

Representing Immigration Detainees: The Juxtaposition of Image and Sound in "Border Country"

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Abstract: This paper discusses the four-year (2003-2007) research process towards my exhibition and publication "Border Country", which focuses on the experience of immigration detainees (appellant or "failed" asylum seekers) in the UK's "immigration removal centres". I discuss my earlier exhibition "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" which focused on the repression in Kosovo under the Milošević regime, and the difficulties of representing the "hidden violence" which led to the adoption of a particular sound/image structure for the exhibition. I discuss how I then chose to work with a similar sound/image framework for "Border Country" and the aesthetic and conceptual considerations involved. I discuss the decision to expand the focus of the exhibition from one individual detainee to eleven, and to omit the photographic portraits of detainees from the exhibition for ethical and conceptual reasons. I finally produced a juxtaposition of photographs of immigration removal centre landscapes and interiors (devoid of people) with a soundtrack of oral testimonies. The voices of individual detainees could be heard at listening stations within the gallery spaces or on the publication's audio CD. Within this research process I also discuss my interview methodology and questions of power imbalance between photographer/artist and incarcerated asylum seekers.

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1. Introduction

My work as a photographer has often focused (perhaps paradoxically) on what is impossible to document visually—the hidden undercurrent of emotional trauma. In my exhibitions and publications the drive to communicate to a wider public led me away from the "purity" of the still image, to use accompanying text and/or sound testimonies. As Susan SONTAG commented: "Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" (2003, p.89). [1]

Before discussing the particular form of my current exhibition and publication "Border Country" (FRIEND, 2007a), which focuses on immigration detainees in the UK, I'd like to discuss some of my earlier work, as this was instrumental in leading me to the decision about how to present "Border Country". [2]

2. "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible"

Throughout the 1990s my work in Kosovo¹ as a photojournalist was inevitably subject to restrictions: Kosovars lived under the repressive regime of Slobodan Milošević, in what was effectively a "police state". I was not free to travel wherever I wanted; I had to work (as did other foreign photojournalists) with restrictive permits, police roadblocks, and surveillance. Although I knew about regular police raids in the countryside, it was almost impossible to witness them, as police would cordon off the villages or regularly patrol them, sometimes for several weeks. Unless the photographer was on the scene speedily, any "evidence" of human rights abuses may well have been invisible. The "wanted" men (sometimes resisters to the Milošević regime) might have left the village or gone into hiding, the bruises might have faded, or the injuries were internal. [3]

Once, in a remote Kosovo village up in the hills, I did come across a man recovering in bed with bandages around his swollen feet, having been brutally beaten by the police the day before; the room was filled with villagers who had come to offer moral support. They called it an attempt at "slow motion ethnic cleansing". I wrote about this, and other human rights issues in Kosovo, for *The Guardian*. But as a photographer, the possibilities were limited. I was often faced with the psychological aftermath only, the testimony of the traumatised wife and family left behind, and the disorientating sunny living room where I was given hospitality, the tranquillity of an autumn garden; the palpable, but invisible, fear. As I wrote at the time:

1 Re: Kosovo/a. Although many countries (including the UK) now recognise the independence of the Republic of Kosova (using its Albanian name), during the timescale of my work in the former Yugoslavia (between 1989-2001), Kosovo was the official (Serbian) internationally recognised name of the province. Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in February 2008. For simplicity's sake—as Kosovo was used in the titles of my own publications in 1996 and 2001—I have used Kosovo throughout this article. (Note: The BBC news website primarily uses Kosova).

"without bandages, clearly defined wounds, traumatised faces or crying women, the pictures could not be instantly 'read' or interpreted. The people couldn't be neatly categorised as 'victims' of suffering ... they looked too ordinary ... So I decided to work with that ordinariness" (FRIEND, 1996, pp.7-8). [4]

As Val WILLIAMS commented in her review of my exhibition on Kosovo, "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible"², I developed a strategic approach "to defeat the inadequacies of the visual" (WILLIAMS, 1996, p.36). By frequently choosing to use "understatement" in my photographs, I also moved away from the visual "drama" present in photojournalism and much documentary photography. As Susan SONTAG commented:

"The hunt for more dramatic (as they're often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value ... How else to get attention for one's product or one's art? How else to make a dent when there is incessant exposure to images, and overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again? The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence" (2003, p.23). [5]

However, in moving away from photojournalism I also had a much smaller, different audience than that commanded by a national newspaper: but an audience who might have more time to contemplate and think in the calm of a gallery space, or alone with a book. By the time I came to work on "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" I had already diverged into print journalism (*The Guardian*) and radio journalism (as the reporter for BBC Radio 4's 40 minute programme "Inside Kosovo", 1992) alongside my photography. I felt the inadequacies of the lone still image or series of images in trying to represent the situation in Kosovo; the limitations of the two-dimensional photograph itself, as described by Caroline BROTHERS:

"...The contents of a photograph can offer only two-dimensional information about the past, what its surface looked like, the faces perhaps of its actors. Its focus is selective, its vision blinkered, its opinions always subjective. While photographs freeze time and seem to give the past a tangible form, they can never be more than a *point de depart* for a wealth of experience they may indicate but cannot contain ..." (1997, p.15). [6]

I had already reached large audiences through my print and radio journalism, and felt that I could afford the luxury of producing a piece of work specifically for a gallery. As a politically driven photographer/artist, this did feel indulgent. It meant a much smaller audience—but I hoped that reviews and publicity for the show would bring in additional viewers. Besides, as a photojournalist I was intensely

2 "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" was first shown as a solo exhibition at Camerawork gallery, London in 1996 and then toured the UK. In 1998 it was included in the international group show "Claustrophobia" at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, which then toured nationally and internationally till 2000. It also travelled to the Houston Center for Photography, Texas, in 1998, and to the Hasselblad Center, Sweden in 2001. The catalogue is available from Melanie FRIEND (see publications page, <http://www.melaniefriend.com/>).

frustrated trying to represent the "hidden violence", particularly at a time when (understandably) the horrors of the war in Bosnia took precedence in the UK media over the repression in Kosovo. I wanted to find a more complex, subtle form of communication, to take risks with a less "accessible" format. I hoped that this would communicate at a deeper level. Having launched into radio I was of course keenly tuned into the oral as well as the visual, and equally fascinated by both. Now I had practical experience of "professional" listening and recording alongside photographing and writing. I thought back to my experience in Kosovo and wanted to communicate it to others. [7]

In "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" I presented colour photographs of peaceful landscapes and domestic interiors, used in conjunction with (often) emotionally charged voiced testimonies, to convey the hidden violence, and overall, the repression of the Kosovar Albanians by the Milošević regime. I played on the very *lack* of visual evidence, and on that intangible gap between what we see and what we know as elucidated by John BERGER: "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (BERGER, BLOMBERG, FOX, DIBB & HOLLIS, 1981 [1972], p.7). I taped voices of the inhabitants detailing violent abuse experienced *in their homes* at the hands of state police and security forces, and played the soundtrack from loudspeakers in the gallery exhibitions, with images of the homes and gardens where the abuses had taken place.



Illustration 1: from "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" (1996, copyright Melanie FRIEND) [8]

In the accompanying catalogue, extracts from the transcripts were published opposite the images. Next to this image (Illustration 1) was the anonymous testimony of a homeowner describing being taken to the local police station and tortured:

"Then one of them took a butcher's knife and said 'Cut his hand off.' I stretched out my hand but he didn't do it. One of them pointed a pistol at my eye and threatened he was going to kill me... the next morning I was taken to another room where they turned on the electric saw and threatened to cut off my head, unless I told them about my friends and their activities ... It has already been a year of my insecurity here, and as I have got a wife and three children I have nowhere to go. So I stay at home and every day I expect them to come back ..." (FRIEND, 1996, p.41). [9]

I thus used the tension between the images and the sound to try and suggest both the individual psychological trauma experienced and the repression of the political situation. David BATE wrote in his essay for my 1996 "Homes and Gardens" catalogue: "We might speak here of what was named by the first patient of Freud as the '*talking cure*'—the use of language rather than the visual to speak a trauma" (1996, p.48). [10]

Through the seductiveness of the images I invited the viewer to inhabit the empty domestic space, to literally bring the fear in this Milošević-run police state "closer to home".



Illustration 2: from "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible", 1996, copyright Melanie FRIEND [11]

The woman inhabitant of this room (see Illustration 2, above), who remained anonymous for her own safety, poured out her story of a police raid on her home, with a rhythm, intonation and pace in her speech that reflected her otherwise invisible trauma. Even if she had felt safe enough to be photographed, I felt that the work would be stronger without her portrait—and that her oral testimony was more powerful with her absence. [12]

Wendy KOZOL commented on my "Homes and Gardens" piece: "How can photographers visualize trauma without inevitably turning people into spectacles?"

If photographers attempt to avoid the spectacle of embodied suffering, what happens if we do not have an embodied victim to pity?" (KOZOL, 2004, p.19)³



Sound Extract 1 (see translated transcript⁴): from "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible", copyright Melanie FRIEND [13]

Even without any understanding of Albanian, the listener could get a sense of the speaker's nervousness and fear in retelling her traumatic experience. [14]

In effect I transferred the *horror* of the events in "Homes and Gardens" from the *images* (where it is more usually situated in the genre of war photography) to the *voices* of the Kosovar Albanians. I felt that recording the speakers was crucial; speaking out can empower the subject more than being photographed. I hoped that in the exhibition, the voices would draw in the viewer: using the medium of sound can also effect a more emotional response in the audience, and lead to greater involvement (STORR, 1997, p.26). [15]

Whilst acknowledging my work as "strategic"⁵, I need perhaps to emphasise that the starting point for my work was both experiential and emotional. The schema for the "Homes and Gardens" exhibition format may have appeared cool and contemplative but it primarily emerged from the experience in Kosovo of interviewing a vulnerable elderly man, Maliq Eyupi, who had been brutally beaten by police in his living room some weeks earlier. I sat in that comfortable living room hearing his disturbing testimony whilst the sun streamed in on sheepskin

3 KOZOL's comment is not only pertinent to this earlier Kosovo work, but also, as we shall see later, to the representation of immigration detainees in "Border Country", where during the final edit, for several reasons, I decided to leave the portraits out of the exhibition and the book, thus again avoiding "the spectacle of embodied suffering".

4 The translated transcript for Sound Extract no. 1 from "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible".

Woman, 37 (in Albanian, cont'd):

"... But then they said that I have hidden machine guns under their bedclothes and under the pillows. I asked them why aren't they doing it [searching] then, and they replied because the children were asleep. And then they immediately changed their minds by saying that they were pretending to be asleep. I said maybe they are, so what, they are listening to what you are doing. They are only small kids, never done anything, and you come here to search and frighten them ...

... In Kosova we all suffer from them. I had been hoping for better but this seems to be endless. Every day we hear of terrible new happenings ... My husband has already been away from home for three months now, as it's dangerous for him to stay here. The children miss him a lot and ask 'Where is he? When is he coming back?' Sometimes he comes in for five minutes during the day and leaves quickly.

Every minute we are frightened that they may come back, and every time the bell rings the kids get frightened and ask me to open the door. Any time this happens they jump and say 'Mum, it's the police, come to take daddy away' ..." [the following year her husband left Kosovo].

Note: the full soundtrack for "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" and the complete (translated) transcript is available via the exhibitions page on [my website](#).

5 In terms of my drive to find an alternative form to photojournalism: to devise a particular image/sound framework.

rugs; a reproduction of "The Hay Wain" (1821) by the English painter John CONSTABLE, hung on the wall. The print of "The Hay Wain", a symbol of the rural idyll familiar to a British viewer, was particularly poignant in this Kosovar farmer's living room (FRIEND, 2007b). Looking at the photograph later, I realised that the presence of "The Hay Wain" was, for me, a powerful example of Roland BARTHES's *punctum*—"this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me ... A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (1984 [1980], pp.26-27). [16]

I knew that a portrait of Maliq Eyupi would not convey what had happened or be sufficiently emotive or dramatic for a newspaper editor (see SONTAG, 2003, p.23, quoted earlier in this paper). The attack had taken place weeks before, and his injuries were largely internal; there was little visual "evidence" to support his story at this stage. But his traumatic narrative stayed with me. [17]

The following year I returned to Kosovo and discovered that Maliq Eyupi had died a few months after our interview took place. I interviewed his son, Shyqri, and then, impelled by the memory of the conversation with his traumatised father in the sunny living room with its print of "The Hay Wain", decided to juxtapose Shyqri's narrative with a picture of the room (see Illustration 3) where the brutality took place.



Illustration 3: from "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible", copyright Melanie FRIEND [18]

The final exhibition may not appear to have been emotionally driven; but its starting point was a very moving experience. [19]

Acknowledging that the effects of "compassion fatigue" "tempt journalists to find ever more sensational tidbits in stories to retain the attention of their audience" (MOELLER, 1998, p.2), I also developed the strategy of disarming or seducing

the viewer through the photographs, but introducing shock through the narrative, recreating some of the texture of my own personal experience. [20]

At the same time I felt that the form of exhibition allowed more space for the viewer's imagination than traditional photojournalism or social documentary. The meaning of the work was less fixed, less instantly accessed than that evoked by a dramatic news photograph showing an injured individual or the body of a victim. The exhibition "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible", was widely exhibited (see Footnote 2) and accompanied by a catalogue where parts of the testimonies were produced as texts opposite the photographs. (Translated transcripts of the soundtracks were also available to visitors in the [gallery](#).) [21]

3. "Border Country"

With my current exhibition "Border Country", I'm focusing on the UK government's treatment of immigration detainees and on *institutional* spaces rather than *domestic* interiors or landscapes. The project eventually evolved into an exhibition and publication—"Border Country"—structurally resembling "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible". This had not been my initial intention, but, after some quandary (more on this below), I realised I wanted to explore the experiences of detained migrants and asylum seekers in the UK by loosely juxtaposing their voiced testimonies and critical commentary on the immigration system, with the orderly images of empty institutional interiors and the landscapes of Immigration Removal Centres. [22]

The "Border Country" exhibition comprises 17 still images including six large (1260mm x 843mm; 50" x 35") images of visits rooms, plus fragmentary soundtracks emanating from several listening stations in the gallery. In the accompanying publication the soundtrack has been produced as an audio CD with a linear sequence. The soundtracks convey the physical, psychological and emotional aspects of life in detention as well as fragments from biographical narratives and perceptive comments on the immigration system itself. The individual stories and lived experiences of the migrants/asylum seekers are communicated not only through their feelings and opinions but through the texture, timbre, rhythm and pace of the voices, the prosody of the voice being a significant indicator of individuality (GREENE, 1975 [1975], p.5). The soundtracks worked differently in the four UK galleries according to the space available.⁶ [23]

6 To date, "Border Country" has been shown at the following galleries:

- Belfast Exposed Photography, 16 November 2007 – 11 January 2008
- The Winchester Gallery, Winchester 6 – 29 February 2008
- The University of the Arts London (Well Gallery) 6 – 24 October 2008
- BCA Gallery, Bedford, 16 January – 27 February 2010

The sound was designed (with the help of sound designer Caleb KNIGHTLEY) so that there was a low "hubbub" of voices as the visitor entered the gallery space, giving a sense of a collective experience; the voices could then be clearly heard and differentiated as the gallery visitor moved close (within a metre; although the optimum listening distances was about 1/3 metre) of each loudspeaker. However, owing to budget constraints, in the largest gallery (The Winchester Gallery) it was not practical to "stretch" the sound over the whole gallery space. I set up five listening stations in subdued lighting at one end of the gallery. The low "hubbub" from these loudspeakers reached the viewer in the "images only" space. At the University of the Arts

3.1 Access

First of all, I need to describe how the "Border Country" project came about. It started with portraits (and recorded narratives) rather than the conceptual framework I developed later of juxtaposing empty institutional interiors with a fragmentary soundtrack. In summer 2003 I was fortunate enough to be given access by the Home Office and the Governor of Dover Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) to carry out interviews there and take portraits over a period of a few months⁷. I was not permitted to take photographs of the visits rooms whilst occupied with detainees and their visitors, and I was not granted access to any of the living spaces such as detainees' cells or dormitories. However the access I initially obtained was apparently pretty unusual and I wanted to make it work for me. [24]

The Dover Detainee Visitor Group (DDVG) offered me invaluable assistance in accessing my first interviewees; thereafter it was through word of mouth (as detainees I had met talked to room-mates or others in the Centre about the experience of being interviewed). The DDVG regularly visited detainees in Dover. However, they only had contact with those who had asked to meet with a regular "visitor", having seen the DDVG posters on centre notice-boards. Vebi KOSUMI, the director of DDVG, approached individuals whom he thought might wish to participate in my project, particularly those who had not yet had a letter from the Home Office specifying a particular "removal" date, and were therefore likely to be in detention for at least another few weeks or months. (I wanted to carry out at least two interviews to build up trust and obtain the best interview material possible; and I was only able to travel to Dover at weekends.) Once the DDVG had made initial contact, I would then speak to the detainee on the phone. (This could take half a dozen attempts, as sometimes the switchboard appeared to be unoccupied, or the detainee could not be found in the building and alerted to his phone call. Later on during the timescale of my project, in 2005, the Dover detainees were allowed certain kinds of mobiles—those with no cameras). We would discuss the interview structure, the need to sign a model release, the

London (Well Gallery) two separate alcoves already existed from a previous show, and I asked the gallery managers to 'hold' them for my show. In the smaller galleries, Belfast Exposed and BCA Gallery, loudspeakers could be distributed throughout the gallery space. After the first run at "Belfast Exposed", where we had only placed seating in the centre of the gallery space, I realised (following feedback) that chairs were essential for all subsequent exhibitions, and positioned these beneath the loudspeakers to allow for longer engagement with the voices of the immigration detainees. Normally the show worked with ten loudspeakers (five pairs) plus one pair of speakers playing an ambient soundtrack from the ceiling.

7 I then asked for more time owing to the particular logistical difficulties of the project, both in finding potential interviewees and the extensive travel involved either from my workplace or my home. In addition two potential interview subjects, with whom I had made initial contact, were suddenly transferred from Dover to other IRCs far away or to which I had not managed to negotiate access. In 2005, I was given access to the (dry) "moat" which surrounds Dover IRC (which is sited at Dover Citadel, a Napoleonic fort built to repel French invaders) to take photographs. In 2006, I was allowed to photograph the religious spaces: Chapel, Mosque and Multi-Faith room. In all, the Dover governor had obligingly extended my access to a period of two years, nine months.

possibility of anonymity⁸, or using just the first names, and my hope for an output of a book/exhibition—and then arrange a first meeting. [25]

3.2 "Border Country" and "The Story of Isaac"

I began by interviewing one young man, Isaac (18 years old at the time of the interviews). Isaac was vital, courageous and curious, embracing all the educational facilities that Dover had to offer and making strong efforts to keep positive about his predicament (FRIEND, 2007a, Extract 3). He also had a harrowing story of his narrow escape from being trafficked for body parts in Nigeria. Initially I had become immersed in this narrative, and pre-occupied with whether it was "true" or fabricated; I realised I was allowing myself to be sidetracked. Whilst reflecting on this, I also began to feel uncomfortable about presenting Isaac's story for consumption; others had tried to sell him, and now so was I. I felt keenly the "transgression in the service of creativity, of stealing as the foundation of making" explored by writer Janet MALCOLM (2004, p.14) in her fascinating book "The Journalist and the Murderer". The sociologist Les BACK also comments: "at the heart of all social investigation is a dialectical tension between theft and gift, appropriation and exchange" (2007, p.97). [26]

Altogether I visited Isaac 14 times, although I did not interview on every occasion. Periodically Isaac had been transferred to Tinsley House, Gatwick, to which I had not negotiated access; I went as an ordinary "visitor" without a tape recorder. Whilst he was in Dover, I increasingly started to interview Isaac about his views of England and his opinion of the immigration system in which he was entrapped—about which he was incisive and perceptive beyond his years. I began to conceive of the whole project as based on his story alone—it would be "The Story of Isaac". At this point I was very emotionally involved with his plight and was acutely aware of the power imbalance between myself as interviewer, and Isaac as (incarcerated) interviewee; but I also needed to maintain integrity and critical distance for the project (more on this later in this paper). This unequal power balance is of course familiar to many sociologists: "Because sociologists study the relatively powerless as well as those more powerful than themselves, research relationships are frequently characterised by disparities of power and status. Despite this, research relationships should be characterised, whenever possible, by trust and integrity" (BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 2002, n.p.). [27]

As the months passed, Isaac's hopes of being allowed to stay in England faded; disillusionment set in, and I witnessed his resilience and optimism being broken down as he realised that "removal" back to Nigeria was highly likely. After two earlier "failed" removals in the autumn of 2003, Isaac was suddenly "removed" back to Nigeria in late December of that year. He had been detained for 13 months. As Isaac had been held at Heathrow immediately upon arrival in the UK, he never directly experienced anything of life in the UK outside of removal

8 Most "Border Country" interviewees requested first names only, or first name + surname initial. One pseudonym was used: "Zimba" for the detainee who had experienced torture and persecution in his home country, Zimbabwe.

centres—other than fleeting glimpses from the backs of vans whilst being transferred between Dover and Tinsley House or (unidentified) airports. [28]

3.3 The project expands from one interviewee to eleven

But before he was "removed", Isaac wanted me to meet his friend Francis A. in Dover IRC. And when I met Francis—whose story was a dramatic and appalling tale of being moved numerous times around the detention estate—I knew that the project needed to expand and that I would include more interviewees. At this stage of the project, all the interviewees were men: Dover IRC, where I had such unusual access, held only male detainees. Besides which, during the timescale of my project (2003-2007), roughly 85%-88% of detained asylum seekers and migrants were male. (In 2007 I obtained access to women detainees at Yarl's Wood IRC, see later in this paper.) [29]

I felt it was historically and politically more valuable to have a *range* of individual viewpoints and experiences from detainees from different countries and different backgrounds. The project evolved from focusing on *one* individual detainee, to *eleven*. I had this apparently quite unique access. I needed to try to do justice both to the participants and to what I felt was, at the time (in 2003), an under-represented issue both in the news media and in the photography world: the experience of immigration detention. I abandoned "The Story of Isaac" as an exhibition concept, but included seven extracts from Isaac's interviews in the final soundtrack (which comprised 38 extracts from 11 interview subjects). The sequencing of Isaac's contributions to the exhibition soundtrack chronologically reflects the eroding of his optimism (mentioned earlier) and his increasing criticism of the immigration system. [30]

3.4 Interview methodology and questions of power imbalance between interviewer and detainee

My interviews were semi-structured; I had a list of core questions, and then digressed at times as the interview developed into a conversation. I normally tried to interview on at least two different occasions; the average was about three times per person. Once the project had expanded to include a larger number of interviewees, funding and time constraints meant that I had to work to a tighter timeframe than that I had had whilst focused on just one individual (Isaac). [31]

Similarly to my work interviewing and photographing Kosovar refugees in Macedonia (FRIEND, 2001) I felt keenly the power imbalance between the detainees and I, and acutely aware of my own privileges. I needed my passport to get past security at the front gate of Dover IRC, and through to the small legal rooms adjoining the visits room, where I carried out the interviews. I remember feeling very uncomfortable sitting with a desperate, powerless detainee, with my passport stashed in my sound equipment bag beside me. I was the "free" British citizen; they were effectively prisoners, with very few rights and no freedom of movement. [32]

Whilst in the process of making "Border Country" I often felt immense empathy with the individuals I met, from the start I had to make clear to interviewees the boundaries and limits of my project. I laid out clearly the parameters of our relationship: how the project could not help them directly. I did try to assist several detainees, writing letters on their behalf to the Home Office, ringing solicitors and other small things but I had to be clear that I was neither a member of the press able to swiftly publicise their plight—which was unlikely to have an effect anyway—nor was I a legal expert who could get them out of detention. [33]

I could not claim that being interviewed was an empowering experience for the detainees, or encourage any hope that their voices could effect change; but they might help influence public opinion. In view of all this, they still wished to partake. Many of the interviewees said that they appreciated the opportunity to be heard, to be listened to: this was what they felt they had been denied by the immigration system. Besides, life in IRCs appeared to be tedious, at best; being interviewed by a person from outside the IRC, and *outside* the immigration system, was at least a diversion, and an opportunity to "vent". Several detainees told me that they did not talk about their own predicament with other detainees. This surprised me, but they said it could be difficult for them to trust; and sometimes there was no language in common. I was a female interviewer liaising with male detainees; a male interviewer may of course have negotiated different kinds of interviews and interview material. [34]

Visiting hours were scheduled at specific times and the interviews took place within these time constraints. At times I was so engrossed in the interview that I forgot to keep an eye on my watch. On one occasion this led to an abrupt termination of the interview as the immigration officer opened the door to the "legal room" and said "will you finish up now please!" This felt particularly harsh as the detainee (R.) was at a vulnerable point in the interview, had to recover his composure, and immediately be escorted out of the room (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 7: which can be heard later in this paper, see Paragraph 51). Although this intervention by officialdom—such a sharp reminder of the interviewee's incarceration—made a particularly compelling recording, I needed to pay more careful attention thereafter. [35]

3.5 Women interviewees

In spring 2007 I finally obtained access to women detainees at Yarl's Wood IRC, after a very long process of trying (and failing) to find interviewees at Tinsley House. Heather JONES of *Yarl's Wood Befrienders* (the visitors group) offered me crucial assistance at Yarl's Wood, and put me in touch with potential interview "subjects". None of the four women originally interviewed felt it was safe for them to be photographed, largely for fear of their husbands back in their home countries, somehow seeing their portraits. All had escaped domestic violence or severe oppression of some kind. I did not therefore attempt to persuade them to be photographed in silhouette, or in some partially identifiable way, which would exacerbate their stress levels. However, all were eager to *speak* and as mentioned earlier, I felt that oral representation can be an equally, if not more,

powerful form of portraying an individual. The importance of narrative interviewing is of course well known in ethnographic work, biographical interviewing and life story interviews (oral history). "If we want to know the unique experience and perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in the person's own voice" (ATKINSON, 1998, p.5). [36]

3.6 Editing the interviewees, and the sound design of the exhibition

Eventually the *emphasis* of the project shifted away from biographical narratives to the detainees' commentary on the immigration system, although I did also retain *some* biographical content. By the end of the project, I had gathered 43 hours of interviews; after transcribing, I edited this down to 75 minutes for the exhibition soundtrack. All interviewees were informed before the start of the interviews, that I was only able to use fragments from their contributions, and that I was going to be making a tight edit. In the final edit of the soundtrack, the shortest contribution was from Owen G. (just one two-minute extract) and the most extensive contribution from Isaac (seven extracts totalling almost 13 minutes). Whilst there were only two extracts from women, their contributions totalled 16½ minutes. Biographies of the detainees and an audio play-list were published in the book, which was accompanied by the 75-minute audio CD. The biographies were reproduced as text panels beside the loudspeakers in the gallery exhibitions to further emphasise the individuality of the interviewees. The intimacy of the individual voices were experienced almost as a "word in the ear" of the visitor to the exhibition; the sound design meant that the visitor had to sit close to the speaker in the gallery to hear the individual voice. [37]

3.7 Portraits—and the decision to exclude them

Right from the start of the project, I had also been given permission to make portraits of detainees in one particular area of the visits room in Dover, should they be willing. As a backdrop against which to take the photographs, I was offered two patches of wall considered innocuous (away from security-sensitive doors and windows). I was not allowed to photograph the detainees elsewhere. I decided to work with those constraints. [38]

As the project expanded, several interviewees fleeing persecution and with concerns about their asylum appeals, had anxieties about their portraits being exhibited or published. Two of the men (A., "Zimba") were not willing to be photographed. Although two further men (Mohammed, Adil) were willing to be photographed, Mohammed did not wish his portrait to appear in Bangladesh, and it was not safe likewise for Adil's portrait to be seen in Pakistan.⁹ This meant it was just not safe to exhibit their portraits or to use them in the book and certainly not on a website. As mentioned above, none of the women wished to be photographed. [39]

9 For a variety of reasons, Adil's interview was not included in the exhibition and the book.

In the last months of considering the final edit for the forthcoming exhibition, I decided that the photographic portraits of detainees I *had* taken ran an unacceptable risk of those individuals being unfairly stereotyped or objectified. Photography itself is an objectifying process: "Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality" (SONTAG, 2003, p.81). [40]

The formal style of portraiture, with the individual standing within a tight institutional frame, back to the wall, risked objectification by the viewer or perhaps the detainee being viewed as a one-dimensional "victim". The framework and the circumstances (the portraits were taken in close proximity to immigration staff) were not always conducive to relaxed portrait sessions. I felt constrained as a photographer. I wanted to fight the stereotype of asylum seekers common in the popular press, and although each individual was photographed three-quarter length, chose how to stand and gamely returned "the gaze" there was still a strong echo of a 19th century anthropological style, particularly dubious in this context. I was wondering if I could use the resonance of the 19th century photography of categorisation (described below by John TAGG) in an ironic fashion—but I felt it would be unfair to the individuals concerned, and could be misconstrued by the audience:

"... a vast and repetitive archive of images is accumulated in which the smallest deviations may be noted, classified and filed. The format varies hardly at all. There are bodies and spaces. The bodies—workers, vagrants, criminals, patients, the insane, the poor, the colonised races—are taken one by one: isolated in a shallow, contained space; turned full face and subjected to an unreturnable gaze; illuminated, focused, measured, numbered and named; forced to yield to the minutest scrutiny of gestures and features. Each device is the trace of a wordless power, replicated in countless images, whenever the photographer prepares an exposure, in police cell, prison, mission house, hospital, asylum, or school ..." (2003, p.260). [41]

Thus although we often had light-hearted times during the portrait sessions and I had produced some portraits of individuals with which both they and I were comfortable (which they sent to their families, and/or placed on the wall by their bed in their IRC dormitory or cell), I preferred to represent them through what they had to say, in particular their perspectives on the immigration system within which they were entrapped. [42]

I had a very limited set of portraits owing to the reluctance of some detainees to be photographed, described above. I could perhaps, have overlooked this, and felt that my set of portraits, although of a small number of detainees, still had some validity. But, as two acquaintances commented (one a writer on photography; the other a book publisher) the portraits seemed like they belonged to a separate project. Whilst they may have had value on an historic or sociological level, as a photographer, I felt that my project as a whole lacked visual coherence. [43]

I felt that the piece would be conceptually and emotively stronger without the portraits and I believed that their absence would focus the viewer on a critique of *the state* (of us) through the portrayal of IRC landscapes and interiors juxtaposed with the warmth and individuality of the oral commentaries. There is now an established tradition within contemporary photography of the "deadpan" and "ordinary": for example Joel STERNFELD in "On This Site" used (mostly urban/suburban) landscapes juxtaposed with text to critique violence in America (STERNFELD, 1997). I myself had used ordinary domestic interiors in my 1996 Kosovo exhibition "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible", and had used sound (voices in particular) in two further exhibitions also. Other contemporary photographic artists focusing on war and migration, such as Anthony HAUGHEY, have also worked with sound/image installations).¹⁰ Still, abandoning the portraits carried its own risks—many viewers find it easier to relate to portraits rather than empty interiors or landscapes—but I felt it was ultimately a more challenging and productive way of presenting both the issue and the detainees' perspectives. [44]

3.8 Visits rooms

Alongside the interviewing, another aspect of the project had developed, the photographing of the "institutional environments" mentioned above. In autumn 2003, when Isaac was suddenly transferred from Dover, I went to visit him in his new place of incarceration, Tinsley House removal centre at Gatwick. I was immediately intrigued—as most photographers would be—by the highly organised, somewhat sterile and monochromatic space of the visits room. After my visit I started to negotiate access to take photographs. I slowly gained access to photograph the visits rooms in all the UK's immigration removal centres (except for Dungavel in Scotland, which refused access). [45]

My fascination was enhanced by the fact that I had to go through tight security before I was allowed into the space. (At removal centres visitors are searched and not allowed to take anything in to the visits room, except perhaps a few coins for the drinks machine. At some IRCs your photograph is taken at the reception, and your fingerprint is taken. Your details are held on a database. You may pass through a metal detector, undergo a "rub-down" search by a Centre officer, and electronic finger print checks before being admitted to the visits room. At Tinsley House I merely experienced a body search and a metal detector.) The visits rooms are compelling spaces for a photographer, "border zones", where poignant, painful encounters take place between the "free" visitor and the imprisoned detainee, who was often about to be deported. I was only ever allowed to photograph the rooms empty, but I found the emptiness resonant.

10 For an indication of Anthony HAUGHEY's work see: http://www.ctmp.ie/staff_detail.php?id=181.



Illustration 4: The visitors' room, Tinsley House IRC (Gatwick), April 2004 from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND [46]

In the photograph above (Illustration 4), the chairs on the left are for the detainee, on the right for his/her visitors. At times in the visits rooms the "boundary" or "difference" is clearly visually configured between visitor and detainee.



Illustration 5: The "domestic visits", Harmondsworth IRC (Heathrow), July 2006, from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND [47]

The red seatbacks here (Illustration 5) are used to differentiate detainees from visitors for security purposes (different systems were used by the Centres; at Dover, for example, detainees wore an orange "bib" to distinguish them from their visitors in the visits room). Such institutional spaces are mesmerising: similar in layout to airport lounges, university common areas, doctors' surgeries or to many institutions' *waiting* rooms—and yet different, *all* having surveillance cameras and a few (Harmondsworth, Haslar, Tinsley House) using these chilling seating demarcations. In fact, the frustration of waiting and the powerlessness of not knowing the *length* of the wait, or the *outcome* of the wait dominated the interviewees' testimonies. [48]

Behind the apparatus of high security and the dispiriting order of the visits rooms lies an apparent bureaucratic chaos: "a system in chaos" according to Amnesty International's report "*Seeking asylum is not a crime: detention of people who*

have sought asylum" (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2005, p.44). Amnesty also highlighted the depths of human misery experienced by immigration detainees: "In the light of its research for this report, Amnesty International found that the detention of these people has a terrible human cost, inflicting untold misery on the individuals concerned and their families" (p.8). [49]

Some detainees wait months and months for their cases to be resolved and are starved of information. They can become very depressed, and experience psychological scarring through the experience of being locked up, in some cases leading to self-harm and suicide attempts (Francis A. , one of the "Border Country" interviewees, admits that he tried to kill himself with a razor blade (FRIEND, 2007a, Extract 13). There were several suicides of immigration detainees during the early years of my project:

"In 2004, there was a sharp increase in the number of apparently self-inflicted deaths among immigration detainees. Four detainees died in removal centres in 2004 ... There are thought to have been two deaths of immigration detainees in prison in 2002 and a further two in 2003" (*Memorandum from the Prison Service and Deaths in Custody*, quoted in AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2005, pp.33, 34). [50]

R., another "Border Country" interviewee, talks about the psychological impact of detention on himself and his fellow asylum seekers (one of whom attempted suicide), and the importance of freedom:



Sound Extract 2: from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND (2007a, Extract 7, 2:48). [51]

3.9 Juxtaposition of images and voices



Illustration 6: The visitors' centre, Campsfield House IRC (near Oxford), March 2006, from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND [52]

At Campsfield House (Illustration 6), clearly an effort has been made to present the modern face of detention, with its stylish visits room (one exhibition visitor commented that she found this "*particularly* chilling"). As elsewhere drink vending machines and comfortable seating reflect attempts to "humanise" the space. But the intimacy of the voices of the detainees disrupts any untroubled viewing of the Immigration Removal Centre landscapes and interiors. Because of the juxtaposition between the images and sound, the "sterile calm" (KOZOL, 2007, <http://www.melaniefriend.com/>, see reviews page) of some of the visits rooms can be seen as merely a gloss over an inhumane system; they mask what lies behind, in the living quarters, particularly when the images are juxtaposed against traumatic narratives of "removal" such as the testimonies of Isaac or Afsham in "Border Country", describing brutal attempts to force them onto planes against their will (FRIEND, 2007a, Tracks 11, 23). [53]

Even the name "immigration *removal* centre" has been widely recognised as functioning euphemistically.

"The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) formally changed the name of detention centres to Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs). Ministers stated at the time that the function of these centres would remain the same and the criteria for detention would not change" (BID/BAIL for IMMIGRATION DETAINEES, 2008, p.5). [54]

The use of euphemistic language by politicians was brilliantly lambasted by George ORWELL in his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language":

"... In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness ... Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the road with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them ... " (1968 [1946], p.136). [55]

One of the "Border Country" detainees, A., himself delivers an extraordinary monologue on the English use of the word "sorry":



Sound Extract 3: from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND (2007a, Track 12, 1:15) [56]

A.'s excoriation of the use of the word "sorry" is echoed in "Border Country" images, such as that of the duck-pond at Lindholme IRC.



Illustration 7: Detainees' recreation area, Lindholme IRC, April 2006 from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND [57]

The duck-pond with its accompanying bench, offers the "failed" or "appellant" asylum seeker an introduction to the rural English idyll—and yet it backs onto a high security fence. It almost seems like an apology for the system, a veneer of decency, perhaps a genuine desire to make the experience of detention as humane as possible. [58]

After A.'s critique of the system (above) it is perhaps surprising to again hear A.—an incarcerated asylum seeker—identifying with the perspective of an imaginary racist immigration officer:



Sound Extract 4: from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND (2007a, 1 min:04) [59]

Perhaps another artist would have edited this out—it doesn't fit neatly with our preconceptions—but I felt it *had* to be in. I liked how it worked against my own preconceptions and assumptions. Recently I was introduced to the work of Les BACK and found this passage from "The Art of Listening" particularly pertinent:

"I think, too, we have to allow the people about whom we write to be complex, frail, ethically ambiguous, contradictory and damaged. The tendency to write society as if it were populated by Manichaeian camps of either good or bad people, angels or devils, is a strong temptation. When one is writing about stigmatized and excluded social groups, this temptation is particularly keen. I know for example that this is most acute in the situation of asylum seekers and refugees. To accept that desperate people do entirely human reckless things like lie or falsify their documents is unspeakable because it plays into the hands of the forces of law who seek to expunge them. What right do we have to outline their weakness or failings? The danger here in creating heroic portrayals is that we make the very people whose humanity one may want to defend less than human. We do not allow them to be as complicated as we are, namely compounds of pride and shame, weakness and strength ..." (2007, pp.157-8). [60]

Whilst predominantly critical, the soundtracks in "Border Country" are mixed in tenor. Not all immigration officers are painted critically: Hamlaoui for example sings *Nights in White Satin* with an immigration officer—and on my tape (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 31). Complex viewpoints are expressed; anglophilia exists alongside stringent criticism; poignant intimate details are revealed alongside resilience and humour. [61]

Most dominant mainstream representations of asylum seekers and migrants are negative: "even without undertaking a systematic study of the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in the British media, the overwhelmingly negative and hostile nature of coverage is hard to avoid" (ARTICLE 19, 2003, p.12). In addition "The dominant stereotype that emerged from both the print and broadcast coverage of asylum was that of the young dangerous male breaking into Britain and threatening our communities" (ARTICLE 19, 2003, p.24). [62]

In my project, (which comprises largely male interviewees), I have tried to break down this particular stereotype by the inclusion of intimate details from the detainees' narratives, for example: Zimba's tender reflections on his children back home in Zimbabwe (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 22); A.'s vulnerability as he reflects on power relations within the Centre and his own powerlessness (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 18). In addition the recordings detail torture experienced by both R. (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 2) and "Zimba" (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 21) in their home countries, and the violent domestic abuse experienced by the two women interviewees, Afsham and L. (FRIEND, 2007a, Tracks 19 & 32). Afsham, from Pakistan, poignantly reflects on the comparative freedom for women in the West, and the connection between freedom and creativity (FRIEND, 2007a, Track 23). As one such "free" Western woman myself, I found this reflection particularly moving during the course of the interview. [63]

Altogether, I have tried to employ the detainees' perspectives as a mirror, with their frequently pertinent commentary on the immigration system itself and different aspects of UK culture (FRIEND, 2007a, Tracks 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 24, 27, 28, 29). L., a Kenyan, is one such detainee becoming the commentator. During our second interview L. was initially reluctant to criticise white privilege in Kenya (whilst she was being excluded from the UK); I, after all, was British, and white. Had I been black British rather than white British, or an African or Kenyan interviewer, I may of course have received a different, justifiably angrier response. But despite this, L. even surprised herself (listening to herself on headphones after our interview) by being an incredibly articulate, passionate and eloquent speaker. Here she reflects on the injustice she experienced in the UK, and on the right for all to seek a better life, challenging the very notion of borders:

"... And God created the world without any demarcation, any borders. There was nothing, you know. And why should it be easy for some people to come into your country or to go into any other country? Because they are looking—everybody is looking—for a better life. Who is the judge to say you, you can look for a better life, you, you can't look for a better life? Who is more human than the other? Why? Why should it be that way? If you are coming to my country to look for a better life, and you

find in my country a better life; why can't I come to your country to look for a better life?" (FRIEND, 2007a, p.43)



Sound Extract 5: from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND (2007, Track 38, 3:52)



Illustration 8: Detainees' recreation area, Lindholme IRC (near Doncaster), April 2006, from "Border Country", copyright Melanie FRIEND [64]

L., who had experienced extreme domestic violence at the hands of her husband in Kenya, including the threat of circumcision and death threats, had fled to the UK and worked illegally as a carer for the elderly. L. was "removed" in summer 2007—sent back to Kenya to a dangerous, uncertain future. I have had three email exchanges with her since her "removal". The last contact I had with L. was an email she sent me in January 2008 during the ethnic conflicts in Kenya, describing a violent raid on her neighbouring village. Just two kilometres away, several people had been killed and homes burnt. I have not heard from her since. [65]

Several other detainees were "removed" shortly after the interviews. Sometimes, during our last meeting, I knew removal was imminent; and we said our goodbyes. David, from Georgia, dreamt of coming back to the UK in a few years' time; by then he joked, my project would have had such an effect on public opinion that the UK would be more open to accepting him! [66]

With several others, however, I did not know when they would be removed. Isaac phoned me from Nigeria on New Year's Day 2004. I had last spoken to him shortly before Christmas, after he had returned to Dover after a spell in Tinsley House. Owen G phoned me from the airport about to be forced onto a plane to Jamaica. Afsham sent me a text from her airplane seat, surrounded by escort officers:

"Hi, Melane, im in the plain. 4
Peoples ascort are going
With me. Takecare about yourself.
Goodby. Afsham" (sic, FRIEND, 2007, p58). [67]

These were harrowing communications, particularly Afsham's inclusion of "Takecare about yourself" at a moment when she herself was in such a grim predicament. I had had experience of very distressing interviews before, during the work for my book on Kosovo, "No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo" (FRIEND, 2001) but in most cases I had paid return visits to the interviewees the following year (partly to give them a copy of the book: at the time there was no functioning postal system in the villages). I had not wanted to sever the connection immediately after the interview; that seemed brutal, particularly with those who had been bereaved; the interviewees seemed to value the continuing connection also. But with the "Border Country" project, when the individual detainees were "removed", I knew that it was incredibly unlikely we would meet again.¹¹ [68]

4. Conclusion

In making "Border Country" I did not set out to use a similar structure to "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible". Over the years of making "Border Country" I shifted from my initial approach, which had incorporated portraiture. Although working under constraints as a photographer, the lengthy timescale of the project (2003-07) enabled me to take a wider range of images of interiors and landscapes than I originally envisaged. I believe that deciding to exclude the portraits and to employ the sound/image paradigm was an effective framework for an exhibition on immigration detention. In "Homes and Gardens", I had used the tension between the images and the sound to suggest both the individual psychological trauma experienced and the repression of the political situation. In "Border Country" I used the tension between the sound and images to emphasise the individuality of each detainee in contrast to the somewhat sterile institutional environments represented in the photographs. The voices provide an emotional counterpoint to the formal images of the institutions. This prompts the listener/viewer to reflect both on the experience of the immigration system itself and on the wider concepts of migration and borders. The four UK exhibitions, several conference presentations, reviews in online/print journals and in the *Guardian* have helped draw attention to the issue of UK immigration detention, and its injustices (see e.g.: GILLIGAN, 2008; McCORMICK, 2008; LEVERTON, 2008). The project I hope is a small contribution to the history of asylum seeking in the UK. I am immensely grateful to all who participated, particularly the detainees who were forced to leave our shores and now face troubled or dangerous futures. [69]

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11 I have since been in intermittent email contact with Isaac and Afsham; I have also been in regular phone contact with Francis, Hamlaoui and "Zimba", now released from detention, and living in the UK.

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Note: Parts of the early section of this article discussing my exhibition "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible" are drawn from FRIEND (2007b).

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Videos

Audio_1: <http://medien.cedis.fu-berlin.de/stream01/cedis/fqs/2-11/audio1.wav>

Audio_2: <http://medien.cedis.fu-berlin.de/stream01/cedis/fqs/2-11/audio2.wav>

Audio_3: <http://medien.cedis.fu-berlin.de/stream01/cedis/fqs/2-11/audio3.wav>

Audio_4: <http://medien.cedis.fu-berlin.de/stream01/cedis/fqs/2-11/audio4.wav>

Audio_5: <http://medien.cedis.fu-berlin.de/stream01/cedis/fqs/2-11/audio5.wav>

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