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**ARTICLE**

# Locked out? Navigating the geographies of precarity on Britain's waterways

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**Abstract**

Motivations for living on the UK's waterways range from lifestyle to financial, but increasing numbers have been pushed aboard in response to current, and longstanding, cost-of-living and housing crises. However, while more affordable than living on land, our qualitative investigation reveals a diversity of practices and experiences of marginalisation on the waterways, drawing out the impacts of temporal and spatial fluidity to inform our understanding of precarity in a mobile world. The waterways are a contested and politicised space with diverse actors seeking to delineate legitimate practices and users. Liveaboard boaters practice residential subjectivities in what others designate as leisure spaces. Resistance to such powerful claims to the waterways is not necessarily chosen or active and yet has become implicit to boaters' everyday practices. The mobility and liminality offered by boat living, experienced by some as a chosen freedom and others as a restrictive imposition, presents opportunities for resistance to powerful interests but also social marginalisation and stigmatisation. Through a focus on moorings, we highlight the legal and spatial grey areas regularly inhabited by all boaters. In seemingly secure marinas, we expose a hidden world of housing precarity with residential boaters' living in the shadows of these leisure-designed spaces, resulting in no stability, security or statutory rights. For boaters out on the waterways, precarity continued, albeit with different manifestations. Powerful local actors mobilise narratives that disembody boaters from the waterways through the absence and poor maintenance of essential facilities alongside the loss of legal, safe mooring sites. Precarity emerges as not something restricted to 'vulnerable groups' but an ever present ontological condition. As such it is critical to understand how individuals and communities are responding to their implicit vulnerability, and the opportunities and challenges that mobility offers to the development and practice of this agency.

**KEYWORDS**

agency, mobility, precarity, qualitative, UK, waterways

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

We recently lost more moorings because people who bought houses next to boat moorings are then saying, ‘Well, I don’t want these filthy travellers here’. And I’m like, ‘Well, you bought a house by the canal, by the river. You like the boats, to look at the boats on the river. We are part of it, you know, like it or not’.

(Boater 12, Mooring, 30 March 2020)

Precarity is a ‘socio-economic condition associated with economic instability’ (Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021, p. 731) that can be experienced across multiple arenas of everyday life, including housing and, specifically, the ability to achieve and maintain a home. Secure housing is usually conceived as fixed in space, offering its residents stability and affordability, alongside the capability to access local services and engage as local citizens (Clair et al., 2019). By contrast, living beyond or on the edge of sedentary places is often considered an outcome of precarity, although this homogenises the experience of mobile living, which can serve to resist housing precarity by, for example, giving access to different forms of accommodation (Preece et al., 2020; Richardson, 2017). Such acts can be empowering, opening up new ways of living and working yet, because of their marginality, are themselves precarious.

There is evidence that different forms of mobile but precarious living are becoming increasingly significant for many, including sofa-surfing, sleeping on public transport, rough sleeping and moving between temporary accommodations (see Boland et al., 2021; Ding et al., 2022; Nowicki et al., 2019; Ortega-Alcázar & Wilkinson, 2021). Significantly, these ways of living are often unseen, contributing to greater marginalisation when people cannot access, or be accessed by, support services.

In this paper, we propose the concept of ‘mobile precarity’, which offers an original way to understand the contingent and dialogical practices of people living on the margins of society. In doing so, we present novel insights into an emergent form of living through an examination of people resident on British waterways. Two interconnected issues are examined. First, we navigate the diversity of precarity on the British waterways—how it is experienced and informs boaters’ practices—to draw out the impacts of temporal and spatial fluidity to better understand precarity in a mobile world. Over recent years, increasing numbers of people in England and Wales are living on boats, with an estimated 8783 boat licences issued to liveaboard boaters in 2021 (representing 25% of all boat licences issued, up from 15% in 2011 [Bryant, 2021]).<sup>1</sup> It has been speculated that this has been driven by a necessity to find alternative accommodation in the face of unaffordable housing (Bowles, 2015). Once aboard, boaters face challenges in accessing services, which are exacerbated by boat licensing rules.

Second, we examine how precarity counters more dominant discourses over what, and who, canals and other waterways are for. In doing so, we reveal the politics of precarity through the praxis of different subjectivities in contested, liminal landscapes. Here, liminality is grounded in the mobility of liveaboards’ chosen homes, which move as a response to the socio-material and regulatory inscriptions of authorities that seek to define appropriate rhythms and acceptable traces of living (Cresswell, 2010). Through a consideration of marinas as spaces of precarity, boater experiences of being ‘out of place’ on the water, and boaters claiming space through developing moorings, we analyse the efforts and entanglements involved in delineating acceptable behaviours and practices on the waterways (Brown, 2015) to unpack stories of voice and agency in a precarious world.

## 2 | MOBILE PRECARIETY

The embodied and relational nature of precarity has been increasingly recognised as an *ontological* condition of ‘vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict’ (Ettlinger, 2007, p. 320). As such, precarity offers a conceptual connection between micro-scales and macro-scales, being simultaneously an individual status and collective condition (Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021), situating ‘experiences of insecurity and vulnerability within historically and geographically specific contexts’ (Paret & Gleeson, 2016, p. 280). For many, precarity is associated with the home and, in particular, ‘their relationship with their housing provider, the physical qualities, affordability, security of their home, and access to essential services’ (Clair et al., 2019, p. 16). Conversely, being without a fixed home reduces feelings of security, denies access to services and strengthens associations with ‘pre-modern’ standards of living (Powell, 2017).

It is little wonder that fears of being without a home significantly contribute to absolute, relative or perceived forms of precarity (Brickell, 2012; Richardson, 2017). Such precarity is highly contextual, heterogenous and contingent; as Preece et al. (2020, p. 142) reflect ‘whilst some may feel “on-edge” living amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty ... others may

become acclimatised to a persistent sense of insecurity, with implications for identity-construction'. Thus, precarity is a 'state of uncertainty' (Clair et al., 2019) that increases a person or household's likelihood of experiencing disadvantage. Precarity is at once intimate, in engendering isolation, and collective, being experienced by groups of people in marginal spaces. This liminality can exacerbate internalised powerlessness and hopelessness, fuelling a withdrawal from, and deep mistrust of, formal political systems (Michener & SoRelle, 2022), leading to two responses.

First, precarity can galvanise relations between people, communities and institutions, acting as an opportunity for engagement and agency (Michener & SoRelle, 2022); indeed, precarity was initially thought of as a tool of mobilisation (Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021). Living precariously in a place can catalyse membership-based organisations, such as tenants' groups, that are well placed to develop power and voice amongst subaltern communities (Nowicki, 2020). Resistance within asymmetrical relations, such as those of tenant-landlord/developer, can be hampered by coercive tactics and reprisals by the more powerful partner (August, 2016), but collective mobilisation can gain concessions, improvements and security (August, 2016; Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021; Michener & SoRelle, 2022).

Second, resistance to precarity may be mobilised through a rejection of static living. Mobile lifestyles challenge widely accepted discourses of 'sedentary' citizen identities that are mapped onto fixed places (Cresswell, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006). Mobility offers a way of empowering individuals to move across spaces to better their real and perceived circumstances. In one study, some homeless individuals identified as 'contemporary nomads', embracing the more favourable markers of 'freedom' and 'travel' to align with current conceptions of mobility (Preece et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, itinerant peoples have long experienced stigmatisation and marginalisation, with feelings of precarity amplified by their perceived 'Otherness' and the structural inequalities this entails in housing, education, health, welfare and employment (Richardson, 2017). This structural precarity is grounded in the racialised social precarity of everyday relations—the suspicions and exclusion from neighbouring communities and wider public discourses (Malovics et al., 2019; Richardson, 2017). The hegemony of sedentary thinking reproduces the world as a rooted and bounded place in which mobility, other than those normalised rhythms like the commute, shop or holiday, is pathological (Cresswell, 2014). This prejudice is also grounded in the inaccurate assumption that, because nomads move, place is unimportant for them; for example, viewing Roma as 'out-of-place' further reinforces a myth that they are a 'placeless' people (Malovics et al., 2019).

It is therefore essential to better understand the links between mobile precarity and place. An opportunity to do this is offered through a significant growth in liveaboard boaters, who either live on 'home' moorings or travel between different places. As the following section examines, water, like the land, is heavily contested and reveals much about the ways precarious living is experienced and challenged through strategies of mobile living.

### 3 | BRITAIN'S INLAND WATERWAYS: PRECARIETY AND POWER

All landscapes are 'entangled in struggles over appropriate spatial conduct' (Flemlsaeter et al., 2015, p. 343) and waterscapes are no exception. The rhythms, traces, inscriptions and mobilities deemed appropriate on a given waterway vary (Cresswell, 2014; Flemlsaeter et al., 2015; Peters, 2014), but are grounded in the normatively ascribed 'character', value and purpose of the place (Brown, 2014) and the agency of water itself (Anderson & Peters, 2016). These affect who can lay claim to being legitimate subjects of that place (Flemlsaeter et al., 2015) and delineate spatial practices within and between them (Brown, 2015). Flemlsaeter et al. (2015, p. 342) 'identify how morality works in spatialised ways, shaping who can move where, and how they are expected to do it'. As such, watery places are both spaces of hope and oppression, offering possibilities of challenging or enforcing precarity. These issues are evident in the socio-economic and political transformation of the UK's inland waterways.

Originally developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to transport manufacturing goods (Thrift, 1991), the British inland waterways network declined from the 1850s with the advent of rail and road (Bissell, 2016). Yet, from their dereliction in the 1960s, canals have emerged as vibrant, yet contested, spaces.<sup>2</sup> From the 1970s, nostalgia encouraged volunteers to restore local stretches of canals. As well as re-establishing a connected transport network, these heritage sites link users to a past 'way of being-in-the-world which was physical, authentic and meaningful' (Malkogeorgou, 2019, p. 211) through the performance of travel (Fallon, 2012). This is reflected in the development of the leisure boating industry: a slow tourism experience for those searching for authenticity, adventure and personal growth by travelling on, and not just viewing, the water (McGrath et al., 2020). One of the Canal & River Trust's (C&RT)<sup>3</sup> (2022a, n.p.) main aims has been to develop canals as 'living waterways ... a space for boating, angling, cycling, walking, paddling or just watching the world drift by'. However, this has led to conflict between the sometimes disparate interests of cyclists, canoeists, walkers,

anglers and residential and leisure boaters (Church et al., 2007). Further, the post-industrial reinvention of canals has presented investment opportunities in prime urban areas with Pitt (2018, p. 162) noting that, although '[n]eglect left late 20th century waterways as remnants of de-industrialisation ... many have since featured in urban regeneration schemes and been redeveloped as leisure resources'.

Canals are also becoming homes for more people. In part, this reflects how waterways have been reimagined as 'more authentic' places to live but, equally, a lack of affordable urban housing positions boats as more economical alternatives, especially in expensive, desirable areas such as London, Oxford and Bath (Bowles, 2016; Malkogeorgou, 2019). In response to this trend, Schopen (2006) called for additional marinas and urban moorings to accommodate more households on the water and act as focal points for social regeneration. Nonetheless, moorings remain expensive and scarce, often far from services and, increasingly, under threat from property developers. Those living on boats are generally invisible to service providers and state actors, such as local housing authorities (BANES Council, 2013; Bowles, 2015; NBTA, 2018), an issue exacerbated for boaters without fixed moorings who are obliged to keep moving, impacting their access to (in)formal support networks. Waterways therefore emerge as both secure and precarious; private and yet public; in the metropolis yet abstracted from it; static yet mobile (Malkogeorgou, 2019)—a fluid place without place (Wilkie in Bissell, 2016, p. 178).

New perspectives on the broader politics of precarity can be gained by analysing the dynamic and multiple contestations around residential practices on the waterways. These are neither singular nor static, meaning that all actors with authority over a place need to be in constant negotiation over how it *should* be practised. We argue that analysing the strategies that powerful agencies, the navigational authorities, marinas, state, private landowners and local residents, use to practice waterways as exclusive and exclusionary residential spaces highlights orthodoxies around what counts as a home and legitimate spaces for homes. As Bowles (2015, p. 108) reflects, 'boats [are] more than sedentary homes, they become identified with and inseparable from their owners'. Residential boats—including narrowboats, cruisers, wide beams, houseboats and Dutch barges—are traces that sometimes support or challenge the hegemonic orderings of a waterway, depending on their appearance, position and movements (Sutton, 2021). Critically though, they are part of the landscape, the place, the neighbourhood *and* their occupier (Malkogeorgou, 2019), which highlights that the multiple traces asserting or resisting prevailing spatial orderings are both physical and emotional (Brown, 2015). This is most clearly evident in the enforcement of licences that determine who can live on the water and which spaces they can occupy.

#### 4 | THE MOBILITY OF CONTINUAL CRUISERS

The 5000 miles of navigable inland waterways in Britain are principally governed and regulated by the C&RT, the government's Environment Agency and Broads Authority, and a plethora of other agencies, including state harbour authorities, that are responsible for local stretches of water. Navigational authorities inscribe the waterscape through designating moorings and issuing licences that proscribe where, and how, boaters can live on the water. These can be understood as spatial, infrastructural and institutional *immobilities*, the literal moorings that configure complex mobility systems (Hannam et al., 2006). Yet the way that canals are *supposed* to operate are contested (Andres et al., 2020).

One of the most contentious issues has been whether a boat is required to have a permanent mooring. During the 1990s, British Waterways proposed that all boats should have a recognised 'home' mooring before being granted a licence. Opposition led to the 1995 British Waterways Act that introduced Continuous Cruising Licences (CCLs) 'for navigation ... without remaining continuously in any one place for more than 14 days' (British Waterways Act, 1995, 17cii). Consequently, liveaboards with CCLs must move from point to point, making access to schools, work, welfare and services challenging.

Since 2012, the C&RT has become more rigorous in its policing of CCLs, insisting that these licence-holders 'must be engaged in a genuine, progressive journey around the network' (C&RT, 2018). This has led to surveillance of boat movements, legal actions against boaters who breach the CCL conditions and efforts to dissuade people from applying for such licences: 'could you honestly say you'd enjoy trudging along the towpath with firewood or trying to empty sanitary tanks when the rain is horizontal, and the wind chill is  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and it's getting dark?' (C&RT, 2022b). Regulation and surveillance challenge liveboard boaters' attempts to perform the canal as a different world, a 'last bastion of space free for itinerant peoples and travellers in the "post-enclosure" world' (Bowles, 2016, p. 108), through

flexible and uncertain mobilities. As Bowles (*ibid.*) argues, CCLs impose fixity on the elastic temporalities of 'boat time' and so mobility in these spaces cannot be equated with freedom (Malkogeorgou, 2019). Although many boaters accept the C&RT's movement requirements, recent changes suggest that some boaters' historic travel patterns are no longer deemed compliant (NBTA, 2018).

The mobility of the continuous cruiser means they regularly move between spaces controlled by a variety of powerful actors such as navigational authorities, local councils and private landowners (Sutton, 2021). Given that canals are managed and regulated largely as leisure spaces, the presence of liveaboards is often neglected within wider discourses of recreation and tourism. The uncertainty around whether or not they are 'in place' at certain moorings is therefore exacerbated by the complex politics and competing interests over how the waterway is supposed to operate. Such moral judgements question 'who counts as a legitimate citizen [being] judged against socially and materially situated normativities of how the outdoors and nature ought to be engaged with and appreciated' (Brown, 2014, p. 23). The fluidity of the UK's canals, and the mobility that enables, is intrinsic to their identity but also acts as a challenge to how they as places, and liveboard boaters—people 'who appear to be mobile, without place' (Cresswell, 2014, p. 173)—are labelled and treated.

According to the National Bargee Travellers' Association (NBTA), a third of its members were threatened with restricted or loss of licences in 2016 for not complying with CCL requirements (NBTA, 2017). This is a particular issue for those with children or employment who need to remain in certain areas. The broader tensions, discussed further below, around mooring and licensing can be understood as contentions over the legitimacy and inclusion of different subjects in canal spaces. Boaters are also positioned as 'other' through the mobility of their homes rather than being socio-economically or demographically different to those on land and yet, like other itinerant peoples, they continue to experience suspicion, prejudice and precarity. These varied experiences of vulnerability on the waterways further reflects their broader equivocal status, offering a lens into the heterogeneity of experiences, and highlighting the need to give voice to the ways people themselves respond to, resist or remake precarious lives (Preece et al., 2020).

As Brown (2014, p. 23) reflects 'as soon as we disembled ... someone, we pave the way to exclude them' so it is important to recognise and analyse the socio-material processes and practices through which certain narratives of the canal are performed and resisted. Liveboard boaters are an important part of the waterscape, forming a fluid and mobile 'linear village' (Malkogeorgou, 2019), albeit a heterogenous one in terms of licences, types of boats and boater. Drawing on Lancione (2020), we understand waterscapes as marginal spaces because they articulate a politics of the in-between, with analyses of their liminal lives and communities pointing towards other ways of being and becoming. This also reveals why canal living is precarious for many.

## 5 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

We draw on research conducted between 2019 and 2021 with people living on boats in England and Wales. Our aims were to understand motivations for, and experiences of, living on boats, including access to services and employment, and how the regulatory environment and mobile community impacted on these. Our methodological strategy therefore combined an online survey to gain a broad understanding of different boaters' experiences, demographics and concerns, with semi-structured interviews to access individual biographies, contextualising boaters' current and past experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that these interviews were predominantly conducted remotely.

Following ethical approval from the University of Plymouth, the survey was developed with input from the NBTA, publicised through boating forums and hosted on an online platform that was accessed via a weblink. It yielded 154 responses that covered a wide range of situations, journeys and viewpoints, which were analysed using SPSS. Most respondents lived on board all year, which reflected our distribution strategy and aim of surveying 'liveaboards' rather than tourists (see Figure 1).

Our survey population mainly comprised middle-aged and older people: with 42% aged 46–60, 35% over 60 and 30% retired. As such, it reflected the wider population of liveboard boaters (cf. Boater Reputation Survey, C&RT, 2020). The survey identified people who were willing to be interviewed in more detail about their lives on the water. Additional interviewees emerged through snowballing and we also spoke with representatives from key organisations. We conducted 36 interviews in total: with six representatives of boating organisations and waterway authorities and 34 liveboard boaters (18 with home moorings and 16 without).<sup>4</sup> Interviews ranged from 30 to 105 min, were recorded using either Zoom or a Dictaphone, transcribed and inductively coded using NVivo 12.

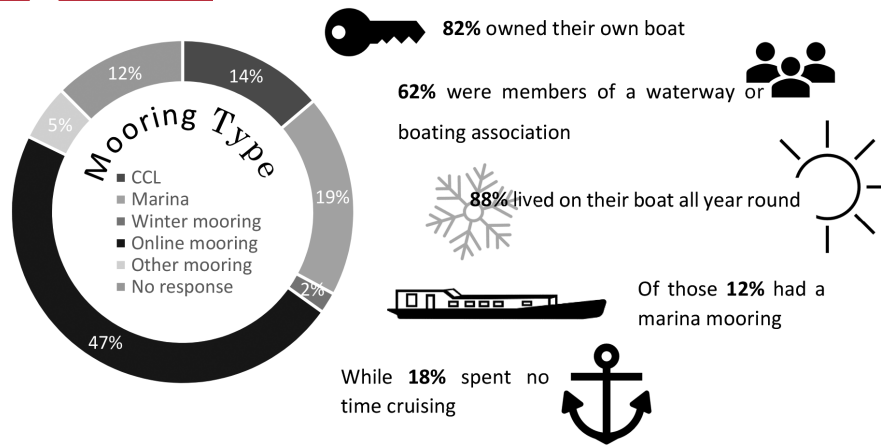


FIGURE 1 Survey respondent details. Canal Boat by Claire Jones from Noun Project.

## 6 | BOATING LIVES

We first outline the reasons why people established homes on the water, revealing a wide range of circumstances that determined these moves, before considering those living in marinas, which appear to offer secure harbours, both literally and metaphorically. However, as we unpack the issues around their residential status, the precarity they enforce in boaters' lives emerges, highlighting the legal and spatial grey areas which boaters regularly inhabit. We then move on to the waterways network, which is similarly governed by a fluctuating patchwork of powerful interests and narratives, which exclude or restrict boaters' everyday practices as they move along the waterways. For those with CCLs, precarity outside the marina is grounded in their vulnerability in accessing essential facilities and their right of navigation, which is exacerbated by the limited development of a collective voice with which to highlight issues and push back. Nevertheless, what is experienced as precarity by some is a chosen freedom for others, and we reflect on the practices boaters adopt to subvert dominant narratives. More explicitly, liveaboard boaters can also claim space, performing areas as residential as we discuss in the final section that details efforts to create a mooring. While living with vulnerability may be a universal condition, it is critical to examine the practices and strategies that define this relationship and how it is experienced.

### 6.1 | Moving onboard

Motivations for becoming a liveaboard boater fell broadly into two, interconnected camps for both our interviewees and survey respondents. 61% of survey respondents positioned this as a lifestyle change, that was often triggered by a life event such as retirement or downsizing, but brought about many benefits including a slower pace of life, being off-grid and living closer to nature. For many, this had been aspirational and, while they acknowledged the challenges of the lifestyle, reflected that 'it's absolutely magic being next to the water, and it's a fulfilment of a dream. I like the fact that it's different, and I've got a beautiful view where I am' (Boater 32, Mooring, 13 April 2021). Nevertheless, even when lifestyle was emphasised, affordability could also be important:

I certainly don't want to spend my entire pay cheque on a really tiny ugly studio flat out in the middle of nowhere just for the sake of living on my own. So I think this was the most realistic option for me where I could have my own home and operate independently without getting into debt.

(Boater 3, CCL, 19 November 2019)

Several interviewees considered that more people were being pushed aboard 'for the wrong reasons, because they can't afford a property, so they end up buying a very old boat and they're just about existing' (Boater 21, Mooring, 7 April 2021). Indeed, canal-living emerged as a response to existing precarity in our survey, with 25% reporting that they, or someone living on their boat, had previously experienced a period of homelessness; while 29% noted that their move had been driven by a lack of

affordable housing and 34% had been motivated by cheaper costs-of-living, compared with on land. Boater 9 (CCL, 15 January 20/20), reflecting on motivations for becoming a liveaboard, noted that:

there are a number I see going from rough sleeping onto boats ... You are not going to be going from a hostel, a night shelter ... into a central London rented flat ... Because you will never ever have the money to do that. At least the boat environment, it's definitely a potential for transition.

The greater flexibility and affordability offered by boats in comparison to bricks and mortar therefore represents a potentially crucial transitional point in a residential life course. Given that 71% of survey respondents intended to live on their boat 'for the foreseeable future', this offers a long-term response for those experiencing housing precarity. Nevertheless, many boaters faced new forms of precarious living.

## 6.2 | Precarity and the Marina

Liveaboard boaters are a diverse group of people with a broad spectrum of experiences and expectations but, despite the 'otherness' of their floating homes, boaters to a large extent reflect society more broadly. This social diversity is reflected in boaters' capability to access moorings and their power to retain them. While some individuals thrive within an atmosphere of uncertainty, others struggle with the precarity of mobile life and choose a 'fixed' or 'home' mooring that provides a greater sense of security. Seventy-three percent of our survey respondents lived on year-round or seasonal moorings (see [Figure 1](#)) in marinas (small docks, basins or harbours for leisure craft) or 'on the cut' of a waterway (which may be onside [by the tow-path] or offside). Marinas, and some 'on the cut' moorings, provide facilities, such as water and power, that appear to offer boaters the ability to live in one place. Thus, one boater with a marina mooring explained that:

I like the convenience ... being able to connect up to electricity and the fibre optic connection so that makes it possible to work at home and stuff like that which otherwise would be difficult on continuous cruising.  
(Boater 4, Mooring, 27 November 2019)

... we had some bad winters and that's when it was really rough, because it did freeze up for a couple of weeks ... we were glad we were in the marina actually, because they've got ... electric supply, they've even got a BT line we could connect to. We've got a water tap ... a shop, restaurant.  
(Boater 21, Mooring, 7 April 2021)

Despite access to facilities (Clair et al., 2019), marinas are not secure spaces—the equivocality of their residential status grounds them in vulnerability. Establishing residential moorings is challenging with the Vice Chair of the Residential Boat Owners Association (RBOA) claiming that 98% of applications are turned down (Interview, 10 January 2019). Boaters framed this struggle in terms of the politics about who/what the marina should be for and the potential for state liability:

... even the landowners and the marinas that have wanted to take residential boats have often found it difficult because councils will resist giving planning consent because they're liable to end up with a rehousing issue if the boat sinks.  
(Boater 31, Mooring, 21 April 2021)

Because there isn't direct planning guidance ... which covers residential moorings. So their default is to go, well it's the equivalent to bricks and mortar in green belt, no you can't do it. Which of course it isn't, it's a nonsense.  
(Vice Chair, RBOA, 10 January 2019)

Marinas therefore have more leisure than residential berths, but it was common knowledge amongst our interviewees that this did not stop liveaboards:

It got the spotlight shone on it a bit with the first lockdown when it suddenly became obvious when the marinas were saying, 'Well, you can't come into my marina because there's a risk to the residents'. And, of



course, there shouldn't have been any residents (laughs) because the marina didn't have residential planning consent. So all this stuff that was under the radar suddenly bubbles up ...

(Boater 31, Mooring, 21 April 2021)

This has implications for liveboards in terms of community, rights and security of tenure. While they cannot provide figures, the NBTA (2017) noted that most marinas do not permit residential use and the hidden nature of *any* marina resident makes it harder to establish and enforce the responsibilities of marinas as landlords. As one boater reflected:

... should they be subject to the same sort of rules and good practice procedures as landlords in a more traditional sense? Are they landlords or aren't they and I think in some cases, I think there's a case to say yes they are and we should be able to expect more protection as dwellers ... they try to present it as a commercial arrangement, it's not a rental agreement.

(Boater 4, Mooring, 27 November 2019)

A common sentiment across our interviews was a sense that liveboard boaters consistently exist between the cracks in society, an experience exemplified by the limited oversight and lack of regulation in marinas simply because their residential nature is unacknowledged. Living on a leisure mooring can put the boater in breach of the planning permissions for the marina (Secretary and Legal Officer, NBTA, 23 August 2019) meaning there is no security of tenure, no right to stay and no statutory notice period; echoing Dotsey and Chiodelli (2021, p. 731), the boaters experience 'a temporary concession, not a stable right', indicating the precariousness of their housing condition. Boaters as well as the NBTA and RBOA discussed summary evictions from marinas, noting the impacts this uncertainty takes on boaters' mental health; 'unless and until there's an adequate supply of residential moorings ... we're going to be living in the shadows, because we're always going to have the threat of eviction hanging over us' (Vice Chair, RBOA, 10 January 2019).

House boats simply are, and remain, a grey area. Nobody's said there needs to be this much distance between two boats ... whereas if you go to a mobile home site, the minimum is 12 foot something ... It's that attitude, that if there isn't a law against it, then it's okay for people who live on boats to tolerate it because there's no specific law. In other words, you don't really matter. It's only the law that matters.

(Boater 30, Mooring, 20 April 2021)

Marinas are therefore liminal landscapes, subject to contestation as legally authoritative planning authorities position them as non-residential, a status that is quietly transgressed by both the marina owners and the everyday practices of those living on leisure moorings. This subversion is precarious and, ultimately, can never be successful as the boaters have no legal backing to practicing the marina as a permanent domestic space. Consequently, marinas are largely unregulated, which enforces a lack of rights for liveboard boaters more generally. Not only is there no equivalent of the Landlord and Tenant Act to offer legal protections (Vice Chair, RBOA, 10 January 2019) but few boaters have the capability to challenge marina practices or raise attention to their situation when they are living under a constant shadow of eviction. Liveboards in marinas are therefore susceptible to the predatory and poorly regulated landlords, price hikes, revenge evictions and coercive tactics symptomatic of housing precarity (Richardson, 2017), as can be seen in [Figure 2](#).

Boaters cannot simply leave adverse housing situations.<sup>5</sup> Many boaters are restricted by a lack of available, affordable residential moorings (Boating Organisation, Interview, 20 July 2020) and the asymmetric power relations within, and ambiguity of, the marina can make it hard to transfer a mooring and so leave through a market transaction:

... you don't actually buy the mooring ... it's a bit of a shady industry to be honest. You're allowed to advertise your boat on a mooring which is transferable, but there's actually nothing there of any substance other than you're relying wholly on the goodwill of the marina to say 'yes, they'll transfer the licence'—they can say no if they want to ...

(Boater 4, Mooring, 27 November 2019)

These experiences highlight the everyday pervasiveness of housing precarity in the marina, but also its contingency as 'it affects individuals but is not intrinsic to them' (Clair et al., 2019, p. 15) because there are clear, if difficult, routes to establishing greater security. Michener and SoRelle (2022) suggest this creates opportunities for resistive practices or emergent political subjectivities (Dotsey & Chiodelli, 2021). When asked about residents associations, which can offer such a space for

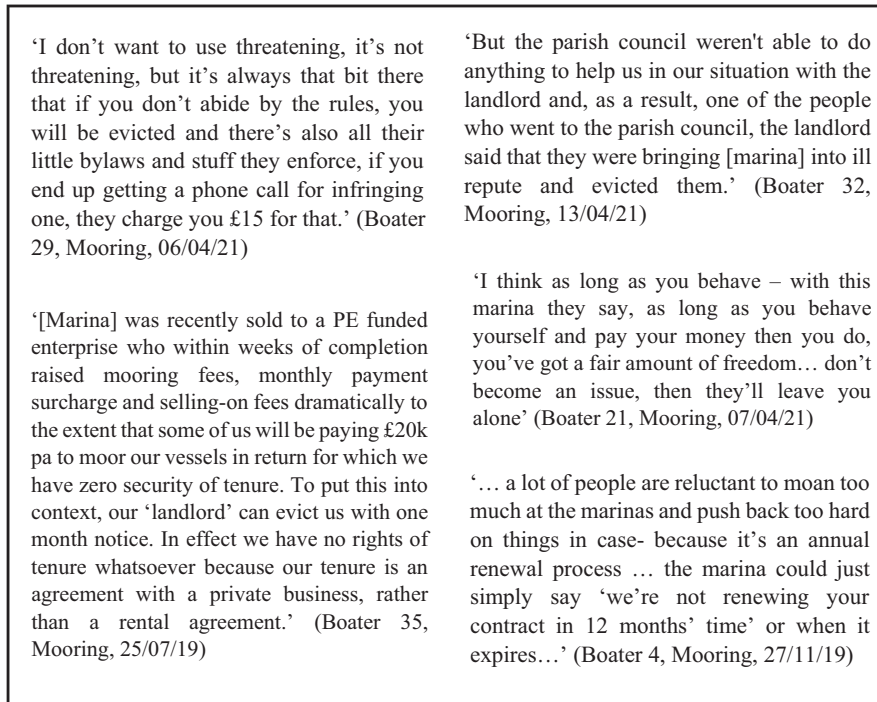


FIGURE 2 Experiences of Marina Landlords.

developing voice and agency, none of our interviewees were in marinas with one ‘... because sometimes they can be, end up with a bit of a, cause trouble for the marina owners ...’ (Boater 21, Mooring, 7 April 2021); a number commented that ‘you can’t have a recognised legal residents’ association because the laws about residents’ associations apply to bricks and mortar, not to boats’ (Boater 30, Mooring, 20 April 2021). The de jure status of boaters’ residential rights remains opaque and leases are negotiated between landlord and boater;<sup>6</sup> both of which mitigate against collective resistance to predatory practices.

This is not to say that there are not benefits to living in marinas, access to facilities such as utilities and essential services like healthcare and education (Clair et al., 2019) avoid some of the challenges experienced by those with CCLs. Some marina residents enjoyed a supportive community (Boater 15, Mooring, 12 January 2020), while others noted that some marinas are quietly increasing the number of legal residential berths (Boater 31, Mooring, 21 April 2021). However, the common experience for boaters of the marina as an ambiguous space, with insecure tenure dependent on the whims of the landlord rather than statutory rights, highlights the invisibility of some precarious housing. While the choice of a marina mooring may have been to avoid the uncertainty and unpredictability of continuous cruising, the experiences discussed here emphasise the differential but ultimately existential nature of precarity, a condition definitive for all (Jorenen & Rose, 2021).

### 6.3 | ‘Out-of-place’ on the water

For continuous cruisers, mobility is fundamental to boater life. Although this is required by their licence, many relished the apparent freedom this offered (see Section 4):

It seems to me there’s no point having a boat if you’re not going to go anywhere on it.  
(Boater 11, CCL, 26 March 2020)

I take my ropes off and I set off, and I look behind me—and I always look behind me—and think, is it really that easy?  
(Boater 19, CCL, 15 December 2020)

Access to nature, tranquillity and adventure all from the comfort of their own home brought our interviewees with CCLs satisfaction and joy, but maintaining a mobile lifestyle in a sedentarist society also exposed them to challenges

in terms of waste management and utilities; digital, financial and political exclusions; access to essential services and employment; and transport. With a CCL, housing precarity is arguably less impacted by affordability than for those in marinas, but Clair et al.'s (2019) different categories of precarity (security, quality and facilities and access to essential services) are highly relevant in governing their experiences. Facilities such as water and waste disposal play a significant role in shaping cruising patterns and signalling inclusion or exclusion from particular places. The C&RT (2020) noted that many boaters had deep dissatisfaction with their facilities, with issues raised about deteriorating quality, outdated information and insufficient numbers. As boater numbers grow, the strain on already stretched and unreliable facilities also increases (Worrall, 2019); many interviewees had stories of unhygienic Elsan points,<sup>7</sup> unusable taps, bins being removed and limited recycling points:

I guess it's now almost two years, there's a ... CRT tap, but the water doesn't come in. And there's a pub. So I wandered up ... and I said, 'What's wrong with the tap down the bottom?' He goes, '... It comes off my supply into the pub. The CRT said they'd pay me whatever a quarter and they haven't, so I've turned the water off'. Okay, I can understand that. So over the space of probably two months I tried to find out who was responsible. 'I can tell you it's a difficult issue'. 'I can tell you we have a number of people looking into it'.

(Boater 27 + 28, CCL, 6 April 2021)

For the boaters, this represented a failure by the navigation authorities to maintain the network for which they are responsible, with questions raised about the efficiency and functionality of C&RT internal governance structures. The lack of facilities was also perceived to be related to the C&RT's, and other powerful actors', performance of the waterways as heritage and leisure rather than residential spaces:

CRT said to me—I said, 'It's because you've got no money, isn't it?' and they go, 'No, we've got the money. It's just that it's considered a piece of English heritage, and therefore we're not really allowed to change it, fundamentally'. And I thought, but you expect people to live on it. You're happy for them to live on it, but yet you don't provide amenities, like a water standpipe. Sometimes it can be 10 miles! It's like, what is this? ... There's so much snobbery and there's so much hostility to those who are living this lifestyle that you can bet that they're not going to put any more standpipes in ...

(Boater 26, Mooring, 14 April 2021)

Richardson (2017) discusses how control over Gypsy and Traveller sites was, in some instances, exercised through neglect; whether the neglect of waterways facilities is intentional or not, it manifests the asymmetrical power relations governing the waterways and lack of agency of those who rely on the services, offering a very material indicator as to where boaters are legitimate users. From discussions with boaters—both with and without home moorings—as well as considering the material inscriptions on the waterways, it is clear that liveaboards are only 'in place' when they follow the navigational authority rules and adhere to contextually grounded, normative perceptions of what a canal boat should look like, where it should be and what a boater should be like.<sup>8</sup> Boaters reflected on the exclusionary strategies deployed, noting that being denied moorings was increasingly common in hot-spots such as Central London and Bath. In some instances this seemed unintentional; in others, prejudice towards boaters was being legitimated through reference to environmental issues:

But they couldn't come out with their prejudices, so they had to concoct a valid and non-judgemental reason for wanting the moorings lifted. So what they did was they brought these geographers in and they were saying, 'Do you know what?' and ecologists and well, saying, 'Because of the mooring pins, the solidity of the riverbank has been undermined, which has affected,' I don't know, 'water vole populations, nesting buntings,' whatever it is that they're doing. So, on that basis, the local parish council, or county council, has stripped the boaters of the rights now to Salford moorings, and particularly the water point down there, which is critical.

(Boater 26, Mooring, 14 April 2021)

Some authorities, such as Islington, have taken this further—connecting into air and noise pollution concerns to establish an Eco-Zone, which is working towards a smoke-free space with no solid fuel stoves permitted (C&RT, 2021). The Islington Eco-Mooring Zone trial is a collaboration between DEFRA, Islington Council and the C&RT, offering bookable visitor moorings

with access to electric charging points. Boaters understood a dislike of fossil fuels but stressed that not everyone has the capability to choose cleaner energy sources:

In Islington, they declared an eco-zone, which sounds all very nice and fluffy, but what they were saying was, ‘We don’t want you to run your engines and we don’t want you to use generators’. So how are you meant to generate electricity? So all the recreational boaters were able to use the eco zone. All of the liveaboards had to move through. So they basically succeeded in purging Islington of liveaboard boaters ...

(Secretary and Legal Officer, NBTA, 23 August 2019)

The cost of converting boats to using the new electric hook-ups is prohibitive for many (Alasauskaite, 2021), with this drive for ‘eco-gentrification’ cleansing the area of lower income, liveaboard boaters. Other councils take a more explicit approach with both the NBTA and RBOA reflecting on Richmond Council which, under pressure from an organisation called Reclaim Our Riverbank (established 2014), passed a by-law banning casual mooring on its stretch of the Thames (Vice-Chair, RBOA, 10 January 2019). As the NBTA Secretary and Legal Officer (Interview, 23 August 2019) commented, ‘we’ve got a borough in London where it’s a criminal offence to moor, which is directly subverting the public right of navigation’. Precarity for those with CCLs is therefore spatially contingent because experiences of (in)security, (un)predictability and the quality of facilities are so dependent on who controls a particular stretch of water. Moving through, and between, sometimes collaborating, sometimes competing interests positions the boater within a constantly shifting political patchwork that is highly dependent on local knowledge and interests:

... you may get a local authority that is very much sort of used to working with the boating community; and you may then come across an organisation that only has a small part of the canal network who aren’t used to working with the boating communities ... we see them [local authorities] as one organisation but in reality they’re lots of organisations under one roof ... and they might not all necessarily have the same viewpoint ...

(National Boating Manager, C&RT, 23 June 2020)

The fluid mobility of the waterscape challenges terrestrial ontologies of bounded zones that seek to govern flowing waterways through the emplaced banks along their sides (Couper, 2018; McGrath et al., 2023). This fluidity facilitates both division and connection (*ibid.*); while the presence of multiple, powerful actors even within a single organisation exacerbates the insecurity experienced by those with CCL, it can also create opportunities for resistance as one boater recalled:

There was an organisation in Oxford called UMBEG ... [they] worked out who owned what. But, of course, there were a few gaps. So one of the itinerant moorers sent in a freedom of information request to the council for the results of their survey ... So they had a list of where the gaps were (laughs) That got shared around so that everyone could find a hole ... It was a brilliant piece of opportunism ...

(Boater 31, Mooring, 21 April 2021)

Through the negotiations of the different authorities in this environment, the liminal spaces created by this complex patchwork of ownership were made visible. This allowed boaters to subvert strategies of control and assemble counter-narratives of the waterway as a residential space. However, such localised efforts at practising liveaboard boats as ‘in place’ on the waterways are often only temporary. The lack of legal title combined with local pressure groups establishing a normative narrative of their illegitimacy makes it hard for boater communities to successfully resist static, terrestrial power (Steinberg & Peters, 2015) in the long term, and in the short term the threat and experience of eviction, abuse and violence does not make for a secure environment.

The experiences of those with CCLs highlights the temporal fluctuations of living with precarity as experiences of absolute, relative and perceived (in)security wax and wane with context. Under the terms of CCLs, boaters can moor in a neighbourhood for up to 14 days, which grants them temporary security before they revert to the uncertainty of where to go next. As discussed above, this mobility is not experienced by all as precarity but for those who have CCLs because of the lack of affordable and/or available moorings, the inevitability of short-term respite within a broader arc of insecurity can be physically and mentally draining. This is exacerbated by changes to mooring conditions, which enforce different cruising patterns, and—again—are perceived as linked to the C&RT’s preference for its waterways to be for leisure use only:

... it seems like there are constant squeezes made to liveaboards that don't need to be made as I see it ... there's been moorings that used to be normal moorings that anyone could come to and moor for two weeks, but now all of a sudden they're 48 hours ... I don't remember those moorings being particularly over-congested. I don't understand the rationale for this except, well it's perfect for hire boats isn't it? The liveaboards won't moor there if it's only 48 hours because it's too much hassle ...

(Boater 6, CCL, 27 November 2019)

This reflects discussions with boaters about moorings in gentrifying areas being lost or sold to developers who hike the rents (Boater 1, Mooring, 27 September 2019). Many boaters felt the C&RT, in particular, was using mooring changes to actively, if gradually, push liveaboards out:

... most continual cruisers don't like the C&RT ... it feels like they don't like people that continually cruise, and they'd prefer everybody to live in a marina. I've seen reports where it's like as a new marina gets built, they take away moorings that are on the side of the canal ... they don't want people living on the canals ...

(Boater 16, CCL, 18 January 2020)

The C&RT states that 'continuous cruisers are a big part of the draw to our waterways. They bring a sense of vibrancy to our canals and rivers ...' (C&RT, 2022b). Yet, while boaters are represented by various advisory groups in the governance structures of navigational authorities, many (70%) of our respondents felt that they had no say in waterways management. Spatial, digital, language and experience barriers, amongst others, meant having a real voice in consultations or processes was difficult.

## 6.4 | Practising counter-narratives: Creating a mooring

Moorings are key places in liveaboard boaters' daily lives, performing physical and metaphorical connections to place through mobilising locality and re-arranging scale (Hannam et al., 2006). While there is evidence of some subversive and resistive practices from boaters, politically organising a group of transient people who are often disinclined to organise anyway (Boater 11, CCL, 26 /march 2020) and disempowered by their previous experiences (Boater 26, Mooring, 14 April 2021) is challenging. Combined with the insecurity of marina dwellers, this suggested that any community organisation that did exist was very contingent on scale and personality. Where these elements did coalesce, opportunities to mobilise emerged as we discuss here through the experiences of one boater who is in the process of creating a mooring:

It's an old scrap land that the C&RT couldn't do anything with and there's a scrapyards behind it that the council couldn't do anything with ... so my husband and myself and two of our friends creating the moorings ... we've got moorings for four boats at the moment. We've built one side of it ... It's going to take us a good year or so to get the other side ready, and then we can get some more people in, moorers.

(Boater 24, Mooring, 30 March 2021)

The success of Boater 24's efforts to practice this space as residential is arguably made easier by the fact it was marginal, unused land. Everyday, resistive tactics 'always operate in a place defined by the strategies of the powerful' (Andres et al., 2020, p. 2444), here the two key actors—the local council and the C&RT—are choosing to legitimate this mooring. Collaborative negotiations between boaters and powerful institutions can therefore work in challenging or mitigating issues when interests align:

C&RT own part of it and then the council own the other part ... but they've both been very keen on getting something done with it, so they've been very, very helpful.

(Boater 24, Mooring, 30 March 2021)

The experiences of liveaboard boaters both with and without home moorings highlights the pervasiveness of precarious housing, and living more generally, on UK waterways. Although our respondents came from a range of socio-economic, education and employment backgrounds, the liminality and mobility of boats as homes provided a common, precarious baseline. This emphasises the existential nature of vulnerability for all, which is often masked by its consideration as a socio-political, racial, spatial and/or gendered problem (Jorenen & Rose, 2021). Recognising vulnerability as a fundamental limit to

power, something we all have to deal with and yet have no capability to ever resolve, allows us to, according to Jorenen and Rose (2021), engage with the politics of living *with* vulnerability, a politics that acknowledges it is never enough. Creating this mooring is a response to the vulnerability of boaters in areas with insufficient moorings, and recognising the potential of 'old scrap land' 'creatively mines the cracks of life' (Jorenen & Rose, 2021, p. 1413), finding and using opportunities to actively perform the landscape through restoring existing buildings, clearing land, establishing utilities and engaging with community projects. This is about living with existential vulnerability as while you may never be able to create a safe haven, this does not preclude efforts to mobilise, mitigate and engage *with* that precariousness (ibid.). The 'with' is important because it recognises that while political actions can never lead to escape, they do include diverse practices to create and live with hope. As Boater 24 (Mooring, 30 March 2021) explained, this project is also seeking to respond to the spatial vulnerabilities of neighbouring communities:

The other thing that we heard a lot from the community was there's never anywhere to do anything outside. So in one of the spaces we've got from the council, we are going to build a built-in barbecue ... We're providing the gardens and we're providing the growing space, if people want to come and play at gardening, or just interested in plants or whatever and a lot of older people ... they can potter in the garden, you know, have a cup of tea, have a chat, do what you want.

Establishing this mooring has therefore been supported by these boaters' efforts to represent the wider, local community; more inclusive performances of the mooring space have strengthened their voice by enhancing the perceived moral standing of the initiative amongst local residents. Having a stake through access to community, leisure and outside spaces makes the boaters' narrative of the space as a residential mooring normatively acceptable. Building a shared community to connect boat and land dwellers through communal spaces and activities promotes local ties and a sense of micro-scale citizenship to the neighbourhood, which further promotes long-term resilience for this mooring.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

Despite growing interest and attention, inland waterways in the UK remain marginal spaces because, following Lancione (2020), they perform a politics of the in-between. Their liminality arises from contests over what are deemed to be *appropriate* practices in watery spaces, which themselves reflect terrestrial ways of thinking and governing (Steinberg & Peters, 2015). This is best seen in the ways in which liveaboard boaters' everyday practices are regarded as 'other', 'marginal' or 'out of place' by decision-makers and other canal users. Moorings, whether long term or transitory, are key points of immobility in the domestic lives of liveaboard boaters, and have emerged as places of dense interaction; anchoring points for more fluid and sedentary practices to connect. Critically, boats perform alternative ways of 'making' a home, which challenge the contemporary hegemony of ideal domestic performances in terms of their mobility, spatiality and interactions with utilities. Liveaboard boaters practice residential subjectivities in what others have, or are trying to, designate as purely leisure spaces. Residents on or near waterways can form powerful lobbies that join the navigation authorities, local authorities and landowners in negotiations over legitimate use(r)s to question whether, or in what form, boats and boaters belong on canals.

Resistance to the powerful voices laying claim to the waterways is not necessarily chosen or active, but has become implicit to boaters' everyday practices of simply living an alternative life to the hegemonic norm. The ability to resist, or the desire to conform, to the dominant visions of inland waterways reflects the contingent power and differential agency of individual boaters, from the wealthy retirees who helped police the canals (by reporting over-staying CCLs, for example) to the active resistance or subversion by those who had long followed travelling lifestyles.

While further work is needed to examine the significance of class, power and intersectionality on the precarity of boating, and mobile lives more broadly, our stories have predominantly centred on a lack of agency, within a community of fragmented voices. In marinas, with their smart promotional materials, we have exposed the residential boaters' living in the shadows of these leisure-designed spaces, resulting in no stability, security or statutory rights and so limited capability to develop a voice and push for change. Along the waterways, housing precarity continued albeit with different manifestations. Powerful local actors mobilised narratives that materialised exclusions, disembedding boaters from the waterways through the absence and poor maintenance of essential facilities alongside the loss of legal, safe mooring sites. This has emphasised the contingency of precarity; it is not intrinsic to any individual, but can be experienced whatever the boater's socio-economic background, education, employment history, health, personal life or type of home. Boater

experiences highlight how any sense of stability and security is spatially and/or temporally fluid, which requires the individual to continually respond and adapt to this dynamic context; such experiences are further complicated by the patchwork of politicised and contested interests governing waterscapes. These open up wider questions reflecting on the capability or, indeed, the morality of using waterways to deal with structural housing issues, and the extent to which such experiences translate beyond the UK's post-industrial waterscapes.

Furthermore, boater experiences emphasise the importance of connection to challenging the politics of precarity. Cutting across heterogenous communities, and speaking for more than just the boaters, was critical for the sustainability of the new mooring; this helped to build a collective sense of what that particular place should be for, supporting the boaters in their interactions with more powerful, local actors. In communities that are hard to mobilise, building bridges across seemingly disparate groups is even more essential to successful counter-narratives and, in this instance, gaining the statutory support to legitimate residential practices and so allow the full exercise of tenancy and citizenship rights.

The experience of boaters also raises questions about the relationship between precarity and mobility; the latter is simultaneously a means of escaping *and* a risk factor for differential precarities. We advance 'mobile precarity' as both a consequence of, and way of understanding, the relationship between mobility and structural disadvantage. While the literatures largely approach precarity in relation to what are perceived as vulnerable groups, our research empirically demonstrates that mobile precarity is an ever present *ontological* condition (Ettlinger, 2007; Jorenen & Rose, 2021). By engaging with a mobile population, our work emphasises that stability and security are only ever superficial and contextual. Bleak as this may sound, this is not a call to despair but a reminder to understand and make space for individuals and communities to articulate *how* they are responding to, resisting or remaking their lives *with* the implicit precariousness and vulnerability acknowledged. Strategic agency can take many forms and precarity is not inevitable but, rather, has to be actively and relationally performed through a combination of socio-structural ambiguities and absences. Exploring the interactions of mobility and precarity therefore highlights the endemic but fluid nature of the latter, which acts to remove it of its seemingly inexorable inevitability for some to acknowledge its relational and contingent multiplicity for all citizens. We argue that this makes space for the quiet voices, everyday resistances and mundane subversions required to utilise the cracks of life.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The precise numbers of people living on boats is unknown (National Boating Manager, Canal & River Trust [C&RT], 23 June 2020), which itself suggests marginality.

<sup>2</sup>We use the term canals as a shorthand that incorporates other inland waterways, including navigable rivers.

<sup>3</sup>A charity established in 2012 to succeed British Waterways in the management of 2000 miles of canals in England and Wales.

<sup>4</sup>Twenty-four of our interviewees were male. Twenty had partners who lived on the boat all the time or sometimes, while 13 were single (with four explicitly mentioning divorce). Three had children living aboard. Our interviewees came from a diverse range of occupational classes: from wealthy retirees to those without formal employment.

<sup>5</sup>Further, houseboats lack means of propulsion.

<sup>6</sup>For example, the Communities and Local Government (2009) publication 'Residential Long Leaseholders: a guide to your rights and responsibilities' lists 'the right to seek recognition for a tenants' association' as 'your right whether you own a house or a flat', and so the legal status of boaters rights remains unclear.

<sup>7</sup>A chemical toilet disposal unit.

<sup>8</sup>Material inscriptions include type of surface, presence of mooring rings, maintenance of the bank as well as signage all of which indicate whether boaters can moor safely and/or legally.

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