Chapter One
Introduction

> Nothing personal, it's just business: this is the new Satan of liquid modernity.
> Bauman and Donskis (2013, p. 10)

Migrant Deaths

In 2013 an unannounced inspection of Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre revealed worrying instances of neglect. Harmondsworth is a British secure facility near London that incarcerates refused asylum seekers prior to their deportation. The inspection, undertaken by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, reported that 'on at least two occasions, elderly, vulnerable and incapacitated detainees, one of whom was terminally ill, were needlessly handcuffed in an excessive and unacceptable manner… These men were so ill that one died shortly after his handcuffs were removed and the other, an 84 year-old-man, died while still in restraints' (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2014, p. 5). Staff had ignored a doctor's report declaring the 84-year-old, Alois Dvorzac, unfit for detention and in need of medical care. 'These are shocking cases where a sense of humanity was lost' the report continued, '[n]either had been in any way resistant or posed any current specific individual risk' (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 2014, p. 13). Harmondsworth has the capacity to hold 615 detainees, making it the largest detention centre in Europe. It holds men

only and the security in various wings is comparable to a high security prison. The report concluded that the centre displayed, 'inadequate focus on the needs of the most vulnerable detainees, including elderly and sick men, those at risk of self harm through food refusal, and other people whose physical or mental health conditions made them potentially unfit for detention' (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2014, p. 5).

Mr Dvorzac's specific case is not an isolated phenomenon. Deaths in immigration detention are part of a global pattern of migrant deaths that occur as a result of the combination of bureaucratic ineptitude, the desperation of migrants and the strengthening of border controls. What is more, is not just asylum seekers who face risks.[1] For example, 58 Chinese stowaways who had suffocated in a container en route to the UK to work were discovered in Dover in 2001, together with just two survivors, almost suffocated amidst the putrid smell of rotting corpses (Hyland, 2000). The migrants had travelled from the southern Chinese province of Fujian on the Taiwan Strait and would have paid around £15,000 to get to Britain, most likely travelling on the strength of a deposit and facing the rest of the debt upon their arrival.[2] Although widespread consternation was expressed at the time, no fundamental alterations were made to the border policies and control practices that are at least partly responsible for the high risks they took. Another 23 Chinese migrants died picking cockles on the sands of Morecambe Bay in Lancashire, United Kingdom, in 2004. They were employed illegally, paid well below the minimum wage, and were sent to work in dangerous conditions without safety equipment or the ability to call for help. When the tide suddenly came in they were swept out to sea and suffered 'death in a cold, strange land' (BBC, 2006a). Although their deaths prompted the adoption of the Gangmaster (Licensing) Act (GLA) 2004, there 'is little direct evidence to suggest that the GLA has reduced worker exploitation, including long hours, lack of holiday and/or sick pay, unfair deductions, poor-quality tied housing, and restrictive contracts' (Strauss, 2013, p. 190). More recently, one man died and another 34 others were found suffering from dehydration and hypothermia, in a shipping container in Tilbury Docks, Essex, in August 2014. In this case the group were Afghan Sikhs who were intending to claim asylum, and included 13 children; they had been trapped inside the container for at least 12 hours.

The moral claim made by asylum seekers is seen as different from that made by economic migrants even though both often experience hardship, uncertainty and discomfort. Asylum seekers are invoking their right to safety from persecution rather than their right to work. As such they do not offend the sensibilities of those who are concerned about 'British jobs for British workers' in quite the same way as economic migrants, although overstated suspicion about 'bogus' asylum seekers – i.e. asylum seekers who are really in pursuit of employment or other financial gains – is never far from view in the British context (see Zimmermann, 2014, for an exposition

of the poverty of the notion of bogus asylum seeking). For the most part in this book I examine the situation of asylum seekers and not economic migrants, although I recognise that there are difficulties and sensitivities in distinguishing between the two.[3]

The British public's attitude towards migrant deaths has been largely insensitive since at least the early 2000s. Occasionally, the magnitude of a disaster or the horrific circumstances that surround it will make the news and provoke a popular, although usually short-lived, sense of guilt, as in the case of the tragic drowning of the toddler Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach in 2015, which prompted a social media outcry and a flurry of grassroots activism, obliging the Prime Minister David Cameron to accept more Syrian refugees to Britain. But most migrant deaths make little impact on public consciousness. UNITED[4] has kept a 'List of Deaths' since 1993, which includes all reported deaths that have occurred as a consequence of European border militarisation, asylum laws, poor accommodation conditions, detention, deportations and carrier sanctions. The fatality count stood at 22,394 by mid-June 2015, although the actual figure is likely to be much higher as a result of the number of unreported deaths (UNITED, 2015). The United National High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (2014) reported that 3,419 people lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2014 alone, making it the deadliest sea crossing route in the world. Yet because these numbers accrue steadily they have little impact. Until recently, there had been no sustained outcry from the British public against the lethal consequences of the current management of border controls beyond the protestations of a small number of interest groups.

Although this lacklustre attitude might be uncomfortable to acknowledge, it is possible to understand how it originates. Reports of migrant deaths refer to migrant struggles and lives that seem alien to, and distant from, the lives of most citizens in Western developed countries. It is difficult to appreciate their experiences of loss and suffering, especially when the accounts reference far-flung places that are unfamiliar and carry little resonance for the majority of middle-class Westerners. While this should not be taken as an excuse for the persistence of highly securitised border controls that pose a threat to the lives of migrants, it does render intelligible public apathy in the face of the calamities that befall migrants.

The degree of neglect exhibited by the guards, medical personnel and centre managers responsible for Mr Dvorzac at the time of his death, however, goes beyond the more general listlessness of the British public towards migrant deaths. It displays a level of unconcern and a disregard for suffering that is qualitatively distinct from public indifference. Disconcertingly, Mr Dvorzac was well known to the authorities: guards did not 'discover' him in the same way that border control officers came across the migrants in shipping containers. Rather Mr Dvorzac died as a result of neglect by individuals who could see his discomfort, were acquainted with

him, and had the power to alleviate his distress. Tragically, other deaths in British detention display similar symptoms. The Institute of Race Relations documents a series of deaths of detainees in British detention between 1989 and 2014, pointing toward the slowness of authorities to react to cries for help, the aggravating role of neglect when medical conditions are already being suffered, misplaced medical records, allegations of poor treatment and assaults by staff, referrals by medical staff that were never followed up, and insufficient care taken to prevent suicides (Athwal, 2014[5]).

It is a gruesome feat to be able to engender, within employees, levels of indifference that allow them to overlook the suffering of subjects right before their eyes. I call this a feat because it must have been achieved despite our tendency to feel weaker empathy for people who are far away from us and stronger empathy for those close to us. The British public's generally lack-lustre response to migrants' suffering can be explained by this tendency: the fact that most migrant struggles occur in settings, countries and situations unfamiliar to most Western citizens, including the ports, docks and vessels that form the backdrop of the deaths in shipping containers and at sea, means that news of migrant deaths seems decidedly removed from their everyday lives. Mr Dvorzac, however, died in full view of the authorities that were supposedly caring and responsible for him and he was not, at the time, attempting to dodge these authorities but was rather relying on them for his welfare. His death, and the deaths of others who have died in similar conditions in detention in the United Kingdom, provides a starting point for my exploration of the relationship between indifference, moral distance and proximity in this book. What interpersonal, institutional and political factors, I ask, are producing levels of indifference that are proving lethal to migrants around the world? And what can anti-border activists do in response to them?

Moral Distance and Encounters

The relation between distance and indifference has been formally conceptualised in terms of 'moral distance'. Moral distance is a concept that enjoys considerable currency among moral philosophers, sociologists and psychologists, and represents a prominent example of geographical language that has been taken up outside the discipline of geography. My intention in adopting it is not to engage in subjective moralising, but to use it to refer to an empirical phenomenon. It refers to the 'distance decay' that moral concerns exhibit, resembling gravity to the extent that people further from us exert a weaker moral claim upon us (Tronto, 1987, citing Hutcheson, 1971; see also Smith, 2000).[6] Put simply, it refers to the human tendency to care more for people close to us than to those far away.

Of course not all distance is the same. Zygmunt Bauman (1989) helps to disentangle various forms of distance and in so doing augments the 'moral

distance' argument. In his much-discussed study of the Holocaust[7] he distinguishes the physical from the psychological distancing effect of bureaucratic organisational forms, although both are able to quash 'the moral significance of the act and thereby pre-empt all conflict between personal standards of moral decency and immorality of the social consequences of the act' (Bauman, 1989, p. 25). He also discusses the importance of mediation – that is the density of middlemen and women, or technological devices, that stand between the issuing of an order or the making of a bureaucratic decision and its consequence. Where this density increases, moral estrangement also increases, bringing with it the risk that individuals will be licensed to act immorally in the absence of any clear view of the suffering that their actions may cause. Although Bauman points to different forms of distance though, in essence the moral distance argument involves a consistent claim: that where distance of one sort or another separates individuals, any moral sentiments they might feel for those influenced by their actions are suppressed roughly in proportion to the distance itself.

Consistent with the notion of moral distance, it seems to follow that when distance is overcome this can act as a catalyst to moral concern. In recent years much has been written about 'the encounter'. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1979, 1981), encounters mean that I[8] come face to face with suffering others[9] such as asylum seekers fleeing persecution, and at this point I become responsible for them and accountable to them, experiencing their bearing of their vulnerability to me as both a plea and a command to respond. It is the face of the suffering other that generates this moral effect. Levinas is careful not to reduce being face to face with someone to merely sighting them: he understands proximity in a specific way that has an ethical rather than an empirical or literal meaning. Nevertheless, he makes clear that there is something morally demanding about being in proximity with someone who is suffering, and authors such as Bauman (1993) and Hamblet (2011) have extrapolated from this observation to make more practical claims about distance, morality and bureaucracy (see also Hamblet, 2003). For Hamblet (2011, p. 717) 'Levinas frames ethics as a problem of distance; the moral challenge is a challenge of geography.' For Bauman (1993, p. 83) '[p]roximity is the realm of intimacy and morality' whereas 'distance is the realm of estrangement and the Law'. Basing his argument on Levinas, Bauman opposes the moral potential of the face to face encounter with impersonal systems of bureaucratic rule that distance officials from subjects.

Border scholars have been largely silent of the topic of moral distance and indifference. In the next chapter I begin by making the case that our understanding of the spatial organisation of borders, border control and border work could be enriched by taking into account their importance. According to this argument the opening of moral distance – that is the phenomenon of *moral distancing* – is an important consequence of the broad shape of recent changes to both 'the state' in general and to modern immigration

control systems. The pursuit of efficiency and the smooth operation of systems, the turn to governance, the internationalisation and outsourcing of immigration controls, and the privatisation of large swathes of the business of control, have moral consequences that have been generally overlooked. In the case of British border control, they tend to keep decision makers and asylum seekers apart through various forms of distance and mediate more densely between them, with the effect that the moral check afforded by encounters and 'rights of presence' (Amin, 2002a, p. 972) is extinguished. The ability of 'the sufferer [to] find her way into the direct perceptual range of the moral agent in order to awaken the moral sensibility that will elicit a compassionate response to her suffering' (Hamblet, 2011, p. 717) is seriously undermined by modern border controls.

This keeping-apart makes excluding migrants by force a morally less demanding task. Individual functionaries and managers are not confronted by the worst consequences of their work by having to look their subjects in the eye. By functionaries I mean the frontline personnel who make daily decisions about asylum seekers and who have responsibility for asylum seekers' day-to-day welfare, and by managers I mean the designers and orchestrators of the system of asylum governance that is currently in place.[10] The international obscuring of asylum seekers also ensures that publics in destination countries are insulated from the moral claims of would-be immigrants and the disturbing moral consequences of pre-emptive, remote and forceful border controls.

It would be inaccurate to claim that the restructuring of the state and of border controls in recent years has been explicitly undertaken with this aim of moral distancing in mind. To make this claim would be to credit the managers of state institutions and border controls with more organisational competence than they have ever demonstrated, at least in a British context. It would also, more broadly, risk feeding the 'state-phobia' that Foucault (2008, p. 76) has identified, which has the potential to disseminate a misleading image of an unassailable, monstrous, calculating and coherent state behemoth, possessing 'a sort of generic continuity' (Foucault, 2008, p. 187), that is difficult to resist. Rather, while the drivers of this trend towards moral distancing might occasionally be premeditative and calculative, they are more often mundane and banal, associated with the achievement of immediate targets, the minimisation of costs and the adoption of efficient organisational models and business practices. Moral distancing arises, then, as a result of the dispassionate organisation of practices in accordance with bureaucratic concerns. In this light we might say that moral distancing is an emergent property of a complex system that governs human mobility – a property of the system that is not reducible or traceable to the actions of any individual or parts within it (see Urry, 2007).

Calculated or not, however, separation between decision makers and asylum seekers nonetheless leads to the former becoming detached from

the real-world experiences of the latter, to the extent that they are often unable to appreciate the gravity of their own work. This detachment is particularly damaging given that those fleeing the threat of persecution have usually already experienced fearful and traumatic events. The emotional, psychological and economic buffeting that slow, impersonal and detached bureaucratic treatment delivers often acts to compound these difficult experiences.

Enriching Accounts of Moral Distance

Moral distance describes a basic, fundamental consequence of the strengthening and proliferation of national borders in contemporary society and, using this concept, *Nothing Personal?* offers an empirical examination of indifference and immigration control. The primary thrust of the book is to understand the empirically evident indifference to suffering others in Britain's immigration system, and the concept of moral distance provides a useful tool for doing so. Before going further though I want to critically enrich the perspective of moral distance in order to help to formulate a full picture of the indifference towards suffering others generated by border controls and to lay the foundations for the investigation that follows. I will do so in four ways: (i) by addressing the distancing of officials from migrants and not simply vice versa; (ii) by questioning the ethical potential of closeness; (iii) by exploring forms of indifference that are *not* generated by distance; and (iv) by thinking critically about the relationship between indifference and emotions.

We should not assume, firstly, that moral distancing is primarily a matter of distancing subjects on the one hand from publics, managers and functionaries on the other, and not vice versa. The way the restructuring of border control has been discussed by scholars recently, with reference to the export of borders (Clayton, 2010) and the 'push back' of migrants (Bialasiewicz, 2012, p. 856), for example, emphasises *migrants'* experiences of remoteness. But there are other ways in which moral distancing can occur – not simply by alienating A from B, but also B from A. Distance is a relational concept and so it makes sense to consider the experience of distance from the perspective of both parties.

A second important nuance of the moral distance argument is to recognise that literal closeness will not necessarily lead to a morally demanding encounter. It would be easy, but over-simplistic, to assert that where distance is eradicated encounters occur. On the contrary, modern border control systems are also capable of entertaining closeness whilst suspending moral proximity and encounter. It is therefore centrally important, I argue, to think about ways in which encounters are avoided, averted and suspended even when decision makers are close to their subjects. This requires thinking

about the different forms of organisational and institutional distance that permit, and often guarantee, moral estrangement at close quarters.

A third necessary elaboration of thinking in terms of moral distance is to recognise that moral distance nurtures only one specific type of indifference. In particular, whereas moral distance operates through the removal of subjects from moral purview, it is possible for indifference to also arise through over-familiarity with suffering others. In making this argument I turn to Simmel (1903/2002) in order to develop a vocabulary around the blasé functionary, whose indifference towards others is of a qualitatively different nature to the indifference that moral distance nurtures. Being alive to the different sources of insensitivity and indifference that combine within complex systems of control is essential to fully understanding them.

A fourth development of the theme of moral distance is to be wary of associating moral distance, and the indifferent, impersonal disposition of the bureaucrat, with a lack of emotion. According to Bauman (1989) bureaucracies tend to produce moral distance through various mechanisms, which allow their functionaries to treat their subjects dispassionately, indifferently and unemotionally. Weber (1948) also associates bureaucracies with emotional coolness. In contradiction of Bauman and Weber, however, the bureaucratic processes in evidence in Britain's asylum system do not rely upon the evacuation of emotion that they set out. Rather, bureaucracy and sensitivity are woven together in subtle and insipid ways in the area of asylum seeker management, which ultimately leads to the strengthening of bureaucratic modes of rule. The management of asylum seekers is able to present a 'softer side' that actively encourages and enrols emotions such as care and empathy among its functionaries and managers and throughout its structure.

This last assertion requires attention not only to the way bureaucracy might co-opt emotion, but also to the way activists might position themselves in relation to the struggles of asylum seekers. In particular, in the closing sections of the book, I consider the implications for progressive border activism of the fact that discourses of care and compassion have been adopted by the systems governing asylum seeker and refugee issues in the United Kingdom. This melding of subjugation and care, repression and compassion, renders any activist attitude towards asylum seekers couched in terms of 'caring-for', 'supporting', 'helping' or 'caring-about' also at risk of co-optation. This brings me ultimately to advocate for activist tactics that are in *solidarity-with* asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom, because it is through this type of language and positioning that activists can ensure that they remain oppositional to, rather than facilitative of or complicit in (however unwittingly), the governance of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom and the passivity with which they are often portrayed.

Asylum Seekers in the United Kingdom

In this book I delve into the working lives of immigration personnel in order to investigate a series of questions. First and most importantly I ask how indifference towards migrants is produced in border control systems. This leads to numerous further questions such as: What are the moral effects of recent changes to border control systems? How are immigration personnel nurtured in such a way as to make them capable of, and willing to, deliver an increasingly exclusionary and brutal system of control? To what extent, and how, are the consequences of their work precluded from them? How are they 'kept apart' from their subjects and through what forms of distance? In exploring these questions *Nothing Personal?* offers a comprehensive study of the relationship between British immigration control, distance and indifference towards suffering others.

Before I can describe my methodology in detail it is necessary to set out the social and political context of the asylum system in the United Kingdom. With this background I can explain how I approached the study of immigration control. In this section I briefly describe recent trends in Britain's asylum system, the media climate surrounding asylum in the United Kingdom, the legal innovations that have impacted upon the asylum sector in recent years, and the recent technical and practical policy initiatives that have come into force.

The United Kingdom is witnessing a sustained intensification in the way systems of governing asylum seekers act to exclude them, govern them through discomfort, criminalise them and expose them to uncertainty and risk (see Vickers, 2012; also Darling, 2011a). In 2002, the United Kingdom received 84,132 applications for asylum. By 2014 this number had fallen to 24,914 representing a 70.4% reduction. In contrast, although the number of asylum applicants to the EU-27 fell from 421,470 in 2002 to just below 200,000 in 2006,[11] numbers subsequently rose to 626,710 in 2014 (a 48.7% increase on 2002 levels) largely due to significant increases in numbers of applicants from Syria, Eritrea, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Ukraine. These changes occurred in the context of many more people fleeing persecution, conflict, generalised violence, and human rights violations globally. In 2002 around 40 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, but by the end of 2014 nearly 60 million were, constituting levels of displacement that are 'unprecedented in recent history' (UNHCR, 2015: 5).

As a result of Britain's apparent hospitality crisis, the share of forcibly displaced people globally who apply for asylum in the United Kingdom has dropped precipitously. Taking the ratio of the number of asylum claims received by the United Kingdom to the global population of concern to the UNHCR as a crude measure, this ratio fell from 4.1/1000 in 2002 to just 0.5/1000 in 2014.[12] This reduction in asylum claims received by

the United Kingdom is the result of the nation's increasingly harsh and exclusionary discourse around asylum migration.

The media climate surrounding asylum seekers in the United Kingdom is central to understanding their treatment. Since at least the early 2000s the popular printed tabloid press (henceforth 'the press') has disseminated a perception that Britain offers generous social security benefits to asylum seekers. The press has also attained notoriety for its heavy-handed, subjective and derogatory treatment of asylum seekers over this period[13] (Mollard, 2001, Leveson 2012). Britain is now routinely perceived as a 'soft-touch' for migrants who supposedly seek out the most attractive reception conditions among European countries. Although asylum seekers' ability to do this has been discredited (Day and White, 2001; Robinson and Segrott, 2002) these concerns endured for over a decade (Kelly, 2012), attaining the status of a full-blown 'invasion complex' (Tyler, 2013, p. 87).

Spurious connections between asylum seekers and a variety of social ills have simultaneously become commonplace. For example, concern has been expressed that asylum seeking is linked to terrorism – 'Bombers are all sponging asylum seekers' the *Daily Express* printed (Daily Express, 2005).[14] Other tabloid sources have exaggerated the cultural mismatch between asylum seekers and British communities with stories that depicted asylum seekers as strange and outlandish. 'Swan Baked… Asylum seekers are stealing and eating swans' *The Sun* reported (The Sun, 2003), whereas the *Daily Star* published the claim that 'Asylum seekers ate our donkeys' (Daily Star, 2005).[15] Others have been concerned that asylum seekers might commit crimes in British host communities: 'Our town's too nice for refugees…they will try to escape, rapists and thieves will terrorise us' the *Daily Express* quoted in a headline (*Daily Express*, 23 March 2002, p. 1) while others are outspoken about supposedly bogus asylum seekers arriving in Britain in order to benefit from the welfare entitlements available to asylum seekers: 'we resent the scroungers, beggars and crooks who are prepared to cross every country in Europe to reach our generous benefits system' *The Sun* has printed (The Sun, 2001).

Although unfounded, concerns that asylum seekers were 'sponging', or terror threats, or culturally mismatched, or represented criminal risks, put pressure on successive governments to control what was quickly conceptualised as the asylum 'problem' and the asylum 'threat' during the 2000s (see Squire, 2009), providing the grounds for greatly toughened policies. The budget allocated to the enforcement of immigration law has increased markedly since the late 1990s, for example. In 1996–7 the Immigration and Nationality Directorate had 5,868 staff and a budget of £218 million. By 2004–5, there were 15,002 staff and the budget had increased to £1.7 billion.[16] This increase in detection and enforcement capacity has been combined with a series of legal innovations designed to make Britain a more inaccessible place internationally and a more hostile place once it has been reached. For example, asylum seekers' access to legal appeals against negative decisions

on their claims for asylum has been significantly curtailed via a series of exclusions from access to the appeal system, and cuts and restrictions to legal aid (see Webber, 2012).

Alongside legal measures, a number of technological and practical innovations have also been introduced. In 2005 the government announced a five-year strategy, the key proposals of which included heavy investment in technological capacity, such as large X-ray scanners capable of detecting human stowaways in moving vehicles, electronic fingerprinting, digital scanning of the iris, and the electronic tagging of asylum seekers already in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2006). The strategy proposed the granting of temporary leave to remain rather than permanent refugee status wherever possible, and fast-tracking of asylum claims[17] so that the time and resources spent on the legal system are reduced. The proposals also introduced the rollout of e-borders, where all international passengers are electronically checked before they reach the United Kingdom, as they enter and as they leave, and a redoubling of efforts to remove unsuccessful asylum applicants in order to achieve parity between the number of those refused and those removed.

The consequences for the asylum seekers who are refused and who might, under different conditions, have been granted asylum are often dire. There are reports that some are tortured and killed upon return to their origin countries, although systematic research into the fatality rate of deportees is sorely lacking in the British context.[18] There are, nevertheless, a series of observed consequences that deported asylum seekers experience. In the case of Afghan deportees, for example, these include 'the impossibility of repaying debts incurred by migration…the shame of failure, and the perceptions of "contamination"' (Schuster and Majidi, 2013, p. 221). For those that remain in the United Kingdom without status, they can expect to endure exploitation (Vickers, 2012), destitution (British Red Cross, 2010), ostracisation and marginalisation among Britain's working-class communities (Hynes, 2009) and defamation in Britain's press (Finney and Simpson, 2009).

Then there are those migrants, like Mr Dvorzac, who lose their liberty in immigration detention facilities as a result of their journeys. When 19-year-old Bereket Yohannes was found hanged in a shower block at Harmondsworth removal centre in January 2006, 61 detainees at the centre issued a catalogue of complaints and indictments of the conditions in removal centres in the United Kingdom. They referred to 'dehumanising and depressing conditions' (Garcia *et al.*, 2006, p. 15), the way in which staff 'make us feel that we are an inconvenience' (Garcia *et al.*, 2006, p. 15), the food that 'would be rejected by some dogs in the United Kingdom' (Garcia *et al.*, 2006, p. 16) and '[t]he way and manner officers disrespect detainees [which] is quite disgusting and very humiliating' (Garcia *et al.*, 2006, p. 16). Nearly ten years later similar issues persisted. A television news investigation aired in 2015 (Channel Four, 2015) included undercover footage of guards at the

Yarl's Wood centre for females showing contempt for detainees, such as by referring to them as 'animals', 'beasties' and 'bitches'.

Regarding disrespect for asylum seekers among border control officials, Louise Perrett, a former employee of UKBA, blew the whistle on the tactics used by staff at a major centre for processing asylum seekers' claims in the United Kingdom in 2009. She identified practices of mistreatment, trickery, humiliation, generalised hostility, indifference and rudeness among staff. According to her account, when claims were complicated she was advised simply to refuse them, and when immigration staff granted 'too many' claims then a humiliating 'grant monkey' (a soft toy) was placed on the desk of the culprit (Taylor and Muir, 2010).

The British government also routinely suffers embarrassing public relations disasters that have occurred because individuals working within immigration control either make mistakes or step out of line. Scandals have included the mistaken release of hundreds of convicted criminal migrants who should[19] have been considered for deportation under British law (BBC, 2006b); the employment of asylum seekers, who were not supposed to undertake paid employment according to British law, in Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) offices (BBC, 2006c); and evidence that senior officers have tried to exchange immigration status for sexual favours (Doward and Townsend, 2006).

Substandard treatment of migrants by staff and poor public relations have been linked to deep-seated cultural deficiencies at the heart of the government institutions that oversee border control. Commentators have detected widespread denial that asylum seekers might be positing legitimate claims. Denial refers to 'an advance decision to avoid situations in which … facts might reveal themselves' (Cohen, 2001, p. 23). The UNHCR, for example, has diagnosed a 'refusal mindset' among decision makers (UNHCR, 2005, p. 17). Asylum claims have been refused without properly considering the facts of individual cases or the country of origin information that is made available to decision makers, and by using speculative arguments and citing a small number of peripheral inconsistencies as grounds to dismiss entire applications (Amnesty International, 2004; Amnesty International and Still Human Still Here, 2013). As a result fully 25% of initial decisions are eventually overturned on appeal, indicating the wastefulness of the initial decision making process even on its own terms. New members of staff are plunged into this system with little training and either have to acculturate rapidly or face the psychological and professional consequences of swimming against the tide.

Approaching Immigration Control: Spaces and Settings

Researching the way border control decision makers, including frontline officers, elite managers and contracted agents, relate to migrants is no easy matter because access is often highly constrained, especially around secure

sites such as Immigration Removal Centres. This is due, in large part, to anxiety among managers and gatekeepers that research will either not be in their interest, will lead to some sort of public embarrassment or that it could compromise the security of such centres. Many functionaries, for example, are contractually forbidden from discussing their work because doing so might involve security breaches. A related methodological challenge is obtaining a clear overall view of the system of controls. Functionaries tend to be positioned in specific roles and often do not have a view of the entire system. Managers, on the other hand, can be less knowledgeable about the everyday, on the ground, happenings at particular sites of border work.

Another challenge concerns the relentless 'policy churn' meaning the 'endless stream of new initiatives' (Hess, 1998, p. 52) that characterises British immigration control. In terms of legislation, a major new piece of legislation has been introduced in the United Kingdom every couple of years over the past 20 years, which often significantly rewrites immigration rules, causing confusion for migrants and support groups and providing a challenging research environment.[20] In comparing the immigration control systems of the United States and United Kingdom, Bohmer and Shuman (2008) point out that whereas the US system has been slow to adapt to changes in international relations, the UK system has been, 'if anything, too quick to change' as a result of the fact that 'rules and laws, unlike in the US, are not subject to constitutional oversight' (Bohmer and Shuman, 2008, p. 22). Maiman (2005, p. 244) is similarly disconcerted by 'the British government's…unchallengeable capacity to make, unmake, and remake its own rules'. This has been reflected not only legislatively, but also in the frequent creation and disbanding of institutions that oversee border control in the United Kingdom. In 2007 the Immigration and Nationality Directorate was replaced by the Border and Immigration Agency, which was replaced in 2008 by the UK Border Agency (UKBA), which was itself abolished in 2013 in order to return the work of immigration control to the Home Office.

I approach these challenges using three general principles that have underpinned a programme of research that began in 2003 (methodological details relating to timescale of research activities, access, sampling, analysis and ethical considerations are provided in the Appendix). Firstly, I have employed a range of qualitative methods on the premise that different methodologies give different insights into the complex phenomena under study. *Nothing Personal?* therefore draws upon interviews, focus groups and ethnographic work as well as document and policy analysis in an attempt to form a nuanced picture of the objects of the research. I draw most frequently upon interviews, which have been conducted at various points through the research period. Interviews were generally recorded unless the interviewee explicitly requested that I did not use a voice recorder, which was sometimes the case among anxious immigration personnel (I discuss anxiety among immigration personnel in greater detail in Chapter Six).

The interview was then transcribed in full if it had been recorded, or else written out as extensively as possible on the basis of scratch notes taken during and immediately after the unrecorded interviews. Transcripts were then sometimes shared with the interviewee for approval, correction or elaboration. They were then coded according to a set of research themes that I had distilled in advance from existing academic literature and my own research questions, and that guided my approach to the varied empirical material that multiple methodologies generate. Focus groups were held in London in 2012 and brought together activists, charity workers and volunteers for a series of compelling conversations (see Tyler *et al.*, 2014). The ethnographies were conducted in 2013 and 2014 by my researchers Drs Melanie Griffiths and Andrew Burridge, who spent considerable time observing asylum appeal procedures in the first tier immigration and asylum tribunals in various tribunals around the UK.

Secondly, I have avoided confining the analysis to any single site of immigration control. Although there are various excellent studies that focus upon individual sites of border work such as detention centres or the interview process, *Nothing Personal?* provides an overview of the British immigration system by examining a series of relevant settings. These span key sites in the execution of the different stages of an asylum application, including the main site of initial claims processing in the United Kingdom at Lunar House in Croydon, London, the location of back-office work relating to asylum claims for welfare support in Portishead near Bristol, and Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centre near Oxford, where individuals are detained under immigration powers, ostensibly pending their removal from the United Kingdom. These sites differ not only according to their formal function in asylum claim determination and immigration enforcement processes, but also according to their political sensitivity and media profile. Lunar House was the target of sustained media scrutiny through much of the 2000s, for example, and as such finding willing interviewees there and gaining access to the site was more challenging even than accessing Campsfield Detention Centre. By contrast I occasionally found staff employed in other areas and sites of immigration control surprisingly willing and eager to participate in my research, sometimes in order to vent their frustration about their working conditions. More broadly, by taking an approach that spanned multiple research sites, the book is able to identify general, system-level patterns in the way officials are governed and the way that indifference is nurtured.

Thirdly, given the challenges of gaining a clear overview of the system, a variety of groups have participated in the study. So although I do draw on research with frontline decision makers, contracted security staff, police officers, back-office employees and elite immigration managers, I also draw upon evidence from migrants themselves who have experienced indifference and insensitivity first hand, as well as activists, charity workers and

community leaders. One noticeable phenomenon in this respect is the degree to which some individuals occupy more than one subject position. For example, I have interviewed police officers who are also activists, refugees who are also government workers, and solicitors and government workers who are involved in multiple initiatives that are often very different and sometimes in tension. Often these different subject positions would only come to light part way through interviews, but they serve to highlight the difficulty of firmly categorising individuals, and often gave me pause for thought about my own preconceptions.

Plan of the Book

Nothing Personal? proceeds over seven further chapters. In Chapter Two I set out the case for taking account of the morally distancing consequences of border work. I outline the moral potential of proximity from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints, and examine how recent rounds of state and border rescaling and restructuring have made proximity between decision makers and asylum seekers less likely. The chapter consequently calls for a rereading of modern state rescaling through the lens of its interpersonal effects and makes the case that moral distancing, and the indifference to suffering that it promotes, is a primary consequence of recent changes in border control practices.

Identifying the moral distancing effect that changes to the bureaucratic management of borders has in the international context is important, but needs to be approached carefully. This account of moral distancing does not help to account for Mr Dvorzac's death, for example. Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six therefore draw on varied empirical material to develop critical reflections on some of the assumptions of the broad picture presented in Chapter Two. These chapters offer important embellishments to the account of moral distance, especially with regard to the ability of systems of control to nurture moral indifference of decision makers towards subjects even when they come close to each other, when they are in contact for considerable periods of time and when they feel significant emotional attachment to each other. Together they highlight the different forms of distance that keep decision makers and asylum seekers apart, and the different forms of indifference operating throughout border control work.

Chapter Three examines the importance of thinking about moral distance from the perspective of both partners in a relationship of distance. The chapter examines the remarkable extraction of asylum decision makers from the environments in which asylum seekers were present through the 2000s in the United Kingdom, as part of a drive to regionalise and modernise asylum support and decision-making systems. Offices and employees were located well away from the urban concentrations of migrants thereby

insulating them from contact with their subjects. Contracted agencies were positioned between them and they were set into competition with each other over abstract metrics that gave no clue as to the human gravity of the activities they undertook. In this way distance between functionaries and subjects was opened not by excluding subjects but by removing functionaries from contact with migrants.

Chapter Four examines the situation in which physical distance has been overcome by considering the cases of asylum interviews and asylum appeals.[21] These are contact events that are both legally required and that represent the most effective way to exchange the sort of complex information that it is necessary to exchange in the determination of individual asylum cases. Here functionaries and asylum applicants come close to each other, but what is striking about these meetings is how rarely they entail morally demanding encounters. Somehow, the ethical epiphany that Levinas describes in proximity is suspended. The chapter draws on the psychological literature on contact to identify the intricate ways in which indifference is nurtured, and encounters suspended and averted, even at close quarters.

In the case of immigration detention, which is the subject of Chapter Five, the indifference of functionaries towards their subjects is sustained even during prolonged contact. Any notion that physical proximity alone might provoke moral sentiments is consequently thrown into question. In detention, overstimulation of the empathetic instincts of personnel is commonplace, caused by their overexposure to harrowing accounts of trauma and prompting them to adopt tactics of psychological avoidance as a form of self-care. The incessant churning of detainees exacerbates this exposure, whereas their trivialisation, infantilisation and repeatedly asserted strangeness make aloofness towards them easier still. Avoidance thus morphs from a spatiotemporal phenomenon to a psychological one. Perversely, it is the very closeness of staff to detainees that achieves this effect (Simmel, 1903/2002, p. 14).

Chapter Six refutes an important assumption that beleaguers theorists of indifference and insensitivity: that indifference towards others can be associated with a lack of emotion. From Bauman and Simmel to Glover and Weber, the Chapter begins by setting out evidence of this widespread conjecture. Yet there are at least two emotions that functionaries commonly experience that serve to actually facilitate rather than frustrate the development of indifference. The first is anxiety, which nagged almost every functionary I came across or heard about during the course of my fieldwork. Without anxiety – over discipline from managers or embarrassment in the press – many more functionaries might have the imaginative courage to overcome their own insensitivity. And the second, perhaps more disconcertingly still, is care. The ability of immoral systems to interweave care and indifference in increasingly complex ways, allowing functionaries to morally

question their involvement *and find themselves blameless*, signals a higher level of sophistication in the development of insensitivity than these theorists can accommodate.

Chapter Seven turns to activist attempts to counteract indifference and insensitivity among immigration personnel. Drawing on the experiences and tactics of a subset of migrant support organizations, the chapter describes mobilizations that seek specifically to nurture compassion among functionaries and decision makers. Such activities aim to directly confront the impersonality and indifference of bureaucratic border control by repersonalising elements of the system – an approach that, I argue, entails a series of risks. Nurturing compassion requires closeness to institutional centres of control, and the spectre of co-optation is never far from view in these situations. The pursuit of compassion among functionaries, which entails metaphoric and sometimes literal pleading with them, also signals a capitulation to the structure of the system that bestows these functionaries with power and authority in the first place. Most fundamentally though, given that compassion and sensitivity are perfectly compatible with brutal systems of control (as I demonstrate in Chapter Six), making the nurturing of compassion among functionaries an activist objective risks strengthening the system itself. The chapter provides some illustrations of this and, although it lists a series of mitigating considerations and extenuating circumstances that might render compassion-seeking less risky and more worthwhile, it concludes by questioning the conditions that have reduced some activists to pity-seekers and setting out the demanding conditions under which activism in pursuit of compassion is desirable.

The conclusion provides a summary of the argument of the previous chapters and synthesises the key insights that the book develops regarding the generation of indifference towards asylum seekers amongst border officials. Beginning from this empirical starting point, the book sheds light on the various forms of indifference operating in British immigration control, the opportunities and limitations of thinking about changes to immigration control systems in terms of moral distance, the techniques by which encounters are suspended or averted even in situations of face to face and sustained contact, and the co-optation of softer and gentler discourses in the brutal business of border control management.

Notes

1   Although most people in British immigration detention have sought asylum in the UK at some point (The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 2015a), Mr Dvorzac himself was not seeking asylum, he had just become confused when asked by border officials where he was travelling to, resulting in his detention. His treatment is indicative, though, of the sort of treatment that it is possible to receive in immigration detention.

2   The tragedy was the subject of a Hong Kong, Cantonese language film, *Stowaway* (2001), shot in Fuzhou, Vietnam, Moscow, Ukraine and England.

3   It is worth noting that the term 'asylum seeker' has become associated with a range of negative connotations and tends to paste over different national experiences in an unhelpful way. Alternative terms are therefore arguably more appropriate, such as 'sanctuary seeker', 'refugee' or simply 'migrant', the latter of which rejects the notion that distinctions need to be made between migrants on the basis of their reasons for migrating. Although I retain the term asylum seeker in this book because it was in such wide usage among both my participants and the legal and policy sources I draw from, the deficiencies with the term 'asylum seeker' should consequently be borne in mind throughout.

4   The European network against nationalism, racism, fascism and in support of migrants and refugees.

5   http://www.irr.org.uk/news/deaths-in-immigration-detention-1989-2014/

6   Throughout the book I follow Proctor (1999) in understanding morality to be concerned with 'the *normative* sphere of human existence and practice' (Proctor, 1999, p. 3, italics in original) as opposed to ethics, which refers to 'systematic intellectual reflection on morality in general, or specific moral concerns in particular' (Proctor, 1999, p. 3).

7   I accept that the Holocaust was an historical event of unparalleled atrocity and magnitude in the recent history of Western developed countries and I am not suggesting that immigration detention in Western countries is comparable to the Nazi death camps.

8   Levinas sometimes writes in the first person, which has the effect of increasing the impact of his prose.

9   I use this term 'Other' to describe those considered different and unfamiliar. The term is a general one and need not imply suffering or neediness, although for the most part in this book I use the term to refer to Others who are also in some form of need.

10   I use the term 'decision makers' to refer to managers and functionaries collectively.

11   Non-EU-27 applicants only.

12   Figures quoted in this paragraph and the previous one are taken from UNHCR (2002), The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford (2015b), Eurostat (2015) and UNHCR (2015).

13   In fact the *Daily Mail*, Britain's best-selling tabloid newspaper, has exhibited a staunchly anti-immigration stance for over 70 years. In 1938 it published the following: '"The way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage…." In these words, Mr Herbert Metcalfe, the Old Street magistrate, yesterday referred to the number of aliens entering the country through the "back door" – a problem to which the *Daily Mail* has repeatedly pointed' (*Daily Mail*, 20 August 1938; see Karpf, 2002, for a fuller discussion).

14   The article about the 7 July bombers was inaccurate – the identity of the bombers was unknown when the story was written and neither of the men mentioned in the story was an asylum seeker anyway.

15   Both of these stories were simply untrue. They are made up, but were front page news. *The Sun* published the following clarification over five months

later without forewarning on page 41 of its newspaper (see Medic, 2004): 'A report in *The Sun* on the 4th July about the disappearance of swans in southern England stated that asylum seekers were responsible for poaching them. While numerous members of the public alleged that the swans were being killed and eaten by people they believed to be Eastern European, nobody has been arrested in relation to these offences and we accept that it is not therefore possible to conclude yet whether or not the suspects were indeed asylum seekers'. And the Leveson Inquiry into media practices found that the story about the donkeys was 'total speculation' and that the police had 'no idea what had happened to the donkeys' (Leveson, 2012, Vol. 2, Sect. 8.47).

16   The budget remains at around this level despite the number of asylum seekers requiring support reducing significantly since the mid-2000s, implying that more resources have been directed towards detection, deterrence and prevention mechanisms. Data on expenditure on border control and enforcement taken from   http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/dec/04/government-spending-department-2011-12, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmhaff/775/775i.pdf and Back *et al.* (2005).

17   Fast-tracking proved particularly controversial. The Detained Fast Track (DFT) was a system designed to expedite the determination of asylum claims. From the early 2000s to mid-2015 the United Kingdom operated a fast-track asylum process according to which individuals could be taken straight from the port of entry to detention to have their claim decided quickly. Even if a refused claim was appealed, denied and appealed again to either the High Court or the Court of Appeal, the entire process was scheduled to take just 21–22 days (although in reality it often took longer). Serious questions over the impartiality and thoroughness of these procedures were raised (Asylum Aid, 2013). The UNHCR, for example, recorded 'concerns regarding the quality of decisions made within the DFT, including the concern that the speed of the DFT process may hinder the ability…to produce quality decisions' (UNHCR, 2008, p. 24). It noted the use of standard wording to refuse claims without engaging with the specific circumstances of particular cases as well as frequently inaccurate application of key refugee law concepts in the DFT setting. The DFT was found to be unlawful by a High Court judge in June 2015 and was suspended soon afterwards, a decision that was upheld by the Court of Appeal in July 2015.

18   This said see www.lifeafterdeportation.com for an attempt to collate deportees' experiences.

19   The British government aims to remove foreign national offenders as quickly as possible to their home countries, ostensibly to protect the public, to reduce costs and to free up spaces in prison. It should be noted, however, that removal often occurs at the end of a prison sentence, thereby constituting double punishment for a single offence. It is also very easy for foreign nationals to infringe complex immigration laws and become branded as criminals whilst posing no threat to the public.

20   Major pieces of legislation introduced in the past 20 years include: the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996; the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997; the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002; the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.)

Act 2004; the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006; the UK Borders Act 2007; the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009; and the Immigration Act 2014 (Great Britain 1996; 1997; 1999; 2002; 2004; 2006; 2007; 2009; 2014).

21   By asylum interviews I mean both the screening interviews and substantive interviews that form parts of the determination process in the British system. I explain the distinction between these two types of interview in Chapter Four. Asylum appeals are legal events, held in tribunals, at which immigrants put their case to an immigration judge.