In 2008 Alejandro was a student of nursing at a college in Los Angeles, where he had lived for the last seven years. He also worked as a marketer for a private ambulance company. Originally from the Philippines, Alejandro believed that after seven years working and paying taxes he now had the right to have a say in how his adopted country should be governed. He felt that eight years of the Bush administration had run the economy down and driven too many jobs offshore. He was also aware that presidential nominee Barak Obama had spoken in favour of comprehensive immigration reform that would give many immigrants like him a pathway to US citizenship. Alejandro spoke out to his fellow students, asking them to vote for Obama and making them aware of federal and state bills under debate that would provide financial aid to undocumented students to assist with their college expenses and grant them legal status for the duration of their studies.

Alejandro is one of millions of ‘irregular’ migrants whose ongoing presence is not formally sanctioned by the state in which they reside. Some have crossed borders unlawfully, some are the children of border-crossers, while others have overstayd valid visas. Many have come to work and many send money home to families and communities abroad. Some have fled poverty, conflict or disaster, while others are seeking asylum from political persecution. Many in the latter category may be granted short-term visas but their futures remain gravely uncertain. Most live with the ongoing prospect of deportation. Irregular migration provokes enormous anxiety within destination states. Stories like Alejandro’s raise questions about the capacity of states to retain control, not only over entry and exit but also over the kinds of social relations that shape political communities. Migration, in all its forms, creates social change that challenges prevailing ideas about who we are as citizens. When Alejandro plays a role in shaping the society from which he is technically excluded a new set of questions arises around the status of citizenship itself.
In what follows, I reflect upon some of the ways in which citizenship is enacted by people like Alejandro—formally excluded from citizenship’s reach yet helping to shape the civic life of communities in which they live and work. In order to do so, I outline a conceptual approach to citizenship that starts from a broader field of political belonging. From this perspective, citizenship is envisaged as a dynamic practice rather than a static status bestowed from on high. This approach allows us to build a more accurate picture of the impact of transnational migration, in all its forms, on contemporary political community formation. By way of conclusion, I gesture towards a research agenda that flows from this approach focusing on the local and global dimensions of a growing social movement for migrant rights.

**Citizenship and political belonging**

How is it possible to think about citizenship in a way that allows us to see Alejandro as a maker and shaper of the very community from which he is excluded? How can one be engaged in acts of citizenship whilst also defying the norms that citizenship sets? We can start by locating citizenship within the broader conceptual framework of political belonging. Political belonging can be thought of as a dynamic ordering principle that structures different kinds of political communities across time and space. Particular modes of political belonging become deeply embedded in our spatial, temporal and embodied ontologies. They contribute, in other words, to our conception of who we are. They contribute, in addition, to how we perceive the context in which we act politically and the authority we have for doing so. This is what distinguishes a citizen from, say, a feudal subject, a tribal elder or a jihadi warrior and gives to each identity a certain kind of legitimacy to carry formal status and conduct certain acts. There is no limit to the diversity of forms that political belonging might take. The key point for present purposes is to conceptualize citizenship as one mode of political belonging amongst many—albeit one that is currently hegemonic. This broader perspective denies citizenship a natural or essential status and opens a conceptual avenue from which to approach it as a dynamic and contestable identity.

In its conventional form, citizenship is tied to the system of sovereign states which emerged from the European Treaty of Westphalia over 360 years ago. Since then, this system has expanded through processes of colonization and decolonization to be global in scope. On this basis, political community, identity and practice have been linked conceptually to a relatively fixed relationship between state, citizen and territory. There are clearly other contenders in today’s world for bases of political belonging. Tribal societies and pan-religious identities are obvious alternatives and are often overlayed with citizenship in complex social structures. Yet a great deal of political practice continues to be shaped by the state/citizen/territory constellation. This is why, for instance, self-determination is commonly associated with claims to independent statehood and designated territory rather than alternative forms of political organization.

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Citizenship, like any identity, requires an exterior boundary. Citizens come into being only alongside non-citizens. Thus any reference to the citizen assumes the existence of the non-citizen, and any consequences flowing from citizenship (rights, opportunities and so on) are enjoyed in the context of the denial of the same to others. In reality, of course, there are gradations of citizenship—some citizens belong more than others—and a range of identities that constitute citizenship’s outsiders—some friendlier and some more hostile. Identity and difference are thus established along a spectrum of status categories (foreign enemy; illegal alien; first-, second-, third-... generation migrant; legal resident; model citizen, and so on) rather than in crude two-dimensional terms. The naturalization of citizenship as the ‘common sense’ mode of political belonging depends on the denial of this relational constitution. Cast as constant, universal and self-evident, citizen identities mask the processes of exclusion which condition their possibility.

This constitutive dynamic between insider and outsider in relation to citizenship is the subject of Engin Isin’s book *Being Political.* Isin rejects conventional histories of citizenship which depict its gradual and linear evolution from the ancient Greek polis as an ever more inclusive basis for political practice. For Isin, this dominant account omits those aspects of citizenship which are based on the necessary exclusion of non-citizens. He contends that the story of citizenship, which begins with Greek men of high ranking birth and extends over the centuries to include former slaves, the property-less, the working classes, colonial subjects, women and indigenous populations, shields from view the processes by which shifts in the constitution of political membership brought with them, at different times, new and unique forms of exclusion. It also fails to account for those immanent others inside the polity whose relative denial of status helped to create the particular kind of privilege accorded to full citizens. It omits, in addition, the construction of the polity’s outside: those distant alien others whose incivility, backwardness and political immaturity marks, by contrast, the progress of citizenship’s evolution in occidental cities. For Isin, the citizen and its others are mutually constitutive. The insider identity is only possible via the parallel marking of the outsider; a marking that will change in space and time as the shape and character of the polity takes different forms. These insider/outside dynamics are, in Isin’s account, an enduring feature of political communities, not only those characterized by citizens and citizenship in the conventional sense but all those communities engaged in the political organization of affairs and the marking of identities.

Isin’s analysis provides a way of seeing the identities of irregular migrants like Alejandro as part of a more general history of producing insiders and outsiders to political communities; of simultaneously constructing those who do and do not belong and policing the boundary between them. From this perspective, stories like Alejandro’s become integral and necessary to the constitution of contemporary insider-status. While Isin insists on the continuity of this insider/outside process he also reveals its susceptibility
to particular kinds of challenge. In this respect, Isin’s broader purpose is to tell the stories of those who have contested their outsider-status: those who struggled and sometimes succeeded in transforming the boundaries of political belonging through which their exclusion was maintained.

In his book, Isin recovers the particular struggles of slaves, women, plebeians, Jews, craftsmen, tradesmen, prostitutes, vagabonds, working classes, aborigines and others cast as strangers and outsiders in different settings. The unique characteristics of these struggles distinguish the terrain of insider/outsider relations in the Greek polis from that of the Roman civitas, the early Christian empire, the early modern state, and so on. Isin thus reveals the fractured nature of citizenship and a history of contestation that lies beneath its hegemonic status. His approach enables us to see the struggles that have shaped what we take for granted as contemporary boundaries of citizenship. It also prompts us to imagine how demands that are made by contemporary outsiders (irregular migrants among them) may well shape the contours of future modes of belonging.

**Irregular migrants and the edges of political belonging**

Irregular migrants are non-citizens who have crossed state borders or remain in state territory without the explicit and ongoing sanction of the host state. As a consequence, they do not possess the status which fully legitimizes their presence or makes certain rights associated with citizenship or permanent legal residence available to them. At present the status of irregular migrants is deeply implicated in an account of political belonging in which the state/citizen/territory constellation is axiomatic. It is only with reference to the positive status of citizens that the irregular status of certain kinds of migrants is brought into being. Likewise, without reference to the state as bounded and territorialized the notion of irregular migration would cease to be meaningful; what would irregular migration look like if there were no borders, as such, to cross? If the spatial basis of political belonging were to be constructed and naturalized in terms other than territorial ones then our understanding of citizens and outsiders, irregular migrants amongst them, would necessarily be cast in different terms as well. This spatial framing of citizenship becomes increasingly apparent as processes of globalization generate new experiences of local and global space. As theorists attempt to name and conceptualize new spatialities with terms like ‘translocal’ and ‘transversal’, they also invoke new subjectivities that gain form in and through new spaces. Such subjectivities may challenge the capacity of citizenship to capture our primary political affiliations.

Precisely this sense of flux and uncertainty in relation to territorial identities prompts enormous anxiety over irregular migration in governments and publics alike. In the late twentieth century, governments around the world shifted their approach to migration from an administrative milieu to a question of state security. The liberalization of exit options from former Soviet States posed a new order of scale to the potential for flows of irregular
migrants. At the same time, the rise of neoliberalism from the 1970s onwards radically transformed the social and economic fabric of highly indebted countries when debt relief was tied to cutbacks in public expenditure and the liberalization of trade. Economic restructuring in South America, Asia and Africa from the 1980s onwards displaced many people from traditional lands and forms of employment. Rural to urban migration in these contexts threatened to spill over into migration paths towards the more affluent global north where shrinking welfare states and structural unemployment had exacerbated hostilities towards migrants. Commentators warned that unprecedented floods of migrants from the south and from the east threatened to overwhelm labour markets of receiving states and their social stability in general. Spurred by the rise of anti-immigrant national populism across the industrialized world, governments linked border policing against unwanted migration to the discursive and administrative apparatus of broader security functions, tightened restrictions on legal forms of migration (including avenues for seeking asylum) and dramatically up-scaled border policing efforts.

For many who are endangered by new kinds of civil conflicts and ongoing processes of decolonization, migration is an urgent necessity. For many who are marginalized by the geopolitical upheavals associated with the end of the Cold War, uneven development within and between states, the destruction of environments and the effects of neoliberal restructuring on a global scale, there are powerful incentives to seek a better life abroad, regardless of the dangers involved in border transgressions. For others, living and working abroad is part of a long-established and sometimes state-sponsored means of supporting families and communities at home. 12 million irregular migrants are currently estimated to be residing in the United States, 12 million in Russia and 4.5 million in Europe, with some 500,000 more entering annually. In 2007 over 640,000 applications for asylum were made. Yet this number reflects only those who managed to cross borders and detail their journeys in ways that prima facie met strict definitions of refugee status. At the close of 2007, over 8 million people recognised as refugees had been living in camps, unable to be repatriated, for ten years or more. Yet official resettlement places were available for only 82,100 people on average per year over the same period. Under these conditions there are few signs of irregular migration abating and every indication of increasingly compelling motivations to migrate.

Growth in irregular migration should be read alongside an increasingly restrictive immigration environment from the 1980s onwards. Reduced avenues for legal migration meant that many migrants, who in previous eras might have travelled as guestworkers, now crossed borders without official sanction to fill similar jobs. Stricter border policing and the dangers of illicit border-crossings meant that many who might otherwise have been seasonal workers, returning to their homelands regularly, now stayed on indefinitely because they could not guarantee subsequent re-entry.
Massey has shown how this counter-productive aspect of border policing has characterized recent experience in the United States in particular. Simplifying criteria for refugee status has had a similar effect. Governments defending such moves hold that migrants increasingly make specious asylum claims in order to circumvent mainstream migration procedures. Accordingly, rising numbers of rejected asylum seekers support the notion that the majority are disingenuous and justify ever tighter restrictions. Critics, however, hold that the proportion of claims rejected is more indicative of unrealistically high burdens of proof resting with the claimant, and that many people suffering from genuine political persecution no longer have access to a fair asylum procedure. As a consequence, some prefer to risk an illicit border-crossing or to overstay short-term visas rather than return to the places from which they have fled. In an effort to avoid this kind of dilemma, policing against unwanted migrants is increasingly conducted well before they reach the border in question. Italy and Spain, for example, work with Moroccan and Libyan authorities to intercept would-be migrants from other parts of Africa as they move towards their European destination. Australia works with Indonesia in similar ways. When borders are externalized in this way, irregular migrants are prevented from entering territories where obligations apply under international law to examine claims to asylum. In states that are not party to the Refugee Convention (Libya, for example), status categories such as asylum seeker and refugee have few means of being realized. Authorities simply distinguish between legal and illegal migrants, and, without a valid visa, irregular migrants become ‘illegal’ by default. This kind of policing is exacerbated by the post-September 11 security environment. If not directly linked to the threat of terrorism, irregular migrants are invoked as part of a general state of insecurity that requires a hard-line response.

The result, more generally, of this ever more restrictive environment is a process of illegalization of both the means of transit available to people on the move and of irregular migrants themselves. Acknowledging this process of illegalization is not to dismiss the very real dilemmas that arise for states on the question of irregular migration. There are no easy ways of balancing the rights of political communities to regulate entry and limit group membership with the many compelling reasons for seeking through migration a safer, more decent and prosperous life beyond what is offered in that place to which one is tied by an accident of birth. The point is not to minimize these complex and enduring questions but to move beyond the crisis mentality which has come to shape much of the discourse and practice of border control. The point, in addition, is to recognize that the process of illegalization raises serious questions about the justice of policing irregular migrants as illegitimate intruders.
Citizenship in contestation

Irregular migrants are finding new ways of contesting their outsider status. A range of examples exist in which irregular migrants both seek recognition as citizens through regularization and contest the very basis of citizenship itself as the prevailing measure of political belonging. Since the mid 1990s, the Sans-Papiers, a coalition of irregular migrants based in France, have been mobilizing and asserting the legitimacy of their presence. Drawing attention to their cause through church occupations, labour strikes, demonstrations and petitions, the Sans-Papiers base their claims on the integration of their labour into the French economy and a history of colonial oppression which has shaped their migration paths. They have won some victories, generating support within the French community and compelling the French administration to regularize their status in some cases. In May 2008 the Coordination de Sans-Papiers 75 (CSP75), an autonomous group of irregular migrants with some 2000 members in Paris, occupied the union hall of the General Confederation of Labour (GCT). They brought attention to their central role as workers within the French labour market. They objected to the terms in which the GCT had spoken for the Sans-Papiers and demanded to negotiate their own regularizations directly with government authorities. This was a crucial symbolic step in gaining legitimate status. To sit at the table with government is already to be recognized as having a worthy case to make and as being partners in negotiation. At the time of writing, the occupation included 1500 people and was in its thirteenth month.  

In other cases, irregular migrants seem to act like citizens; fighting for and winning political rights despite a lack of legal status. Irregular migrants have successfully sought legal redress for unpaid wages in numerous cases in the US. Irregular migrants attending various campuses of the University of California have organized a network of support and advocacy groups. The students have lobbied at state and federal levels, through media outlets and Congressional hearings, in support of legislation that would provide them with conditional permanent resident status for the duration of their studies and a subsequent pathway to citizenship. Their public acts of protest have also involved rallies, mock graduations and hunger strikes. Irregular migrants are also organizing as parents of school-age children for more equitable education in poorly performing school districts. In the northern suburbs of Los Angeles, parent groups have compelled school boards to make information available to parents in a number of different languages and to allow parent groups to induct and train key school personnel in the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse parent and student population. This kind of organizing has the potential to create a considerable impact on the direction and composition of school boards in districts in which parents from immigrant communities form a significant majority.
Irregular migrants are also active in numerous labour campaigns. Organizing strategies have adapted to the realities of contemporary low-paid work that cut across citizen/non-citizen divides. New coalitions have formed on this basis between unions, worker centres, community organizations, immigrant rights groups, faith-based organizations and schools with which workers, migrants and their families are associated. These alliances have been central, for example, in establishing campaigns in Los Angeles where janitorial, garment factory, supermarket, restaurant and car-wash workers have organized against exploitation by employers. Campaigns have involved pickets, protests and business boycotts as well as lawsuits, speaking tours and outreach to other industry workers. These strategies are gaining increasing influence within and beyond the US in regions and industries with significant proportions of irregular migrant workers. The approach of the much cited ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign has been taken up by unions and community organizations in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. A current campaign in the car wash industry has won the endorsement of the LA city council. The council offers its rooms as negotiating space between workers and employers and has agreed to modify city car wash contracts in line with car wash workers’ demands for decent working conditions. Campaign organizers interpret the Council’s involvement as a form of recognition of irregular migrants in the public life of the city, which adds to the drive of workers to continue with their struggle.

Across this array of activism new modes of belonging are forming. As a sense of entitlement emerges, a ‘becoming’ of the citizen takes place. From micro-level expressions of belonging to local communities as parents, workers, students and so on, the fabric of what it means to engage in a civic life takes shape. Banners held in May Day marches of recent years across the United States on one hand declare: ‘We are citizens!’; positioning millions of irregular migrants as equal political subjects. On the other, they announce: ‘I’m illegal, so what?’, ridiculing the very measures of legality and legitimacy that citizenship norms define. Perhaps we are witnessing new kinds of subjectivities—residents who are neither ‘illegal’ nor citizens, but something else within a spectrum of political belonging that seems to challenge the authority of citizenship as we know it.

Towards a local-global view of citizenship dynamics

These examples of mobilizations by irregular migrants prompt a range of questions about contemporary dynamics of citizenship and political belonging across local and global space. How are our civic communities being transformed by the two-tiered nature of contemporary transnational migration and transnational labour markets—both of which have substantial informal, illicit or underground components? To what extent can we generalize about common conditions and histories that drive these migration trends and related contestations of citizenship? The advance of neoliberal
agendas across the globe have impacted upon both push and pull factors for irregular migration—the displacement of workers from traditional areas and industries of employment (the push) and the drive for ever more flexible forms of labour (the pull). But neoliberalism also involves culturally and geographically uneven results and reactions that require more specific investigation. Are there transnational dimensions of a global social movement for migrant rights and how might this articulate with a broad challenge to conventional citizenship norms? What kind of tensions might distinguish the struggles of different kinds of irregular migrants and work against a common platform? Are new spatialities generating new modes of political belonging that can co-exist with territorial citizenship or challenge its hegemonic status? How can we remain open to the potential for such dynamics without underestimating the continued power of citizenship norms to exclude, punish and police unwanted outsiders, and to set the terms of reference for migrant struggles seeking legalization?

We can only engage with these questions by loosening the grasp of territorial citizenship on our ‘common sense’ measures of political belonging. By positioning citizenship conceptually as one mode of political belonging amongst a range of alternatives, by imagining citizenship as a living, moving practice that is open to contestation, we can start to see that modifications, gradations and ambiguities in citizenship status already exist. Multiple spatial scales and corresponding levels of government, community and identity are increasingly part of the dynamics that shape prevailing ideas about who belongs where legitimately. When irregular migrants act as citizens do in local public spheres they draw our attention to place-based modes of belonging. When acts are scaled up to other levels we are moved to consider how modes of belonging diverge, intersect and transform across different spatialities. We are moved to imagine the space of citizenship and political belonging to come.
Endnotes

1. Interview, Los Angeles, 4 May 2009 (pseudonym used). The bills referred to are the Federal DREAM Act (HR 1751 being the most recent version) and the Californian DREAM Act (SB 1301).


16. Author’s interview with parents, 22 May 2009. See also the website for Pasadena Parent Association Advocating for Equitable Education (Asociación de Padres de Pasadena Luchando por la Educación) otherwise known as A.P.P.L.E www.idepsca.org/Programs/Education_and_youth/APPLE.html.

