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Performing for the camera: queer migration, sex work, and objecthood

MATTHEW ABBEY 

This article explores cultural production on queer migrant sex work. More specifically, I critically analyse a photography series by Bradley Secker titled Sexugees and a short documentary film by Manuel Abramovich titled Blue Boy. Despite sex work featuring in many narratives on queer migration, this is often treated as one marginal aspect of broader experiences. Sexugees and Blue Boy take an alternative approach by centring sex work. Instead of relying on tropes of vulnerability, I argue these forms of cultural production rely on objecthood as a sign of political agency to highlight queer migrant subjectivity. Objecthood thus becomes means of not only refusing the necessity of performing as worthy subjects of sexual humanitarianism, but to complicate the relationship between queer migrants and those gazing upon their presence within cultural production.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores cultural production on queer migrant sex work. More specifically, I analyse the photography series *Sexugees* by Bradley Secker (2017a) and the short documentary film *Blue Boy* by Manuel Abramovich (2019). Whereas *Sexugees* explores queer migrants engaging in sex work in Istanbul, *Blue Boy* explores mostly heterosexual migrant men engaging in sex work with other men in Berlin. The latter, albeit largely not identifying as gay or bisexual, may nonetheless be understood as queer through their engagement in sex work with men. Such approach follows in the tradition of Cathy Cohen (1997) on a subjectless critique, which posits the radical potential of denying there being any proper subject of queer studies. Although both forms of cultural production have differing realms of visibility, including separate political (and epistemological) domains, I am more interested in how they intervene within political discourses of queer migrant sex work. Despite the specific lived experiences of queer migrant sex workers remaining somewhat underexplored, this article takes another approach by exploring their presence within cultural production.

To explore queer migrant sex work, I seek to build upon the work of Uri McMillan (2015) on performing objecthood, which recognises the possibility of black subjects becoming art objects as means of performing and subsequently rescripting the way they move and are perceived within social worlds. According to McMillan (2015, 9) performing objecthood involves:

rescrambling the dichotomy between objectified bodies or embodied subjects by reimagining objecthood as a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivity. What happens, I ask, if we reimagine black objecthood as a way toward agency rather than its antithesis, as a strategy rather than simply a primal site of injury?

Although there is a specific history of colonialism and slavery built into the radical possibilities of black subjectivity through objecthood, I suggest it may also apply to different contexts where subjects have been considered objects of consumption, including migrants (mostly those racialised as inferior vis-a-vis the white citizen) and sex workers. I thus seek to explore how queer migrant sex workers rely on the possibility of becoming objects as means of challenging the notion of their inherent vulnerability within discourses of sexual humanitarianism (Mai 2018), referring to the demands of sexual and gendered performances of vulnerability that migrants must follow to become intelligible within immigration regimes. Such a task is important because notions of saving allegedly vulnerable queer migrants and migrant sex workers has long fuelled the humanitarian imaginary (Ticktin 2011; Giametta 2017). In one sense, this means recognising the possibility of moving away from objectification as sexual and gendered subjects of care and towards the imaginative possibilities of objecthood. I thus seek to explore how queer migrant sex workers have become and made themselves present within cultural production in ways that rely on performing objecthood to highlight agency.

My approach in this article recognises the transformative ability of cultural production to imagine new ways of understanding how queer migrant sex

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workers position themselves within notions of sexual humanitarianism. By cultural production, I refer to the multiple domains of artistic practise – such as photography and documentary, but also live performance, art, film, and so on – that intervene into social worlds. Cultural production is thus one domain of meaning making that should be considered when trying to grasp the nuances of migration. Although there is risk of cultural production reproducing such tropes of sexual humanitarianism, which is perhaps unsurprising knowing ongoing desires to ‘save’ such individuals extend beyond those working in humanitarianism itself, I am approaching *Sexugees* and *Blue Boy* through what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) has termed a reparative approach, a way ‘to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise’. The point is to avoid foreclosing what cultural production may have to say based on not only its context and subsequent political discourses but the way such cultural production comes into being. In this way, despite knowing of the material and discursive violence faced by queer migrant sex workers, I am not assuming such cultural production to have anything to do with violence, whether through the subject matter or the potential for exploitation within the sometimes difficult relationship between photographers or directors and subjects of cultural production, which be only be amplified if other power dynamics surrounding race, class, sexuality, and gender are involved.

Keeping this in mind, it must be recognised neither *Sexugees* nor *Blue Boy* were directed by queer migrant sex workers – although they may have had some level of control in the former. Questions arise about whether this objecthood can be performed if initiated by somebody else, whereby such an approach risks becoming objectification if there is the demand for the subject to appear in certain ways. Yet it would be equally wrong to dismiss the agency of somebody to agree to their objectification too, thereby willingly engaging in a modality of objecthood to reclaim their subjectivity as discussed above. Ultimately, distinguishing between self-objectification and external-objectification is a difficult task. Neither ignoring the material conditions that may lead to the objectification of queer migrant sex workers nor suggesting they have total control of their representation; I am focusing on the performative dimensions of *Sexugees* and *Blue Boy* to see how they offer the possibility of reclaiming objecthood for political agency.

This does not mean those depicted within the photographs and documentary may necessarily have done so, but it does suggest such cultural production allows for the possibility of turning the potential for objectification into a modality of objecthood that disrupts the necessity of performing the figure of the vulnerable queer migrant sex worker. Hence, I want to stress my focus on reclaiming objecthood does not mean to detract from the material conditions faced by queer migrants sex workers. Although there has been little attention given to queer migrant sex work, a number of scholars have explored not only the heightened marginalisation faced by queer migrant sex workers but also their agency within such dynamics (Mai 2012; Browne, Cull, and Hubbard 2010; Altay, Yurdakul, and Korteweg 2020). Especially in contexts where migrants do not have formal access to the labour market, it must be recognised that marginalisation within sex work can increase. While recognising such conditions of marginalisation, this article also recognises the agency of queer migrant sex workers to engage within such labour. Before beginning the analysis, I will expand how I am engaging with objecthood as a sign of political agency.

OBJECTHOOD AS AGENCY

Instead of making themselves appear as familiar subjects within discourses on queer migration in Europe, not only through performing vulnerability but performing an identity along the lines of Western understandings of sexuality and gender (Koçak 2020), both *Sexugees* and *Blue Boy* show the power of relying on objecthood to claim political agency. If notions of the subject have been recognised in more recent years as points of fluidity as opposed to essentiality (Sabsay 2018), it remains beneficial to explore how such fluidity may be utilised as means of disrupting the gaze of the viewer, which might be assumed to be the (liberal) citizen. This means disrupting the notion of the subject as only being vulnerable to discourse, an attempt to challenge poststructuralist approaches of the subject (Foucault 1970). Such an approach to subjectivity recognises the way the subject is both fixed (as it appears within political discourses) and fluid (as it engages in processes of meaning making) (Sabsay 2018), both internally and externally to the subject itself. If the subject is constantly in flux but simultaneously suspended within cultural production as way of indicating presence, it is necessary to explore how the latter positioning of stasis allows for recognition of the former radical possibility of

indeterminacy. Objecthood thus can recognise the potential for fluidity – and hence disrupting there being any proper object of sexual humanitarianism – by focusing upon the dynamic encounter between the subject (or object) and the viewer.

Ultimately, this means recognising queer migrant sex workers are not simply trapped by discourses of vulnerability, including within cultural production, but may use such alleged vulnerability *as objects* to alter how they are perceived within social worlds. The focus on objects may seem indicative of the possibility of subjects presenting themselves as whole, yet following Sabsay (2018, 67–8), who suggests the ‘precarious totalization of subject positions takes the form of corporeal and subjective experience’, I argue objecthood becomes means of recognising the necessity of becoming intelligible within social worlds while maintaining the impossibility of intelligibility on material and discursive levels. Objecthood thus becomes the cloak of subjectivity; making oneself present to claim agency without relying on proving subjectivity to claim vulnerability. Performing as an object therefore does not mean denying complex subjectivity but instead highlights the difficulty of accessing such subjectivity, which I suggest shifts attention onto those who are seeking an understanding of the subject. In other words, sexual humanitarianism may demand to know the subject, but performing objecthood allows for the subject to gaze upon the demands of sexual humanitarianism. If the subject is an object, who is watching?

The shift in gaze recognises the transformative ability of approaching subjectivity through its interrelational dimensions, indicating the possibility of reversing the gaze of the subject onto the viewer. From photographs of nipples and arched backs to penetrating gazes and occasional smiles, the cultural production being studied ultimately demands the viewer grapple with their own spectatorship. Indeed, the impossibility of knowing anything more about the queer migrant sex workers shown within *Sexugees* and *Blue Boy* allows the sexual humanitarian gaze to be reversed. As opposed to suggesting objecthood removes the subjectivity of migrants, I argue this becomes one means of reclaiming subjectivity by not being forced to perform their humanity to the viewer. As Judith Butler (2004) astutely remarks, the desire to humanise the individual through recognition must be questioned as this relies on producing the subject as something observable. Instead of relying on recognition of the subject to allow for its humanisation, objecthood recognises the possibility of subjectivity existing beyond what is immediately

observed. Objecthood thus demands the viewer question why the subject is appearing in unrecognisable forms that challenge notions of the allegedly vulnerable migrant demanded by sexual humanitarianism, an attempt to recognise the complexity of subjectivity on material and discursive levels.

My focus on objecthood situates the analysis within broader discussions on the objectification of queer migrants, recognising they have long been fetishised using particular tropes within diverse forms of cultural production (Williams 2020). Perhaps this objectification is most explicit through depictions of migrants within pornography. Such work on ‘migration porn’ has explored not only the way migrants are represented as being on the receiving end of violence at the border (Casaglia 2020) along with subsequent notions of saviourism (Abbey 2021), but also the ‘possibility of recovering pleasure in the shame of abjection, a sexual pleasure that engages the sexual submission demanded of racialized subjects’ (such as migrants) (Rodriguez 2014, 141). The latter would not deny the material or discursive violence faced by migrants (or those employed within the porn industry), but suggests the necessity of exploring such abjection to reclaim a sense of control over the erotic self.

Utilising what has usually been seen as negative has long been recognised as a strategy within cultural production. Whether it is the embodied alienation discussed by Dariack Scott (2010), the racialised abjection discussed by Leticia Alvarado (2018), the beautiful shame discussed by Stockton (2006), or the previously discussed work of Rodriguez (2014) and McMillan (2015), I suggest the potential of embracing what is usually seen as negative as means of performing an altered subjectivity. Indeed, queer migrant sex workers might thus be subjected to what Hortense Spillers (1987) describes as pornotroping, the means in which certain bodies are both violently objectified but deemed sexually available. Writing on Spillers, Musser (2018, 6) suggests ‘[p]ornotroping does not just illustrate the materiality of the body, then. Through its discourse of fleshiness it emphasises the ways that power and projection produce certain bodies as other, thereby granting them a mysterious quality of desirability, which is always already undergirded by violence and the assumption of possession’. Yet that does not mean there is no possibility of reclaiming such objectification for political agency. Indeed, pornotroping might be exposed through performing objecthood, as I suggested earlier through the possibility of reversing the gaze. Exploring the political agency of

reversing the gaze surrounding queer migrant sex work is thus the aim of this article.

SEXUGEES; OR THE DISJOINTED BODY

Photographs have longed been used to document the plight of migrants, whether depicting their alleged threatening arrival on European shores, profiling their joyous presence as nonthreatening subjects within the country, or invoking any other number of passions using what might be considered negative or positive tropes (Bleiker et al. 2013; Risam 2018). As pointed out by Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi (2020), the 'refugee' crisis in Europe might very well be the most photographed humanitarian spectacle in history. That photographs effect and conjure affect is nothing radical to claim. The image of Alan Kurdi invoking sympathy across Europe is perhaps the most obvious example of a photograph altering the course of public perceptions towards migration (Binder and Jaworsky 2018; Ibrahim 2018). Regardless of how such photographs are produced, it is important to recognise how they do what they do. As opposed to merely attempting to reflect the world, photographs intervene within knowledge production on the world. In this section, I am broadly suggesting photographs can alter how one understands the subjectivity of queer migrant sex workers; an important task considering discourses on their alleged vulnerability.

As such, I am turning to *Sexugees*, a collection of photographs taken by Bradley Secker (2017a) that focuses on queer migrant sex workers in Istanbul. In general, the photographs are of different isolated body parts, except for two subjects who marginally expose their face along with other parts of their body. Shot on instant film, the photographs are described by Secker as reflecting the calling cards sex workers, referring to the business cards used by sex workers often including image and text which are subsequently distributed or placed in public spaces advertising their labour. Written onto the photographs, there is the occasional price, drawing, or piece of text too. The photographs appeared in *Politico* (Secker 2017b) as well as on the website of Secker: both times, there was an accompanying text by Secker about the context and subjects being photographed. The inclusion of such texts will undeniably affect how the viewer understands the photographs, but I am more interested in the formal elements of the photographs, which I suggest allows for the possibility of an alternate reading of their significance. In some ways, the photographs might be seen as exploring the violence faced by queer migrants in Turkey, aligned with much scholarly work on the

topic (Koçak 2020; Shakhsari 2014). Yet *Sexugees* does not seem to only do this. There is no attempt to prove the subjectivity of the migrants by highlighting their vulnerability, but instead relies on the objecthood of the subjects as means of remarking upon their agency. Instead of suggesting this is paradoxical, I am suggesting the photographs stage the objecthood of queer migrant sex workers as means of raising questions about spectatorship.

Although *Sexugees* might fall under the banner of portraiture, the photographs at least differ from typical portraiture by not exactly focusing on the face nor expressions of the subject. Keeping this in mind, much of the photography on queer migrants in Europe has used portraiture as means of highlighting not only the presence of the subject but often how they have overcome or continue to face violence. Take for instance the *Where Love is Illegal* project by Robin Hammond, which uses mostly portraiture to showcase queer subjects who had stories of discrimination and survival to share. A collaborative project, the participants wrote down narratives of their life which subsequently accompanied the photographs to give context. Another example is *Rainbow Refugees Stories*, which also uses extensive narratives to give the participants more power over their portrayal within society. Although the viewer can still make their own interpretation of such photographs, the captioning encourages a preferential reading, an attempt to grid the perception of the subject. In this case, such portraiture seems to encourage the persistence of queer migrants against the odds of their survival. Their presence within the photography can thus be celebrated because it reproduces their presence within the destination country; they are *here*, allegedly safe, by being in the photograph. Typical portraiture of queer migrants may thus encourage the subject to become the signifier of the figure of the queer migrant needing protection. Yet this risks the 'figure' of the queer migrant being reproduced at the expense of the subject.

THE IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECT

Sexugees mostly includes photographs of isolated body parts, including arched backs, exposed pubic hairs, nipples, bare stomachs, crossed arms, and other displays of the body. Although some photographs expose faces along with other parts of the body too, the subject is often turning away from the camera or somewhat masked by lighting, whereby instead it is the body that takes precedence. Grosz (1994, 146) rightly says the body is a 'medium on which power operates and through which it functions', but the material body

might also be understood as the medium that resistance to power takes place, including with the context of migration (Bond 2018). If migrants are forced to make themselves present within not only the immigration regimes that seek to govern them but cultural production that seeks to uplift them, *Sexugees* mostly denies exposing the whole subject to the gaze of the spectator. Even when exposing the faces of two participants within the wider photography series, this may only reinforce the notion that most participants desired to keep themselves hidden, even when desiring to partake within the project by showing off part of their body. Instead of maintaining their anonymity through masking their face (whether through a mask or another object), there is an explicit shift from focusing on the hidden subject to focusing on the exposed body part. Although not photographs of any particular body part, nor body parts that are often associated with sexual arousal, the photographs are still carefully constructed to highlight certain parts of the body. Different poses, stances, and postures are used to animate the body in different ways. The photographs render the subject as being signified by an object of their body. In this way, the body is disjointed into its separate parts while keeping the rest of the body as its constitutive whole outside of the frame.

In this way, the desire to know the subject is seemingly denied because the subject is not accessible. Even the photographs showing the face play with this tension by begging the question of why this subject decided to show their face while others did not. The unviewability of the subject renders them purposely unknowable while maintaining an aspect of their body as signifying themselves. In this way the photos are revealing, not necessarily of the subject in front of the camera but of their body in a structural form that limits the gaze to individual parts of their body. Reduced to a foot, a nipple, or any other body part, implies the possibility of this individual relying on their own objecthood to expose themselves. The revelation of body parts but not the subject not only maintains the anonymity of the migrant but grapples with the impossibility of the subject being exposed. The disjointed body subsequently signifies the impossibility of the subject being shown (even if the face, as explored later when discussing *Blue Boy*, may be used in similar ways). More questions are thus raised that go beyond desiring to highlight the physical presence of queer migrants in the country, as often used in other portraiture. *Sexugees* denies that possibility by denying easy exposure. Clearly no photograph can expose the complex subjectivity of any individual, but *Sexugees* differs by not even attempting to suggest this is the goal. If the subject

remains purposely visibly absent within the photographs, if the desire of the photographs is seemingly not to expose the whole of the subject, it seems there is another approach being taken.

It might thus be said the photographs rely not necessarily on what they show but what they keep out of the frame. As Tina Campt (2017) remarks, listening to photographs is important, allowing for one to perceive beyond what is visually shown. Indeed, the desire to expose not the whole subject but the disjointed body separates the subject from what is shown in the photographs. Such separation only creates heightened distance between the viewer and the subject of the photographs precisely because the latter is rendered as an object. Recognising this distance reveals the desire of the viewer (including my own) to know more of the subject of the photographs. Yet using the disjointed body to indicate what is outside of the frame, *Sexugees* demands grappling with the uncertainty of what subject is beyond the frame. Rather than attempting to look for whom this subject may be, the impossibility of doing so becomes focal to the photographs. The migrant becomes an anonymous subject, but this remains far removed from allegations that some photography dehumanises migrants because of their anonymity. Ultimately, *Sexugees* shows the disjointed body reclaiming the subject without demanding that subject prove their humanity by exposing themselves. Such a possibility aligns with the work of Butler (2004) on the problem of looking for humanity within the subject. Whether most of the queer migrants in *Sexugees* chose anonymity as the reason for their display of a body part is not exactly the point. The result is the display of body parts; a way of turning objecthood into a sign of political agency as means of reclaiming subjectivity. It must be assumed the subject is there; neither does their body part mark anything but representation of what is missing, nor does the figure of the queer migrant triumph over the individual in a desperate bid to highlight their humanity. Yet the viewer must imagine the subject existing as such, producing desires to know what exists outside of the frame. The viewer shall not know who the subjects are, which challenges the very desires of sexual humanitarianism. Instead, the viewer must grapple with the unknowability of the subject.

WRITING ON THE SUBJECT

If *Sexugees* hints at the possibility of queer migrant sex workers using objecthood to signal subjectivity beyond the demands of sexual humanitarianism, I now want to explore objecthood in relation to the desires of the subject themselves to reorient the viewer. Recognising the

photographs featured within *Sexugees* are stylised as calling cards, it is the performative element that is most interesting here. Although the photographs mimic calling cards, the viewer knows they are not calling cards. As such, the photographs allow the queer migrant to 'perform' as the sex worker. Hence queer migrant sex workers are performing as queer migrant sex workers for the sake of being photographed, but this does not mean the photographs draw upon the alleged vulnerability of the subjects. Indeed, the photographs display the performative element of sex work through the form of the calling card, indicating those involved within the industry are not only presented within such frame, but are performing such labour to highlight their subjectivity as objects of desire. The photographs thus form another barrier to accessing the subject even if they are kept hidden, whereby the subject is masked behind the performative element of mimicking the labour of sex work. In this way, I am suggesting the photographs recognise the power the subjects have over their very production, whereby there is an appropriation of calling cards that allows for alternative visions to be presented.

As remarked earlier, the difference between objecthood and objectification may be impacted by who turns the subject into an object. And this is where the occasional price, drawing, or piece of text featured on the photographs becomes paramount. In *Sexugees*, the photographs included textual material, including prices depicting their rates, little drawings of wings, love hearts, and smiley faces indicating heightened stylistic choice, and pieces of writing in Arabic and English providing a glimpse into the life and desires of the subject. Both positive and negative, the texts include messages such as 'am different but for the best, I will not turn to the past because my future is bright'; 'this is my body and I am free'; 'a dead body' and 'I want stability'. Such messages give meaning to the subject whose body largely remains outside of the frame. Different from information that might otherwise feature on calling cards (except the price), *Sexugees* allows for alternate visions of the subjects being signified by their disjointed body within the frame and such inscriptions. It is relatively banal to suggest that the meanings of such texts highlights the agency of the subjects, especially in the case of the more optimistic messages; I am more interested in how they allow for recognition of their control over their narrative through such inscriptions.

Indeed, this is where the possibility of moving from objectification to objecthood takes place. I suggest it is not only the meaning behind such manipulations of the

photographs that remain important but the possibility of the subjects taking ownership of the photographs; they provide the preferred meaning of their photograph to divert the viewer. Unlike captions that are often added to accompany a photograph, whether by the subject, photographer, or somebody else involved in the production, the inscriptions in *Sexugees* come from the subjects to form part of the photographs themselves. They knot the visuality of photography to the inscriptions. The inscriptions *are* the photographs as opposed to accompanying them. *Sexugees* may allow for the viewer to gaze about the disjointed body, but that gaze will be diverted onto the desired meaning given by the subject regardless of its reproduction elsewhere, not as an afterthought needed to give context but as *modus operandi*. These inscriptions thus become one vital aspect of the photograph. If viewers will always project meaning onto photographs of migrants, whereby not only subjectivity but context informs the reception of photographs (Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi 2020), the inscriptions thus may a role subjectively bounding the anonymous subject to the photography. Such possibility contrasts with most photography of migrants, which may be taken without the subject knowing or alternatively becoming separate to the subject because their own involvement in its production is lacking. It might thus be said the queer migrants in *Sexugees* take over the photographs, indicating how the subject remains bound to their representation as an object (even if anonymously) but seemingly in control of such process. If the queer migrants have even marginal control over the photographs, there exists the possibility of reorientating the viewer to preferred meanings.

I am therefore suggesting *Sexugees* makes the viewer think about not only what exists outside the frame but where such inscriptions take them; an attempt to question their own participation and subsequent interpretation within circuits of meaning. The queer migrants in *Sexugees* look as if they could be whole subjects, but they can only exist within the imagination of the viewer. The body parts and adjoining inscriptions become means of demanding the viewer go beyond what is being represented. Even when the face is included, there is a refusal to suggest the subject can possibly be known by the viewer. Indeed, the object is the only thing that the viewer will get. Objecthood thus becomes means of not only exposing the impossibility of the subject being confined to a photograph, but the knowledge that the subject exists far beyond its signifier as object. Although the disjointed body is understood as being imbued with agency in *Sexugees*, such agency might be seen as interrupted depending on the gaze of the viewer. Bond (2018, 3) outlines this predicament in

their own study of the body within migration: 'although the body provides the potential for expressing subjective agency, it also poses a limit to that same agency through the perceptive gaze of the other, which can assign meaning and narrative without the knowledge or consent of the subject'. Although I do not suggest those gazing upon the disjointed body in *Sexugees* disrupt the possibility of queer migrants using objecthood to claim political agency, I am suggesting there is further room to explore how objecthood raises the possibility of staring back at this perceptive gaze of the other. Indeed, objecthood may be used to signal a modality of politics that recognises the gaze of the subject onto the viewer. What happens when the subject figuratively, and quite literally, stares back?

BLUE BOY; OR WATCHING THEM LISTENING TO THEM WATCHING YOU

Blue Boy is a short documentary film directed by Manuel Abramovich (2019). Staged in the former Blue Boy Bar in the Schöneberg district of Berlin, the documentary delves into the complexity of queer migrant sex work, especially the relationship mostly heterosexual migrant men have with their labour (and might I add, love). The bar itself has been known to attract young men from Romania and other Eastern Europe countries, as well older men seeking them out. Basing itself within the sight of action, *Blue Boy* gives voices to several queer migrant sex workers who narrate a number of their different experiences of their life both past and present. Yet what remains poignant about the documentary is not only the experiences being narrated. As interesting as they are, I suggest they become the backdrop for the formalistic elements of the documentary. Instead of speaking into the camera, *Blue Boy* involves the subjects being filmed while they listen back to their own narratives given through prior interviews. Reflected by the title of this section, *Blue Boy* thus involves the viewer watching queer migrant sex workers listening to their own narrated experiences while staring directly into the camera. By focusing on the form of the documentary, I explore not only the separation of sound and image but the means in which the migrants, the director, and the viewer become complicated within power dynamics. Such latter positioning will be explored in subsequent sections, however.

To begin, *Blue Boy* involves several short videos of young men sitting alone in the bar. They gaze into the camera for the entirety of the performance, except for the occasional flicker of the eyes to the side. Listening to their own stories in German and Romanian

(translations in this article used the available subtitles on Mubi), which for some might be seen as an uncomfortable experience, they smile, they frown, they mask their smiles, they mask their frowns. Including discussions on the negotiation of sexual limits, expected etiquette, love, proclamations of heterosexuality, reenactments of encounters, a more philosophical treatise on how the world is a stage, problems with the police, the narrations of their labour provoke an array of reactions from the migrants: laughter, tears, uncomfortable movements of the body. Ultimately, they are positioned as observing themselves, or at least hearing their own speech. In this way, there becomes a distance between their material self and the voice they hear. The distance is performed through the multiple ways in which the body reacts to its own voice.

Subsequently, this means the formalist approach of *Blue Boy* creates a distance between the migrants and the experiences they are narrating. Sex work often involves playing a role, a performance; a character is used to obtain clients, to keep clients happy through affective labour that involves the emotions of not only the worker but the client. Such becomes especially clear when the protagonists talk about the identities they must create, which sometimes change every night. Sex work is another performative encounter that can demand the creation of a specific identity depending on the client. Challenging the prejudice of sex work, *Blue Boy* exposes the affective labour behind what is typically delegitimised as work. By having them listen to their own experiences, they are watching their own performance too. Separating the voice from the subject allows for their own performances to be seen from a distance. Small gestures and some larger, they tell a story of how the individual not only exposes their narrative (a difficult enough task) but how they react to their narrative when being retold. Even if it goes without saying there is a performance for the camera that is manipulated too, *Blue Boy* explores how subjects react to their own interpretation of their experiences as objects of desire. Indeed, the migrants in *Blue Boy* might thus be seen as reacting to their own objecthood. In effect, however, this means grappling with how their position as subjects is mediated through objecthood, both within sex work itself and the production of *Blue Boy*.

PERFORMING THE ENCOUNTER

Questions thus remain about how *Blue Boy* engages with objecthood through its other formalistic elements. Not only do subjects experience themselves as objects as suggested in the prior section, but the very encounter

staged between the migrants, the director, and subsequently the viewer demands this reading. To rewind back to the beginning of the documentary, *Blue Boy* begins with a young man wearing a cap staring directly into the camera with half of his face brightened up by nearby light. Nothing happens for 15 seconds or thereabouts as he continues to gaze into the camera, barely moving a muscle as he props himself up on the bar with his left arm. Whereas one might expect the young man to say something – he is the one on camera, after all – he maintains his stoic posture and blank facial expression as another voice begins talking (it is not his voice, yet). *I hereby authorise the producer and director ... says the voice. The young man finally allows a brief smile to escape his face; perhaps comforted by the voice, or perhaps by his test of patience coming to an end. The voice continues: to record and edit into the film and related materials my image, voice, and my artistic performance to use them in the above-mentioned film or in parts of it from now on referred to as 'The Film'. I agree that the Film may be edited and otherwise altered* [the young man's eyes flicker to the right, disrupting his gaze with the camera] *at the sole discretion of the producer and used in whole or in part for any and all broadcasting, non-broadcasting* [another flicker to the right] *audio/visual, and/or exhibition purposes in any manner or media, in perpetuity, throughout the world. The producer may use and authorise others to use all or parts of the recording* [the man subtly rolls his eyes]. *The producer, their successor and assignee shall own all right, title and interest* [he looks to the right again, then his eyes widen], *including copy right, in and to the film, including the recordings to be used and disposed of without limitation as the producer shall in their sole discretion determine.* Another moment of silence takes place where the young man does nothing but blink; and then title *Blue Boy* appears. Indeed, the contract of this participant in *Blue Boy* has just been read out to them on camera.

So what? By including the contract in which the young men have agreed to participate in *Blue Boy*, there is a clear play on the (un)written contracts involved within sex work – including the formal contracts that may be established between sex workers, clients, and those organising the labour such as brothel owners; the verbal arrangements made between sex workers and clients; or differing norms that govern the industry, ranging from maintaining anonymity or the handling of payment. Like many jobs (but definitely not all, especially for migrants without the right to work), sex work involves a negotiation of terms to facilitate smooth interactions, much in the same way that

subjects within documentaries mostly negotiate a contract too. The terms are set to allow for everybody (hopefully, but not always, as will be shown) to remain comfortable about the affective labour being given. *Blue Boy* makes this explicit by performing the contract signed between subjects and the director, yet this purposely mimics the contract signed (officially or implied) between sex workers and clients.

Indeed, this makes *Blue Boy* a performance of sex work in the double sense of that expression: a performance about sex work and a performance displaying similar mechanics of sex work being operationalised. As the director has remarked (Abramovich in Bobák 2019), they wanted to play with these ideas surrounding sexual labour by loosely taking upon the role of the client of sex work. The director paid the participants for their labour – their participation in the documentary and therefore stories of their intimate lives. There is a performance within the performance here; or perhaps more aptly, both performances merge into one. The reality is the encounter between the migrants and the director who asked the migrants to partake, yet that reality attempts to (albeit very loosely) mimic the logics of the sex worker interacting with the client. Hence this is a performance using the structures of reality; a mimic of a client asking a sex worker to do something and the sex worker doing that something (on camera). Even if this stylistic form was chosen by the director, the migrants are still shown as relying on their objecthood within the dynamics of sex work (and documentary practise) to make their subjectivity known. Although this could be seen as the director relying on the objectification of the subjects, I will continue to suggest that taking on this role signifies their willingness to use objecthood as means of political agency.

Yet if the subject is staring into the camera throughout (more or less) the entirety of *Blue Boy*, I suggest they are not only figuratively staring into the director being positioned as the client, but the viewer observing the encounter. A triangular relationship between the migrants, the director, and the viewer thus manifests, whereby the penetrating gaze of the migrants into the camera is placed directly upon the viewer too. Although this may be understood as allowing a modality of voyeurism upon the objecthood of the migrants, reflecting desires to observe the allegedly vulnerable subject as part of the humanitarian impulse of documentary (Rangan 2017), I am suggesting an additional reading is possible the centres on the merging of the director and the viewer. The viewer ultimately becomes part of the encounter because they must confront being stared at by the migrants, which

subsequently forces the viewer to grapple with their own participation too. *Blue Boy* thus forces the viewer to be gazed upon by the migrants, which demands the viewer question themselves in relation to their own gaze. Even if the migrant does not observe the viewer, their participation in the documentary – along with their knowledge of being filmed and subsequently staring directly into the camera – suggests they are fully aware of being stared at while knowing they are staring back at the (unknown) viewer too. In this way, neither the viewer can truly grasp the subject (as more directly explored in *Sexugees*) nor can the subject fully grasp the viewer. Instead, they are both staring at each other without really knowing who exists on the other side.

By disrupting who holds the gaze, the roles of everybody within *Blue Boy* is open for negotiation: the migrants stare back as much as they are stared at. Although objecthood may be used to reclaim political agency, it equally demands the viewer (who may otherwise objectify the migrant) questions the subjectivity behind the object staring back. The embrace of this objecthood, a way of becoming the object as means of staring back, I would suggest, seemingly allows for this reclamation of subjecthood. Purposeful objecthood thus exposes the subject behind the object, whereby reclaiming such objecthood raises questions about the need for subjects to prove themselves as subjects for the viewer in the first place. This possibility indicates the transformative potential of disrupting the typical dynamic of the viewer gazing upon the subject, the latter who may typically be expected to occupy the figure of the allegedly vulnerable queer migrant who must adhere to the demands of sexual humanitarianism. Instead of only attempting to shed light on the nuance experiences of queer migrant sex workers, *Blue Boy* thus brings to the forefront the power of objecthood to stare back (at the viewer) as means of restating subjectivity – not only from behind but through the camera.

BROKEN CONTRACTS

Yet at the end of the documentary, there is a disruption. Contracts do not always go smoothly. As the credits roll, there are snippets of voices, although whose voice they belong to remains unclear as there is no longer anybody shown listening to their own narration. *It's been already 20 minutes. I honoured my part of the deal, I told him my story, now he needs to honour his and give me my money. I want to leave. He can do what he wants with it* [a pause]. *I don't give a fuck. Is this normal? He asked me to tell the story from Italy, and I did* [a pause]. *I'm not an actor! What the fuck!* [a pause]. *What the*

fuck am I supposed to do, you faggot? Come on bro, this is Germany! This is not Italy or Argentina ... This is Germany! I don't have anything to do with you. I don't know you; you don't know me. I'm not wasting my time with you! You give me the money and do whatever you want. But don't try to mock me, ridicule me. Are you insane? [a pause]. *That's not right! Don't think that because you pay a boy to do something ... He's gonna do something that he doesn't like ... Or something that he wouldn't do ... If you agree on something, you have to respect it ... We're not kids, bro ... Do you understand? Look bro' ... You give me my money. You have your registration, and it's good ... Good for me, good for you* [a pause]. *Boom. We're done!*

As stipulated in the contract at the beginning, there existed the possibility of the documentary being 'edited and otherwise altered', hence these remarks are seemingly compiled together to show the complexity of contracts going wrong. To somewhat clarify the above remarks, Abramovich (Abramovich in Linssen 2019) explained in an interview that there was a misunderstanding about the contract with one of the migrants. According to Abramovich, one hour of interviewing and shooting was agreed upon but after only ten minutes one of the migrants had wanted to leave. It had been necessary for the migrant to repeat some of the shots that had been taken, but they remarked it was an impossible task because they were not an actor. Indeed, this remark galvanises on the alleged difficulty of acting out a performance that had already taken place. According to the remark, it would have been an impossibility to recreate the reactions, the gestures, the laughs, the smiles; the entirety of the performance could not take place again because then it would be acting, which would imply the initial shots were perceived as natural reactions to one listening to themselves narrate their own experiences. Yet such information is not given in *Blue Boy*; instead, the documentary ends up with an agitated voice. It remains up to the viewer to guess what exactly happened – perhaps even after hearing the side of the story suggested by Abramovich.

Although the viewer may attempt to link the voice to one of the previous voices heard, I want to suggest the inclusion of this tension is not about deciding upon who is specifically speaking, nor about whom is right (or wrong), but suggesting the importance of recognising the possibility to speak up at all. If documentaries often rely extensively on the director having the power to exclude themselves from the scene, Abramovich inserts himself as possibly being at fault. Indeed, *Blue Boy* ends with the difficulty of the contract going awry to show the possibility of tensions

existing between the director and the subjects. The viewer does not know the answer; they are left to guess as to what happened. Although directors set many of the rules of documentaries, an attempt to control how the subject is portrayed, that does not deny the possibility of subjects bringing their (perhaps surprising) new meanings into play. Before *Blue Boy* was released, it should also be stressed that Abramovich (Abramovich in Linnsen 2019) showed the documentary to all participants to make sure they were happy with the final product. Instead of shying away from tensions over the gaze, between subject and director and consequently between subject and viewer as they grapple with such interjection, *Blue Boy* embraces it. *Blue Boy* ultimately shows how queer migrant sex workers may navigate their objecthood when being gazed upon by, and gazing at, the viewer. By performing as such objects, whether to meet the gaze of the director, the viewer, or both, the anonymous migrant in *Blue Boy* seemingly highlights their political agency to dispute their position within cultural production.

CONCLUSION

It would be difficult to view *Sexugees* or *Blue Boy* without understanding the marginalisation faced by queer migrants engaging in sex work – often described in accompanying captions or blurbs. Yet even if they are marginalised on material and discursive levels, I suggest *Sexugees* and *Blue Boy* rely on formalist elements of photography and documentary to highlight the possibility of queer migrants claiming objecthood as indicative of both their subjectivity and agency. As McMillan (2015, 9) suggests, ‘subjectivity and agency are always present, however minuscule they may be, in the often complex and rigorous performances of objecthood’. Whereas sexual humanitarianism may rely on the figure of the vulnerable queer migrant, including those engaging in sex work, I have attempted to linger on the formalistic elements of these photographs and documentary to provide an alternate reading that shows how their subjectivity might be understood otherwise. While it is outside the scope of this article to explore how the queer migrants photographed by Secker and filmed by Abramovich were affected, an understanding of these photographs and documentary that considers the possibility of claiming objecthood indicates a sign of agency without migrants giving themselves away to the demands of sexual humanitarianism. Advocated by *Sexugees* and *Blue Boy*, such possibility stems from the complex relationship between the subject, photographer or director, and the viewer. I thus follow Ariella Azoulay (2008) by acknowledging not only the shifting power dynamics between such players but the possibility of

cultural production to act as an encounter, whereby no player has total power of the final product, what will happen to it, and its lasting importance (Azoulay focuses on photography, but I think it is reasonable to extend such insights to documentary). Even if photographs and documentaries are used in ways that remain outside the control of the subject, that does not deny the possibility of photographs and documentaries to showcase the radical possibilities of objecthood.

To conclude, if cultural production holds such possibility, I suggest the other possibility of exploring social worlds as another domain where objecthood comes into display, especially within the context of queer migrant sex work. If queer migrants become objects of sexual humanitarianism to be recognised as subjects, this may indeed indicate a perhaps more abstract form of objecthood being used as yet another sign of political agency. The necessity of performing sexual and gendered performances of vulnerability to become subjects of sexual humanitarianism therefore suggests there is a figure (or object) that must initially be adhered to. As Edgkins (2013, 7) suggests, the political realm that produces the visible ‘face’ leaves the subject as an object: ‘Pinned down like a specimen insect . . . the person is immobilised and made present, available to the gaze of a bureaucracy, an administration. The person is called on to give an account of themselves, to say who they are, to be unchanging, categorisable, knowable’. Yet knowing what is demanded might similarly produce an attempt to use such expected norms shows political agency. Considering the objectification of queer migrants, and migrant sex workers more broadly, there seems ample space to consider how such objecthood might be engaged with while individuals engage with immigration regimes, not only attempting to highlight the subjectivity of the individual but attempting to cast a return gaze upon sexual humanitarianism itself. Hence it seems within cultural production and social worlds, there may be the need to further grapple with how the subject becomes present through objecthood. Not only those writing about cultural production and social words but those engaged with such domains may equally find the potential for objecthood to become a paradigm to explore the subjectivity of queer migrants and the subsequent return gaze that disrupts the demands of sexual humanitarianism

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