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Decolonising and the Aesthetic Turn in International Studies: Border Thinking, Co-Creation and Voice

Abstract

The aesthetic turn (AT) in International Studies stresses the ongoing task of marshalling non-western insights to better explore the agency of the globally marginalised in discourses about representability. Decolonial literature also calls specifically for more understanding of relationality and co-creativity underpinning agency and voice in global politics. Building on this decolonialising challenge, this article embeds a focus on ‘ordinary language use’ within a ‘decolonial orientation’ to open up complexities around the politics of representability. It specifically employs the concept of ‘border thinking’ by Walter Dignolo; and centres struggles in language by Gloria Anzaldúa as well as in the vernacular language ‘Verlan’ (as used by working-class racially marginalised people in France) to think ‘from’ the border. Highlighting how language works across (not just within) different registers and forms, the categories of ‘non-standard’ and ‘standard’, ‘domination’ and ‘resistance’ are destabilised. This provides the basis for re-centring Othered voices within a more relational co-creative ontology, by making the entanglement of discipline and resistance a space to think modernity from, rather than a space of interruption into modernity.

Key words: aesthetic turn; border thinking; co-creation; decolonising; language; voice

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Introduction

We die. That maybe the meaning of life. But we do language. That maybe the measure of our lives¹

Pour dire bonjour, tu dis wesh / To say 'bonjour' you say 'wesh'
Une phrase complete, wesh bien? / The full sentence, 'wesh bien?'
...Pour dire j'adore, tu dis kiff / To say 'j'adore', you say 'kiff'
Pour les cheveux, tu dis tifs / For 'les cheveux', you say 'tiffs'
Puis quand t'as faim, tu dis aim-f / And when you are 'faim', you say 'aimf'
Un africain, tu dis cinf / [For] an africain, you say 'cinf'
...Pour dire flirter, tu dis pécho / To say 'flirter', you say 'pécho'
Pour dire joint, tu dis bédot / To say 'joint', you say 'bédot'
...Pour dire avare, tu dis crevard / To say 'avare' you say 'crevard'
Un immigré, c'est un blédard / An 'immigré', is 'blédard'
...J'ai voulu apprendre le népalais, le marocain, le colombien, le mandarin,
l'américain, le suédois / I wanted to learn Nepalese, Moroccan, Columbian,
Mandarin, American, Swedish
... Mais c'est en Verlan que j'ai des fa-ci-li-tés / But it's in Verlan that I get by with
the most ease and ab-il-i-ty²

In International Studies (IS) is it now recognised that marginalised voices have been suppressed rather than elucidated within its dominant colonial, Eurocentric, imperial, racist frameworks³. That said, the discipline has become increasingly diverse and pluralised, and the 'aesthetic turn' (AT) has made a big contribution to this. The AT has notably led reflections on what is meant by 'voice' and how this can be opened up – through its analysis of the sensory in art and popular culture.⁴ It has enabled 'voice' to be linked to practices through which people express and

¹ Toni Morrison *Nobel Prize for Literature Acceptance Speech*, December 7, 1993.

² Kerridine Soltani, 'Le Verlan' Radio Edit, *Kerredine Soltani* (Les Mecs d'Oberkampf, 2015); Lyrics reproduced with permission.

³ Branwen Gruffydd Jones, *Decolonizing IR* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western Theory 1760-2010* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (Routledge, 2004); Himadeep Muppidi, *Colonial Signs of International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Robbie Shilliam, ed., *IR and Non-western Thought* (Routledge, 2010); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Cornel University Press, 2015).

⁴ E.g. Roland Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory', *Millennium* No. 3, (2001): 509-533; Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World politics* (Palgrave, 2009); Federica Caso, and Caitlin Hamilton, eds. *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*. (E-International Relations, 2015); M.I. Franklin, ed. *Resounding International Relations: On Music, Politics and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Mike Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (Routledge, 2012); Christine Sylvester, *Art/Museums: IR where we Least Expect It* (Paradigm, 2009).

represent themselves through various combinations of (visual, affective and/or audible) senses to create what is thinkable and meaningful.

However, within this AT there is an emphasis on the ongoing need to ‘marshal non-western and postcolonial accounts’ more to better explore the agency of the globally marginalised in discourses about representability.⁵ Furthermore, decolonial literature in IS emphasises the need to unpack more deeply the role of the globally marginalised as one of ‘complex powerlessness’ whereby their actions ‘operating on the fringes of power impact the system in decisive ways’.⁶ Gurminder Bhambra notably points to a rich focus in IS on co-victimhood, and co-resistance in the face of modernity between globally dominant and globally marginal(ised) cultures.⁷ However, she and others distinguish this from analysis of ‘co-creation’ of modernity, which they argue is lacking.⁸

In the music lyrics above, the artist Kerredine Soltani – the son of Tunisian parents who grew up in France on the outskirts of Paris in the *banlieue Argenteuil* – notes the development of a vernacular by working-class racialised migrant heritage people in France known as ‘Verlan’. Soltani points to how working-class racialised migrant heritage people in France are ‘taking voice’ through this vernacular, which works through processes of language mixing and language inversions. Squire *et al* distinguish between moments when voice is ‘given’ through dominant structures of power, contra moments when people ‘take voice’ in ways that undermine the premise on which dominant structures of power make sense of the world.⁹ They highlight the importance of exploring instances of ‘taking voice’ which represent ‘diverse narratives, practices and projects...that are otherwise rendered invisible’ (*ibid*) when trying to think about ‘decolonised’ dialogues to bring ‘alternative’ subjects into being.¹⁰

This article embeds a focus on ‘ordinary language use’ within a ‘decolonial orientation’ in order to open up the complexities around the politics of representability and better explore the agency of globally marginalised peoples here.¹¹ It employs the concept of ‘border thinking’

⁵ Brent J. Steele, ‘Recognizing and Realizing the Promise of the Aesthetic Turn’, *Millennium*, No. 2, (2007): 207; Aida A. Hozic (2017) (ed.) ‘The Aesthetic Turn at 15 (Legacies, Limits and Prospects)’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Special Issue, No.2 (2017): 201-205.

⁶ John Hobson and Alina Sajed, ‘Navigating Beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory: Exploring the Complex Landscapes of Non-Western Agency’ *International Studies Review*, No.4, (2017): 562.

⁷ Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007): 19.

⁸ Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Gurminder Bhambra *Connected Sociologies: Theory for a Global Age* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Hobson and Sajed, ‘Navigating Beyond’; Alina Sajed, *Postcolonial Encounters in International Relations: The Politics of Transgression in the Maghreb* (Routledge, 2013); Robbie Shilliam, ‘What We (Should Have) Talked About at ISA: Poststructural and Postcolonial Thought’ *The Disorder of Things*, 24 April 2011; Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anticolonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2015).

⁹ Vicki Squire, Nina Perkowski, Dallal Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Reclaiming Migration: Voices from Europe’s ‘Migrant Crisis’* (Manchester University Press, 2021): 48.

¹⁰ Sabaratnam, M. (2011) ‘IR in Dialogue...But can we Change the Subjects? A Typology of Strategies for the Study of World Politics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, No.3, (2011): 781-803.

¹¹ Xavier Guillaume, ‘How to Do things with Silence: Rethinking the Centrality of Speech to the Securitization Framework’ *Security Dialogue* No.6, (2018): 476-492; Véronique Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics and IR: A Grammatical Reading* (Routledge, 2010).

by Walter Mignolo, and looks at ordinary language use (across, rather than within) poetry and prose, dialect and public speech, Spanish and English by Gloria Anzaldúa to think through the ordinariness of border languages and thereby to enable thinking *from* the border language Verlan (as used by working-class racialised migrant heritage people in France). Highlighting how language works across (not just within) different registers and forms, the categories of ‘non-standard’ and ‘standard’, ‘domination’ and ‘resistance’ are destabilised. The result is that ‘modernity’ is rethought beyond oppression and discipline of the margins contra challenges presented by the margins, and instead in terms of *co-creation* with and through the margins. By focusing on the co-creation of modernity by those marginal(ised), this article builds on existing ideas about the complexity of voice(s) and subjectivities of the marginalised and Othered in International Studies; but with particular focus on how this works ‘beyond the known, the exposed, the victim’.¹²

This article provides the following three contributions: first, it adds to our understanding of the role of the Othered beyond ideas of responsive creativity and abjectness by focusing on their role in the co-creation of modernity. Second, it stresses a new starting point from which we can reflect on global politics by emphasising an alternative understanding of ‘modernity’ to think from – one made up of processes of standardisation produced *through* the margins (and bound up in the *entanglement* of discipline and challenge). Third, it shows how border thinking can be employed as part of the AT in IS – to develop a decolonising lens.¹³ Collectively these contributions aid in enabling the project of decolonising within the AT in IS.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section discusses existing contributions of the AT towards understandings of ‘voice’ and ‘language’; but highlights the importance of ‘ordinary language use’ to move towards a more holistic understanding of how standardised and non-standardised language forms *intersect* to enable co-creation of modernity. The second section centres the work of Walter Mignolo and his concept of ‘border thinking’, as well as the work of Gloria Anzaldúa on the ordinariness of border ‘linguaging’.¹⁴ Through the insights from these authors, the article reflects on the ordinariness of the border language as an embodied conscious space to think from (rather than about). The third section looks at how Verlan, as used by working-class racialised migrant heritage people in France, can be understood as an ordinary embodied part of doing language and building culture rather

¹² Hobson and Sajed, ‘Navigating Beyond’, 564.

¹³ Marc Woons and Sebastian Weier, Eds. *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2017).

¹⁴ Rey Chow, *Not like a Native Speaker: On Linguaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

than an atypical type of language use. I move then in the fourth section to think ‘from’ Verlan as a space of ordinary language use to reflect on how modern national community is co-created here. This final section argues that this deepens our understanding of the co-creative relationality at play in modernity *across* discipline and challenge, standardisation and non-standardisation, the audible and inaudible.

The Aesthetic Turn in IS: Opening up Voice

The AT in IS builds on what is commonly called ‘the linguistic turn’.¹⁵ which pointed to the standardisation of technocratic, patriarchal, racist, gendered and securitised linguistic frameworks, variously combined, in mainstream IS which have narrowly circumscribed its imagination and rendered many voices mute.¹⁶ The AT opens up the way ‘voice’ can be conceptualised by revaluing sensory modes of inquiry. It emphasises the importance of the sensory to ‘how politics is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, carried out and legitimised’.¹⁷ What is explored are the verbal and non-verbal sensory aspects of how language works to invoke emotions, feelings, and affect.

A key focus within the AT has been to draw attention to alternatives *within* language, by unpacking the diversity in language forms to elucidate on questions of resistance and alternative subjecthood. Aesthetics is linked here using the work of Jacques Rancière¹⁸ to ‘sense-making’ because what makes sense (or is ‘sensible’) is linked to what is made audible, felt or visible and therefore thinkable and meaningful.¹⁹ Dominant forms of disciplining the sensible are considered alongside alternative forms of reconfiguring ‘sensitivity’ here.

What is emphasised, in particular, are the ‘multiple voices that are possible’ when we engage non-standardised language forms.²⁰ Examples of non-standardised language forms looked at (and explored) include poetry²¹; autobiography²²; storytelling²³; songwriting²⁴; and

¹⁵ Roland Bleiker, ‘The Aesthetic Turn’.

¹⁶ E.g. Carol Cohen, ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals’, *Signs*, No.4, (1987): 697-718; Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shoat, Eds, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Roland Bleiker, Ed. *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018): 4.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Trans G. Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004): 7-12.

¹⁹ E.g. Jenny Edkins, and Adrian Kear, eds, *International Politics and Performance* (Routledge, 2013).

²⁰ Megan Daigle, ‘Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, No.1, (2016): 28.

²¹ Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany, Eds *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response* (Pluto, 2019).

²² Naeem Inayatullah, ed. *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR* (Routledge, 2010); Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee eds, *Narrative Global Politics: Theory, History and the Personal In IR* (Routledge, 2016); Erzsebet Strausz, *Writing the Self and Transforming Knowledge in International Relations: Towards a Politics of Liminality* (Routledge, 2018).

²³ Daigle, ‘Writing the Lives’.

²⁴ Susanna Hast, *Sounds of War: Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya* (E-International Relations, 2018).

novel writing.²⁵ What is argued is that it is a refusal in these (marginal and thus) non-standardised language forms to hold ‘boundaries of theory, methodology and analysis’ in place,²⁶ which enables different ways of voicing the self beyond authority and objectivity and therefore different ways of thinking about related issues such as resistance and subjectivity. Non-standardised language form is something which is posited as *separate* from standardised language form here.²⁷ This is because it is conceptualised as ‘an element of our humanity that gets lost’ given how we are taught we must write and think in terms of sovereignty and authority to be taken seriously.²⁸

What needs further scrutiny and reflection, however, are the conditions of voice-ability - understood more specifically as a relationship *between* how voices are opened up and shut down. Himadeep Muppidi has notably argued that what is needed is further understanding of the broader *relationship between* those standardised ways of voicing which ‘we get to hear all the time’ and those less-standardised ways which ‘are generally inaudible’.²⁹ This paper draws on the work of the historian Arlette Farge, who specialises in histories of the supposedly ‘voiceless’, to understand the relationship between voice and language. Farge posits ‘voice’ as that which has the potential to link together people in many different possible forms given the ‘multiple heritages which mould it, the nourishment and the accidents of life which deform it and which reshape/reroute (*déroutent*) it’.³⁰ She argues that these multiple heritages (of voice) are transmitted through languages – each of which is a specific system of signs which ‘establishes the identity of the subject’, grounding it in some respects through an interactive process with those who recognise it but not reducible to recognition by all. For Farge, voice is not limited to words but involves gestures, tone, sounds and that which escapes words – with different configurations of ‘voice’ depending on the type of language (the specific system of signs) used in a given context.

What Farge points to is how we can understand ‘voice’ from the margins as that which does not respect ‘traditional codes’ and ‘dominant accents’ but which is nonetheless bound up in languages involving their own codes, accents, tones and gestures – rather than simply

²⁵ Angharad Closs Stephens, (2011) ‘Beyond Imaginative Geographies? Critique, Cooptation and imagination in the aftermath of the War on Terror’, *Environment and Planning C: Society and Space*, No.2, (2011): 254-267; Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile* (Routledge, 2013); Shapiro, ‘Studies in Trans-disciplinary’.

²⁶ Hast ‘Sounds of War’: 137. See also e.g. Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (Routledge, 2013).

²⁷ Although the non-standardised is not understood as a new category with clear boundaries, as it ‘can refer to something within ourselves’ – Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Maladies of Our Soul: Identity and Voice in the writing of Academic International Relations’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, No.2, (2004): 381. See also Hast ‘Sounds of War’.

²⁸ Doty, ‘Maladies of Our Soul’: 386; Roland Bleiker, and Emma Hutchison, (2008) ‘Fear no More: Emotions and World Politics’, *Review of International Studies*, No.1 (2008): 115-135.

²⁹ Himadeep Muppidi, ‘Reflections on Narrative Voice’, *The Disorder of Things*, March 23 2013: np.

³⁰ Arlette Farge, *Essay Pour Une Histoire des Voix au dix-huitième Siècle* (Bayard Édition, 2009): 21.

antithetical to these.³¹ I suggest this helps us think about how people can ‘express the fabric of common experience’³² in language as part of broader struggles for voice. I do not understand language as resulting in ‘a collective voice [of] the anonymous’ but rather as operating as a space ‘in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation’³³ continue to be developed as part of broader struggles for voice. This paper seeks to consider how the concepts of standardisation/non-standardisation are central to voicing and making sensible common experiences in language through the effect of enunciation (where audibility intersects with emotions invoked through language) which influences what is meaningful and thinkable.

Recent attempts to draw attention to the ‘tension’ between standardisation and non-standardisation in the AT (articulated as ‘orchestration and improvisation’³⁴ move us closer towards considering the way language operates across what is made more and less sensible. However, standardisation is still separated out here from non-standard(isation) given how orchestration is explicitly associated with processes which have ‘a script’ or ‘are scripted in advance’ unlike improvisation which is associated with processes which lack ‘a script’.³⁵ What is missing is a focus on how processes of improvisation (those processes which lack ‘a script’) are *bound up* in standardisation (the processes which are scripted) as part of the politics of representability.

William Callahan argues that ‘greater appreciation of the relationality of dynamic dyads’ moves us further away from the fixed binary distinctions characteristic of colonial thought.³⁶ Callahan argues that this relational focus doesn’t just fill in an empirical gap but ‘presents an oblique entry into a nuanced appreciation of sensible politics itself’.³⁷ Elsewhere Holly Eva Ryan and Matthew Flinders point to the need to think about the ways in which voice and audibility are linked to the fluidities of how people simultaneously position themselves inside and outside a given socio-political role.³⁸ This article builds on this literature by considering the relationality, contextuality, contingent and fluid nature of the ‘dyad’ standardisation/non-standardisation to reflect on how their ‘productive tensions’ are key to the

³¹ Farge, *Essay Pour*: 297

³² Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 141

³³ Rancière, *Disagreement*: 141.

³⁴ Angharad Closs Stephens, Martin Coward, Samuel Merrill, and Shanti Sumartojo, ‘Affect and Response to Terror: Commemoration and Communities of Sense’, *International Political Sociology*, No.1, (2021): 26.

³⁵ Closs Stephens *et al*, ‘Affect and Response’: 26.

³⁶ William A. Callahan, *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2020): 48.

³⁷ Callahan, *Sensible Politics*: 56.

³⁸ Holly Eva Ryan, and Matthew Flinders, ‘From senseless to sensory democracy: Insights from applied and participatory theatre’, *Politics*, No.2, (2018): 139.

social ordering (and reordering) of nationhood where people simultaneously inhabit roles as both victims and challengers, as both creators and resisters.

I focus on modern nationhood in this article. Understanding key aspects of modernity (such as nationhood) as co-created is particularly urgent when we consider how the marginalised Other has been shown to be integral to language but also constructed as silenced through standardisation ‘beneath the white, white collars of objective social science’³⁹—emerging as challenger rather than enunciator. As arguably this undermines our understandings of the complexities at play in how oppression and subversion work, even as it strives precisely to explore the role of ‘creativity’ at play. Indeed, the need to focus more on the role of Othered voices in the creation of modernity is one which has been increasingly underscored by decolonial scholars in IS. They argue that without it academic knowledge production continues to be oriented around ‘the self/other-subject framework’.⁴⁰

From a decolonial perspective nationhood is understood to have reconfigured exclusionary logics of colonialism anew as part of modernity (rather than shifting towards more inclusionary forms of community emerging in response to colonialism, imperialism and slavery). Walter Dignolo notably unpacks how the formation of the nation state was the formation of a community of birth (replacing the community of faith) which shifted the language used to describe the Other from ‘heathen’ to ‘foreigner’ – the latter who was not necessarily an enemy of the common (now national) community but someone who was not born (and thus not national) ‘in a given language, territory, culture and blood’.⁴¹ The Other continued to be set in a hierarchy in other words, but this time based around the level of ‘civility’ linked to their nationality, with white European nationalities linked to the highest forms of civility.⁴² From a decolonial perspective plurality is thus understood as bound up in modern nationhood operating within it but having been suppressed through ideas of unity and cohesion bound up in hierarchical logics of ‘civility’.⁴³ With this in mind, this article does not set out to reify or naturalise nationhood but to explore how nationhood is co-constituted through exclusionary logics and plurality (rather than being separate from them) as part of modernity, and therefore explore nationhood in terms of connections and relationality rather than breaks.⁴⁴

³⁹ Doty, ‘Maladies of Our Soul’: 389.

⁴⁰ Shilliam, ‘What we should have’, np; Hobson and Sajed, ‘Navigating Beyond’: 557.

⁴¹ Walter Dignolo ‘Citizenship, Knowledge and the Limits of Humanity’, *American Literary History*, No.2, (2006): 319

⁴² Dignolo ‘Citizenship Knowledge’: 319

⁴³ Martin Munro, and Robbie Shilliam, ‘Alternative Sources of Cosmopolitanism: Nationalism, universalism and Creolite in Francophone Caribbean Thought’ In R. Shilliam (ed) *International Relations and Non-Western Thought* (Routledge, 2011): 159- 176

⁴⁴ Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

Indeed, the focus on Verlan in this article as a vernacular language which involves the blending of different linguistic elements from across several language communities – takes inspiration from a large body of literature on the politics of creolisation focused on the Caribbean – which pushes us to reconfigure understandings of identity and community around relationality rather than essence. This literature emphasises the complexities of how creolisation (as that which develops out of a mixture of different languages and becomes the main language of a place) operated as a tool of subversion across ‘a strategy of trickery’ *and* by being a ‘productive and responsible language’.⁴⁵ The creole language is understood as being part of surviving and making new worlds within plantation economies: involving subversion and restructuring of European languages and cultures, rather than ‘working to transcend European languages and cultures’.⁴⁶ The focus on Verlan below in this article helps us to think about the complexities of vernacular language use (which is based in language mixing) in a contemporary European postcolonial context. It does so by exploring how Verlan reflects and enables experiences which are complex colonial-national *entanglements* of resistance, subversion, agency and domination – which are central to enabling and (re)producing ‘Frenchness’ (subverting and restructuring it simultaneously) rather than simply maintaining it or challenging (to transcend) it.

It is with all this in mind I turn to consider work within IS based around the idea of ‘ordinary language’. This work seeks to understand possibilities of voicing which start from the intersection and relationality of standardised/non-standardised language use – and in terms of how modern linguistic possibility is enabled (the ‘doing’ of language which Morrison speaks of⁴⁷), rather than necessarily how it is only resisted or oppressive. Ordinary language can be defined as ‘automatic and normalised language use’.⁴⁸ This literature explores struggles in language *across* a variety of registers and ways of speaking (within what are referred to as ‘language games’, based on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein) rather in terms of standardised or non-standardised uses of language and associated connections and disconnections.⁴⁹ Wittgenstein posits language as always linked to a series of specific games (processes/ rules) which are enacted when one speaks.⁵⁰ Drawing on Wittgenstein, what is argued in this literature is that we need to begin with the rules of automatic and everyday language use to understand

⁴⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Trans. JA Dash (University of Virginia Press, 1989): 21

⁴⁶ Munro and Shilliam, ‘Alternative Sources’: 74; see also Celia Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory* (University of Virginia Press, 1999): 34.

⁴⁷ Morrison, *Nobel Prize*.

⁴⁸ Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics*: 17

⁴⁹ Guillaume, ‘How to do’; Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics*.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

the interwoven nature of language in action(s) – and then move into looking at language more generally in its ordinary use where change and fluidity are key.⁵¹

Speaking a language here is understood to be ‘part of an activity or of a form of life’.⁵² For example, what has been considered within this ordinary language literature is the integral role of silence(s) ‘to the flow and direction of debate’ – which enables communities to be constituted ‘or interpellates a reaction from those confronted by it’.⁵³ Elsewhere the significance of grammar in language has been emphasised as central to how we imagine and thus enact ethical possibility in the world.⁵⁴ This refers to the grammatical rules followed which enable naming to be made meaningful, such as through distinctions made between human/non-human, tragedy/crisis. Doing so, ordinary language theory explores general aesthetic questions regarding what can be said and how it can be said, understood as ‘the flow and direction of debate itself’.⁵⁵ This work also emphasises the need to expand understandings, however, on what constitutes everyday ‘ordinary’ types of language use, to explore further the complexity of aesthetic dimensions at play and to move beyond the ‘dominance of a modern rational, secular, liberal, “Western self”’.⁵⁶

The next section of this article embeds a focus on ‘ordinary language’ within a ‘decolonial orientation’ in order to open up some of these complexities around the politics of representability. It does so by considering the struggles in language of Gloria Anzaldúa, as someone positioned at the intersection of global dominance and global marginality who speaks in-between national languages and language forms – and therefore across standardised and non-standardised registers. I engage Anzaldúa’s work here as that which allows us to theorise the use of ordinary language and also which simultaneously provides examples of how ordinary language works on a day-to-day basis. I approach her expression(s) of language and poetry outlined below furthermore not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres but as a philosophical discourse which is bound up in the process of ‘refus[ing] the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics’.⁵⁷ This is given how her work draws

⁵¹ Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics*.

⁵² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 15.

⁵³ Xavier Guillaume and Elizabeth Schweiger, ‘Silence as Doing’ In: S Dingli and TN Cooke (Eds) *Political Silence: Meanings, Functions and Ambiguity* (Routledge, 2018) 96; Guillaume, ‘How to do’.

⁵⁴ Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics*.

⁵⁵ Sophia Dingli and Thomas N Cooke, ‘Re-Examining Political Silence: New Openings for Research and Practice’, *E-International Relations*, September 2019: np; Guillaume, ‘How to do’; Guillaume and Schweiger, ‘Silence as Doing’.

⁵⁶ Sophia Dingli, ‘We Need to Talk about Silence: Re-Examining Silence in IR Theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, No.4, (2015): 733.

⁵⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993): 38.

attention to the way poetry is a form of experimenting with issues of expressivity, language use and ‘self’ bound up in ordinary everyday cultural practice as political expression.

Indeed, within IS, literatures on ‘everyday politics’ emphasise the complexities of how people live their day-to-day lives, and push us to think creatively (‘curiously’⁵⁸) about the ‘everyday’ lives we focus on.⁵⁹ Exploring the ‘ordinary-ness’ of vernacular language in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and in Verlan (as manifested in the everyday) below builds on insights from this literature by pushing our understandings of how ‘the everyday’ can be linked to decolonial insights about entanglements across domination and resistance, colonial and postcolonial experiences.

Focusing on the rules of ordinary language in the next section involves focusing on the way language is used and fluid, rather than the way things are simply named in language.⁶⁰ What I consider, in particular, is how language is used across, rather than within, registers (dialect and formal speech); language forms (poetry and prose); and national languages (Spanish and English). This is a necessary step before I return to Verlan in the third section because it enables us to reflect on the ordinariness of speaking across languages, registers and forms; and therefore the ordinariness of the border language as a fluid (‘inherently unstable’⁶¹) space to speak from and to think modernity from.

A Decolonial Orientation: Thinking from (rather than about) the border

Walter D. Mignolo argues that a ‘decolonial option’ is one which provides the opportunity to find a ‘locus of enunciation’ where the marginalised and Othered experience can no longer be separated out from ‘modern normativity’ to be objectified as a limit condition or a challenge.⁶² There are several important steps as part of this: one is recognising coloniality as a vital element of modernity (its underside) – and thus the notion of a ‘modernity/coloniality’ global order making up two sides of the same coin.⁶³ From this starting point ‘modernity’ is not simply a dominant western project but is a complex intermingling of both dominant western and

⁵⁸ Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (California University Press, 2004).

⁵⁹ E.g. Xavier Guillaume, (Ed) ‘The International as an Everyday Practice’, IPS Forum, with contributions by C. Enloe; J. Crane-Seeber; Mark B. Salter; L. Seabrooke, *International Political Sociology*, No.5, (2011): 446-462

⁶⁰ Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics*: 9-10.

⁶¹ Sebastian Weier, and Marc Woons, (2017) (Eds) ‘Introduction’, In: M Woons and S. Weier (Eds.) *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2017): 3.

⁶² Walter D. Mignolo (2010) ‘Introduction: Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking’ In: Eds. W.D. Mignolo and A. Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (Routledge, 2010): 17.

⁶³ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011); Walter D. Mignolo ‘Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: on (De)coloniality, Border thinking and Epistemic Disobedience’, *Postcolonial Studies*, No.3 (2011): 273-283; Mignolo credits Anibal Quijano’s work here inspiring his ideas (in particular, Quijano 2000).

marginalised Othered thought. In other words, modernity is not a project which requires marginalised voices and ways of thinking, but is understood as inseparable from such voices – although this perspective also stresses that these voices and ways of thinking are not reducible to modernity but exist beyond it.⁶⁴ Robbie Shilliam puts it thus: a decolonial option involves the understanding that experiences of the globally marginalised are entangled within, rather than ‘speaking back to’ and/or shedding light on (limits of) modernity.⁶⁵

Mignolo’s concept of ‘border thinking’ is key to unpacking this ‘decolonial option’ and provides another step. It is understood as ‘thinking of the outside created from the inside’.⁶⁶ Border thinking, Mignolo explains, is about setting a starting point which involves ‘dwell[ing] in the borders’ as a space to think from rather than about.⁶⁷ For him it is about anchoring thought ‘in double consciousness, in mestiza consciousness’.⁶⁸ Mignolo attributes the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, in particular, with having influenced his concept of ‘border thinking’ – as the person who has linked together discussions about consciousness and borderlands to write at length about a form of consciousness which emanates from being situated in the borderlands.⁶⁹ This is no longer understood as an atypical site but as a site which reflects the lived experiences of the global majority.

Anzaldúa links her everyday engagements with language to broader structures of global politics and its realities of oppression.⁷⁰ She focuses on marginality not as a limit but as central to how global politics is done. Through her concept of ‘the borderlands’ she has been able to establish her own personal experience of growing up on the border between the US and Mexico as a metaphor between all types of crossings: ‘between geographical boundaries, sexual transgressions, social dislocations and the crossings necessary to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts’.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Rosalba Icaza, ‘Decolonial Feminism and Global Politics: Border Thinking and Vulnerability as Knowing Otherwise’, In *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics*, Eds. Marc Woons and Sebastian Weier (E-international Relations Publishing, 2017): 26-45

Decolonial thinking contests the idea that modernity is the totality of reality. It emphasises that there are ‘ways of relating to the world, ways of feeling acting thinking and inhabiting the world that come from other geo-genealogies, non-western and non-modern’ (Vasquez 2014 quoted in Icaza 2017: 28), even though it explores how modernity is itself bound up in non-western geo-genealogies.

⁶⁵ ‘What we (should have) talked about’: np.

⁶⁶ Walter Mignolo and Madina Valdimirovna Tlostanova, M.V (2006), ‘Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo-and Body-Politics of Knowledge’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, No.2, (2006): 206.

⁶⁷ Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (University of Michigan Press, 2003): xiii; Walter Mignolo, ‘Interview with Walter D. Mignolo’ in *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics* Eds. Marc. Woons and Sebastian. Weier (E-international Relations Publishing, 2017): 13.

⁶⁸ Mignolo, ‘Introduction’: 17/18.

⁶⁹ Mignolo, ‘Interview with Walter D. Mignolo’: 12

⁷⁰ Anzaldúa ; Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘Haciendo Caras, Una Entrada: An Introduction’ In. G. Anzaldúa (ed) *Making Face Making Soul, Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Colour* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990): x-X ; Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

⁷¹ Norma E. Cantú, and Adía Hurtado, ‘Introduction’, In. G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2012): 6.

It is through her identification as a woman of colour, as queer, and as *mestizaje* (culturally mixed) that Gloria Anzaldúa draws us into her embodied experiences of struggles in language. She discusses how language can be a space where one learns to ‘build culture’.⁷² She stresses (and demonstrates in her writing by switching between English and Spanish, as well as between poetry and prose, and between dialect and formal speech) how she, and others like her, build culture by reengaging with what is ‘sensible’ about who they are at the *intersection* of a variety of language processes rather than from a space of challenge and resistance located in any one of these types of (standardised or less standardised) processes. The reengaging with what is sensible Anzaldúa points to (as I further unpack below in her work) is not reducible to voice in language; but is bound up in audibility in language (across different forms of language) *intersecting* with emotions (in particular, about mixture, inbetween-ness and contradiction) which together make meaningful and thinkable lives lived here.⁷³ Language processes pointed to and used by Anzaldúa include English dialect (which Anzaldúa calls ‘working class and slang English’⁷⁴); poetry; standard (Mexican) Spanish; Mexican Dialect; Tex-Mex; Pachuco; prose; and ‘standard English’. Anzaldúa⁷⁵ explains it thus:

The switching of ‘codes’...from English to Castillian Spanish to the North Mexican Dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language – this language of the Borderlands. There, at the juncture of cultures, languages, cross-pollinate and are revitalised; they die and are born.

She concludes in the preface to her most well-known book ‘*Borderlands/ La Frontera*’ with the line ‘Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you – from the New *mestizas*’.⁷⁶ And the rest of the book not only switches between national languages and dialects but also between poetry and prose. Significantly, in her chapter ‘*La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness*’ she introduces the concept of ‘a consciousness of the Borderlands’ (which she argues is ‘an “alien” consciousness ... presently in the making’) with the following poem entitled ‘*Una lucha de fronteras/ a Struggle of Borders*’.

Because I, a *mestiza*,
Continually walk out of one culture and into another

⁷² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*: xxiv

⁷³ I use the term emotion here as ‘a broad umbrella term to denote a range of different phenomena’ (Bleiker and Hutchison 2018: 329); not simply ‘the conscious awareness that someone is experiencing an emotion’ which is understood to describe a feeling (Mercer 2014: 516) but processes which also have intersubjective and cultural components’ bound up in pre-existing social, political and cultural contexts (which they are shaped by and help to shape). Neta C. Crawford, ‘The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotions and Emotional Relationships’ *International Security*, No.4 (2000): 125.

⁷⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2012): 77

⁷⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*: preface.

⁷⁶ Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera*: 20.

Because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro / [a] soul between two worlds, three, four
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio / my head buzzes with all the contradictions
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan / I am northerly for all the voices
that speak to me
simultáneamente / simultaneously⁷⁷

This expression of voice through a variety of language processes (which she calls ‘the language of the borderlands’) in Anzaldúa’s work embodies ideas about globalisation and mixture of culture which she talks about. She links different language forms and registers (poetry, prose, English standard, dialect, standard Spanish) together – erecting, destroying and redrawing their borders to situate herself within them all. Doing so, she indicates how ‘embodied consciousness’ of dualities and vulnerabilities which foreground the racialised body⁷⁸ can be the *starting point* for understanding how processes of globalisation and colonialism shape the world. She is not only talking about, pointing to, or asking us to think about the border. She thinks and lives *from* the border, demonstrating how identity and community is made possible from this space as an everyday ‘ordinary’ process. Emphasising a multiple, oppressed and resisting self she demonstrates how the border is an embodied consciousness through which global politics is lived and made possible.

I argue that Anzaldúa’s work forces us to reconsider the idea that certain language registers or language forms reflect particular types of experience – some being more creative or fluid, and others more oppressive and less fluid, due to their levels of standardisation. Instead, her work foregrounds everyday language as working through the *intersection* of different language registers (across standardisation and non-standardisation) on a regular basis. It is in the ‘cross-pollination’ of languages (‘the language of the borderlands’) that she situates her own everyday life – and where she shows how culture is built through an ability to express the self through invocations of audibility intertwined with emotions. This intersection of language forms and registers, and thus this intersection of standardisation and non-standardisation, appears in her work as integral, in other words, to how language and thus voice is *made possible* on a day-to-day basis (as a key aspect of building culture), rather than merely as resistive. The language of the borderlands is positioned in terms of ordinariness (as

⁷⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*: 99.

⁷⁸ Icaza, ‘Decolonial Feminism’: 31.

commonplace and standard(ised), rather than primarily as non-standard(ised) oppressed, creative or resistive marginality.

Verlan as the ordinary embodied doing of language

The last section considered how building culture is made possible on a day-to-day basis through the ordinariness of the intersection of national languages, registers and forms bound up in emotions which enable the production of the self as a subject. This section in turn thinks about how the border language Verlan – as a language which works through the intersection of national languages and registers – can be understood as an ordinary standard(ised) embodied process bound up in building culture (specifically modern nationhood), rather than primarily a non-standard(ised) process. It unpacks, in particular, the intertwined role of regularity (discipline) *along with* fluidity as part of this ordinariness to think through the relational nature of how language works here in its ordinariness: across discipline and fluidity, across standardisation and non-standardisation.

Rather than understanding regularity and discipline as limiting the modern world, Rey Chow⁷⁹ and others like David Gramling⁸⁰ ask us to reflect on how it *enables* the modern world. Indeed, Michel Foucault argued at some length that regularity and discipline enabled transparency which was central for completing the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and its project of ‘modernity’.⁸¹ This was given the Enlightenment’s emphasis on defining ‘valid’ truth and knowledge as based around visibility and the ability to compare.

Gramling discusses at length how regularity and discipline in language produced standardisation which was instrumental in making nationalism thinkable.⁸² This is given how standardisation in language constructed language as ‘a unified possessable object’ with borders (regularities) which made it possible to conceptualise language as having *de jure* ‘native speakers’ (who make up the national community) in contradistinction to ‘non-native speakers’.⁸³ What this points to is that standardisation is central to processes of nationalisation and to the development of ‘shared community in the present as in the past’⁸⁴ in a broad manner,

⁷⁹ Chow, *Not like a Native*.

⁸⁰ David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (Bloomsburg, 2016)

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Essays 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁸² Gramling, *The Invention of*.

⁸³ Ibid: 10. Gramling points out that previously speakers ‘made meaning from an inherited chest of conventional expressive possibilities’. The shift was to an ‘imagined coordinate grid of rational infinity named French or English, as became the conceit of post-Cartesian linguistics.’
ibid: 13.

⁸⁴ Rolando Vásquez, ‘Translation as Erasure : Thoughts on Modernity’s Epistemic Violence’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1, (2011) : 38.

rather than just a narrow manner. In other words, it posits standardisation as central to enabling modernity by enabling modern nationhood.

While there are several known varieties of Verlan used by communities inside France, it is the variety used by working-class migrant heritage people(s) in France that I want to focus on and 'think from' in this article. In keeping with Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of 'ordinary language' use (a framework I employ the first section of this article), I understand different varieties of Verlan as constituting their own 'language games', given the specificities of who uses them and how they are used in everyday life.⁸⁵ The Verlan I want to look at is the Verlan which is linked to experiences of growing up in the French *banlieues* – many of which are peripheral housing projects and home to France's poorest immigrants, heavily populated in particular by North African and African Arabs, their children and great/grandchildren. We need to be careful not to assume a homogenised experience of 'the *banlieue*'.⁸⁶ However, I want to consider how this Verlan is grounded in an experience of the *banlieue* which is often a marginalised 'space of exclusion, violence and hopelessness' due to largescale poverty, unemployment and substandard educational facilities.⁸⁷ It is a space in which people are often subject to daily colonial violences – both cultural violences (which exclude them from economic, historical and political centres of French society) and physical violence (enacted by the police). Youth living in the *banlieue* are often stereotyped as gang members, criminals and potential terrorists; and large scale 'uprisings'⁸⁸ in response to police brutality have developed at various points, in the 1990s and again in 2005. Azouz Begag, the first French Arab to become a government minister, who has written several novels (including one exploring his own childhood growing up in a Shanty Town outside of Lyon), explains that the people who live in the *banlieues* can be said to be French 'to a large extent in terms of culture'; yet they have remained targets of 'widespread discrimination by the majority ethnic population' due to anti-blackness and in particular anti-Arab sentiment.⁸⁹ There is growing emphasis here therefore

⁸⁵ Wittgenstein defines 'language games' as 'consisting of language and the actions with which it is interwoven'. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*: 8. Although the different varieties of verlan are not mutually exclusive (and may interweave) they each have their own rules (and forms of fluidity linked to these rules). I argue that they therefore need to be considered as different types of 'ordinary language' use. Other varieties of verlan include: the verlan of the urban professionals (*verlan geoisbour*); or the verlan of the teenagers who use it to distinguish themselves from the adult world. N. Lefkowitz, *Talking Backwards, Looking Forwards: The French Language Game Verlan* (Tübingen, 1992).

⁸⁶ For example, Étienne Balibar points out there are differences across *banlieues* in terms of wealth. Étienne Balibar, 'Uprisings in the Banlieues', *Constellations*: No.1 (2007): 48. Elsewhere Trimaille and Candea discuss the dangers of concepts like '*banlieue* accent' (whether intended as demonising or empowering) as flattening the heterogeneity of urban experiences of living in France. Cyril Trimaille, and Maria Candea, 'Urban Youth Accents In France', in *Pragmatics of Accents*, Eds. Gaëlle Planchenault and Livia Poljak (John Benjamin Publishing, 2021): 41-62.

⁸⁷ Sajed, *Postcolonial Encounters*: 53.

⁸⁸ Balibar, 'Uprisings in the Banlieues'.

⁸⁹ Azouz Begag, A. (2007) *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance* (Bison Books, 2007), xxvii.

regarding the colonial legacies of this situation; and indeed the *banlieue* is increasingly pointed to as a significant contemporary (post)colonial periphery within the west.⁹⁰

In the words of one young person: ‘We start to speak [Verlan] ... because we are looking for ourselves and can’t find ourselves. And we will stop speaking it when we have found ourselves and when we have given ourselves another identity’.⁹¹ This echoes a point made by James Baldwin who argued that ‘[p]eople evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate’.⁹² What it points to is how the use of this Verlan is grounded in embodied experiences of colonialism and racism as a site in which oppression and resistance are entangled up together – where ‘the self in germination’ is a self ‘in-between’ oppression, feeling limits, pushed in, constrained, denied... and pushing back’.⁹³ The self here is multiple, entangled in ‘everyday history of oppression’ and ‘everyday history of resistance’.⁹⁴ These insights from those using Verlan here, dovetail with what is understood in critical linguistic studies about it, where the academic term for it is ‘a multi-ethnolect’, which is a variety of ‘contact language’.⁹⁵ Multi-ethnolects are defined by a series of regularities (e.g. new grammar rules, phonological and phonetic innovations, and lexical additions).⁹⁶ Given the systematic and regular way Verlan is used by working-class migrant heritage communities, as I discuss further below, it is clear that the bold claim to Verlan being a language (a border language) has a strong basis.

In her work Gloria Anzaldúa also situates herself in embodied experiences of colonialism such as found here in discussions about the *banlieue*. Situating her work within her own experience of growing up in the US-Mexico border(lands), she writes about how the first and the third world rub up (‘grate’) against each other and ‘bleed’ in these colonial spaces.⁹⁷ Anzaldúa argues that these spaces produce the need to develop a way of being which recognises the tension(s) at play – a way of being which does not use ‘the masters tools’ only but which does ‘use the knowledges and histories of the white cultures, [in conjunction with those] of

⁹⁰ See e.g. Paul Silverstein, *Postcolonial France: Race, Islam and the Future of the Republic* (Pluto Press, 2018).

⁹¹ Dalila, age 19 quoted in Meredith Doran, ‘Negotiating between Bourg and Racaille: Verlan as Youth Identity Practice in Suburban Paris’ in *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*, eds. Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (Clevedon: Cromwell Press Ltd, 2004): 98.

⁹² James Baldwin, ‘If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell me, What is?’, *The New York Times*, July 29 1970.

⁹³ Icaza, *Decolonial Feminism*. 32.

⁹⁴ Icaza *Ibid*:31.

⁹⁵ Other contact language varieties include pigeons, creoles, and mixed languages (also known as intertwined languages or bilingual mixed languages). ‘All three types share certain characteristics: they are new languages, they usually emerged within one or two generations, and they contain major structural components that can be traced back to more than one single ancestor language...’ Peter Bakker, and Yaron Matras, ‘Introduction’ in *Contact Languages*, eds. Peter Bakker and Yaron Matras Eds. *Contact Languages* (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2013): 2.

⁹⁶ Bakker and Matras, *Contact Languages*; Jacomine Nortier, and Margreet Dorleijn ‘Multi-Ethnolects’ in *Contact Languages*, eds. Peter Bakker and Yaron Matras (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2013): 229-272

⁹⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera*: 25.

other ethnic cultures' underpinning these spaces.⁹⁸ She argues that this way of being is part of a desire to produce rather than just reflect existing knowledge and theories which she and others like her are expected to internalise and assimilate into. You could argue that this very accurately describes how Verlan works – as I unpack further below – as that which uses (rather than trying to bypass) standardised French but also uses the languages of other ethnic cultures.

Let us consider how Verlan works a bit more, to unpack these entanglements between oppression and resistance as well as between discipline, regularity and fluidity. When used by working-class migrant heritage people(s) in France, Verlan employs what is referred to as 'neutral' French (*le français neutre*) or 'normal' French (*le français normé*) as its base language. Vocabulary from other languages is then drawn into this base language – including from Arabic (in particular, Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian varieties), Wolof, Romani, American (rap) and Jamaican (reggae).⁹⁹ The languages bound up in Verlan point to (although do not simply map onto) the range of languages available in the multicultural environments where those speaking it grow up. Doran notably points to how use of American rap and reggae by working-class racialised migrant heritage youth enables alignment with other racially minoritised groups beyond France which they understand as 'sharing a similar daily reality of economic and social marginality'.¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere, through the use of older French argot and Romani, what is made possible is identification with marginalised and working-class social groups *within* France. When we think from Verlan, as such, we are able to think *from* the embodied entanglement of language and racial objectification,¹⁰¹ rather than about this merely as 'a discursive strategy';¹⁰² we are thereby able to contribute to understandings of the embodied role of language in IS. Looking at some key features of how Verlan works will help us think through these embodied entanglements of language and racialisation.

A key feature of Verlan as used by working-class migrant heritage communities in France is the inversion of syllables in words. This is a practice which has been linked back to the wordplay tradition known as argot which refers to the idea of a covert language which has become systematised – a tradition which has been popular in France historically among marginalised groups.¹⁰³ The word 'Verlan' is itself an inversion of the word '*L'envers*' (*l'envers*), which means 'backwards'. In the song lyrics which opened this article, an example of

⁹⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'On the process of writing borderlands/la frontera' In: AL Keating (ed) *The Gloria Anzaldua Reader* (London: Duke University Press, 2009): 189.

⁹⁹ Nortier and Dorleijin, 'Multi-Ethnolects'.

¹⁰⁰ Meredith Doran 'Alternative French, Alternative Identities: Situating Language in *la Banlieue*' *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, No. 4, (2008): 501; Doran 'Negotiating Between'.

¹⁰¹ Chow, *Not like a Native*: 2

¹⁰² Icaza, 'Decolonial Feminism': 31.

¹⁰³ A group often cited to have historically used argot in France is the so-called criminal underworld. Albin Michel Lacassagne, *L'Argot Du "Milieu"* (Albin Michel, Paris, 1935). A non-French example of argot is the language 'shelty' linked to the traveller community in Ireland.

inversion is on the sixth line where *africain* (*afri-cain/f-cain*) is inverted to *cin-f*. An example of borrowing from other languages in this type of Verlan is evident in the tenth line of the same song lyrics where the reference to *blédard* for immigrant (*immigré*) derives from the Arabic word *bled* (or *balad/bilad*) which means ‘country’. Because those using Arabic were mostly migrating into so-called continental France, this word *bled* became a reference to one’s country (*mon bled*) outside of continental France. In mainstream French discourse (and potentially under colonialism) it came to be used often in a pejorative way to mean ‘(colonial) rural hinterland’ (*lieu isolé offrant peu de ressources*).¹⁰⁴ When used in Verlan in this context *blédard* has come to refer to being foreign and to hailing from elsewhere in an ironic manner, however; this is given that the people it refers are mostly those who have been born in and grown up in France, and so their ‘foreign’ status is highly questionable.

The irony underpinning the term ‘blédard’ as used in Verlan is nicely captured, for example, in the youtube series entitled ‘Blédard Story’ by the French comic/artist Anas. This series is a general reflection on French life which (among other things) draws out humour while foregrounding the reality of embodied experiences of racialised ‘Frenchness’. For example, Anas talks about having fundamentalist views ascribed to him by ‘a friend’ due to him letting his beard grow; or causing a stir when he (a *bled/un bléd*) shows up in secondary school to study for the baccalaureate and goes on to pass this with honours. What is demonstrated here is that Verlan draws explicit attention to the ways in which wordplay allows for experimentation with issues of expressivity, language use and ‘self’ in material embodied ways as ordinary political practice. I suggest that we can therefore begin to consider how Verlan displays similar characteristics to Anzaldúa’s work in acting as a ‘philosophical discourse’ which is involved in ‘refus[ing] the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics’.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, what has been pointed to by those who used Verlan in this manner is that racialisation (and racial diversity) is a particular form of embodiment which Verlan makes possible due to the wide range of terms relating to race, ethnicity and immigration status developed in it through inversions and borrowing.¹⁰⁶ Doing so, it works questions of ‘truth’ about what it is to be French into aesthetic linguistic practices, intertwining ethical considerations about cultural categories. Examples of this range include (with Verlan words underlined below):

¹⁰⁴ Aurélia Vertaldi, ‘Bled, barda... ces dix mots d’ailleurs devenus français’, *Le Figaro*, 16 March 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*: 38.

¹⁰⁶ Doran, ‘Negotiating between Bourg’; Doran, ‘Alternative French’.

Toubab (from Wolof “white person” or “European”) *babtou*
 “Arabe (“Arab”)) *beur, reub, reubeu, rabzouille, crouille* (from Arabic *rouilla* (“brother”))
Juif (“Jew”)) *feuj*
 “Pakistani” or “Indian”) *big-bang, indou*
Marocain (“Moroccan”)) *camaro*
Noir (“black person”)) *renoi, black, ne'gro, gre`ne*
Race (“race,” “ethnicity”)) *cera*
Clandestin (“illegal alien”)) *clande', clandax, clando*.¹⁰⁷

At play here in how Verlan is used are regularities (and patterns) around how ‘inversions’ and ‘borrowings’ work. These regularities are bound up however *in* the shifting meanings produced and the potential for many different types of words to be inverted or borrowed – rather than contra this. John McWhorter argues that the systematic nature of vernaculars has been ignored for decades (despite being stressed by linguists) because of how vernaculars are often presented as ‘a series of exceptions to using standard...rules’.¹⁰⁸ What McWhorter draws our attention to is how it is precisely because vernaculars are presented as ‘exceptions’, limit conditions, non-standard(ised) *to* a standard that they fail to be understood and appreciated for their full(er) potential. To explore this full(er) potential, I consider below in the final section how Verlan ‘co-creates’ by disciplining understandings of modern Frenchness (‘the sensible’) bound up in fluidities, rather than merely working to challenge, resist, or undermine modern Frenchness as sensible. Put another way, this final section explores how the unacceptable, the intolerable and the ineffable are bound up *in* the making of the national standard *through* regularised patterns and standardised sens-sible understandings.

Thinking from the Border, Rethinking Modernity

The previous two sections looked at how we might think *with* ordinary everyday practices and indeed *rethink* where we might find ordinary everyday practices – as an important part of ‘border thinking’. Rather than understanding these practices as ‘non-standard’ these sections point to the need to think about the intertwined nature of ‘regularisation(s)’ within fluidities as part of ‘the ordinary’. By considering an ‘ordinary language’ approach in conjunction with a decolonial orientation, it points to the importance of starting with the idea of the ‘ordinary’

¹⁰⁷ Doran, ‘Alternative French’: 503.

¹⁰⁸ John McWhorter, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca* (NY: Bellview Literary Press, 2017): 32.

within what is typically linked to the limit or non-standard.¹⁰⁹ This final section looks at some key steps in thinking ‘from’ the border language with this in mind, and considers how this develops a more relational co-productive understanding of modernity.

Having looked at how Verlan can be considered an ‘ordinary’ practice of language use and having pointed to the regularities and patterns here (entangled up within the fluidities), I want to suggest that we are pushed to consider the regularities and patterns around Verlan as well, in order to think ‘from’ the border. Remaining with the role of language in music, let us consider the regularised use of Verlan in French rap music to start with. Verlan is known as being integral to rap music given its expressive wordplay and how it enables poetic description of life in the *banlieue*.¹¹⁰ As a result, it is regularly and ordinarily found in a lot of rap music in France.¹¹¹ Let us also consider another regularised process – which is that of quotas for French language music which were introduced on French radio in the mid 1990s. To think with these regularisations is to centre them and to consider how they help us understand the role of Verlan in the co-production of modernity.

What we know about language quotas for French language music introduced in the mid 1990s is that they were introduced through (what is commonly known as) *la Loi Toubon/* The Tubon Law.¹¹² The Tubon Law introduced music language quotas in 1994 to ‘counteract’ the growing strength of the American English language music market which saw French radio stations playing large proportions of English language music rather than French language music.¹¹³ The Toubon Law (which also affects many other areas of public life) declared that 40% of all songs played on public radio must be in ‘French’ and 20% needed to be ‘new French music’. These quotas (which were adjusted slightly in 2016) were reached and continue to be reached in large part through the playing of French language rap music.¹¹⁴ This is because France has the second largest rap/hip hop music market in the world and rap is where most of ‘new French’ music has developed in recent decades.

Now, as already mentioned, Verlan is integral to rap music and found in abundance in it. Therefore, through rap music on French radio we can say that Verlan has come to *define* ‘the

¹⁰⁹ This ‘rethinking’ includes the very linking of ordinary language use to the (cultural, queer and feminist) theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, as by definition ordinary language use is posited as language use by those who are not philosophers.

¹¹⁰ Durand, *Black, Blanc, Beur*.

¹¹¹ Although there is no suggestion that verlan is used ‘uniformly’ in rap music. E.g. Hassa argues that verlan is more in use by rap artists based in northern France than those based in southern France, and notably looks at combinations of how it is used with Arabic and English in ‘rap texts’. Samira Hassa, ‘Kiff my Zikmu: Symbolic dimensions of Arabic, English and Verlan in French Rap Texts’ in *The languages of Global Hip hop*, ed. Marina. Terkourafa (Continuum, 2010).

¹¹² The official name is *Loi 94-665 du 4 Août 1994 relative à l’emploi de la langue française*

¹¹³ The Minister Jacques Toubon, who brought in this law, in an interview at this time argued that ‘the problem is that French people no longer speak French properly. And we are afraid that they may express themselves with the vocabulary, the syntax and the spirit of another language’ (quoted in Scott Kraft, ‘Jacques Toubon: Defending the French Language Against All Interlopers’, *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 1994).

¹¹⁴ Adjustments included reducing the quota to 35% of all songs played on radio needing to be in French, and increasing slightly the percentage of music needing to be ‘new’ or ‘recent’ French music.

standard' of what 'French music' sounds like, how it is spoken and articulated. Thinking from Verlan here (namely, its regularities and regularities of the related processes of quotas and its abundance in rap music) in other words, enables us to think about the centrality of how Verlan defines modern 'Frenchness'. What this points to is how the border language co-creates modernity through regularisations in ordinary practices. These disciplining procedures (which are inseparable from its fluidities) are a key part of how the border language helps define the boundaries of modern national community (for example, as something which can be heard and pointed to as 'French' rather than as 'English' or as 'German' etc.), as well as linked to marginalisations and solidarities, and therefore as thinkable and meaningful.

Indeed, it is important to note that neither French rap music *nor* language mixing are easily classified as primarily 'alternative' (or non-standard) when look at them in detail – although this may also be an important factor. French rap music often combines traditionally and non-traditionally 'French' musical influences. For example, the artist *Stromae* (whose name is Verlan for *Maestro*) who is one of the most successful rap music artists singing in French of all time,¹¹⁵ cites Jacques Brel (who is known as the master of the French lyrical song) as one of the major influences in his work.¹¹⁶ Epitomising the intertwining of 'traditionally' and 'non-traditionally' French influences within rap music in France is furthermore the album produced by Kerredine Soltani which invited youth from *banlieues* across France to reclaim the most iconic traditionally 'French' songs (e.g. *La vie en rose*) and remix these into rap music while working alongside various rap artists.¹¹⁷ Nor is language inversion as a process easily classified as 'alternative' in France; for as previously noted, argot (the practice of inverting syllables in words) is understood to be bound up the historical expression of marginalised 'French' communities.

In other words, the border language is bound up in a deeply relational *intertwining* between the forces of discipline and resistance which *make* a modern national standard sense-ible (as that which is audible (linked to inversions and borrowings), as well as felt (linked to anger/defiance, resistance, vulnerabilities and solidarities) and therefore thinkable and meaningful. This standard acts as a contrast with a non-standard at the same time that it embodies much of what is non-standard and deeply fluid. It is this entanglement between discipline (understood as tradition and regularity) and resistance (fluidity and multiplicity of

¹¹⁵ Stromae has sold 8.5 million records world-wide. Epitomising this eclecticism Stromae's work more generally brings together Caribbean and African musical influences with 1990s-inspired dance beats.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Heerma v Voss, 'The Sorrow of Europe: Stromae Raps Like Jacques Brel', *Medium*, 21 January 2014.

¹¹⁷ Kerredine Soltani, *Ma cité va chanter* (Les Mecs d'Oberkampf, 2022).

possible meanings) which the border language points to and allows us to consider. Discipline can be seen in the ways in which a national community with regular(ised) borders is invoked (e.g. through invocations of iconic songs or around what are understood to be ‘traditional’ practices of language inversions) and resistance can be seen in the ways in which the narrowness of all such borders is stressed *simultaneously* (in the fluidity through which the inversions and symbols are mixed with influences from elsewhere/ ‘other’ language communities).

Indeed, we can appreciate this complex relational intertwining across discipline(ing) and resistance when we look around in all directions at the everyday usage of this type of Verlan. On one hand this Verlan is restricted to Parisian *banlieues* and/or towns around France with high working-class ‘migrant’ (in particular Maghrebi) populations. However, at the same time it is noted for its ‘growing significance’¹¹⁸ given its limited use in popular culture – across media, film and music. Some Verlan words can even be found within mainstream usage – such as, for example, *chelou* (from *louche* – shifty, unsavoury, weird) or *kiffe*. The former is in the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* since 2014; the latter was used by the French embassy in New York in 2008 in a festival billed widely as ‘a French urban cultures festival’ entitled ‘I kiffe NY’. The *Académie Française* does not include any Verlan words in its dictionaries, yet it includes discussion of Verlan under broader reflections on ‘The future of the French language’.¹¹⁹ It is not a simple a question of verlan ‘becoming mainstream’ over time however. This Verlan is linked specifically to experiences of those growing up within *banlieues* in France for the most part. For example, where this Verlan is found in film, it is film which is set in the *banlieue* (e.g. *La Haine*¹²⁰, *L’Esquive*¹²¹); or films which follow the lives of people from the *banlieues* (e.g. *Untouchables*¹²²) directed by working-class racialised migrant heritage French people. Yet, many of these films have won César awards (the National film award of France). Doing so, Verlan can be understood as co-producing (rather than being alternative to) ‘Modern French’ cinema which is understood for being honest and realistic – given its grounding in these films which attempt to portray the lived reality of life in the *banlieue*.

This is not to ignore how Verlan remains a target for scorn in French society; contrasted with so-called ‘proper French’ – depicted as a ‘linguistic ghetto’ that promotes self-

¹¹⁸ Rana Noor Mohammed, ‘Negotiating Alternative Linguistic Practices: The Struggle between Verlan Usage and the Académie Française’, *Makings: A Journal Researching the Creative Industries*, No.1, (2021): 1-2/

¹¹⁹ Alain Decaux, ‘The Future of the French Language’, Académie Française website 16 October 2001, Accessed 25 January 2024 - Available at: <https://www.academie-francaise.fr/lavenir-de-la-langue-francaise>

¹²⁰ Mathieu Kassovitz, *La Haine* (Canal +, 1995).

¹²¹ Abdellatif Kechiche, *L’Esquive* (Noé Productions, 2003).

¹²² Olivier Nakache, and Éric Toledano, *Les Untouchable* (Gaumont, 2011)

marginalisation, undermines cohesion and ultimately threatens national identity.¹²³ Of note here is the ‘gatekeeping’ of language which reinforces standardisations in the service of a type of narrow nationhood – in France notably through the *Académie française* founded in 1635 which sought to give ‘undebatable rules’ to the French language (Académie française website).¹²⁴ This scornful view of Verlan is deeply racialised and works to reinforce the idea of the colonial Other. It points to what is ‘inaudible’ about Verlan and the ‘Frenchness’ it invokes to many people – yet it also emphasises at the same time how Verlan is ‘audible’ as (a type of) ‘French’ given how Verlan is understood to be ‘falling short’ through contrasts with so-called proper French (as opposed to being a different language completely). The inaudibility of Verlan, in other words, is part of border languaging. It is part of the same process in which those who use Verlan from working-class colonial migrant heritage communities intimate that it helps them to express (and make audible as something that can be felt and is meaningful) their ‘French’ identity through solidarity with others they understand as sharing their experiences of marginalisation.¹²⁵ Given its effect within France we can say Verlan disciplines by making ‘Frenchness’ sensible (as something that is made audible and which invokes emotions linked to solidarity and marginalisation) not just for those who directly use it but with implications more generally for how ‘modern Frenchness’ is heard and thinkable. I suggest this is summed up in an observation made in *Jeunes Afrique*. Commenting on a publication entitled *Lexik des Cités/Lexicon of the City*¹²⁶ which was put together by nine youth from Évry, southern Paris celebrating expressions from the *banlieues*, here it is observed that ‘The 204 words chosen make up a type of *French* melting pot’.¹²⁷

Much is made in the AT about the potential ‘to find new ways of thinking, seeing, hearing and sensing the political’ in creative expression contra disciplining the sensible.¹²⁸ However, above we can begin to recognise how integral Verlan as creative expression is to *making* the national standard (understood as what is ‘acceptable and tolerable’) *bound up in* discipline through regularisations (patterns and tradition and standardisations). It points to how the unacceptable, the intolerable and the ineffable are bound up *in* the making of the national standard *through* regularised patterns. We have fluidity bound up discipline via regularised

¹²³ (Trimaille and Candea 2021; Ramdani 2009; Vidalie 2008) Trimaille and Candea, ‘Urban Youth Accents’; Nabila Ramdani, ‘Language is Still a Barrier in the Banlieue’ *The Guardian*, December 16 2009.

¹²⁴ Other examples of such gatekeepers include the *Instituto Cervantes* in Spain.

¹²⁵ Doran, ‘Negotiating between Bourg’; Doran, ‘Alternative French’.

¹²⁶ Alain Rey and Dizis la Peste, *Lexik des Cités* (Fleuve Éditions, 2007). ‘Cité’ is often used as an alternative to ‘banlieue’.

¹²⁷ June Afrique, ‘Parlez-vous banlieue?’ *Jeune Afrique*, 15 October 2007, my emphasis.

¹²⁸ Roland Bleiker, ‘In Search of Thinking Space: Reflections on the Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, No.2 (2017): 262

patterns which enable standardisation. Discipline and fluidity are shown as intertwined in other words rather than in tension (or undermining each other).

What I've shown then is how the border language helps make sens(ible) the ways national community is heard and felt and thus 'known' as a meaningful process; in other words, how the border language is involved in disciplining understandings of the modern national community. The border language does more than provide the diversity to either undermine or stabilise the standard and/or act as a bridge (a point of tension) between these processes. Border language enables the co-creation of standardisation through which political community (looked at here as national community) is made possible and its boundaries are lived and can be pointed to. Thinking from the border in this article helps us move away from a 'western lens' therefore – which Steele points out is focused on the politics of representation of known forms of discipline(s) and (less known) challenge(s).¹²⁹ It opens up our understanding of the politics of representability away from a western lens because it foregrounds the entanglements (relationality) of non-standardisation within standardisation, discipline within fluidities, the audible within the inaudible (the ineffable within the effable). It allows us to consider how representation is made possible at the *intersection* of audibility and inaudibility rather than how representations of audibility are challenged by inaudibility. This is importantly in keeping with a more co-creative and 'relational ontology' which reflects better the complex terrain of marginalised agencies within global politics.¹³⁰ What I've looked at is how the relationality between discipline and challenge, standardisation and non-standardisation becomes a space of modernity we can think from – because it is where we can understand political community being co-created – rather than a space of interruption into modernity where political community is resisted, challenged or undermined.

Conclusion

The AT has played a large role in enabling IS to open up how 'voice' can be understood beyond a limited western ideal of a singular authoritative speech situation. However, through an emphasis on the non-standard(ised), limits, alternatives and that which is lacking in the standard(ised) to open up questions of 'voice', the marginalised Othered is in danger of

¹²⁹ Steele, 'Recognising and Realising'.

¹³⁰ Hobson and Sajed, 'Navigating Beyond'; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

continuing to appear as a presence which is filled in terms of how it is ‘the verso to the internal constitution of the European self’.¹³¹

This article has focused on the use of language by decolonial theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, and the complexities of how the border language *Verlan* is employed by working-class racialised migrant heritage people in France, in order to explore the dynamics through which ‘the standard(ised)’ is created *from* and *through* the margins. In doing so it has demonstrated how border languaging can become a point *from* which we can think modern politics rather than an alternative space of challenge or limit ‘to’ modern politics. This changes the politics of naming who are the agents of modernity, because modern politics becomes articulated through the margins rather than the margins doing something ‘to’ (challenging, resisting or existing in tension with) modernity. This helps us open up the role of globally marginalised voice(s) as decisive agents of modern global politics – to deepen understandings of the ‘complex landscapes’¹³² of agency and subjectivity at play linked to co-creation of modernity. It does so as it presents a starting point which can be understood as a ‘subaltern viewing’¹³³ – given it is a starting point *from* which the known and unknown are simultaneously and *co-creatively* made possible and sensible – a starting point which centres processes of ‘taking voice’ by those who are made marginal. I suggest that academically thinking from a space which is constituted through, but also exceeds language, means disavowing mastery of this space – that is, disavowing our ability to fully ‘know’ and/or ‘capture’ representation(s) here. It demands we work on ‘listening as a critical mode of becoming vulnerable to the voices....that are always sounding even when we have not been trained or allowed ourselves to listen’.¹³⁴

By considering an ‘ordinary language’ approach in conjunction with a ‘decolonial orientation’ this article points to the importance of starting with the idea of the ‘ordinary’ within what has been considered limit or non-standard and unpacking the regularities here. This helps rethink existing understandings of power relations at play in ‘modernity’, to centralise the role of marginalised voices and thereby to open up our understanding of ‘the conditions that enable representability’.¹³⁵ It has focused on how the power relations at play in modernity (through a focus on modern nationhood) operate simultaneously across the audible and inaudible, rather than the conditions of modernity operating in what is made audible and being challenged by what is inaudible. As that which enables the nation to be audible and felt, and therefore

¹³¹ Shilliam, ‘What we’: np.

¹³² Hobson and Sajed, ‘Navigating Beyond’; Sajed, *Postcolonial Encounters*.

¹³³ Priya Dixit, ‘Decolonizing Visuality in Security Studies: Reflections on the Death of Osama bin Laden’, *Critical Studies on Security* No.3, (2014): 338.

¹³⁴ Julietta Singh *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 27

¹³⁵ Steele, ‘Recognising and Realising’: 207

thinkable and livable, the border language shows how ordinariness and regularities are intertwined within ‘creativity’ and non-standard, as part of processes of ‘taking voice’ by marginalised peoples and thus part of the conditions that enable representability. From this perspective it becomes clearer how ‘discontinuities of speaking’ and thus border thinking can be understood as not just challenging modernity but ‘constitutive of [modern] history itself’.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Chow, *Not Like a Native*: 58