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# Green Hell: Detention, art, and activism in an English landscape

STEPHANIE HEMELRYK DONALD 

KAYA DAVIES HAYON 

\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

RESEARCH



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## ABSTRACT

This paper revolves on the carceral practices of Morton Hall IRC (Immigration Removal Centre) and of the role of visual imagery in the campaigns against them. Morton Hall is located in Lincolnshire, a rural county in England with a long history of agricultural innovation. It observes and debates a sense of the dissonance between institution and location that Morton Hall shared with Manus Island in the Pacific, the site of another postcolonial prison camp also in a beautiful setting. We interrogate how the legacies of British colonialism in the Pacific might help to explain that shared incongruity between function and place. We discuss a public initiative that aimed to give artistic and activist expression to these insights by highlighting the physical, historical, and emotional connections between Lincoln, the surrounding countryside, and the IRC. The aim of this planned event, The Big Walk, was to show that there is no absolute spatial disconnect between places of incarceration and places of freedom. In describing and analysing the cultural legacy of the planned event, curtailed by the 2020 pandemic, we draw on the wider oeuvre of British-Croatian artist, Natasha Davis, which include a film (2020) commissioned to replace the Walk and yet draw attention to the landscape as layered by time and memory, a landscape that yields up a cross-temporal narrative spored beneath our feet.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Stephanie Hemelryk Donald**

University of Technology  
Sydney, Australia

[shdonald1@me.com](mailto:shdonald1@me.com)

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'The beauty of this green hell burns to the deepest depth of our souls.' (Boochani, *Remain*)

In his pioneering book *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams demonstrated not only that the progressive domination of capitalist social relations over several centuries physically shaped the changing rural landscape of England, but also that, of necessity, the ways in which English poets, novelists and visual artists saw and represented that landscape was a form of ideological engagement as much as an aesthetic response. In this article, albeit now with the emphasis on the legacies of colonialism and migration and on critical rather than affirmative art practices, we examine the continuing salience of Williams's propositions as they informed contemporary activism and art making in relation to a specific topic and a specific location: the existence of an Immigration Removal Centre (HMIRC) at Morton Hall in pastoral Lincolnshire.

The methodology underpinning the work described below is best characterised as community-oriented grounded activism, or research as reflective pilgrimage. We developed practice-based research that treated the contemporary systems of detention of forced migrants (Donald, 2018, 2019; Cox, 2015) through creative actions that arose from public interventions and ethical challenges from activists and service providers. The work of Australian Iranian photographer and video-maker, Hoda Afshar was the focus of a 2019 UK exhibition entitled

*There's No Place Like Home: Migration, Detention and the Arts*. Her two-channel video *Remain* (2018), filmed on Manus in Papua New Guinea (PNG), had exploded Australian theories that the refugees abandoned on Manus following the closure of the detention centre in 2017 were safe. In the opening sequence, then-detainee and artist Behrouz Boochani stands by a waterfall in Manus PNG, smoking a cigarette and uses the term 'green hell' to refer to the cruel contradiction between the miserable and dangerous conditions of the Manus offshore detention project and the lush tropical beauty of the Pacific Island on which it was located (Tofighian, 2020). In this sequence he is thinking specifically about a fellow detainee who drowned in the waterfall. It was one of several refugee suicides on the island.

In a continuing process of grounded critique and creative growth, the phrase, and the relocation of Afshar's film into an English arts centre, prompted a chain of thought about the parallel dissonance between function and location that eventually led to *It Takes a Decade* (Davis, 2020), a short film exploring the themes of migration, detention and pilgrimage in relation to the rural Lincolnshire countryside, and one of the main points of focus of this article.

Afshar's film/two channel video of Manus was first screened in an English setting in 2019 at *Mansions of the Future*, an Arts Council England funded project in Lincoln, a small city in the rural county of Lincolnshire, UK (Figure 1). The screening was part of an exhibition and workshop series



**Figure 1** Talking to Boochani on Manus after watching *Remain* in Lincoln (Matt Snellin, 2019).

designed to explore the Australian detention system and make ongoing abuses more widely known. In preparation for the show and the workshops, activists pointed out that similarly traumatic detention practices were also taking place very nearby in the Morton Hall Immigration Removal Centre, funded by the British government. It was also mooted in a public debate, by a refugee action group leader, Rosie, that anyone in the room should make an attempt to visit the detention centre (or IRC) on their doorstep as a first action in confronting the state practices of detention, removal, and traumatising that have characterised British and Australian approaches to irregular arrivals across the 21st century. This intervention pointed to the need for connected acknowledgment of the production of postcolonial, punitive and grounded 'green hells' in places that are linked by British imperial practices of entitled occupation or historical appropriation (Bhattacharya, 2019), and the aggressive responses to the long-term mobilities that imperial networks have themselves enabled and necessitated.

The purpose of our localised interaction with community activists and professional artists was to 'underpin, provoke, catalyse and understand strategies through which creative and curatorial arts practices inform and refine public understanding of the experience of contemporary migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; influence the practice of artists and professional curators as they engage with questions of migration, displacement, detention and hospitality, and inject a cultural and creative dimension into campaigns for the ethical treatment of refugees and asylum seekers' (JAM Network, 2019).

Our structuring narrative here is an account of the response to that challenge to visit the nearby detention centre, of the interruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and of the subsequent evolution and creation of a short film, *It Takes a Decade*, made by the British-Croatian artist Natasha Davis during the summer of 2020. *It Takes a Decade* can be understood, as described above, as a piece of action research, rooted in political geography, curatorial and socially embedded arts practice, and cross-cultural visual and sound-based communications for social impact. This research does not reside in a linear methodology but reports against a combination of critical analysis, engaged creative practice, and responsive engagement with stakeholders (see Donald, 2018a and 2019a).

Bringing together academics, curators, creatives, activists, and other members of the public, the overarching project was entitled *There's No Place Like Home* and addressed notions of home and homelessness. It situated those debates in some of the ways in which artists – principally photographers, filmmakers, composers, and writers – have documented and engaged with the experiences of migration and detention in various places around the world: most notably, the Australian

Government's detention centre on Manus Island, in the Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea. As noted already, local activists responded to the concept by requiring a parallel and embedded consideration of the meaning of Morton Hall IRC.

## LOCATION

The location of the exhibition and events that led to the making of Davis's film is crucial to the methodology, which we position as situated action research aligned with curatorial practice. The situation in question is the relationships between a small city (Lincoln) and its rural hinterland (the rest of the county), between a postcolonial nation-state (Australia) and its island neighbours (Papua New Guinea), and between a defunct empire (England/Britain) and the space its practices still occupy in the politics of migration.

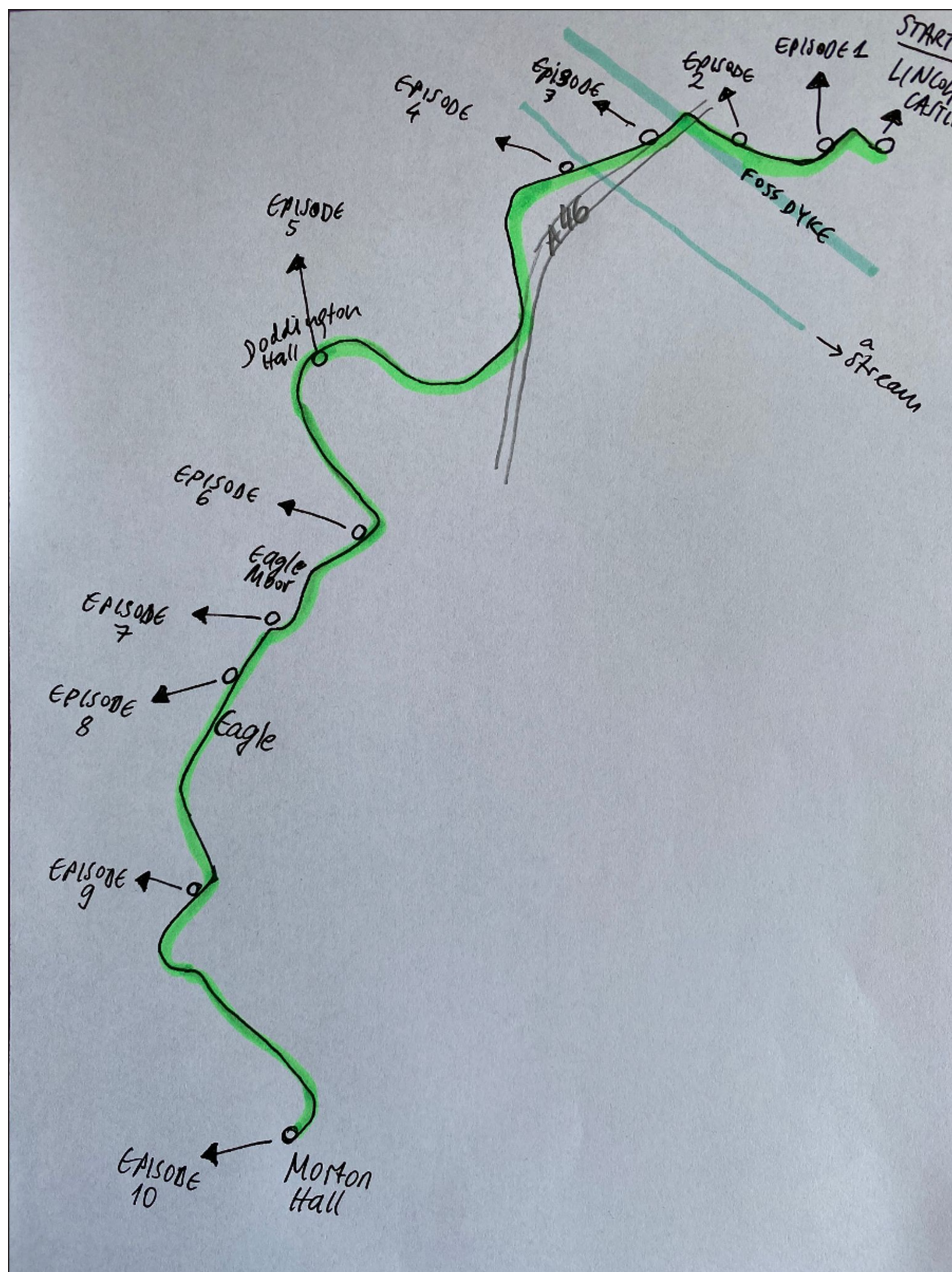
Lincoln is a small cathedral city that hosts a new university and an old castle, as well as a prison that once held Irish Republican leader Eamon de Valera, who escaped, and, more recently, the disgraced Tory peer and thriller writer, Jeffrey Archer. It is a city that retains the structures and architecture of its past, from the long, steep hill that leads from the working heart of the city, once a busy port, up through a mediaeval enclave where tanners plied their trade and hefted leather up and down the hill, to the wealthier and picturesque Cathedral quarter, and the remnants of a Roman settlement (Colyer, 1975; Jones, 2002). Plaques inform the visitor that, as well as being a fortification, the hill was used as a retirement place for centurions of the Roman Empire past their fighting age. It has long been seen as a holy city, a fortress, and a sanctuary. It is also an ancient place of pilgrimage, a site of anti-Semitic violence (Booth 2020), and home to an Immigration Removal Centre/detention centre which is 12 miles by foot (a 5–6 hour walk across varied agricultural terrain and public footpaths) (Figures 2a–e) and ten minutes by car (the route taken by the many Lincoln residents who work at Morton Hall). This is a city and a region well used to living within the violent contradictions that are imbricated in Williams' nostalgic view of community and belonging. The site of a child's (a boy called Hugh) drowning in Lincoln was one of the most popular places of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. The child's death was accidental but upwards of 50 Jews were killed in the aftermath of the incident and the story was repeated and embellished to further outlaw Jews in England for centuries (Heng, 2012). The belonging and religiosity of the city are founded squarely on unequal treatment of outsiders, especially Jews.

Whilst the idea of pilgrimage underscored our collective decision to walk from Lincoln to Morton Hall, it was not therefore in naive mimicry of the city's past. A pilgrim intends personal spiritual change, describing this commitment via a physical journey from one place to



another, the road as important as the arrival. Even in the literature of tourism and pilgrimage (the two intersect) that notion of multiple sacralities and transformations remains pertinent (Balestrieri and Conjiu, 2017; Di Giovine and Choe, 2019). Our original decision to walk to the detention centre (walks which occurred individually, and in a small group in 2019) (Figures 2b, 2c, 2d, 2e and 3a, 3b, 3c) was thus both a small act of respect to our fellow Lincolnshire residents in Morton Hall, forced to be our neighbours via detention, and an imaginary journey across time between the places where outsiders, refugees, and Indigenous peoples have been killed in the aftermath of the protracted incident of Englishness and the Empire. The larger 'Big Walk' pilgrimage (see route map below Figure 2a) from Lincoln Castle to Morton Hall IRC was curtailed by the pandemic.

Morton Hall IRC sits in a hamlet twelve miles by foot from the centre of Lincoln, close to the larger village of Swinderby. Its proximity is such that it shares its postcode, LN6, with the city University that has done much to regenerate the city's economy and culture in recent years. The facility at Morton Hall was first established as a Royal Air Force Base in 1966. It was converted into a prison for women in 1985, and then repurposed again in 2011 to hold detainees awaiting deportation, a decision on their appeals for asylum, or clarification of the status of their visas. 'Hall' has connotations of a country estate, but there is no longer sign of any such place; the original buildings having been destroyed in a fire in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The nearest extant Hall (in any case much grander than the destroyed Morton Hall), stands on the Doddington Estate (Figure 3b), built



**Figure 2a** Davis' first map imagining the performative interventions.





**Figure 2b, c, d, e** Testing the route to the IRC in November 2019, Mansions of the Future curatorial team (Photographs, Colette Griffith, 2019).



**Figure 3a, b, c** Walking to Morton Hall in Spring via Doddington Hall (courtesy Hollie L.S. Morgan, 2020).

in 1585, five miles from the prison and a stopping point on the walking route to the Hall. The current buildings at Morton Hall are in no way beautiful or welcoming. They have the dour aspect of any prosaic prison block, enclosed by green metal fences and large quantities of razor wire. Yet, the prison is set in a very beautiful

rural environment, surrounded by farmland, including the Doddington Estate, and close to the Lincolnshire fenlands. (The name ‘Morton’ derives from the German word for fen, *das Moor*: a legacy of its settlement by migrant Angles (Anglo Saxon) in the fourth and fifth centuries.)



## PERSPECTIVE

Prior to Rosie's intervention: 'who has actually been to Morton Hall?', we had asked a refugee support group (SYMAAG) in Sheffield whether any of their number – especially those who had been detained and could speak to that experience – would talk on a panel as part of the exhibition-related events. The organisers responded that it was too dangerous for active asylum seekers to be politically visible, but they introduced us to a settled ex-refugee and his work documenting activism at Morton Hall. His resulting contribution to the *There's No Place Like Home* exhibit offered ways of looking and seeing that helped us to make sense of this disconcerting juxtaposition of traumatic human incarceration against a backdrop of a well-managed and green English landscape.

Manuchehr is a Kurdish Iranian photographer, who first settled first in the United Kingdom as a refugee and now lives in Sheffield. Manuchehr's photography is a facet of his activism, whose aim is to end the mandatory and potentially indefinite detention of people generally termed 'migrants' in the UK press and by British politicians. For several years, he was the principal image maker for demonstrations against the IRC at Morton Hall, and he gave the *There's No Place Like Home* project access to his archive covering the years from 2017 through 2019. At his invitation, the authors also attended a demonstration at Morton Hall in late 2019.

Most of Manuchehr's work focuses on three subjects: protestors, the fence, and, at exceptional moments, the detainees. Protestors are sometimes pictured singly and sometimes in groups. Often, they are shown holding up handmade signs or carrying banners and the insignia of anti-racist organisations. The protestors at Morton Hall came on buses mainly from Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds: not just big university cities, but also places where support organisations are based and where volunteers render help to ex-detainees and others living in the UK's self-proclaimed 'Hostile Environment' – a set of policies initiated by then Home Secretary Theresa May in 2012. The geography of detention is arranged so as to make these urban support networks less easily available. The geographer Deirdre Conlon and her fellow researchers have analysed the systematic distribution of detainees and prisoners to rural and remote sites. They have deduced from the geography of the sites chosen that the UK State's intention is that 'detention not only removes people from social and economic networks and communities, but that it becomes embedded (both economically and culturally) in the economies of rural communities' (Conlon, Hiemstra and Mountz, 2017: 144). This refers us back to the importance of Lincoln, a city in one of the poorest counties in the UK, where unemployment in 2019 trended at twice that of the average UK rate, and where salaries are generally low. Here, any employment is welcome, and mainstream political critiques of a major employer are unlikely.<sup>2</sup> The



**Figure 4** At the Perimeter Fence (Courtesy Manuchehr 2018).



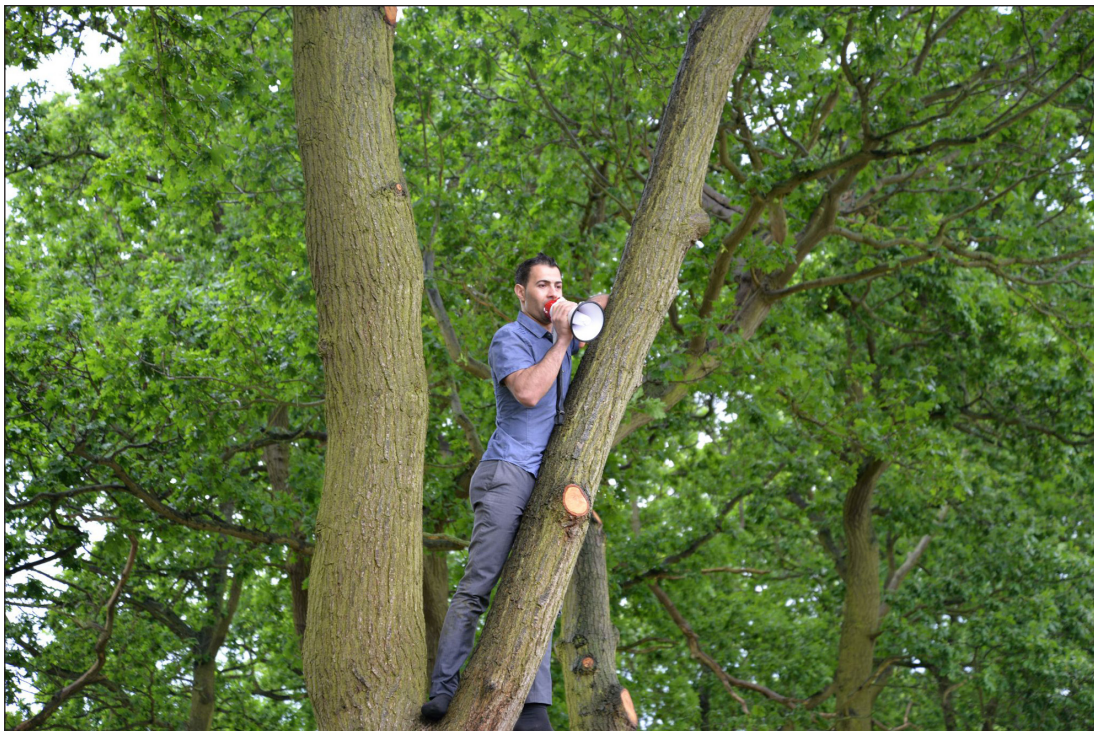
concentration of prison employment in the peripheral village of Swinderby is also significant, from probation officers to waste disposal operatives, the prison is a key employer.

The Manuchehr photographs reveal the perversity of this carceral ruralisation, displaying a prison nested in a green landscape ringed by trees. One image in particular

captures the essence of this place and its impact on human relations. Manuchehr's image of one detainee, Narumar, behind the wire (Figure 5a) stands out as an image that exceeds the usual expectations of protest photography. He also supplied a companion image of the same man outside the wire (Figure 5b) on a later date (after his detention was finally proven illegal, he returned



**Figure 5a** Narumar/Detainee behind the wire, here. (Credit: Manuchehr 2018).



**Figure 5b** Narumar outside the wire after release. (Credit: Manucher 2019).



to protest the incarceration of others). This sequence is an example of the type of photograph that can, in David Company's words, 'tell us valuable things about the flux from which it came' (Company, 2020: 11). The first photograph is unusual because the height of the main fence normally makes it impossible to see into the prison from the outside and the entrance yard is out of bounds to inmates whenever protestors are in the vicinity. Prison staff and police authorities strongly discouraged, or actively prevented, detainees from making contact with the visitors outside. In response, demonstrators developed the practice of singing and drumming their heels on the fence, making a noise that the officers could not easily suppress without a physical confrontation on the 'belonging' side of the fence (Figure 4). In this case, however, Narumar has managed to climb high enough to be seen through the wire mesh and is clearly shouting back to the supporters outside (Figure 5a). The image thus captures an extraordinary moment of communication, achieved despite its routine suppression. Manuchehr's photographic eye places Narumar exquisitely between two upright fence poles, a solitary figure with a naked torso. There are no other figures in sight. He appears vulnerable in his caged, solitary humanity, but at the same time powerful in his physical athleticism. His physicality is also reminiscent of Afshar's photograph of Boochani, a Kurdish Iranian also detained and also brave enough to shout back (through film, poetry and memoir in his case), and included in the show in Lincoln

(Figure 6). This single image of Narumar relegates all other photographs of the Morton Hall protests to context, admirable and impressive in their record of courage and care, but now subject to the action of the caged man shouting across the internal border of the prison wire. In the second image he mirrors his earlier action and climbs a tree outside with a megaphone to talk back to the detainees he is here to support (Figure 5b).

Narumar's action exposes and challenges the practice of detention in at least three ways. First, he makes himself visible and audible, and therefore also a seeing and hearing agent of the protest event. He commands the field, looking through the boundary fence towards both the photographer, and presumably the protestors and the greenery in which the prison is situated. Second, he thereby becomes part of the protest and, in that way at least, escapes his status as someone beyond society's scope, someone to be 'removed' (de Noronha and Bradley, 2020). Manuchehr informed us that at the time of this protest Narumar's detention was being challenged by lawyers acting on his behalf and, as noted above, he was later released (Figure 5b). In this image, therefore, he can be seen to be performing and prefiguring that release by claiming his place in the frame of resistance. The sight of a human body behind the wire not only makes an individual visible, it also brings into the field of vision the practice of caging refugee and migrant bodies that lies at the heart of the detention system. Other images showing men and women behind wire do not



**Figure 6** Photograph of Boochani at Mansions of the Future, Lincoln, Artist Hoda Afshar (Credit Matt Snellin 2019).

generally manifest the agency of the prisoner with this effect. To take one famous example, Margaret Bourke-White's 'The Day After Liberation, Buchenwald Germany' shows a number of inmates clustered together (Bourke-White, 1945). These men are about to be freed, but their demeanour is quiet. The man at the centre of the group holds the wire with one hand and leans into the image, but his expression, like the faces around him, betrays only mistrust and, above all, exhaustion. Another photograph that resonates with 'Narumar/Detainee behind the wire' is Danny Lyon's 'Prisoner being patted down' (USA, 1968). Here the prisoner, wearing a white shirt, faces the camera in medium close up, with his arms held high in a rough cross. Another man's hands are on his chest, 'patting him down', but the rest of the guard's body is hidden by that of the prisoner. The prisoner holds the image and owns the frame, but he does not transcend it with the energy of Narumar in Manuchehr's brave image. There is no wire in Lyon's photograph, but the guard's hands are sufficient to convey the situation, and to diminish the prisoner's space. The Morton Hall detainee occupies a similar photographic space of incarceration. But the sight of Narumar having climbed to a position above the guards, and also above the protestors on the ground, exceeds the expected documentary evidence of political damage and activist resistance to seen or unseen brutality (Lea, 2009; Thomas, 2018). The photograph ruptures the fabric of the usual suspects, guards and protestors, of the protest event.

Afshar's shots of the Pacific and its greenery in *Remain* drew attention to the British imperial legacies that manifest themselves both on Manus Island and at Morton Hall. The two centres are instances less of post-colonialism than of a revenant colonialism. However, the one reveals the other. In the case of Manus, the Australian Government was using a still quite young and fragile nation that had once been part of the Australian colonies as a dumping ground for displaced men seeking protection (El-Enany and Keenan, 2019). At Morton Hall, in addition to asylum seekers fleeing conflicts and persecution in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Zimbabwe, Somalia and elsewhere, some of the detainees in recent years have been victims of the Windrush scandal: that is, Commonwealth citizens, who had arrived in the UK from previously colonised Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1973 and have been systematically and wrongfully detained, deported and denied legal rights as a result of the UK's Hostile Environment strategy. It has been alleged that two of these Windrush detainees were deliberately deported back to the Caribbean in order to prevent them from testifying at the inquest into the 2017 death at Morton Hall of a Jamaican man, Carlington Spencer, which they had witnessed. In an unusually pointed letter to the Home Secretary in 2020, the coroner asked the Home Office why 'no formal, declared statements were obtained timeously from these witnesses' before their removal (Bulman 2019; Townsend 2021).

## HISTORY

The juxtaposition of Manus Island and Morton Hall threw up another historical connection that is both serendipitous and absolutely to be expected. The wealthy Enlightenment naturalist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) is probably best remembered for his role, while still a young man, as chief scientist and botanist on Captain James Cook's first voyage on the *Endeavour* to the Pacific Ocean between 1768 and 1771. Having circumnavigated New Zealand and then arrived on the east coast of Australia, where they named Botany Bay for its profusion of plant life, Cook and Banks sailed on to explore the coastlines of Pacific Islands, including Papua New Guinea. It is not clear whether Banks visited Manus in particular. In his scientific fieldwork, Banks was dedicated not just to observing the natural history of the lands they visited, but also to collecting specimens of plant life and to documenting the lives and cultures of indigenous populations both in visual images and in ethnographic descriptions. (He was rich enough to fund an extensive team of visual artists as well as botanists and other scientists.) Banks was undeniably a pioneer of British colonialism in the obvious sense that he lobbied successfully for the colonisation of New South Wales (including the establishment of its penal colony) and continued throughout his life to promote expeditions in search of resources that could be imported into the colonial metropolis in order to drive the growth of the British economy. Equally, he can be seen as a prototype of a certain colonialist mentality or disposition. In his voracious curiosity and thirst for knowledge, Banks displayed the colonist's compulsion to render colonised spaces, colonised resources and colonised populations manageable and exploitable by recording, categorising and taxonomizing their every detail in the metropolitan archive.

That archive manifested itself in a number of institutional forms. Banks's house in Soho Square in London contained both his library and his extensive botanical collections: it became, in effect, an informal research institute. Having donated many plants from his voyage on the *Endeavour* to the Chelsea Physic Garden, Banks went on to advise King George III on the creation of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, where specimens collected from around the world by Banks himself and by the many plant hunters he funded were transplanted (Goodman, 2020). As a trustee of the British Museum, Banks also collaborated with Hans Sloane in setting up many of its collections. In a letter to Banks in 1793, the politician Robert Hobart (after whom Tasmania's capital is named) told him: 'wide as the world is, traces of you are to be found in every corner' (Hoppitt, 2018: 407). As Michael Rothberg has argued, however, the relationship between metropole and colony is always *multidirectional* rather than *unidirectional*. It is not just a question of the



colonial power leaving its traces around the world. In attempting to understand specifically the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust, Rothberg invokes Hannah Arendt's notion of 'boomerang effects' and Aimé Césaire's *choc en retour* (translated as 'boomerang effect' but more accurately 'backlash' or 'reverse shock') to show how the violence of the colonial encounter returned to Europe and manifested itself as genocide (Rothberg 2009: 23–24). Less traumatically, but not without injury, Kew Gardens and the British Museum stand as monuments to the (aptly named) 'boomerang effect' whereby the far-flung 'traces' left in Australia and elsewhere by Banks and his fellows entailed the expropriation of exotic flora and anthropological artefacts, their transportation to London, and their curation in such a way that they would become both material and symbolic components of an English national heritage.

Although Banks is known primarily as the global Enlightenment 'man of science', he was equally a Lincolnshire man – and, more specifically, an influential Lincolnshire landowner. Although born in London, Banks spent his childhood from the age of two until he packed off to boarding school in Lincolnshire, at the family's huge estate, Revesby Abbey, thirty miles or so from Morton Hall. It was there that he first developed his interest in nature and especially in plant life. When he inherited the estate at the age of just eighteen, Banks became one of the richest men in England, and it was with the revenues from Revesby and his other properties that he funded the voyage with Cook, the research centre in Soho Square, and his many other projects (Hoppitt, 2018: 420). Banks undertook his last overseas voyage, to Iceland, in the early 1770s. Although he continued to support scientific expeditions and remained an influential voice on colonial matters, his interests and activities became increasingly national and, indeed, provincial. In the last four decades of his life, Banks regularly lived at Revesby Abbey for a couple of months each year, managing his affairs, becoming involved in the life and politics of the county, and devoting his considerable energy and resources to draining and repurposing the fenlands on and around his property (Hoppitt, 2018: 411; Werrett, 2019). Even in Lincolnshire, however, the older Banks still displayed the 'traces' of his colonial encounters. They are most evident, perhaps, in the way that he combined the efficient exploitation of the land's natural resources with an aesthetic and anthropological impulse to record the world he saw around him. Between 1789 and 1797, for example, he commissioned the artist Jean Claude Nattes to produce hundreds of drawings and watercolours of Lincolnshire landscapes, churches, and houses, at the same time as he amassed a substantial archive of maps, pamphlets, and books about the county, past and present (Hoppitt, 2018: 413).

Can Joseph Banks's colonial experiences, land management, and pastoral aesthetic help to explain

the apparent incongruity of the rural setting of a contemporary detention centre? Part of the answer may be implicit in Raymond Williams's complaint that the history of the English landscape in the eighteenth century has been 'foreshortened' in standard accounts of its development.

Reading some of these histories you might almost believe – you are often enough told – that the eighteenth-century landlord, through the agency of his hired landscapers, and with poets and painters in support, invented natural beauty. And in a way, why not? In the same ideology, he invented charity, land-improvement and politeness, just as when he and his kind went to other men's countries, such countries were 'discovered'. (Williams, 1973: 120)

That outward movement of 'discovery', and the subsequent colonial biopolitics of racial hierarchies and the forced movement or confinement of Indigenous *people*, produced their own 'boomerang effects' in terms of an inward movement of *things* that helped to form (and deform) the metropolitan culture and its imagined histories. Noting how the English word 'boomerang' not only 'emerges out of a colonial encounter' but also 'indexes a genocidal history', Rothberg sees a potential downside to the metaphor of its 'circular trajectory' insofar as certain histories 'risk falling into oblivion'. The occlusion of the colonial determinants of English wealth and English culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can then be cited as another factor in the 'foreshortening' of histories of the English landscape. At the same time, however, Rothberg suggests that situating such histories 'on the arc of the boomerang' can provide 'the means to return to those silences and to return them to a multidirectional archive of collective memory' (Rothberg, 2009: 65). A telling example of recovering such multidirectional memory is evident in an interview given in 2020 by the barrister, Martin Forde, about the experiences of the Windrush generation. In 2018, Forde, himself the son of Windrush parents, had been appointed by the Home Secretary to design a compensation scheme for victims of the scandal. In acquitting that task, Forde was shocked to be confronted by a wilful and pervasive historical amnesia.

'One of the things that's horrified me in the Windrush scandal has been the lack of obligation this country feels to those citizens. I feel this quite strongly, given that we were enslaved, taken from Africa to the Caribbean and basically provided free labour for hundreds of years which enabled the industrial revolution, and the building of most stately homes and magnificent buildings in this country. No special obligation is felt to their

generation because of what happened to our ancestors.’ (Shotunde, 2020)

Taken together, the foreshortened history of the eighteenth-century English landscape and the British disavowal of any duty of hospitality towards its erstwhile colonial and present postcolonial (ex)subjects reveal the multidirectional determinants of Morton Hall’s particular ‘green hell’. Landscape and prison are two aspects of the same post-Enlightenment logic: the European appropriation of colonial resources, and a biopolitical manifestation of the metropolitan state’s strategic hostility towards colonised or displaced peoples. Different forms of control and incarceration were developed as techniques of colonial rule – not least in the concentration camps the British first set up in South Africa during the Boer War. And further back still, it was the 12th century English who created the ghettoisation of Jewish co-residents before the great expulsions the following century (Heng 2012). Today, in rural Lincolnshire, deportation can be seen as an attempt to reverse, or deflect, the flows of people that have been one boomerang effect of global trade, colonial occupation, war, and genocide. Detention, meanwhile, emphasises the power of the state to manage the consequences of such events in the present, acting on the bodies and minds of those who do not fit in the ever-decreasing legal space of British citizenship (El-Enany, 2020). A doubtless well-intentioned warning from the Citizens’ Advice Bureau makes the normalisation of precarity and unfreedom baldly apparent:

You can be taken into detention at any time. You’re most likely to be taken in when you’re visiting the reporting centre, but it can happen any time. It’s best to be prepared, so make sure you have important documents with you. This includes all your documents related to your immigration case – like copies of applications and refusal decisions. (Citizens’ Advice Bureau, 2019) (quoted by ex-Morton Hall detainee and lawyer/activist, Mujakachi, 2020)

## ART

By the end of the *No Place Like Home* conference in Lincoln, we had developed an awareness of the carceral practices of Morton Hall IRC and of the role of visual imagery in the campaigns against them, a sense of the dissonance between institution and location that Morton Hall shared with Manus Island, and inklings of how the legacies of British colonialism in the Pacific might help to explain that incongruity. At the conference and in subsequent conversations, some of the participants agreed that it would be appropriate to devise a public initiative that might give both artistic and activist

expression to these insights by highlighting the physical, historical, and emotional connections between Lincoln, the surrounding countryside, and the IRC. The aim was to show that there is no absolute spatial disconnect between places of incarceration and places of freedom.

Eventually, those discussions crystallized into a proposal for *The Big Walk*. This envisaged a group of people walking from Lincoln Castle to Morton Hall in a way that would acknowledge earlier demonstrations, but that would infuse their activism with the disruptive insights and affective power of critical, site-specific art. Along with the notion of pilgrimage, there was an intention to disrupt the concept of beating the bounds (Soth, 2020), an ancient practice whereby parishioners learned their territory and used pain against themselves to literally beat that knowledge into their children. Again, the flipside of community spirit is territorial claims and exclusion, at all costs. Nonetheless, the practice did embody some aspects of rural self-determination which were lost by the enclosure movement that commenced with the Tudors in the late 16th century and accelerated into the industrial and colonial periods. The enclosure movement and its effects on rural life provoked religious, political and performative activism (King, 1976, Stokes, 2003).

The call for artists’ involvement hoped to inspire a realisation of the moral conflicts within these ancient practices:

The ancient practices of pilgrimage and walking the walls, beating the bounds, will be re-oriented to an acknowledgment of how the policy of detention without trial plays out in real time for real people in our own county. The walk was not intended to mimic or replicate the work and activities of existing protest and asylum support organisations but will be a collective action, response and acknowledgement of the detention/removal centre and the lives within. (MotF, 2019/2020)

We have noted that the history of Lincoln suggested the framework of a desacralized pilgrimage, in which the act of walking directs the pilgrim’s attention not only to thoughtful observation of the world through which she is passing but also to the process of free-associative memory and introspection that often goes with it. Another part of the inspiration was implicit in the title of *There’s No Place Like Home*: that is, Dorothy’s journey along the Yellow Brick Road in *The Wizard of Oz* (1901/1949), with its evocations of migration, exile, and the quest to find a home. This combined style of thoughtful, performative, and exploratory walking ‘opens the doors of memory to intersecting pasts and undefined futures’, to borrow a phrase from Michael Rothberg. As he adds, however, it need not remain a matter of individual interiority: ‘as



soon as memory is articulated publicly, questions of representation, ethics, and politics arise' (Rothberg, 2009: 35–36). Those were exactly the questions we wanted to address in relation to Morton Hall and its location.

We had heard Natasha Davis reflecting on her own traumatic history of dislocation and migration on a panel at *There's No Place Like Home*, describing how she had left Niš, a city in southern Serbia, on the last possible train as the civil war of the 1990s broke apart the old Yugoslavia, and how she had then spent several years as a stateless person in Greece, before living in Syria, and finally arriving in the UK. She had also talked about her current project, *Welcome Town*, which she was in the process of preparing for Refugee Week, in June 2019. In Lincoln, this took the form of a large-scale performance installation outside the Bus Station, in which Davis played with ideas about how towns might offer genuine hospitality to displaced individuals. By the time she presented *Welcome Town* in Dublin, however, the event had evolved into a 'personal walk' led by Davis herself, which was the occasion for a dialogue about the resilience of towns and their migrant identities (Smith, 2020: 14–15).

Given this background, and the body of work she had developed across live performance, installations, film and writing, Natasha Davis was approached to create a 'performance walk', in collaboration with the East Midlands musician and sound artist, Jane Olson, who was selected via the open call.

As she began to pace out the route from Lincoln to Morton, Davis saw that it contained ten distinct changes in landscape: 'suburban exits out of Lincoln, paths behind peaceful family homes, rising waters in the local river, playgrounds, cornfields, electricity pylons, horse farms, plant nurseries, forests in the dusk, and finally HMIRC Morton Hall' (Smith, 2020: 17) (Figure 2a). The number ten chimed with an insight Davis had often shared with refugee friends: that it takes ten years to recover after being uprooted and displaced. In an interview in 2017, Davis recalled how she was unable to do any artistic work while she was living in Greece: '...I couldn't do anything. To be an artist you have to dig deep. And digging deep at that time meant opening that chasm which I desperately wanted to close. You do lose a decade of your life, in one way or another, when you are displaced' (Marchevska, 2017:40). This idea of a decade of recovery in turn resonated with Davis's realisation that, over the ten years she had spent in the UK, her work had consistently returned to three themes that were strikingly relevant to the experience of the people who had ended up in Morton Hall: that is, migration and border crossings, the vulnerability of the migrant's body, and how memories are evoked from a position of homelessness or exile.

In her 2017 interview, Davis had noted the political significance of dislocation: 'When your citizenship is problematic or disputed, as soon as you start crossing borders, you are unaccounted for as a human being'

(Marchevska, 2017: 39). Whereas the power of Manuchehr's photograph of the climbing man, Narumar, at Morton Hall lies in the way that, instinctively and viscerally, it says *no* to that process of dehumanization, Davis is particularly sensitive to the less heroic, more prosaic price paid by the human (especially female) body for insecurity and statelessness: '... this may work when you are young and you're invincible, but what happens when you need medical care, shelter...?' (Marchevska, 2017: 39). The frailty of the body has to be acknowledged. The body suffers, it ages, and it is harmed by neglect. Thus, Davis's mixed-media installation, *Teeth Show* (2016), offered a 'playful and harrowing' account of the difference in experience between a healthy mouth of a citizen with consistent access to dentistry, as against the neglected mouth of an uprooted migrant. It showed 'who, and across what borders, may have access to beautiful and pain-free teeth, and what options remain to those in precarious or transient situations and those who are left out' (Davis, 2016).

This emphasis on the contingent individual experience of a broad historical phenomenon is central to Davis's art. It demonstrates, or enacts, the *multidimensionality* of memory and, in doing so, it 'encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others' (Rothberg, 2009: 5). That conception of the public sphere is evident in Davis's short film, *Citizenship*, which was part of *Rupture* (2009), a larger work on the impact of the trauma of displacement on the body.

The film starts with the documentation of my 'becoming British' ceremony. In the first part of the oath I pledge that 'on becoming a British citizen I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors, according to law'. During this, the real visual recorded documentation of that event is what the audience watch. In the second part of the oath, I pledge to 'uphold [the United Kingdom's] democratic values, observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen'. But in this part of the film we don't see the ceremony in the Town Hall any more, but the bombed buildings in Belgrade. When my oath is completed, my voice is replaced with wailing Serbian women's voices against the background of the war-torn buildings. (Cianetti, 2016: 55)

Here, Davis's re-enactment of memory, or commemoration, is *multidirectional* as well as multidimensional. Overlaying the ruins of Belgrade on the municipal ceremonies of an English town hall captures her pervasive sense of teetering between and across

borders. In their 2019 film *Berlin-Sarajevo* (2019), Davis and Micha Stelle interview inhabitants of the two cities, both of which have splintered and then reconnected in new ways, and where people retain memories of a different order of things. A woman in Berlin says that she had also felt comfortable ‘in the East’ – that is, East Berlin before reunification. A man says that East and West were not reunified, but that the West had simply swallowed the East whole. In Sarajevo, a young man notes that he has not changed his address, but that the repeated redrawing of geopolitical borders around that address had meant that he had ended up living in ‘five or six countries’. These wistful statements reveal how tightly the local is intertwined with the global (Harb, 2012: 20). They disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to have a home, or not to have a home, by evoking an experience of having both more than one and less than one: ‘to be simultaneously at home and in exile’ (Rothberg, 2003: 154–155).

Davis’s plan was to stage ten events or installations against the changing landscapes between Lincoln and Morton that would enact ‘metaphors of breathing, ruptures, suspensions, decays of the body and the land, stem cells, martial arts, items we deem necessary to take with us on a journey of escape, and so on’ (Smith, 2020: 17). As authors, we were surprised and moved by the way that Natasha had taken the *Big Walk*’s original focus

on Morton Hall as part of a widely discredited detention system and then expanded our ideas while also giving them sharper definition. By zooming in on her own experiences and zooming out to identify their historical conditions of existence, she managed to create a more generalisable and yet absolutely personal narrative of trauma and regeneration (Figures 7b, 7c 7d). By making the traces of her own traumatic uprooting visible in the English countryside, and by evoking the violence normally occluded in the apparent naturalness of its landscape, she was aiming for the disruptive effect of Césaire’s *choc en retour*. In doing so, she found an artistic strategy for engaging with Rothberg’s ‘questions of representation, ethics, and politics’.

*The Big Walk* from Lincoln Castle to Morton Hall had been scheduled for 26 March 2020. In the event, that turned out to be the exact date on which the first English Covid lockdown measures legally came into force. As originally conceived and imagined, the walk was not going to happen. In response, all those involved in the project quickly agreed that Natasha Davis should instead create a ‘poetic video record’ that would turn the performance into a virtual experience for the viewer, now a fellow walker on an imagined journey. *It Takes a Decade* was the outcome.

The film is divided into ten episodes that reflect what would have been the ten staging posts on the planned



Figure 7a, b, c, d Screenshots: A poetic record. *It Takes a Decade* (2020), Natasha Davis (with Jane Olson).



walk. It opens with a shot of Lincoln Castle, with a voice-over.

If you'd met me here at the Castle, we'd have smiled and looked at each other... I would have given you a little box, as a gift.

Davis's hands are shown filling a little box, with a few blades of grass, a twig, a piece of string, and a blue ribbon. She shuts the box carefully. The box is small enough to tuck in any pocket. It would have served as a memento of the walk that was about to be taken, as a memory. The film cuts to a path by houses, and then a green fringed with trees, still in the bounds of Lincoln city. The voice-over continues:

I would have had a large blue cloth with me. A sea of memories. I'd have run into the green with it.

A figure runs into shot and then away into the distance. She holds aloft an expanse of silk, the size of a large bedsheet, that billows behind her (Figure 7a). It is the same blue as the ribbon in the box each walker would have been given.

And I'd have asked you to imagine, I'd have asked you to imagine being taken out of one of the beautiful homes at the side of this green, imagine ... leaving all of this behind.

In these opening shots we have seen the solid structure of an English mediaeval castle, the lane running beside Victorian villas, built with imperially derived middle-class wealth, and a green space that may have been green for centuries. We have seen a woman run with a blue cloth which she calls a 'sea of memories', and we have been asked to imagine homelessness, forced eviction, loss. To embark on this walk is to leave familiar milestones and places of safety and head towards something wilder, less certain, and perhaps dangerous, but also something that may be uncannily familiar.

The 'sea of memories' evoked by Davis's blue cloth crystallizes Rothberg's ideas about multidimensional and multidirectional memory. Historically, the equation of *memory* with *sea* recalls how different seas have been an actor in different movements of conquest, displacement, and migration. The Atlantic is eternally marked by the shame of the Middle Passage. The Mediterranean is a sea on which colonial interactions and entanglements that transcend continental and national boundaries have long played out – including, most recently, the dangerous traffic of refugees from Libya and elsewhere in Africa to the shores of southern Europe (Borutta and Gekas, 2012: 2). In Australia, two centuries after the invasion of the ships of the First Fleet, asylum seekers arriving by boat have either been forcibly pushed back at

sea – a 'cruel and deadly practice', according to a senior UN official, which violates international law and risks sending people back to death, torture or persecution – or else they have been taken offshore and incarcerated in camps (Doherty, 2021). In the first twenty years of this century, meanwhile, on a small island off mainland Europe, almost three hundred asylum seekers, including thirty-six children, died trying to cross the English Channel (Taylor, 2020). As critical migration scholars are showing in recent work, these deaths are part of the colonial legacy of offshoring and repulsion (Davies, Isakjee, Mayblin and Turner, 2021).

As a metaphor, the sea evokes a sense of memory's own powerful cross-currents, tides, storms, and hidden depths. A 'sea of memories' suggests a force that is limitless, unbounded and primordial. Freud opens his *Civilization and Its Discontents* with a discussion of the 'oceanic feeling' that Roman Rolland had proposed to him as the source of all religious energy. Although he denies any hint of such a feeling in himself, Freud hypothesised that it must refer to a feeling of 'being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself'; that is, a feeling that predates the formation of the individual ego (Freud, 2002: 4). Davis's blue cloth might thus be seen to conjure up what it is she does as an artist: that is, she draws from the oceanic flux of history images and narratives that can make some sense of the whole, and also, especially, of each individual's place in that whole.

From the start, it is clear the walk in *It Takes a Decade* is a journey through trauma and towards trauma. The laneways of Lincolnshire are now haunted by traces of imagined migrant journeys, with their inevitable delays, detours, hardships and losses: metaphoric journeys, whose reality would nonetheless be recognised by many of those who have ended up in Morton Hall. To underline this point, the film's seventh and tenth episodes feature Davis giving voice to composites and fragments of speech drawn from the words of the detainees.

In Episode 7, the camera tracks around three horses in a field, a palomino, a bay and a grey, all quiet and standing still in place. Only the wind disturbs the silence. The scene shifts to a longer shot of the field, with its long grasses waving in the breeze. Davis's voice-over lists places that have been left, the reasons for leaving, the factors of flight.

I wasn't allowed to be Muslim, Christian, Hindi,  
Gay, to speak freely, to have long hair

...

I had to leave, was forced, was expelled, exiled,  
not wanted, was in danger, had to run away, pay  
for a box in a container on a ship.

Every uprooted migrant has experienced a unique tragedy. Every tragedy has its own words. All these

stories, we are guessing, may end up where we are heading, in a detention centre in an ancient but also much manipulated rural landscape of England.

The words of a former detainee return in Episode 10. Over stills of the prison at night, lit up before a dark brown sky, Davis reads them to us.

You were detained, there was little you could do.  
It was easier for your peace of mind to accept you  
were put there for a reason. ... for something I did  
or didn't do.

The scene cuts to day, with Davis sitting on concrete steps (diagetically at Swinderby Station, but by force of circumstance actually in Copenhagen), still reading.

Soon it will become just a sentence in your whole  
life's story, and ultimately, one day, just a word or  
two.

The film closes with Davis tying the sea-of-memories cloth to the railings beside the steps. There is a strong summer wind blowing and the blue cloth twists and swells, covering the lens of the camera. Memory tied down at last, in a place, even if never wholly securely. This is the wind that blows through the memories of the detainees and the refugees and all those who cross borders in hope or fear, the stuff of Davis's work. The memories remain. Borders are real; damage has consequences. There is resignation, but also hope for renewal. It takes a decade to get beyond trauma, but if you do, and if, when you do, the passage of time that seemed to take hold of your entire being, may become just a sentence or a few words in the final autobiography.

Had the *Big Walk* taken place, participants would have paused for lunch at Doddington Hall. Doddington thus features at mid-point in *It Takes a Decade*, as Episode 5, as the location for Jane Olson's musical contribution (Figure 8). This interlude is signalled earlier, as Episode 3 fades into Episode 4. Over an empty children's playground, Davis is heard humming the tune of the eighteenth-century folk song, 'Country Gardens'. The tune was collected by Cecil Sharp from the playing of William Kimber in 1906. It gained widespread popularity in 1918 in a piano transcription by the obnoxious (fascist sympathiser) Australian musician and composer, Percy Grainger, and then again as 'English Country Garden' in the early 1960s recording by the country singer Jimmie Rodgers. As we first hear it, Natasha Davis speaks over the music, recalling her happy childhood in Yugoslavia with her brother and parents, before the civil war cast her into exile.

I was lucky. Nine thousand children who arrived in  
Europe in 2019 ... were alone.

In Episode 5, Jane Olson walks around a walled garden at Doddington Hall. The beds – the borders – are in full bloom. Olson pauses to don and lace a pair of clogs, the type used for clog-dancing in northern England. (Intentionally or not, she here loops elegantly back to the starting point of *There's No Place Like Home*, to Dorothy's slippers in Oz – silver in the book, ruby red in the film – and to the notion of walking for a cause, or walking to change a life. It also transpired at the film's launch that 'Rosie's' sister is a clog dancer). Olson starts to dance. The three verses of the 'Country Gardens' list the flowers, the birds, and the insects that can be found in a supposedly



**Figure 8** Olson dances in clogs at Doddington Hall (Davis, 2020).



typical England garden. We only hear some of the lyrics about birds, and those indistinctly. They are mixed with the melody being played on a flute and a concertina, and with the sound of women's voices insistently reiterating the three words, 'English, country, garden' and reading extracts from botanical manuals and birding books that speak of the global migration of birds and the overseas origins of plants.

...daffodils, native to meadows in southern Europe and north Africa, the daffodil probably arrived in Britain brought by Roman soldiers.

In 1797, Joseph Banks commissioned a drawing of Doddington Hall from Jean Claude Nattes, showing how the gardens were being developed at that time. It is by no means impossible that he would have contributed exotic plants and seeds to them from his own herbarium. The dance Episode continues to name hollyhocks, flocks and snowdrops as migrants to England. Each time, the word *English* is accented and repeated, underlined by the thwack of Olson's clogs on her dance board on the path, and nailing home the irony of country garden as boomerang effect.

Among the closing credits of *It Takes a Decade* is one that reads:

On 23 July 2020, we heard that Morton Hall Immigration removal Centre in Lincolnshire is due to close as an immigration detention centre. Words of celebration and victory were coupled with mourning the deaths of those killed inside – Carlington 'Jammy' Spencer, Rubel Ahmed, Lukasz Debowski, Bai Bai Ahmed Kabia among others, and anger as the hostile environment continues, and the news that the building will continue to detain people in prison. The inspection report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons in early 2020 found high levels of self-harm, violence, and use of force at Morton Hall.

## CONCLUSION

Morton Hall was not being decommissioned, however. It was due to re-open in early December 2021 as a detention centre for Foreign National Offenders: that is, UK residents who have served a prison sentence and can be deported at the behest of the Home Secretary to countries where they may have no ties and no means of support, and whose language they may not speak. At the time of writing (April 2022) the British Home Secretary (Patel) and Prime Minister (Johnson) are celebrating an agreement to send asylum seekers to Rwanda for offshore processing. The Australian system has been

cited as an inspiration for this. Another impoverished but doubtless beautiful landscape will be turned over to offshoring the consequences of global mobility and post-colonial migrations, and another pernicious connection will run beneath the soils of the worlds we traverse.

This article has endeavoured to record a sequence of events that arose from and through a methodology of practice, reflection and engagement with professional artists and community activists. Our central argument is that, despite emanating from different geographical contexts, the different artistic and aesthetic interventions covered, all expose the links between green carceral geographies and (neo)colonial practices. All the artworks studied expose the dissonances between location and institution that both Morton Hall and Manus Island share, and the inextricable links between contemporary immigration detention systems and the legacies of British colonialism. As visual culture academics, we embrace the current movement in radical geography, including writing on migration and postcolonial impacts, towards a linked-up approach to English history that traverses the boundaries of the imperial project, the roots of exclusionary practices in its holy cities, and its many victims. Our contribution here is to focus on the rural landscape of Lincolnshire as a *place* whilst simultaneously observing arts practices and experiences from a *distributed spatial context* so as to properly understand how the legacies of British colonialism play out in contemporary carceral practices globally.

## NOTES

- 1 <http://www.raf-lincolnshire.info/mortonhall/mortonhall.htm> accessed 21 March 2022.
- 2 <https://www.plumplot.co.uk/Lincolnshire-salary-and-unemployment.html> (accessed 2022.04.19). See also the more positive city plan delivered in 2020 pre-pandemic (City of Lincoln: Lincoln Economic Evidence and Growth Study 2020. University of Lincoln Business School).

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Stephanie Hemelryk Donald**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-9435-7905](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9435-7905)  
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

**Kaya Davies Hayon**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-9269-510X](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9269-510X)  
Open University, GB

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