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**Title: The Affective and Intimate Life of the Family Migration Visa: Knowing, Feeling and Encountering the Heteronormative State**

*Abstract*

This article explores the intimate entanglements of heteronormative power, citizenship and affect in the UK family migration visa. It pays particular attention to the material intricacies of the application process itself and the place of narration and emotional investment central to this form of government. The power of the family visa is how it is attuned to the explicit quantification and categorisation of intimate relationships on which claim to territorial rights rest. Drawing on both the analytical and methodological promise of work on ‘intimacy’ we take the family visa as a particular site for exploring our *own* intimate entanglement and complicity in this practice of ‘geopolitical making’ - that is as *both* subjects and researchers of the visa. We are interested in how the visa both relies upon and produces certain forms of intimacy, particularly through processes of ‘archiving’ and the intricacies, solidarities and fragments that this is entangled with. We thus explore how we are both authors and subjects of the reproduction of heteronormative order central to visa and the drawing of borders around sanctified and unsanctified intimacy.

Keywords: Intimacy, Borders, Migration, Methodology, Heteronormativity

## *Introduction*

Family visas provide a distinct technology of bordering. Over the last decade, states across the Globe have placed increased scrutiny on subjects applying for residency as a partner/spouse/child/relative (Barabantseva 2015; Ogawa et al 2018). This has been intensified in Northern states in a bid to control the bodies of certain categories of migrant (Block and Bonjour 2013) bringing with it struggles over mobility, equality, rights and postcolonial social justice (Bhambra 2017; see also Daigle and Tyerman papers on this question of the control of bodies in this special issue). The UK exemplifies this trend (Wray 2014) with the introduction of financial and language requirements and more stringent evaluations on the ‘genuineness’ of a relationship (Home Office 2011). However, whilst the family visa provides a strategy for the control of sexualised and racialized movement (See Marmo and Smith 2014; Turner 2015), it also works as a strategy of inclusive-exclusion (see also Barabantseva paper on the family visa in this special issue). Because of the privileging of the heteronormative family and consumptive domesticity at the heart of liberal capitalism (Povinelli 2006), we also need to be attuned to how the British state uses the visa to promote *certain* relationships, ‘family’ unions, kinship, partnerships, and modes of intimacy. We can consider for instance, how same-sex marriage is now ‘included’ within the regime of family rights in the UK, as other intimacies and kinships are rendered targets of suspicion.

In mind of this, whilst a large body of work has been interested in (justifiably) exploring family visas as a violent *exclusory* process (Bonjour and Hart 2013; Wray 2014), we want to examine what this visa also *produces*. We thus ask what emotional economies, intimacies, domesticities the visa process itself enacts, calls upon and materialises? We are interested in examining not just the wider rationale of the visa but following recent work on the materiality of border practices (Darling 2014; Smith 2012; Walters and Vandelip 2015) also the mundane, every day and bureaucratic process of the application processes itself. Seeing the visa as a proximate site for social-sexual affect (White 2014), we pay attention to what the process asks applicants to do, narrate, gather, evidence, ‘archive’, struggle for and to ‘feel’. In doing so, this provides a key site for understanding the intricacies of contemporary borders, territoriality, citizenship and the way they are made possible through performances of heteronormative domestic/familial life. **To put this differently we could say that we**

explore here both how borders make intimacy but in the same moment how intimacy makes borders.

Whilst the visa works as a form of intimate management/geopolitical reproduction, it raises intimate and ethical questions for us as researchers. As we write we are also actively involved in preparing applications for our own/our partner's visa: creating archives of documents, gathering extensive records of proof of earnings, writing narratives of our intimate lives, filling out endlessly changing application forms, etc. These experiences fundamentally shaped our decision to write this paper (and our research more widely) and the methodologies and analysis we used to both understand the visa process and our subjectification within it. Amidst writing this article we were making decisions over vital life choices we might have to make in regards to the possibility of visa rejections – the end of our academic careers, imminent deportations, lengthy and expensive appeal processes, being separated away from our partners and children – as well as the possibility of relief of having the visa granted. Such spiralling possibilities and vulnerabilities leak out of course across subject boundaries of colleagues, friends, family, partners, children etc and highlight the dragnet function that contemporary bordering practices have as a membrane of *(in)securitising* affect (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 5). Markedly, this is a deeply intimate and emotional process of bordering which has shaped our own lives.

With this in mind, this article reflexively engages with the multiple scales of intimacy that inhabit and condition the visa process that we, in differing ways, reproduce. We understand intimacy in relation to the spatial, temporal and affective dimensions of the 'intimate' (Barabantseva et al 2018). That is to say, intimacies are a series of attachments and relations, which work to different degrees of intensity. This can be emotional, affective embodied states which connect to familial, socio-sexual, proximate relations (Peterson 2017). Thinking of the geopolitical/intimate together help us understand how these processes of attachment are not only conditioned by the geopolitical (in this case borders, visas, citizenship) but also reproduce and shore up these modes of governing (Oswin and Olund 2010). In this paper, intimacy is discussed both as a product of the visa process (i.e. emotions, relations, proximities that are brought together in being subject to the border) and as a way of exploring the power relations that circulations within the process of bordering.

We attempt to place our own experiences and treat ourselves as both subject/researchers within our investigation of the intimate geopolitics of the visa (we say ‘attempt’ to draw attention to the ambiguity of this which will be outlined below). Our choice to address our own intimacies in the article is not an exercise in ‘navel gazing’ but a commitment to reflexive feminist research methods, and taking seriously the political work that intimacy does: That is as series of embodied, lived, relationality and feelings (Smith 2016); a site of state management and regulation (Stoler 2002); and as method which has the potential to disturb the dichotomous construction of modern life as public/private, migrant/citizen, subject/object, research/researcher (Peterson 2017). We, and the people close to us, are already entangled in the visa as a process of geopolitical and subject making and thus we find it important to recognise how our experiences provide a rich site through which to understand the various productive strategies at play.

Bearing this in mind, we decided to draw upon encounters between ourselves and our partners, friends, colleagues and the visa processes as material for analysing the affective and intimate life of the visa. To do this we staged several intimate ‘conversations’ (Bulmer and Jackson 2016) in order to ethnographically reflect and explore the ongoing *life and afterlife* of the visa both within the confines of the application processes and the intimate sites, relations and emotional circulations it energises during and after the application is made<sup>1</sup>. These different intimate scales provide rich material for exploring processes of geopolitical making i.e. of identities – such as spouse, couple, scholar; of citizenship i.e. granting of rights, naturalisation; of sovereignty i.e. decisions over who can be intimate with who in a certain territory, deportation, detention; of political alternatives i.e. fragmented solidarities and performances of difference. Importantly, throughout this piece we attempt to demonstrate how *we* (and our intimacies) are also materialised through the visa process. But rather than seeing ourselves as victims here we try and stay uneasy as to our own relative privilege (our collaborators could be identified as cisgender, heterosexual, married couples, with a history of cohabitation, in some cases with biological children) and active complicity and seduction in making the visa ‘run smoothly’ as a technology of rule.

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<sup>1</sup> Through the text we refer to both the ‘life of the visa’ and the ‘visa afterlife’ in order to address the different temporalities of the process of visa application (before, during and after) as well as the practices, dynamics and feelings that the different ‘moments’ of the visa produce.

We argue that the visa application generates and contributes to re-produce different forms and spaces of intimacies, some of them constructed from the exclusionary characteristics of the visa process and others that emerge from the response to the visa requirements that end up reinforcing specific types of family performance. On the one hand, the *(in)securitising* affect of the visa translates into diverse and intertwined forms of fear that allows certain intimacies to emerge within the household as well as with other actors/spaces. On the other hand, the way that we respond to those fears, from a position of relative privilege (from accomplishing requirements such as the income threshold, time of cohabitation and marital status, among others), push us to *materialise* our relationships in a ways that we reproduce the intimacies of the heteronormative family, making us complicit in the validation of the state's technologies of bordering and exclusion.

We develop this argument through three sections. After briefly surveying the recent developments around the UK family migration visa and examining recent approaches to borders, emotions and intimate geopolitics we set out our methodological approach in this article. We then turn to a record of the encounters we had with our collaborators and explore the entanglement of geopolitics within the visa and its wider afterlife.

### *The logic and practice of the visa*

The UK family migration visa emerged in its current form in 2012. The Conservative-Liberal coalition reorientated the visa with the expressed purpose of reducing net migration to the UK (Home Office 2011). The changes were equally rationalised through racialised and sexualised anxiety over the intimacies of migrant families (Carver 2014). For example, the hypervisibility of postcolonial South Asian communities who are frequently depicted as enacting forms of 'arranged', 'forced' and 'sham' marriages (terms that are often slipped together) (Charsely and Benson 2012). Whilst placing scrutiny on the intimate relations of migrants and racialized communities has a far longer colonial genealogy across the British Empire (Turner 2015), the 2012 changes heralded a shift in the increased emphasis on evidencing a 'genuine' relationship which became the basis for an applicant to secure a visa. Not only does a relationship need to be evidenced as 'genuine' but a relationship must be '*subsisting*' - this is categorised by the household/couples UK income, ongoing connection to the UK, marital status, as well as claims to future domesticity (such as living together). This relates to the liberal character of the visa which is concerned with securing the citizen-

migrant household as an economic unit which sustains the 'genuine' family free of state benefits. Further restrictions were equally imposed on an applicant's journey to eventual settlement with interconnecting border practices limiting access to marriage for those suspected of a 'non-genuine' relationship and extending time period before naturalisation/indefinite leave to remain can be sought - between 5 and 10 years (D'Aoust 2017).

From 2012 any couple with non-EEA applicant have since had to earn collectively over £18,600 to live together in the UK (plus £3800 for the first dependent child and £2400 for each additional dependent child thereafter). These earnings must be continuous in the UK at the time of application and any salary used as evidenced must be backdated 6 months prior to the application date (the couple also have the option to use existing cash savings but if they are without a salary this must exceed £62,800). Further to the income clause, the applicant must also provide proof of a minimum standard of English and perhaps most significantly the couple have to be able to provide evidence that they are in a 'genuine' relationship which is codified and categorised within the Home Office's purview of familial and domestic life (Home Office 2011). The 'genuine-ness' of the relationship can be evidenced with marriage or civil partnership certificates, letters written by friends/family, (auto)biographical narratives and portfolios of a couple's life together, alongside the evidence of biological children. Since 2004 same-sex couples have been able to apply through the visa. Significantly for an analysis of everyday (in)securities, the visa lasts for 2.5 years and must be renewed before an applicant can apply for indefinite leave to remain/naturalisation after either a 5 or 10 year period (Home Office 2017). During this time the couple must remain together and provide proof of sustained intimate domesticity otherwise the visa can be retracted. Relationship breakdowns can be directly reported to the Home Office through an online reporting tool.

The raced, classed and gendered criteria of the 'genuine' and 'subsisting' couple is shaped through an embedded heteronormativity which relies on appeals to domestic sustainability and ideas of the reproductive household. For instance, unmarried couple must provide 2 years of evidence of 'cohabitation', married couples or those in civil partnerships are only required to do this for 6 months or prove other forms of 'lasting' commitment. Here we need to consider how heteronormativity is not only bound to heterosexuality, but the privileging of heterosexual domesticity and kinship structures as a superior moral and cultural form (Berlant and Warner 1998). Following Jasbir Puar (2007, 30-31), we recognise that whilst

same-sex couples are increasingly 'included' within family visa regimes, this is through the contingent emulation of codes of reproductive domesticity (such as marriage, child rearing, consumerism) (Also see Duggan 2004). Subjects are thus rendered abnormal or 'non-genuine' through the dual working of hetero/homonormativity which is equally bound to a particular configuration of white familial domesticity (consider here the exclusion of unmarried couples, polygamous kinship or the suspicion over 'arranged marriage'). We use heteronormativity to refer to an overarching normative regime of which homonormativity is one distinct aspect.

### **Intimate Exclusions**

Existing studies of the UK visa (and comparative regimes) have adeptly analysed the regulatory and exclusory function of family visas, we now have a sophisticated understanding of the way that family migration regimes delimit the boundaries of acceptable domesticity, citizenship and nationhood (D'Aoust 2014; Gedalof 2007; White 2014). Taking cue from postcolonial scholarship there is an increasing interest in the raced terms on which European claims to family life function (Byrne 2015; Turner 2015; Watson 2017). Whilst a large body of this work has focused on the juridical dimension of accounts of family and coupledom (Charsley and Benson 2012; Wray 2011) recent critical scholarship has pointed towards the role that emotions and affect plays in regimes of migration governance (D' Aoust 2013, 2017; White 2013, 2014). Rather than viewing the family as a commonsensical social unit against which state practices intervene this work has demonstrated the more performative dimension of borders and is attuned to how migrant subjectivities are materialised through border regimes (Barabantseva 2015).

Too often in migration studies intimacy and emotions have been treated as a means of revealing the agential remainder of border regimes - either as a form of 'resistance' (Beattie 2017) or a demonstration of the victimhood/violence done to migrants (Wray 2014). Far less is also said about the intimacies and that are produced in the act of researching the intimate or the positionalities and intimacies of those conducting studies themselves (see Smith 2016). We want to trouble this by exploring what political work emotions do in the visa (Gregory and Åhäll 2015) and how our research is equally wrapped up in these circulations and is thus irreparably bound to ongoing process of citizenship and border making.

D'Aoust's (2013) theorisation of 'technologies of love' provides a useful starting point for our analysis. In family migration regimes she argues, what becomes relatable to 'love' is materialised within a particular western history; thus only particular codifications of 'love' are conceivable as 'real' to state officials in the conjoining of certain bodies, subjects and atmospheres. Here we understand how 'love' functions as a technology through which 'genuine'/'non-genuine' relationships are materialised, accounted for and thus made possible. Drawing upon this move to recognise the interconnection of emotions and boundary making (Sara Smith 2012), we are interested in exploring the embodied processes through which **borders work** – in the collecting of letters, narrating of stories, feelings of the 'gut' – and their connection to the reproduction of the heteronormative state (also see White 2014). Moving beyond D'Aoust's focus on 'love', we see competing emotional dynamics - anger, loss, despair, **vulnerability, fear, uncertainty** - as different nodes in this technology.

Whilst studies often focus on the legalistic implications of border decisions (i.e. refusals, consequences for human rights) we want to push this further by investigating the complex spatial and temporal processes the visa makes possible, not just the application process and the final decision by the state, but the scales of waiting, the demands place on mobility, feelings of deportability, and the visas afterlife. To speak of the visa as *living* is to recognise the (un)intended affective economies or 'moody force fields' that it energises (Closs Stephens 2015, 182), and the experiences and bodies it works upon/through. **To do this we demonstrate that the emotional and affective life of the visa produces multiple sites of geopolitical making, which are not only confined to the control of the migrant. The geopolitical dynamics here are how citizen/migrant demarcations shape (gendered/raced) power relations within 'couples'/'families'. And how the borders between citizen/non-citizen shape wider social relations and attachments with: extended families, solicitors, colleagues, bank officers, children/dependents, etc.**

This means taking intimacy seriously as more than a euphemism for socio-sexual proximities or a valorisation of the 'private'. Instead it is a way of grasping the interconnectivity of experiences which appear 'innermost'. Intimacy has been approached as a governmental apparatus through which modes of being intimate are structured by shifting modes of power/knowledge (Harker and Martin 2012; Oswin and Olund 2010). But thinking through an analysis of the intimate can also push us towards a productive questioning of commonsensical approaches to spatialisation, temporality and subjectivity. To Lisa Lowe

(2015), seeing intimacy **as a method allows** us to disturb linear liberal histories by examining the intimate circulations of objects/subjects across imperial capitalist time. To Lowe artefacts can be read through their intimacies - as the embodiment of a contingent/ongoing set of colonial power relations which bring the past into the present (also see Turner 2017). Pain's (2015) work makes a similar argument for how we can collapse or rethink geographical scales of the personal/private/national/geopolitical. Here work on intimate geopolitics has examined the forms of relationality through which the 'intimate' and 'geopolitical' are co-constituted together (McKinnon 2016). This leads to a circulatory and interlocking analysis which doesn't separate the innermost, the proximate from the 'distant' and 'macro' (Peterson 2017). For example we might think of how the writing of a couple's statement of their 'life together' for a visa application works to resuscitate heteronormative ideals of the modern state (such as the reproductive 'family') by appearing to be 'real', just as this act of becoming is also made possible by the state's technology of the visa.

Here we would add Smith's (2016) recent work on the intimacies of research/the researcher as a further means to understand what we are driving at in our own analysis of the intimate. To Smith there is a necessary and inescapable tension researching intimacy because the act of researching itself is materialising of/within further intimacies. Drawing on a longer legacy of feminist scholarship (Pratt and Rosner 1997; Rose 1997), the act of researching with others is already/always a deeply intertwined, embodied and performative act which we need to be reflexive of. How for instance are new solidarities, antagonisms, emotive economies made possible through the site of an interview? The look of the ethnographer? The questioning of a research participant? **These are deeply political-ethical questions. So to add to the work on temporal/spatial disruptions of intimate geopolitics we also want to speak to some of these questions and to reflect (within the limitations of this article) on how knowledge production and particularly researching intimacy is always/already implicated/bound up with forms of geopolitical making. It is not our intention to answer all of these questions here but instead reflect upon these dynamics in particular in relationship to the family visa application. As researchers who are both subject/objects of the visa this gives us a particular angle from which to explore these entanglements.**

*Methodologies under the state's gaze*

To begin to talk about the visa is to encounter our own unease in researching and writing about it. This involves a political-ethical negotiation which equally comes up against the limitations of academic practice and the politics of knowledge production. In the Home Office's attempt to distinguish between 'genuine'/'non-genuine' relationships any documentation of our relationships could become 'evidence' to be used in assessing current or future applications. So in tracing the feelings and strategies involved in applying for the visa, this text in **itself could become** a record or an intimate archive for the state. Given what is at stake in our ongoing applications to claim rights of settlement for our self/participants (possible implications being rejection, deportation, separation, relocation) we are led to question the conventions of possessive authorship so central to academic practice and shape our methodology accordingly. Author anonymity is almost unthinkable within the liberal economies of journal publication. **Likewise, we questioned whether autoethnography is a politically-ethically appropriate method to draw upon in researching intimacy. We actively draw from aspects of the relational ethics of autobiography (Ellis 2007) as we discuss our own experiences, and those close to us, within the visa application process. Nonetheless, we are aware of the risks of using an autoethnography which could be traceable by the Home Office - i.e. as an expression of our experiences and lived histories. Thus we take the political decision of employing instead an (auto)ethnography, by which we recognise the central role of the 'self' as part of the analysis whilst we privilege a broader ethnographic and storytelling approach which includes the voices and experiences of others. This allows our voices and others to be expressed and concealed within the collective 'we'.**

**To explore the intimate after life of the visa** we staged a number of conversations (Bulmer and Jackson 2016) with friends, partners, colleagues as part of the research process. All participants had formative experiences of applying for the visa. Conversations were staged around a number of common themes but took the form of dialogic encounters in multiple settings – universities offices, hallways, walks in the park, over wine in friend's houses. Sometimes there was an interviewer and participant, often these roles were then reversed, we also invited participants to engage in a larger group conversation and to reflect on their experiences of the conversations over time and as the visa applications developed. This approach ended up, in part, reflecting the circulatory character of the affective sites through which the visa is present in our lives and to explore the way that different sites materialised divergent feelings and knowledges.

As Adams and Jones (2011) suggest, we have narrated different voices in our analysis below without tying the speaker to a particular subject: we chose to call ourselves collaborators. Such disembodiment is an ethical decision to disturb the state's claim to know the 'truth' of an applicant's relationships which is all about tracing evidential intimacy onto certain couples. But whilst we feel that this move to disturb the state's knowledge is strategically necessary, we remain uneasy as to our power to narrate and interpret different speakers' experiences (see Kobayashi 1994). What is more, these strategic decisions do not fully unproblematised the fact that researching and writing about our and others' visa experiences means initially bringing participants into the research process and the risk this involves<sup>2</sup>. We adopt a reflexive and self-critical positionality that integrate ourselves in the research encounters and process (England 1994). **In speaking as 'we' here, this voices the singularity and multiplicity of the different lived experiences of the visa in the context of this project (see Tolia-Kelly 2017 for a similar strategy). To speak to (if not on behalf of) these experiences, we highlight how our collaborators' interventions challenge, disrupt or reproduce the codes of normative intimacy central to the visa.** This commitment to narrate interventions seems appropriate to us given that it reflects the demand to narrate one's social-sexual life within the visa application.

### **Materialising Love/Complex Intensities**

*'It felt like someone was squeezing my heart'*

Over the course of our conversations and time spent with our collaborators it was striking how often our encounters were saturated with feelings of anxiety, fear and impending sense of unease. This related to particular intimate entanglements between modes of temporality, space and subjectivity. The application process itself constantly works to materialise the imminent possibility of deportation binding subjects to a logic and sense of futurity. We spoke of how specific questions in the online application worked upon us to bring this imaginary to life. For example the question: *What attachments you have to the UK and what you would do if you had to leave the UK?* Such questions intensify the alive possibility of being forced to leave if the visa is refused. *'At this point you have to confront what it might*

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<sup>2</sup> Through the use of information sheets, consent forms and ongoing conversations we explained to our collaborators how we are ensuring their confidentiality and anonymity. The research received ethical approval on June 2017.

*mean to live apart, be separated from your partner, child'* one collaborator revealed. This is an everyday fear that permeates the visa's afterlife. It is not only found in the final decision but in encounters with solicitors, in conversations over the dinner table, in the act of writing and gathering documents, standing at the queue in the bank. The constant presence of the imaginary of deportation demands considering how to react and what to do in case of a refusal. *'You get back from a meeting with a solicitor and then you need to sit down, at home, at the end of the day, and you need to talk to your partner about the practicalities of what we would do if our application is rejected. If I need to leave, do I take my son with me? Does my husband come and join us? Where would we live? A life is not just open to you because you come from a different country'*. Here embodied forms of anxiety, of stories and fantasies of leaving, a sense of violent futurity, of waiting, are attuned to the dominant modes of territorialised citizenship that the visa attempts to enact.

The fear produced by the visa process prevails at different times of the application. In our conversations, the imaginary of deportation became particularly acute while waiting for a response. During the 8 weeks wait, our collaborators described living in a constant state of alertness, saturated with a sense of powerlessness. The experience of waiting diminishes people's agency as they feel unable to control their own experiences. As Bourdieu (2000, p.228) argues, waiting implies a submission and is "one of the ways of experiencing the effects of power [...] making people wait, [...] delaying without destroying hope". 'Waiting' extends then beyond the visa application as the anxiety that surrounds it does not necessarily ends with a positive outcome of the visa application. *'Even if we do get it, there is that sense that we always going to be in borrowed time. As there is always going to be a time limit. With the first application we had 2.5 years, with the second one there is another time limit. And whatever process comes after there will another time limit. It seems never ending.'* This period of waiting is related to the amount of years needed to secure a permanent status and the transitory environment that the family visa now creates. This intensifies the precarity of migrant status while at the same time it frames and limits a wide range of life course decisions, including employment, housing and mobility.

### *Intimate Archiving*

The visa asks for a huge body of 'authentic' documentation, of financial records, employment contracts, payslips, housing contracts, mortgages, birth certificates, marriage certificates,

utility bills, educational certificates, passports, photographs, statements of relationship history and subsisting domesticity. The compiling of these archives becomes an intimate labour of love. Our collaborators felt an intense attachment to these archives but spoke of an element of ‘secrecy’ in gathering of such records whilst ironically remaining hypervisible in the face of the state. We spoke of how archiving of documents was done **in ‘secret’ - as an unseen/unacknowledged form of labour - and conducted under an** atmosphere of relative silence. Both the act of archiving and sharing the experience of archiving formed solidarities and antagonisms. The process of archiving started from the end of the last visa cycle (2.5 years prior to the current application). Applying for the visa means being orientated to an every form of archiving: we recalled the sense in which every scrap of paper had to be kept, protected and stored meticulously as a potential source of evidence for future applications.

Obsessively recording was experienced as a futile sense of control over an immigration system that is constantly in flux. The ever restrictive regulation of migrant bodies is felt in the constant maintenance and keeping of papers, in detailed recordings, in anxiety over things thrown away, documents lost or damaged: *‘You just don’t know what they are going to ask next, every time is different they want more documents, more details, there is no way to predict what will happen next and what you will be asked to do. Now we have started applying we feel like we are in this and need to keep going but this is a constant unknown.’* Darling (2014) reminds us how artefacts become forms of embodied attachment in the face of absence, control and endless waiting. A paper letter becomes a materialising site for senses of loss, pride, uncertainty. Here a physical document becomes intimately archived and kept, often close to subjects bodies - unfurled, crumpled - sometimes shared and rigorously studied for answers from the state that are often elusive.

We explored together how archiving produces a sense of precarity and vulnerability which unfurls and shapes particular life courses. But archiving was equally experienced as a relational process through which partners, friends, colleagues, family members collaborated in moments of often unrecognised intimacy. **Attachments here were produced without them necessarily being acknowledged** (see Ní Mhurchú paper and Introduction paper in this special issue for a different use of attachments). The feverish gathering and writing of documents became a source of tension, connection, disappointment and elation through which a sense of vulnerability and deportability circulated (De Genova 2002). Producing such archives demanded a collective effort of documentation where applicants and sponsors needed to work

together to provide proof of subsistence. *'You are constantly asked to keep going back to change documents, to include more details in what feels like an endless cycle.'* Making requests to managers, bank clerks, human resources agents, solicitors, writing statements and print out photographs is a labour which created spark points for anger, frustration, hopeless embodied in sense of proximity and distance. *'I felt sometimes like we took this anxiety out on each other, yes sometimes it would bring us together but often it would also push us apart. We argued a lot during the process.'* It also was felt in moments of elation and relief. These shifting emotional states were altered through the positionality of our collaborators. An applicant's vulnerability was also produced by the citizen/migrant divide which created both dependency and antagonism within couples. *'There were times when I felt alone in all of this. Like it was just me applying for the visa. In the end of the day it is not my partner who will be deported or have to leave.'* Here the very fabric of territorialised and individualised citizenship central to the modern state is performed through the intimate boundaries which disrupt and remold intensities between couples, friends, family members. It is the sense of future loss which reproduces the politics of the border here – in constantly demarcating bodies as citizen/migrant in the space of the conjugal couple.

At the same, uncertainty also produces a sense of solidarity and bonding. *'The visa made us feel like we were together in all of this, it was just us versus the world and that was all that matters'*. Here we can consider how the heteronormative 'romantic couple' of western liberalism (what Povinelli 2006 calls the 'autological subject') is performed through the vulnerabilities and 'labours of love' that the visa necessitates.

### **Linear Time, Life 'Milestones' and Feeling 'Genuine'**

In our encounters we began to reflect on how the visa functions as a form of performative surveillance through which intimacies are constantly monitored and equally energised. This is networked through competing experiences of temporality. The visa constantly tests the 'subsisting' element of a relationship. As we have outlined above, fear and anxiety often work to manufacture and shape the experience of relationships in line with heteronormative fixations on monogamy, fidelity and consistent domesticity. The conduct and writing of relationship 'milestones' in accounts to the state relies on a sense of futurity which both projects fears of precarity and deportation into the future (*what if we fail to get the visa this time?*) as well as revitalises a series of expectations about what a relationship should *look like*

and *feel* (after all *what is a genuine look or touch of love?*). *'I know this sounds funny, but from all the pictures we initially put together it was difficult to find a picture of all of us smiling. We always look weird. And that became a concern. What does that mean to someone else? That there is no happiness in our relationship?'* In needing to script and project lives through codes of 'happiness' (Ahmed 2010) and linear futurity this worked to resuscitate highly gendered expectations of familial domesticity. Notably, motherhood, childbirth, child-rearing. Symbolic subject positions that are central to the project of national futurity (Ní Mhurchú 2016; Yuval-Davis 1997). *'The milestones are not the only thing we are [as a couple]. We have the facts and that is what our relationship is, but we need to care about the perception of our relationship. And we have to justify anything that put us away from that ideal family.'*

This projection of gendered symbols of the ideal family equally relates to how patriarchal forms of violence, dependencies and gendered configurations of households are shored and brought to life through the visa. For example, any breakdown in a relationship can mean that a right to reside in the UK can be revoked. In 2014 the Home Office set up a new online reporting mechanism where sponsors can inform the authorities immediately of relationship breakdown. In the context of abusive relationships this can become a method of terror, fear or psychological and physical entrapment (Innes and Steele 2015). *'I know someone, close to me, who was in a relationship that broke down, she had two children, but she couldn't leave her husband, they had to stay together, if they broke up she'd have been forced to leave.'* Such regulatory functions interconnect with the broader sense of dependency that the visa reproduces with highly gendered consequences. At a national level the high threshold of the income requirement puts female workers at a disadvantage - given that more precarious, part-time and low paid work is more likely to be taken up by women. In our collaborator's experiences most visa sponsors were male partners and the visa applicants were women. This is consistent with general trends in family migration in the UK where women outnumber men among family migrants (women comprised 76% of family migrants in 2015, Blinders 2017). According to our collaborators, this produced an emergent reorientation of positions within the household. *'I felt increasingly dependent. Even though I was working, my salary wasn't enough to be included on the form. This meant that we were only relying upon my husband's salary.... This did make me feel dependent and strangely thankful. It was an odd position to be in.'* At such a juncture we can begin to question how bordering practices strengthen

patriarchal gendered relations just as they are resuscitated through the gendered power dynamics of relationships *within* households (Peterson 1999).

### *Translocal attachments*

There are also peculiar spatial dimension to the visa process and its exclusionary aims which both disrupt and fold into territorialised logics and nationalist imaginaries of 'home' (Brickell 2012; see Ní Mhurchú paper for discussion on 'home' as linked to alternative logics and Shindo paper on idea of 'home' as dilemmatic space in this special issue). The visa demands translocal circulations which collapse distinctions as they are situated in multiple scales involving the 'individual', 'home', 'transnational home(s)' and other institutions that act as 'localized contexts' where the visa process is situated (Brickell and Datta 2011). In completing the process connections emerge from the UK 'home' (where most of archiving and document gathering is often done) to 'countries of origin' where input and documents are often needed to secure money for the income threshold. This demands the intimate involvement of multiple subjects and institutions who become folded into and interpellated through the emotive and material labour of the visa (also see Safri and Graham 2010). In doing this the application energises translocal solidarities. **It both relies upon and produces fractured and competing senses of 'home'/belonging that is by engaging wider structures of kinship beyond the confines of the UK (Ahmed et al 2003).**

**Securing the visa also promises** a further separation from an applicant's place of origin. *'This (the visa) affects my family because it worries them and they know that is a source of stress. There is also a weird feeling from our extended family abroad that they want you to have the visa approved, while at the same time they know that if your visa is accepted you will be away [living abroad] for another period'*. Such feelings of unease and disruption of transnational connections are intensified by the visa application which asks applicants to actively demonstrate why they can't go back to the country of origin and declare why it would be difficult to live there. **At the same time, the applicants are asked to evidence their attachments to the UK.** Our collaborators talked of how in the same moment that you need to provide details of all the people that you have in a country of origin, you also need to enumerate the reasons why you *cannot go back* in order to gain status, as the visa application asks to list the reasons why the family should live in the UK instead of the applicant's country of origin. This is because the visa is aimed at distinguishing those relationships that

are both 'subsisting' and 'genuine' but also have an ongoing 'attachment' to the UK (Home Office 2011).

As with the broader colonial anxiety regarding dual attachment to 'elsewhere' and racist logics which distinguish foreignness as possessing 'dual' and 'dangerous' loyalties, here British nationalist imaginaries of the territorialized national 'home' are central to the way that the applicant must declare their attachment to the UK, against alternative figurations of 'home' and belonging (Ahmed et al 2003). Whilst the visa energises solidarities which are ostensibly transnational it demands the applicant disavow such connections by prioritising their connection to the UK and to declare, perform and *feel* attachments to the intimate national body (Fortier 2007). The demand for 'genuine attachment' comes hand in hand with the 'hostile environment' generated by the visa towards the suspicious migrant. In our conversations, collaborators emphasised the tension that emerged between the demand for attachment and the constant reminder of their precarious status. *[The visa] makes me feel anxious, but it also makes me frustrated. Because I have been here so many years and I always feel that I am giving and paying, but anyway I am always under constant scrutiny.[...] And it pissed me off that I have to validate my membership over and over.* The applicant's 'foreignness' is reinforced by a temporary status, while at the same time the visa application demands a never ending pledge to prove and evidence 'genuine attachment'.

### *Making (Love)*

Creating archives of intimacy also means actively crafting and producing documents. In our encounters we examined what it meant to craft a statement of our relationships and account a history of our 'romantic', sexual and domestic lives to state authorities. Here narrating a compelling story of a relationship became an exercise in reproducing competing claims to the heteronormative couple and family. Here choices of tone, language, became central to producing a compelling account as well as choices over which photographs to include and visualising relationship 'milestones'. White (2014) talks about how paper 'reality' must emerge as a hyperreal version of normative claims to belonging. The composition of a photograph, expressions on faces, the colour of backgrounds, showing multiple social encounters reveal what can become recognisable as a 'look of love' (D'Aoust 2017). Here the heterogeneity of intimacies that may or may not be experiences become condensed into 'comprehensible' linear patterns of what our collaborators often referred to as the 'dream

couple' image. What is included or excluded in such accounts are equally shaped by encounters with a complex set of authorities. For example, solicitors who constantly work to second guess the imaginary of what Home Office agents determine as 'genuine' couples. *'I remember our solicitor reading an early draft of our statement and just telling us 'no, don't write like this. It isn't appropriate. This is what you need to focus on. Take this out. Put this in, etc'. We were then told to focus on big events. By this they meant when we met, meeting our families, getting married, my wife being pregnant, the birth of our child.'* Here struggles over how to narrate intimacy bled out and blurred distinctions between the proximities within a couple and the functionality of state bureaucracies.

Not only does the application process work to produce dominant accounts of heteronormativity which are violently exclusory, it also has a performative effect. *'You have this sense, you know that you have to be the couple which is in the eyes of the home office. We start thinking about what milestones you might need to achieve by the next time we apply. What would make us really genuine? Like how we don't have a child, it makes us think, is the only way to be a family? to have a child?.'* Pinning the visa to ways of regulating non-normative couples is thus central to the logic of exclusion that energises the visa – that is producing couples who conform to heteronormative modes of intimacy at the heart of the modern liberal state (Povinelli 2006). But this doesn't only work through the outright expulsion of non-normative intimacies (i.e. visa refusals) but also through the fabric of constantly checking and accounting for claims to 'family' which must appear to emerge over a linear sense of time and across the various reapplication points of the visa (*should we have children? Is this what we need to provide evidence of a relationship?*). Such imaginaries of the reproductive developing 'family' remain at the heart of the juridical structures of the visa. In the most recent supreme court ruling on the visa in 2017 the Home Office's right to deny couples settlement together was upheld, the only exception was in the case of there being 'children's interest' at stake (JCWI 2017). Here we argue that the legal conditionality of border regimes meets with the constant need to account and document the 'progression' of a relationship over a life course. In doing so this works to create the very fabric through which heterosexism is reproduced and lived.

### **Unease, Reflexive Writing and the Intimate Politics of Complicity**

Through sharing sketches of our encounters with our collaborators we have demonstrated how the visa energises and produces even as it 'excludes'. The production of intimacies entangled in the application process and the visa's afterlife, in its atmospheres and its sense of anxiety, attachment and vulnerability, is always/already geopolitical. Here geopolitical demarcations of citizenship/migrant are reproduced through antagonisms and fractured solidarities *within* couples as they attempt to apply; gendered household dynamics and emergent positions of dependency work in tandem with the patriarchal state; heteronormative appeals to developmental time and reproductive domesticity are performed in the hope of gaining access to rights; territorialized and nationalistic feelings of 'home' are brought to life as applicants 'prove' their attachments to the UK are experienced and shared in our intimate conversations.

We have tried to stress here how our own process of researching the intimate life and afterlife of the visa is deeply entwined in both the disruption and regulation of such boundary making. Our encounters themselves produced and made possible new intimate archives. Producing this text relied upon and also made possible emergent solidarities and intimate moments of sharing, collaboration, senses of togetherness as well as further events of unease, vulnerability and antagonism. Lines constantly blurred between colleagues, friends, partners, subjects, authors and reformed in powerful demarcations around sponsor/dependent, citizen/migrant, man/women, subject/researcher. In writing this piece we also came to terms with how our own investigation worked as another site in the afterlife of the visa and, more importantly, how we are also complicit in the violent bordering of the visa process and as a site for reproducing heteronormative citizenship.

In addressing the visa our conversations with our collaborators actively energised anxiety and fear. Just as the visa produces archives, this research reanimated the demands placed on our collaborators to archive and narrate (to record, take notes, share their stories). But our collaborators were constantly attuned to the risk of writing about the visa and thus sharing their experiences with us. Here the research process and the possibility of publishing this work became a source of anxiety in case it affected future applications. Our conversations and sites of knowledge production were thus always under the gaze of the state and shaped by the modes of disciplinary power that the visa holds (*does sharing anxieties reveal that we are 'non-genuine'? How would an utterance be read and noted within the confines of the*

*Home Offices' visa checklist? Does sharing intimate information jeopardise a future right to settlement?).*

But such unease regarding knowledge production cannot be detached from our relative privilege within the visa procedure. Our collaborators feelings of anxiety were shored up by the success of our past visa applications, that our salaries put us above the income threshold and that we already lived with our partners together in the UK. Here precarity and deportability was *alive* in this process but it was equally tempered by forms of economic and social capital and the ability to comply with modes of proof regarding 'subsisting' domesticity. Classed, sexualised and racialised privileges cut through and reanimate this border regime. Whilst we reflected on the performative dimension of heteronormativity in our conversations and analysis, we still possess the relationship to heterosexual 'family' ideals that are necessary to evidence ourselves as 'genuine' in the eyes of the state. As we have demonstrated, fear of deportation and separation is central to the atmosphere and micro practices of the visa but the characterisation of our relationships in relation to codes of white bourgeois domesticity and configurations of western 'romantic love' play into the ongoing contestation of the visa by legal authorities, individual MPs and activist groups (see Bridget Byrne 2015 for a longer discussion). Here we need to reflect on how our own intimacies are complicit in the violent bordering practices of the heteronormative state. **So whilst borders shape our intimate lives, we are entangled in reproducing those borders are well.**

What we argue is that even whilst we have attempted to analyse the intimate geopolitics of the visa through an analytics and methodology of 'intimacy', our collaborators applications, from positions of relative privilege, also make it possible for the visa and these modes of bordering to work. As a mechanism of border formation the visa regime needs subjects to apply, conform and to offer/deny rights as part of its' very existence (to perform the role of sovereign power). In our ability to document our lives and produce intimate archives for the state, in passing the income threshold and striving to attain settlement, we allow the visa to continue and for the state to demonstrate that it 'works'. We are part of the raw material of the subjectification process of **the visa as a geopolitical tool for managing mobility.** Such intimacies, made possible by the visa, are brought to life through our own complicity.

This reveals the otherside of the intimate and emotional politics of the visa. Applying for and securing the visa is necessary for us. We neither have the political-ethical will nor the

material and emotional resources to resist this visa route (nor it could be argued would that serve much wider good - although see Vigneswaran 2017). We are unwilling to disrupt the workings of the state's bordering because not being with our partners is too great a sacrifice. *But this doesn't make us any less complicit.* Instead, it reveals the way that even as 'reflexive' researchers, committed to a 'no borders' politics we are still very much intimately entangled in the ongoing reproduction of violent boundary making, even in the very moments when we attempt to disrupt and challenge them (i.e. in writing 'critically' about them). This is a difficult position to admit and write about but it is central to analysis of intimate geopolitics that none of our lives are separate from the function and reproduction of relations of power. Here analysing the geopolitically intimate means also recognising that the fabric of our own lives can be part of the raw material for the exclusion of others and ongoing manufacture of borderlines around (un)sanctified intimacies. To wish this away in our account and act of writing would be a further violence.

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