnivalesque not only temporarily turns borders upside-down, but symbolically *and* materially inverts their attempt to govern queer migrants, and migrants more broadly, through hetero/homonormativity.

The wedding that was not: making critical fun of heteronormativity

On the Bride's Side is a documentary about Syrian and Palestinian migrants crossing multiple European borders between Milan and Stockholm under the guise of a travelling wedding party – directed by Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, Antonio Augugliaro and Gabriele del Grande. In total, the wedding party included 23 people: the directors and film crew, other friends of the group who played wedding guests and organised logistics along the way, the ‘bride’ Tasneem who held a German passport and the five migrants undertaking the clandestine crossing, namely, the ‘groom’ Abdallah, a couple Mona and Ahmed, and Alaa and their young son MC Manar. Using different modes of transport (including walking) and spanning 3,000 kilometres across France, Luxembourg, Germany and Denmark, the wedding party eventually arrived safely in Sweden. As suggested on the website of the documentary: ‘What border policeman would ever stop a bride to check her documents?’ Although it remains unknown as to whether being a wedding party actually impacted their specific experience crossing borders, it is going public with the performance of the wedding that is important to consider. It seems there is a carnivalesque rendering of the border that both exposes the violence faced by migrants seeking to cross borders and engages in making critical fun of how marriage has become one of the few means for migrants to (legally) enter the European Union (EU). Although violent, the border becomes imagined as porous by displaying how migrants creatively manoeuvre its demands. As remarked by the wedding party during the crossing, they are fully aware of European attempts to propagate their hospitality while not doing enough to actually support migrants. Having this knowledge demands migrants take crossings into their own hands.

Marriage has long been a mechanism to allow for one to migrate to Europe. Despite once being confined to heterosexual couples, the EU has since ruled that all member-states must allow the spouse of a citizen to migrate to the bloc regardless of their sexuality (Kochenov and Belavusau, 2019). In many EU member-states, this had already been a possibility following the legislation of same-sex marriage. Despite this, there have been other growing restrictions applied to spousal migration across Europe since the 1980s (Ruffer, 2011). Several scholars have subsequently pointed out how ‘marriage migration’ has been subjected to tough controls, ranging from financial restrictions to specific demands of integration (Bonjour and De Hart, 2013). Although Wray, Agoston, and Hutton (2014) point out the differences in laws across EU member-states, they equally suggest few laws are radically different. Instead, it is levels of language attainment, required fees, or other factors that differ. Unsurprisingly, this means there is a high burden of proof needed by anyone seeking to migrate to be with their spouse. This has led to the circulation of discourses surrounding ‘sham’ marriages, which Wemyss et al. (2018) suggest has turned the celebration of marriage into a security interrogation. The attempt to regulate alleged sham marriages through subjective criteria has ended up problematising ‘legitimate’ marriages too: for example, where marriage is only one of many reasons for migration or where the migrant is considered undesirable by the nation (Wray, 2015). Hence, marriage forms part of wider immigration policy, recognising there are regulations not just on explicitly shammed marriages but any marriage that may allow for migration. This is a racialised and classed undertaking that attempts to control

migration more broadly (Bonjour and De Hart, 2013), whereby certain migrants are framed as seeking entry into Europe on questionable terms.

Hence, *On the Bride's Side* deploys a sham wedding party as means of subverting the border – not only allowing the migrants to cross but making critical fun at the fixation of uncovering sham marriages. The Syrian bride Tasneem gets married to the Palestinian groom Abdallah in a carnivalesque display of how a wedding usually appears. The beginning of the documentary sets the scene: the wedding party begins trying on wedding attire, getting haircuts for the upcoming journey, and telling the staff about their upcoming wedding. Indeed, this is not about hiding their voyage: even the cars they drive are covered in wedding decorations. Prior to the border crossing, the performance of the wedding becomes transparent in the documentary. There is footage of the group preparing for the journey together inside a house, sharing food, dancing, clapping, and explaining the dangerous path they will take. The image of a wedding couple crossing rough mountainous terrain in traditional wedding garb becomes an irrevocably queer gesture that deploys the heteronormative institution par excellence in a liminal space it would otherwise not be expected, namely the mountainous terrain within Europe. Although the wedding party may seem to mimic the heteronormativity of marriage, I suggest an alternate reading of this staging that focusses on how the wedding becomes the performance that makes critical fun of such heteronormativity – clearly shown by Tasneem constantly wearing the wedding dress throughout their plight, despite the dangerous path. Occasionally smoking a cigarette, it is the bride that crosses mountainous terrain to support migrants. The group sings while walking through the mountains; they use ropes to climb up hills in wedding attire; they climb through barbed wire to get where they need to go; it is a carnivalesque display of a wedding with symbolic and material effect.

The wedding does not seek permission to cross the border but uses the wedding to symbolically invert who has the right to cross the border. Indeed, the documentary ends up providing a critique of the hyper fixation on detecting sham marriages, the way marriage may allow for migration for only relatively privileged binational couples, and even the way marriage is an exclusionary norm but risks delegitimising other forms of intimacy or kinship. By adopting the wedding as the ploy in *On the Bride's Side*, the means by which many EU member-states rely on marriage to regulate borders is disrupted. The staging of the wedding not only challenges the exclusionary aspects of European borders but manoeuvres them; an attempt to expose the heteronormativity of borders through an exaggerated deployment of a wedding disrupts the means or purposes of regulating migration itself. Indeed, exposing the violence of European borders takes a distinctively queer trip by making a spectacle out of heteronormativity. Turning the border crossing into the carnivalesque therefore stages the very possibility of making critical fun; an upside-down wedding that symbolically disrupts heteronormativity while materially being used as the ploy to allow for Abdallah, Mona and Ahmed, and Alaa and MC Manar to cross the border into Sweden.

The performance of crossing

As opposed to suggesting migrants only seek to clandestinely cross borders by remaining hidden, an attempt to shy away from the 'illegality' of their crossing, *On the Bride's Side* does

not seek invisibility but instead boasts the spectacle of their crossing. The crossing of the border becomes a performance potentially under the gaze of immigration authorities. This means there was not only risk of the crossing but risk for exposing the crossing. At present, the Dublin Convention (European Union, 1990) would otherwise restrict migrants applying for asylum in EU member-states other than the one they initially arrived in. Despite the restrictions, there has been much analysis of how the Dublin Convention is not sufficient to stop border crossings between EU member-states (Armstrong, 2020). Regardless, the possibility of being prosecuted for border crossings looms. Indeed, the known migrant border crossings taking place across Europe have prompted attempts to disrupt such mobility through coercive means (De Genova, 2017). The journey taken in *On the Bride's Side* was therefore not only 'illegal' but dangerous, whereby the migrants risked deportation back to Italy if caught and everyone else risked arrest. As discussed in an article on the documentary (Ponzanesi, 2016), by having only five migrants within the production, there was less chance of trafficking charges as opposed to the lesser charge of aiding and abetting 'illegal' migration. Not only this, but the directors sought to finance the documentary film through an online crowdfunding campaign that collected funds from 2617 donors, showing a high degree of solidarity behind the project. To limit the possibility of persecution, many donors of the film were listed as co-producers in the final credits, recognising the difficulty of such a large prosecution (Ponzanesi, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the risk of prosecution has neither deterred migrants from making such crossings nor those helping to make this happen. Although the wedding party may have been used as the ploy to allow for the crossing, I suggest it is making a performance out of the crossing that holds a greater disruption to the heteronormativity of European borders.

On one hand, there is a group of migrants seeking to manoeuvre European borders. On the other hand, there is a performance of migrants and their supporters turning the border into the carnivalesque by making their crossing hyper visible. The wedding party becomes the means of simultaneously making present and absent their crossing. The 'migrant' crossing the border is replaced by the wedding party crossing the border. Indeed, the migrant is not 'supposed' to display their subversion of either marriage or the border, hence the status of migrants *as migrants* is masked by doing exactly what is unexpected. The disruption of the heteronormativity of European borders comes into clear display by performing the wedding – precisely because it is expected no migrant would act so brazenly while undertaking a clandestine crossing. Although any 'illegal' border crossing may be transgressive, I suggest this does not inherently mean the border is delegitimised. Whereas such acts show the possibility of subversion, I suggest turning the border into the carnivalesque goes one step further by using the very tools of the border against it in a provocative way. *On the Bride's Side* uses the heteronormativity of the border to allow for the crossing, as both mask and modus operandi. The border is not only made a spectacle of, but its own logics are taken advantage of. Hence the performance not only masks reality but stages another reality, allowing for the performance to merge with the difficulty of crossing borders through clandestine means. What remains most poignant is the connection between reality and the performance, allowing the migrants to make a performance out of their migratory experience.

Although the wedding party becomes the spectacle, *On the Bride's Side* does not suggest crossing the border through clandestine means is anything new. The documentary

not only blurs reality and the performance but brings focus onto the way migrants more broadly subvert the border. By highlighting the dangerous path taken as familiar, the documentary invokes the spectres of those forced to manoeuvre European borders. Indeed, the performance of their crossing stages a solidarity with those who have sought or continue to seek to cross the border. Take for instance when Abdallah discusses the hundreds of migrants who died in the Mediterranean shipwreck they survived, which resulted in 250 migrants going missing. Another instance is when the party stumbles into a cave before crossing into France where they find inscribed onto the walls the names of other migrants, physical locations, travel routes, and some political statements, as well as discarded shoes and clothing scattered all over the place. Or even earlier in the documentary, when it is expressed that 'illegal' Italian migrants used to take this route into France many decades ago. *On the Bride's Side* uses the carnivalesque as means of drawing attention to the everyday crossings taking place across European borders. Despite highlighting its violence, the documentary also shows glimmers of joy in such crossings – whether it is MC Manar rapping to crowds of people in a bar, or the group seeking out the national foods of where they cross. Indeed, a more nuanced account of crossing borders is given that does not only focus on vulnerability. There may be nothing overtly new about crossing borders, including using marriage to facilitate entry, yet *On the Bride's Side* turns the experience into a modality of performance to be consumed by the public. Reality does not inherently need the performance to be understood as making critical fun, but the performance allows for such an act to gain traction. The performance opens the possibility of exposing how making critical fun is already occurring.

The point is not questioning whether their wedding is legitimate (we know it is not) but reflecting upon how *On the Bride's Side* focusses on an intentional blurring to immigration authorities. Within such blind spots, I suggest the possibility of making critical fun is made clear. If one cannot properly distinguish between reality and the performance, I suggest there is a degree of agency linked to the role of making critical fun. It is the performance of such crossing that fosters a temporal separation from reality. The violence faced by migrants is exposed, but the possibility of subverting European borders is what mostly informs the performance. The separation between reality and the performance opens the possibility of critiquing that reality – not only from the position of those made victims of European borders but also from the position of those who manoeuvre such practices (and it should be remarked that both positions often coexist). By challenging the diktats of who belongs where, the migrants and their supporters disrupt European borders by performing a wedding. Instead of trying to expose the heteronormativity of borders by masking their own mobility, they use the alleged desire for marriage to expose their own mobility. Although subjected to the demands of European borders, the wedding party subverts the way only some are granted access to the possibility of migration through marriage. Despite the difficulty of distinguishing between reality and the performance in immigration regimes, the difficulty of doing so is what becomes important to recognise, and knowing this difficulty opens the possibility of making critical fun of such attempts to regulate what is a sham. Instead of always seeking to know what is accurate, the importance of *not knowing* becomes paramount to consider. Reality? Performance? It does not always matter. As opposed to only distinguishing between which migrants may pass through the heteronormativity of the border, making critical fun of European borders

involves the purposeful blurring of lines between reality and performance – an attempt to take advantage of such indistinction to allow for migrants to cross the border despite violence seeking to keep them barred from entry.

Fluid subjects: making critical fun of homonormativity

Yet how do acts of making critical fun also disrupt the very possibility of interpellating the migrant? I explore such possibility for queer migrants confronting the dictates of homonormativity. *Moebius Stripping* is a filmed performance by the Istanbul Queer Art Collective in 2019. Presently made up of Tuna Erdem and Seda Ergul, the group is based in London but was founded in Istanbul in 2012. Erdem and Ergul could not continue their work in Turkey because of political reasons, which prompted their move to the United Kingdom. Inspired by the Fluxus performances of the 1960s and 1970s, whereby creativity was about not only the finished product but experimental artistic process, the Collective has (in their own words) openly embraced the ‘queer art of failure’, referring to arguments made by Halberstam (2011) about the potential for failure to open up creative ways of existing within not only heteronormativity and homonormativity but neoliberalism, gender norms, and other forms of normalising practice. The group have remade many of the Fluxus performances by not only ‘queerifying’ them but positioning their performances within the temporal and spatial here and now. I thus understand *Moebius Stripping* as grappling with the potential for failure too, not only within their artistic process but their recognition of how failing may lead to something more productive. This could equally be flipped to explore their failure to embody the demands expected by immigration regimes. In sum, *Moebius Stripping* involves Erdem and Ergul cutting up three kilogrammes of documents they had given to the British Home Office to extend their ‘leave to remain’ in the United Kingdom, and then turning the paper into decorative Moebius strips. In a carnivalesque display, the bureaucracy of immigration regimes is turned into something existing far beyond what it intends to do. If the last section focussed on making critical fun of heteronormativity, this section and the following extends the analysis to homonormativity.

Like someone seeking to prove their marriage to immigration authorities, queer migrants seeking asylum in the United Kingdom must supply extensive documentation, albeit now there is the added burden of having to prove sexuality and gender. Ranging from testimonies from past lovers to photographs of themselves at queer events (Giametta, 2017; Lewis, 2014), such documentation attests to their reasons for migration as well as proving their desirability to become ‘good’ citizens. Indeed, the documentation becomes important not necessarily to the individual but to the state. As Millbank (2009) points out, there has been a shift in the processing of queer migrants seeking asylum from discretion to disbelief, whereby there are attempts to disprove the sexuality and gender of an applicant as opposed to suggesting they can be returned to their home country if discreet about their sexuality and gender. Yet instead of trying to understand the nuances of sexuality and gender, there is an attempt to interpellate queer migrants based on their ability to reproduce Western stereotypes of the queer subject, ranging from music tastes, desires of visibility, and knowledge of nightlife (Dustin and Held, 2018; Lewis, 2013). Queer migrants claiming asylum based on sexuality and gender face the challenging task

of not only proving they are at risk of persecution but proving they can fit into such moulds. Hence, only certain queer migrants will find acceptance into the fold of the state depending on their ability to perform a particular identity. As pointed out by Heimer (2020), there is an expectation of queer migrants to align their identity with norms of the homonormative queer subject. A denunciation of such problematic expectations may expose their violence – namely how they become grounds for exclusion, but also an ignorance about non-Western understandings of sexuality and gender – but making critical fun goes one step further by highlighting the failure of immigration regimes to truly understand the subject.

If immigration regimes rely on not only personal narration but documentation, tearing up such evidence in *Moebius Stripping* with the purpose of turning them into decorative Moebius strips disrupts the very importance placed onto such materials by immigration regimes. Borders attempt to legitimate the subjects who cross them, but this performance makes critical fun of the means of doing so. The precise contents of such documentation in *Moebius Stripping* remain unknown, but that is beside the point. More importantly, their documents become representative of their bureaucratic relationship with the Home Office. The performance, however, displays Erdem and Ergul disrupting the possibility of being placed within such homonormative spaces by performing as cisgender female drag queens – adopting what they consider a form of ‘radical drag’ (Lorenz, 2012). Indeed, *Moebius Stripping* involves Erdem and Ergul wearing excessively bright clothing, colourful wigs, heavy makeup, spotty bras over the top of jumpers, and fluffy headpieces resembling birds. Just like the carnivalesque that disrupts how society appears, the appearances displayed in the performance disrupt typical attire. Refusing to be defined by their documentation, as indicative of what may prove their desire to belong to the state, *Moebius Stripping* enacts a performance that would otherwise disrupt their intelligibility to the Home Office. It may seem banal that appearance plays a role in determining immigration status, but as mentioned above stereotypes have long played a role in determining eligibility for asylum or acceptance into the nation more broadly (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011). While cutting up their documents, Erdem and Ergul present a version of themselves in a radical way, a disruption to the way immigration regimes seek homonormative performances of sexuality and gender. Instead of focussing on producing themselves as intelligible to the viewer, *Moebius Stripping* hints at their unintelligibility becoming the priority. If Erdem and Ergul have stressed the way sexuality and gender are performative throughout their broader repertoire of work, *Moebius Stripping* continues such arguments by making critical fun of immigration regimes for demanding performances that do not necessarily reflect the subjectivity of queer migrants.

Yet this impossibility of understanding the sexuality and gender of queer migrants can also be extended to an analysis of migration more broadly. Even though studies on queer migration have mostly focussed upon queer migrants seeking asylum – hence an overt focus on the figure of the ‘refugee’ being vulnerable – the very act of categorising migrants has been problematised (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Indeed, immigration regimes seek to categorise migrants into arbitrary legal groupings, such as the economic migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker, and so forth, which often deny subjective experiences of plight. It is important now to state that the ‘category’ of migrant held by Erdem and Ergul is not the point but how queer migrants are interpellated by immigration regimes more broadly.

Moebius Stripping enacts such a critique of categorisations when Erdem begins reading aloud from the website of the *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds*. More specifically, they read from a page titled ‘Do All Birds Migrate?’, which focusses on the multiple types of migration that birds undergo before and during their arrival in the United Kingdom. The resemblance between such migratory bird patterns and the categories chosen to control the mobility of (human) migrants is clear, ranging from discussions about the uncertainty of where some birds come from, the way birds may migrate for safety, irruptions involving large numbers of birds, and seasonal migration. Such techniques of categorisation, however, appear elaborate compared with how (human) migration is understood within most public discourses. The point is, by reading such categorisations aloud, *Moebius Stripping* extends such techniques of categorisation for migratory bird patterns to immigration regimes, whereby there are attempts to filter migrants into a limited number of specific categories that risks denying the sheer complexity of migration. Again, this challenges the way in which queer migrants must often prove themselves as embodying the ‘vulnerable refugee’ to be subsumed by homonormativity.

Hence, the complexity of migration is ignored for the sake of bureaucracy. Yet it would be equally amiss to say bureaucracy is merely functioning without active choices continuously shaping its effects. Such facts becomes poignant when Erdem reads aloud two newspaper articles in the performance. First, they read ‘Migrant Flows’ by Tubiana and Warin (2019) from the *London Review of Books*. The article focusses on the negotiations between the EU and Turkey that foresaw Ankara doing its best to keep migrants from crossing into European territory, along with the EU being allowed to return migrants from Greece into Turkey. Second, they read ‘Michael Gove admits leave campaign wrong to fuel Turkey fears’ by Sabbagh (2018) from *The Guardian*. The article focusses on British politician Michael Gove admitting he should not have invoked fear of Turkish immigration during the Brexit campaign, knowing there was the possibility of Turkey acceding to the EU at the time. Both articles reflect upon the way migrants become pawns within political debates. The two readings show how the ‘migrant’ ceases to exist outside the categories used to control their (im)mobility. *Moebius Stripping* highlights the abjection of being turned into not only a ‘figure’ or legal category at the expense of an individual, but a political pawn. Hence the alleged vulnerability of queer migrants is undermined by other political factors that override concerns about claiming to save queer migrants. Even if the Home Office demands homonormative subjects, a subject the state can claim to save because they are vulnerable, the performance shows how these desires for vulnerability are merely one factor that contributes to the functioning of immigration regimes. Acknowledging such factors allows *Moebius Stripping* to make critical fun of the United Kingdom claiming a humanitarian stance towards ‘saving’ queer migrants. It is the knowledge of this abjection that encourages the viewer to grapple with how borders are manoeuvred by migrants, recognising such migrants remain aware of how they are perceived.

The performance of waiting

The unintelligibility of Tuna Erdem and Seda Ergul, neither as homonormative subjects nor as subjects unaware of their position as figures or a legal category to immigration

regimes, transcends into the very form of the performance too. *Moebius Stripping* is indeed somewhat of a durational performance for both Erdem and Ergul and the viewer. By slowing down time through choices of form, I suggest, *Moebius Stripping* demands the viewer grapples with their unintelligibility, and accepting this unintelligibility no matter how hard they look. However, the performance equally speaks back to immigration regimes. If so, it would demand a reversal of who is usually waiting upon whom. Before continuing, it is worth saying some words on the temporality of migration – a growing area of interest for some scholars (Griffiths et al., 2013). Such scholarly work on temporality seeks to go above the emphasis on migration as a spatial process to instead focus on how the border organises times too. As Griffiths, (2014, p. 1991) points out, migrants are subjected to temporal constraints within the United Kingdom that ‘arise from specific characteristics of the asylum and detention systems, including certain administrative procedures, chronic uncertainty and the systemic primacy of waiting’. The experience of migration may therefore involve suspended periods of waiting through time being slowed down (Papadopoulos et al., 2008), such as waiting to receive communications and orders to appear in court dates. Andersson (2014) has explored how such immigration regimes involve not only the imposition of waiting but also the purposeful ‘usurpation of time’, whereby the state attempts to stall time through delays and interruptions. The constant uncertainty surrounding how to move forward with an immigration status becomes a temporal barrier to inclusion (Martin, 2012). Migrants get stuck within limbo, whereby the state attempts to assess their eligibility to remain in the country or prepare them for their deportation. As Griffiths et al. (2013) elaborate, ‘time does not literally stop for such people, but nonetheless, a noncumulative stasis appears to be one powerful model of experiencing and explaining time’. Under such conditions, migrants rarely have control over their temporal existence. The never-ending suspension of time becomes a modality of control. As such, migrants awaiting legal status exist within a lacuna: the indefinite length of their waiting positions them existing outside of time while also placing them at mercy to the temporal power of immigration control. If migrants wait with uncertainty, *Moebius Stripping* responds by demanding those seeking to interpellate their subjectivity wait – without the certainty of finding answers, let alone the right ones.

The first 17 minutes of *Moebius Stripping* involves the repetitive task of Erdem and Ergul cutting up bundles of paper. Nothing is said as they undertake the first step of creating the Moebius strips. The repetitive flow of the performance only changes when Ergul stands up from the desk to go and sit by the window to begin reading aloud one of the letters sent to Erdem by the Home Office. The letter informs Erdem about the need to send their application to extend their leave to remain if they want to stay within the United Kingdom. Following this, Ergul continues by reading aloud government documents discussing the necessity of maintaining the privacy of materials given to the Home Office, the privacy regulations being adopted while handling their documentation, and the number of ways in which their data are used. In short, a lot of reading. Like the cutting up of the paper, the reading aloud of bureaucratic information becomes a repetitive task. The bureaucracy of the immigration regime is performed, repetitively, which I suggest risks boring the viewer, but I have a feeling that is the point. The form of the performance is reflective of the experience of migration: slow, long and repetitive. Despite this,

the viewer is encouraged to keep gazing into the screen wondering when Erdem or Ergul will do something else. If the bureaucracy of the immigration regime bores the viewer, the bureaucracy that migrants must navigate can only be interpreted as boring too. Subsequently, there is critical making fun of immigration regimes and their boring demands. But not only this: despite the repetitive demands of immigration regimes, the failure for the immigration regimes to ever understand the individual is stressed – neither the three kilogrammes of paper demanded, nor migrants waiting lengthy periods of time, allows for their subjectivity to be properly understood. Erdem and Ergul quite literally make the viewer experience one aspect of their plight – the excessive documents and the long waiting times. Yet by the end of *Moebius Stripping*, it remains impossible to know much more about the experience of migration had by Erdem and Ergul, nor about themselves more broadly. The Home Office does not capture them within their bureaucracy, nor do Erdem and Ergul desire to make themselves more intelligible to such capturing.

Conclusion

I finish this article by turning to the Moebius strip. Although only featuring in *Moebius Stripping*, I suggest the Moebius strip holds relevance for making critical fun of immigration regimes more broadly. Named after one of its founders August Ferdinand Möbius, the Moebius strip is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as ‘an object with only one surface that is made by twisting a long strip of material once and then joining its two ends’. The Moebius strip not only spurred the development of the mathematical field of study known as topology but was popularised across many domains such as art and recycling. Neither having a top nor bottom, the only possibility is circulating around the loop indefinitely. Poignantly, the Moebius strip is also used within Lacanian psychoanalysis, as explained by the final text read aloud by Seda Ergul; ‘The Lacanian Moebius Strip’, a blog post by milo333milo (2013) on *Gender Space: Psychoanalysis, Gender, Space, and Representation*. As mentioned in the blog post, Jacques Lacan suggested alleged binary positions (inside/outside, love/hate, etc.) are not distinct oppositional categories but exist on a continuous and coexisting schema with no set boundaries. Why is this important? Tuna Erdem and Ergul turn the bureaucracy of the immigration regime into a path with no end; the perpetual loop of the Moebius strip. Following the bureaucracy of migration involves following an indefinitely uninterrupted circuit. Such a possibility stands in contrast to the way immigration regimes demand an interruption, whereby the migrant becomes confined to performing their ‘identity’ within specific spatial and temporal logics. Indeed, even if subjectivity is constantly changing and fluid, there are often demands to present oneself as static to claim intelligibility (Sabsay, 2018). Challenging the possibility of capturing the migrant, imagining the bureaucracy of immigration as one perpetual loop transforms this state apparatus into an ongoing attempt to capture what cannot be captured. By understanding migration not as an event but mobility as the process (Sheller and Urry, 2006), the idea of migration coming to an ‘end’ once the migrant has been properly interpellated is disrupted; not only regarding their relationship with the state but the broader experience of finding a sense of belonging within societal norms. Norms are approximated for the sake of intelligibility, but this does not mean immigration regimes can grasp the subjectivity of (queer) migrants.

From unauthorised border crossings under the guise of heteronormativity to refusing intelligibility under the diktats of homonormativity, the cultural production I have explored in this article engages in the carnivalesque to invert the power of immigration authorities. By making critical fun, not only is violence exposed but the possibility of manoeuvring such violence is put on display. If immigration regimes are perpetual loops of trying to figure out the impossible, *Moebius Stripping* finds another use for the bureaucracy: mere wall decorations. Neither being able to distinguish between sham and real marriages nor being able to interpellate the sexuality and gender of queer migrants, making critical fun points to the failures of immigration regimes to work as they claim. Focussing on the carnivalesque of immigration regimes exposes their cracks, which invokes the possibility of using these cracks to imagine things differently. The porosity of borders is displayed through making critical fun, thereby allowing for the imaginative reconfiguration of immigration regimes. Both *On the Bride's Side* and *Moebius Stripping* disrupt the way migrants must adhere to certain norms to become intelligible. Without denying the importance of exposing the violence faced by queer migrants, I suggest making critical fun does help overcome tropes of vulnerability often used within such accounts. In this way, the carnivalesque does not depend on producing victims, but reminds us that things do not have to remain as they are. The carnivalesque becomes a means of questioning the legitimacy of the violence of immigration regimes uncovering the subjectivity of migrants. Although burdened by hetero/homonormativity, this plays an important role in inverting the power of immigration regimes. Making critical fun ultimately denounces such violence on the border, not only exposing its effects but exploring how such violence might be creatively manoeuvred.

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