Introduction

In June 2014, Harriet Nakigudde, a Ugandan self-identified lesbian in the UK, was denied refugee status on the grounds of sexual orientation, and consequently deported by the British Home Office, because she had been ‘single for five years’, and hence could not convince immigration officials that she was ‘really’ lesbian (Morgan 2014). A perhaps less tragic, but nonetheless painful, story is that of Dario Kosarac, who ‘recounts his feelings of never totally belonging in Bosnia because his parents were of mixed Serbian-Croatian ethnic backgrounds; and never being totally accepted in the USA because he was from Bosnia and is gay’ (LGBT Asylum News 2011). By the same token, in a series of interviews with anthropologist David Murray (2014), a Nigerian man called Odu shared his distressing experience of linguistic anomie ensuing from a tension between resisting sexual-identity categories and the necessity of embracing the category ‘gay’ in order to gain refugee status in Canada. Finally, a South African same-sex couple on their way to Reunion was recently ‘harassed, intimidated and humiliated’ (DeBarros 2014) by a border official at O R Tambo international airport in Johannesburg after they presented their identity documents together at passport control. According to a news report, the official asked the couple who was the ‘man’ and who the ‘woman’ in the relationship, and went on to question ‘who put whose penis in whose anus, and how it felt’ (DeBarros 2014).

These are telling examples of three main points we want to make in this chapter. First, they illustrate that sexuality plays a key role in the (re)production of specific regimes of mobility. Openly identifying as gay or lesbian and being able to ‘prove’ such sexual identities can be the sine qua non for being granted the right to stay in a particular socio-political space, and being invested with some degree of political recognition, such as citizenship. Second, they demonstrate that there is an affective element that exceeds well-established understandings of citizenship as a contract of rights and duties between an individual and one or more political entities. A passport is not enough of a warrant for the right to be treated equally irrespective of sexual orientation, nor is a passport a good indicator of the emotional
pushes and pulls between different, conflicting feelings of belonging. Third, these examples remind us that semiosis – not only language, but also images and body movements – plays a pivotal function in the regulation of the relationships between sexuality, mobility and citizenship: in some contexts, using the identity categories gay or lesbian as signifiers of one’s sense of selfhood may be the only way through which to become visible, and consequently be recognised by the state. In this sense, knowing which identity labels to use, and when, works as a shibboleth that determines who is allowed to be included in a polity and who instead should be excluded. But, of course, the same visibility and recognition may also be springboards to harassment, humiliation, violence and expulsion (see also Kerfoot and Hyltenstam (in press) for a discussion about the relationships between mobility and visibility).

Against this backdrop, the aim of the chapter is to investigate the intersections of mobility, sexuality and citizenship, and the role played by multilingualism and multi-semioticity in mediating such relationships. In addressing these nexus points, we aim to offer a fresh, queer perspective on the growing scholarship on language and citizenship, an important body of work that has nonetheless largely ignored the gendered and sexual facets of the politics of mobility. We also believe that a tight analytical focus on multilingualism and multi-semioticity could constitute a new analytical contribution to the budding field of queer migration (e.g. Luibheid & Cantù 2005), an interdisciplinary enterprise that has, however, paid relatively ‘little attention […] to the border-zones of linguistic and sexual contact, and the attendant struggles for meaning and belonging that are produced through this contact’ (Murray 2014, p. 3; see however Cashman 2015 for a notable exception).

We begin with a discussion of the concept of citizenship, and how it has been employed in recent sociolinguistic scholarship. In reviewing the existing literature, we highlight the heuristic potential of the notion of belonging as a broad conceptual umbrella that encapsulates the relationships between mobility, sexuality and the domain of the affective. We then move on to offer a concrete example of the ways in which sexuality, multilingualism and mobility intersect in a recent documentary about a group of Palestinian gay men who leave the Occupied Territories. The chapter ends with a discussion of the double bind inherent in a liberal politics of citizenship that dispenses rights and recognition on the basis of (self-) ascription to pre-determined sexual-identity categories.

Language, citizenship and belonging

Debates about language and culture tests for the naturalisation of migrants are perhaps the most fraught discursive terrain in which frictions between mobility and the multilingual diversity that comes with it, as well as forms of surveillance geared to the (re)production of an unachievable monolingual national ideal, have manifested themselves in the first ten years of the twenty-first century (see Horner 2015 for an overview in the European context). Typically involving the terms of citizenship and/or nationality, these discussions revolve around the criteria to be employed by state institutions and their delegated agencies in order to determine which of ‘them’ (migrants) is most like ‘us’ and can be officially recognised as part of ‘our’ polity on ‘our’ terms.

Part of the problem in analysing these debates lies in the conflation – confusion even – between nationality and citizenship in popular parlance. To be an Italian national, the argument goes, is synonymous with being an Italian citizen, which, in turn, boils down to the wielding of a particular passport. Nationality and citizenship, however, belong to different semantic fields. The former is strongly related to the idea of the nation, an imagined
sense of commonality (re)produced through a variety of banal material artefacts (e.g. the national flag) and discursive performances (e.g. the personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ in the daily press) (Billig 1995). The latter, in contrast, carries historical links with forms of political agency in matters pertaining to the Greek polis – the city. So, while nationality might be more indicative of a symbolic inclusion in an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) – the in-group of the national ‘we’ – citizenship suggests forms of participation for the common good. Of course, we might wonder whether such political agency is at all possible for those who lack prior symbolic recognition (see also Wodak 2012).

In order to account for the complex connections between symbolic recognition, material structures, and people’s practices, political theorist Engin Isin proposes a tripartite model of citizenship as status, habitus and acts. As status, citizenship is a form of membership, usually in the (nation-)state. In this sense, citizenship is a social contract about the rights and duties between an individual, and one or several states. Looking exclusively at citizenship-as-status, however, might unnecessarily limit our analytical range to state-level legislation, obscuring the dynamics through which individuals acquire and consequently enact citizenship in their daily lives. The understanding of citizenship as a form of embodied practice is informed by: (1) Bourdieu’s theorisation of habitus as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions … which generate and organise practices and representations’ (1980, p. 53; see also Unger 2013); and (2) Foucault’s (1991) notes on governmentality, that is, ‘conduct of conduct’ (Gordon 1991, p. 48; see also Milani 2009; Kauppinen 2013). In this sense, citizenship is not so much the sum of the rights individuals are granted and the duties they must comply with; nor is it a position endowed on an individual by the state upon fulfilment of certain requirements (e.g. naturalisation) – rather, it is a mode of conduct that is acquired through a multiplicity of ‘routines, rituals, customs, norms and habits of the everyday’ (Isin 2008, p. 17).

That citizenship is a series of norms and behaviours learned through socialisation does not mean that individuals cannot break with habitus, or even act without having official status. Echoing Butler’s (1997, p. 156) critique of Bourdieu that habitus fails to take seriously the possibility of agency, opposition or resistance ‘from the margins of power’, Isin’s notion of acts of citizenship seeks to capture those performances of radical dissent that often happen ‘when one may be led to least expect it – in the nooks and crannies of everyday life, outside of institutionalised contexts that one ordinarily associates with politics’ (Besnier 2009, p. 11). And these are performances that might operate at the boundaries of what is considered legal (see, in particular, Milani’s 2015b discussion about a protest against Johannesburg Pride in 2012).

Taken together, status, habitus and acts offer a rich picture. There is however an aspect that has not been developed fully by Isin: the affective/emotional dimension with which these three aspects of citizenship are imbued. Forfier, for example, has recently pointed out that ‘citizenship constitutes a site of emotional investment not only on the part of applicants and “new” citizens but also on the part of the state’ (2013, p. 697). The state differentiates between desirable and undesirable bodies, turning the former into citizens and expelling the latter; it also ‘produces itself as desirable’ (ibidem), through affective processes such as naturalisation ceremonies and their preparations. A cogent example is offered in a carefully nuanced ethnographic account of a migrant’s journey to British citizenship (Khan & Blackledge 2015). UK citizenship applicants are expected to acquire a monoglot, authoritative discourse that ‘demands unconditional allegiance’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 343) to the nation-state. But, as Khan and Blackledge (2015, p. 402) point out, the applicants’ acquisition of the oath of allegiance is not the manifestation of habitus change in that ‘they
may be moving their lips without uttering the authoritative text’. This, in turn, leads us to
wonder ‘[w]hether the ceremony had created a greater sense of belonging and made
becoming British more meaningful’ (ibidem). Either way, the silent lip movements are
important acts of resistance against the affective inculcation promoted by the nation-state.
The UK might be producing British citizenship as desirable, but, in Khan and Blackledge’s
study, it is nothing but a valuable commodity – a status – that needs to be achieved by
playing the rules of the game, seemingly not involving any deeper emotional attachment
(habitus).

Granted, emotions are not reducible to affective states with ontological stability, but, as
Ahmed emphasises, have the performative capacity to ‘do things, […] align individuals
with communities – or bodily space with social space – [and] mediate the relationship
between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective’ (Ahmed
2004, p. 119). Taking a performative approach to emotions, Milani (2015b) investigated a
protest against the annual pride parade in Johannesburg enacted by One in nine, an activist
group of mainly black women. The analysis demonstrates how the mobilisation of shame
enabled the One in nine to:

crack and perturb the very idea of a South African lesbian and gay ‘community,’ […]
[and] questioned a liberal post-apartheid sexual identity politics that recognizes equality
for everyone, but has actually benefited sexually non-normative individuals differently
depending on the intersections of race and social class.

(Milani 2015a, p. 330)

No doubt, Isin’s distinction between status, habitus and acts is analytically useful. But the
notion of citizenship itself, we believe, is too static and lacking in heuristic precision to
grasp the complex relationships between ideological structures and processes, (the
possibility of) individual and collective agency, and the affective components of both of
these dimensions. The concept of belonging, instead, may provide a more dynamic and
multi-faceted tool (see also Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema 2007). In saying so, we have been
inspired by Yuval-Davis’ (2011) argument that belonging is relational – it involves a
subject and an object – the latter being home, the nation, the LGBT community, or any
other concrete or symbolic entity. Moreover, belonging is political; it entails constant
negotiation as well as ‘the dirty work of boundary maintenance’ (Favell 1999, cited in
Yuval-Davis 2011, p. 20). Such border policing – which may be physical and/or symbolic
– involve[s] not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community
of belonging by the hegemonic political powers (within and outside the community) but
also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents’ (Yuval-Davis
2011, p. 20). People’s attachments (or detachments) are also affective, multidimensional,
multi-scalar, and multi-temporal; not only do these connections involve a degree of
emotional investment, but they also relate to different objects, spaces and times that may
be in conflict with one another.

It is specifically because of the affective dimension it encodes that belonging is, in our
view, particularly apt for a discussion of the relationship of multilingualism, mobility and
sexuality. As Cameron and Kulick (2003) remind us, sexuality cannot and should not be
reduced to explicit linguistic acts of self, or other identifications such as heterosexual, gay,
bisexual, asexual, and so on. It should also include the domain of desire. The distinction
between identity (what the individual identifies with) and desire (what the individual longs
for) is not a terminological triviality. Foucault reminds us that the congealment of erotic
desires and practices into specific identities (homosexual/heterosexual) is part and parcel of a specific power/knowledge configuration that aims to rule and control modern subjects in capillary ways, through subtle, but no less pernicious, forms of (self-)monitoring. For, as Cuddon explains, ‘[k]nowledge gives one power to make valid or invalid truth claims about specific “subjects” as well as to control what can be said about them’ (2013).

Foucault’s reflections are particularly useful for an understanding of the sexual regimentation of mobility that is under investigation in this chapter. Sexual-identity based asylum/refugee legislation and its implementation performatively bring into being a regime of truth that regulates what counts as ‘acceptable’ versus ‘deviant’ sexual subjectivities: the only way asylum/refugee applicants can receive political recognition is by openly embracing a non-normative sexual-identity category, ‘coming out’ and thus making themselves visible and intelligible to the state. Such regulatory processes simplify individuals’ lived experiences, whose sexual self-identification (e.g. as heterosexual) may be at odds with their sexual desires and practices (e.g. their erotic involvement with both men and women). They also fail to account for the constraints of making the self seen and heard as a non-normative sexual being, including ‘the ongoing difficulties to express oneself as a non-heteronormative subject, and to find the words to do so without fear of repression, rejection, ridicule or misunderstanding; especially since words may not be the only way we tell this story’ (Ricard 2014, p. 50). Or, as we will see below, since there might be tensions between the ideological affordances offered by different languages in a refugee applicant’s linguistic repertoire, as is the case with the different historical baggage carried by Hebrew versus Arabic in relation to non-normative sexualities.

**A methodological note: why The invisible men? Why a documentary?**

The examples that are analysed below are taken from The invisible men, a documentary by the Israeli filmmaker, Yariv Mozer, which tells the story of three gay Palestinians – Louie, Abud and Fares – and their lives hiding in Tel Aviv. Winner of several film awards, it received strong opposition from many international critics of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories, and the attendant homonationalist discourses that paint Israel as a beacon of sexual liberation in the Middle East vis-à-vis a retrograde homophobic Palestinian society.

Admittedly, the choice of a cinematic text is not particularly common in either the work on language and citizenship, or in queer-migration scholarship, both of which have tended to investigate policy documents, interview data and ethnographic field notes. However, following developments in sociolinguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995; Kelly-Holmes & Milani 2011; Forchtner et al. 2013), we argue that media texts are no less important than any other linguistic/discursive output. They constitute prisms that ‘reflect their time and […] representations of particular contexts of production’, and so ‘can contribute to the understanding of past and present developments and societal forms of expression’ (Pollak 2008, p. 77). Specifically because of their claims to truth, objectivity and credibility, documentaries in particular ‘play a significant part in the production and reproduction of societal images and in the formation, affirmation or contestation of world views’ (ibidem).

**Doing citizenship – (re)negotiating belonging**

The principal goal of our analysis is to illustrate how citizenship is not a static property or state of being, but rather an interactional accomplishment. Citizenship is something that
individuals repeatedly claim and contest as they negotiate between their own sense of attachment and affiliation, and the strictures imposed by dominant social, cultural and institutional forces. We have argued that capturing this more dynamic and processual understanding of citizenship requires re-conceptualising it as one type of a broader phenomenon that Yuval-Davis (2011) labels the politics of belonging. That said, we nevertheless believe that Isin’s (2008) tripartite model of citizenship as comprised of status, habitus and acts, provides a useful heuristic for investigating how citizenship is negotiated in specific interactional contexts. In what follows, we therefore adopt Isin’s framework and examine how individuals struggle to define their own status, habitus and acts as a way of ultimately achieving a sense of national belonging.

That we illustrate our arguments with the example of sexuality and belonging in Israel/Palestine is not accidental. For decades, struggles for recognition and for cultural and political legitimacy have been particularly heightened in the region. Without going into a discussion of the various social and historical reasons for this (though see, e.g. Biale 1997; Kimmerling 2001; Shafir & Peled 2002; Pappé 2006, 2012; Levon 2010), the situation today is one where a supposedly ‘progressive’ and ‘Western’ Israel is set in symbolic opposition to a more ‘traditional’ and ‘Middle Eastern’ (i.e. Muslim) Palestine.1 Sexuality is often recruited to embody this contrast, pitting the enfranchisement of lesbian and gay citizens of Israel against the discrimination and violence experienced by lesbians and gays in Palestine. As an ideological schema, this dichotomy erases a huge amount of variation in actual lived experience. While it is true that lesbian and gay Israelis enjoy a wide range of legal rights and protections that are denied to those in the Palestinian territories, there nevertheless still exist institutionalised patterns of sexuality-based discrimination in Israel (e.g. Walzer 2000; Levon 2010), particularly outside Tel Aviv and for those individuals who do not conform to a homonormative configuration of lesbian or gay sexuality (Seidman 2002; Duggan 2002). Nevertheless, a belief in Israel as a ‘haven’ for lesbians and gays has become a powerful trope both in the region and further afield, and to a certain extent has become part of the way in which Israeli society is imagined. Lesbian and gay Palestinians, however, panic this imagining because they sit uneasily in relation to Israel’s other dominant (and foundational) discourse, that of Jewish ethno-nationalism (Shafir & Peled 2002). Israel, after all, is, and remains, a Jewish state, and all claims to belonging are contingent on prior acceptance into the Israeli polity – an acceptance that is granted on ethno-national terms. Lesbian and gay Palestinians in Israel thus find themselves in the position of having to discursively negotiate the borders between what it means to be Israeli and what it means to be Palestinian in order to belong as non-heterosexuals.

We find a clear example of this type of negotiation in the practice of Louie, one of the principal protagonists of The invisible men. Louie is from Nablus in the West Bank, and has been living as an undocumented migrant in Tel Aviv for over ten years. Towards the beginning of the film, Louie is shown seeking advice about applying for political asylum based on his sexuality. The lawyers who Louie speaks to explain that the request for asylum has to be made to a foreign country (i.e. not Israel) since the Israeli government does not consider asylum applications from Palestinians (for whatever reason). Despite his reticence to be forced to leave what he describes as ‘his culture’ and ‘his land’, Louie ultimately completes and submits his application for political asylum abroad. Immediately preceding excerpt (1), Louie receives a letter informing him that his application has been successful for asylum in an un-named country. Louie responds to this news as follows:

Transcriptions follow a simplified version of the conventions described in Jefferson (2004).
Confronted with the concrete possibility of expatriation, Louie claims that there’s a serious problem here. He goes on to describe how the root of this problem is the perceived inequity of forcing someone who was born in Israel to seek refuge abroad, while Ethiopians and foreign workers from Thailand can remain. It is interesting to note that when claiming his (birth)right to remain in Israel, Louie continually refers to the country with the colloquial term ha-arets (Heb. ‘the land’). While it is true that this is the most common term used to refer to Israel in informal spoken Hebrew, the use of ha-arets by Louie is somewhat marked. For one, it is a term that carries connotations of Jewish nationalism with it, making implicit reference to the Zionist project of ‘enracination’ in the (Promised) land (e.g. Almog 2000). It is also a term that Louie uses nowhere else. Throughout the rest of the film, Louie either refers to medinat Israel (Heb. ‘the State of Israel’) or specifically to Tel Aviv, or makes more oblique reference to po (Heb. ‘here’) versus šam (Heb. ‘there’). But what is most striking about Louie’s use of ha-arets is what he uses it to refer to. Four times in excerpt (1), Louie states that he was born in Israel, though he goes on to admit that he was not born in Tel Aviv but in Šxem (Heb. ‘Nablus’), a city in the West Bank. In making this claim, Louie effectively re-designates Nablus as part of Israel proper, allowing him to assert his right to remain in the country by virtue of his status as a citizen (exemplified in the extract by the official stamp on Louie’s birth certificate). Louie’s doing so would be commonplace were it not for the fact that Nablus sits across the border from Israel in the occupied West Bank. Louie’s claim to citizenship is thus a dissident act (Isin 2008), one which attempts to destabilise existing political borders so as to enact a new definition of the national polity to which he belongs. Note that our claim that Louie works to assert his status as a citizen via a discursive renegotiation of the Israeli border does not imply that he is successful in this...
regard. Louie’s capacity to redefine the terms of Israeli citizenship (at least from the point of view of the state) is tightly constrained by ideological and institutional forces beyond his control. What interests us in (1), however, is not so much whether Louie’s claim to citizenship is recognised. Instead, we focus on how the very act of claiming is part of what constitutes Louie’s own sense of belonging.

While we take excerpt (1) to illustrate how language can be used to actively negotiate *citizenship-as-status*, we argue that the interaction in excerpt (2) is an example of contesting and reconfiguring *citizenship-as-habitus*. Immediately prior to the exchange in excerpt (2), Louie is chatting with Abud, another of the main protagonists of the film, about Abud’s imminent emigration from Israel after having received asylum abroad. Abud declares that he does not plan to call his parents to tell them he is leaving since they have already made it clear to him that they no longer consider him a member of the family. Louie and Abud have this conversation while walking down the beach-front promenade in southern Tel Aviv. The film then immediately cuts to the two of them walking in the park at the end of the promenade while singing traditional Arabic songs together. As they sit down on the grass, Louie asks Abud if he knows any songs by the popular Egyptian singer from the mid twentieth century, Umm Koulthum. The two of them then begin to sing together (Arabic in boldface, Hebrew underlined):

(2) Abud: ((singing)) illi šufto // xarrif ʿanno // qabl ma tšuː.fak ʿe:najja
((singing)) what I’ve seen // tell me about it // before my eyes see you
Louie: pšš eize šir jafe ha?
wow what a beautiful song right?
Abud: ((singing)) ʿomri d’aːːji’
((singing)) I’ve been lost all my life
Louie: bti’ref ʿabdo kaddeːš illi tnaʾšar sabe hoːn? s’aːr li zamaːn ʿaː:jiš hoːn?
you know Abdo how long have I been here (.) 12 years? I’ve lived here for a long time.
Abud: ((continues singing))
Louie: yaʾani lo xašavti paʾam exat še ani efgoš eize exad ’aravi ba-roš oto roš ata mevin? lehatxil lašir e- lašir eː šir be-a’aravit (.)lo xašavti kehilu amarti zeʾu aniːː (.)ein li xaverim ‘aravim
and like I never thought even once that I’d meet another Arab with the same mindset do you understand? to start singing (.) e to sing e sing a song in Arabic (.) I didn’t think, like, I said, that’s it Iːːː (.) I don’t have Arab friends

(Abud and Louie in *The invisible men*)

At the start of excerpt (2), Louie stops singing to comment (in Hebrew) on what a wonderful song it is. Louie’s switch to Hebrew here is very much a marked one (Myers-Scotton 1983), given that talk between Louie and Abud, including that immediately preceding excerpt (2), normally takes place entirely in Arabic. What is more, from both a topical and a situation perspective, it is interesting to have a native Arabic speaker switch into Hebrew with another native Arabic speaker when discussing the beauty of an Arabic song. Abud makes no response to the comment, and Louie switches back into Arabic while shifting the topic to a discussion of how long he has been living in Israel. When Abud again fails to reply, Louie
Tommaso M. Milani and Erez Levon

switches back to Hebrew and tells Abud that before they met each other, Louie never thought that he would meet another Arab with the same mindset and with whom he could sing a song in Arabic. Louie concludes by claiming (still in Hebrew) that he had given up on having Arab friends. Though he does not say so explicitly, we are led to understand that all of this changed when Louie met Abud and discovered the possibility of being his ‘true self’ with another Palestinian.

The content and the form of Louie’s comments in excerpt (2) perform a number of semiotic functions. At the most basic level, Louie’s assertion that he never thought he would meet another Arab with the same mindset relies on a presumed incompatibility between homosexuality and Palestinian subjectivity. By accepting this presumed incompatibility as the narrative background to his subsequent comments (Linde 1993; Ochs & Capps 2001), Louie’s statements have the effect of reproducing the dominant ideology and of (re)positioning a ‘Palestinian habitus’ and a ‘gay habitus’ as mutually exclusive constructs. At the same time, Louie also actively challenges this habitus through the discursive deployment of contrasting chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981). He clearly places his belief in the impossibility of meeting another gay Palestinian in the past in Palestine – a chronotopic node that is implicitly contrasted with the I-here-now (Baynham 2003) of his intimacy with Abud performed on an Israeli beach.

Crucially, the very juxtaposition of languages – Arabic and Hebrew – is ideologically relevant for the achievement of concomitant, conflicting negotiations of belonging. On one level, the I-here-now intimacy is discursively and visually produced through the proximities of Abud’s and Louie’s bodies singing Umm Koulthum songs together in Arabic. It is important to note that Umm Koulthum has the status of a near-mythic figure in many Arabic societies, particularly those of the Middle East and North Africa, and her songs are iconic of Arabic culture in the region. So Abud’s singing Umm Koulthum’s famous love song ‘Enta Omri’ (You are my life), compounded with Louie’s comments, conjure up a moment of Bakhtinian double-voicing: they are the manifestations of these two Palestinian men’s declaration of affection for each other; as such, they are also important discursive tactics through which Abud and Louie position same-sex intimacy as legitimately belonging in Arab culture and Palestinian society.

In sum, the interactions in excerpt (2) are simultaneously embodiments of, and acts against, a well-formed habitus (Bourdieu 1986) that views gay subjectivities as irreconcilable with dominant ideas of Palestinian selfhood. The song line ‘I’ve been lost all my life’ and the sentence ‘I never thought even once I’d meet an Arab with the same mindset’ rely on, and hence reproduce, normative conceptualisations of nation and sexuality for their illocutionary force; yet their very vocalisation challenges the validity of such normativity by making same-sex desire and love between two Palestinian men a tangible reality.

What is most interesting, however, is that Louie’s semiotic manoeuvring in this regard takes place entirely in Hebrew. This is notable since, as Bakhtin (1981) reminds us, language is never innocuous. Instead, using a particular language serves to position a speaker within a given moral universe and helps to legitimize a speaker’s belonging in that socio-semiotic space (Hill 1995). While there might be no attempt on the part of Abud to bring his sense of loss to a closure in Arabic, Louie’s use of Hebrew might be symptomatic of an attempted reconciliation of ‘gay’ and ‘Palestinian’ with the moral universe of Israeli society. In other words, by using Hebrew to make his arguments, Louie effectively reiterates a belief in the impossibility of gayness in Arabic and instead presents gay subjectivity as an exclusively Israeli (i.e. Western) phenomenon. However, we suggest that Louie’s use of Hebrew also
serves as an attempt to redefine Israeli habitus itself by locating the behaviour of Umm Koulthum-singing gay Palestinians firmly within its bounds. In this sense, then, Louie’s switching to Hebrew not only portrays Israel as the only culture in which his brand of gayness is possible, but also allows him to stake his claim as rightfully belonging in Israeli society.

Conclusions

Isin has urged scholars of citizenship to understand ‘how status becomes contested by investigating practices through which claims are articulated and subjectivities are formed’ (2008, p. 17). This is precisely what we have sought to do in this chapter, giving a glimpse of certain acts of citizenship through which two Palestinian men discursively negotiate struggles for belonging in relation to mobility, space and sexuality. In the first example, we illustrated how Louie contests his (lack of) status in Israel via a discursive reconfiguration of the border. In the second case, we showed how Abud and Louie make their affection for each other visible, and, in doing so, simultaneously reproduce and contest citizenship habituses that view Israel and Palestine as proxies of gay empowerment and repression, respectively.

Such examples are, in our view, powerful empirical testimonies of the dynamic, active and multi-faceted life of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011), as produced and negotiated through discursive and multilingual means. The implications of such interactional work, however, should not be overstated, given the far-ranging material and discursive constraints that regiment what can be said and done in a particular context. The wall that separates Israel from the Occupied Territories is real, made of cement and barbed wire, and occasionally interrupted by check-points that police Palestinians’ movement into Israel. No matter how Abud and Louie redraw the cartographies of desire and belonging in Israel/Palestine, the end of the documentary speaks loud and clear: they are both ultimately forced to leave and seek asylum in a Scandinavian country. Yet their discursive exchanges are fleeting moments of ‘cruising utopias’ (Munoz 2009), of a queer dream of a different future, perhaps a future that has no future (see Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2012).

Their stories also question an overly hopeful reliance on the rhetoric of visibility – we are here; we are gays/lesbians; we want to be recognised as such – as a political strategy for the enfranchisement of non-normative sexualities. For men like Abud and Louie, ‘coming out’ is not straightforwardly liberating, but instead instantiates a discursive double bind. Coming out is the prerequisite to recognition as non-heterosexual and hence the key to aspiring to Israeli status. However, paradoxically, by coming out, Abud and Louie are forced to become invisible as gay in Palestine and as Palestinian in Israel. What is impossible then is the visibility of the intersection of these two axes in either end of the Israel/Palestine dyad.

Notes

1 Sensitive to the highly charged politics of labelling in the region, we use the term ‘Israel/Palestine’ to designate the entirety of British Mandatory Palestine (i.e. the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River). ‘Israel’ refers to the internationally recognised borders of the State of Israel, as delineated by the UN Green Line, while ‘Palestine’ is used to refer to those territories currently under military and administrative occupation by the State of Israel (sometimes also called the Occupied Territories).
2 Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in the Gaza Strip (a remnant of British Mandatory regulations), but legal in the West Bank (having been decriminalized by Jordan in 1951). No anti-discrimination legislation or other legal protections exist for lesbians and gays in Palestine.

3 It is also telling that Louie chooses to use the Hebrew name for the city, which, while current in spoken Israeli Hebrew, is normally dispreferred among Palestinians (as well as people abroad) who instead refer to the city with its Arabic name, Nablus.

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