Original research article

Unaddressed citizenship: Wet ontologies and mobile citizenship on Britain's waterways

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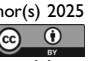

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Abstract

Citizenship is fluid and contested, often dependent on both locality and mobility. Through a focus on liveaboard boaters on the UK's inland waterways, we explore how water *matters* in the relations, skills, practices, experiences and identities of citizens, and the possibilities offered by the mobility of waterscapes to 'unearth' citizenship. We examine how the necessity of a fixed address can exclude those who do not conform to terrestrially informed governance structures. Challenges in accessing healthcare and voting demonstrate the difficulties experienced by such mobile communities, as well as their informal strategies to manage and subvert such socio-structural inequalities. The consequent practiced and connective *watery citizenship* has implications for support and welfare within this community, as the fluidity of water offers simultaneous opportunities to connect and disconnect. Nonetheless, the leaky potential of water emphasises the surprising porosity of the seemingly immovable borders imposed by the state, and helps map the hidden routes to navigate through them.

Keywords

Citizenship, waterscapes, mobility, community, fluid ontologies, bordering

Introduction

> 'So it does feel a bit disenfranchising … because the default is I've got to sort of prove my citizenship, it's not assumed, the default is that I'm not on the list, the default is that there isn't a box to tick for me'. (Boater 6, CCL, 27/11/19)

Citizenship includes and excludes people from places in ways that are shifting, negotiated and contested (Flemsæter et al., 2015; Hall et al., 1999; Woods, 2006). Spinney et al. (2015: 325) argue that citizenship is 'a set of processual, performative and everyday relations between spaces, objects, citizens and non-citizens that ebbs and flows' but the resources needed to successfully perform citizenship

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are unevenly distributed according to the politics of place and mobility. In this article, we explore what conceptualising citizens of *waterscapes* offers, highlighting the contested spatiality of the seemingly universal abstraction of 'citizenship' in the United Kingdom, through a focus on the experiences and practices of people living aboard boats on British inland waterways.

According to Steinberg and Peters (2015), waterscapes offer alternatives to terrestrial power, governance and material perspectives. They offer insights into different worlds (Bowles, 2016) and, accordingly, we position boats, boaters and waterways as ways of 'unearthing' citizenship. We focus specifically on the canals and rivers that comprise the inland waterways of the United Kingdom. While their original function to transport goods is obsolete (Bissell, 2016), there are over 5000 miles of navigable British waterways (Inland Waterways Association, 2025), which have variously become recreational, heritage, development and, increasingly, domestic spaces (Bowles, 2016, 2024; Herman and Yarwood, 2024; Kaaristo and Rhoden, 2017; Pitt, 2018). An estimated 8783 boat licences were issued to liveaboard boaters in England and Wales in 2021 (representing 25% of all boat licences issued, up from 15% in 2011 [Bryant, 2021]).[1] We pay particular attention to those who are required to be mobile on the water and scrutinise how this mobility effects their ability to be citizens.

The article is divided into six sections. First, we reflect on the governance of mobile intra-national citizens, drawing on the experiences of travellers, before introducing the empirical space of the British canal and liveaboard boaters. Secondly, we outline the research project on which our discussion is based. We then analyse what happens when water-based citizens collide with earth-based governance structures through a focus on the practices involved in accessing voting rights and health entitlements. This leads into a critical reflection on how we could 'unearth' citizenship by considering the practices, performances, challenges and opportunities that being a citizen of a waterscape offers. We then explore the implications that living in such a fluid and changeable space has for the practices of 'good' citizenship before concluding with a reflection on the challenges and opportunities presented by a leaky, interdependent and performative *watery citizenship*.

Governance, mobility and denizenship

Citizenship was originally understood as a person's relationship with a wider political unit, together with the rights and duties this afforded (Smith, 2000). Yet, citizenship is much more than a set of *de jure* reciprocities. Identity as a citizen can be confirmed through repetitive, everyday practices (Staeheli, 2010), which might include paying tax, voting or using state-provided services but these operate 'in the background of life, subtle and unremarkable until [they are] disturbed' (Yarwood, 2016: 457). Instead, as Isin and Neilson (2008) argue, *acts* of citizenship are more significant in their ability to disrupt established political orderings and, in doing so, shape the identity of their participants. Acts of citizenship take many forms but have in common a desire to challenge political and social hegemonies, be it through protest, transgression or, quite simply, living out lives in different ways. As Isin (2008: 38) states memorably, 'activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene, active citizens follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created'.

Acts of citizenship are played out in particular localities and, indeed, places contribute strongly to citizen identities (Staeheli, 2005; Whitehead and Bullen, 2005). Yet, citizenship is not sedentary (Cresswell, 2006). Cresswell (2009) demonstrates that mobility remains a key constituent of citizenship that allows people to engage as citizens across different scales; thus, a citizen of the United Kingdom is entitled to receive treatment that is free at the point of delivery from a *National* Health Service anywhere in the country. Citizenship therefore enables and supports the right and capability of people to move between different places. Indeed, the ability to move is fundamental, allowing a citizen to engage and act within wider society. To date, literatures exploring mobility and citizenship have largely focused on transnational migration (Fauser, 2021; Squire, 2011), although work is starting to examine the significance of internal movement (Cresswell, 2009; Flemsæter et al., 2015), and on

the role of everyday mobilities in the formation and performance of citizenship (Yarwood, 2014). Particular attention is being given to the role of bordering as a form of distinction: 'the border thereby represents, enacts, and creates the dividing line between insiders and outsiders, citizens and non-citizens, and the growing number of fine-tuned categories of non-citizens, along with divisions of racialisation and ethnicisation, class, gender, sexuality, and health' (Fauser, 2024: 2478). This allows us to consider how different forms of conduct and belonging are legitimised and governed within, and across, different spaces. At the centre of these debates are the 'specific dimensions of movement and mobility and the role these play in mobilising particular notions of the rightful citizen subject' (Fauser, 2024: 350).

This is demonstrated in the ways that the state and other agencies have attempted to control and curtail nomadic lifestyles (Kabachnik, 2009; Smith and Greenfields, 2012). While itinerant communities, which include Gypsy, Roma and Travellers (GRT), Boaters and Show-people, as well as the visible and hidden homeless, are diverse, they are homogenised by the barriers imposed by terrestrially informed governance structures and their consequent experiences of stigmatisation, marginalisation and feelings of exclusion (Alunni, 2021; Sehmbi and Kamboz, 2023). As well as legislation to impede itinerant lifestyles (Ansell, 2014; Halfacree, 1996), structural discrimination continues to prevent those with different cultural frames from accessing both their rights and entitlements (Alunni, 2021; Ansell, 2014). Their long-standing and deep-rooted precarity in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Powell, 2017) means that their experience of citizenship is equivocal. Education deprivation (Bloomer et al., 2014; Deuchar and Bhopal, 2013) and housing precarity and segregation (Dadusc, 2019; Malovics et al., 2019; Powell, 2017), alongside health inequalities (Alunni, 2021; Sehmbi and Kamboz, 2023), establish nomadic people as 'shadow citizens'.

Shadow citizens are people who are legally citizens but unable to benefit from many of the associated rights of citizenship, such as homeless or disabled people as well as others 'treated in ways that make citizenship a dubious notion' (Cresswell, 2009: 118). If citizenship is a form of membership, then others, by definition, are excluded from it (Smith, 1989). Who is included or excluded as a citizen is reproduced through daily practices that determine access to rights and services, with locality and mobility often defining who can claim rights or act as citizens in particular places. As such, greater consideration must be given to the relationship between moral landscapes (what or who is seen as (im)proper in particular settings), mobility and citizenship (Flemsæter et al., 2015).

It has been recognised that the sea can be important in these relationships – it can be a barrier that excludes people from citizenship (Jones, 2017; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2012); it can be a means of engagement (Fletcher and Potts, 2007); or it can provide spaces for new forms of citizenship (Simpson, 2016) – but, as yet, little attention has been given to the significance of inland waters. Like oceans and rivers, canals are spaces where citizenship is engaged and contested through ideas of mobility and fixity. Yet, they are a different form of watery space to seas and, as such, merit scrutiny given a desire by geographers to understand better the significance of watery ontologies (Steinberg and Peters, 2015). Put simply, rivers and canals are significant but distinct to seas (McGrath et al., 2025) and these differences should be appreciated. As increasing numbers of people are making their homes on inland waterways, these places of watery citizenship are becoming more significant.

This article focuses on liveaboard boaters on the UK's inland waterways. As we reveal, liveaboard boaters experience related challenges to GRT communities in terms of performing and accessing their citizenship on an equal basis with fellow, sedentary citizens (see the 'Unearthing Citizenship?' section). However, in contrast to GRT groups in the United Kingdom whose *mobility* has been regulated, boaters without a home mooring, the subject of this article, are not allowed to remain *stationary* with important consequences for their citizenship.

Liveaboard boaters

For citizens of the waterways, access to this network of watery spaces and moorings is determined by those who own or govern particular stretches of water. Thus, access to a permanent mooring, and with

it access to local services, is at the warrant of agencies who own and manage marinas or other 'off the cut' moorings. Furthermore, liveaboard boaters must licence their boats with the relevant navigational authority, which in the United Kingdom are principally the Canal & River Trust (CRT), the government's Environment Agency and the Broads Authority.[2] Long-term licences of up to 12 months are essential for both those with and without a home mooring, the necessity of which has proved contentious. British Waterways, CRT's predecessor, proposed in the 1990s to make boat licences dependent on having a recognised 'home' mooring. Opposition informed the *1995 British Waterways Act*, which introduced Continuous Cruising Licenses (CCLs) for those without a home mooring, positioning these as 'for navigation… without remaining continuously in any one place for more than 14 days' (British Waterways Act, 1995: 17cii). The interpretation and enforcement of 'genuine' navigation has been bitterly contested with critics arguing that ambiguities within the Act in terms of distance and 'no return periods' have allowed the increasingly rigorous policing and surveillance of boat movements (NBTA, 2017). The CRT (2012: np) is clear that 'shuttling backwards and forwards along a small part of the network do[es] not meet the legal requirement for navigation', which makes access to the political rights, and civil, social and economic entitlements of citizenship in terms of welfare and services problematic for those with CCLs (see the 'Unearthing Citizenship?' section). What we wish to highlight here is the intrinsic idea of movement as those with a CCL 'must be engaged in a genuine, progressive journey around the network' (CRT, 2018).

Given the complexities of governance and spatial regulation of the waterways, those travelling or living on them might be considered as denizens. Their rights to access different parts of the inland waterways are determined by their relationships with various governing bodies, which is largely transactional. Through their lack of postcode, alongside their mobile lifestyles, liveaboard boaters have long inhabited political and socio-economic grey areas that have impacted on their ability to, for example, participate in civic affairs and access welfare, leaving them as denizens in positions of precarity (Herman and Yarwood, 2024). Being 'differently mobile' (Spinney et al., 2015) to the UK's predominantly sedentary, land-based citizenry (Mayblin, 2016), has irregularised boat-dwellers' citizenship, especially for those without a home mooring. Nevertheless, we recognise that such irregularity may be imposed or chosen (Nyers, 2011), and use the concept of 'wet ontologies' (Steinberg and Peters, 2015) to explore what this 'freedom to be otherwise' (Nyers, 2011: 186) for individuals, communities and watery spaces means for conceptualising, experiencing and practicing citizenship. Although this mobility challenges some of the innate bordering associated with citizenship, it remains subject to 'a terrestrial ontology of bounded zones and emplaced points of power and knowledge' (Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 253). While research has reflected on 'hydrosocial citizenship' – how citizenship takes shape 'amidst broader material and political forces of water governance' (Liao and Schmidt, 2023: 250) – this has largely focused on water infrastructure, governance and consumption to explore the 'doings' of citizenship (Fletcher and Potts, 2007). Here, we draw on water's liveliness to engage with the *meanings* of citizenship itself.

Research context

This article draws on research conducted between 2019 and 2021 that examined the lifestyles of liveaboard boaters. There was a particular focus on examining their experiences of accessing services, employment and welfare, setting these in the context of a changing regulatory environment and mobile boater community. Conducted during COVID lockdowns, our research drew on two primary sources. First, we used an online survey to gain a broad understanding of the experiences, challenges, opportunities and demographics of people living and travelling on waterways. This was distributed in partnership with a boaters' organisation and yielded 154 responses. Most (86%) respondents lived on board all year, which reflected our distribution strategy and aim of surveying 'liveaboards' rather than tourists. In common with other boater surveys (CRT, 2025), boaters tended to be older than

the general population (42% were aged between 46 and 60; 35% were over 60) and a high (30%) proportion were retired. Just under a quarter (24%) were in full-time work; with 14% in part-time work. Interestingly, a large percentage (44%) lived alone on a boat and in a further 48% of cases, two adults lived together. The number of boating households with children in our survey was, therefore, relatively low (8%), which perhaps reflected the difficulties of living on the water with children.

Second, drawing on respondents to the survey, snowballing and requests to key agencies, we conducted 36 in-depth interviews. Our sample included representatives from six organisations associated with inland waterways (the CRT; Environment Agency, NBTA, Residential Boat Owners Association [RBOA] and Waterways Chaplaincy) and 33 liveaboard boaters (17 with home moorings and 16 without).[3] Twenty of our interviewees were male, 16 lived alone and only 3 had children. Given COVID social-distancing restrictions, interviews were conducted remotely by phone or Zoom. They were recorded, transcribed and inductively coded using NVivo 12.

The politics of practising mobile citizenship

Anderson and Peters (2014) and Kaaristo and Rhoden (2017) argue that waterscapes, particularly those inland, have long been neglected in human geography and we propose that the unique experience of living on water offers critical insights into understandings and practices of citizenship. In a mobile and fluid world 'the epistemological potential of the watery world's boundlessness and the ways in which it permeates into a myriad of spaces and experiences' (Steinberg and Peters, 2019: 335) offers an important and timely challenge to the restrictions imposed by terrestrial governance (Steinberg and Peters, 2015). For liveaboard boaters, life on the water demands different ways of eating, sleeping, moving about and using the bathroom to a land-based home (Bowles, 2024, Kaaristo and Rhoden, 2017), representing 'a life that exists in contrast to the wider sedentary world' (Bowles, 2016: 108).[4] For those with a CCL, water *matters.* Through its rhythms, pacing and timing, water shapes the relationships, skills, practices, experiences and identities of citizens, which, in turn collide with, critique and question sedentary forms of citizenship.

When asked about the challenges of living on a boat, our interviewees listed various issues from waste disposal to car insurance, reliable internet, banking, credit ratings, Screwfix purchases, access to water, maintaining employment, childcare, welfare, education and healthcare. Crucially, people living on boats had trouble engaging with these diverse services as, unlike terrestrial citizens, they lacked a postcode, especially if they were required to move. Boater 27 (CCL, 06/04/21) commented 'being on the canals makes it harder because of the culture… Your system revolves around bloody postcodes…' They went on to note:

> '…you're constantly forced to lie. I've lied to the bank, I've lied to the insurance company, I've lied to the CRT because they require me to have an address, even though I'm a continuous cruiser, and they say you've got to be insured'.

This was a familiar narrative with the lack of a fixed address, as epitomised by a postcode, establishing bureaucratic barriers that prevented boaters from accessing their rights, and performing their responsibilities, as mobile citizens. In this section we focus specifically on healthcare and voting experiences to reflect on the barriers of shadow citizenship (Cresswell, 2009) for mobile communities, and the informal strategies boaters deploy to manage or subvert these inequalities.

Boaters, like other itinerant communities, have had long-standing challenges in accessing healthcare, including registering for a GP (cf. BANES Council, 2013; Healthwatch Oxfordshire, 2020b; NBTA, 2017). However, Healthwatch Oxfordshire (2020a) states in an information leaflet that:

> 'Everyone is entitled to register with a GP Practice free of charge, even if they do not have a permanent home or proof of address. This includes those who live on boats … You do not need a permanent address… You do not need to prove your address or mooring location'.

Despite this, the leaflet explains what to do if someone is refused access; as the CRT Welfare Officer (Interview, 23/06/20) explained not every GP or, more importantly, their front-of-house realises their legal obligations. Aster (2017), in her personal reflection of palliative care on a boat, highlighted the essential gatekeeper role played by GP receptionists, and so the work being done by the CRT with various Healthwatch groups to raise awareness and improve accessibility is critical (Welfare Officer, CRT, 23/06/20). While boaters are not a homogenous community (Sehmbi and Kamboz, 2023), and not all boaters are marginalised, the barriers established by the demand for a postcode, which are exacerbated for boaters with CCL by their frequent, enforced relocation, establishes a common experience of inequality in terms of accessing emergency care, alongside screening, monitoring and immunisation services.

This is a systems problem governed by a 'terrestrial ontology of bounded zones' (Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 253), which does not allow for the fluid mobility of boaters. Therefore, it is not possible for health services to 'follow actual patient journeys, not artificial boundaries', forcing patients to lie or stay under the radar in order to get treatment (Healthwatch Oxfordshire, 2020b: 1). These health inequalities can be seen in the struggle Boaters 27 and 28 (CCL, 06/04/21) had in accessing COVID vaccinations despite being considered higher risk because of their age. They were registered with a GP in Newark, in the north of England, but had become trapped by lockdown 130 miles away in the South-West:

> Boater 27: **'**…you can't get a COVID booking, vaccination booking, unless you're part of a doctor's surgery… So I gets on the internet and I find out that you can be temporarily registered at a surgery… So I goes to the local one, it's a posh one, they won't let you in. …I told them my tale of woe, said could I please temporarily register so I can get a COVID injection… I get a reply back after four or five days from the local surgery… "No, you won't be temporarily registered just for this occasion." … I found a West Berkshire health something… I wrote to them and told my tale. It took her three days to chop some wood and light a fire under these sods. The next minute the phone's leaping off the thing, "Oh hello, how can I help you?" So we're now temporarily registered. So we've been down to the Newbury racecourse to get our first vaccination…We have to go back to the same place for the second one. The CRT on the 12th is going to start telling me I have to move.'

> Boater 28: **'**We've got to stay in this area to get back to the…we're next to the station so we can get the train, to go down and get our second jab, which won't be until next month sometime. So it's going to be interesting…'

Squire (2011) reflects that it is the 'irregular' movement of people that is usually the object and subject of politics, with contestations over how regularity is defined. This is a broader story about contemporary struggles to master movement and contain space, which in the case of liveaboard boaters centres on their mobile domestic space as a site perceived as being in need of control. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the needs of such itinerant citizens in terms of how they used their homes, were able to feel safe in their homes and access critical services were not considered (Boater 16, CCL, 18/01/20; Boater 23, CCL, 01/04/21; Boater 25, CCL, 13/04/21; Boater 26, Mooring, 14/04/21); 'boaters are always liminal from the point of view of the law' (Bowles, 2015: 80). Being a citizen without a postcode because of their mobility therefore renders boaters irregular, unmaking their citizenship as they have to struggle for the right to have rights (Nyers, 2011). For example, under the *Human Rights Act 1998*, pregnant women have the right to receive maternity care and make their own choices about that care. Nonetheless, as Boater 1 (Mooring, 27/09/19) remembered, accessing maternity services as a boater was challenging:

> '…that was a nightmare, I would say, the health visitor thing…I think maybe they had actually come to the boat maybe three times in total, and the midwife never when I was pregnant… they have a sort of – like a blood test that they have to do before the baby's ten days old or something, they kept ringing me about that, because I'd had an infection and stuff after he was born, I wasn't very well, otherwise I would have just taken him to the children's centre, but… I did actually need them to come to me that time… And actually we didn't really sort of use the health visitors, I just found the whole thing more hassle than it was worth… while I was pregnant, that I was trying to explain to them that the address that they have for me isn't actually my address and I didn't have an address. So I wanted to change it to a care of address… But they just couldn't understand'.

Boater 1 (Mooring, 27/09/19) had originally had a CCL but had moved onto a leisure mooring when pregnant to reduce the pressure, although she had continued to struggle because she said the maternity services she interacted with did not have the knowledge to work with her circumstances. Similarly, Aster (2017) employed other boaters as her palliative carers because they knew how life worked on a boat. While choosing to become a boater grants 'the freedom to be otherwise' (Nyers, 2011: 186), when this alterity collides with earthbound governance structures it *imposes* an unchosen irregularised citizenship. As Nyers (2011: 193) contends 'if citizenship is meant to establish a relationship of equality, then irregular citizenship signifies the presence of social hierarchies and exclusions'.

Boaters identified a number of common strategies to work around these inequalities including using a friends, family members or work address; registering as homeless; or not informing the surgery of their change in circumstances:

> '…the GP in the village where we lived, we told them what we were doing and they said, you can't stay registered with us. So we registered with the one that our son uses; we explained to them that we use his address but we lived on a boat and they were quite happy with it'. (Boater 23, CCL, 01/04/21)

> 'to get a doctor… although we were living on the boat we had to register as homeless'. (Boater 21, Mooring, 07/04/21)

> '…we didn't tell them we'd moved out of the house and just left it at that… I have updated the details with the GP surgery in the last couple of years because I wanted to register to vote… we went to Watford Council… And they basically create a fictional address for you, which is just the name of your boat, like a street near the canal in Watford, and then they can register you to vote at that address. Then the GP surgery is now registered to the boat address and just don't post anything, because I won't get it'. (Boater 9, CCL, 15/01/20)

These are work-arounds to maintain access while avoiding the complications inherent to being a boater in these circumstances. They reflect ways in which the rights associated with citizenship have to be performed and negotiated on a daily basis. Nevertheless, we argue that these are 'fair weather' solutions, dependent on the goodwill of the individual surgery and the good health of the boater. As Boaters 27 and 28's experiences with the COVID-19 vaccine demonstrate, being far from your supposedly 'local' GP complicates access to care and, as Boaters 1 and 9 highlighted, work-around addresses are not functional as contact points; there continues therefore to be a communications gap in ensuring regular screenings and health monitoring. The fact that such a variety of strategies exist emphasises too the negotiability and contextuality of the boundaries between 'regular' and 'irregular' citizenship (Nyers, 2011); as Boater 23 (CCL, 01/04/21) reflected 'the standard answer to any question about boaters like us, it depends … you have to be prepared to put up with the fact that there is no consistency'.

In contrast to healthcare, exercising political rights through voting was reported by liveaboard boaters as being more straightforward since 'registering to vote with a local connection's got a lot easier' (Boater 2, CCL, 21/11/19). This still, however, requires more effort than 'regular', sedentary citizens

because boaters have to re-register every 12 months and be pro-active in ensuring they are registered for every election:

> '… And you can't do it online either, so you have to print off an application and then get it to the council, which can be done through the library, so there's ways of doing it, but you know, not a lot of people have got a printer on a boat… they don't think these things through…' (Boater 7, CCL, 12/02/19)

Addressing these physical barriers for people without a fixed address to register was part of the 2019 UK campaign 'Operation Votey McVoteface', which aimed 'to inspire boaters to go the polls by telling them about how to vote as a boater and about their rights to vote in a marginal' (Operation Votey McVoteface, 2019: np). Boater 3 (CCL, 19/11/19) emphasised the subversive opportunities presented by the permeability of the waterscape, acknowledging that the campaign was 'a drive to get boaters to register to vote, particularly in areas of local connection so places where they might be moored some of the time of the year… by using tactical votes they can get preferred political parties back in power'. As such, the flows of watery mobility to which terrestrial power responds by delineating the 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of its citizenry spill and exceed the geographical boundaries of the canal (cf. Peters and Steinberg, 2019). While Peters and Steinberg (2019) reflect upon the porosity and transcendence of the *ocean*, we argue that the seemingly more 'knowable' waters of the canal have similarly transformative leakages. The liveaboard boaters of the inland waterways push against the spatialised normativities of citizenship, challenging 'assumptions about acceptable modes of conduct' and so 'who can make claim to particular spaces' (Flemsæter et al., 2015: 344) by using the liveliness of the waterways to perform their liminal, shadow citizenship as a political challenge. Citizenship for boaters must be enacted as a porous, connective and multiple meshwork (Peters and Steinberg, 2019), which is 'not given, but involves the active negotiation of acceptance and belonging, and thus has to be learned, and continually worked at' (Hall et al., 1999 in Brown, 2014: 23).

Nevertheless, even when boaters were pro-active and organised, the insidious moralised normativities and active othering by the state continued to permeate. As Boater 16 (CCL, 18/01/20) reflected on registering to vote:

> '…you definitely can't fill out the normal form and you have to fill out this form, it's for people that are in prison or stay in asylums. (Laughs) Like the same form for people that don't have a fixed address is the same one for – like you are just instantly being categorised as "other" who fits into all of these negative, you know, ideas that you have in your head…'

This claim was verified by the 'Voter Registration Form for someone with no fixed or permanent address', which covers those who are: '…homeless or have no fixed address…a patient in a mental health hospital… remanded in custody, but…not yet been convicted of an offence' (Electoral Commission, 2024: 1). This affirms an active 'othering' to 'regular' citizens by the state, equating liveaboard boaters – irregularised through their lack of fixed address – with prisoners – irregularised through their committing a criminal offence – and mental health in-patients, irregularised through their health condition. As Boater 16 (CCL, 18/01/20) notes, these are not commonly positioned as positive connotations, which further bolster internalised and externalised discourses of stigmatisation and marginalisation, regularly experienced by liveaboard boaters without a home mooring (Chair, NBTA & CCL, 23/08/19; Secretary and Legal Officer, NBTA & CCL, 23/08/19; Boater 23, CCL, 01/04/21) and raises questions as to the legitimacy of their citizenship.

The demand for a postcode in order to easily access so many everyday rights, entitlements and relationships continues to foreground this questioning for both liveaboard boaters and service providers – which spaces are subjects without a fixed address *expected* to access? What is appropriate behaviour in these spaces (Brown, 2014)? As Boater 1 (Mooring, 27/09/19) reflected, the discomfort of conforming

to the demand for an address can exacerbate both internal and external judgements about appropriate modes of conduct:

> 'Yeah, like trying to remember which address of the various addresses I use for various things, none of which I live there, you're thinking, God, which address did I use for that? Was it my mum's address? Was it this friend's address? Is it this work address? And it just looks like you're committing fraud. You're in the bank and they're like, what's your postcode? And you're like, hmm…'

These experiences of healthcare and voting highlight the centrality of emplaced sites to contemporary, hegemonic performances of citizenship and how 'if we take the view that citizenship is a territorially based set of rights and privileges to which a relatively sedentary and homogenous community has access, we are left with a clear delineation of "insiders", who have the full suite of rights associated with citizenship, and "outsiders" who do not' (Mayblin, 2016: 194). Nonetheless, while the mobilities of liveaboard boaters characterise them as 'outsiders', 'circulation and flow link mobility to citizenship and identity' (Massey, 1991 in Malkogeorgou, 2019: 217), so in what ways can the 'wet ontology' of the waterscape (Steinberg and Peters, 2015) inform our understandings of citizenship?

Unearthing citizenship?

While conceptions of both mobility and citizenship depend on spatial, institutional and infrastructural moorings to configure and enable their performance (Hannam et al., 2006), the mobilities turn offered a critique of a bounded and static nation, community or place, emphasising instead displacement, disjuncture and dialogism (Hannam et al., 2006). Similarly, the fluid mobility offered by moving, and thinking, *through* water encourages a resistance to 'a terrestrial ontology of bounded zones and emplaced points' (Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 253) with waterscapes fostering powerful but placeless connections (Lobo and Parsons, 2023). A citizen of the water is thus a destablised subject that has been untethered from the 'static simplicity of landed place' (Peters and Steinberg, 2019: 305), existing instead in a relational world of flows, consisting of connections across borders rather than being based on a singular site:

> 'The moving has become – again, with these things you're never quite sure whether you're really going to get into doing it, but the moving – we lived in Watford for like I said ten, twelve years. I'd never been to Kings Langley, never been to Apsley, never really been to Rickmansworth, Croxley. And now they're all our homes. So we now spend a month a year going up and then back down again in each of those places. So they've become part of where we live. We find that really interesting, it's kind of like travelling while being at home, you've got your home with you but you get to know all these different places'. (Boater 9, CCL, 15/01/20)

While the canals and rivers of our study are, perhaps, not as unfathomable as the oceans described by Steinberg and Peters (2015) or George and Wiebe (2020), they still offer an 'embodied experience [that] transcends liquid, "wet" engagement' (Peters and Steinberg, 2019); rivers flow and canals connect, exceeding their elemental and geographic attributes to permeate land, air and living beings physically and metaphorically. The design of canals, and particularly their locks, enables or restricts movement. One boater, for example, complained at the amount of space that 'widebeam' boats occupied but expressed joy that they could not access locks that were only 6-feet wide. This restricted 'widebeams' to limited sections of the water network and, he felt, left more space for other boaters. Rain, floods and swift currents also prevented movement; locks enabled or restricted movement and waterways shaped travel:

> It rained, and it rained enough for me to spend three or four days waiting to go down through a lock, squelching down in the rain to see the locky and saying, "Are we going today?" and him saying, "No." But, I mean, huge volumes of water … It's all downhill from Tring but it's a lot of locks. Berkhamsted, Watford, and then down to Uxbridge and what's called the Long Pan. Because that whole bit to Camden is about five hours and there are no locks on it, it's quite wiggly because it just sticks to the contours. (Boater 10, Mooring, 26/03/20)

Conversely, the drought of 2025 led to many stretches of canals being closed to conserve water, which prevented travel and trapped some boats.

A citizen of the water is therefore not of a place but floats within a network, which recognises the (ir)regular rhythms of reciprocity and dialogue, establishing an intersubjective 'becoming-in-common' as an ethical practice. George and Wiebe's (2020: 501) 'ocean citizenship' turns away 'from land-locked property-centric territorial geography and engages with more embodied, fluid, storied, and vibrant ways of being, knowing and sensing the world'. Thus, being *on* the water, connected some boaters to some places yet isolated them from others. In rural places watery living led to encounters with nature and wildlife. Boater 6 (CCL, 27/11/19) commented:

> '...the swans coming to the window when you're washing up and we feed the swans every day, feed the ducks every day, we rate our favourite mooring spots according to which has got the most tawny owls around it and we lie in bed listening to the tawny owls.'

By contrast, urban moorings were often fraught with insecurity, a lack of privacy and conflict with other towpath users (Kaaristo et al., 2025) – boaters felt apart from terrestrial surroundings.

This positions watery citizenship as a 'continual process, rather than some fixed goal or unchanging values which recalcitrant elements must accept' (Schwarzmantel, 2007: 465), a relational being that is 'neither "by", nor "for", nor "in", nor "despite" but rather "with"' (Nancy, 2000: 34). Nancy (1991) positions this as a relation *that always contains the possibility of being otherwise*, echoed in Gomez-Barris's (2019: 43 in Lobo and Parsons, 2023: 134) imagining of oceans 'as connective tissues of living otherwise'. These highlight the connections between ideas of 'being-with' and a watery citizenship, based not on discourses of fusion but on the praxis of difference and plurality with solidarity and uncertainty:

> 'I think boaters tend to have that attitude – that understanding that no matter how fancy your boat is or who you are, in general, everybody understands that we're sort of, we're each other's neighbours and you know, whoever is moored around you is the closest person to help if anything happens… there's just that understanding about what boat life entails'. (Boater 3, CCL, 19/11/19)

> 'There's always the assumption that if you need something, someone's going to be able to help you and you should always ask…It's just the real spirit of it is just, yeah, very much based on mutual aid and I guess that's because you're existing outside the mainstreams of society'. (Boater 12, Mooring, 30/03/20)

The fluidity and excess of the waterways reminds us that there are multiple ways to perform citizenship, in practices that can conform to, challenge or subvert dominant conceptualisations. While Steinberg and Peters (2015) ask how to govern a fluid, volumetric space, we question how you can be a *citizen* of this changeable sphere? It requires an acknowledgement of the contextuality and contingency of the practices that constitute citizenship and an acceptance of alternative rhythms:

> '…it keeps me active and it keeps me flexible and I don't have to stay in one place for too long and, yeh, it makes a different mind-set for me'. (Boater 3, CCL, 19/11/19)

> 'Sometimes it's inconvenient, but most of the time I just get on with it. It's quite tricky sometimes. Sometimes I just want to rest, and I can't, I have to move… But, most of the time, moving isn't really that big an issue…To quite a large extent, I live in a different world from most people because I only travel at three miles an hour in my boat. I can't move my life fast enough sometimes, and people don't really understand what it's like to be moving all the time'. (Boater 19, CCL, 15/12/20)

Boater 19 acknowledges the potential inconveniences, and other boaters highlighted the constant need to think ahead for fuel, food, water and sanitation needs all, for those holding a CCL, within acceptable cruising patterns imposed by the terrestrial waterway authorities. This more embodied connection to daily practices of living, when compared to house-dwellers, promotes an awareness of the 'hidden world' below the surface on which the boat(er), or 'citizen', largely exists, promoting an engagement with practices and relations that, for the sedentary majority, are more invisible. On a first reading, assumptions of terrestrial citizenship would seem to challenge and erode the right to be a citizen on the water.

Yet, living on the water opens up new possibilities of citizenship. Where Hannam et al. (2006) reflect on the increasingly rapid speed at which networks are being made and re-made, the mobility of the waterways is a remnant from another time, contributing to a slow and discontinuous boat time, 'marked by a lengthy and meandering sense of the immediate present … followed by an opaque and somewhat unknowable future, regarding which it would be foolhardy to plan too far or with too little flexibility' (Bowles, 2016: 106). As Boater 19 also notes, living on the waterway is both mobile and at a different speed, and these qualitative differences add a spatial and temporal disjuncture with hegemonic 'earthed' citizenship. The canal therefore offers a slow and quiet way of rethinking citizenship in a leaky world of multiple affiliations (Cresswell, 2009) but also presents a challenge when its fluid subjectivities and structures collide with terrestrial governance. Lobo and Parsons (2023: 135) reflect that we need to move beyond dominant framings of marine governance that aim to control the 'nuisance' of wetness by working through Indigenous, Black, Brown and Southern oceanic epistemologies to 'decolonise through an ethic of interdependence and shared responsibilities that values cyclical kinship time rather than Western linear time'.

A citizenship based on the waterscape therefore acts as a counterpoint to landlocked *practices* by centring the ebbs and flows (Spinney et al., 2015) that connect an ensemble of parts, offering a citizenship that is seemingly destabilised by its disconnection from a static place (Peters and Steinberg, 2019: 305) and yet retains an unbounded, leaky stability, rooted in active praxis. Liveaboard boaters must continually and actively negotiate, engage with and work for their citizenship; while Spinney et al. (2015) note that this is not a fixed right for anyone, for many regular citizens it represents a largely mundane and unremarkable backdrop (Yarwood, 2014). In contrast, waterscape citizens are constantly confronted by the need to perform their citizenship, and these practices are foundational, going beyond the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' that characterise dominant discussions of the active citizen (Pykett et al., 2010). The clear structural and political obstacles to their capability to claim substantive citizenship (see also Alunni, 2021; Spinney et al., 2015) and the ever-shifting responses to these demanded of boaters, foregrounds that their 'citizenship is not given' (Hall et al., 1999 in Brown, 2014: 23). Instead, 'water's dynamic materiality, or liveliness' (Steinberg and Peters, 2019: 336) enforces a practised, connective and amplified form of citizenship that seeps through terrestrial borderings, responding to context and highlighting the multiplicity of ways to access, perform and connect across the sometimes surprisingly porous boundaries and norms erected and maintained by state and non-state actors. Scripts of citizenship are written, rather than followed, through acts that assert, maintain and challenge what it means to be a citizen on the water (Isin and Neilson, 2008). We move now to explore how this shapes everyday experiences through considering the local practices of canal communities, with a particular focus on relations of support and welfare in this 'linear village' (Malkogeorgou, 2019: 213).

Support and welfare in the 'linear village'

Water is fundamentally connective, flowing through time and space while anchoring bodies and communities in ever-shifting yet ever-renewing practices (George and Wiebe, 2020). The communities of the canal are not based on kinship or geographical homogeneity but are 'a village society rooted in the specific qualities of the element of water…It takes shape by the loyalty and fluidity of the relationships that develop in time and space. A sense of belonging, not because of land ownership but of shared lives' (Malkogeorgou, 2019: 214):

> '…you get to know all of the other people, because it is like a community, all the people that live round here that continually cruise. And we all do the same, we all go to the same spots and we all do roughly the same kind of area…' (Boater 16, CCL, 18/01/20)

> '…the boating community is quite old-fashioned in a way, it's sort of, everybody looks out for each other. Once people know you, and they know your boat and they know you're a liveaboard boater, once they know all that…people look out for each other'. (Boater 7 + 8, CCL, 12/02/19)

The shared lives that anchor this community take time to develop; this is a community of practice that requires learning and practicing an extensive set of skills in order to integrate successfully (Bowles, 2015; Herman and Yarwood, 2025). Both sense of home and identity on the waterways are built and maintained through this everyday taskscape with the democratising influence of this continual re-creation meaning that 'whatever one's background one can become a proper or acceptable boater' (Bowles, 2015: 99).

> '…it's always an interesting group of people and they're very accepting and welcoming people, sort of social structure as well and despite being so transient…' (Boater 3, CCL, 19/11/19)

> 'I just bumped into somebody the day before yesterday who I last saw sort of 30 miles back upstream, back up the canal and we were together for about a week- but yeh, we haven't seen each other for three weeks so I'd like to catch up'. (Boater 2, CCL, 21/11/19)

Such transient, yet often iterative relationships establish a different rhythm to this watery community, which fosters more extensive bonds between individuals that stretch and flex across time and space, moored in unpredictable interactions. While this can allow for dynamic connections of support and solidarity, for some this led to the canal being experienced as 'quite tribal…and not as friendly as we thought it would be' (Boater 1, Mooring, 27/09/19), with Boater 2 (CCL, 21/11/19) commenting '…of course we're British, there is a community, but there are also sub-communities, you will look down on the other sort of sub-communities so to speak'. While it is easy to fall into a homogenising and romanticised perception of canal communities, their intrinsic transience for boaters with CCL can promote positive social mixing but can also reduce tolerance and foster chosen or imposed disruptures. While both George and Wiebe (2020) and Lobo and Parsons (2023) emphasise the connective power of water, on the canals liveaboard boaters also valued the agency it granted them to disconnect:

> 'So I've got the whole of the Thames Estuary and it was rather lovely just to tootle off and drop anchor somewhere, in one of the inlets and so on, and just be completely away from everyone…' (Boater 32, Mooring, 13/04/21)

> 'You've got everything you need on your boat. It is a floating home. There's nothing better than being in the middle of nowhere…' (Boater 24, Mooring, 30/03/21)

> 'If you don't like the view out your window you can pick up your house and toddle off' (Boater 27 + 28, CCL, 06/04/21)

The ease with which boaters and their homes can move makes it simple to connect to different people and places but also to detach. As Boater 11 (CCL, 26/03/20) commented 'I like the fact that if I don't like where I am, I can actually just go… when you're stuck in a house, if you don't like your neighbours, you're stuck there, aren't you?'. In contrast to a sedentary property where you are compelled to engage with neighbours or behaviours, when you can float away from anti-social activities there is arguably less need to compromise or challenge them. What then does this mean for the practice of those shared lives, which Malkogeorgou (2019) positions as anchoring this community? Boater 3 (CCL, 19/11/19) discussed 'the boaters who disrespect the etiquette and the general rules of the towpath' but gave no sense as to how this was managed, and this lack of engagement by some with the perceived norms of the boater community highlights the challenges of building and performing a shared understanding and practice of citizenship in this fluid arena. While the boaters quoted above relish the capability to (dis)connect at will, we argue that the unpredictability and transience of watery citizens acts as a challenge to both enforcing the shared practices of boater communities, and maintaining connections with vulnerable members.

The capacity for disconnection manifests in boaters' lack of a clear relationship to any centre of power with Bowles (2015) arguing that this makes it hard to speak of boaters in any way other than just scattered individuals. While some boaters do organise (see the 'Unearthing citizenship?' section and Herman and Yarwood, 2024), others commented on the difficulties they face in building coalitions to advocate for change:

> 'we're very much a disparate community of people who are moving around and when you have people like that who are moving around all over the place, here there and everywhere, they don't organise into groups very well and, by their nature, are disinclined to organise like that anyway'. (Boater 11, CCL, 26/03/20)

The effects of mobility are further exacerbated by the materiality of the boat, which together can isolate a boater from land- and water-based communities (Malkogeorgou, 2019); '…it's very easy for people to become, to retreat and become solitary because you'd see a boat shut up, you know, it's private' (Boater 2, CCL, 21/11/19). The boat's mobility can mean that connections to places and communities can be ephemeral and superficial, making it more difficult to build and maintain support networks and friendships:

> 'I'm much more isolated now. I don't really have any friends much. I mean, I know a few people, but I don't – Yeah, again, it comes back to if you're moving all the time, you don't really get a chance to build up a social network because you might see people now and again but you just don't really hang around. So you've gone, you know?'(Boater 19, CCL, 15/12/20)

Even experiences which might be seen as convivial can, ultimately, hold few opportunities to develop the emotional connections, which may promote feelings of stability, security and support:

> 'So I parked up with a little CC [continuous cruiser] community and we used to have our dinner and sit on the bank and chat in the cool of the evening, and it went reasonably well. You just let people give you as much as they want to about what they've got going on, and so it works reasonably well'. (Boater 10, Mooring, 26/03/20)

Similar concerns were raised by Healthwatch Oxfordshire (2020b), who linked the increasingly rigorous enforcement by the CRT of CCL movement with a disruption to relations of bottom-up

community care, contributing to poor mental and physical health as a result of increasing social isolation on the canals:

> 'The 14 day "moving on" rules have been enforced more strictly by the Canal and River Trust in the last few years. We used to have more of a community of boaters around, as they stayed longer, and people would know and support one another, and we would keep an eye on them. Now, the rules have sadly made some more vulnerable, and we can't now keep an eye on some who come by, and you think, "they need a bit of care" and are not people who want to come into our marina. It could be a year before you see them again'. (Healthwatch Oxfordshire, 2020b: 30)

The innate mobility of life for boaters with CCLs on UK waterways emphasises the fluidity and capacity for alterity in lived practices of both citizenship and community. While George and Wiebe (2020) are speaking about oceanic, coastal communities, the transient rhythms of these inland waterways offer – for us – a similar connectivity and challenge to Western ideals of citizenship grounded in bounded and static property (George and Wiebe, 2020). The communities and citizens of the waterways may not live 'conventional lives' (Boater 11, CCL, 26/03/20) but they are not a world apart from their terrestrial counterparts because 'it is really just like all society in miniature' (Boater 1, Mooring, 27/09/19). The mobility of the waterways simply offers a lens to explore lived citizenship and community, highlighting the centrality of shared values and practices, the solidarity that can exist between strangers in a taskscape and the leaky stability offered by a waterscape in which shared anchors fade, circulate and are re-made in a continual, everyday performance.

Conclusions

Geo-coded data are increasing used as tools of governance (Rose-Redwood, 2006) and so being a citizen without a postcode in a world of terrestrial, bounded governance is complicated and political. Constant negotiations between the cracks of formality and informality, and the need for repeated performances of citizenship claims are everyday experiences for mobile citizens in these hegemonically sedentary contexts. Through analysing the experiences of boaters, as one example of contemporary mobile citizenry, we exposed the commonality of their experiences of exclusion. This is as diverse a community as that based on land, and even for those who would not be considered marginalised if they lived in a static home, due to their education, employment and socio-economic class, irregularity has been imposed simply by their choice to live on a boat. Although liveaboard boaters reflected on work-arounds to access health and voting rights, these are fair weather solutions, not providing guaranteed and consistent access but dependent on gatekeepers as well as requiring certain knowledges and capabilities from the boater. Indeed, the very experiences of liveaboard boaters highlight the negotiability and contextuality of *regular* citizenship, which is usually invisible as the majority sedentary citizens have neither reason nor opportunity to challenge and so expose its emplaced nature. The liveliness of the waterways therefore shines a lens on the edges and contradictions of citizenship, offering subversive routes in to enacting alternative practices and relations, although the state's ongoing efforts to actively 'other' boaters continues to enforce their feelings and experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation, grounding a questioning of their legitimacy as citizens.

Nonetheless, we argue that the mobility and slowness of canal boat living presents a quiet way to rethink citizenship, which is qualitatively different to the dominant, 'earthed' experiences. Drawing on concepts of wet ontologies, being with and an intersubjective becoming-in-common, we proposed a *watery* citizenship based on the praxis of plurality, solidarity and uncertainty, and always containing the possibility of being otherwise. This is not a citizenship tethered in place but one rooted in active practice, which gives it an unbounded, leaky stability through the constant performance of the foundational relations to that citizenship. A watery conceptualisation also requires an acknowledgement of

the contextuality and contingency of all citizenship, and an acceptance that there may be alternative rhythms to citizens' performances. In order to understand the lived implications of this, we reflected on what this interpretation of citizenship meant for relations and experiences of community on the waterway. This emerged as a community of practice, developed through the everyday taskscape established by life on the water, which offered unpredictable, spatially extensive social bonds. While these can promote mixing and a sense of fluid connection to changing mooring sites, mobility can also mean that these links to people and places are ephemeral and superficial, leading to loneliness and social isolation through the lack of a consistent support network. The power of water to connect also presents the capability to disconnect, making it hard to enforce shared practices, maintain connections and build coalitions making for diverse, multiple and flexible experiences for those living within and moving through liveaboard communities.

What then does this mean beyond the specific spaces and experiences of the inland waterways? The powerful but placeless connections fostered by waterscapes, which establish a relational and unbounded citizenship that quietly seeps through or more loudly challenges imposed terrestrial borderings, has resonance for both regular, sedentary citizens and other irregularised subjects, whether migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, itinerant travellers or the homeless. The leaky, interdependent and performative practices of watery citizenship makes space for belonging in a world of multiple affiliations and serves as a reminder that there are always multiple ways to *do and say* citizenship, whether you are conforming to, advocating for, challenging or subverting dominant interpretations. The potential of water to spill and exceed emphasises the surprising porosity of the seemingly immovable borders established and maintained by the state, and maps the hidden routes to navigate through them.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

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Data availability statement

Data are not available due to privacy/ethical restrictions. Research data are not shared.

Notes

1. The precise numbers of people living on boats is unknown (National Boating Manager, Canal & River Trust [CRT], 23/06/20).
2. The Inland Waterways Association (2025) lists over 200 authorities, which include navigation managers, harbour authorities and internal drainage boards: CRT manages 2000 miles, the Environment Agency 630 miles and the Broads Authority 200 miles.
3. Twenty interviewees had partners who lived all or sometimes on the boat, while 16 were single (with 4 explicitly mentioning divorce). Three had children living aboard. Occupations varied from social worker to NHS, PhD, third sector, carpenter, unemployed, retired and Chinese medicine practitioner.
4. See also and compare with accounts of living at sea (e.g. Spence, 2014; Borovnik, 2018)

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