

Transnational Citizenship Capacity-Building: Moving the Conversation in New Directions

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Challenging statist understandings of citizenship neglectful of their own ironies, we explore the literature on circulation to argue that political actors build citizenship capacities through the transfer of various technologies, ideas, and modes of organization and by enhancing self-understanding across and within borders. This work is largely conceptual. Although we focus on transnational activist engagement with and within the Middle East, the theoretical linkages we make here can be extended to other social and political actors that operate within and across multiple geographical locales. To make our case, we briefly examine the importance of transnational circulation for citizenship capacity-building through a review of the relevant literature and then discuss how theories related to liminality and rhizomatic action can move the theoretical discussion in new directions. Our central argument is that the circular flow of people, political ideas, and tools across nation-state borders—including activists' affinities, identifications, loyalties, animosities, and hostilities—are transforming contemporary social and political relations, including how people see themselves as citizens and build civic capacities in others. Political actors who act purposefully in various sites and scales of struggle are transforming how political subjectivity and citizenship are negotiated, claimed, justified, and legitimated regardless of citizenship status.

Introduction

Citizenship is traditionally denoted as the state's (or society's) recognition of a person's status as a member of a specific territorial unit over which the state governs (Werbner and Yuvul-Davis 1999; Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008; Isin and Wood 1999). The idea that citizenship is a gift that states give to "worthy" people reinscribes the discourses and practices of government officials controlling the ebb and flow of immigration and emigration. Policy-makers lean on the concept of citizenship-as-status to limit migrant access to society and its public goods and institutions and to impede out-flows. One consequence of this view of citizenship is the validation of hard power approaches to law, security, and border control that seek to securitize the migration of people (Wæver, Buzan, and Jaap 1993; Huysmans 2000; Ibrahim 2005; Lister 2007).

There are several reasons why the traditional view of citizenship is impoverished. First, it can reduce citizenship to an accident of birth where people born in a particular locale are afforded recognition as "natural" (naturalized) members or reduce citizenship to "the material capacity to migrate" where people with financial means can purchase recognition. Both cases of people might enjoy the rights of formal and substantive membership in a political system that does not demand civic engagement and, therefore, reduces citizenship to simply recognition.

Second, while the privileging of the “state,” “recognition,” “membership,” and “territory” inherent in such traditional views of citizenship might confer legal status, rights, or opportunities for participation in formal politics or outline concrete parameters for belonging (Bloemraad et al. 2008), it also leaves underacknowledged and underappreciated a great deal of civic action conducted by nonstate actors, the unrecognized, the nonmembers, and those outside a specific territorial unit. Critical citizenship studies scholars have long argued that civic action or action conducted in order to communally benefit people in society in fact makes citizenship and the concept and practice of “being political” substantively meaningful (Isin 2002; Lister 2007). Diasporic and other forms of transnational activism that inject knowledge and capacities in a political locale evince a responsibility to the society of focus and thus, reciprocally, an expectation that the specific government and society responsibly protect in kind. The expectation is that, in some way, the protection in kind will be commensurate with the benefits produced by the original action. Thus, the positive agency of transnational actors who work to ensure the survival and prosperity of democratic institutions could be seen as extending political citizenship (the right to vote), social citizenship (the right to social services), civil citizenship (the right to [liberal] freedoms), and protection by systems of justice to these actors (Bloemraad et al. 2008; Revi 2014). Societies evolve when they adhere to the principles of inclusive citizenship, such as ensuring justice, recognition, self-determination, and solidarity for all (Lister 2007). Evolved societies, we argue, value those who value them. The degree to which actors value society is measured by the extent to which they expand forms of community, common ties, and solidarity among the people of the society without prejudice.

Third, statist conceptualizations of citizenship afford considerable power to the state according to antiquated notions of Westphalian territorial sovereignty. Statist positioning neglects the fact that democratic and authoritarian states alike disavow welfare protections for people formally designated as citizens on the pretexts of national security or border integrity. The liberalization and privatization of service provisions, moreover, produce tiers of rights holders and, therefore, reduce healthcare to a politics based on inclusion and exclusion.¹ Citizenship anchored to, and given meaning primarily through, state decision-making therefore undermines not just citizenship but the concept of rights and responsibilities as well. As Jones (1994) notes, the nature of state power affects the variability in how rights and responsibilities are conceived and mandated. Jones argues that nondemocratic states expect their residents to observe their responsibilities to the state within its territorial boundaries without the state reciprocating and observing the residents’ individual rights. Democratic states expect citizens to observe their obligations to the state on the basis of the individual rights afforded to them, and yet many also put demands on noncitizens to fulfill the substantive duties of citizenship, such as paying taxes, without permitting their enjoyment of the substantive benefits of this status (e.g., reciprocally receiving rights protections). Many democracies expect some citizens to observe military service and not others. Thus, Jones (1994, 257) points out that the scope of rights that states guarantee and the types of people for whom the “juridical status of citizen” applies have been contested in the history of democratic states. Many people in democratic societies are denied citizenship in the full sense of the term, which, for Jan Pakulski (1997, 83), involves the right to exercise complete “cultural participation and undistorted representation” (quoted in, Lister 2007).

¹ A friend of one of the authors is Canadian but studied dentistry in Egypt and once described how the poor in Egypt not only lack access to health insurance but could sometimes be found on the street trying to sell tooth extractions to dentistry students needing the experience for a pittance so that the seller could buy food and cover his/her basic expenses.

Fourth, citizenship tied to state territory produces many untenable ironies. While some states strip citizens of recognition and their rights when they emigrate, many others build part of their national economies on retaining connections with members resident elsewhere (Bloemraad et al. 2008). According to Collyer (2013, 3), the “increasing enthusiasm” of state institutions to engage with absent emigrants of the state makes ironic that same state’s increasing tendency to demarcate their territory through the politicization of immigration. Citizenship, in this context, can become reducible to the strategic or utilitarian overtures of the state to emigrants for economic benefit. In fact, when the question of economics is brought into discussions of migration, the citizenship status of emigrants is often reiterated or left in convenient abeyance because status ambiguity can hold positive political and economic uptake. Bauböck (2013) argues that states have “multiple purposes” for engaging emigrants (xv). States are motivated by anticipated economic gain from remittances, foreign policy engagement with emigrants’ host states, and “political support among domestic constituencies that are ideologically committed to [or derive benefit from] ethnic nationhood, or socially linked to emigrant communities” (Bauböck 2013, xv). In this context, stemming immigration is akin to the state wanting its cake and to eat it too.

When actors move transnationally across state boundaries, in essence when they circulate between various geographical points and in the process transfer their skills, knowledge, and technologies to other actors for the sake of community, democracy, peaceful political protest, or the expansion of political infrastructure, they disrupt and leave unmoored traditional or statist notions of citizenship. When nonmember migrants, and even the “undesirables” of society, act for the sake of a community in which they are systematically excluded, they spotlight the ironies, inequities, and inequalities of citizenship across the world (Brysk and Shafir 2004; Nyers 2004). One might therefore ask what the necessary conditions are for citizenship capacity-building, especially in places where the political agency of people is systematically suppressed or formally excluded. We argue that a central and often critical condition is transnational circulation. More specifically, we argue that the transnational circulation of activists, ideas, teachings, technologies, and practices in the modern world is vital for citizenship capacity-building for most societies and expands the substantive meaning of citizenship; this is especially the case for societies governed by authoritarian regimes, such as those in the Arab world. Transnational circulations support local activists, political parties, and political institutions in a number of ways, such as creating monitoring infrastructures that raise alarms when state governments pay lip-service to citizenship by, on the one hand, demanding that people pay taxes but, on the other hand, insufficiently protecting their rights through such services as accessible healthcare or transparent, free, and fair elections.

In this article, we focus on the importance of transnational circulation for citizenship capacity-building in constraining governance structures in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and draw upon the secondary literature to make our claims, which are largely conceptual. The linkages we make here can be extended to other social and political actors that operate within and across multiple geographical locales. To make our case, we briefly examine the importance of transnational circulation for citizenship through a review of the relevant literature and then investigate new theories related to liminality and rhizomatic action that link circulation, political agency, transnational activism, and citizenship. Our central argument is that the circular flow of people, political ideas, and tools across nation-state borders—including activists’ affinities, identifications, loyalties, animosities, and hostilities—are transforming contemporary social and political relations, including how people see themselves as citizens and build civic capacities in others. Political actors who act purposefully in various sites and scales of struggle are transforming how political subjectivity and citizenship are negotiated, claimed, justified, and legitimated,

regardless of citizenship status (Desforges, Jones, and Woods 2005; Isin 2008, 16; Lister 2007).²

To be clear, we are not attempting in this conceptual paper to homogenize or reify emigrants or transnational circulations of people as a single people or to suggest that such circulations constitute networks of singularities. Aihwa Ong (2004) and Mudu (2009) put these cautions in perspective in relation to an argument by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). Hardt and Negri (2000, 397) argue that “through circulation, the multitude reappropriates space and constitutes itself as an active subject.” Ong argues that “the multitude *contra* Empire” is an abstraction or a trope and that empirical evidence of labor mobilizations shows that the labor class are subject to systematic biopolitical control along stratified lines of capital, value, and labor flows, which layer them as individuals, layer “the possibilities and conditions of citizenship,” and structure “life chances according to one’s specific location in the new geographies of production” (66–67). To make her point, she references contingencies faced by often very invisible migrant labor, which sustains multinational corporations. Mudu (2009) has a similar caution that Hardt and Negri’s multitude is an abstracted network singularity, whereas the 2001 Genoa G8 Summit revolt upon which it is modeled was, in fact, a highly differentiated network that was far from thinking with a single mind-set or with a single set of goals or ideologies. The actors whose circulation we argue has important implications for the development of citizenship capacity-building in the Middle East are highly differentiated and motivated by often individualized values and individualized understandings of belonging to both the resident country and the home country. Such actors do, however, bear some connection to, or find value in Arab culture as a structure worthy of development and investment. Actors’ connections to a sustained culture have been shown to be critical in ensuring that they can productively contribute to citizenship capacity-building; these contributions have an impact as long as the cultural loyalties qua political tradition(s) being supported do not reinforce authoritarian tendencies that strip people of self-determinism and favor the crony practices of elites (Stanley 2006).

The Importance of Transnational Circulation for Citizenship Capacity-Building

Researchers examining transnational migration and activism are increasingly reliant on the concept of circulation, the circular flow of ideas, practices, and people, to explain the phenomena they observe (Boccagni, Lafleur, and Levitt 2015; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Ilcan and Lacey 2013).³ Within this growing literature is the recognition that political subjectivity and citizenship are increasingly being constituted by nonlinear, sometimes cyclical, multidirectional, asymmetric, and reciprocal “trans” activities of residents and nonresidents of “homelands” spanning states, borders, and territories (Baldassar and Mertia 2013; Boccagni et al. 2015). Such dynamics, including the increasing portability of ideas, have been accentuated and accelerated by globalization, global migrations, and economic interdependencies, as well as by transformations in technical knowledge, skills, and opportunities (Boccagni et al. 2015; Bloemraad et al. 2008). As Bloemraad et al. (2008, 165) note, “advances in international transportation and communication technologies allow migrants to maintain more sustained cross-border ties, and such advances facilitate the circulation of ideas and cultures on a global scale, helped

²Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 40), we argue that the scales of citizenship are numerous. The state as the sole or only relevant scale of citizenship is an apparatus of capture, a black hole, that seeks to code and territorialize citizenship in particularly political and hegemonic ways. The scales of citizenship are in fact multiple and often emerge from the interstices of the apparently appropriate or convenient official scales (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 40; Desforges et al. 2005).

³See, for example: Boccagni et al. 2015; Ilcan and Lacey 2013; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Staeheli and Nagel 2006.

along by transnational or international economic, social, religious, and political organizations.” Bloemraad et al. comment on the effect of dual citizenship on migrant activities including financial remittances to home countries (and the importance of depoliticizing it). According to the authors, research has found that when states permit multiple citizenships, this “likely enhances, rather than undermines, political incorporation by encouraging immigrants’ naturalization and expanding the ‘training ground’ in which people learn transferable political skills” (2008, 168).

Heike Jöns (2009) examines the circulation of skilled labor for the development of knowledge economies—what she calls “circular academic mobility” (King 2002) and what others have called “brain circulation” (Gaillard and Gaillard 1997)—using a case study conducted on academic migration into (and out of) German institutions. Jöns (2009) studied circulatory movements that included intrafirm transnational mobilities, temporary forms of contracting, and “transient flows of students, academics, managers and IT specialists” (8). She found that academics and scientists maintain connections with the universities and institutions that hosted them abroad when they migrate either home or to another locale, and that the relationships they have built in these migrations have a profound impact upon their lives and often transform their careers and the careers of those working under their tutelage (Jöns 2009). Similarly, emigrants qua transnationals⁴ living in residence countries build ties locally in their migrations and settlements, which they leverage for connection building in their home countries (Finn and Momani 2017).

There are a number of studies that capture how the circulation of tools like external voting and social remittances help support and legitimize the citizenship claims and build citizenship capacities among locals by emigrants who hold dual citizenship. Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) examine how people in India take back their lives and their labor through their circulation. They write that hegemonic governance is, after all, “a perforated rather than seamless structure of controlling ideas,” requiring constant reproduction by ruling classes to maintain its legitimacy (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 187). Counterhegemonic agency is enabled by an oppositional consciousness and by the circulation of actors’ transformative acts of resistance, which, in fact, helps reveal the limits of the deep state (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 202).

Transnational circulations help explain how citizens capacity-build across borders and, in the process, mobilize citizenship and make it substantively meaningful. One modality that is frequently identified is “bridges” or “bridging” points. East to West (and vice versa) bridging has been theorized in Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) concept of “boomerang politics,” wherein local and transnationally situated actors mutually support each other: those on the outside shame the state and enable the citizenship capacities of locals and their own citizenship claims in the process. Focusing on the social remittances of external voting by transnational actors as drivers of transnational political circulation, Boccagni et al. (2015, 7) argue that “circulation brings to light how the ‘in-betweenness’ at the core of transnational relations is constituted; in our case, the modes of cross-border diffusion of material and non-material resources which are the grist of transnational politics.” For Boccagni et al., “transnational politics is itself a form of circulation, if we define it as an open-ended process encompassing the diffusion of ideas, values, information, and skills via cross-border mobility that includes political content or is used to drive forward state-led and/or migrant-driven forms of political engagement” (Boccagni et al. 2015, 7). Thus, transnationally situated networks are capable of complementing or impeding “comparable . . . networks, thereby thwarting and/or enabling political activism at various sites inside the transnational social field” (Boccagni et al. 2015, 6).

People, ideas, and practices also circulate via mesh-systems (e.g., spider-webs) of nonlinear, non $A \leftrightarrow B$ movements of hybrid connections that are coterminously

⁴Emigrants become transnationals when they connection build across borders.

formed (e.g., neither definitively East nor West; neither mobilized solely in physical spaces or deterritorialized/online spaces). [Dahlberg-Grundberg \(2015\)](#) argues that hybrid organizational systems are founded epistemologically on the reality that “online and offline political initiatives, spaces, activities, technologies, and identities” are entwined and coexist (4). They are also “hybrid” because they do not necessarily emerge from one geographical locale but are co-constituted in multiple geographical locales. A mesh-system of this nature can involve circulating ideas for political ends through technological innovation.

Transnational circulation can rapidly transform the substantive meaning and mobilizations of citizenship in a revolutionary context ([LeVine 2013](#), 195), and this is especially the case with meshwork organizational structures. Such transformations can be performed in spaces that are territorially situated and territorially unanchored. They can occur in real time and in what [Ellison \(2013\)](#) refers to as liquid time (e.g., the instantaneous and simultaneous informational exchange in a cyber, globalized, and interconnected world). For example, the Swedish net-based activist network *Telecomix*⁵ provided technological platforms for the bridging of online and offline local and transnational Arab activism and protests in 2011 (critical when the state shut-down internet access). Without attempting to control how Arab protestors configured their protest, citing such political forms of “advising” as imperialistic, *Telecomix* agents provided a platform for meshwork activism that sometimes took circular and less pattern-emergent forms. Using their Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel as a central hub for their activity, the *Telecomix* network relied on opened modem pools in Europe so that Arab activists in the Middle East could access them via the telephone when national broadbands in their countries were shut down. In order to avoid crackdowns and censorship by regimes for exchanging and publishing sensitive facts, pictures, commentary, films, or plans (e.g., such as “advice and tips on how to communicate and use the Internet more safely to reduce the risk of being monitored”), activists were able to upload the data to *Telecomix*, which then circulated it among relevant groups and the world ([Dahlberg-Grundberg 2015](#), 8). [Dahlberg-Grundberg](#) writes that “the network offered virtual private network tunnels to give safer communication channels and provided technological education, mainly taking place on the network’s IRC channel, where activists were offered the possibility to learn how to communicate safely and how to decrypt important communications” ([Dahlberg-Grundberg 2015](#), 8). *Telecomix* activists emphasized that giving (in our words) citizenship capacity-building a mechanism to circulate was not in itself sufficient to establish an egalitarian mode of politics but rather that the flow of such technologies had to be accompanied by a genuine will to facilitate platforms for horizontal openness in order to coordinate and communicate in real-time ([Dahlberg-Grundberg 2015](#), 8–9). Thus, transnational circulation was evident in this context in the flows of people, political intention, and political means across multiple trajectories that mobilized political agency and mutual aid.

[Finn and Momani \(2017\)](#) theorize the impact of local and transnational Arab activism on citizenship claims-making in the Middle East through the concept of circular human geographies. They argue that the imaginative harnessing of multiple geographical terrains not only challenges authoritarian states in democratic ways but also enables, performs, enacts, and constitutes activist individuals as citizens. Their main argument is that transnational Arab activists during the 2011–12 revolts mobilized citizenship through four main circular modalities. The first “circular human geography” they focus on is how dual citizens straddling homeland and residence leveraged capacities to bridge/diffuse/export/import progressive ideas

⁵ A *Telecomix* activist described it as “a reactive organism consisting of internauts from every corner of the Internet that has as its purpose to let information flow freely and uncensored.” Another activist called *Telecomix* the “red blood cells of the Internet,” which could be interpreted to mean the mechanism that ensured the oxygen of the protests circulated ([Dahlberg-Grundberg 2015](#), 8).

and values locally and into the MENA region. By acting as a bridge, dual-citizenship transnational Arab activists claim citizenship rights, responsibilities, and capacities in two or more societies (Finn and Momani 2017).

The second form of circulation that they examine is how transnational activists found ways to encircle their state of citizenship/residence and use nonviolent, democratic means to hold it to account (Finn and Momani 2017). Demonstrations, protests, vigils, and calls for political transformation were transmitted within and from a complex array of scales and spaces that included the centers of public squares in Bahrain, the downtown streets of Toronto, the graffiti scrawled walls of Deraa, Cairo's winding alleyways, the frontages of the United Nations, and the "cyberspatial" agoras hosting petitions, blogs, tweets, hyperlinks, and messages of resistance. By encircling the state across a range of geographies, transnational Arab activists used their social capital in Western countries to pressure host governments to change policies toward countries of origins in supportive or critical ways. Finn and Momani (2017) argue that encircling the state acts as a form of countersurveillance where circular systems of state control are appropriated.

The third circular human geography involves transformations in (Arab) political subjectivity that occur because heightened peer-to-peer contacts stir political agitation into latent political activism and stir intracommunity conflict and collaboration in ways that increase engagement and mobilization. The fourth modality that Finn and Momani (2017) theorize is the transversal rearrangement(s) of political self-understandings that have an impact on citizenship claims-making.⁶ Transversal changes are enabled through the full-circle return of Arabs to their home countries or identities in ways that have transformational effects. Arab activists learn through these processes to defy the stereotypes that inhibit their political development.

Taking the Discussion in New Directions

With this literature in mind, we seek to move the discussion on transnational citizenship capacity-building in new directions. Spontaneous, constitutive, momentous, and sustained courage, indignation, and righteousness mobilized in circular forms and through the circulation of political technologies make subjects claimants of justice, of rights and responsibilities, and, by extension, of citizenship. Acts worth cultivating, including solidaristic generosity, *communitas*, hospitality, friendship, understanding, and love, transform social and political life and legitimate the citizenship membership of the political subject. Political activism, on the other hand, that is resistant, combative, or adverse should be adjudicated for its contributions to society by virtue of its consequences. Political acts can generate citizenship claims, but the actor's motivations and effects can be genuine or counterfeit. Agonism, or the small or large-scale embracing of the contentious and often unresolvable features of living in common, can facilitate democracy or inhibit democracy, depending on whether it is pursued through nonviolent or violent means. Nonviolent agonism pushes society into liminal spaces (spaces of discomfort) for its own development because it can force people to reexamine taken-for-granted tactics. Political action that serves to undercut solidarity and productive forms of agonism, such as alienating vengefulness, revenge, hostility, and hate are not supportive of a contributive political agency, nor are they citizenship affirming. We are not the first to point out, consequently, the facile nature of formal citizenship or how meanings of

⁶ Mark LeVine (2013, 201) argues that transversal transformations in subjectivity are the product of state-imposed discursivity, disciplinarity, and institutionalism, that subjectivity always moves in deference to relative political power of the state. We question if that is always the case. The state does not define and control all parameters of beingness and potentiality. Though few people are beyond the state, some negate it and the "multiple regimes of governmentality" with their whole person, as in the case of Chelsea Manning. Corporate subjectivity, moreover, is increasingly operating with less regard to the power of the state as the neoliberalization of the global political economy continues through seepage and floods.

citizenship are eroded by the processes of formal citizenship that allow hate-filled individuals to inherit citizenship rights within the territorial space of the nation-state and exclude peace-filled individuals from these rights because of birth outside of the nation-state (Lister 2007; Bloemraad et al. 2008; Isin 2008).

Finn and Momani (2017) argue that, during the Arab uprisings, transnational acts of solidarity (e.g., mutual aid) circulated in ways that expanded and enabled political spaces. The transnational circulation of people, ideas, and practices; of political technologies and political subjectivities; and of tools, skills, ideas, systems of organization, and affect formed the basis of symbolic, constitutive (public sphere expanding), and insurrectionary (status quo-smashing) forms of citizenship claims-making and capacity-building.

The liquidity of activism in the free flow of time and space is slowly rendering the nation-state less important in defining how citizenship is to be consolidated, configured, and claimed (Benhabib 2008; Ellison 2013) and transforming how power is asserted, maintained, and sustained (Momani 2015; Naim 2014). Communion, collaboration, affiliation, and fraternization (Isin 2008, 22) emerge in territorially situated, and territorially disembedded action, in real time or in more liquid, instantaneous forms of time limited only by the speed of people's bandwidth (Ellison 2013, 49). Bauman has theorized liquid modernity in changing social conditions that do not always return back to past forms but are constantly being reconfigured (Bauman 2000). The power of the state to govern, institute control, and ensure that its demands are being met is/was being increasingly transformed and challenged by the liquidity of modernity (Ellison 2013, 52): ideas, tools, skills, organizational designs, and affect do not stop at the nation-state border and await approval to cross, and identities, privileges, rights, and benefits are being increasingly disaggregated. This is happening while spaces for citizenship capacity-building are expanding and being mobilized in countless circular formations. Indeed, the parameters of political action have never been bound by what people do in territorially embedded spaces or within specific legal systems (Isin 2009, 370). At the level of scales, much of the Arab world is shaped by highly interconnected flows of material and culture across borders that are both real and disavowed (Harvey 1989; Tsing 2000; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). Other political actors remain unperturbed by the pressures of modernity and are more resilient in the face of change (Bauman 2000) but, as a consequence of their disengagement, are "increasingly dissociated and marginalized" (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 186).

In discussing the agency of people who build citizenship into a meaningful concept and practice, it is important to recognize that there are numerous structural and nonstructural conditions that enable (or impede) transnational circulations. Some of these conditions include: the nature of actors themselves, the nature of existing sociopolitical channels (and scope and depth of contacts between people), the relative portability of political technologies vis-à-vis technical and technological capacities, the permeability of borders for flows for territorially (dis)embedded action, infrastructures that might be selectively capitalized on (for ad hoc or highly planned projects), the catalysts that drive grassroots responses, and, finally, whether such catalysts are institutionalized (and by whom or what level: supranational, intergovernmental, translocal, or state-diasporic interactions) (Bocconi et al. 2015). The outcomes of these transnational circulations of connections and actions are not assured—in terms of how freedom and rights will ultimately be enabled—but where such actions are positive and productive, we see the budding of transformative change and the instilling of citizenship made substantively meaningful.

Real, effective change emerges from transformative changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles, and opportunities pursued outside of state institutions. Solidarity, *communitas*, and therefore citizenship capacity-building are emerging from an increasing demographic of Arab youth who are attending college and university (learning,

growing, and participating in clubs and associations) and in the continued, determined demands of youth for leaders who are citizens and who complete tasks effectively (in Momani's terminology, "get the job done" and, in Isin's terminology, "make a difference") (Momani 2015; Isin 2009, 379). Citizenship capacity-building also emerges when people are in service to the common good—even if such grassroots transformations take generations to produce change—and when people sustain a politics of refusing, rupturing, and defying stereotypes that debilitate and colonize the mind and body politic. One way that this appropriation of the mind happens in the Middle East is when Arabs are defined or self-define themselves as politically fulfilled under a strongman (Rabbani 2012, 33; Momani 2015). When and where this mind-set changes through social action, so too does citizenship. The political subject qua citizen is, after all, the one who lives, works, and enacts in the company of other people (Arendt 1998[1958]). Political spaces are social spaces that are mobilized in some way; they need not be physical structures but can be "domains of contested power relations" that help form subjects and influence the way people negotiate their political worlds (e.g., in the ways that various Tahrir [freedom] squares in the Arab world acted as physical sites of protest and symbolic sites where power itself was/is contested) (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 191). Some action may be more dialogical than political, but such action still instantiates constituents as formal or informal members of a constituency (Isin 2008, 18; Jubran 2013). Indeed, such political subjectivity mobilization qua citizenship can be enacted even in prisons (Radwan 2012).

Analysis of political subjectivity is impoverished when it is reduced to silo categories of "citizen," "stranger," "outsider," or "alien" that are put on a spectrum in relation to formal citizenship and, thus, acquire differential qualities of legitimacy by virtue of the traditional benchmark of status or recognition. Political subjectivity and the formation of the agency of citizen is so much more than this reductionist myopia would permit. The forces that create citizens are in fact incredibly complex and nonlinear and emerge in multiple and overlapping temporalities and circulations. Political subjectivity emerges from cyclical/repetitive actions (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 193), for example in the work of Yemenese activist Tawakkol Karman's repeated return to the streets to educate, inform, and resist state control of journalism and to defend women's rights. These actions are a bulwark against the state's authority and control and help to ensure that grassroots activism continues to press itself against institutional structures whose mandate is to oppose or impede mutual aid. In this process, the significance of the transnational circulation of people, ideas, and practices builds citizenship without deference to statist prescriptions of membership and recognition. Building on the insights derived from the four circular human geographies identified by Finn and Momani (2017), we theorize the significance of two other modalities of transnational circulation that support citizenship capacity-building and which strengthen the substantive meanings of citizenship in a modern, highly globalized world.

The precariousness and dislocations experienced in spaces of liminality (discomfort produced by what is unfamiliar or terrifying) can be both empowering and disempowering and are amplified in transnational circulation. Revolutionary forms of liminality can paralyze political actors and/or devolve into disaffection and/or compliant acceptance for another form of oppressive rule. We acknowledge this fact but focus our energies on examining the productive and emancipative potential of liminality for individuals and societies to use disaffectedness to explore, reaggregate, and reemerge permanently altered. Productive liminality occurs when local and transnational activists undermine government attempts to curb political spaces for free expression and resignify former spaces of subjugation as arenas of unshackled enfranchisement, thereby facilitating transformative breaks in the way that the political status quo is framed.

Many studies on citizenship have identified the fact that political virtues “are cultivated, that citizenship is not inherited but learned, and that cultivating citizenship requires establishing supportive and relatively enduring practices and institutions” (Allman and Beaty 2002; Isin 2008, 17). The practices that make citizens are often learned in liminal spaces and via the discomforts of liminality (e.g., assimilation or the push back against assimilation). Nelson and Harper (2006) identify that critical thinking skills, self-awareness, and empowerment manifest themselves strongly when people are pushed into spaces that confuse, confound, or challenge them and that through this discomfort they often reaggregate how they see the world and reconstitute their subjectivities as citizens. This process of dislocation, reaggregation, and reconstitution has a circular dimension because the individual development of the citizen is not linear but rather highly cyclical through the highs and lows of human struggle. To be clear, therefore, the transnational circulation of people, skills, practices, and technologies puts transnational actors through difficulties and discomforts (productive liminality) that transform them. As such actors undergo cycles of highs and lows, they transform the substantive meaningfulness of citizenship from “status” to a state of being engaged in the social sphere for the sake of people beyond oneself.

In the literature on pedagogy and education, liminality is mostly productive. Political liminality—that is the discomforts and dislocations that emerged from a lack of representation and political agency—can be empowering and disempowering. Abu-Laban poignantly captures liminality when it produces precariousness. If the designations “citizen” and “human” could be rendered as monolithic structures, many Arabs in the West would hover in the interstices that exist between them (Abu-Laban 2013, 68–88). She notes that Arabs in the Western world often have a liminal (insecure/discomforting) relationship vis-à-vis the citizenship of their countries of residence and that, in a securitized environment, the dual citizen is always vulnerable to deportation (Abu-Laban 2013, 80). Revolutionary liminality can also paralyze political subjectivity. According to Bahraini human rights campaigner Maryam Al Khawaja (2012, 23), many people refused to come out of their comfort zones to demand dignity and be seen as citizens; this created a double standard where people said that they wanted democracy in Bahrain but would not fight for it. There is also a destructive potential in revolutionary liminality wherein the discomfort that presses revolutionaries into action does not produce reaggregation at the individual and collective levels but rather their sublimation into a new form of oppressive rule.⁷ Mohamed Mesrati (2013, 78–79) describes this dynamic in the emergence of the revolutionary guards of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya, “When the opposition activists and students were brought out and pushed onto the scaffold [in April 1982] the revolutionaries began hurling abuse at them, shouting Gaddafi’s name and his slogans as though they were appointed guardians of some god and his religion.”

But liminality can have a productive component in that the tension that arises from dislocation and disaffection can propel an individual and collective reevaluation of his/her respective political conditions (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 191). Arab transnational activism, which sought to propel revolutionary change in the Middle East, wielded the power of liminality and formed the social, political, cultural, and symbolic practices that would afford them substantive citizenship (Glenn 2011, 3). Thus, even Arab subjects in the Western world not born in the Middle East (e.g., university students) stake claims as citizens of their parents’ home countries. Conversely, Arab diaspora that lack formal citizenship of Western countries evince symbolic citizenship upon their country of residence by the pressure they exert on resident country authorities to abide by *communitas* as a principle.

⁷ Destructive liminality is also a characteristic of Western far-right groups whose discomforts produce not a reaggreated self but rather a reassertion of xenophobic and dictatorial tendencies against, for example, the Arab other.

On the power of liminal spaces, Mark LeVine (2013) puts it well when he writes, “revolutionary liminality does not merely revolve back to everyday life. Those undergoing such transformations are not reintegrated into the fabric of community in their changed state; rather, their changed state becomes the impetus and vehicle for the initiation of the broader transformation of society” (198). Cultural, social, and political organization can produce a kind of emancipatory unlearning that can propel people to challenge the sometimes violent exclusions governments pursue to ensure their continuance (LeVine 2013, 197). Opportunities open up when activist interventions encourage transformative progression through liminality—reaggregation—reconstitution (Nelson and Harper 2006). When a community can sustain itself through multiple iterations of itself by breaking attempts to exclude it from rights and protections, it can dismantle regimes of negative affect and (re)claim citizenship capacities that sustain it over the long-term. Liminality also emerges from the activists’ relative abilities to shift from internet to physical protest or from a state of being ruled to being an active citizen.

Activists’ who subvert government attempts to control or erase political spaces for free expression ground and develop political subjectivity and help construct formal political spaces, but such action is frequently seen as not sufficient unto itself for citizenship. The expansion of the public sphere in these acts of constitutive citizenship transform the political subject but require outside/community recognition to acquire the legitimacy of formal citizenship. We argue that even when the state or community does not recognize the formal citizenship of transnational political actors, those actors who commit themselves to making political spaces sites of mutual aid stake a claim of citizenship that is compelling and legitimate.

New modalities of transnational circulation also emerge and are formulated in the unpredictable rhizomatic actions of Arab activists (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); rhizomes are, after all, the roots and spores that produce new growth. Years of humiliation, disillusionment, and abjection produced spatial geographies of opposition, sometimes in the unlikeliest of places. From prison cells to the heavily censored universities and high school classrooms, Arab political subjectivity was consolidated by legacies of disaffection that were transformed into moments of emancipatory mobilization during the uprisings. Revolutionary acts that materialized often took ad hoc forms, which organized in opposition to the authoritarianism that helped spawn them into existence. Using the vocabulary of critical citizenship studies, transnational Arab activists made claims as citizens of their home countries and supported the citizenship claims-making of their compatriots through a number of means. They demanded a complex array of rights, leveraged many sites (“bodies, courts, streets, media, networks, borders”), completed enactments of political agency along numerous scales (“urban, regional, national, transnational, international,” and the cyber-world), and, through acts of resistance and refusal (e.g., sit-ins, peaceful demonstrations, and surveilling the state through citizen journalism and grass-roots publications), engaged in different kinds of voting⁸ and provided social service provisions (Desforges et al. 2005; Isin 2009, 368).

The conditions for the emergence of latent political agency and citizenship capacity-building can be unpredictable, meandering, and organically rooted. People can be mobilized as political subjects by humiliation and disaffection. They can also be mobilized to capacity-build by ad hoc shape-shifting perceptions and direct, indirect, and observed experiences. The conditions for and the sites of citizenship are like the scales of citizenship—they “are tentacular and amorphous and bleed into each other” (Isin 2009, 377). These conditions, as they circulate inside the mind and outside of the body (politic), shape the ultimate configuration that political agency and citizenship claims take at the individual and collective levels. The Arab uprisings grew not only in the people’s responses to unjust government crack-

⁸ Schwedler, Stacher, and Yadav (2012, 41) discuss the productive utility of voting.

downs but through the anger of people inside and outside of the Middle East years before, during, and after the uprisings (Alhassan and Shihab-Eldin 2012, xxiv). The circulation of emancipatory disaffection can consolidate political subjectivity. The importance of circles of rhizomatic action is their persistence and multiple sites of resistance—the rhizome, after all, is root-like and can emerge without warning. Indeed, the very concepts of “sites” or “scales” (e.g., networks/media and local/transnational levels) within or by which political subjectivity is mobilized are themselves “fluid and dynamic entities that are formed through contests and struggles [insofar as] their boundaries become a question of empirical determination” (Desforges 2005; Isin 2009, 370).

Theorists of the state disagree about the extent to which physical borders, the institutional boundaries between state and society, top-down impositions of social and political order, the state’s organizational terrain—and thus, by extension, the deep state (where economic and political elites are tightly bound and profiting from arrangements of “governance”)—force revolutionary agency to be mobilized from outside of these apparatuses of power. The Arab revolts made clear that people inside and outside of the Middle East are capable of perceiving how implicated they are in the structures of oppression in which they are invested or culturally connected, as well as the imperative in refusing to cooperate (LeVine 2013, 199). The geography of refusal then is rhizomatic because it navigates resistance from ubiquitous “circuits, structures and effects of power” in often unexpected and unpredictable ways (through “spontaneous and organized opposition”) from inside and outside the jurisdictional space of the state (LeVine 2013, 199, 204). The methods and practices of the revolutionary acts circulate in nonlinear forms,⁹ like ripples and waves that emanate from a stone dropped in a pond.¹⁰ New geographies, circulations, and political subjectivities are formed in the rhizomatic action of those who resist degradation, abjection, and state lies.

Conclusion

During the early years of the uprisings, rapidly intensifying action took a trajectory that crisscrossed physical and online spaces, transferring political energies and activating political subjectivities in ways that heightened transnational awareness and investment in the civic concerns of the Arab world. In this paper, we highlighted the importance of transnational circulation, specifically the circulation of actors, skills, practices, and technologies for the production of citizenship capacity-building in the Middle East during the 2011–12 period of political revolts.

While it is true that the state can wield control of citizenship membership in ways that permit the domination of people and silence opposition, it is also true that claims of citizenship membership empowers people because, in invoking citizenship claims, they demand to be afforded civil, political, financial, etc. rights. When the level of discussion is shifted about how citizenship membership is constituted or enacted, and when political subjects can claim to be citizens by virtue of their investment in mutual aid, solidarity, fraternity, and *communitas*, they can simultaneously make rights claims that hold governments further responsible to fulfill those rights claims.

Like Evelyn Nakano Glenn, we see the omnirelevance of citizenship for most aspects of public life, including how the parameters of political participation and the development of policies are mapped out. Formal citizenship (substantive citizenship where rights can actually be exercised), or citizenship reduced to belonging

⁹ On the illusion of linearity, see, for example, Rabbani 2012, 33.

¹⁰ Hudson (2012, 26) makes an interesting analogy about waves, arguing that there are differences in the ways that the waves of protest rolled across different states. In some places they hit sandcastles, and in others, such as Bahrain, they hit rocks.

and recognition—so narrowly constrained and always in deference to state determinations of “in” and “out,” “responsible for” and “not responsible for”—are impediments to societal social and political development. These two factors, the ad hoc and often ironic granting and withholding of recognition, magnify social inequalities and perpetuate a politics of exclusion and disavowal (Glenn 2011, 2–3). This dynamic, of course, has a weaker impact upon the official citizen, however no one is immune from being excluded from the formal rights of citizenship in any part of the world. It has a greater impact upon the noncitizen in democratic societies and profoundly affects people who live in countries where their relationship with the state and/or the expectation of reciprocity is virtually nonexistent.

People who have meaningful relationships with the state in its neoliberal and dictatorial guises have limited official avenues to make claims on the basis of formal citizenship strictures. When they rise up to resist both the neoliberal and dictatorial nature of the state, they are injecting themselves into the dysfunctional and unsustainable system and, in the process, mutually aiding all other political subjects suffering from the same conditions (Khalidi 2012). The transnational circulations of actors, skills, technologies, and practices enable the legitimation of rights and the imposition of further obligations. When transnational actors act, they are reappropriating “already written scripts” of rights and duties in familiar sites, often framed by the reduction that the citizen is the one who votes (Isin 2008; Isin 2009). Through this reappropriation, such actors are rewriting the script of citizenship entirely, redrawing and resetting the scene, and performing refusal of the status quo as the status quo. Through these enactments, such actors emerge as claimants of justice and profoundly empower the individual and collective in the process.

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