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<http://revistes.uab.cat/periferia>***The voices of water: Mobility and Subversion through the stories and biographies of London Canals***Elena Scovazzi  
Goldsmiths College <sup>1</sup><http://dx.doi.org/10.5565/rev/periferia.499>**Abstract**

This paper, greatly informed by my own personal experience, consists of an exploration of the lifestyle of boaters living on the canal Regent's and river Lee of the east London area, through the lenses of "nomadism". Considering the huge increase in the number of boats, the essay particularly explores the relationship between narrowboating and London housing crisis and further seeks to discern why mobility, which has always been at the cornerstone of boating, has become both problematic and contestable. Being focused on boaters accounts of their own personal experience, the research investigates whether a nomadic lifestyle is in fact freely chosen and desirable, or rather dictated by other (external) circumstances such as economic pressures. The contrast between agency and structure, and the way it materializes within the waterscape world, will be explored throughout the whole essay; the essay considers contemporary literature on "mobility" and further adopts classic concepts of nomadism and recent theories on nomadic and subversive subjects as metaphors to describe boater's contradictory mobile lifestyle and engagement with the surrounding environment. Both the agency-structure binary as well as concepts of "nomadism" will function as main theoretical frameworks. Conclusive remarks discuss the possibility and difficulty of defining boaters as "nomads".

**Keywords:** Narrow boating, Mobility, Structure, Agency, Nomadism, Subversion**Resumen**

El presente artículo está basado en mi experiencia personal, que consistió en la observación de los estilos de vida de las personas que viven en barcos en el canal Regent y el río Lee al este de Londres, a través de la perspectiva del nomadismo. Teniendo en cuenta el importante auge de este número de barcos, el presente artículo explora la relación entre los barcos del canal en Londres y la crisis de la vivienda, a la vez que intenta investigar sobre por qué la movilidad, la cual siempre ha sido un elemento esencial de la vida en los barcos, se ha convertido en algo problemático y confrontado. Enfocándome en las narrativas de las personas que siguen este estilo de vida, este estudio quiso investigar sobre si la vida nómada es libremente escogida y deseada, o si por el contrario está sujeta a circunstancias

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externas, como necesidades económicas. El contraste entre agencia y estructura, y el modo en el que esta dicotomía se materializa en estos modos de vida, es por tanto un tema recurrente a lo largo del artículo, así como las teorías contemporáneas sobre "movilidad", adoptando los conceptos clásicos de "nomadismo" y de los sujetos subversivos como metáforas para interpretar las contradicciones de los modos de vida móviles de estas personas y su relación con el medio en el que se mueven. Las conclusiones subrayan la posibilidad y la dificultad de definir a dichos sujetos como "nómadas".

**Palabras Claves:** "Narrow boating", movilidad, estructura, agencia, nomadismo, subversión

*"What happens when the "other" that the Anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?"*  
Lila Abu-Lughod (1991:137)

*"They moved about, and carried on their mysterious pursuits unknown to society"*  
Hadfield (1952:207)

## Introduction

We are all nomads, to a certain extent; yet, some are more nomads than others. But according to what criteria has the character of nomadic been ascribed to certain individuals? Where does the limit between nomadic and static lie? In classic Anthropological literature the term "nomadic" has often been associated with small-scale societies of both hunter-gatherers and pastoralists: in this sense, nomadism is mainly defined in terms of a highly mobile lifestyle, whose activities, characterized by a deep engagement with the surrounding environment, inextricably depend upon ecological and environmental factors such as seasonal changes. Yet, besides classical theories that define nomadism mainly in terms of lifestyle, within more recent ones the term has been semantically unmoored from the realm of practice to embrace a multiplicity of different meanings: Braidotti, for instance, defines nomadism not in terms of travelling but as a form of transition as well as resistance to settle into "socially coded modes of thought and behaviour" (1994:5); against conceptualizations that sees it as inextricably entangled with territoriality and physical movement, her view rather associates it to figuratively mobile and subversive subjects (1994:22); according to this idea the nomad, by resisting categorization as well as fixation to structural patterns of thought and behavior,

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mirrors tensions arising between structure and agency. Thus the nomad does simultaneously stand for several different things all worth taking into consideration

before moving on to our analysis of London boaters mobile community; however, central to both more classic as well as contemporary accounts on the subject, it is the idea of the nomad as a highly mobile subject (either concretely or figuratively).

In this essay, I will look at a specific mobile community that populates the inner canals of the city of London, through the lenses of the above mentioned theories on nomadism: I will adopt the latter (only) as a framework of analysis, in order to highlight the peculiarities of boaters from the point of view of both mobility and "subversion". The aim of the research is not to label boaters as necessarily nomadic subjects, but rather, by adopting nomadism as a device, to disclose and thoroughly explore boater's lifestyle in its entirety; in fact to look at boaters' lifestyle in terms of mobility will allow us to examine boaters' relations to the State and its institutions, but also to cast light on the twofold nature of mobility as both a means of voluntary escapism as well as an undesired problem that many have to face as a consequence of economical struggle<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, by combining the analysis of London boaters to more recent conceptualizations of the nomadic state (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Braidotti 1994), this research will pose a great emphasis on boaters' marginality as well as on the difficulty of fitting them into conventional categories. Overall, the essay will focus on the opposition between agency and structure and on the manifold ways in which the tensions arising from it materialize in and through the lives of boaters: in this respect mobility and subversion further take the shape of strategies that boaters, either voluntarily or necessarily, employ in order to cope as well as elude the structure. Both these themes will come up several times: in certain sections it might be temporarily put more emphasis on one over the other respectively but it is to be borne in mind that, as long as boaters are concerned, mobility and subversion will mutually as well as concurrently determine one another.

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<sup>2</sup> As Urry argues, contemporary social life does in fact presuppose many issues of both "movement and non-movement, of forced movement and of chosen fixity" (Urry, 2007: 17): and it is within such a context that the contested "mobilities" of boaters are inscribed. Boaters moved are often desired as well as enforced; these are eventually the outcome as well as consequences of macro social changes, structures and dynamics as analyzed in the research.

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The essay is divided into several chapters: each will closely focus on one topic; however, they are all interconnected. The structure and agency binary as well as the coupling of mobility and subversion (as devices of analysis) will be central themes as well as the connecting threads across the several sections of this research. A brief outline of the themes that will be debated in the following chapters is provided as follows: in the method section clarifications will be made regarding the researcher's position in relation to the object of study as well as in regard to the methodologies adopted to carry out this research; further details are included in relation to the difficulties and about the periods of data gathering and analysis. Then by way of an historical detour, the essay will subsequently look at the development of both canals and narrowboats and how the latter, along with the advent of the railways, gradually shifted from being a means of transportation for economic purposes to a means for leisure practices and living; in these sections, the essay will also briefly touch upon the characteristics of the first boaters in comparison to the 21<sup>st</sup> century ones. Subsequently, the research will mainly concentrate on the contemporary London scene as well as on changes in the ways narrowboating is practiced today and its relations to the wider townscape in terms of housing policy; by considering the huge increase in the number of boats (Meyer 2013; Jessel E. 2014, London Assembly 2013:9) as well as the enforcement processes enacted by the navigation authority in order to make them move more regularly and for longer distances (Jessel E. 2014), on the one hand this essay will advance the hypothesis that the overcrowding of canals is very much related to London's housing crisis, on the other it will put into question boater's propensity toward mobility: in fact, contrasts between boaters' desires and necessities as well as between voluntary and enforced moves make wonder whether a mobile lifestyle is in fact desirable or rather dictated by other structural/societal circumstances. Throughout, the following research seeks to discuss these issues if not to answer such questions. It will ultimately consider alternative ways in which London boaters can be conceived of as nomads: less in terms of mobility but of subversion as well as vagueness vis-à-vis conventional societal norms and categories.

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**Methods****Researcher positionality**

The nature of my positionality has at times cast a special light on things as much as it has often obscured them. However it is by virtue of it that it has been possible to get insights as well as access from within the most inner waterscape world. I have been living on a narrowboat for nearly three years, since I first arrived in London as an Italian migrant. My experience with the boaters' community and the social and cultural life of the canal went hand in hand with my studies in Anthropology: both these elements converged together to inform my point of view towards the object of this research; in light of these concurrent factors, it has been of great importance to first critically reflect upon my own position in order to then choose what methodology to adopt as well as for assessing the validity of the knowledge gathered. I have tried to circumscribe myself within already existing Anthropological categories: I should be something in between a "native" Anthropologist and a "halfie". According to Lila Abu-Lughod the Anthropological practice of "halfies" does "unsettle the boundaries between self and other" (1991:137), and her statement points to the difficulty in Anthropology to achieve objective-like portrayals of reality when the clear cut between "I-the-researcher" and "the-other- the object-of-study" is not such a clear cut. This opposition has at times caused several difficulties both theoretical and practical which I will explain more thoroughly in the later section.

**Difficulties**

Most of the difficulties encountered in carrying out this research are of an essentially theoretical nature: these are mostly linked to the above mentioned likewise challenge of defining myself vis-à-vis the object of study (i.e. my own community). The difficulties deriving from the ambiguity of my position are mainly dual: on the one hand there has been the problem of neutrality, on the other hand there has been the problem of authenticity. The former is a problem of "partiality (as bias or position) of the observer" and a problem of gaining "enough distance" (Abu-Lughod 1991:141). The latter is more to do with the "nature of the picture presented" (1991:141) that can be more or less truthful, more or less complete.

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The multiple ways in which I tried to cope with both problems are mirrored in the shifting methodologies I have played with: I have practiced strategies of distancing as well as of approaching, with the purpose of looking into the semi-familiarity of the community reality from always diverse points of view.

Moreover, several are also the difficulties that I have encountered in carrying out a research that is about mobility and mobile subjects: the "uneavenness" and complexity of the object of study (i.e. boaters mobilities) has compelled me to reflect on new paradigms for the study of a specific form of social life that, along with many others in contemporary society, is governed by mobility. Along with Urry's claim on the need to "rethink the social world by putting movement at the forefront" (Urry in Ferentzy 2009: 188), and in order to catch glimpses of boaters complex social network, it has been necessary for me to think "through a mobilities lens" (Urry, 2007:18), by being highly flexible as well as attentive to even the most subtle changes. On a more practical level, researching on boaters has at times compelled me to move very long distances in order not to lose touch with certain informants as well as sight over determined dynamics. Thus, since most of boaters have no address nor a fixed or preferred location, it has often been difficult to maintain a continuity between anthropologist and informant without one of the two disappearing in the middle of a river-nowhere; for the whole time of fieldwork, I have been traveling from one side of London to the other and more towards the countryside and peripheral areas with the purpose of picturing each informant's itinerary: being constantly on the move in order to catch the move has been the main moral imperative of this research.

**The choice of methodology**

During fieldwork, I have alternatively engaged in participant-observation practices as well as in one-to-one interviews with the aim of respectively distancing as well as getting myself closer to the community. Both practices are in fact not only functional but also necessary in order to capture a coherent and homogeneous picture of the waterscape world. Nevertheless, I have eventually favored interviews as the main means of investigation, for the fact that a great prevalence of direct testimonies would have eventually compensated as well as leveled the otherwise possible incongruence deriving from my biased point of view (as boater myself). A

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propensity towards interviews is also in line with the way I generally decided to frame this research: throughout the entire work I have in fact tried to let my informants and their stories speak as much as possible. As stated in the introduction, the final goal of the research is in fact not just to discuss the issues arising from boaters contested mobilities in contemporary London society, but also to let a picture that would capture the complexities and multiple contradictions of the boaters' world to emerge.

The canal is in fact a polyedric reality that embraces within the same space-time dimension a multiplicity of socially culturally different worlds. The complexity of defining the researcher's position vis-à-vis the waterscape world mirrors the likewise shifting nature of boaters as people who do not easily fit in conventional categories. By prioritizing the voices of boaters themselves, I have put myself in line with Narayan claim for a knowledge that results from an "ongoing process" of interaction between the informant and the Anthropologist (1991:183). Furthermore considering the shifting character of boaters as well as the peculiar subject of the research itself (i.e. mobility), it would have been foolish to look at them as if they were static objects: on the one hand, it has thus been necessary to engage in an "ethnography of the particular", one that lingers upon the "actual circumstances and detailed histories of individuals and their relationships" (Abu-Lughod 1991:153), on the other hand, it has been essential to deploy new strategies of research of the "social" as increasingly organized around "mobility and horizontal fluidities" (Urry, 2000: 3). Thus, despite acquiring the feature of an "ethnography laden with stories" (1998:175) which, as Narayan points out, is a genre often thought of as lacking consistent theoretical analysis, this research will actually represent an "enactment of hybridity" (1998:176), a specific anthropological writing that does not polarize experience and theory but ultimately considers the former as an expression of and "embodiment of theory" (1998:176). Framed in such a way, this research is ultimately about the intersection of various trajectories and life experiences, about the different roots and routes of those living along the water flow.

**Periods and times of research**

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<b>Spring 2014</b>	<b>Summer 2014</b>	<b>Autumn 2014</b>	<b>Winter 2015</b>	<b>Spring 2015</b>	<b>Summer 2015</b>
Planning of fieldwork and first participant observations	Participant observation	Participant observation Ethnographic data research Theoretical research Interviews	Interviews Participant observation	Elaboration of data gathered and data analysis	Research completion and final revision

**Table 1:** Recapitulatory chart of research schedule and periods

I have been working on this research for a period of over 16 months; I started planning it as well as carrying out fieldwork during Spring 2014 and continued until the end of summer 2015. The choice of periods was essentially functional as well as necessary: by carrying out fieldwork for over a year and more, I have in fact been able to observe the remarkable changes that the waterscape world undergoes along the changing of seasons: as will be better discussed in later chapters, boaters' mobilities are often dictated by as well as sensitive to seasonal changes. Boaters' propensity towards narrowboating too shifts according to seasons: most boaters do in fact move on boats only during summer, and abandon them over winter.

I have conducted several participant observations practices ever since Spring 2014, however, interviews have mainly been carried out during the autumn, winter and spring months of 2015. Interviews have been carried out avoiding direct questions related to the research topic: with the aim of pursuing as much transparency as possible, boaters have not been informed about the topic of the research until the end of interviews so as not to influence their answers nor trigger specific bias in their points of view. Despite formal interviews, I also carried out several informal conversations with boaters whilst myself traveling and carrying out daily duties: I considered this part of "research" as a form of daily fieldwork as well as an often enlightening theoretical exercise for the purpose of clarification of my positionality. In fact, despite formal proper periods of research, my experience within the boaters community had been already dating back from 2012: this is the main reasons behind the difficulties in relation to my positionality, since fieldwork and this



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research came only after a relatively long time of deep engagement within the waterscape world.

**Historical Background****The artificial spring: canal building and horse/narrow boating**

Even though canals and narrowboating have now become respectively leisure places and practice, however the signs of that which once was the original commercial use of canals still exist: canals have in fact undergone a great shift in character since the time they were first built. Their history traces back to the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and goes hand in hand with the industrial revolution: both canals and boats ultimately represent the living evidence of an outdated era known under the name of "Canal Age".

**Image 1:** Horseboating during the "Canal Age"

Available at: <https://inlanding.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/horse-boating-on-the-bcn-refuse-and-salvage/>



As the Jobo, English boater, 65 years old, argues canals, unlike rivers, were cut out of the ground by wealthy men and large companies in order to fulfill commercial purposes: in fact, despite rivers had already made more navigable in 18<sup>th</sup> century England (Hadfield 1952, Cann & Bartholomew 1983:4), many cities and manufacturing centers still remained cut out from their trajectories and the cost for

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delivering goods such as coal, iron ore and clay to such locations was very high (1983). Thus, in order to connect the most productive manufacturing centers with the main cities (1983:4), an entire network of canals was built: this made the transportation of goods easier, quicker and cheaper. Narrowboats did therefore first appeared as wooden cargo boats(1983; 1952) pulled along by horses, and in fact this boating practice is often recalled to memory as "horse-boating"; however as time went by, horse power was superseded by the employment of respectively steam and diesel engine (Cann & Bartholomew 1983:6; Hadfield 1952: 53; Braithwaite 1976:35). Overall, the "Golden Age of canals " did not last long after the 1840: in fact canals soon entered into competition with the railway transportation system: as railways allowed for goods to be carried even more quickly and cheaply (1983:24), canals progressively fell into disuse.



**Image 2:** Horse Boating during the Canal Age

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Available at: <http://www.gloucesterdocks.me.uk/museum/background/britainswaterways.htm>



**Image 3:** Cargo Boats during the "Canal Age"

Available at: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/>



**Image 4:** Cargo Boats Nowadays

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**Image 5:** Horseboating Nowadays

Available at: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/>

## Living aboard: a Comparison

### Shadows of marginality: the canal people

As Cann & Bartholomew argue, in response to the threat weighing on canals and narrowboats supremacy as the main means of commercial transportation, canal freights as well as the wages of those working on cargo boats were cut in order to “try and compete with the railways” (1983:24): for these (economical) reasons the families of men working on cargo boats started to move aboard and to work as part of the crew (1983:24; 1952: 207). Historical accounts of the life on canals already stressed the very mobile nature of canal people: “boatmen were always on the move” Cann & Bartholomew argue (1983: 7). Furthermore, they also referred to the tensions arising from boaters’ contradictory relation with the social structure as well as to their (in)capability to conform to State institutions particularly in terms of health, education, legislation etc. (1983; 1952:207). In light of these features, 21<sup>st</sup> century London boaters do not differ from 19<sup>th</sup> century ones as much: in fact, as Jobo, English boater in his sixties, argues nowadays boaters are the “drop out” of society , they live at the interstices of State institutions under the subtle shadow of

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marginality<sup>3</sup>. And in fact, boaters' social structure has been explicitly envisioned as one of "partial separation" from the State (Bowles, 2015): whether this separation, mirrored in boaters' wandering life at the "fringes of the State" (Scott, 2009), is something desirable or displeasing is open to question; mobility does in fact often turn out to be a double-edged sword: it can be "instrumentally used to get out of the way" (Ben Bowles, talk held at RAI, 30/01/2015), as much as it can often constitute an undesirable and disadvantageous hindrance to everyday life in ways that will be analyzed in later chapters. Overall both the spatial and the human sides of canals (particularly urban ones) have, ever since their decline following the advent of the railway network, kept such an aura of mysteriousness and marginality to the extent that some spoke of them as an "unreal private world" (1976:8) or a "secret town" (Cullen in Braithwaite 1976:8). However, this alleged secrecy often concealed an attribute of negativity: in fact, subsequent to their decline as commercial spaces, canals became dangerous and well as neglected places (Braithwaite 1976:7), no-walk-zones (Jessel, 2014) up until they started to be considered for their potential employment for leisure.



<sup>3</sup> Jobo's statement on the nature of boaters as the "drop out of society" bears similarity with Turner concept of "liminality": by standing in between and slipping away from sharp categorization, boaters are in fact "liminoidals".

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**Image 6:** Workmen and their families during the "Canal Age"

 Available at: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/>

**Image 7:** Workmen and their families during the "Canal Age"

**The contemporary Scene**
**The vague nature of mobility: rules and legislation**

The character of canals has radically changed nowadays; from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both the Inland Waterways association (IWA) and the British Waterways Board (BWB), the latter being the "statutory body government for the canals"(1976:16) (until it was superseded by CRT in 2012) began projects aimed at restoring their condition for several purposes (1976:16): few were kept for minor commercial uses, while others labeled "Cruising Waterways" have been equipped and provided with services and facilities in order to promote their recreational uses(1976:17). Moreover, as Braithwaite argues, at that time people seemed to be enjoying rural canals and instead avoid urban ones (1976:38), however, by looking at the city of London as our main focus, it could easily be noticed how the latter are now not just sought-after, but also very much overcrowded. Narrowboats too ceased to be mainly commercial means of transport, and were largely "converted to pleasure use with a full length cabin" (1976:15). The overall emerging tendency to employ boats for pleasure did reflect on the number of boats licensed by BWB: the year of 1973 BWB could count 23700 licenses released to boats for pleasure

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cruising (1976:38); and as time went by, the use of narrowboats kept shifting: as Jobo argues these are slowly becoming more of flats than boats: in fact they are not just employed for holidays and one-day cruises, but have now become homes for most people who choose to permanently live aboard. But how did this use of boats develop?

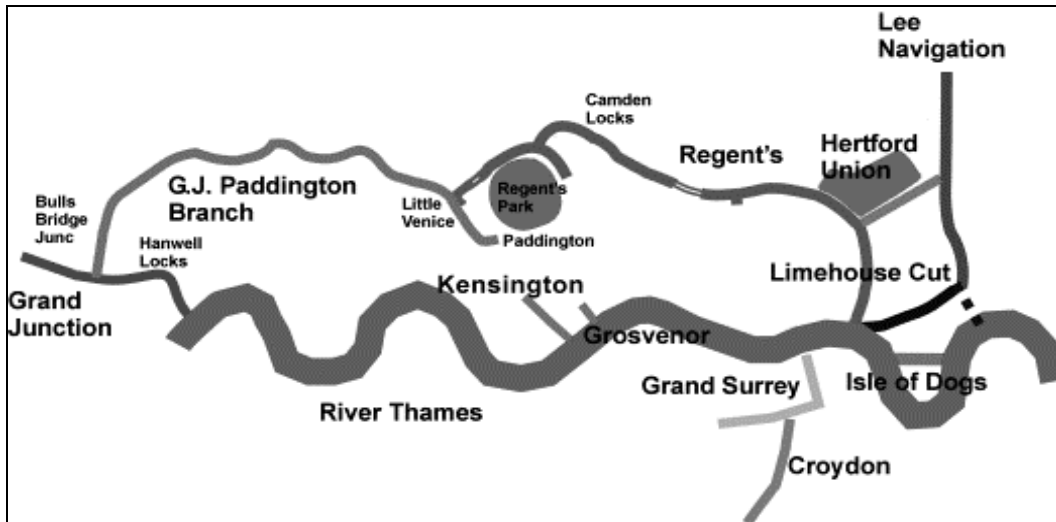
Before 1995, boaters could not apply for a license unless they had a home mooring, which consists of a "place where the vessel can reasonably be kept and may lawfully be left" (CRT see "Guidance for Boaters Without a Home Mooring"). However, in the BW act in 1995, British Waterways agreed to release the first "Continuous Cruising" (CC) licenses addressed for those boaters who were continuously living aboard and cruising along the network and therefore did not wish to pay money for a marina and services that they were not taking advantage of (see CRT "Guidance" & "British Waterways Act" 1995). In the first act, as well as on the several other documents that followed the rules and conditions for the release as well as for the denial of CC license are stated: Continuous Cruisers are expected to engage in regular navigation along the network of canals and rivers, and should not be moored in the same place for more than 14 days (Weymouth, 2015; see CRT "Guidance"). However, there is a long standing debate around the words "place" and "navigation", since the vague nature of such statements has allowed many people to interpret the law to their liking (Weymouth, 2015). As Mikaela, English boater in her twenties working for CRT, argues boaters too often demand for black and white legislation in order to essentially know the "minimum they can get away with" so that they could stay within their favorite area most of the time. Mikaela does further claims that boaters should rather act in the spirit of the legislation as a moving community, and should take advantage from the vague nature of the legislation in order to allow this way of living to persist for a longer period of time.

### **The twofold nature of Mobility**

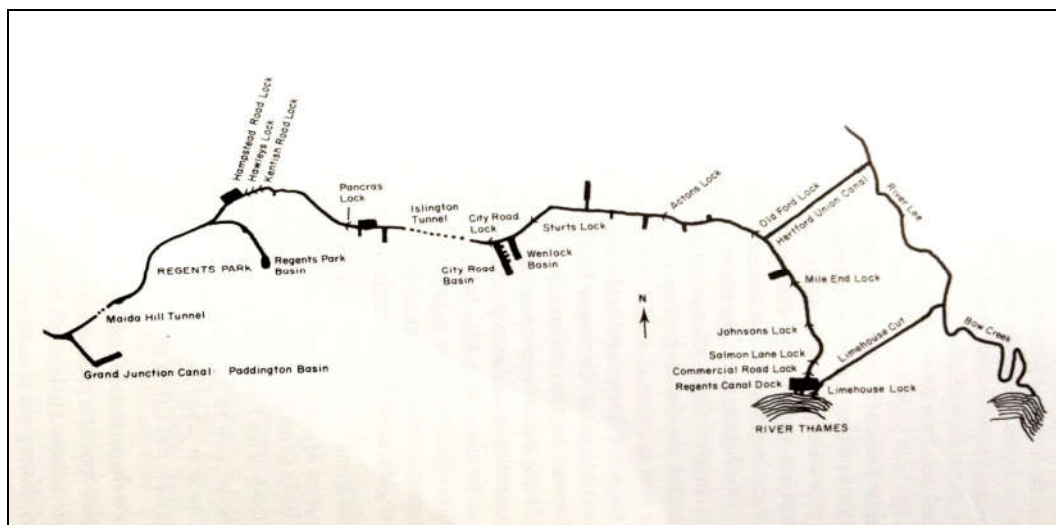
#### **London housing crisis and narrowboating**

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**Illustration 1:** Map of London rivers and canals



**Illustration 2:** Focus on the Regent's and River Lee- Central and East London Areas

Mikaela's statement drives us at the heart of the ongoing issue that is taking place in London, particularly in the East and Central areas. In fact, even though the CC license, nowadays owned by the vast majority of boaters, was created in order to meet the needs of travelling boaters before 1995, however it does not seem to match with the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century boaters anymore. In fact many of them do not meet the criteria stated by the legislation, either by overstaying too long time in certain locations or by moving too short distances, causing CRT to enact



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enforcement processes in order to make them move more regularly, and to guarantee that a more thorough navigation is pursued by all. The static tendency and "sedentary" habits of certain boaters, but also the general increase in the number of boats, especially in the past three years (Meyer 2013; Jessel E. 2014, London Assembly 2013:9), has further compelled CRT to either make mooring policies stricter or create special extra-license purchasable permits that allow boaters to stay firm in one spot over the winter months, which is a solution that also temporarily amends the lack of purchasable permanent (home) moorings. Overall, the massive increase in the number of licensed boats, the overcrowding of urban locations as well as the increasing overstaying tendency are all potential symptoms of a change in the way narrowboating is conceived of today.

Mobility has been, ever since narrowboating first appeared as part of England most singular/peculiar landscape, one of the main feature of the people inhabiting canals (Hadfield 1952; Cann and Bartholomew), and it (partly) (allegedly) lies at the heart of the social and cultural life of canals nowadays too. However it is not very clear whether mobility and the adoption of boating as a mobile lifestyle consists of an object of desire, or rather a reasonable choice for some to accommodate economical needs. In light of the recent problems in terms of enforcement processes enacted by CRT, it seems clear that the desire and regularity of moving is in not something that everyone shares equally. Furthermore, within such a context, the already existing tension between *agency*, embodied by boaters' desires/necessity, and *structure*, materialized in CRT enforcement processes, has strengthen to the extent that the limit between voluntary and enforced move does at time incomprehensibly blur.

On top of that, London is undergoing a serious housing crisis that sees the prices of both potential purchasable houses as well as for rent increased dramatically. This is causing London to become terrifyingly "unaffordable" ( Hill, 2013) but also a city where most people foresee their possibilities becoming narrower and narrower (Hill 2014, 2013) . The analysis of English Housing Survey statistics, conducted by Shelter in 2011, has revealed that the current situation has pushed an increasing percentage of people and families to choose for "social rented dwellings" (Hill, 2014; Prynne, 2013, Shelter- Web Page); statistics further show that most people

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are losing the hope to ever be able to buy a house, making rent to become a real “trap” and a “way of life for thousands of hundreds of Londoners” (Prynn, 2013). This is affecting the whole city of London and the East area too (i.e. Stoke Newington, Shoreditch, Dalston, Clapton, Hackney), which some argue is slowly turning into a “gentrification hot-spot” (Hill, 2013). It is not surprise that in such times of economic crisis, we all look for alternative and cheaper solutions to make our living more comfortable or at least more affordable. It is no doubt, neither, that this emergency has led some to hypothesize a potential connection between London housing crisis and the increase in the number of boats (Lerner, 2015; Meyer 2013; Jessel E. 2014, London Assembly 2013:9;). This connection well translate into the Campaign “Boats are Homes!” started on “38 Degrees: People, Power, Change” by Frank Riverman: it consists of an open protest against CRT declaration according to which it will not re-license boats that it retains have not moved enough or regularly, therefore endangering boat families that explicitly saw in the waterways an affordable and alternative housing resource to the current socio-political and economic reality<sup>4</sup>.

Could it therefore be that the narrow possibilities that people face in light of such an economic crisis have led people to choose narrowboats as an alternative way of living in the city? If it is so, the tension between agency and structure becomes very clear. Boaters are in fact faced by a multiplicity of issues: the city lack of availability of houses as well as of affordable permanent moorings (Weymouth, 2015), ultimately the fact that the canals exist as regulated spaces, with mobility as its cornerstone<sup>5</sup>. It is in light of these tensions that the extent to which mobility is desirable is put into question; it is in fact the contrast between boaters’ desires and necessities to move that all these issues are played out and unmasked.

However, it is only by virtue of an analysis of boaters’ accounts of their personal experience that we can better understand the weigh that such tensions have in

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<sup>4</sup> See at: <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/boats-are-homes-prevent-the-eviction-of-boat-dwellers?state=thanks#>

<sup>5</sup> There is in fact limited possibilities for non-mobility too: the lack of availability of purchasable moorings (and where there are, they are often very expensive) is added to the lack of availability of affordable houses.

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their lives: these ultimately underpin as well as reveal themselves through the stories of the “ways and whys” people came to live in that no man’s land called canal.

**Roots and Routes****Different life trajectories**

It is in fact in light of the diverse life trajectories that led each boater to choose the water as his/her home, that we can better understand the way in which these tensions either materialize or crumble by letting us envisage the survival of a community that takes mobility as its most important value. The following stories do reflect the different needs, struggles, contingencies, and desires behind narrowboating. The essay will report a few, in which each boater tells of how it happened to be on a boat and what he/she values the most of its lifestyle. As Jobo, English boater, 65 years old, argues the beauty of being on a boat is that it allows to move around freely. Jobo is an artist, he works independently and throughout his life has moved from one place to another without being more than 6 years in each; Jobo does in fact explicitly claim his need and desire to move around, also his propensity towards boating is spread throughout his life, since he both sailed and owned a fishing boat in Scotland. Jobo further proudly underlines his identity as a real boater, opposing himself to many who, as he says, do not truly enjoy this lifestyle.

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**Image**  
 Boater  
 inside



**8:**  
 Jobo  
 his

narrowboat "Khatarine"

Similarly Mikaela, English boater in her twenties, working as a "mooring ranger" (checking people do move around and respect rules on a daily basis) for CRT, tells the story of how she and her husband did end up living on their boat: after their 10-months cycling trip from England to Mali, they had become accustomed to a sort of nomadic and independent lifestyle; therefore after their marriage they started thinking of their possibilities in terms of housing: they first considered the option of renting a flat, or rather working towards a mortgage, but finally realized that they could not and did not want to live in a normal house set-up in London, rather opting for a more creative living.

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**Image 9:** Mikaela's narrowboat "Habibti"

Besides these, there are consistent accounts of boaters who still do enjoy the mobile nature of boating but, nevertheless, had looked at it first as an alternative to the unaffordable prices of London houses. As Sam, who has been living on his boat for as little as two months, argues the canal has always attracted him, however he claims he would have never had the money to afford a house at its sides. He further tells the story of how he luckily got the chance to move on the boat after having been kicked out by the landlord of his previous house; the boat, he says, gives him the opportunity to live on his own and to save money for future rent. Similarly, Trev, British English from Essex, boater in his thirties, has only moved onto his boat two months before. He tells the story of the many rented flats he shared with other people until he started to feel the need for his own space; he goes on telling of how he spent six months struggling trying to buy a house and being constantly priced out of the market; his further desire for a career change that could allow him to work as a free-lancer (and therefore not possibly getting a stable salary) was just the cherry on top of everything: he then, under the advice

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of a close friend, started to envision the boat as the best opportunity that would allow him to have a "*place where to live and live cheap*".

The truth about boaters is that, as their stories tell, there often are multiple reasons at stake in their choice to live on a narrowboat: this in fact often result from an already existing love for an adventurous and "off the beaten track" lifestyle, plus a certain amount of individual flexibility and ability to adapt, but also economic and financial needs. Genevieve's story is quite emblematic in the way it embraces these aspects all at once: being born in London, at the age of 16 she sets off for multiple journeys across many countries such as Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Bali, for a 9 years long time of her life. Once back in England, she starts looking for a more settled living: she first thinks of buying a house, but the high prices would have compelled her to undesirably work many hours in order to keep up with the payment of mortgages, so she found her narrowboat. The story of her journeys reveals her already existing propensity as well as enjoyment of mobility, however her lack of economic availability did also play a consistent role in her decision to live on a boat. Overall these accounts cast light on the multiple aspects (or constraints) that determine boaters' choice or need to live on a boat and ultimately disclose the tensions underlying such decisions and deriving from boaters' individual relation to the macro socio, economic and political structures of society.

**Mobility: advantages and disadvantages**

Besides enlightening us on the multiple truths behind narrowboating, boaters' stories further cast light over the advantages and disadvantages that such a lifestyle entails. Among the advantages of living a highly mobile lifestyle, we must first and above all cite autonomy and independence: in fact, moving on a narrowboat represent a way of independently "housing oneself" and of acquiring "freedom of manoeuvre" (Turner 1976:7). According to Turner, (economically disadvantaged) people in big cities such as London and New York are simultaneously trapped in the "culture of poverty" and in the "machinery of welfare" (1976:7), being essentially alienated as well as gradually dispossessed from the means for their housing. It is within a similar framework that the boat starts to be envisioned as a potential autonomous dwelling: since autonomy depends on

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"access to essential resources" (1976:17) the boat can partially be considered an autonomous space whose necessary resources such as water, light, coal and wood are self-procured.

However, its alleged autonomy always comes to clash with institutional structures in an endless dialectical relation between autonomy (agency) and heteronomy (structure) (Turner 1976:17). In fact, despite self-sufficiency in terms of resources, boaters are nevertheless entertaining ties as well as obligations towards the wider social structure; their lives as well as their boats are not fully disconnected from society. The waterscape world is in fact part of the wider urban landscape and exists within State's regulated spaces and its institutions: boaters are not just boaters in fact! They do not spend most of their time cruising around the network, but have jobs, attend universities, pay taxes to CRT etc.. For this reason it would be better to define the boat as a dwelling that is only "partially" autonomous, because even if it allows for the material appropriation and control of resources, however the "accessibility of these basic resources is ultimately a function of law and its administration (CRT). Thus even if boaters mobile lifestyle has often been envisioned as one of potential State avoidance (Bowles, B. 2015), and even if boaters try to become as self-sufficient as possible (Bowles, B. 2015) our analysis shows that the autonomy that narrowboating often portends is always only partial.

Furthermore, several are also the inconveniences of a mobility that, as we have already noted, is not always desired, but also often enforced: as Andrea argues, the two weeks rule does at time put a little bit of pressure on him: he acknowledges and understands the rationale behind it, but he states that it was probably made for people who were not using their boats as permanent homes; he goes on by saying that two weeks for him is not enough time to get familiar with the neighborhoods, while one month in each place would be ideal. This once again points to the fact that the use of narrowboats has, through time, shifted from commercial to residential and that the meanings as well as the implications of mobility have thus accordingly changed. Yet Sam, new to narrowboats, when asked about the frequency with which he intends moving clearly claims his intention to "*stick within two miles*", stressing the fact that a more habitual and settled life is what he needs since "*everything is just very new*" for him; among the reasons for which he would

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rather not move, he lists the fact that the neighborhood where he is temporarily moored does offer him easy access to many facilities comprising a gym (with a public shower), a launderette as well as the water point and toilet disposal. Above all Sam concludes by saying that moving too often (for water collection and other reasons<sup>6</sup>) is quite annoying and he does not intend to spend that much of his free time doing it. It becomes clear that, even if the slow-rhythm mobile lifestyle allows for a less alienated existence, it also often proves to be quite of hindrance. Further conversations with boaters have also brought to the surface a strong link existing between mobility and seasonality: most of them explicitly confess that their moving patterns increase over summer and decrease in winter time.

It is ultimately in light of the above mentioned advantages and disadvantages that the desirability of movement is called into question: besides being dependent upon seasonal changes, boaters' desirability to move has also resulted to be very much dependent on factors such as the accessibility of public transportations, the proximity to work place, schools, GPs, hospitals and so on (this obviously varies from boater to boater) (Weymouth, 2015); moreover, on the one hand boaters move because they have to, in name of the 1995 BWB legislation and 2012 CRT "Guidance"; on the other they do it in order to provide the essential means for subsistence (water, wood etc). Overall, a closer look at the lives of London boaters allows us to reflect on the contested nature of mobility: even if there is still evidence of boaters who chose the lifestyle simply for the sake of mobility, however boaters moves, far from being exclusively voluntary, are often functional<sup>7</sup> to the fulfillment of specific needs, and generally induced by external factors. Obviously, this is not the case for all boaters, but fieldwork in London has brought up to the surface underlying tensions as well as several issues related to mobility that put into question the authenticity but above all the desirability of narrowboating mobile lifestyle.

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<sup>6</sup> Since water and toilet facilities are unevenly distributed along the canal, boaters may have to travel across one or more neighborhoods in order to "fill their tanks up".

<sup>7</sup> Boaters' strategic moves echo Urry's concept of "Motility", defined as "the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the domain of mobility and puts this potential to use for his or her activities" (2007).



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**Conclusions**

Throughout, this essay has brought into light the multiple aspects that make each boater unique as well as different, particularly in terms of choices, desires, and necessities behind their commitment to a mobile lifestyle. The differences in the ways boating is practiced makes it difficult to draw any sharp generalization that would prove to be either applicable or truthful for each single boater: this is particularly the case if we think in terms of mobility. In fact, even though it is expected from all boaters to comply with the navigation authority legislation (14 days rule), however the discontinuous and uneven moving patterns followed by each highlight different interpretations of the law, but also divergent propensity as well as contradictory desire for mobility. There is a clear coexistence of boaters who value it above everything else and those who seem not to be enjoying it so much. To simply dismiss mobility as something essentially undesirable would therefore be just as incorrect as to claim it as equally appreciated by all; it can therefore only be said that this analysis shows that mobility is neither homogeneously nor equally valued. In light of such contradictions, it would be quite difficult to come to any conclusion regarding the suitability of the term "nomadic"(as synonymous of mobile) in reference to east London boaters; but having specified that labeling them as nomads is not quite the scope of the research, and having rather employed several theories on "nomadism" as devices to better understand the world of narrowboats today, this research ultimately sought to explore boaters' relation to the macro social, cultural, economic and political structure of society, through an analysis of the manifold ways in which mobility affects the lives of boaters.

In the attempt to coherently picture the narrowboats' world, we have in fact encountered several obstacles that impede us to entirely associate boaters with nomads; particularly in terms of mobility, which is what interested us the most, boaters cannot be considered nomadic but neither static: since the mobility aspect is not enough to define either of the two, boater are inevitably destined to lie somewhere in between. Boaters' nomadic character ultimately springs from their divergence from already constituted categories; in fact according to Braidotti "it is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling" (1994:5): since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, boaters have always had a long

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standing reputation as marginal people living at the interstices of society; similarly canals have been argued by many to be worlds on their own (Braithwaite 1976; Cullen 1961) that welcome the drop-out of societies (Jobo, informant), those that "resist settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour" (1994:5). Boaters are therefore nomadic only in the sense that they lie in between and escape sharp categorization: by being not fully nomadic nor static (in the physical sense), they are nevertheless nomadic figuratively since they avoid and challenge already existing categories. Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari argue that "the primary determination of nomads is to occupy and hold a smooth space", one that lies in between two flanks that "delimit it and control it"(1987:410); boaters materialize and embody this metaphor in that they inhabit the inner canals of the city, "smooth" spaces where a multiplicity of trajectories simultaneously converge and dissolve in always different shapes; the paths at the canal sides delimit the water and drive its flow but also remind boaters of the boundaries that separate the "smooth" from the "sharp" spaces of society. It is "the nomads" that ultimately "inhabit these places" (1994: 382), where a simple footstep draws the line between water and land.

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