

Anxious Vigilance and the Production of (Il)legitimacy in the UK Citizenship Regime

"It's How You Sift Them Out, Y'know?"

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article examines the navigation and enactment of vigilance in the UK citizenship regime. Drawing on data from a four-year research project in a UK city, including observations of citizenship ceremonies and interviews with institutional actors and citizen-candidates, it sees vigilance as a central feature of the naturalization process, with watchfulness oriented toward three key areas: the bureaucratic precision, the linguistic proficiency, and the commitment to the nation evidenced by the citizen-candidate. It sees the navigation of anxious vigilance among all actors—state, institutional, and citizen-candidates—but argues that this is directed unevenly, with the state's securitizing gaze particularly maintained upon those racialized as Other. Reading citizenship in domopolitical terms as a technology through which the securitized state can enact its bordering practices, it sees the vigilance enacted in the naturalization process as productive: as working to realize the legitimacy of the state and the Good citizen, to articulate and exclude from membership those deemed illegitimate, and, ultimately, to curtail possibilities for solidarity.

■ **KEYWORDS:** anxiety, bordering practices, citizenship, domopolitics, legitimacy, vigilance

In the corridor of a grand civic building, a crowd of people waits in line. I sense a nervous excitement in the space—foot tapping, stifled coughs, hushed tones. And I notice the paperwork: everyone in the queue carries documentation, many holding brown A5 envelopes, some bursting with papers. At 10:35 a.m., Amy—one of two registrars running the citizenship ceremony that day—calls to attendees to have their “photo ID and Home Office letter” ready. People begin to rummage through their documents. Amy greets each person politely as they approach her desk and checks their documentation carefully against her paperwork. She asks an attendee in a face veil to step aside and lower the veil so she can verify her ID. After passing through Amy's verification process, each attendee moves forward a few feet to the ceremonial room where Bernie, the superintendent registrar, waits in the doorway to greet them. For the second time and within the space of a few feet, they are cross-referenced against a spreadsheet. Today, there's a mix-up: Bernie can't find the names of a couple who had checked in with Amy without issue. There's much to-ing and fro-ing as the two officials hurriedly check their paperwork together, and I see a hint of anxiety on Amy's face as she flicks quickly through another, different, folder. But finally, the situation is resolved, the names are identified somewhere on a list, the attendees



are allowed into the room, and the process restarts. People take their seats in the ceremony room as “Land of Hope and Glory,” “Rule Britannia,” and “Auld Lang Syne” play from Amy’s *Now That’s What I Call Britain* CD.

This short, reconstructed excerpt from my fieldnotes captures the moments before the citizenship ceremony in a city in the UK. It is a scene that has played out, with various permutations, fortnightly¹ since the event was introduced by the Labour Party in 2004 as a means by which to articulate and emphasize the “significance” of citizenship acquisition (Home Office 2001: 34). And it captures some of the essence of this article: for while the scene may appear rather mundane and unspectacular, we see in this brief excerpt the attentive, meticulous institutional actors described in the Introduction to this issue (Ivasiuc et al., this issue), some of the gatekeeping and verification processes they are called to uphold, the anxieties this can produce, and a hint of the bureaucratic and affective complexities that both they and applicants for citizen status navigate in the citizenship process.

Over the past two decades, a well-documented shift has taken place in these citizenship processes and practices, both in the UK and beyond. Typically, these have involved increasingly onerous bureaucratic and financial barriers to accessing citizenship and progressively “culturalized” (Bassel et al. 2020) processes through which citizen-candidates are required to pass. In the UK, the applicant must now satisfy an extensive set of eligibility criteria, pay an exclusionary application fee (currently at least a minimum of £1,330), undertake the (frequently reformulated) Life in the United Kingdom testing regime, document their English language proficiency, and attend a compulsory ceremony in which they make a verbal pledge to be “faithful” to the UK (MacGregor and Bailey 2012).

This (re)assertion of the significance of national citizenship is interesting on two counts: first, it appears to render somewhat unpersuasive the plethora of alternative conceptualizations of citizenship proposed over the past two decades—theories around “transnational” or “postnational” citizenship which sought to respond to the increase in global mobility and the attendant growth of transnational affiliations by proposing alternatives to the nation-state as the key locus of membership (see, e.g., Bauböck 1994; Soysal 1994). Indeed, “reclaiming sovereignty” and “taking back control of our borders” are central refrains in the current national discourse (Bhambra 2016), and the nation, rather than retreating, has been explicitly reasserted and recentred (Però 2013).

Second, and significantly for this article, these newly instituted citizenship requirements indicate an important shift in the articulation of national citizenship: this is not citizenship as a broadly bureaucratic legal-political marker predicated on length of residence in the country but instead as a rather more complex “ontological process” (Fortier 2017), a process through which the citizen-candidate is called to evidence their legitimacy not only in legislative/bureaucratic terms but also in *normative* terms. “Citizenization,” as Anne-Marie Fortier (2017) terms it, requires the citizen-candidate to display and evidence characteristics of “responsibility, self-improvement and productivity” (Bassel et al. 2020: 2) by documenting their linguistic proficiency and their knowledge of and submission to the skills and values deemed central to the UK narrative, and demonstrating a commitment to the nation never previously demanded. There is an affective dimension here that scholars such as Fortier (2013, 2017) emphasize, with citizenship increasingly constituting a “site of emotional investment” (2013: 697) both on the part of the citizen, and indeed on the part of the nation-state itself.

It is this affective dimension of citizenship which this article centers, with a particular focus on the vigilance articulated through the citizenship regime: that is to say, the “form(s) of watchfulness” (Ivasiuc et al., this issue) practiced by the state, by institutional actors, and by citizen-candidates, and the ways in which these vigilant practices work to produce and secure

certain subjects and relations. In doing so, I draw on the well-established body of scholarship that sees anxiety and vigilance as co-constitutive, orienting features of the post-9/11 “hyper-securitized” (Bonino 2013: 393) nation-state: the “watchful politics” (Amoore 2007) that requires not only state apparatuses but also the individual subject to see, to notice, to apprehend the suspicious Other (Emerson 2018: 286). I take as my point of departure, therefore, the claim that a “pervasive anxiety” characterizes the contemporary era which fuels an “ethos of suspicion” (Fournier 2014: 318) and mobilizes the “good” subject to maintain a sustained and constant attention toward the “suspicious” or “risky” Other (Vaughan-Williams 2008: 64).

However, where this body of literature more traditionally looks to the vigilance oriented toward a *material* threat—that of the spectacular figure of the terrorist (e.g., Amoore 2007; Emerson 2018), I focus here on the ways in which this watchfulness is mobilized toward a *symbolic* threat—that is, the Other who may disrupt or disturb the boundaries of the national *community*; as Bridget Anderson (2013) terms it, the “community of value.” As such, I position the contemporary citizenship regime as a key site at which the boundaries of the community of value can be drawn and the Other discursively or materially excluded and, therefore, as an anxious space in which the state, institutional actors, and citizen-candidates call and are called upon to play their part in the assertion and protection of these immaterial boundaries. I argue that the anxious vigilance with which individuals are impelled to act is productive: it works to realize the nation-state as a home that must be both desired (Fortier 2013) and protected; to produce the Good, legitimate citizen subject; and to articulate this desirable individual in terms of their oppositional anti-citizen. While there is always space for resistance and disruption in all social practice, I argue that the watchfulness enacted by all individuals in their navigation of the citizenship regime—to varying degrees and upon some more than others—works to destabilize trust and to foreclose possibilities for solidarity and conviviality.

Setting the scene

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted over four years (2013–2017) in a UK city. I have anonymized the name of the location for two reasons: first, to avoid identifying institutional figures; and second because issues around citizenship and status are often beset with anxieties: indeed, it took significant perseverance and reassurance to secure participants for this research. As such, I refer to the location as “the City” throughout and use pseudonyms for participants where requested. The City itself is home to approximately 30,000 residents, around a quarter of whom were born outside the UK. The documented increase in residents over the past decade is attributable as much to inward migration of overseas individuals as it is to “natural growth,” and the number of overseas individuals moving into the City is among the highest in the country (Evans 2012). At the time of writing, the City has relatively higher rates of deprivation compared to the national average and relatively lower levels of educational attainment ([X] City Council 2021).

In this article, I use a section of the data constructed in the larger project, focusing particularly on the citizenship ceremony. My observations of the ceremony took place over a period of two years, and I took on a variety of roles during each event, at times observing at a distance from the viewing gallery, on other occasions working alongside the officials to provide organizational support—filing paperwork, setting up the ceremonial space, directing attendees to their seats. Although I was not dressed in the registrar’s uniform, attendees seemingly perceived me as another official, following my “instructions” and asking for advice and support. The insider-like status I was accorded gave me access “backstage” as well as “frontstage” (Goffman 1959)

of the ceremonial event and allowed me an insight into an affective dimension I would not otherwise have seen.

I also include here data from interviews with 20 individuals, including institutional actors such as registrars and members of the mayoralty—all of whom are White and British born, and with individuals at various stages of the naturalization process. These citizen-candidates included individuals born in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Some—for instance, Thandi from Zimbabwe and Johannes from Eritrea—had taken long and complex routes to get to their citizenship application (in Johannes’s case arriving as an undocumented migrant following a treacherous journey to the UK). Others such as Alex from Italy, Antje from Germany, and Bahadir from Turkey—all of whom are researchers—and Cindy and Russ, married pastors from the US, had a more straightforward path to citizenship.

Citizenship in Domopolitical Terms: Producing and Protecting the Nation-as-Home

I begin by positioning vigilance and anxiety as orienting features of the securitized nation-state, both resulting from and central to the bordering practices of the post-9/11 political community. In doing so, I follow the established body of scholarship that sees a state of watchfulness against threat enacted not only at the territorial frontier by state actors, as a traditional cartographic understanding of borders may assume, but also *within* the nation-state (see, e.g., Bauder 2011; Vaughan-Williams 2012) by the populace. For while frontier management continues to remain a central feature in the securitization of political communities (Bauder 2011; Darling 2011: 263; de Genova 2011), a consensus has emerged that the contemporary border is produced and enacted not only at the “margins” but also in the “center” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 1; see also Tulbure, this issue). On this account, the border, or rather bordering *practices*, can be seen as a structuring feature of the everyday, operating at multiple sites within the territorial boundary and involving a complex network of actors, mechanisms, and technologies (Aas 2007: 296). The contemporary “call for alertness” (Ivasiuc et al., this issue) thus mobilizes *both* the state *and* the individual subject in the recognition and attempted nullification of supposed threat.

In the UK, this domestication of the border can be seen vividly in the continued embedding of surveillance, regulation, and identification technologies (Walters 2004) within mundane and “unspectacular” (Larsson 2016: 95) spaces—workplaces, schools, GP surgeries, for example. With the UK Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 in particular, “ordinary people”—landlords, medics, teachers—generally untrained and unqualified in the complex legalities of visa documentation, now find themselves responsible for verifying immigration status, subject to penalties if they fail to recognize and report irregular visa statuses, increasingly “liable for the maintenance of border control *inside* a territory” (Jones et al. 2017: 6). The bureaucratic vigilance demanded of the populace can be situated as part of the “regime of vigilance” theorized in the introduction to this special section in which the populace is called to exercise a particular watchfulness directed specifically toward (in this case) the undocumented migrant but more broadly the migrant Other. And the material effects of this regime are felt far more widely, by minoritized communities both with and without regularized status: as Chai Patel and Charlotte Peel (2017) note, for instance, there is widespread discrimination in the housing market toward both non-British nationals and British citizens racialized as Other. And, central to this article, by criminalizing failures in border-guarding in the “everyday/everywhere” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 239), these legislative measures co-opt all individuals into the securitization of the nation, mobilizing the ordinary citizen towards a “state of perpetual vigilance” (Hay and Andrejevic

2006: 341) and producing anxiety and unease toward the Other—regardless of their citizen status—as the social norm.

It is instructive at this point to briefly position this bordering scholarship within broader conceptualizations of the state and of statecraft, in particular to note that the body of research looking to the deterritorialization of the border and its mundane enactment in the everyday fits comfortably with the work of scholars such as Begoña Aretxaga (2003), and James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2008: 983), who reject a managerialist approach to the state as a singular, rational entity “up there,” responsible for the conferral of policy upon a receiving public, and instead look to the *production* of the state as complex and contingent, as “dynamic,” “multifaceted,” and as “produced in local encounters at the everyday level.” On this account, it is through the everyday routines of a plurality of actors—both officials and the “ordinary people” mentioned here—that political order is produced and reproduced. And importantly, as Aretxaga makes so clear, it is not simply through bureaucratic and “rational” technologies (2003: 403) that the state is produced and its authority maintained, although these are of course crucial, but through the *affective*: that is, the “psychic life of power” (Butler 1997) through which fear, desire, uncertainty, impotence mobilize and are mobilized to produce state and subject.

With this affective dimension of statecraft in mind, the state of unease produced through the incursion of the border into the everyday speaks to the “neuroticization” (Isin 2004) of the populace where contemporary governance orientates toward the affective subject for whom “metaphysical uncertainty” (Fournier 2013: 310) and the elimination of risk are central. For Engin Isin, one domain in which this neurosis is produced and managed is in the home, constituted both as a vital space of sanctuary and, concurrently, as threatened and unstable. Indeed, within the home, a “double movement of neuroticization” (2004: 231) plays out, for while the anxieties about external dangers can be stabilized within this space, so the home simultaneously becomes itself a place of anxiety, a domain that *must* be protected from external threat. Clearly, this understanding of the anxieties immanent to the home parallels the articulation of the “home-land” within the securitized state and thus points to a *domopolitical* governmentality at play; that is to say, a governmental strategy which articulates the nation in *domestic* terms as a place to which “we belong naturally” and, concurrently, as a threatened space, at risk of incursion from the “chaotic outside” (Walters 2004: 241).

As I noted earlier, the particular threat posed to the national home by the Other is both material (from the spectacular figure of the terrorist) and symbolic (from those who fail to uphold and enact certain values or practices). These are the ideals, patterns of behavior, and shared values said to unite the state not as a legal entity, but as a “community of value” (Anderson 2013). One key site at which the boundaries of this community of value can be articulated, drawn, and policed is the citizenship regime. Citizenship on this account operates as a site at which the state can (endeavor to) enact a particular vigilance in the service of the nation, producing and strengthening the infrastructures, apparatuses, and practices through which to exclude from full membership those it deems undesirable. That is not to claim that this is a new phenomenon: national citizenship has long been an ideological space through which the nation is produced and the Other excluded. The “patriality clause” of the 1971 Immigration Act, for instance, essentially maintained the right to move to Britain for White citizens while prohibiting entry for those from other (predominantly not White) British Empire territories, thereby “knowingly” enshrining race in immigration law (Jones 2021: 99). As Imogen Tyler (2010) and others (e.g., Baucom 1999; Bhabra 2016) argue, the racial logics at play within the subsequent 1981 British Nationality Act essentially excluded Black and Asian populations in the Commonwealth, designing them out of citizenship. This was, as Bridget Byrne (2014) notes, a practice that cemented in legislation an “essentially racial definition” (Goulbourne 1993: 181) of British-

ness as White. However, the past two decades have seen an explicit impetus, from successive UK administrations, to make citizenship a “privilege” and “not a right” (Home Office 2013) and, in doing so, to tighten and police the boundaries around citizenship status somewhat differently from before.

To become a citizen of the UK now, the applicant must satisfy a set of seven criteria, including:

- to be aged over 18,
- to be “of sound mind,”
- to intend to continue living in the UK post-naturalization,
- to be “of good character,”
- to meet certain residential requirements,
- to be “able to communicate in English . . . to an acceptable degree,” and
- to “have sufficient knowledge of life in the UK.”

These legislative requirements provide an insight into the particular fears around which contemporary bordering practices circulate and are mobilized, pointing to an increased vigilance on the part of the state in three key areas: bureaucratic precision, linguistic proficiency, and commitment to the nation. I will take each of these in turn, considering the ways in which vigilance is enacted and resisted by the state, by institutional actors, and by citizen-candidates themselves and looking to the production of the state, the subject, and the relation between the two through these practices.

Bureaucratic Precision: “Even If All Your Documents Are Right, They Always Treat You Like a Suspect”

For citizen-candidates, the application process can be a source of intense anxiety, demanding a precision that every individual I spoke to found onerous at best, impossible at worst. For instance, Antje, a German-born academic, recalled her decision to include a “huge wodge” of extra documents in her application, despite knowing most of it was unnecessary, in case this additional paperwork might help confirm her eligibility. Bahadir, a Turkish-born researcher, offered a similar narration of his experience: “You want to pretty much provide everything that you can possibly put in the envelope because you never know what’s going to be sufficient.”

Both Antje and Bahadir spoke at length about the anxieties they had experienced gathering and submitting the necessary paperwork, which I found somewhat surprising given their relative affluence and educational capital. However, they were not unusual in these concerns: every individual I interviewed, regardless of background, spoke about the anxiety the application process had caused them; indeed, all had enlisted outside support, from the City’s refugee center, from lawyers, or from the Nationality Checking Service—an organization that, at the time of research, charged £70 to verify that applications were complete and precise. Interestingly, government statistics suggest that “incomplete” applications only infrequently result in rejected applications so their concerns may superficially appear unnecessary (gov.uk 2020). However, broader “issues with or inconsistencies in . . . immigration paperwork” are indeed a common justification for citizenship refusal; in fact, these bureaucratic errors are actually recorded under the category of “good character,” and this “amorphous, value-laden measure” has become a “pivotal condition” (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019: 653) in citizenship applications, employed as the main reason for refusals over the past two years. Whether applicants are aware exactly how much the state polices aspects of their paperwork is immaterial: the point is the perception by citizen-candidates that vigilance will be enacted, and the anxiety this causes.

In this aspect of the citizenship regime, there is no space for resistance: the citizen-candidate must submit to the requirements of the state if they wish their bureaucratic legitimacy to be ratified. With documentation a key part of the discursive realization of the state-subject relation, paperwork here works as a legitimating technology through which to substantiate the authority of the state and to categorize and institutionalize the legitimate subject (Darling 2014). As such, and in keeping with the principle discussed earlier that the state cannot be said to exist but is rather *produced* and actualized in everyday practice (see also Ivasiuc, this issue), I see in these cautious, self-legitimizing practices, the citizen-candidate called upon to sanctify the authority of the state and thereby to affirm the hegemonic relationship between state and citizen. The attentiveness with which the state is perceived to police citizenship applications thus works to produce and secure the state-subject relation as inevitably and unquestionably asymmetrical.

Importantly, the bureaucratic demands placed on the candidate are more complex and onerous for some than others: those who pass through the asylum system, for instance, often have inconsistencies and omissions in their paperwork that can be particularly challenging to navigate. Indeed, for some, no amount of caution would be sufficient: Thandi, for instance, arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe in 1998 and was working on her citizenship application when we met. There were inconsistencies in her paperwork, so it was taking Thandi significant time to evidence all necessary criteria. This left her vulnerable to bureaucratic changes, for partway through her application process, the Home Office changed some of the application form and criteria, resulting in Thandi and her lawyers discarding documents they had previously completed: “We had to start all over again. Right now I am in limbo waiting for them to say whether they can submit the application or not.” Thandi was held here in a liminal state, a not-quite citizen who had undertaken the legitimating mechanisms required by the state—passing the Life in the UK test and taking an English language exam despite being educated predominantly in English during her childhood in British-occupied Zimbabwe—yet struggling to provide the specific documentation required to prove herself. No matter how cautiously she worked to substantiate her legitimacy, she remained at the whim of the state’s arbitrary and mutable bureaucratic requirements, the asymmetrical power relations between state and subject again here materialized and secured.

That is not to overstate intentionality here; it is not that texts and their associated practices are necessarily *designed* as mechanisms through which to produce particular social relations. And nor do I want to suggest that the verification of documentation is an activity enacted by a totalizing structural apparatus within which the human subject disappears (Giroux 1983): this is rather a human endeavor, carried out by state bureaucrats. However, these bureaucratic practices can be seen to enact certain governmental effects (Darling 2014: 489), particularly on those from more marginalized communities with more precarious experiences of status. Indeed, although Thandi spoke very positively about the UK government and institutions throughout our interview, she articulated a sense that her own experiences navigating the asylum and citizenship process may have been mediated through her positioning as a Black woman. In her words:

Because of my color I’ve always been discriminated all my life . . . It happens a lot, especially like for instance in the Home Office when you are coming in, even if all your documents are right, they always treat you like a suspect. And we’ve always accepted to be treated like that, what can we do?

Thandi explicitly articulates herself here as the “racialized subaltern” (Ivasiuc et al., this issue), sensing that she is positioned as a suspect subject, watched and verified in a way that others are not. And she sees no way around this except to submit: for Thandi, accessing citizen status

is crucial; she tells me it will accord her a sense of protection and security from the UK state, allow her to travel back to Zimbabwe to visit family, and offer her a feeling of belonging that she strongly desires. “I won’t feel like a refugee, I’ll feel that I belong.” For Thandi, there is thus a necessary and explicit acquiescence: she recognizes that she will be the object of the state’s securitizing gaze, but her desire for the status prevents her from seeking ways to resist, despite the hardship this obviously causes her.

Importantly, it is not only state actors who are called to cast their watchful gaze over the documentation of the candidate. As I described in the vignette at the start of this article, institutional actors must now also play their part in the verification and ratification of the citizen-candidate; to act as “intermediaries of the state” (Fortier 2021) in monitoring and *recognizing* (Amoore 2007) the subject as legitimate or otherwise. The concern this can cause *them* is evident in the multiple accounts Amy, a senior administrator in the City council, gave me of moments when she had questioned a ceremony attendee’s identity. On one occasion, for instance, she encountered an attendee whose appearance did not seem to match that of his ID: “Because we did have a guy attend . . . and I was like, ‘It doesn’t look like him, what do I do?’” She explained that some registrars have taken a course that prepares them for this scenario, but, significantly, Amy herself had been given no such training. On this occasion, she had enlisted the support of a colleague, who directed her to look at the bridge of the attendee’s nose and their septum in order to ascertain their identity, and the two registrars were able to satisfy themselves that the attendee was genuine.

As Ana Ivasiuc, Eveline Dürr, and Catherine Whittaker note in their introduction to this special section, processes of categorization and identification demand “the production of supporting materialities and infrastructures, such as biometric databases, algorithmic technologies, and surveillance apparatuses,” yet it is clear from Amy’s account that institutional actors are not necessarily provided with the training or support necessary to navigate these verification technologies. Amy did not mention whether she would be subject to any penalties if she failed to authenticate an individual’s ID accurately; however, given the legal sanctions to which ordinary citizens are now subject (as discussed earlier), it may reasonably be assumed that public servants could also be implicated in these criminalizing practices. And even if not, Amy is left to carry out a role for which she has received no training but that she clearly sees as central to her job, hence the concern she articulates. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Amy and her colleagues feel impelled to act with caution in those moments before the ceremony, checking and then, within a few feet, rechecking that attendees are who they say they are. I cannot make firm claims as to whether the registrars always enact the same degree of bureaucratic vigilance towards all attendees, or whether some are subject to greater scrutiny than others. But in a sense, that is unimportant—the point is that the registrars are called on to play a bordering role never previously required of them, to act as “agents of the state” (du Gay 2005) in enacting these verification practices, and, importantly, that they are *seen* to do so by all citizen-candidates.

Linguistic Proficiency: “Well, Should We Report Him?”

The watchfulness that institutional actors such as Amy enact is not limited solely to the verification of identity but also involves a particular attention toward ceremony attendees’ *linguistic* legitimacy. Amy told me, for instance, about a difficult telephone interaction with an individual who asked if her friend might be able to attend her ceremony alongside her to act as a translator. Amy told her this would not be possible, but soon after received a follow-up call from someone who “pretended to *be* the woman” but no longer spoke in “broken English.” Amy was

anxious lest the “impersonator” attempt to attend the ceremony, so she called the Home Office for advice, whereby she received the rather vague guidance to simply verify the individual’s ID more carefully on the day of the ceremony—a process we have seen causes Amy real unease. In another instance, I witnessed an exchange between Amy and another colleague, Sharon: a citizenship ceremony had just finished and attendees were leaving the room when Sharon began whispering to Amy about a participant whose daughter had approached her before the ceremony began to ask if her father would need to read anything as he “could not speak English.” The two registrars looked visibly concerned, and Amy asked, “Well, should we report him?” At that point, another attendee interrupted the conversation to ask for directions, and, as far as I am aware, the matter was forgotten and no further action taken. On a separate occasion, as Bernie verified attendees’ names in the ceremony room, I heard her say loudly to one woman in a headscarf that *she* would need to speak, not just her husband. This was not something she routinely said to attendees, and, as far as I could hear, the attendee had not asked a question of Bernie that might prompt this as a response.

These vignettes may appear relatively unspectacular—no material consequences necessarily arose—but they are interesting: they indicate a sense of concern on the part of institutional actors around linguistic proficiency, and a feeling of responsibility to ensure they police this appropriately—a sense that vigilance is necessary, even if it is not always fully enacted. This fits with the increased attention on the part of the state toward the linguistic legitimacy of the migrant Other: since the British Nationality Act 1981, a minimum level of linguistic competence has been a requirement for citizenship; however, the “sufficient knowledge” was previously undefined (Blackledge 2009: 72), and the test consisted of an interview between the applicant and a police officer: if both parties could understand one another, this was deemed sufficient (van Oers 2010: 64). These were certainly not halcyon days: an unregulated language test clearly poses its own major problems. However, the practices for determining an applicant’s language level have, since 2001, become significantly more rigorous, and proof of linguistic proficiency has been demanded of a greater spectrum of applicants. As Fortier (2017: 9) argues, English language fluency is increasingly now articulated as a signifier of integration and commitment to the nation—language a “fetishized commodity” that operates as an “adjudicating principle distinguishing the worthy from the unworthy migrant.” Impositions around linguistic proficiency indicate an increased attention by the state toward the language practices of migrant communities, a link—explicit or implicit—between linguistic proficiency and security, and the production of (some of) those who are said to lack the requisite proficiency as inherently suspect (Bassel et al. 2018). Concerns around the non-English speaker are then recontextualized by institutional actors such as Amy, Sharon, and Bernie, who feel impelled to act with caution, to seek advice and reassurance from the Home Office, or to articulate their concerns indirectly when they encounter less proficient speakers of English.

Importantly, the vigilance that both institutional actors and state bureaucrats pay to linguistic proficiency is differentiated: there are those required to prove their language skills in order to avoid suspicion and those who are never suspected. As I mentioned earlier, Thandi, for instance, was required to pass an English language exam despite having been educated predominantly in English, indeed having followed a British-mandated curriculum during her childhood in British-occupied Zimbabwe. Others, however, faced no such imposition. In fact, there was a particularly interesting contrast between Thandi, and Cindy and Russ—two White North Americans whose linguistic proficiency was never questioned but who actually spent a large proportion of our discussion commenting on all the language differences they had noticed between North American and British English, and laughing about the various miscommunications they had encountered since moving to the UK, including confusions when interacting with institu-

tional actors and other officials. This discrepancy speaks back to the racialized practices through which Commonwealth citizens such as Thandi were excluded from citizenship, and points again to the differentiated enactment of vigilance in which certain subjects are produced as inherently suspicious and others not.

In the three vignettes I described in this section, the individuals involved may not have noticed or found meaningful the anxieties they had inadvertently provoked—or perhaps they had indeed noted an unease in Amy’s tone, a pointed look, a more careful examination of their documentation compared to others. And if this is the case, then these vignettes point to the ways in which the anxious watchfulness of institutional actors may work to cement and enhance suspicion and distrust toward, and perhaps in, *some of* the individuals they encounter. Vigilant practices on this account may be said therefore to construct and produce “communities that are fused, less by fellow feeling, than suspicion, fear, and indignation” (Walsh 2020: 289).

Pledging Allegiance to the Nation-State: “I’m Going to Cross My Fingers”

I turn finally to the last part of this article: the anxieties mobilized around citizen-candidates’ desire for and commitment to the nation, and the vigilance variously enacted around this. The point at which this watchfulness is most visible and most interesting is during the articulation of the pledge of allegiance during the citizenship ceremony, so I now dwell predominantly on this moment. To begin with, however, it is worth commenting briefly on the ceremony in terms of its choreography and aesthetics. In the City, at the time of research, the event takes place in the Town Hall—a large, Tudor-style building adorned with wood paneling and intricate features. The building is used predominantly for mundane activities such as the payment of overdue parking fines; however, it is an architecturally imposing site. The room in which the ceremony takes place is grand: the walls are clad in dark wood with three of the four sizeable portraits depicting the Queen at various stages in her life. These visible manifestations of the Crown sit alongside plaques and formal portraits of previous Lord Mayors. The seating is arranged in a horseshoe with pews facing toward a large, raised “throne” at the front of the room: this throne consists of three seats, each set into an ornately carved, slightly raised wooden structure. Here the Lord Mayor and any attending dignitaries sit for the duration of the ceremony. To the right of this wooden structure, a large portrait of the Queen rests on a stand, and next to this a Union Flag.

Due to the layout of the room and the positioning of the props, the gaze of attendees and their guests is directed throughout the ceremony at three key manifestations of the state: the image of the Queen, the Union Flag, and the dignitaries positioned on their throne. Just as Nirmal Puwar (2010) notes in her analysis of the parliament building, there is an “architectural split,” a horizontal divide between the audience and the officials, a manifestation and an affirmation of the hierarchical asymmetry in the room. The fact that the throne is raised is a particularly marked display of state power, reinforcing the “sacred aspect of authority” (Lefebvre 1991: 225) and thereby working to secure further the dominant social relations (Rai 2010). Given the proxemics, both officials and attendees can see and be seen by one another at all times, lending a sense of necessary alertness to all present.

There is a vigilance around time, as perhaps to be expected in any communal event, with the registrars working hard to ensure the event begins on time: latecomers are chivvied through, although the verification of their paperwork is never omitted. Alongside this careful timekeeping is a policing of movement and behavior: as the ceremony begins, the superintendent registrar (SR) states that all mobile phones must be turned off and that children are welcome but

should be taken outside if they become disruptive: indeed, on two occasions I did observe one SR—Bernie—stop the ceremony to ask that a child be temporarily removed from the room. It is important to clarify here that citizenship ceremonies at this site are not wholly serious, formal affairs—just as Byrne (2014) in the UK, Oskar Verkaaik (2010) in the Netherlands, and Susan Bibler Coutin (2003) in the US found, these citizenship ceremonies can be enthusiastic, at times even joyous events. However, in my experience in the City, the overall tone is highly dependent on the individual officials presiding on the day: some are more relaxed and informal, while others present a more formal and serious persona, and this inevitably influences the atmosphere in the space. And further, these directives around time, space, and noise are important—regardless of the fact there can be moments of levity during the event, they indicate the degree to which the ceremony is controlled and choreographed, symbolize the perceived formality of the occasion, and constitute some individuals as authoritative and others as submissive within the space. That is not to claim that these performances work wholly to naturalize the citizen-subject as passive or compliant but to argue that these ceremonial practices disguise conflict and disruption (Rai 2010: 293) and legitimate the uneven power relations between state and subject.

The moment at which the performance of state and subject is most explicit is in the articulation of the pledge of allegiance, the point at which ceremony attendees stand and collectively recite first either the oath (religious) or affirmation (nonreligious) of allegiance to the Crown—“her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, her Heirs and Successors,” and second, their pledge of loyalty to the UK, as shown in the cards displayed in Figure 1.

According to the Home Office (2017: 19), the oath/affirmation and pledge are a crucial element of the ceremony: “Making the Oath (or Affirmation) and Pledge at a citizenship cere-



Figure 1. Affirmation/oath of allegiance and pledge cards, 2015. Photo by author.

mony is a legal requirement, and *the point at which* you will become a British citizen” (emphasis added). The phrase in italics indicates the significance attached to this act; until the verbal proclamation of commitment to the nation, the individual rests in something of a liminal state: they have passed through the onerous application process and been accepted as legitimate, but they are not technically ratified *as* citizens until they have made this statement. I had expected therefore that this moment would be tightly observed and policed, presuming the ceremony officials—of whom there are several: at least one administrator, a senior registrar, the Lord Mayor, a Lord Lieutenant, and a Mayoral officer—would police this point of the ceremony attentively to ensure all attendees made the declaration appropriately. I was thus extremely surprised to note that on every occasion, several attendees “misspoke” the declaration in some way. Certainly, there were always some who read the statement with enthusiasm and precision; however, in the City, the declaration is made in unison, and, as such, it is not in fact difficult for others to remain intermittently silent. During each ceremony, I would observe at least one person omit several or more words from the pledge; others omit their own name at the point at which it is demanded.

I believe this is often inadvertent—an error born of misunderstanding or of a reticence to speak aloud in public. However, at times there may in fact be a willful and considered act of contestation. For instance, Alex, an Italian-born academic who was partway through her citizenship application when we met, spoke with anger and frustration about the pledge she knew she would need to make, seeing a grave injustice in the fact that those born in Britain are never asked to make a declaration of loyalty to the monarch, whereas she must. While she recognized that she could not legally avoid making the pledge, she planned to cross her fingers behind her back as she did so, feeling that this act of direct contestation would at least negate the moral obligation she would otherwise feel on taking an oath of allegiance to an institution she fundamentally rejected. This would be a deliberate moment of resistance to state-imposed directives, and Alex recognized that some consequences may arise if she was caught doing this: “I’ll let you know whether I manage to get away with it.” Despite her awareness that her resistance may result in some form of penalty, Alex still planned to try, indicating the space that *certain* subjects can find for contestation: I think it is not insignificant that Alex is a White, European academic and thus, as with Cindy and Russ, may not feel herself so strongly the object of the securitizing gaze.

From my observations of the ceremony, however, it does seem possible that the officials would either not notice or not attempt to prevent Alex’s act. Indeed, on one occasion, I did witness a ceremony attendee avoid making the oath/affirmation entirely: Sharon, the SR that day, realized that this individual had failed to stand for a declaration so stopped the ceremony to ask her directly if she had participated in either oath or affirmation; however, the attendee appeared not to understand the question and simply remained silent. There was a rather uncomfortable moment during which Sharon looked visibly uncertain, but after some consideration she continued the ceremony. This unexpected leniency indicates the uneven and inconsistent enactment of vigilance in citizenship practices: if the pledge is as crucial a moment as the Home Office states, it may be presumed that there is an expectation at state level that registrars will enact a very obvious vigilance to ensure it is carried out as fully and appropriately as possible. And indeed it is certainly possible that a different SR would have exercised more attention than Sharon and refused to proceed with the ceremony until the attendee had made a declaration, or might even have reported the attendee in question to the Home Office: Bernie, for instance, always made a point of specifying that people should say the pledge “nice and clearly and loudly,” and on one of the occasions she stopped the ceremony to ask that a noisy child be taken out of the room, this was “just while we’re taking the oath.” This appears, therefore, to be a point at which registrars can exercise a degree of agency in their actions, using their own personal/professional judgement to enact the level of vigilance they believe to be necessary and appropriate.

Articulating a Normative Frame: “They Just Want the Piece of Paper”

Interestingly, however, despite the inconsistent enactment of vigilance during the declaration, the institutional actors I spoke to were unanimous in their articulation of the pledge as significant; in fact, both Bernie and the Lord Mayor expressed a desire to make the pledge an individual rather than collective declaration, as is the case in other districts. For the Lord Mayor, this would mean that people “couldn’t hide behind the fact that everybody else is saying it and they can just sort of mumble it.” This is a notable statement: in the Lord Mayor’s apparent disappointment in those who mumble, there is a desire expressed here to see attendees *engaging* with the ceremony, not just attending but participating enthusiastically with the event. As Bernie declared, “the louder the words are spoken to me the nicer.” Amy similarly spoke with a sense of sadness and disappointment about the people who “can’t wait to get out the door and I’m kind of like ‘it hasn’t finished yet, y’know, come back in,’ and obviously they just want the piece of paper and that’s it.”

Clearly, Amy and the other officials cannot police enthusiasm: they *want* attendees to demonstrate their enthusiasm for the event, but they cannot *enforce* this in any meaningful way. However, Amy’s comments indicate a vigilance in rather broader terms: this is not the watchfulness typical in border/security studies in which individuals are called to *police* the suspect other but a watchfulness in a rather broader sense. It is a sense of caution or implicit suspicion oriented toward the other which mobilizes these institutional actors to *watch* attendees and to pass judgment on them. Clearly, the visible displays of enthusiasm *matter* to the officials—both professionally and on a personal level—but, importantly, they are seen as reflecting something rather broader than simply an enjoyment of the event itself. There is a sense that enthusiasm or lack thereof may in fact relate to an attendee’s legitimacy or otherwise as a citizen of the UK.

The Lord Mayor expressed this most clearly as she appeared to articulate a direct link between the visibly emotional attendee and the “Good” citizen. During our conversation, I asked her to tell me the purpose of the ceremony, to which she replied that it was about the City welcoming the individual but also about the individual demonstrating that they can be “as good a citizen as [they] can.” She said a little more about showing respect for neighbors and playing a part in the community and then added:

I mean, odd times I’ve seen the odd person or two and I think, ‘Right, you’re not taking much interest in it. They don’t read the words, just sit there with their arms folded; they come and get their certificate and then they’re gone.

In the shift from speaking about the “good . . . citizen” to those who “just sit there with their arms folded,” the Lord Mayor appears to suggest that those who do not visibly emote at the ceremony therefore do not *value* it and, crucially, that these individuals may not make the effort to be “as good a citizen” as they can. Indeed, she articulated this link more explicitly at other points, for instance, when she said:

Certainly the majority do see it as something special to become a citizen. But it’s how you sift them out, y’know? How you find out who the genuine ones who do want to come from another country and be good citizens here and really work hard and those who don’t?

These comments resonate with Carol Johnson’s (2010: 501) contention that the “good citizen” both “feels” and “performs” appropriate emotions—that those citizens who, as Amy says, “just want the piece of paper” are a source of consternation, potentially bad citizens who may even pose an undefined threat to the nation-state.

I see here the articulation of a “normative frame” (Byrne 2014: 6) through which the oppositional figure can be separated from the Good citizen, identified as a potential source of threat and thence “sift[ed] out” of their citizenship claim. Again, there is a normalization of suspicion at play, the ceremony officials exercising a watchfulness over ceremony attendees, with this playing out in differing ways in the policing and verifying of identity, of linguistic proficiency, *and* of apparent enthusiasm as evidence of legitimacy, worth, and of an affective attachment to the UK. These institutional actors then enact a welcome to the nation-as-home that is contingent, predicated on the perceived desirability of the citizen-candidate and of the citizen-candidate’s perceived desire for the nation-state (Fortier 2017).

Conclusion: “You Never Know What Happens”

I draw this article to a close by noting Johannes’s justification for retaining every one of the documents used during his application for citizen status, even years after the process was completed; his explanation that he keeps all this paperwork because “you never know what happens.” In this, he captures the anxiety that still structures his life, even long after receiving his UK passport. There is an awareness for Johannes that just as the state can formally welcome him and bestow status on him, so this welcome is contingent, and this status can be taken away. The unease that Johannes carries with him may speak to his own experiences of precarity and vulnerability, and this would be unsurprising given the complex and traumatic journey he had taken as an undocumented migrant seeking asylum from Eritrea. But it is also rather broader than Johannes’s own individual circumstances; as Fortier (2017: 6) explains, the individual psyche is “thoroughly social,” and the social is “shaped by and ‘imbued with’ the ‘psychic’ life of individuals.” It is thus not so much the individual psyche that is of interest here but rather the broader governance strategies that orientate to the affective subject.

I argue here then that the citizenship regime operates as a domopolitical bordering practice through which to produce the nation as a home that is both a sanctuary and a threatened space, and in turn to encourage “neurotic forms of subjectivity” (Carvalho et al. 2020: 269) through which some are constituted as secure and others as an immanent threat. However, while the state may indeed seek to draw material boundaries around the community of value and exclude those it deems undesirable, the enactment of vigilance among institutional actors is somewhat complex, with some policing more vigorously and attentively than others. Despite this complexity, however, all registrars are co-opted into the state’s regime of vigilance—“governmentalities of watchfulness” (Goldstein 2010) thus working to constitute these institutional actors as watchful, citizen-candidates as watched. This is not necessarily the *reporting* explored typically in border studies scholarship but instead a *noticing*, a sense of suspicion and concern oriented particularly toward some and not others that does not always result in explicit policing but can leave the registrars themselves negotiating a sense of real anxiety and unease. In domopolitical terms, Britain is their *home*, it requires protection, and those whose legitimacy is in question become a source of potential disruption to their community of value and must thus be sifted out.

And for some citizen-candidates, there is a clear recognition of the regime of vigilance within which they are implicated—the securitizing gaze of both the Home Office and the institutional actors they encounter at the ceremony. This is most evident in Thandi’s recognition of her positioning as inherently suspect but can also be seen, for instance, in Alex’s awareness that her attempt to counteract the performative effects of the pledge may be met with some negative consequence. And it is evident in the *lack* of concern voiced by individuals such as Cindy and Russ, whose laughter about linguistic mishaps indicates the space some subjects feel they are accorded

to err without their legitimacy being questioned. In the differential enactment of vigilance at the macro, meso, and micro level then, with suspicions directed unevenly toward different subjects, I see here the asymmetrical state-subject relation produced and secured, the conviviality (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) of the national community as a whole threatened, and the possibilities for solidarity across subject positions curtailed.

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■ **NOTE**

1. This was the case until disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; ceremonies were for a time carried out online.

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