BREXIT, LIMINALITY, AND AMBIGUITIES OF BELONGING
French Citizens in London

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The Brexit process has affected the lives of "middling" mobile Europeans living in the UK, who have experienced uncertainty as their legal status and social position have shifted. Based on ethnographic research during the years 2015–2020 among French citizens living in London, I draw upon the concepts of liminality, social drama, and precarity to analyze the effects of the unfolding events triggered by the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (Brexit) on their everyday lives and trajectories. Although there is much diversity among the French in London, my longitudinal perspective suggests that the social drama of the Brexit process raises questions about the precarity of the mobile EU middle class and the strength of their European and national affiliations.

Keywords: social drama, European Union, Brexit, mobility, precarity

In late June 2016, eligible voters approved a referendum that began a process through which the United Kingdom would cease being a member state of the European Union. Brexit, as the UK's departure from the EU is known, is an experiment in that no member state has ever left the EU before. The original date of the departure, the so-called Brexit Day when the UK would officially leave the EU, was set for the end of March 2019. Various delays to this timetable were subsequently requested by the UK government and approved by the EU. The UK finally left the EU on the 31st of January 2020, almost four years after the referendum passed. This was followed by a period of continued negotiations regarding the future relationship of the two parties that would last until December 31, during which time the UK remained in the single market and customs union. Just as the UK was crossing a threshold delineating a transition from insider to outsider in the EU, there was also a transition of status for citizens of the EU who live in the UK.

Middle-Class EU Movers and Uncertain Temporalities

In keeping with the theme of this special issue, I will discuss how "Brexit matters" in two ways. On one hand, I will explore the ways in which Brexit matters because it represents a pivotal historical moment and social transition, with broad implications for the lives of European citizens in the UK and more broadly for the future of the EU and its mobility schemes. On the other hand, I will bring

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ethnographic perspectives to bear in a consideration of how matters pertaining to Brexit (legal, social, and personal) are perceived by French citizens living in London among whom I have undertaken longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork since the spring of 2015 – more than one year before the referendum.[1] My pre- and post-Brexit perspectives on the French in London have prompted me to see the Brexit process as a "social drama" (Turner 1974, 1980) and a "secular ritual" (Moore & Myerhoff 1977).

My research among French citizens living in London started out as a project to study the lives of EU movers (Recchi 2015) who could also be considered "middling migrants" (Conradson & Latham 2005), and their continued ties to France while living in the UK as well as their modes of emplacement in London. Their status in the UK and my own research agenda altered substantially following the referendum of 2016. The focus of my research necessarily shifted as the Leave campaign gained strength and plans to hold the vote were enacted. Doing fieldwork in such uncertain times has its challenges (as well as opportunities) and, like my research participants who had to reconsider their life projects in response to Brexit, I changed course. Although we are always aware that change is constant in social life, some fieldwork situations must confront the uncertainties of life more than others. As an American anthropologist, I have been brought into the social drama surrounding my research participants even though I am not European, in that my fieldwork project has muddled through the vagaries and uncertain temporalities of Brexit.

In this article,[2] I examine the ritualization of Brexit and its consequences for French citizens in London. As EU citizens, the French in London are in the midst of a change in status due to the UK's departure from the EU. They are transitioning from being people who could enjoy a host of legal rights by virtue of being EU citizens living in another EU member state (including the freedom to work in and live there without the need for a visa or work permit), to people who face a future in which they must become documented international migrants living in the UK or acquire UK citizenship. The concept of liminality or transition – which identifies a period of uncertainty, anti-structure (in Turner's formulation), and in-between-ness – characterizes the situation of EU citizens in the UK who wait for the final outcome of the Brexit process and its implications for their lives. This article contributes to the growing literature in anthropology on uncertainty and precarity in social life (e.g. Stewart 2012; Allison 2013; Calkins 2016; Kleist & Jansen 2016; Han 2018), although it does so not by focusing on the most marginal populations but, rather, on middle-class and upper-middle-class mobile Europeans whose understandings of their place in the world have changed as a result of Brexit.

This article is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss concepts related to social drama, liminality, and precarity that inform my analysis, and trace the ways in which Brexit can be understood as a form of "social drama" in Turner's terms and a rite of passage (Van Gennep [1909]1960) for EU citizens whose status is in the process of changing. Then, I will introduce the broad contours of my research among the French in London and turn to specific examples from my ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate how the Brexit process has led to forms of "ambiguous belonging" among the French in London who have been caught by it. I will end this article with a further discussion of how seeing Brexit in terms of a social drama, with the qualities of uncertainty and danger associated with it, helps illuminate the shifting forms of affiliation in contemporary Europe (especially among the French in London) affected by the Brexit process.

Brexit as Social Drama and Rite of Passage: Liminality and Danger

In his essay "The Symbolic Ordering of a Man-Made World: Boundaries of Social Space and Time," Sir Edmund Leach wrote: "The crossing of frontiers and thresholds is always hedged about with ritual, so also is the transition from one social status to another" (1976: 35). With his emphasis on "passage," either territorial or social, Arnold Van Gennep's analysis of rites of passage encompassed both individual and group transitions. For him, there are

three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. Van Gennep described rites of passage as "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one social situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" ([1909]1960: 10). According to Victor Turner (1980: 149), who elaborated upon Van Gennep's original formulation to focus on a type of group transition related to crisis and schism, "social dramas occur within groups of persons who share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history." This fits the case of Brexit, given the historically close ties between the UK and the rest of Europe. That the Brexit negotiations are frequently discussed in the British media (and beyond) as divorce proceedings underscores the importance of the relationship, symbolized through a vocabulary of kinship and affinity. There is talk of the "divorce settlement," especially the amount the UK will have to repay the EU,[3] and in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote EU citizens (including British citizens) were referred to as "helpless children" at the mercy of their divorcing parents. For Turner, social dramas frequently have a "tragic quality" to them because "people have to take sides" (1974: 35). Turner identified four phases to such processes: "breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism" (Turner 1980: 149).

The social drama of Brexit was set in motion ("the breach") by a UK referendum vote to leave the EU on 23 June 2016, followed by the March 2017 letter from then Prime Minister Theresa May to Donald Tusk, then President of the European Council. This letter formally triggered Article 50, which is the provision in the European Treaty for withdrawal from the EU. The procedures of Article 50 demand that the European Parliament (the only directly elected institution of the EU) approve the deal. When Article 50 was set in motion, the timeline stipulated that the UK would officially depart the EU as of midnight on 29 March 2019 – a day popularly referred to as "Brexit Day." A transition period to implement the withdrawal was to take place for at least two years following that date. As mentioned above, there have been several delays beyond March of 2019.

The results of the Brexit referendum have led to a long phase of crisis and redress, in which the government of the UK has tried to mend the breach both among its own citizens (those who voted Leave and those who voted Remain) and with the EU and its member states. The Brexit process has been accompanied by a seemingly unending period of waiting for the outcome, leading both to social activism aimed at influencing the outcome and to a phenomenon frequently referred to as "Brexit fatigue." There was a lengthy period of negotiation, with attempts to produce a withdrawal agreement that would be approved by governing bodies in both the UK and the EU. Although the EU accepted the withdrawal agreement negotiated by Theresa May, she was unable to get this approved by the UK Parliament, and she eventually resigned in late spring 2019. She was replaced by Boris Johnson, who promised that the UK would leave the EU with or without a deal at the end of October 2019. As that date approached and he failed to bring the UK out of the EU, Johnson was obliged to request a further extension of the deadline from the EU and subsequently called for Parliamentary elections.

Apart from the issue of whether or not the UK should leave the EU, which has divided the British public, major issues of contention surrounding the Brexit negotiations have been those of trade, the Irish border (see Wilson 2020, this issue), and the rights of EU citizens residing in the UK and UK citizens residing in EU member states. Various options have been discussed regarding the outcome: a "hard" vs. a "soft" Brexit; and a "no-deal" Brexit. Many activist and lobbying groups in the UK formed in response to the withdrawal, advocating for various outcomes. There were protest demonstrations and marches by the Remainers who hoped to halt the process of departure from the EU, and by the Leavers who wanted to see the mandate carried out so that the UK would cease to be a member state of the EU. This period of negotiation is the period called "transition" by Van Gennep and it entails the liminal period betwixt and between phases in the social drama as outlined by Turner. For Turner, the periods of crisis and redress can be accompanied by a mounting sense of "danger

and suspense" (1974: 39). This somewhat precarious social situation can produce forms of what Turner called *communitas*, which bring people together in forms of sociability that are more egalitarian. Inhabiting this state of liminality is being both in the middle of the process and also somewhat outside of the social structural arrangements that existed before the breach. Although this point raises a topic beyond the scope of this article, the forms of social activism and demonstrations elicited by Brexit can be seen as forms of *communitas*.

The rights of EU citizens after Brexit became a key element in the negotiations. Concern about this was heightened due to a statement made a couple of months after the referendum by Liam Fox, then UK Secretary of State for International Trade. Fox remarked that uncertainty over the future status of EU citizens was "one of our main cards" in Brexit negotiations. At the time, there were an estimated 3.8 million EU citizens in the UK. The cry of "we are not bargaining chips" is what initially animated the movement known as The3million,[4] which has lobbied the UK and the EU on behalf of EU citizens living in the UK and was founded by Nicholas Hatton, a Frenchman who has lived and worked in England for many years.

In the letter that Theresa May sent to Donald Tusk on 29 March 2017, in which she triggered Article 50 and began the negotiation process, she stated, as one of the principles that should guide their discussions:

> **We should always put our citizens first.** There is obvious complexity in the discussions we are about to undertake, but we should remember that at the heart of our talks are the interests of all our citizens. There are, for example, many citizens of the remaining member states living in the United Kingdom, and UK citizens living elsewhere in the European Union, and we should aim to strike an early agreement about their rights.

Prime Minister Theresa May's position on the rights of EU citizens evolved as negotiations continued. By spring 2018 she was insisting that free movement to the UK would end with Brexit. The exact nature of the status and rights for EU citizens in the UK after Brexit is still unresolved as I write these words. The initial proffer of the UK in 2016 was that, at least until at least March 2019, French nationals and other EU citizens residing in the UK had the right to obtain permanent residency if they had lived there for five years or more. The application process for permanent residency was considered to be onerous and expensive by my French interlocutors.

A new status of "settler" was subsequently proposed and Britain's Home Secretary at the time, Sajid Javid, informed European citizens via email communication in the fall of 2018 on the steps they could take to acquire this. The French Consulate in London included details on "settled status" on their website. Access to the internet and some facility with digital communication is necessary for the application, providing disadvantages especially to elderly Europeans in the UK. This EU Settlement Scheme, which is only for EU citizens, Swiss citizens, and citizens from EEA (European Economic Area) countries, became fully functioning in spring 2019, with applications to be accepted until June 2021. According to the UK website dedicated to providing information on the process of acquiring settled status, "the rights and status of EU, EEA, and Swiss citizens living in the UK will remain the same until 30 June 2021."[5] Anyone who has been approved for settled or pre-settled status, or has acquired UK citizenship, may then remain in the UK. Even EU citizens who hold permanent residence in the UK, or applied for this in the months that immediately followed Brexit, are obliged to obtain settled or pre-settled status. They are told that this can be a path to UK citizenship, but it is very unclear what may happen to those who fail to achieve this status by the deadline. Many of the people with whom I have spoken are still adopting a "wait and see" approach until the final outcome of Brexit is determined after December 2020 before applying. Others have hastened to complete their applications in order to secure their right to stay before any further changes to immigration policy in the UK.

Even with settled status, the legal rights of EU citizens in the UK will be lower than before because

the UK will not be obligated to ensure EU rights for those living within its territory. EU citizens living in London will become international immigrants rather than mobile Europeans living within another EU member state. The French in London profited from the mobility regime of the European Union, and have now been caught in a situation that threatens to undermine their status in the UK. Although Turner suggested, as I cited above, that social dramas impel people to "choose sides," before Brexit the French in London could remain legally, culturally, and socially "French" and still live in London. Now many are torn between taking on another affiliation in the UK in order to remain there or to leave. Although dual citizenship is possible, the symbolism of this is difficult for many of my research participants who told me they have never felt "British" even while living in London.

Beginning with the establishment of the European Economic Community through the Treaty of Rome in 1957, what later became known as the European Union has espoused the values of what it refers to as the "four freedoms." These are the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital/money. Although the original driving force for mobility in the EU was labor mobility, and this was the main emphasis in the Treaty of Rome, there has long been a prevailing hope that geographic mobility will enhance feelings of attachment to the EU among its citizens. An important hallmark of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which established European citizenship, was the freedom of movement for all EU citizens who could live and work in any other EU member state. They could also register to receive health care in the country where they resided, and in many cases vote in local elections.

Ettore Recchi (2015: 7) has stressed that mobility within the European Union for EU citizens is more about "supranational" than "transnational" processes. He points out that few mobile Europeans adopt the citizenship of the countries in which they reside, and pre-Brexit this was true for the French population in London. Many of my research informants have told me that they never considered obtaining UK citizenship until Brexit, and applications for UK citizenship among the French have risen dramatically since the referendum (Duncan & O'Carroll 2018). Although there are no hard statistics on this matter, my research indicates that French citizens married to UK citizens and also those who have lived longest in the UK are those most apt to apply for citizenship.

In their introduction to the volume *Secular Ritual*, Moore and Myerhoff write: "social life proceeds somewhere between the imaginary extremes of absolute order, and absolute chaotic conflict and anarchic improvisation" (1977: 3). They point out that social transitions can be dangerous, because they lead people to question the social constructions they generally accept most of the time. As the authors of a recent volume on the ethnography of waiting have pointed out, waiting may trigger "forms of social energies." "For a period," Janeja and Bandek write, "short or extended, an individual or a collective finds itself placed in a situation where what is hoped for or anxiously anticipated has not yet been actualized" (2018: 1). The period of Brexit negotiations has entailed modes of waiting that have generated social energies on both sides of the debate (Remain or Leave), and the Brexit vote was followed by a growth in the rate of hate crimes against immigrants in England and Wales (Weaver 2018).[6] In addition, there has been what can be called a new "structure of feeling" (Williams 1961) associated with a heightened sense of uncertainty and precarity. Recent anthropological attention to concepts of uncertainty (Samimian-Darash & Rabinow 2015a) and precarity (Muehlebach 2013) predates Brexit but helps shed light on the overall social climate in which it is taking place. Samimian-Darash and Rabinow point to the important question – also posed by Janeja and Bandek regarding waiting – of "what modes of subjectivity are produced" (2015b: 4) by the ways in which uncertainty has been problematized in social responses to it that include institutionalized forms of risk management.[7]

Bjørn Thomassen has recently called for renewed attention to the concept of liminality, which is related to these other ideas. He argues that "liminality refers to something very simple and universal: the

experience of finding oneself at a boundary or an in-between position, either spatially or temporally" (2015: 40). Although liminality can occur at the scale of the individual undergoing a ritual transformation, Thomassen writes, it can also be part of a wider societal transformation, and sometimes these go together. This characterizes the situation of Brexit, in that the UK and the EU are experiencing the social drama of Brexit at one scale, while individuals, including the EU citizens who concern me here, are in the midst of their own status change as residents of the UK.[8] Thomassen points to situations of liminality that go beyond narrow ways of thinking about it in anthropology, where most often the outcome is known. In situations he describes, which I argue apply to Brexit, the "future is inherently unknown" and no one is truly there to guide the participants because no one has ever gone through this particular liminal period before (ibid.: 52). It may be the case that Brexit will, as Turner indicated was the case for some social dramas, have no "clear resolution" (1974: 33) in the near future.

Although Victor Turner emphasized the creative aspects of liminality and the liminoid, and the positive features of *communitas*, Thomassen suggests that there can be negative and dangerous outcomes in liminality – "dominated by resentment, envy, and hate" (ibid.: 52). For Thomassen, liminality is a feature of contemporary life that deserves more attention. The extended period of uncertainty associated with Brexit, in between the referendum of 2016 and the end of a transition period on December 31, 2020 (with 2021 being the year in which the rights and status of all EU citizens in the UK will officially change), provides a lens with which to view a fairly unsettled landscape perceived as dangerous and causing anxiety and stress among those affected by it. Worries about the ability to continue to live in the UK or to join family there in the future have been very present among EU citizens in the UK, as are concerns about eventual deportations in the wake of the Windrush scandal.[9]

In their attention to ritualized forms of status change, Van Gennep and Turner considered reversals and demotions as well as promotions of status, and this is also a factor in viewing the outcome of the liminal period of Brexit. It is leading toward a form of "ritual degradation" (Turner 1974: 232) for EU citizens living in the UK in that rights will be lost.[10] As EU citizens, the French could easily cross the channel, reside and work in London or elsewhere in the EU, and go back and forth to France when they so desired. The Brexit process caused a shift in their feelings of belonging, not so much with respect to the UK more broadly but as legal residents of the city of London, and led to their re-positioning in the social space of the UK.[11]

Ambiguities of Belonging: The French in London Before and After Brexit

There is a long history of French presence in London, which is memorialized across the city.[12] The recent acceleration of movement to the UK that began in the 1990s was layered upon previous waves of Normans, Huguenots, Royalists fleeing the French Revolution, exiles from the Franco-Prussian War, and the Free French government of World War II.[13] According to the French government, 2 million French citizens live abroad, and the United Kingdom is third among the destinations for these mobile French, after Switzerland and the United States. The French constitute the sixth largest group of EU citizens in the UK,[14] after those from Poland, Romania, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, and Portugal. Most of the French in the UK live in the London area.

When I began my research, there were approximately 300,000 French citizens who resided in London. Estimating the number of French citizens in London and throughout the UK is not straightforward, however, because they have not been required to register their presence under the mobility regime of the EU that permits free movement of EU citizens across the member states. The French in London have been surrounded by a large range of francophone institutions. These include many schools, churches, shops, civic associations, the French Embassy and French Consulate, and a large cultural center – the French Institute (*L'Institut Français*), which is subsidized by the French government. There are also many health providers and real

estate firms that cater to the French population in London. In addition, there is a francophone London radio station, and many websites and Facebook groups supporting the French population.[15]

I first discovered and encountered the large French presence in London during a sabbatical semester spent at Cambridge University in autumn 2012,[16] when I visited the South Kensington neighborhood of London. At that time and unaware of any other anthropological research among this population, I started to consider undertaking a research project that would bring together my interests in migration processes and my long-standing engagement with the anthropology of France and French people.[17] I launched this study in 2014, and made my first research trip to London in March 2015. Between March 2015 and January 2020, I have conducted nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in London, during noncontinuous periods ranging from one month to three months. This is a long-term project and is still ongoing. My research provides a longitudinal perspective on the effects of a changing mobility and citizenship regime and new international borders for French citizens in London who previously experienced the benefits of free movement to the UK.

The fieldwork upon which this article is based includes participant observation at both informal and formal social gatherings in a variety of French and francophone institutions and civic associations in London, as well as in homes and restaurants, and both semi-structured and open-ended interviews that took place either in the homes of my research participants or in quiet corners of coffee shops and restaurants. I also attended and did some fieldwork at demonstrations and marches organized by the coalitions of Remain advocates. My conversations and interviews with French residents in London have been conducted in the French language, even though several of my interlocutors are bilingual.[18] I have sought to include a diverse range of people in my study, who differ in terms of age and length of residence in London. My research participants include elderly long-term residents of London, some of whom live on modest retirement incomes and in subsidized housing; young adults living in co-housing situations and earning meagre salaries in service industry jobs; and middle-class and upper-middle class professionals. They include not only French nationals from metropolitan France, but also French citizens from French overseas departments and Africans from former colonies who inherited their French citizenship by way of kinship ties (largely based on prior military service). Some came to London when transferred by their companies, some came via diplomatic service, some came as entrepreneurs and to establish small businesses, some came as an accompanying partner or spouse, some came as students, and still others came alone seeking a job. My research has thus far concerned only first-generation residents and not their children. Although there is variation in the social class backgrounds of those with whom I have interacted, most of my research participants are what can be characterized as "middling migrants" (Conradson & Latham 2005; see also Raj 2003 and Amit 2007), who are neither super-rich and super-mobile nor destitute.[19] They live scattered in different boroughs of London, especially the younger newly arrived who find affordable housing wherever they can. My research participants live, for example, in such boroughs as Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Camden, Wandsworth, Southwark, and Hounslow.

Things have changed quite dramatically from just a few years ago when I first began to conceive of a project on the French in London in 2012. In October 2013, French-based journalist Anne-Elisabeth Moutet wrote an article in the right-wing British newspaper the *Telegraph* about the French fleeing to London due to the economic woes they suffered in France. At the time, there had been a lot of media attention reporting that affluent French nationals were relocating elsewhere in order to avoid the heavy taxes in France levied by then President François Hollande's government. Moutet's article was entitled "Down and Out: The French Flee a Nation in Despair" (Moutet 2013a). A week later, she wrote a follow-up piece (2013b) responding to the criticisms of her original article which had outraged French readers, who labeled it as "British propaganda." Moutet mentioned that although some French

people had written her to voice their agreement with her portrayal of their compatriots, she also encountered dismissals of her assessment, noting "Elsewhere, I was told that French emigration to Britain was 'a myth', the figures 'too low to even consider.' In an online chat, I was asked why I wrote in English, implying that I was some sort of traitor."

A cartoon that accompanied Moutet's story, by *Telegraph* cartoonist Howard McWilliams, traded in stereotypes. There is a British man, in pinstripe suit and bowler hat, symbolizing the City of London, London's financial center. He tips his hat to welcome a Frenchman, who is caricatured with moustache, beret, and a Breton-style striped sailor's shirt. The Frenchman walks across what appears to be a depiction of France as a desert. A French flag hanging in the background is tattered. The Frenchman has a big grin on his face as, crossing the channel, he approaches a green and shining Britain and extends his arm to shake hands with the also smiling Brit awaiting him there. This depiction of a welcoming Britain presents a sharp contrast to the current situation.

Moutet's article appeared not too long after the emergence of claims in 2012 that London was France's sixth biggest city – meaning that there were more French living there than in Bordeaux. This was the subject of a BBC news online article (Ash 2012) that reported a huge presence of French people in the city and quoted the French Consulate as believing there were between 300,000 and 400,000 French citizens living there – more in fact than the population of Bordeaux. When he was mayor of London, Boris Johnson frequently claimed that he was the mayor of the sixth largest French city, and others were also using this rhetoric. London was described at the time as "Paris-on-Thames."

The case of French citizens in London illustrates both continuities and shifts in senses of belonging that have been triggered by Brexit. In the midst of the negotiation and transition phases of Brexit, they are living, along with everyone else affected, in what is popularly known as "Brexit limbo" (in French, *dans le flou*). This metaphor was used in a collection of essays, *In Limbo: Brexit Testimonies from EU Citizens in the UK* (Remigi, Martin & Sykes 2017), edited by activists associated with the group The3million, which lobbies on behalf of EU citizens. As one of the editors of the collection, an Italian national living in the UK, wrote in her preface: "Our limbo is not only about whether or not we have the right documents to be able to live here or not. There is a psychological limbo too into which we have been plunged" (Remigi 2017: xiii). To be or feel in limbo is a concept similar to liminality and may be viewed as an emic articulation of the feelings of uncertainty and potential danger and chaos associated with the Brexit process.

For many of my research participants, Brexit has evoked feelings of having been betrayed and rejected by the UK. They were shocked (a common phrase has been "c'était un choc") by the referendum results and its implications for them, given the long-standing entanglements and physical proximity between their two countries. I have discussed elsewhere (Reed-Danahay 2020b) the emotional aspects of Brexit and how it has influenced the temporality of decisions about staying or remaining in the UK for French nationals. A changing legal structure surrounds people who have settled in a country with one set of expectations and are now confronted with a new legal status and a climate that is less welcoming to migrants. This has affected their behaviors and feelings of belonging and affiliation in the UK. Everyday anecdotes of French people being insulted in public for speaking French have spread.[20] One woman told me that in the autumn after the vote to leave, she was picking up her children from school and speaking French to them, when another parent (British) yelled across the street "Speak English!".

One concern for French nationals is that they had never considered themselves to be migrants (using the term *migrant* in French), but had come to see that they were perceived as such along with other foreigners in the UK. That EU citizens should not be conflated with non-EU migrants is a sentiment shared by all of my French research participants. My French interlocutors have explained to me that in France, the term *migrant* has a pejorative connotation with which they do not want to be linked. In France, *un migrant* is someone who is poor and

comes primarily from outside of Europe. When I discussed this with an EU bureaucrat in 2017, he told me that the French were indeed neither immigrants nor migrants because they were EU citizens and therefore mobile Europeans. Even though some of the French in London may have preferred the term expat (also *expat* in French), many with whom I spoke struggled to find a term to describe their status because they simply had not really thought of a label for their positionality in the UK prior to Brexit. As EU citizens in another EU member state, there was no need for such a label. This is how a headline in the French newspaper *Le Monde* in October 2018 described what would change: "After Brexit, the United Kingdom will treat a European just like any other immigrant" (my translation).

I have followed the trajectories over time of several people since I began my fieldwork. A young woman in her early thirties who had come with her partner to London with the initial expectation of possibly settling long-term, left after two years when she was laid off from her job. She believes her EU citizenship was behind this, and her attitudes toward the British have soured since I first met her in 2015. Another young woman in her early thirties, from Martinique, came to London hoping to find work in the hospitality industry. Her employment experiences have been precarious in that she initially found a job, was laid off, and then trained in another profession but has since been on short-term contract jobs. She hopes to stay but is open to a move to another European country for work. One couple with teenage children have returned to France after several years in London, after the husband had the choice of either making his job in London more permanent or transferring back to Paris. The wife told me that Brexit was a definite factor in their decision. Stories about such spatial choices (Bourdieu [1993]1999) abound in French social circles and are a point of discussion, but some people have more choices about how to respond to the changes associated with Brexit – including income, gender, age, marital status, and ethnicity/race.[21]

Here is an example from my fieldwork during the period before the referendum. One afternoon in the spring of 2016, when the Leave campaign was in full swing, I arranged to visit a middle-aged woman with school-age children who had followed her husband a few years earlier to London when he was transferred there for his job in the financial industry. She was not working outside of the house for pay, and was active in French expatriate associations. As we sat in her living room drinking coffee one morning, I asked her some questions about how much she felt at home in the UK and what it had been like to move to London. She told me about how difficult it had been to get to know English people, even though her children attended a private English school. She and her husband mainly socialized with other French people and she felt that although superficially friendly, the English were not all that interested in getting to know people from outside their own social circle. But she also felt out of place in France now, after having lived a few years in London, and it was no longer the same home for her that it had been before she had left. She told me that the only place she really felt "at home" in terms of being at peace and feeling comfortable was when she was travelling in the Eurostar train. There, she was neither in the UK nor in France. She was just in the present and not conscious of the awkward status she had now in both places.

In his discussion of social dramas, Turner distinguished between "outsiders" and "marginals." During a social drama, those who are part of the social fabric come to feel as outsiders as a result of their liminal status during the transition phase. During the liminal phase they are outsiders, who later regain a new sense of being part of the reconfigured social scene during the period of resolution. By contrast, marginals are people like "migrant foreigners," who are similarly liminal to outsiders, Turner wrote, "but have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (1974: 233). Was the woman profiled in the previous paragraph an outsider or a marginal? Can we distinguish between French nationals in London who felt accepted there more than did she, who now came to feel as outsiders, and those like her who never felt remotely as an "insider"?

Other cases illustrate the precarity of those who felt "at home" and at ease in the UK but for whom

the social drama of Brexit disrupted this. An elderly French woman who came to London when she was in her late twenties, remained single, and worked as a teacher, provides an example of one of the most vulnerable in the social drama of Brexit. She does not use the internet, which is how the "settled status" applications are to be filed. She lives on a small retirement income and in subsidized housing, and she is in poor health. I have visited her regularly since 2015, and her approach to Brexit has been: "how can they possibly kick me out?" She arrived in London before the free movement provisions for European citizens and acquired permanent residency in the UK years ago. She was initially very uncertain of what steps to take in order to acquire settled status, which she was obligated to acquire even though she already had permanent residency, and unsure about the paperwork and documents she would need in the future to travel to visit family in France. When I saw her in January 2020, I learned that she had recently earned settled status after receiving help to file the necessary documents by an association in London that assists vulnerable French residents. This woman has retained a strong identity as French, in spite of the years living in the UK, and does not feel British. She has made acquaintances among British people, but her closest friends in London are also native to France, and she preserves strong ties to her childhood friends in France. During her long residence in London, she had come to feel respected and accepted, and she had lectured on various topics regarding France to British audiences in her retirement years. Her reaction to Brexit has been one of deep disappointment, as she had felt that being French always gave her a social advantage in London.

In a third case, that of a woman in her late forties whom I first interviewed in the spring of 2019, the Brexit vote came as a complete shock because she had felt very bicultural and "at home" in London. She had moved to the UK as a university student via the EU's Erasmus exchange program, and had remained there, developing her career and fostering social networks among both British and French residents of London. In the course of our conversation, which was conducted in French, she suddenly switched to English for emphasis to tell me that, on the morning after the Brexit referendum, "I felt as though I had been stabbed in the heart!" This dramatic statement expresses her feelings of now being a liminal outsider in the social drama and someone undertaking a rite of passage that feels like a form of degradation and lowering of social and legal status. Having already acquired permanent residency in the UK, she had become a UK citizen after the referendum to ensure her rights. Even though she is a citizen, she feels newly "foreign" in London in the wake of Brexit. She also noted that many French acquaintances of hers have not applied for citizenship because they are still too angry about the situation.

The Ethnography of Uncertainty: Brexit, Anthropology, and the European Union

Brexit matters to the anthropology of Europe in that it calls any linear narrative of the growth of the European Union and consolidation of European identity into question. How can an anthropology of Europe contribute to understandings of the processes through which mobile Europeans negotiate their multiple and frequently ambiguous modes of belonging in the face of Brexit? In this last section, I will draw upon my research and the arguments about liminality and social drama that I have developed in this article in order to address these questions.

The current liminal status of French and other EU citizens in the UK during this period of transition in the "social drama" of Brexit is one in which those who have not become naturalized UK citizens will have a diminished legal status and lower rights in the UK than before Brexit. Although on the one hand Brexit may lead to ritual degradation among EU citizens living there, there is also the potential for this to result in a rite of intensification for EU citizens – a renewed commitment to an EU identity brought into relief by the Brexit process. This is, of course, the hope of the EU. When I attended the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in May 2017,[22] there was much talk of renewed energy among EU citizens in the wake of Brexit. There was a grand March for Europe through the streets of Rome that had counterparts in other cities, including London.

We have since seen the election of pro-Europe President Macron in France (who has encouraged the French in London to come back home) but also the increasing growth of far-right and anti-EU political movements across Europe.

Depending upon the outcome of final negotiations, following the confusion and uncertainty of this social drama and accompanying liminal period in between the breach and the final resolution, will the commitment of these mobile French people to the EU grow stronger or weaker? As anthropologists studying the European Union "from below" (e.g. Macdonald 1993; Bellier & Wilson 2000; Stacul, Moutsou & Kopnina 2006; Demossier 2007) as well as within its own institutions (e.g. Shore 2000) have observed, belonging in a diverse Europe of states and regions has long posed challenges for the construction of a united European space that is free of social or territorial borders. The social drama of Brexit has brought a heightened consciousness of being an EU citizen to the fore both among those UK citizens who voted to Leave the EU and those UK and EU citizens living in the UK who favor Remain, wishing that their freedom of movement and EU citizenship rights could continue. The aspirations of the EU to construct feelings of European identity among its citizens may have paradoxically been advanced by Brexit (in the case of the French and other mobile Europeans), even as Brexit itself may be a symptom of its failures to act as a social and inclusive Europe.

Social transitions, as I noted earlier in this article by way of referencing Moore and Myerhoff, can cause people to question what they took for granted as being the state of the social world. They lead us to see the impermanence of social life, which is something that nation-states have worked hard to avoid as they present themselves as solid and based in historical realities. Brexit has disrupted the status quo of European mobility (among many other things) and contributes to the recognition that the EU is a fairly new social body-in-the-making. It is still working to construct a sense of European identity among its citizens, and Brexit represents a glaring failure on this front – at least when it comes to the British.

With reference to my own research population, however, French identity is strong but a consciousness of European identity and affiliation became increasingly present and viewed positively in the wake of the Brexit vote (even when the EU itself may be the subject of criticisms). The French have benefited for almost thirty years from the free movement of EU citizens within the EU that was established with the Maastricht Treaty. In my pre-Brexit discussions with the French in London, European identity was not a particularly prominent component of their sense of belonging in comparison with French national identity. Most of the French citizens in London who arrived there from metropolitan France maintain a strong attachment to France. The easy access back and forth from London to Paris has been a factor in the continuing ties to France for the majority of the French in London. Although Marta Kempny (2012) writes that Poles in Belfast retain an attachment to Polish identity because they are so far away from Poland, this does not explain the French case. The geographical proximity of France to the UK is very much a factor in the continued identification with France that is exhibited by my research participants. But an additional factor may be that the French educational system instills a profound sense of national identity based on language and history. For example, even though French citizens from its overseas departments and territories have less attachment to the territory of France itself, especially if they never lived there, my research participants from the Antilles and Africa have told me that through French education they came to identify strongly with French culture (language, cuisine, literature).

As I compose this article in the months before the final negotiations for the ongoing relationship between the UK and EU post-Brexit are approved by the end of December 2020, and before new immigration policies that affect EU citizens in the UK are implemented in the months and years to come, there continues to be a situation that I have characterized as "liminal" for EU citizens, including French citizens in London.[23] The emotional responses that Brexit has provoked among EU citizens living in the UK are in large part connected to the uncertainties

and temporalities of a long process that seems to have no end as their legal and social status shifts. Whether or not increased attachment to the EU will be the outcome may depend upon the final "deal" for EU citizens who are resident in the UK, because it will be a sign of the ability of the EU to protect and advance the interests of its citizens. Craig Calhoun (2007) has claimed that "nations matter" quite a lot now, especially in the face of growing nationalist and populist movements in Europe, and the nationalism of Brexit is a symptom of that trend. Adrian Favell (2017), who coined the term "Eurostars" in a pre-Brexit era to denote EU movers, suggests that a process of "renationalization" may be occurring among many mobile Europeans in the wake of Brexit. By contrast, my own research points in a different direction, because there was no widescale de-nationalization among the French in London to begin with.

For Rogers Brubaker, "the nation-state remains the decisive locus of membership even in a globalizing world; struggles over belonging in and to the nation-state remain the most consequential forms of membership politics" (2010: 77). He argues that states maintain ties with their citizens who live externally to their borders and also maintain control over those living within their territory who have come from elsewhere, and notes that this control is supported by "the language of nationalism" (ibid.: 78). For Brubaker, the term transborder is preferable to transnational in understanding the experiences of mobile people. This very much applies in the case of the French in London. The French in London already felt very French, not so European, and definitely not "British" even if they playfully enjoyed what some have described to me as the quaint customs and history of the UK. For many, as I have indicated, their vision of the British turned darker following the Brexit referendum, in that they felt rejected and realized that for many people in the UK they were viewed as "any other immigrant." My research thus far suggests that a greater appreciation of the benefits of EU citizenship has arisen in the context of these feelings of rejection by the British. My French research participants have been placed in a more precarious position both legally and socially in the wake of the Brexit process. Will their feelings of uncertainty and of being less welcome in the UK lead to a more European sense of identity or will it reinforce their attachment to France?

During my fieldwork in the period before the 2016 vote to leave the EU, French people in London primarily experienced their lives in a translocal way across the two nations of France and Britain (and, more specifically, a city or region of France and London). The European Union was vaguely in the background for most, even as it facilitated their mobility. The picture that is coming into focus now regarding the French in London is one of mobile people who keep their ties to France, are more conscious of their European (supranational) identity due to the threats to the advantages of having it, and who will acquire new legal statuses in the UK out of necessity when they determine that it may benefit them. Nations matter, but so does the EU. The social drama of Brexit and the transitions it promises in a shifting landscape of ambiguous belonging is one that anthropologists are well poised to study through their close observations of how such transitions are lived and perceived in everyday life.

Notes

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2 This article is a revised and extended version of a paper delivered at the American Anthropological Annual Meetings in 2017 entitled "EU Mobility, Brexit, and the Liminal: '*L'Incertitude*' among French Citizens in London." This was in the panel on "Brexit Matters" organized by Thomas Wilson. I would like to thank Tom and also the two anonymous reviewers for this journal, as well as the journal's editors Marie Sandberg and Monique Scheer, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

3 This term has appeared in both the British and French media. See, e.g., recent reference to the "divorce process" and the "divorce bill" in BBC News (October 19, 2019), https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-48511379, and Bernard, Ducourtiex & Bacqué (2019).

4 Information about the history of this group and its current activities can be found on its website https://www.the3million.org.uk/. For media coverage as Brexit negotiations began of the cry "we are not bargaining chips," see http://www.rfi.fr/en/europe/20190205-brexit-eu-citizens-bargaining-chips-legal-limbo-no-deal; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/17/3-million-citizens-uk-brexit-vote-theresa-may; and https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/05/theresa-may-clarify-stance-eu-citizens-right-to-remain-uk-brexit.

5 https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families/what-settled-and-presettled-status-means (last accessed June 18, 2020).

6 See also Watts (2016) on abuse against French citizens in the wake of the referendum. Other groups have suffered more extensive forms of hostility, especially those from Eastern European countries. See Guma & Jones (2019) and Botterill & Burrell (2019).

7 In a discussion of "resilience" among French nationals in Manchester following Brexit, Brahic and Lallement (2018) frame their precarity in terms of strategies aimed at being able to "bounce back."

8 It is also the case that UK citizens are going to lose their EU citizenship, but this is a topic outside the immediate scope of this essay.

9 The Windrush scandal refers to efforts by the UK's Home Office to deport thousands of people of Caribbean ancestry who believed they were legally resident in the UK. This erupted in 2018. A controversial official report of an investigation into practices of deportation was published in March 2020. See Gentleman & Bowcott (2020).

10 See Shaw (2018) for a discussion of the implications of this loss, which she compares to the loss of rights associated with the break-up of Yugoslavia.

11 I have elaborated upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social space and its implications for the study of migration and mobility, albeit without extensive reference to the case of the French in London, in Reed-Danahay (2020a).

12 Some examples of this include the statue of General Charles de Gaulle in Carleton Gardens, and cultural heritage sites and tours related to the Huguenot presence in the Spitalfields neighborhood.

13 For historical perspectives, see Kelly & Cornick (2013). Regarding the more recent migration of French nationals to the UK, see the overview in Huc-Hepher & Drake (2013).

14 These statistics are from the Office of National Statistics (2020) for the year 2019. Among EU citizens in London, the Polish are by far the largest group (with one million in the UK), followed by Romanians and Irish who also have very high numbers.

15 In the aftermath of Brexit, two print francophone magazines have ceased operations, although one associated with the French lycée in London continues.

16 I am grateful to have been awarded a Yip Fellowship at Magdalene College, which permitted me to spend that semester at Cambridge.

17 I had recently completed a book based on ethnographic research I had conducted among former Vietnamese refugees in Texas (Brettell & Reed-Danahay 2012; see also Reed-Danahay 2015), but I had spent much of my career focused on the anthropology of France (e.g., Reed-Danahay 1996).

18 I have close to native fluency in French given my long engagement with French studies, beginning with fieldwork in rural France in 1980. Although several of my research participants who had lived for a long time in London were bilingual, most of those with whom I spoke were not as proficient in English as I am in French. When speaking with those who were bilingual, however, we frequently code switched between the two languages during conversations. Research participants and I often chose venues for interviews and extended conversations where there would not likely be francophone patrons, in order to preserve some privacy in our conversations when we were speaking French yet surrounded primarily by English speakers.

19 There is a growing literature on the contemporary presence of French citizens in the UK, although most of this has focused on the "highly skilled" segment of the population or on what Favell earlier referred to as "Eurostars." See e.g. Favell 2008; Ryan & Mulholland 2014; Brahic & Lallement 2018.

20 See Huc-Hepher (2019) for a depiction of what the author refers to as xenophobic "microaggressions" reported by French residents of London that predated the 2016 referendum.

21 For other examples of diverse responses to Brexit from my fieldwork, see Reed-Danahay (2020b).

22 I attended the Jean Monnet seminar on The Future of Europe in Rome by invitation in my capacity as Jean Monnet Chair. I also attended the March for Europe and other events marking the anniversary.

23 The final version of this article has also been prepared in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected mobility and increased the feelings of liminality and uncertainty for EU citizens. Unfortunately, I have been unable to conduct any fieldwork addressing this issue since my most recent trip to London in January 2020, and so this development is out of the scope of this particular article.

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