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Living the spectre of forced return: Negotiating deportability in British immigration detention

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Abstract

Immigration detention and deportation are being increasingly utilised in many countries as key state responses to irregular migration. These practices work together to force migrants to their countries of origin or third countries, offering limited choice about whether to stay or leave. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnographic study of British immigration detention, this paper explores how detainees negotiate deportability and their accounts of the spectre of departing the United Kingdom, often against their wishes and occasionally by force. It analyses how deportability and the institutional structures and logics of immigration detention coalesce to shape detainees' understandings of their positions and options as deportable subjects. The paper highlights the materiality of return from immigration detention and the complexities and multiplicities of how detainees account for their possible departures in relation to the themes of identity, belonging, and home. British immigration removal centres can be understood as 'sites of struggle' in which those subject to detention and deportation negotiate these interconnected practices, acting as best they can within coercive and isolating carceral institutions.

Keywords: immigration detention, deportation, deportability, agency

1. Introduction

This paper examines how deportability is experienced amongst individuals who are facing expulsion from the United Kingdom (UK) from the unique carceral context of immigration detention and the effects thereof. The notion of deportability (De Genova 2002) underscores the spatial and temporal effects associated with the possibility of deportation and of the lived experience of being a deportable subject. Although they may have existed with the spectre of deportation as a facet of everyday life whilst in the community (see, e.g., Hasselberg 2014, 2016a), it is within the confines of one of the UK's nine immigration removal centres (IRCs) that the threat is made 'real', challenging complex senses of identity, home, and belonging. Yet, once detained, migrants encounter the indeterminacy of British immigration detention and ongoing uncertainty as to whether they will be able to stay or if they will have to go. In this paper, I analyse how deportability and the institutional structures and logics of immigration detention come together to shape detainees' understandings of their positions and options as deportable subjects.

Facing a return to the country of origin (or third country) from the carceral environment of one of Britain's detention centres poses several challenges (Turnbull 2018). Immigration detention is a unique context from which to plan and prepare for return, particularly because the majority of those who end up in detention do not want to leave the UK. Detainees are

especially limited in how they can prepare as the carceral environment of a British IRC does not enable people to get their affairs in order. Rather, immigration detention is used primarily to facilitate the expulsion of those the state deems uncooperative—individuals who, for a variety of reasons, do not have a regularised status and have not left the UK of their own accord.

The notion of deportability is useful for thinking through the productive functions of immigration detention as a ‘site of struggle’ (Strange et al. 2017: 244) in which ‘particular subjects are constituted [...] and come into being as such through dynamics of power-resistance’ (Squire 2017: 266). The production of deportable subjects through operations of power reflect the ways in which individual hopes, dreams, and identities intersect with the punitive logics and practices of detention and expulsion. Processes of subject formation within detention thus have important spatial and temporal effects. That is, people are removed from their (British) lives and places they view as home; they are told that they do not (or no longer) belong in or to Britain; and they are informed who they (now) are (and are not)—all for uncertain and often protracted periods of time due to the indefinite nature of British immigration detention. Through deportability, the ‘dynamics of power-resistance’ (Squire 2017: 266) shape detainees’ responses to detention and deportation as coercive and violent exercises of state power, encouraging certain degrees of compliance and cooperation (Gill 2009; Conlon & Gill 2013). In this sense, deportability has particular governmental effects.

With few exceptions (Kox 2011; Bosworth 2014; Leerkes & Kox 2017; Gerlach 2018), little empirical research exists that examines how detainees experience the threat of expulsion from the confines of immigration detention. Most of the existing research considers former detainees’ retrospective accounts of detention and their experiences of deportability in the community (e.g., Hasselberg 2014, 2016; Golash-Boza 2015). This paper draws on a multi-sited ethnographic study of four British IRCs to explore detainees’ narratives of the possibility of leaving the UK, often against their wishes and occasionally by force. It examines participants’ accounts of their potential returns (via administrative removal or deportation) in relation to the materiality of return and the themes of identity (i.e., as British or a resident of Britain), belonging (i.e., of being where they want to be and where they feel they fit), and home (i.e., their perceived place(s) of comfort and connection). For many individuals, being confined in an IRC and facing expulsion forces them to confront, perhaps for the first time, their foreignness and non-belonging, and the state’s demand that they ‘go home’. Detention and the possibility of expulsion also necessitate that they contemplate, at minimum, a ban on re-entry or, for some, their permanent exclusion from the UK.

In this paper, I argue that detainees’ negotiations of deportability show how IRCs are ‘contested spaces’ and how detainees are not ‘uni-dimensional bare life’ (Mainwaring 2016: 303). Indeed, as Gill (2009: 187) argues, the banality of immigration detention as a practice risks ‘reduc[ing] individuals within detention systems to mere numbers, positioning them in passive and vulnerable roles’. This paper thus presents a more multifaceted view of the IRC as a ‘site of struggle’ (Strange et al. 2017: 244), showing how those in detention and facing deportation negotiate these interconnected practices, acting as best they can within coercive and isolating carceral institutions. In so doing, it highlights the complexities and multiplicities

of migrants' accounts of staying and going (see also Hasselberg 2016b; cf. Leerkes & Kox 2017).

2. Context

Since the 1990s the United Kingdom (UK) has taken an increasingly punitive stance towards noncitizens in its territory. In particular, there has been a notable increase in the use of immigration detention and political rhetoric focused on the administrative removal or deportation of those deemed 'illegal'.¹ For example, the practice of detaining noncitizens has expanded rapidly since the early 1990s, with the British detention estate growing from 250 'bedspaces' in 1993 (Bacon 2005) to the present capacity for 3,566 persons.² In addition, the British government has made its asylum system increasingly restrictive (Gibney 2008) and has enacted legislation requiring the mandatory expulsion of non-European Economic Area (EEA) foreign nationals who have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment greater than twelve months (see Nason 2017). The British government has likewise increased its focus on 'illegal immigration' and the removal of those without the right to remain, widening the net of immigration enforcement to international students, asylum-seekers, visa overstayers, and other irregular migrants through immigration raids and its recent 'go home' campaigns (Jones et al. 2015).³ The Immigration Act 2016 has further entrenched a punitive and criminalising approach to migration, creating new offences in relation to 'illegal' working and the letting of residential properties as well as extending the enforcement powers of immigration officers (Aliverti 2015; Neckles 2016). A key policy objective for the British government has been to create a 'hostile environment' for (irregular) migrants, with the hope this will deter migration and/or encourage foreigners to leave voluntarily (Neckles 2016). On the other, harsher, end of the migration control spectrum are immigration detention and expulsion for those who fail to comply.

Despite the British government's focus on administrative removal and deportation, 53% of the detained population in 2017 was released into the community through temporary admission or release, immigration bail, or having received a regularised status (Home Office 2018). Put differently, a total of 15,071 people left detention in 2017 without being expelled (Home Office 2018). Although they may not be able to avoid their expulsion indefinitely, individuals can resist and postpone it in several ways, deploying knowledge of the immigration rules and their rights in order to exert some control over their situations. They may, for instance, refuse to cooperate with the Home Office's attempts to obtain travel documents, give false names or nationalities (Bosworth 2013), and/or pursue all avenues of appeal at the immigration tribunals and with the courts. These actions may result in multiple and/or prolonged stints in detention as the state seeks 'to prove their identity and obtain travel documents, both of which are necessary for deportation' and administrative removal (Bosworth 2013: 151).

Immigration detention and expulsion are thus not simple, linear administrative processes or distinct events (see, e.g., Coutin 2015), but rather chaotic and unpredictable practices as the state may engage in several attempts to evict someone from British soil. Individuals may be issued removal directions on multiple occasions, only to have them later cancelled, either by their own undertakings or due to administrative decisions on the part of the Home Office.⁴ For

some, tickets are cancelled at the last minute, after they have packed up their belongings and have been discharged from the IRC, escorted to the airport, and made to wait, prior to boarding, in immigration holding at the airport. These scenarios are especially stressful and disruptive as individuals are subsequently returned to detention, often to a different IRC where they are subject to a new facility and all that it entails (see Gill 2009). In rarer cases, individuals may be taken abroad only to be rejected by the receiving country and returned to the UK and back to detention.

In what follows, I first outline the qualitative research methodology and data on which this paper is based. I then turn to examine the specific context of experiencing a forced migration from the confinements of immigration detention and consider four aspects of this experience: the materiality of return in detention, the impacts on identity, the fear of returning to ‘nothing’, and agreeing to go. I conclude with a discussion of how detainees’ accounts of deportability and immigration detention further our understanding of these contemporary practices of managing migration and of IRCs as ‘sites of struggle’.

3. Methods and data

This paper draws on data gathered in the UK as part of a larger project involving both the detention and post-detention experiences of migrants. The fieldwork data for this paper are based on my time spent at four IRCs from September 2013 to August 2014. Methods included participant observation based on informal encounters, observation, and engagements (149 days of fieldwork) as well as formal semi-structured interviews (n=89) and focus groups (n=3) with male and female detainees. The research questions centred on understanding the lived experiences of detention with specific focus on issues of identity, home, and belonging. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and, along with the fieldnotes, entered into NVivo for inductive thematic analysis. The names of participants have been anonymised either with pseudonyms they selected, or I assigned to them.

The four fieldwork sites⁵ for this study are diverse in terms of population detained, regime, security, architecture, and operator. These characteristics provided for variety in terms of observations of daily life in detention. The first centre, Campsfield House IRC, operated by Mitie Care & Custody, is an all-male facility that offers, compared to other IRCs, a less restrictive regime and layout, with detainees free to associate from 7:00 to 21:30, with the overnight period of ‘closed’ association, meaning detainees are locked in their residential blocks, but not in their ‘rooms’. The second fieldwork site, Yarl’s Wood IRC, operated by Serco, is a predominantly female centre that also has a family unit and a male-only unit for short-term detention. Detainees are free to associate in their respective common areas from 8:30 to 12:00, from 13:30 to 17:00, and from 18:30 to 21:00. Like Campsfield House, during periods of closed association detainees are locked in their residential units but free to associate within. Also operated by Serco, the third centre, Colnbrook IRC,⁶ is built to Category B prison security architecture, meaning that male detainees are subject to a restricted regime, spending 13 hours per day locked in their cells, including the overnight period from 21:00 to 8:00. The fourth centre, Dover IRC,⁷ is an all-male facility run by HM Prison Service. It has a ‘campus’ style layout reflective of its previous uses as a prison and a young offenders’ institution.

Detainees at Dover are locked in their cells overnight from 20:40 to 7:45 yet during the day have open association in the IRC's common areas.

At all four IRCs I was able to draw keys and had a high degree of access to wander the spaces of the centres and to observe and interact with both detainees and staff. I spent an average of three to four days per week at each IRC. I spent the majority of my time in the common areas where most activities and 'hanging out' took place. This included the art and crafts room, games room, library, IT/English room, cultural kitchen, and other common areas. I also observed various events offered at the centres, including first aid classes, music workshops, bingo and other social activities, football matches, and consultative meetings with members of staff and detainee representatives. In addition to speaking with detained individuals about their experiences of detention, I asked them about why they came to the UK, how they felt about the possibility of having to leave, and whether their experiences of detention changed how they felt about the UK.

This paper analyses participants' accounts of deportability made at particular moments during their detention. Some informants negotiated protracted periods of uncertainty whilst detained and facing expulsion yet were subsequently released from detention. For others, their negotiations of deportability had more direct implications as they were, eventually, expelled from the UK (see Turnbull 2018).

4. Facing a forced return from immigration detention

As Bosworth (2014) has convincingly shown, IRCs are sites characterised by confusion and ambivalence and largely devoid of a meaningful purpose that coheres the experience for detainees and staff alike. Immigration detention is best described as highly emotional, complex, ambiguous, unpredictable, and monotonous. It is simultaneously punitive and caring, forced and empowering, hostile and hospitable (Khosravi 2009: 53). The lived experience of detention is characterised by profound uncertainty (Griffiths 2013, 2014; Bosworth 2014; Turnbull 2016), and perceived inconsistency and arbitrariness. It is no surprise that detention suffers a notable 'legitimacy deficit' as individuals are held indefinitely in prison-like conditions while the British state tries to remove them (Bosworth 2013: 151). This unique context shapes how detainees cope with detention, including how they negotiate the prospect of leaving the UK under conditions not of their choosing.

The narratives of participants in this study highlight the important affective connections between deportability, immigration detention, and identity. Detention is primarily experienced as a painful event, one that removes individuals from their familial and community contexts, isolating them in carceral spaces to expel them from the country. It is particularly stressful and anxiety provoking because outcomes are uncertain and unpredictable. That is, most detainees do not know if they will be released into the British community or sent away, nor when this could happen. Additionally, as noted above, not all individuals who are detained are successfully evicted from the country. Many circulate in and out of detention on multiple occasions as their immigration cases proceed, which has important implications for their experiences of deportability (see Hasselberg 2014). Some detainees receive 'removal

directions’—a document outlining ‘the date of [the individual’s] removal and flight details, including the destination’ (Home Office 2016a: 4)—which they may be able to cancel through applications for judicial review to the courts. Decisions at the immigration tribunals or courts could be favourable, stirring feelings of hope and expectation, and leading some individuals to postpone making plans for returning to their countries of origin (see also Gerlach 2018). In sum, the uncertainty and precariousness of detainees’ situations significantly impacts their understandings of their positions and options as deportable subjects and thus how they act whilst living the spectre of expulsion.

Unsurprisingly, the prospect of being removed to one’s country of origin provoked strong emotional responses among participants. Common feelings include anger, frustration, disbelief, sadness, and anxiety. Many participants reported having no home to return to upon their removal from the UK. The participants who had come to the UK as young children or teenagers were most likely to describe themselves as having British identities and to see themselves as British despite having been born in another country and lacking a British passport. These participants discussed, often with British accents, having gone to school in the UK and having built their lives there. As part of participants’ efforts to stay, claims to Britishness and belonging to the British nation were commonly articulated. Immigration detention is thus a site of struggle where government definitions and legal statuses do not align with people’s identities or senses of belonging, nor their hopes, dreams, or desires. Detainees act, as best they can, negotiating deportability within challenging spatial and temporal contexts.

4.1 The materiality of return

What is unique about detention as a site from which to face the possibility of a return is that the carceral conditions significantly limit how one can prepare, both emotionally and practically. Detainees’ choices for when, how, and where they go are severely restricted, if not denied entirely.⁸ The Home Office sets the date and time, the means (i.e., charter flight or commercial airline), and the destination (i.e., the country of origin or a third country under the Dublin III Regulation). It also arranges the escorts—subcontracted to private security firms like Tascor or G4S—to accompany those being removed or deported on their flights to ensure they are properly delivered to their destinations. These matters are, on one hand, banal, bureaucratic mechanisms and practices necessary for the day-to-day operation of immigration detention and deportation as administrative exercises of state power. Yet, on the other, these mechanisms and practices are constitutive of particular subjectivities in immigration detention, shaping how detainees respond to their detention and deportability.

For many individuals, their detention was sudden and unpredictable;⁹ they did not have time to pack their belongings or settle their affairs, such as gathering important documents or retrieving savings from bank accounts. This created a challenging predicament as there were no allowances by the Home Office for temporary or escorted release from detention to prepare for departure. Ostensibly, as ‘failed citizens’ (Tyler 2010) and ‘detainable subjects’ (De Genova 2017), they had lost the apparent privilege to prepare themselves for expulsion. Instead, detainees are made responsible for their deportability, often having to rely on friends or family members to assist them, packing up belongings into suitcases or bags and delivering

these to the IRC during social visit hours (usually between 14:00-21:00). Although detainees are permitted basic mobile phones (i.e., those without cameras or data), they are responsible for purchasing the necessary ‘top-up’ credit to make calls. And while each IRC has an IT suite, all social networking sites like Facebook and Skype are blocked, thus preventing detainees from accessing free online means of communication.

Relying on others was far from an ideal situation for many, as Aroleoba (early twenties, Nigeria, Campsfield House IRC) describes:

I’m trying to communicate with my friend. But obviously your friend cannot do as much as you. You’re here [in detention], thinking about what has happened to my smart TV, what’s happened to my fridge, my chair, sofa, everything, you know. It’s just crazy. Property is down there, and you can’t do anything about. And you don’t even know if you ever get the chance to actually go and pick your own stuff yourself and all that.

As this quote illustrates, the inability to sort out one’s belongings caused significant distress and added to the uncertainty and frustration of the situation. Those without trustworthy friends or family on the outside and/or who were detained at an IRC that was prohibitively far away, or who lacked the financial means to hire someone,¹⁰ often had no ability to prepare for their expulsion. This meant personal property and other valuables were, in some instances, left behind in detainees’ residences to be dealt with by landlords or other tenants. For some, like Adel (mid-twenties, Morocco, Dover IRC), the loss was significant:

[When] I came here [to detention], I didn’t bring my stuff, my documents. You know diplomas and certificates and all these things. I left them in my place in London. The thing is, it’s fine by me if I go home, but if I go home I’m gonna do two things. I’m gonna try to find a job or to continue my studies. In both cases I’m gonna need my documents.

Adel explained that he did not care so much about his property—clothes, musical instruments—but the documents were important for his future as they were not easily replaceable. Likewise, Kebolou (mid-thirties, Guinea-Conakry, Campsfield House IRC) explained how he was trying to convince the Home Office that he could not leave the UK without his documents (i.e., the original copies of his certificates that prove his educational attainments), which were somewhere among his things in London. He was exasperated that the Home Office would not listen to him and afford him the opportunity to recover them. The inability to retrieve important documents before being removed was extremely frustrating for informants like Adel and Kebolou, adding to the perception that their treatment was unjust and inhumane and compounding their concerns about establishing themselves once they are returned to their countries of origin. These participants drew attention to the eurocentricity of the Home Office’s assumption that new copies could simply be obtained once they were home. Yet, paradoxically, through their attempts to get their affairs in order and prepare themselves for expulsion, these informants largely conducted themselves as ‘ideal detainees’ (Gill 2009;

Conlon & Gill 2013) and as ‘good’ deportable subjects, despite the range of institutional barriers that shaped their experiences of deportability.

A forced return from the confines of immigration detention was viewed as dehumanising and degrading. Despite the Home Office’s admonishments to ‘go home’, the actual idea of returning to the country of origin was not so straightforward (Ruben et al. 2009) and evoked strong emotional reactions. Luiza (mid-forties, Brazil, Yarl’s Wood IRC), for instance, was incensed at this prospect:

I came to this country proud of myself [...]. Why I gonna have to go back to Brazil on a shame situation, without even my clothes? I'm not allowed to go in my house, to get my clothes, my underwear. [...] Where is the respect? Where is the human rights in this?

The ‘shame situation’ identified by Luiza speaks to the impacts upon one’s sense of self on the possibility of returning in this manner, without one’s belongings, and without the chance to put one’s affairs in order. For Luiza, this practice was disrespectful and reflected the (perceived) rightlessness of immigration detainees’ existence. It also helps explain why many detainees fought their expulsion on the perceived dehumanising terms set by the Home Office.

The policies governing the management of detainees’ property further compounded the perceived indignity associated with a forced return from immigration detention, requiring detainees to negotiate these bureaucratic hindrances. Those who had their belongings with them in detention faced additional challenges due to restrictions as to the amount of property they could both store at the IRC and bring on the airplane. These policies set the amount of luggage to one 20-kilogram item unless the detainee could pay the excess luggage fees or arrange for the belongings to be shipped separately.¹¹ These restrictions limited detainees’ ability to shape the circumstances of their potential expulsion, particularly for those without the necessary financial means.

Such seemingly banal bureaucratic policies had important affective consequences and constitutive effects for detainees. Those who do not have access to suitcases or other travel luggage are obligated to travel home with their belongings in transparent plastic bags provided by the IRC from which they are discharged. Luiza (mid-forties, Brazil, Yarl’s Wood IRC) viewed this possibility as an affront to her sense of self:

I don’t want to go back like I’m ashamed. I don’t want to go back with my plastic bag, even without a right to have your luggage, your things, you know.

These restrictions on one’s agency and self-determination were experienced as unfair, punitive, and disrespectful. This type of return scenario was not what participants imagined for themselves. At one of the fieldwork sites, Yarl’s Wood IRC, a member of staff explained how the chaplaincy worked with a local charity to provide suitcases to detainees in need, but the demand outpaced the supply. If detainees had the financial means and enough time before their flights, they could order suitcases from a catalogue through the centre shop. However, this was not an option for all detainees who faced a forced return from detention.

Indeed, those who ended up in detention were often suffering financially, many having spent their savings or borrowed money fighting their immigration cases in an effort to prevent their expulsion. Detainees deemed ‘compliant’ with the Home Office were permitted to perform paid work—albeit for paltry wages¹²—in the detention centres, which allowed some participants to save some money in anticipation of their removal or deportation. Some detainees also purchased rebranded counterfeit clothes and other goods in the ‘market’ run by the Christian charity His Church to take back as gifts, so as not to return empty-handed—a key sign of a ‘failed migrant’. However, for the most part, facing a return to the country of origin from detention meant being ill-prepared in multiple ways: financially, materially, and emotionally. In this context, the limited ability to plan a dignified, humane return—with proper luggage, for example, as the bare minimum—weighed heavily on some informants’ minds.

4.2 Unmaking identities

For long-term residents of the UK, the spectre of a forced return to the country of origin was especially difficult to comprehend. Through the automatic deportation provisions attached to their criminal convictions, individuals from non-EEA countries had their legal right to settlement (called indefinite leave to remain) revoked, legally and emotionally disrupting their sense of home and belonging. Participants commonly reported that they did not apply for British citizenship when they had the chance as they (mistakenly) thought their indefinite leave to remain was a sufficient—and secure—legal status. However, the British government’s crackdown on ‘foreign criminals’ in recent years has meant greater precarity for noncitizen residents, particularly those from non-EEA countries who are in conflict with the law (see, e.g., Griffiths 2017; Turnbull and Hasselberg 2017).

Being told to ‘go home’ when one felt they were home was a deeply troubling and upsetting experience for a number of my informants. From an interview room in one of the residential units at Dover IRC, Bashiir (late twenties, Somalia) spoke to the distress at being instructed to leave the UK:

This is my home. I regard this as my home. I regard this as my country. Because I’ve lived here more than I’ve lived in my own country. I don’t remember anything of my country. I don’t speak the language of my country. I wasn’t raised there. I never learnt anything from there. All that I know is from here. So how can I learn everything in this country, and then they say to me, ‘oh, this is not your home’?

This quote underscores both the emotionality and sense of injustice inherent in detention and deportation as practices of border control that work to unmake and remake people’s identities and senses of home and belonging. For Bashiir, the length of time he has spent in the UK, how he was educated there, and how he now only knows English, are key aspects of his sense of being British and at home in Britain. Yet, frustratingly, these aspects of his identity and connectedness to the UK were not recognised by the Home Office. The British state’s constitution of ‘foreign criminals’ as inherently irredeemable and thus deportable worked in such a way that Bashiir’s criminal convictions trumped all other considerations.

Likewise, Oliver (mid-twenties, Zimbabwe, Dover IRC) felt he was just like any other British person until his irregular immigration status set him apart:

I've lived an authentic life like any other British person [...] I had a house to go to, like, I had a stable life [...] Everything was perfect for me. Only when I wanted to go college, like, I was sort of like shoved out, innit [isn't it] [...] I've had a good life, innit, in this country when I was young, but after that it just all went down the drain.

Oliver's words highlight the disappointment, sadness, and frustration associated with the experience of being 'shoved out'. Unable to regularise his status—unlike this mother and sibling—he was subject to removal to a country he did not remember and to which he did not want to go. The interconnected practices of detention and expulsion work to constitute these subjects as those who do not belong, as those who are out of place.

Michael (early twenties, Rwanda, Colnbrook IRC) also had come to the UK as a young child. With a London accent, he talked about growing up in Britain not thinking he was different than any of his British friends and schoolmates. His detention and deportation order, however, began to challenge this understanding, highlighting the idea that one's identity and sense of belonging is not tied to legal citizenship. Michael expressed frustration at the Home Office's attempts to deport him:

Obviously, I feel pretty shit about it, innit. Taking into consideration this is all I know, innit. Like, whether I'm British on paper or not, I, I consider myself British, innit. This is what I know. This is where I've grown up. This is where my family is. You know what I mean? And it's not like I came here as an adult. If I came here as an adult, then fine, innit. But I came here as a kid, innit. Everything I've learned is from here, innit. I wasn't bad before I came here, you know, and brought that bad behaviour to the country. This is what I've learnt here, innit. Know what I mean?

Despite the Home Office's instance otherwise, Michael asserted that he was a product of the UK because he had grown up there and learnt all that he knew as a consequence of this upbringing. He felt that it was therefore unfair for the British government to revoke his right to residency and try to deport him on account of his criminal offences. Facing a return to a country he did not know was hard to imagine; it was also a potential future and imposed identity that he resisted.

Similarly, Kevin (mid-twenties, Netherlands, Colnbrook IRC) explained that being told to go home 'was shocking to the system, because [he] thought [he] was pretty much British'. The painful jolt of having one's identity challenged, if not denied all together, in the context of immigration detention was an especially difficult experience as it was compounded by the possibility of expulsion without the ability to prepare. It is not surprising that participants frequently described the intertwined practices of detention and expulsion as life destroying.

Other participants expressed frustration that the British government could demand they leave after they had spent substantial periods of time in the UK. Luiza (mid-forties, Brazil,

Yarl's Wood IRC) was angry that the Home Office seemingly discounted the amount of time that those facing removal had been resident:

Eleven years—what is that? Is nothing eleven years, ten years, fourteen years is nothing? Is that life, living away from our families, from our country? So, we belong already in this country. We know the language, we know the tradition.

Luiza argued that it was unfair to be forced to return when her original migration meant giving up her family and country to make a new home and create a new sense of belonging, both of which were now threatened. Her words also underscore the challenge of what it takes to be accepted as belonging, including the length of residency that is deemed sufficient.

4.3 The fear of returning to nothing

The prospect of leaving the UK was daunting for many participants, especially those with no cultural, familial, or linguistic ties to their countries of origin. Some worried about returning to nothing and having to start again. Others, who were seeking asylum, were afraid of being sent to unsafe situations that they had purposefully left. Participants who faced administrative removal to a third country under the Dublin III Regulation were anxious about what they would do next.¹³

Some participants had only vague recollections of their countries of origin as children before they migrated to the UK. Oliver (mid-twenties, Zimbabwe, Dover IRC) described what he imagined happening if he was returned:

Like, literally once I'm there [...] I'm gonna be homeless. My mum will have to give me money. I don't know. I have to find a place to rent and I don't know where that is. I don't, I wouldn't even know where to start. I've never walked the streets of Zimbabwe, like.

For this young man, his expulsion from the UK meant being sent to an unfamiliar place in which he feared he could not meet his basic material needs like housing. Oliver also worried about being reliant on his mother again to help him yet again, after she had already spent thousands of pounds on his immigration case. This possible future was both infantilising and terrifying for him.

Samson (mid-twenties, Jamaica, Dover IRC) also did not want to return to his country of origin:

I don't have any memories of Jamaica. I couldn't establish myself there. I don't have no culture, I grew up in Britain, and I don't know nothing at all [about] Jamaica.

Lacking cultural ties and local knowledge of Jamaica, Samson was troubled as to how he could survive if deported. Bashiir (late twenties, Somalia, Dover IRC) reported similar worries. He did not see himself as Somalian and was concerned that others would know this if he was forced back:

... if the worse came to the worst and I was to be deported to Somalia, I would be treated as a foreigner there. I wouldn't be treated like a Somali person there. Because I don't speak the language. I didn't grow up there. I'm from a minority tribe, Bravanese people. It's about one per cent of the people in Somalia now are Bravanese. So, and the rest of them are Somalis. Sometimes, what they [the Home Office] do, you just get lost for words. It's just, it's not right. It's not right what they're doing.

Facing deportation as doubly disadvantaged (both a 'foreigner' and 'ethnic minority'), Bashiir was troubled about the possibility of being returned to a context in which he would be out of place, where he would not belong. Like other informants, this was not a situation that he had imagined for himself and he perceived it as wholly unfair. For Oliver, Samson, and Bashiir, they were British, regardless of what the Home Office or their documents pronounced.

Other participants in detention who had migrated as adults to pursue their education worried about returning to their countries of origin when they had not completed their studies. Ada (late twenties, Nigeria, Yarl's Wood IRC), for example, had her education interrupted due to immigration issues. She was dismayed at the thought of going to Nigeria without fulfilling the original purpose of her migration:

I've been in here for six years, been in this country for six years. Going back to start, where, where will I start from? Without any qualification?

For Ada, it was unimaginable to return to Nigeria without succeeding in her education—the primary purpose of her original migration to the UK. Being forced back empty-handed was too painful for Ada to consider.

Others, like Waseem (early twenties, Pakistan, Campsfield House IRC), felt like going back meant that 'everything gonna be finished', that their life chances were over along with the opportunities for education and employment, as well as safety and stability. Young men like Eshan (early twenties, Bangladesh, Campsfield House IRC) had migrated to the UK with the hopes of obtaining an education, then a good job, so as to elevate his impoverished family in Bangladesh. For Eshan, whose family had invested significantly (including taking out loans) for him to come to the UK and succeed, the spectre of a return to Bangladesh was unthinkable. The ramifications of his failure as a migrant—being detained, having his student visa cancelled, and facing removal—resulted in substantial anxiety and depression. Eshan told me that going back to Bangladesh was simply not an option for him; he would not be compliant with the Home Office's demands.

Being returned to the country of origin was commonly described as having to 'start from scratch', as Henry (mid-thirties, Malawi, Colnbrook IRC) describes:

If I have to go back home [...] I'll have to study, I mean from scratch, you know. Because it's been ten years. I don't expect myself to find things the way I left it there. So, I do understand that many things have changed. So yeah, if I have to go back home, then I mean I'll have to start from scratch.

In addition, as this quote highlights, a return after a significant period of time (a decade, in Henry's case) means starting from scratch in a place that is different from the one left during migration. The prospective futures looked bleak for these detainees.

Asylum-seeking participants who faced administrative removal under the Dublin III Regulation were anxious about being returned to third countries they had purposefully left in search of protection in the UK. Zahir (late twenties, Pakistan, Colnbrook IRC), for instance, awaited the Home Office's determination as to whether he would be returned to Belgium or Italy as he had applied for asylum in both:

I don't know what they are going to do with me. If they send me back to Italy, there is no future for me in Italy, because they are not going to give me any place to live there. I will be back on the streets.

As the quote makes clear, he did not want to return to Italy in particular because of the homelessness and destitution he had already experienced there as an asylum seeker. Being removed under the Dublin III Regulation also meant a return to nothing: no home, no support, no future. Zahir had come to the UK in search of asylum at great personal and economic cost, traveling irregularly through Western Europe to Calais, France, his entry point. Administrative removal to Italy (or Belgium) meant restarting his search for protection.

4.4 Agreeing to go

A small minority of participants expressed a desire to return to their countries of origin, motivated by different factors, ranging from the need to get out of detention to reinventing oneself and starting anew (see also Collyer 2018). Some had travel plans in place and were awaiting their flights, while others articulated their thoughts about going. In contrast to detainees like Henry, Siad (late twenties, Somalia, Colnbrook IRC) viewed the option of leaving the UK as a welcome chance to start again. He spoke eloquently about how his multiple experiences with immigration detention, and the Home Office's attempts to deport him, had motivated him to leave. As we sat outside on the blue exercise equipment in one of the courtyards at Colnbrook IRC, Siad described the painful feeling of being 'unwanted' in a country he had thought he belonged.

I kind of made the mistake that people in my age group usually make, of thinking that they belong. Did that make sense? Cause I thought, yeah, I grew up here. I lived here all my life, basically. So, I must belong here. Like, I identified with this country, with these people. When I say these people, I mean the people in the UK, the so-called British people. But apparently, I didn't.

Siad had grown tired of fighting the Home Office to stay in the UK, a lengthy process that had negatively impacted his mental health, resulting in addictions and suicidal ideation. He was also worried about the stain of his criminal record on his future employment prospects in the UK. Siad viewed a return to Somalia as an opportunity to, in his words, 'start a whole new life' and take advantage of his language abilities and UK-based education—what Golash-Boza

(2016) terms ‘foreign-earned capital’—to enter into business in the country’s growing economy:

... the way I see it, the best time to start something and make it a big project, like a big company, is when you have minimal competition. As in, where everything’s on the same level. I mean, there are a couple of things that are established there, but nothing on the same level as in the UK or in America or in the western world. Like everything there is just now starting to emerge.

Through repeated detentions and the prolonged fight over his deportation order, Siad felt the pain of exclusion from his perceived home yet hoped for a better future in the land of his birth.

For a few others, like Abdul (thirties, Pakistan, Campsfield House IRC), the possibility of a return to his country of origin was a welcome option, even as the experience of detention and forced return was an undignified affront to their sense of self. On a picnic table near the football pitch at Campsfield House IRC, I spoke with Abdul about his experiences of the UK and of detention. He stated that ‘the UK is a cage’, pointing to his experiences as a migrant worker without the right to work. Abdul contrasted his experiences of living in the UK to those of British citizens and (privileged) tourists. Abdul was motivated to return to Pakistan because his life in the UK was hard:

[Y]ou have to get up early in the morning. You have to go to the job. When you come back, there’s no social activities at all. You can’t go anywhere else.

The cage he describes was characterised by familial responsibility as his ‘parents are waiting’ for the money he remits through his work, dependent on him for their survival. Abdul said he was ‘totally fed up of this life’, noting that it was good ‘but just for a few years [...] because [after] that your body needs some rest. But if you still live in UK, you can’t get the rest’. Even though he was angry at being detained, he welcomed the option of going home and leaving his difficult life as an unauthorised migrant worker.

Bruna (late twenties, Brazil, Yarl’s Wood IRC) expressed similar thoughts to Abdul. From the confinements of immigration detention, she explained that she was happy to go back to Brazil after spending seven years living in the UK irregularly. Removal from Britain marked, for her, a natural ending to this particular migration and to all of the difficulties (e.g., working long hours) associated with her life as an irregular migrant, which, in her words, ‘was not life’. Without the ability to regularise her status, going home was a welcome option.

For participants like Siad, Abdul, and Bruna, acquiescing to the state’s command that they go home were agentic negotiations of their deportability in the context of limited options. More specifically, compliance with the Home Office’s removal processes allowed them to reframe their deportability as a rejection of the UK and its unfair treatment of them as ‘foreign criminals’ (in Siad’s case) and as migrant workers (in the cases of Abdul and Bruna). As Kubal (2014: 105–6) has shown, ‘resistance by withdrawal, resistance by return’ are options exercised by some irregular migrants as a way of ‘not having anything to do with’ systems deemed exploitative, uncompromising, and unfair.

5. Discussion

The data presented above highlight the affective implications and governmental effects of the experience of deportability whilst confined in British IRCs. The spectre of a forced return is experienced differently for detainees depending on a variety of factors, including the age at which they migrated and their length of time in the UK, their connections to their countries of origin, and whether they had criminal convictions resulting in mandatory deportation orders. However, for most participants in this research project, negotiating deportability from immigration detention was a particularly difficult experience.

Within IRCs, the experience of detention combined with the threat of expulsion produced feelings of anger and betrayal over what were viewed as unjust practices. For many detainees, the interconnected practices of detention and expulsion challenged their sense of identity (i.e., as British or a British resident), belonging (i.e., of being where they want to be and where they feel they fit), and home (i.e., their perceived place(s) of comfort and connection). This was especially the case for long-term residents who had migrated with their families as children and had grown up in the UK and had significant histories (e.g., schooling, work, social) and familial connections there. Detention and expulsion were commonly seen to destroy lives and tear apart homes, while forcibly unmaking identities and upsetting feelings of belonging. To be told to go home when one thought they were home was both a painful and frustrating experience. It threatened detainees' ontological security and negatively affected their emotional well-being.

Participants' accounts of deportability show that immigration detention is an especially problematic site from which to face the possibility of forced expulsion from the UK. The inability to adequately prepare, both materially and emotionally, generated negative feelings for most, including anxiety, depression, anger, and a deep sense of injustice. The carceral environments of detention and the significant institutional restrictions on their agency made preparing for the possibility of return extremely challenging to negotiate. The spectre of forced return from detention weighed heavily on detainees' minds. Like Hasselberg (2016b), this research finds that the lived experience of deportability from immigration detention is not one of imagining a return 'home' but a painful departure from the UK and all of the associated losses (see also Turnbull and Hasselberg 2017; Turnbull 2018).

Detainees' narratives highlight the fears associated with the possibility of being returned, underscoring the challenges that administrative removal and deportation bring about, including stigmatization, destitution, precarity, and loss of identity. The inability to practicably prepare for their return seemed to compound such fears and accentuate the experience of powerlessness. As a strategy of controlling unwanted migration, immigration detention may serve the state's interest in getting rid of people defined as unwanted or disposable, but it does not enable people to prepare for this next (forced) migration, regardless of whether they perform the role of 'ideal detainee' (Conlon & Gill 2013) or reject and fight against their deportability.

The impact of immigration detention is also noteworthy in terms of motivating individuals to ‘give up’ and agree to their expulsion. Several participants narrated how they did not want to be trapped endlessly in detention. Consequently, they saw the most plausible route to freedom was agreeing to go. For others, compliance was also a form of resistance (Kubal 2014) in which they rejected what they perceived as unfair legal systems and exploitative labour markets. The institutional and bureaucratic practices imposed by the system of immigration detention and the lack of affordable legal assistance made fighting to stay a difficult and often lengthy undertaking. It is perhaps unsurprisingly that, for some, ‘voluntary departure’ was the best option to bring an end to the uncertainty of indefinite detention. Here, agency is exercised within a context in which detainees’ choices are significantly constrained.

6. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that immigration detention is an especially challenging context from which to negotiate deportability and contend with expulsion from the UK. In detention, the effects of power work to govern potential departures in ways that limit the options available to detainees as deportable subjects. This paper points to several institutional and bureaucratic elements of detention that make it a unique site from which to negotiate deportability and act in accordance with differing desires to stay or go. Having considered detainees’ lived experiences of deportability and their perceptions of the possibility of leaving the UK, often against their wishes and occasionally by force, this paper has shown how IRCs can be understood as ‘sites of struggle’ (Strange et al. 2017) in which detainees negotiate this exercise of state power in the context of extreme uncertainty, vulnerability, and unpredictability characteristic of life in British IRCs. The various strategies of action underscore the challenges of exerting agency within coercive and isolating carceral institutions. For some, agreeing to go emerged as the best option in the context of limited choice.

Facing expulsion from the confines of immigration detention raises important issues about the nature and extent of the British state’s responsibility to these migrants in its ‘care’. The purpose of detention in the UK, as per the Detention Centre Rules 2001, is about ‘holding’ people in ‘safe and secure’ environments. It is not about reforming or preparing people for their (potential) future lives in other countries (Bosworth 2012), but rather, quite simply, ensuring people go. As each returnee is deposited in their country of origin (or third country), the British state absolves its responsibility for what comes next: destitution, (re)integration, remigration. Getting rid of unwanted migrants is the paramount policy goal, which reflects the domestic concerns of the British state (see also Blitz et al. 2005; Cassarino 2015; Collyer 2018).

As a key site where concerns about identity, belonging, and home are contested, immigration detention does more than hold non-citizens. The effects of power work to unmake people’s identities and their senses of belonging and home, while imposing largely unwanted alternatives. The interconnected policies and practices of detention and deportation reorder and re-situate the (largely racialised) bodies whom the British state deems out of place. Attending to how those subject to these exercises of state power narrate their experiences and possible futures helps make visible the violence of these practices and how they may be resisted.

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Notes

1. In the UK, administrative removal and deportation are separate legal processes and categories. Although both involve the expulsion of individuals to another country and restrictions on re-entry (ranging from one year to ten years' duration), deportation refers specifically to individuals who are subject to expulsion due to their criminal convictions and is now mandatory for those receiving sentences of imprisonment greater than 12 months. In this paper, I use both terms in reference to their specific contexts whereas use the term 'expulsion' to refer generally to the practice of forcibly removing people.
2. However, as of December 2017, 2,138 persons were held in detention, plus another 407 individuals were confined in one of Her Majesty's (HM) Prisons (Home Office 2018).
3. There is not space here to detail the important implications of the Home Office's use of 'go home', either in its communications with detainees or as a slogan through its 'hostile environment' campaign, as a form of political power with governmental effects.
4. Individuals facing expulsion may file judicial reviews of their removal directions in order to stop (albeit, in many cases, temporarily) their flights. In some instances, individuals with tickets on commercial airlines may refuse to participate in their removal, causing disruptions to their flight once on board the airplane by shouting and pleading to stay, encouraging the support from other passengers and the captain to be removed from the plane. Cancellations due to administrative decisions by the Home Office typically occur when there are issues with individuals' paper work, including the emergency travel documents that are legally necessary to pursue removal and deportation.
5. The following descriptions of the fieldwork sites reflect conditions of operation at the time of fieldwork. IRCs are not static institutions; regimes change, as do the private companies operating the centres.
6. This centre also has a small short-term female unit that operates a more relaxed regime.
7. Dover IRC closed in October 2015.
7. In 2013 during the early stages of fieldwork, the then UK Border Agency and the IRC operators pushed an assisted voluntary return (AVR) program, which was contracted to the British charity Refuge Action, within IRCs. In addition to financial incentives, this program offered eligible participants the chance of a more 'normal' return flight 'home', such as flying without private security escorts.
9. A common pathway into detention is being detained when 'signing on' at one of the Home Office's immigration reporting centres.
10. At the research sites, I observed that the welfare offices provided information or assistance for detainees who needed to retrieve their property as part of their preparations for expulsion. For instance, at Campsfield House IRC, a participant reported that the centre could arrange for a company to pick up his things and deliver them to the IRC for £50.
11. Detention Service Order 06/2013: Reception and Induction Checklist and Supplementary Guidance (Home Office 2013a); Detention Service Order 06-2012: Management of Property (Home Office 2012).

12. As per Detention Service Order 01/2013: Paid Work (Home Office 2013b), the standard hourly wage is £1.00 capped at a 30-hour work week. At the time of writing, legal proceedings have been launched against the Home Office by several detainees to challenge this policy (Taylor 2017).
13. The Dublin III Regulation stipulates that only one European Union Member State is responsible for determining an asylum application. Consequently, an individual may be returned to the Member State deemed responsible for her or his application (EUR-Lex 2015).

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