

Taking up space: Community, belonging and gender among itinerant boat-dwellers on London's waterways

Laura Roberts

Queen Mary University of London, l.e.v.roberts@qmul.ac.uk

Abstract

Itinerant boat-dwellers on the waterways in London have been portrayed as a community of like-minded people living alternative lives, sharing skills, resources, and space. This paper complicates the neat presentation of a boating community or imagined community through auto-ethnographic research as an itinerant boat dweller on the waterways in London and through seventeen in-depth interviews conducted within this population in 2017. This research reveals how hierarchies of belonging are created through the exhibition and acquisition of boating know-how and sanctioned through the body along gender lines. The discussion furthers understandings of the lived experiences of itinerant boat-dwellers in London.

KEYWORDS: narrowboats, canals, waterways, hierarchies of belonging, gender

Introduction

Itinerant boat-dwellers in London have been framed by the media as a convivial, tight-knit, egalitarian community who were forced onto the waterways by the UK housing crisis (CityAM 2016; CNN 2018; BBC One 2019). Apart from Bowles (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019), this population has not received much academic attention, and the media's portrayal has not been interrogated. While criticism that human geography is too terra-centric and neglects waterscapes (Anderson & Peters 2014; Anim-Addo, Hasty & Peters 2014) is being addressed by emerging literature on sea and oceanic water mobilities (Kleinert 2009; Vannini 2012a; Vannini 2012b; Merriman 2015), the inland waterways, particularly urban canals, have been largely overlooked. Where it exists, work on inland waterways in the UK focusses on individual contemporary experiences of canal tourism (Fallon 2012; Kaaristo & Rhoden 2017), volunteering (Trapp-Fallon 2007), and accessibility of waterways for leisure use in the urban and rural context (Pitt 2018).

The ethnographic research presented here looks at hierarchies of belonging in relation to practical knowledge acquisition and gender among Continuous Cruisers in London, which problematises existing presentations of a “boating community”. My research suggests that the increasing numbers of people moving onto boats in London has caused Continuous Cruisers to feel that overcrowding threatens to restrict current freedoms or increase fees to a degree that makes their current way of dwelling unsustainable. This creates ideas of fear, insecurity and scarcity among the population and leads to claims to belong demonstrated by embodied forms of knowledge related to practical and technical boating know-how. These claims to belong through boating competence are exhibited in online groups and performed on the waterways creating hierarchies of belonging amongst “old-timers” (boaters who have been living on board longer) and “newbies” (those new on the canals). These hierarchies can be read in the abilities exhibited by Continuous Cruisers, but are also experienced through gender-normative ideas around particular technical or practical skill-sets.

In this paper, I first set out the methodology of this research. I then describe my position as a Continuous Cruiser and an academic, describing how I came to live on a narrowboat. I then set out a wider context of the history of boat-dwelling and ideas of “boating communities” on waterways in the UK. I move on to complicate presentations of today’s boating community as a tight-knit population through which knowledge and favours are exchanged freely. My research leads me to examine how the increase in boats creates tensions and insecurity and creates claims to belong, sanctioned by boating expertise and longevity on-board. This relates to “new hierarchies of belonging” (Back 2012) that emerge from fear and insecurity within certain groups. Participants describe how boating know-how is articulated by gender identities and the bodies they occupy, causing female participants to feel they lack skills, and male participants to feel an expectation of having more boating ability than they do. I aim to show that by taking the gendered and embodied hierarchies of belonging on London’s waterways seriously, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of Continuous Cruisers and warns against presentations of a “boating community” that threaten to obscure the lived experience of Continuous Cruisers in London.

Methodology

In 2017, I conducted six months of mobile auto-ethography (Anderson 2006) among Continuous Cruisers on the canals and rivers in London: from Uxbridge on the Grand Union along the Paddington Arm, the Regents Canal past London Zoo to the Limehouse Cut in Bow, including the Hertford Union that runs alongside Victoria Park and the whole stretch of the River Lee. This research consisted of participant observation: living peripatetically on a narrowboat, interactions on the towpath and at lock gates with Continuous Cruisers and others using the waterway space. I also attended meet-ups through the Facebook group *London Boatwomen*. The research included seventeen semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen female and three male Continuous Cruisers living on London’s waterways recruited through *London Boatwomen*, chance meetings on the towpath and by interviewees recommending other boaters to interview. The participants

ranged from 24 to 35 years old and lived on their boat alone or in a couple with or without young children (one had a new-born baby, another was pregnant with twins). Participants had been living on their boats for varying amounts of time, between four months and five years. Individuals' experience of everyday hierarchies of belonging extends previous research on this group by suggesting that expertise and longevity on the waterways intersect with gender and create feelings of inadequacy. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, employing pseudonyms and censoring identifying features.

The boating context

There has been a long history of people creating place and belonging on and around the canals in the UK. In what follows, I will describe how historically the values of boat-people have been contrary to sedentary populations and outline some of the groups that populate the waterways today. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the majority of the UK's canals were dug by cutting channels through the earth to create "navigations", routes linking commercial hubs across the country in order to fuel the Industrial Revolution. The men who built them were known as navigators, or "navvies". "Bargees" worked on the navigations to transport cargo on horse-drawn boats around the country. The advent of the railways in the mid-1800s saw workboats having to work much harder to compete, causing more and more families to move onto boats full-time. Bargee families became largely nomadic and dislocated from health services, as well as education and religious organisations that controlled the housed population.

This way of life directly contravened the 'values at the heart of sedentary, civilized life: permanence of relation, abodes and employment' (Mayall 2004: 268). In addition, women and children were heavily involved in manual work, which conflated the gendered spheres of domestic and wage labour and challenged the idea that certain work and skills were appropriate only for working men. In this way, bargee families challenged notions of Britishness, identity and gender of the time (Matthews 2013). Matthews (2013: 139) argues that the decline of canal boat people in the late 19th century was not solely due to an inability to compete with the "railway age" but also 'motivated by mainstream mistrust of nomadic modes of life, and fears about its consequences for the "floating population" and anyone with whom it might come into contact.' She posits that the government did not protect the bargee way of life when canal transportation rapidly declined following a boom in the road transport industry during the First World War, an increase in unionisation, and a fall in the demand for coal. The final nail in the coffin for the bargee way of life was the Transport Act of 1947, which saw most of the canal network nationalised along with the railways and road transport. In this period of decline, the inland waterways fell into disrepair. In the 1950s, a voluntary charity, the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) began work maintaining, restoring and developing the waterways for both recreational and commercial purposes (Bolton 1991; Blagrove 2006). Volunteers dubbed themselves "navvies", forging an association with the original navigation workers (Trapp-Fallon 2007). The number of boats on the canals and rivers gradually increased from 1,500 craft licences issued on the canals in 1950 (Harrison & Sutton 2003) to over 34,000 registered today (CRT 2019).

The increase in boats in urban areas like London has caused tensions in recent years, especially with the growing popularity of boats with a Continuous Cruising licence. These licences were first issued in 1995 by the British Waterways who were the authority that managed the waterways and were later reorganised into the Canal and River Trust (CRT) and allowed boaters to live on the network without having to buy or pay rent on a home mooring for the first time. Boats with this licence have to move to a new place every two weeks and cover a minimum distance of 20 miles per year in one direction (CRT, 2012). This overlapped with increasing house prices, and the cost of rent particularly in London that, in more recent years, has caused the city to be labelled as “unaffordable” (Hill 2014) and considerably narrowed peoples housing possibilities. Between 2012 and 2016, London saw a 57% increase in people living on boats (CRT 2016). This increase has led not only to tensions between established and newer Continuous Cruisers but also to arguments between different boating groups making claims to belong on the waterways. For example, in recent years the IWA have called for the CRT to increase the minimum distance that Continuous Cruisers are required to travel per year in order to free up space in the city for all boaters. This includes holiday boaters who have seen the city’s waterways become increasingly congested in recent years and who struggle to find a visitor mooring (see Crisp 2018).

For Bowles (2015: 285), Continuous Cruisers make up the heart of the ‘boating community,’ with ‘marina dwellers, holidaymakers and enthusiasts’ at its periphery. Kaaristo argues that Bowles presentation is ‘rather partial’ (2018: 142) and, in turn, states that there is a ‘close-knit community on the canals that accommodates everyone’ from canal enthusiasts and volunteers to liveaboards. Analysing boating in terms of Bourdieu’s (1977) idea of habitus, a complex of acquired dispositions, she suggests the community should be defined ‘through the commitment to the canals and possession of the habitus of canal boating’ (Kaaristo 2018: 142), which creates an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983), a socially constructed collective based on shared representations and narratives that create a feeling of belonging.

Although it is clear that there has been a long history of people living and working on the UK’s inland waterways, I will argue that the concept of a “boating community” today threatens to obscure or distract from the lived experience of individuals and their perception of the group they constitute. My research findings on Continuous Cruisers in London suggest that “boating community” elides the reproduction of embodied hierarchies of belonging that participants confront in their everyday lives. In what follows, I will describe my entry into the field and then turn to my research findings to argue against the presentation of a “boating community” that threaten to obscure the lived experience of hierarchies on the waterways.

Entry into the field

In August 2014, my parents took out a bank loan on my behalf in order for me to buy a 60-foot steel narrowboat with my (now ex) partner. The idea was this; as we turned thirty, we would escape the staggering rent we were paying to sleep in the living room of a two-bedroom North London house with three other people. We would cheaply live in our new

home- by obtaining a Continuous Cruising licence from CRT. According to the terms of this licence, we would have no permanent mooring and would have to move every two weeks to a new place, covering a minimum of 20 miles in one direction per year in order to meet the conditions of being on a “bona fide journey” (CRT 2012). We bought a narrowboat called *The Sorcerer* in Birmingham for £28,000 and moved on-board immediately. It took two solid, meandering weeks under the blaze of the late summer sun, travelling at four miles an hour, quite literally learning the ropes as we went before we finally got within commuting distance to London. We soon realised that the acquisition of skill came in the form of disaster. Some major lessons were learnt in calamitous episodes in which pipes came loose, gaskets blew, and on more than one occasion the boat ran aground: sticking us fast in the muddy shallow waters caused by the heat and lack of rain. On each dramatic occasion, I was convinced that we would sink right then and there and lose everything. Overnight, I felt like all my freedoms and ties had been turned on their head; I had adopted responsibility for a new home but also a release from the tight grip of the city and its relentless wage labour.

My ex is a carpenter and metalworker and extremely practically minded. I am decidedly less so. We were both aware that we could easily split the work share down the path of gender-normative least resistance. That is, I could surrender all practical, boat-handling responsibilities to him and spend my energies on domestic tasks. He could deal with *The Sorcerer* as a boat; I could deal with it as a home. Luckily this is not what happened, as both of us had commitments in London that meant we had to take it in turns to cruise South while the other was in the city. I did parts of the journey alone or with my nervous parents and got accustomed to remaining calm and being methodical in the face of catastrophe. I gradually learnt to enjoy the bewildering responsibility of an 18-tonne hunk of steel that happened to be my home. As we neared London and the commutes to work got shorter, boat life seemed less precarious and the accumulation of competence less stressful. We acclimatised to the material conditions and acts of dwelling we needed to survive. The boat seemed to settle into new bodies occupying it and stopped rebelling against having boating novices for owners. Without the financial responsibility I had to a landlord, I was able to work one part-time job and study for a part-time master's degree in Social Anthropology.

Two years after I bought the boat, my relationship broke down, and I found myself to be a lone boat-woman. I unofficially renamed the boat *The Sorceress* and am now perpetually maintaining, repairing and attempting to improve her. I experience waves of loneliness and melodrama when things go wrong, but the fear of not being able to cope without my practically minded ex has all but disappeared through the process of throwing myself into boat jobs like re-hauling my engine and changing my windows. I realise that I am able to do things I would have never attempted before, because I have to. This constantly reveals – and forces me to challenge – my own ingrained gender biases.

Being alone on the boat somehow intensifies my relationship with the waterways, which feel like a warm and quiet fold in the flesh of the city – a place that simultaneously offers its own brand of the peaceful sanctuary and fetid danger. These dark margins are detached from the bright lights and hubbub of the city, ideal for menace and

crime but also a calm backdrop to cosy, cabin-like domesticities. Here, in the unlit shadows of the city, not surveilled by CCTV, every stranger can be imagined as dangerous. This vulnerability is juxtaposed by the lights and chatter emanating from warm boats with fires roaring and hatches open to the still, black water. From inside the boat, the call of birdlife can sometimes be broken by the sound of arguments a few feet away on the towpath. In this way, the waterways can be simultaneously a homely and an inhospitable place. For support, I lean on the boatwomen around me. Being around these women has made me reflect on stories I repeatedly hear about the unique treatment that comes with the territory of being new to living on a boat and being a woman, and I have come to understand myself amongst this social landscape. This compelled me to conduct ethnographic research on this group to try to understand better what wider lessons could be drawn about presentations of a “boating community” through a focus on community and gender on the waterways.

A sense of community?

The continuous and randomised movement of boats makes London’s waterways a constantly changing landscape. For no more than two weeks at a time, boats are nested into, around, and quite literally tied to each other. When it is time to move on, Continuous Cruisers disentangle themselves and relocate to the next place. At times, Continuous Cruisers interact with neighbours; other times, they pass like ships in the night. This shifting string of boats is known as the “linear village” (Bowles 2015): an imagined village grouped by their choice to live on waterways, rather than the boundaries of the wards, boroughs and counties that they move through. It might be tempting to frame this mobile ‘village’ as dis-embedded from social hierarchies of the fixed city. This is often how the media portrays Continuous Cruisers, for example, TimeOut paint a picture of the “boating community” as:

... one of the best in London. Most Continuous Cruisers are really friendly. Got a boat related problem? Post it to the community Facebook group and you’ll have a reply within the hour from an experienced Continuous Cruiser, who will more than likely offer to pop round and have a look at your dodgy boiler/batteries/engine (TimeOut 2016).

Contrary to this depiction, my research participants described online boating forums as exclusionary, fault-finding and often sexist. They described feeling “judgement” (Beth), “anxiety” (Sophie), and “bewilderment” (Naomi) when asking for practical help on the most popular London boaters Facebook group. As there is no formal initiation into living itinerantly on a boat, know-how comes from asking more experienced boaters and learning from fixing problems and doing things for the first time. Boating know-how is accumulated over time and can be highly valued to newer boaters who are struggling. I agree with Bowles (2015) that there is tension between those who had been on the waterways longer (known as “old-timers”) and those who more recently moved onboard (known as “newbies”). One of my research participants, Helena, described the divide as ‘huge between old Continuous Cruisers and new Continuous Cruisers.’ Furthermore,

... there is annoyance about new boaters joining the waterways because of the over-crowding... of course, new people have to ask – they are starting from the beginning – but it seems like once it's clear they are new they have no power, no kudos and the older ones can laugh at them and treat them like shit (Tom).

My participants fear that the authorities will respond to the congested waterways in London by creating 'more restrictions' or 'increasing fees'. These feelings create a sense of insecurity and scarcity on the waterways, causing people to make claims to belong by using boating competence as a yardstick of longevity. I was told that, 'It is seen that newbies are free-riding on the knowledge of the old-timers who went through harder times' (Leila). Belonging based on boating expertise is not only apparent online but also expressed through the bodies of boaters that live and work on boats on towpaths in full view of other boaters and the wider public. Boating ability can be a performance that some "do" better than others and can be read in the bodies of boaters that adeptly handle locks or manoeuvre boats.

The term "hierarchies of belonging" was used by Wemyss (2009) to explain how historically hierarchies are produced through the granting or withholding of tolerance. She describes how the white East Ender in London is placed at the top of a ladder of belonging with automatic claims to the area while the black, Asian and, Bengali presence is "tolerated" as long as it does not challenge the hierarchy. Les Back (2012) builds on these ideas to posit that post 9/11 there are new processes of ordering in the UK. He illustrates this by focusing on one example from his larger sample research, where Charlynnne, a new migrant to London from Dominica, was scorned by a black British immigration officer on entering the country. Charlynnne describes how the officer looked down on her, although they were both "outsiders"; Back (2012: 148) suggests that through a 'tragic anxiety' the officer tries to elevate herself in order to feel less of an outsider. This is illustrative of fear and insecurity, rather than tolerance causing older migrants to tell newcomers to 'know their subservient place' on the new hierarchy of belonging (Back 2012: 146).

We can use "hierarchies of belonging" when considering tensions between old-timers and newbies. Clearly, the pernicious effects of racism cannot be compared to boating hierarchies, but the term can be used to look at how people are motivated to create hierarchies of belonging and try to secure their higher ranking. The fears and rumours attached to the increase of boats on the waterways create insecurity among Continuous Cruisers. They fear that overcrowding will cause a clampdown, leading to more restrictions, monitoring, enforcement or even eviction. This translates into the social sanctioning of newcomers, paralleling Charlynnne's experience of the 'pecking orders of integration' (Back 2012: 150), illustrated in the following description of meeting an 'old-timer' at a lock:

I suppose I am the kind of newbie that the older boaters don't like. I had to share a lock with an older boater- you know, the hardcore type... a scruffy, tough-looking man. At the lock he made me feel really... new... like he can see by the way I'm not confident opening the lock gates, or if I don't

do the right knot and I could feel him look down on me. I felt watched- like he is just waiting for me to do something wrong or differently to the way he does things. I tried not to interact with him, he made me feel like an imposter (Clare).

Clare describes how she feels like an “imposter”, because her lack of confidence and know-how could be read through her bodily techniques, and this revealed her as a new-comer to the waterways. Clearly, among an acephalous group like Continuous Cruisers, there is no formal hierarchy or ranking, but an imagined one felt through the acquisition of bodily techniques related to boating. Bowles analyses the acquisition of boating competence among Continuous Cruisers by drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). He describes Continuous Cruisers as entering a “community of practice” at its periphery and, gradually ‘through close attention to other, more knowledgeable members,’ develop and gain expertise and move towards the centre which is “populated by skilled and experienced full practitioners” (Bowles 2015: 104). He describes the sharing of resources and capabilities through ‘favours, exchanges and reciprocal understandings’ within ‘informal markets embedded in relationships of friendship and patronage’ (Bowles 2015: 142).

Although Bowles acknowledges there are tensions between the old-timers and newbies, he suggests that new members to the community of practice are somewhat homogenous and treated relatively equally. The body the boater occupies is not acknowledged in this process of enskillment. My participants experienced the exchange of boating knowledge exchange as distributed unevenly for men and women, due to the reproduction of the idea that capabilities are gendered. Participants saw practical, technical, and mechanical favours and exchanges predominately circulated among men. They reported instances where male mechanics and tradesmen (often also Continuous Cruisers) would withhold or attempt to mystify specialised knowledge to make it inaccessible to them as women. It would seem that these “experienced full practitioners” of the boating world do not treat boatwomen in the same way as boatmen and often ostracise women from the learning process. Emily describes how ‘as soon as my [male] partner was there, the boat mechanic wanted to teach him. I was just there to write things down.’ Kaaristo (2018: 153) reports a similar experience when she hired a day-boat, and ‘... all of the instructions concerning steering and manoeuvring the boat were directed towards my (male) friend Marko, who on that day was seeing a narrowboat for the first time in his life.’

My participants explained that it was only through their experience with boats they became aware not only of the assumptions made about the abilities they have in relation to their gender, but also how implicitly skills are exchanged, learnt, and accumulated over time in relation to the gender of our bodies. Helena describes, ‘it’s only now I live on a boat that I realise I’ve been left out and I am fighting to scrape together how to do practical stuff that [my male partner] just seems to know.’ Situations that require certain practical knowledge such as plumbing, electrics, or engine work, create the realisation that these abilities were distributed unevenly growing up and continue to be distributed unevenly as adults. This lead to attitudes that ‘there is a gender bias going on more notice-

ably in the boating world' (Melissa). Where female participants were frustrated at being underestimated or not included, male participants reported this in reverse: that they were expected to know more than they did and were judged on their knowledge; 'the man working in the marina made me feel like an idiot for not knowing about my engine' (Ben).

According to Bourdieu, culturally normative ideas about gender are legitimised through ideological means achieved by making the social order appear 'timeless or part of an order of nature rather than culture' (Tilley et al. 2006: 66). This 'goes without saying because it comes without saying': it has always been like this, so it could not be any different (Bourdieu 1977: 167). Bourdieu describes how this legitimises sex and age inequalities by the endless sequence of conversions of capital between groups and individuals affirming and reproducing hierarchies, which become naturalised (Tilley et al. 2006: 66). This capital often relates to expertise and knowledge conferred and entrusted to an individual. How much, how, and what knowledge is exchanged is determined by reproduced biases, social understandings, and practices embodied in the individual (Bourdieu 1977: 164). Judith Butler extends these ideas to gender, describing how acts are repeated within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of ... a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 33).

My female informants explained that growing up, certain practical knowledge that could later be utilised or moderated for boat-life was not offered to them, leading them to 'not feel capable' (Katharine) and to be 'on the catch up' (Melissa). This was often described as the way their male partner was taught to be confident understanding car engines or bike parts, whereas they were taught 'to change a bloody duvet cover' (Clare) or 'sew a button' (Melissa). I have described how certain know-how pertains to certain genders through the reproduction of behaviours over time, creating gendered capabilities that feel naturalised. However, these differences in attitudes towards ability are largely obscured by capitalist commodification, whereby technicians are paid for their specific expertise. In this way, the association of technical and practical skill with men and caregiving and administrative work with women is in this way reproduced.

Continuous Cruisers are more likely to do boat work themselves than hire a professional. This could be due to the unique character of each boat and the autonomy and self-direction that perhaps comes with itinerant life. It could also be that there are limited numbers of people who specialise in unique boat-related problems and can deal with a lack of mains supply electricity. For this reason, hiring a professional is not always the best, quickest, or even a possible option. This makes Continuous Cruisers more aware of the boating competence they do or do not possess and why. Sally described how her boat "exacerbated gender divides" between herself and her husband because it requires capabilities not needed in a house:

In a house, there's no difference, we both did the same jobs. The boat is a home... but is also technical. We both need to understand it, but he has way more confidence.

The statement by a female participant that 'I'm expected to know less than a man' (Katharine) parallels the statement by a male informant that 'I am expected to know

more than I do' (Adam). In this way we must be attentive to the ways that claims to belong are made through boating competence and hierarchies become embodied not only in the performative aspect of boating know-how but also through the expectations and assumptions related to skill and the gender of the boater.

It's not my intention to Continuous Cruisers' experience is necessarily fixed by the reproduction of gendered boating capabilities. In fact, the research shows that networks of support and care have emerged from joint experiences and frustrations around gender and gaining boating expertise. The Facebook group *London Boatwomen* was set up in 2014 to counter the aggressive attitudes of other online groups about boating knowledge and the unnecessary discomfort it gave women who felt like they knew less. This "secret" group (meaning that it can only be seen and joined by invitation) is underpinned by the philosophy of kindness and support, and clearly outlines that any rudeness or aggression is not tolerated:

This group has given me loads more confidence- ok, so it might take me a little bit longer than my boyfriend to understand engineering jargon that he has somehow absorbed: but boat stuff isn't rocket science, and if there's someone who will be patient enough to explain, then I can learn. The idea is that once I know, I will help someone else when they need it. I feel like that's the London Boatwoman philosophy (Helena).

Others explained how they used the group to actively employ and encourage women to work on the waterways:

I post on the group to find women to do the work. Men have always had a monopoly on this type of work, and I'd like to see more women out there (Sally).

First, I post and ask for advice to see if I can do a boat job on my own. Then, if I can't, I see if there's a tradeswoman who can help. If not, I ask if there are any recommendations for anyone else... but I'd rather employ a woman (Amy).

I've had some bad experiences with tradesmen making advances. They know I live alone, they know what boat I live on... it's such a violating feeling, they probably think they are just being a chancer... But, now I will only do the work myself or employ a woman (Sophie).

The lived experience of Continuous Cruisers shows that there are embodied hierarchies of belonging on the waterways that call for an interrogation of what is meant by a "boating community". Some Continuous Cruisers may feel that their resources and facilities are being stretched, leading to a perception of scarcity and newcomers as a threat. This leads to a performance of belonging through boating ability and bodily techniques. However, participants described how their access and acquisition of expertise was affected by their gender. The term "boating community" implies a type of commune living

or shared experience that not only obscures fears and insecurities that are creating tension on the waterways but also elides a whole set of social structures that are continually reproduced through the body, creating embodied hierarchies of belonging.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined historical and current claims to belong on the UK waterways. It draws on presentations of “community” in this context to question what is meant by this term for my participants. Their experience of learning how to live itinerantly on the waterways in London suggests that the reproduction of behaviours and assumptions about ability determines how learning processes and skill acquisition are restricted, accelerated or shaped through gender. My focus here is not to suggest that Continuous Cruisers do not see themselves as part of a community, but to ensure that the idea of a “boating community” does not swallow whole hierarchies involved in dwelling itinerantly on the waterways in London. These hierarchies open out questions of gender, belonging, and the distribution of skill. In this way, I aim to further previous portrayals of “boating community” that describe canal users as drawn into the orbit of an “imagined community” through emotion, interaction, and identity that create a feeling of belonging (Kaaristo 2018) or through a “community of practice” (Bowles 2015). Instead, this paper takes seriously the embodied experience of participants when discussing acts of dwelling on water and in so doing complicates ideas of “community” that imply a type of commune living or shared experience that not only obscures fears and insecurities that are creating tension on the waterways but also elides a whole set of social structures that are continually reproduced through the body, creating embodied hierarchies of belonging.

My research findings reflect the fact that my participants were mostly female and experienced their gender to be the factor that most determined their access to boating know-how. There are no doubt other ways of understanding embodied hierarchies of belonging on the waterways that did not emerge in this research. However, further ethnographic research is needed on these themes to interrogate the lived experience and identities of Continuous Cruisers.

Continuous Cruisers require certain boating competence but experience the gaining or accessing of it through their gender. Through these experiences, other groups and support networks emerge that counter the reproduction of the imagination of gendered skills. This paper suggests that a deeper understanding of the mobile geographies of support and care is necessary to understand how individuals autonomously come together and move apart on the waterways, creating fluvial intimacies. I have critically analysed the presentation of a “boating community” in order to provide a closer examination of the lived experience of belonging on the waterways and a deeper understanding of the non-static and ever-changing lives and experiences of itinerant boat dwellers in London. Extending the research findings of this paper, new research should employ caution around the term “community”, and more focus should be on how the lives of Continuous Cruisers attach and de-attach, tie and loosen to each other, and to the city.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Joe Penny and Professor Alastair Owens for their insight and direction and Dr Benjamin O. L. Bowles and Dr Helen Underhill for inexhaustible support and guidance.

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Povzetek

Barkarji so navadno predstavljeni kot skupnost podobno mislečih posameznikov z alternativnim načinom življenja, ki si med seboj delijo spretnosti, vire in prostor. Prispevek skozi lastno etnografijo članice te skupnosti in na podlagi sedemnajstih intervjujev z ljudmi, ki živijo na barkah v rečnih kanalih Londona, problematizira takšno enoznačno sliko zamišljene skupnosti. Raziskava namreč razkriva ustvarjanje hierarhij pripadanja skozi pridobivanje in kazanje znanj in izkušenj ter sankcioniranje le-teh po liniji spolnih razlik. S tem raziskava doprinaša k nadaljnjemu razumevanju izkušenj londonskih barkarjev.

KLUJČNE BESEDE: rečne barke, kanali, hierarhije pripadanja, spol

CORRESPONDENCE: Laura Roberts, Queen Mary University London, Mile End Road, Bethnal Green, London, E1 4NS, United Kingdom, Email: l.e.v.roberts@qmul.ac.uk.