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# **Ambiguous Subjectivity, Irregular Citizenship:**

## **From Inside/Outside to Being-Caught In-between**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the recent development of new and innovative ways of thinking about political subjectivity in international politics as flexible and contingent; it considers ambiguity (in-between-ness) as an important, yet under-theorized, aspect of how political subjectivity is experienced in this way. It does so by focusing on the question of irregular citizenship, where people get caught between citizenship and migration. Focusing on the constant question mark around citizenship *and* around the alternative of being a migrant in the everyday life of certain people in the US and in Europe, this paper unpacks how ambiguity is constitutive of political identity and belonging. It argues that Julia Kristeva's notion of 'foreignness' offers a useful way of understanding such experiences of Being which escape both citizenship and migration: by showing how such experiences escape through embodiment in stylistic emotions (for example, music, friendship, family ties).

### **Key words:**

ambiguous subjectivity; irregular citizenship; Julia Kristeva; emotion

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## **‘Trapped between Here and There’: Lack of Foundations and Ambiguity**

*J'neco ap La Marcellaise / I don't know La Marseillaise*  
*Mais c'est ici que je mange mes fraises / But it's here I live*  
*Au deblé, j'suis céfran / In the village (in Algeria), I'm French*  
*Et j'suis robeu en cefran / And I'm Arab in France*  
*Kéblo entre ici et lá-bas / Trapped between here and there*  
*Des fois j'ai envie de me séca / Sometimes, I just feel like leaving*  
*Mais c'est près d'Pari, que j'ai grandi / But near to Paris is where I grew up*  
*Et l'Algérie j'l'ai tchav' quand j'étais petit / And Algeria, I left there when I was little*  
*Alors où j'me vétrou? / So, where do I find myself?*  
*J'me sens perdu, c'est chelou / I feel lost, it is weird*

The last two decades have seen an emphasis in international politics on new and innovative ways of thinking about political subjectivity linked to questions of flexibility and contingency (Balibar, 2004; Edkins and Pin-Fat 1999; Isin and Neilson, 2008; Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; Ong, 1999 and 2005). However, as well as the need to recognise flexibility and contingency in political subjectivity more generally, what has been pointed to is the need to distinguish between various experiences of flexible and contingent political subjectivity: in particular, between those experiences which involve the ability to claim affinity to more than one place (to here and there), and those experiences which problematically claim affinity to any place (neither here nor there) (Bhabha 2004; Sajed 2013).<sup>1</sup> It is the latter ambiguous types of experiences, of being caught in-between here and there, which this paper focuses upon.

Such experiences are indicated in recent studies – for example those which specifically look at how people are linked to both citizenship (here) and migration (there) to unequal degrees by shaping societies from which they are technically excluded (Balibar 2004; Closs Stephens 2013; McNevin 2011; Nyers 2008). It is indicated here given the idea underpinning such studies of a lack of secure foundation *in* identification (and the constant possibility that positions such as ‘migrant’ and ‘citizen’ can be mis-read or re-read in different ways).

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<sup>1</sup>In doing the point is not to associate these with individual experiences and rigid political identities but with socio-political positions which are fluid and which also have much in common. See Sajed 2013, pp.41-62.

However, experiences which are unable to claim affinity to either here or there have thus far been less well theorised.

The above – which is part of a song in Verlan (French slang) – speaks to the experience of being lost as a result of being caught between two worlds (‘trapped between here and there’). In this song, the emphasis is on what escapes and evades subjectivity encompassed in being French *or* being Arab in France – because the only place the author is French is in Algeria, a home which they say is not their home (because they left there when they were very little). It indicates the constant ambiguity (in-between-ness) which underlies certain experiences of political subjectivity. It emphasises how this is not only a question of various competing positions which add up to French-Arab, or which produce inconsistent combinations of French and Arab, but results in feelings of being *neither* French nor Arab (‘less-than sovereign spaces’ (Ní Mhurchú 2014)) because political subjectivity is always retrospectively undefined: only French upon leaving France, but still not French as never French *in* France; and not Arab in France *nor* in Algeria either because of the lack of access to that identity (having grown up near Paris rather than in Algeria). As a song composed in Verlan (a form of slang that involves wordplay), the above raises questions about the mode of expression of such in-between experiences of political subjectivity. It indicates that ambiguity needs to be engaged with in terms of how it is expressed stylistically rather than (only) reducible to form and coherency. It furthermore points to how ambiguity can be reclaimed as a creative expression in and of itself which opens up positive alternatives to the (often) restrictive nature of existing options which are presented as either French *or* Arab, or as a coherent combination of these. In such circumstances people are left without a map in a strange landscape of various linguistic and cultural possibilities and what happens is that ‘an appeal is made to their own creativity in designing their identity’ (Nortier and Dorleijn 2013: 233).

This paper considers the concept of ‘irregular citizenship’ as a way of exploring experiences of ambiguous subjectivity (being caught between two worlds). Irregular citizenship can be understood as an instance (which can last indefinitely) where citizenship fails to be operable or is irregularised due to the negation of rights, duties and obligations through informal and unofficial means (Nyers 2011a). Nyers differentiates such experiences from those which involve formal revocations of citizenship or dramatic denationalisations. ‘Citizenship is not revoked so much as made irregular. It is unmade by being made unworkable’ (ibid: 185). My aim here is not to exhaust discussion about all the processes, conditions and relationships

which produce ‘irregular’ political subjects given that these are in themselves highly complex and open to contestation. What is important is the manner in which irregularity in this context is a process which is defined in the nexus *between* citizenship and migration; it results in the breakdown of both categories as useful terms of meaning and it resituates political subjectivity around this ambiguity. It is this constitutive ambiguity of being citizen and the question how we might go about engaging with it and understanding it as part of the signification process – as part of the process of flexibility and contingency which is constitutive of political subjectivity – which this article takes as its aim. It does so by turning to the work of Julia Kristeva and exploring how this displaces the question of politics from the public domain ‘to the singular and intimate spaces of signification’ which can be found in the body (Sjöholm 2005: 1). Increasingly there is an emphasis on the importance of considering the role of emotions and embodiment as that which helps to undermine more mechanical, technologised ‘technocratic’ (Rygiel 2010) understandings of political identity and belonging in international politics (Closs Stephens 2013; Jabri 2012; Masters 2008). By focusing on how ambiguous subjectivity can be understood as embodied in non-words such as music (but also friendship and family ties), this paper contributes to existing understandings of the role of emotion *in* political subjectivity.

The outline of the paper is as follows: the first part of the paper considers how political subjectivity can be understood in terms of an inter-relationship with the social order which is retrospectively *undefined* (resulting in access to neither here nor there) rather than only retrospectively defined (resulting in access to both here and there), as the basis of ambiguous subjectivity. It then moves on to discuss experiences from Cynthia Weber’s project *I am an American* as well as experiences of young people from North African families growing up in France as examples of irregular citizenship which should be understood in terms of ambiguity. The second part of the paper looks at how Kristeva’s understanding of foreignness can help us better understand ambiguous political subjectivity – being caught between citizenship and migration – discussed in these two examples: by theorizing how such experiences escape through embodiment in stylistic emotions (for example, music, friendship, family ties).

This paper, as such, contributes to existing discussions in international politics about how political subjectivity works beyond state-centric linearities (us/them, inside/outside, citizen/migrant) by considering how citizenship is constituted through ambiguity – as access

to neither citizenship nor migration. It uses Kristeva's concept of foreignness as a way of understanding such experiences: as that which escape through embodiment in stylistic emotions. In doing so it emphasises how political subjectivity operates at the limit of statehood and its linearities: escaping these to allow for different possibilities of political subjectivity to be expressed through the body. It thus highlights the de-centered role of the state in this process, focusing on the possibility that citizenship is instituted in an important way through a relationship between the self and the aesthetic drives in the body rather than only through a relationship between the self and the state which is dictated by sovereign linearities. Put another way, it contributes to discussions about how political subjectivity can be rethought beyond state-centric forms of citizenship by focusing on a substantially de-centred role of the state in *constituting* citizenship. This de-centering of the role of the state allows us to consider the ways in which political subjectivity escapes statehood (operating at its limits) through embodied emotion, thus enabling recognition of the subversive possibility of the body (Puumala and Pehkonen 2010) without dismissing the way in which the 'body' and 'self' continue to be enabled through the state and broader logics of classification (Rygiel 2010).

### **Rethinking Political Subjectivity**

A growing body of literature has developed in recent decades which explores the nature of political subjectivity beyond the idea of substance and coherency. No longer understood as grounded in sovereign linearities, Being is explored in terms of how it is produced (constituted) through, and at the same time *as*, the social order (Isin 2002; Jabri 2012; McNevin 2011; Odysseos 2007; Ong 2005; Shapiro 2010). From a Lacanian perspective, what this type of work points to is how the subject is constantly searching for an imaginary wholeness (autonomy) it will never obtain; it constitutes itself through its surroundings by becoming that which occupies a certain place as citizen, as intellectual, as consumer and so on, in the social order. 'The subject seeks a place in the social, a place that will confirm its existence as a subject' (Edkins and Pin-Fat 1999: 4). Linked to the notion of an original decentering, subjectivity is understood as such, as retrospectively defined because this social or symbolic order is posited in advance by assuming it already exists (at which point we are constituted as subjects); therefore subjectivity itself 'only ever *will have been*' (ibid 5).

Increasingly what is emphasised is the fragmented, indeterminate and uncertain nature of how the self is constituted through the social order in increasingly complex ways (Closs Stephens 2013; Dauphinee 2013; Jabri 2012; Ní Mhurchú 2014; Sajed 2013). This is particularly the case in the context of those whose subjectivity is defined in terms of mobility: as s/he who ‘is a subject of history and of the present’ (Jabri 2012: 17). This is a subject which is not constituted through a linear narrative: moving from here to there, from past to present. This is a subject who is interpellated by *many* discourses and institutions that surround them: some which link to understandings of being ‘from here’ (citizenship) and others to understandings of being ‘from there’ (migrancy). I want to suggest that the concept of ‘irregular citizenship’ provides a way of thinking about instances of subjectivity – in keeping with this idea of complexity – which are experienced furthermore as *never having been or never being* because they remain retrospectively undefined: falling in-between. It contributes to existing discussions about political subjectivity in international politics with its emphasis on those moments where citizenship fails to be operable (due to the negation of rights, duties and obligations through informal and unofficial means) and as such where it is defined *by* this inoperability (a status of less-than-citizen) which (because it is not a formal revocation of citizenship or dramatic denaturalisation) is at the same time a less-than-migrant status. Indeed, as subjects are interpellated retrospectively (Edkins and Pin-Fat 1999) it is increasingly possible to see how there is always a chance that they are interpellated to varying degrees of incoherency as well as to varying degrees of (temporary) coherency, given the pre-existing expectations and understandings of what it is to be a subject ‘from here’ (a citizen) or ‘from there’ (a migrant) which many people fall short of. One of the questions which arises and which I focus on in this paper is how we might understand those forms of political subjectivity which remain (in)coherent insofar as they fall between the categories of ‘citizen’ (from here) and ‘migrant’ (from there).

Existing work on the question of political subjectivity as fragmented and contingent has produced in international relations a (re)turn towards the question of affect (aesthetic) and the body in the past few decades (‘the intimate’ (Jabri 2012)) in attempts to consider, explore and engage with possibilities (and ongoing experience(s)) of politics which do not invoke and rely on sovereign linearities (coherency). Influencing much of the poststructuralist and feminist work here is an understanding that the subject is guided by desire of the Other – the desire to know “‘what do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?’” (Žižek 1997: 9). This is a desire which is also always creative, however, allowing

for (re)emergence of bodily enactment through gaps in the ongoing creation of the social order (Jabri 2012, Masters 2008; Shapiro 2010). What has been stressed is the need to explore anger, passions, loving and laughing – what Masters (2008: 103) calls the ‘messiness and excess that makes embodied experiences potentially subversive’ – which so often get subsumed (‘folded into’) the aim of defining, classifying or explaining (Closs Stephens 2013: 7). This focus on the question of ‘messiness’ emphasises that politics needs to be explored increasingly in terms of less-effable, less-intelligible spaces of subjectivity. This article does so by focusing on how political subjectivity is constituted through ambiguity, as access to neither here nor there. However, I do not attempt to classify ambiguity but to reflect on its existence in concrete example both in the US and Europe; and subsequently, drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, to consider how it can be understood as expressed creatively through embodiment (Coole 2002; Sjöholm 2005).

### ***Ambiguous Political Subjectivity: Experiences of Irregular Citizenship***

all the ...citizens...[that] are both included in the laws and ethereal ideals of [the nation] while at the same time are being placed outside of these very same laws... (Weber 2011: 114)

A multi-media project turned book, *I am an American: Filming the Fear of Difference* (2011) is a collection of personal stories told to Cynthia Weber by US citizens. Weber developed this project as her response to a Public Service Announcement (PSA) by the Ad Council of America which she believed failed to portray much of the complexity of citizenship. This PSA claimed to celebrate the diversity of the US nation post 9/11 by featuring a series of people of different ages, race and religions proudly declaring their claim to US citizenship by stating the words ‘I am an American’, while emotive music played in the background.

As a response to the original PSA, Weber’s thought-provoking project seeks to undermine the simplified understanding which the US State attempts to propagate in the name of security, democracy, diversity and humanity, of ‘citizen’ as a coherent identity. She does not do so by simply demonstrating, however, how citizenship is inconsistent and dis-located and thus how people are connected to both here and there (to citizenship *and* migration). What Weber’s project further does is to explore how a declaration such as ‘I am an American’ can be shown

to be fraught with complications and paradoxes which speak to the way in which people get caught between citizenship and migration.

This project does so by documenting the first hand experiences of citizens who are caught up in the War on Terror: predictably (as fighting soldiers and their families), less predictably (as citizens embroiled in the associated War on Immigration) and unpredictably (as ‘collateral damage’).<sup>2</sup> By considering a series of ways in which US citizenship fails to be operable or is irregularised, Weber draws attention to the question of ambiguity *within* the nation. Weber is demonstrably aware that there are various forms taken by claims to citizenship. With this in mind, however, she successfully highlights experiences of being a citizen which are based to varying degrees around incoherency due to the manner in which they are often caught in-between inclusion and exclusion, citizenship and non-citizenship, failing to become either. I want to stress how these can be seen as experiences of ‘irregular citizenship’ as defined by Peter Nyers because they are experiences of citizenship which are made unworkable – to varying degrees – but are not revoked, nor do they involve dramatic denationalisations.

In Weber’s book the stories told are framed around evocative double-paged portraits of various Americans proclaiming their complicated relationships with the US state – for example by holding the US flag upside down to indicate distress, or taping a peace sign onto the US flag – at the same time as making their claims to be US citizens. These portraits, which have an image of the person taking a particular stance and a caption underneath, are shot twice by Weber – first as a live image with her video camera and later, as a stilled screen grab. This produces a TV screen blue glow giving ‘each image an eerie undertone’ so that Weber is able to present stylistically, the way in which she argues these citizens ‘haunt’ the coherent image of citizenship portrayed in the original PSA (ibid: 115). For Weber (ibid), ‘nowhere is this more apparent than the twice shot face of Saul Arellano’. It is therefore this particular haunting experience I want to focus on below. I do not believe that such an experience of citizenship is defined only by ambiguity, or can be reduced to such qualities. Rather ambiguity is an important aspect of the experience of citizenship which Weber has attempted to capture and which I seek to understand. My aim in doing so is to build on work elsewhere which seeks to theorise the way(s) in which political subjectivity is experienced in a postcolonial world other than through a liberal national/universal dualistic framework

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<sup>2</sup> Doing so Weber produces ‘a remixed PSA’ (see Weber 2007).

where the latter category continues to be limited to the few who possess ‘global capacity’ (Jabri 2012: 125). However, instead of focusing on how political subjectivity operates within postcolonial sites of resistance – what Jabri (2012) calls the ‘intimacy of revolt’ – I focus specifically on how the fleeting political subject is generated from within the centre(s) of this postcolonial world through ‘citizenship’ in intimate ways (see for example, Mezzadra and Rahola 2006; Mignolo 2000).

### *Saul Arellano*

When Weber first meets Saul Arellano, he is living in a church in Chicago with his undocumented mother Elvira Arellano, a young Mexican woman who crossed the US border checkpoint in 1997. It is in this church that Saul and his mother went to seek sanctuary after Elvira was issued with a deportation order. A casualty of the War Against Terrorism, Elvira was arrested when found working illegally as a cleaner in O’Hare Airport, Chicago as part of Operation Tarmac: an operation to ensure that no terrorists were working in American airports.

Elvira is seeking sanctuary on the basis that by deporting her, the US government would effectively be deporting her son Saulito. Saulito then 8-years old, was born and raised in the US and is therefore a US citizen.<sup>3</sup> As an American citizen, Elvira argued that Saul was entitled to the life which America offered.

The decision I made to stay in the United States was about my concerns for Saulito’s future. As a U.S. citizen he has the right to stay in his country, have a better education, and have the same rights as any other U.S. citizen, including president Bush (cited in Weber 2007).

In the course of the book Weber introduces us to the ongoing struggle to stay in the US with his mother which has become Saul’s life. We quickly see that this daily struggle takes over the question of ‘who’ Saul is. This is not simply because he has become defined by this struggle to remain in the US. It is also arguably because he has constantly struggled to define himself as other than someone who is always in danger of being indirectly deported. He is someone whose Being is defined by his absence *within* the legitimate body politic – his need to fight for his rights as a US citizen despite being a US citizen. While considering her role as one of many who are responsible for taking away Saul’s private life and putting him under the glare of the camera, Weber notes the manner in which Saul is both a perfect citizen (‘a boy hero’ (Weber 2011: 97)) meeting lawmakers in Washington DC, as well as the perfect

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<sup>3</sup> Birthright citizenship is guaranteed in the fourteenth amendment of the US constitution

migrant, for example, addressing the Mexican Congress. Yet she struggles to describe him as other than a lost child, caught between both possibilities. Contemplating the still video portrait of Saul which she eventually uses for the front cover of her book (see figure 1.1), Weber notes that that Saul's image epitomises the appearance of a ghostlike silhouette haunting the coherent image of citizenship portrayed in the original PSA (ibid: 115).



(Figure 1.1. Saul Arellano)

Saul's story has been described as 'one of the most moving and politically suggestive' of those looked at by Weber in her *I am an American* project (Nyers 2011b: 216). Most people would agree that this story is moving because it is the story of a young child put in a vulnerable position by the US state through its attempts to deport his only parent – and therefore by default also himself, from the only life he has ever known and from his country of birth. It is also arguably politically suggestive, however, because it is a stark tale about the role which ambiguity (getting caught between inclusion and exclusion) plays in *constituting* the citizen.

As is increasingly noted, exclusion is not antithetical to citizenship, but has somewhat always been a component of, and increasingly is integral to the way in which citizenship operates. In her book *Semi-Citizenship*, Elizabeth F. Cohen (2009: 2) notes that various forms of less-than-full ('semi') citizenships may individually appear as exceptional, 'yet many such statuses appear and reappear in different countries and political eras'. Elsewhere Nyers (2006: 23) considers the notion of 'accidental citizenship' – which is used as a pejorative term to describe the status of citizenship acquired at birth on U.S. soil to children born to non-citizen parents – in order to consider the less-than full status of citizenship accorded to certain people. Nyers argues that such a status should not be understood as exceptional but as

that which is increasingly ‘built into technologies by which people become recognised as political subjects. Accidental citizenship involves discursive technologies that enable an exceptional logic to be applied to legally normalised subjects with the effect of excluding those who are included’ (ibid). What such work points to I argue, is not just the need to move away from the oppositional categories of citizenship/non-citizenship and towards an understanding of the inter-relationship between ‘those citizens who are deemed essential and necessary and those who are dismissed as accidental and dispensable’ (ibid: 24); but also the ambiguity of the latter category of ‘citizen’ which is defined *through* its ‘accidental’ and ‘dispensable’ nature in increasing numbers.

Indeed, it is important to consider how the case of Saul Arellano has significant parallels with intergenerational migrants elsewhere in the US and with a growing disenfranchised population of young people across Europe. These are people who can also be seen to fall in-between the citizenship/migration divide. Looking at such cases it is difficult not to see how irregularisation of citizenship threatens certain kinds of racialised subjects more than others, although, of course, it cannot be reduced to this logic (Nyers 2011a). Recently, for example, a lot of attention has been paid to those from North African families growing up in France (known as ‘les beurs’). These are young people who grow up in France yet are relegated to the peripheries of French society: both symbolically through their identification as yet another generation of migrants (a ‘second generation’), as well as physically: housed as they are on the outskirts of cities.

They did become French, both in terms of citizenship and to a large extent in terms of culture. Yet, no matter how French they became, their swarthy skins and Arabic names made them the targets of widespread discrimination by members of the majority ethnic population (Begag 2007: xxvii)

As Sajed (2013: 53) notes ‘[t]he banlieus (suburban ghettos) in which most North African migrants are housed have attracted a lot of attention as spaces of exclusion, violence and hopelessness’. Expressions of this hopelessness and exclusion were played out for the world to see during the 2005 riots which began in the suburbs of northeast Paris and then spread to other suburban ghettos throughout France. The reason these riots were arguably so emotive and of interest to the world was because they involved people who were French citizens but ones which the Republican ideal had failed to incorporate. Born in France without being recognised as ‘French’, yet not ‘migrants’ either given that their only tie with their parent’s

birthplace is often simply an occasional visit or vacation, they exist as ‘as spectres/zombies’ at the margins of French society (ibid). Similar stories are told about some people from Turkish families growing up in Germany and about Mexican families growing up in the US (Alba 2007). Yet the response, as I discuss below is not alienation but an alternative form of stylistic expression (linked to music, friendship, family ties) which enables in-between-ness as an(other) form of political identity and belonging.

It can be tempting to put all non-progressive aspects of citizenship down to bad or unfair state practices. However the question of ambiguity as looked at thus far needs to be linked to a world in which political subjectivity is increasingly over determined for some people. These are not people who easily fall into the categories of ‘citizen’ or ‘migrant’ but who fall between them. To some extent such people have always existed but this is exacerbated in ever more globalised societies which result in greater instability and fracture for some people. The point is that their situations cannot simply be solved by changing state practices but their exceptional status is increasingly built into existing sovereign structures.

For example, I would point out that Saul’s problematic situation cannot be resolved by widening the scope of ‘citizen’ and by simply granting his mother an amnesty. Instead, state policies which are often used to rectify the situation by passing laws which would grant a stay of deportation with a view to regularising the status of undocumented migrants so that their children are not deported, need to be recognised as merely instigating a temporary fix in such situations.<sup>4</sup> Amnesties for undocumented migrants are increasingly accompanied by tighter controls on migration.<sup>5</sup> This thus reinforces the racialisation of certain types of citizens for whom such controls are seen as targeted towards; it continues to underscore the inauthenticity of certain citizens given the exceptional nature of such laws, as well as the inauthenticity of *future* citizen children born to suspect (e.g. undocumented) parents. Changing state practices, in other words, would reinforce the exceptional nature of political subjectivity such as that of Saul Arellano by creating a new group of people – those children of migrants who have not been given amnesties or who are seen as being culturally different – who subsequently fall in-between citizenship and non-citizenship.

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<sup>4</sup> Two such attempts include 1. HR1557 ‘A Bill for the Relief of Elvira Arellano’ (introduced 15/03/07) and HR 2182 ‘A Bill for the Relief of Elvira Arellano and Others’ (introduced 5/03/07).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, current U.S Senate plans to tighten US-Mexico border security drastically – from existing rates of 44% operational control to 90% – as a pre-requisite to any amnesty for undocumented workers currently being requested (Murray 2013: 9).

This situation can be linked to the modern state's obsession with legibility: its need to draw lines and classify (Scott 2009; Shindo 2010). It is through the act of classification (distinguishing between 'inside' and 'outside', between 'citizen' and 'migrant') that the state functions to govern populations. As we cannot transcend this logic – because attempts to widen the scope of who is to be included (as citizens) always leads to a creation of other people who are to be excluded – the question becomes that of how we might evade – by reciting in a different way at the limit of sovereignty – this 'otherwise omnipresent logic of exclusion and inclusion' (Shindo 2010: 150). The concept of 'ambiguity' does this I argue because it allows us to consider how subjectivity operates at the limit of the inclusion/exclusion logic – by escaping the dominant categories of 'citizen' and 'migrant' – thus undermining the act of classification (sovereign intelligibility), even though it can never transcend the logic more generally *of* classification. Saul's case is an interesting one for our purposes here not because his mother might be deported and so we can stop this and solve the problem; but because whether or not she is deported, and the need to introduce an exception for her and others *defines* the ambiguous irregularity of the type of political subjectivity which Saul and others like him inhabit – as both out of place but also not out of place – which undermines the omnipresent logic of exclusion and inclusion by opening up other possibilities for political subjectivity.

### *Failing to Present: Contested Identity and being Caught In-Between*

The 2005 riots in France, as well as Saul's own story and thus the question of irregularisation – how citizenship is made inoperable – are inseparable from the processes through which identity is (becomes) contested. In the former, challenges to identity in the form of identity checks sparked off the riots when 'minority ethnic youths' (to use Azouz Begag's term) were stopped and fled (due to a perception of ongoing harassment by the police) rather than submit to the police identity check, eventually taking refuge in an electrical substation. When two of them died by accident, many blamed their deaths on aggressive police action and took to the streets. Challenges to identity in the form of identity checks also resulted in Saul's mother being identified as an 'illegal migrant' in her place of work. This is significant for Saul because it takes place within a much broader system of stop and search checks which disproportionately affect certain types of minorities – in particular African Americans and

Hispanic Americans – within the USA (ACLU 2009), thus indicating how this will affect his everyday life. The importance of such contestations against ‘American’, ‘French’ etc. identity is that they result in the racialisation of certain bodies that are understood as Being out of place; yet for intergenerational migrants such as Saul and those who died or eventually took part in the French riots, theirs are not bodies which are legally (or always culturally) out of place. They do not belong elsewhere according to the law or to cultural norms – as for example, Saul has grown up immersed in U.S. culture and the youth who were involved in the French riots in 2005 similarly have grown up immersed in French culture. Yet nor do they ‘belong’ where they are found within the existing image of the ‘French’ and ‘American’ political community. They are not people who can be deported (as migrants) yet nor do they conform to the image of the non-deportable (citizen). They are caught between ‘migration’ and ‘citizenship’.

Sajed (2013) is insistent that such examples serve to interrupt stable ideas regarding hybridity and the idea of someone straddling several worlds – for example, as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan migrant who is clearly at home in many places. I would add that it also interrupts ideas regarding how people can even unevenly claim affiliation to both here and here. Instead it indicates how hybridity can be experienced as cultural limbo and inaccessibility to *either* the world of migration or the world of citizenship. It is experienced as a form of ambiguity within, rather than a form of presence across several nations. Such experiences help us distinguish, as such, between various types of mobile or hybrid subjects at the intersection of citizenship and migration, here and there, emphasizing those which are defined in terms of their fragility, instability and unintelligibility.<sup>6</sup>

What the story of Saul Arellano and similar stories across Europe and the US illustrate is the manner in which citizenship is not only experienced in terms of dislocated presence within the nation. It is also experienced by those who lack presence within the nation and are unintelligible according to the master-narrative of sovereignty as they neither belong nor are they outsiders vis-à-vis the state. This echoes what Engin Isin’s book *Being Political* (2002) so eloquently discusses: how citizenship has always been a struggle between presenting and failure to present, between meaning and incoherency. These emerged simultaneously in dialogical manner and constituted each other. Being political is associated with the interplay between *both* rather than necessarily being confined to the former.

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<sup>6</sup> Although this group should not be seen as homogeneous. See for example Begag 2007.

Thus far Isin's work (2002, 2008) has been used in international politics to explore how citizenship and non-citizenship are forms of practice up for the taking (Nyers 2008). The focus has been on how migrants (as those who are defined as non-citizens) engage in campaigns which challenge the taken for granted space of 'citizenship' through differentiated acts associated with the exclusive space of citizenship – such as protesting, marching, voicing their descent. 'Migrant political agency is asserted in places meant to deny, limit or repress it.' (ibid: 125). The term of 'irregular migrant' has been used to highlight the manner in which such people are linked to *both* citizenship and migration to unequal degrees; it explores how they shape society from which they are often also technically excluded (Balibar 2004; McNevin 2011).

Yet an equally important question is that of how citizens' others are not only those who have been clearly identified as recognisably different and therefore presenting in disjunct and multiple overlapping ways– an 'other' who (in)distinguishes themselves by emphasising their agency in the face of attempts to deny this. Rather citizen's others are also those who also appear as 'intolerably different' (Weber, 2011: 200) in the margins of society – defined predominantly in terms of what they lack as members of society, such as legitimacy, visibility, a voice. Such forms of political subjectivity are caught in the intersection between meaning and incoherency, presenting and failure to present; they are defined by their in-between-ness (their constant displacement) which is an aspect of how the selective filtering, differentiation and differential inclusion of subjects in transit increasingly takes place (Balibar 2011; Jabri 2012; Mezzadra and Neilson 2012)

Such experiences as explored in this paper are unintelligible according to the categories of citizen/migrant, inside/outside, us/them, rather than people who straddle both. Such experiences do not re-present – for example, in cities in ways that can be linked to alternative forms of legitimacy contra mere legal status (Closs Stephens 2013; McNevin 2011) – but precisely *fail* to present as either citizen or migrant. As I discuss below my intention is not to imply that there is only powerlessness associated with these experiences. Resistance is built into these experiences in a different way from how we normally conceptualise this however. Resistance potentially comes not from resisting the state in intelligible forms but through failing to present intelligibly within the framework of statehood.

The next section turns to the work of Julia Kristeva and her notion of ‘foreignness’: as that which is both familiar and strange. It does so in order to suggest how we can better understand political subjectivity *as* ambiguous ((un)intelligible): as escaping the worlds of both citizenship and migration. Kristeva theorises the (un)intelligibility around which subjectivity is based as accessible through the living speaking body.

### **Ambiguity as Being at the limit: Foreignness and Unintelligibility**

Kristeva points out that foreignness since Freud is no longer a substantive question of race, faith, or beauty, nor madness. Rather foreignness can be understood as that which ‘creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself, and [...] irrigates our very speaking-being, estranged by other logics, including the heterogeneity of biology’ (Kristeva 1991: 170). She suggests that foreignness is not a permanent substance (‘a thing’) located somewhere but is a symptom of our attempts to ignore the other within ourselves: it ‘signifies the difficulty we have of living as an *other* [...]’ (ibid: 103). In thinking about foreignness through Freud’s theory of the unconscious in this manner, Kristeva is able to consider how foreignness can be recognised as a relation of otherness to the self which is both familiar yet strange (‘uncanny’). She is able to consider how it can be recognised as ‘Other’ yet is constantly being repressed and therefore remains also un-intelligible. The manner in which Kristeva thus uses the concept of ‘foreigner’ can no longer be used interchangeably with the notion of ‘the migrant’. It does not refer to otherness which is juxtaposed to identity in the way the ‘migrant’ represents an alternative to ‘citizen’, deriving its challenge precisely from this dualistic, antagonistic relationship and its ability to contest the ground *of* ‘citizenship’.

Instead, Kristeva draws our attention to the idea that ‘foreignness’ challenges the master-narrative of sovereignty: which defines our choices as that of living in a world of clearly defined spatial and temporal boundaries of nationhood and requires us to distinguish between ‘citizen’ – as s/he who is included – and ‘man’ (migrant) – as s/he who has *yet* to be included. In contrast we see how the foreigner embodies a third option: ‘a scar’ between citizen and man. For, as Kristeva notes, ‘man’ is understood as s/he who *can* become a full citizen (ibid: 97-98). Yet, the foreigner is defined precisely as s/he who fails to become a full citizen. The foreigner is not therefore either an alternative to the citizen in the form of ‘man’ nor a dislocated form of both man and citizen, but neither. The foreigner is a crossroad; it is ‘a process, an intersection – an impossible unity’ (1984: 118). It is precisely because the

foreigner escapes the categories of ‘man’ *and* ‘citizen’ that s/he is potentially transgressive of the law of sovereignty and society.

What is significant in Kristeva’s work is that she emphasises the relationship between what is intelligible and unintelligible (ambiguous) *in* signification. The notion of foreignness is used to consider this intersection. She explores how the subject as a process of signification, exists somewhere *between* what is effable and ineffable. In doing so her work draws upon, yet also builds on that of Jacques Lacan who brought together the fields of linguistics and psychoanalysis during the 1950s, revitalising Freudian philosophy in doing so, by famously claiming that the unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan 1997). However, the Lacanian subject consists of elements which will never be fully grasped – these are its drives and passions; these elements, associated with the body, are located in the real and the imaginary and can never be known, only supposed (Sheridan 1997: xi-x). For Lacan (1992: 196), ‘man...as an image is interesting for the hollow the image leaves empty’. Unlike Lacan, Kristeva focuses on exploring the role of latter hidden elements (passions and drives) *in* the signification process as opposed to taking for granted their inaccessible existence (Barzilai 1991: 296).

In order to do so, Kristeva distinguishes between two registers within the signifying process: the register of the ‘symbolic’ and the register of the ‘semiotic’. The distinction which Kristeva draws between the semiotic and the symbolic as two equally important elements of the signification process, can be best understood as a distinction between clear and orderly (logical) meaning derived from syntax and grammar, and that of a discharge of the subject’s energies derived from feeling and desire – the unconscious drive. As she (1989: 129) explains of the latter: ‘What I call “the semiotic” is a state of disintegration in which patterns appear but which do not have any stable identity: they are blurred and fluctuating’.

Freud referred to these as processes as ‘primary’ because they were ‘instinctual impulses’ occupied with immediate satisfaction which contrasted with conscious elements of the mind occupied with orderly rational questions of avoiding external danger and adapting to reality. While the semiotic may be expressed verbally it is not subject to the rules of syntax but associated with style (emotions). As Kristeva explains, the

semiotic network gives ‘music’ to literature...[and] musicality is not without signification; indeed it is deployed within it. Logical synthesis and all ideologies are present, but they are

pulverized within their own logic before being displaced towards something that is no longer within the realm of the idea, sign, syntax and thus Logos... (1986: 113-4).

The semiotic is thus useful to consider how ambiguity is visible *in* signification through the body by way of the semiotic (drives).<sup>7</sup> In other words, it allows us to consider how excesses in coherency (the symbolic) are embodied stylistically (in the semiotic); they escape through non-words.

### ***Foreign Body***

We need to consider how the problem for the foreigner is often one of speech. The foreigner has ‘lost’ their mother tongue (often never speaking their mother’s tongue) and yet they do not quite possess or inhabit fully the alternative language of the country in which they reside. This is of course a function of language itself and the difficulty of *ever* (completely) translating between languages (see Shindo 2010; Bhabha 2004). I want to consider the way in which translation particularly becomes a problem nonetheless in certain ways contributing to (and reinforcing) the status of ‘the foreigner’ who is caught between here and there.

Regardless of whether they embrace the process of speaking their non-maternal tongue with enthusiasm or not, the foreigner can see in the faces of others – the raising of eyebrows and the ever so polite ‘I beg your pardon’ – that they ‘will never be part of it’ (Kristeva 1991: 15). They will instead always need to be tolerated; their mistakes considered charming at best, at worst their alternative dialect (whether deliberate or unintentional) too different to be understood completely. This ‘second and secondary discourse’ (ibid: 32) which often demonstrates intellectual daring and excessive sophistication is nonetheless always an imitation. For example, a very notable development in many countries is the adoption of slang by those growing up in migrant communities as their imitation of the master language; perhaps the most well-known is in France in the case of ‘Verlan’, the mode of expression of the song at the beginning of this article.<sup>8</sup> Much of its origins are in the growth of France’s

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<sup>7</sup> Kristeva does not seek here to reinforce a ‘material (as biological) versus social’ distinction: the body is merely seen by her as the other part of signification which enables us to think *in terms of* distinctions such as biological versus social, material versus representation.

<sup>8</sup> Other possible examples include Rinkeby-Svenska in Sweden or Kiezdeutsch in Germany. The official term of this ‘slang-like linguistic style’ (Nortier and Dorleijn 2013, p.229) is a multi-ethnolect which is defined as follows: ‘A linguistic style of variety...that is part of linguistic practices of speakers of more than two different ethnic and (by consequence) linguistic backgrounds, and contains an usually high number of features from more than one language, but has a clear base-language, generally the dominant language of the society where the mutli-ethnolect is in use.’ (ibid).

banlieus which are peripheral housing projects home to France's poorest immigrants, heavily populated by North African and African Arabs.

Verlan, which involves word play (normally inverting syllables of words) is that which falls short of 'correct' French, a language linked to an obsession with linguistic purity propagated by the Academie Francaise (Lefkowitz 1991: 65). Caught between two languages in this manner, the foreigner's realm is a silent one: 'By dint of staying things in various ways, one just as trite as the other, just as approximate, one ends up no longer saying them.' (Kristeva 1991: 15) Yet the result is not lack of expression. Much has been written about how Verlan offers an alternative identity for those 'caught between the culture of their parents, which they no longer possess, and the French culture to which they don't have complete access' (Lefkowitz 1991: 137; Nortier and Dorleijn 2013). As one young woman explains 'we begin to speak it...because we are looking for ourselves, and we can't find ourselves' (Doran 2004: 93). What is notable is the question of style and creativity which dominates Verlan. The expressive nature of Verlan is thus linked to what Kristeva would call its 'musicality' associated with the semiotic. Verlan contrasts starkly with traditional French which is based resolutely on structure and substance, defined instead predominantly in terms of form and style.

Indeed, what is interesting is how Verlan is precisely linked to an identity, a way of life which is creative (stylistic) rather than declarative. Verlan is understood as enabling ideas of 'non-standard' speech and linking this to non-standard understandings of ethnic and religious differences – drawing many influences together (from Arabic, Creole and African languages as well as Romani and Argot (Nortier and Dorleijn 2013: 254)) and *modifying* these constantly – rather than drawing on coherent differences as alternative forms of identity. These new forms of identity are thus turned away from a focus on rethinking French, coherent, intelligible identity and towards articulating identity in terms of what falls short of French *and* non-French, towards that which is less-than-coherent.

The result is not an alternative reconfigured relationship to the state and to questions of nationalism which is displaced or dis-located – i.e. based on newly hyphenated (or uneven multiple) understandings of what it is to be a citizen of the French Republic. Rather, I argue that here we see political identity expressed by trying to turn away from the milieu of statehood and associated questions of birth, parental origin and questions of national 'authenticity' and towards new issues which are not normally associated with political

identity such as music, food, fashion, and poetry. These are new milieus for identity as noted increasingly by some scholars (e.g. Ni Laoire et al 2011; Portes and Zhou 1993). What we can see here is how ambiguity of/as foreignness (the foreigner) emerges (escapes) through the body; it is embodied in non-words (style). Yet these non-words cannot be reduced to an absence of language; for just as the semiotic works with symbolic forms, emerging out of the latter, the stylistic (nonverbal) nature of something like Verlan emerges through words even though it cannot be reduced to these. This highlights ambiguity in the relationship between language (as words) and extra linguistic stylistic emotions as well as notion of ambiguity *in* subjectivity, which produces this.

This attempt to turn away from the state is always a failure because the state apparatus continues to define the terms on which certain bodies have (had) their identities contested and the ways in which they get caught between citizenship and migration in the first place. As many scholars have shown, the constitution of the body is inseparable from state assemblages (Foucault 1980; Rygiel 2010). Indeed the state assemblage plays a huge role in determining how political identity and belonging is inscribed through particular types of (for example, gendered or racialised) bodies (Seely et al 2013). However this attempt to turn away from the milieu of statehood is significant I suggest, nonetheless for how it opens up the possibility of an alternative – embodied – focus for the expression of political identity and belonging which operates at the limit of statehood (sovereign power) and its intelligibilities; it provides a different way of thinking about political subjectivity because it links citizenship to ideas of intimacy which are not encapsulated in institutional concepts of birth and marriage: such as friendship, music and poetry. Doing so it undermines the rigid lines which are so often drawn between relationships with parents (communities of descent) in contrast to relationships with wider family and friends, with the former being prioritised over the latter.

The ambiguity as/of foreignness produced here is not a new coherent space of embodied stylistic expression. Instead we need to understand the ephemeral nature itself of something like Verlan – defined in terms of multiplicity and mixture given the way it draws on immigrant languages (plural) and various dialects which cut across (and undermine) ethnic identifiers, rather than linking to these to create a new coherent space (Lefkowitz 1991; Nortier and Dorleijn). What results is a mode (a position) defined in terms of fragmented space(s) and inconsistent time(s) of engagement, interaction and expression through music, food, fashion, and poetry. Rather than creating a new space around which immigrants or

particular nationalities are re-defined in a stable way, Verlan and similar slang work to disconnect language from national origins – because the emphasis is on creativity and undermining intelligibility rather than grammatical, linguistic coherency – such that the use of elements of certain languages has no necessary link to the speaker’s origins in those languages: he/she maybe of that origin but may be of another origin also (Nortier and Dorleijn 2013). Indeed Verlan traverses French society (is transversal) – found now in film dialogue, advertising campaigns, French hip-hop and rap music – and connects together different elements of what has become ‘French’ culture, subverting at the same time as it joins together various aspects of this: ‘a kind of belonging which is not to a particular community of origin... [but] really multi-etcetera’ (quoted in *ibid*: 110). In other words, where meaning (identity) does become stabilised through embodiment, it does so from a position of ambiguity where questions of origin and identity are constantly filtered through other nationalities, and origins (and thus ‘citizenships’ and ‘migrancies’) which simultaneously undermines moments of stability (stabilised identities and/or stabilised embodiments).

*Foreign voice: affective citizenship*

In Weber’s project we see that the problematic of language is raised linked specifically to the issue of ‘voice’. The project has been described as setting out to explore ‘through video the lived experiences of those who say “I am American” in a different voice’ to the definite certainty, and coherency of those heard in the original PSA (cited in Weber 2007). What is significant is that the question of ‘voice’ cannot be understood in the narrow grammatical linguistic articulate sense. Most of the time, when Weber is with Saul he does not speak nor face the camera but hides his face in his mother’s chest. When Saul is required to pose for his portrait he very briefly faces the camera holding a small American flag. Saul only once speaks very quietly to say the words ‘I am the son of an immigrant without papers. I am American’. And indeed, these words only appear in the three minute video which Weber creates telling Elvira and Saul’s story (Weber 2007). In Weber’s 2011 book itself Saul’s portrait includes no words. While Saul’s face adorns the front cover of Weber’s book and indeed the inside and back covers, these images include no caption underneath. This raises the question of how we understand the term ‘voice’ in this context. I suggest that Weber’s *I am an American* project is an attempt to understand how US citizenship is experienced in all its complexity and multiplicity including what is so often ignored because there often isn’t the room (at present) to articulate it. This book is powerful precisely because citizenship is

discussed in terms of emotions, fears, reservations, anticipation – asking her participants to look towards themselves rather than (only) at themselves through their relationship with ‘the state’ and its linear intelligibilities: citizen/non-citizen, belonging/not-belonging, inside/outside.

As discussed above, in the case of intergenerational migrants in France, reducing their ‘voice’ to coherency – what is articulate and reducible to language (words) – ignores how political identity is being articulated through semiotic as well as symbolic forms. A similar argument can, I suggest, be made in the case of Saul Arellano. In the case of Saul Arellano, he might not speak very much (and indeed we might never ultimately know what is ‘Saulito’s will’, as noted by Weber towards the end of the book). However we can see how Saul’s identity is expressed (less-than verbally) through his relationship with his mother whose side he clings to silently. In normal circumstances, this relationship makes little sense in the context of constituting *his* citizenship; it only undermines Saul’s rights as an American citizen given that his mother lacks the correct documentation and thus jeopardises his right to remain in his country of birth. However, the reader is left with the impression that even if counter-intuitive, Saul’s identity and who he is as a political subject can only be understood through this bond: it defines him as a citizen *in* (rather than of) America. Indeed the potency of Saul’s story is that it is not the only one. As Administrations attempt to tighten immigration policy and movements against deportations of family members without correct documentation grow, intra-familial relationships and emotional bonds between parents and their children, between siblings and/or close relatives, as well as neighbours and friends are becoming increasingly linked to debates about political identity (Boehm 2008; Chaudry et al 2010; Menjívar and Abrego 2009). These relationships can either be dismissed because they make little sense (at present) or recognised as part of how citizenship is increasingly experienced and expressed *ambiguously*. If we choose to follow the latter course there is a need to understand better how such processes work through the body linked to emotion and extra-linguistic expression. It points to the need to recognise the subversive potential in the body to enact politics in a different way to what is normally expected (Puumala and Pehkonen 2010).

## **Conclusion**

In her *I am an American* project, Cynthia Weber emphasises that the fault lines worthy of looking at are not only those which interrupt the categories of ‘citizen’ and its others resulting in a dis-located (uneven) relationship to both citizenship and migration. It also emphasises the need to consider those more indeterminate, ephemeral, inconsistent fault lines which undermine and point to increasing ambiguities within ‘citizenship’ itself – its retrospectively undefined nature. Highlighting the ambiguity of citizen(ship), *I am an American* underlines the manner in which citizenship’s determination is increasingly undermined by its ineffable mobility. The focus of this paper as such has been on the question of ambiguous political subjectivity – the constant question mark around citizenship *and* around the alternative of being a migrant – in the everyday life of certain people. It is in this manner that ambiguity is theorised as that which is constitutive of political identity and belonging.

It is widely recognised that we need to rethink how we understand political subjectivity beyond state-centric forms of citizenship which emphasise essence. While existing work which emphasises uneven affiliations to both here and there is an important part of this, Weber’s work demonstrates that there is also a need to think about political subjectivity in terms of ambiguity – as access to neither here nor there – in order to develop our understanding of the increasingly complex ways in which political subjectivity works. As the examples of Saul Arellano and other intergenerational migrants highlight, irregular citizenship produces experiences of Being which do not simply undermine the essence of the nation and the idea of commonality resulting in ontological fragmentation and fracture in the form of uneven affiliation to both here and there. Irregular citizenship needs to be understood in terms of experiences which also ultimately escape the logic of statehood and its intelligibility by providing forms of Being which operate as an unnameable ‘haunting/haunted’ ambiguity (Weber 2011: 115). These are not challenges to politics as normal which interrupt the authority of the state to define the parameters of politics; they do not present an alternative way of thinking about citizenship from the position of non-citizenship and via different articulations of nationalism, birthright, protest etc. Rather they are experiences of citizenship which are less than *both* citizenship and non-citizenship; they are experiences which fail to be either. I argue that Kristeva’s work emphasises how we might theorise Being as ambiguous yet accessible through the body. Doing so, it suggests how we can move away in international politics from theorising ontology only via a relationship with the state. It suggests how we can also theorise citizenship as a relationship between the self and the body – recognising the extra-linguistic, stylistic emotions which are expressed here (in music, poetry, friendship, and love) as also integral to citizenship itself.



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