THE ART OF LISTENING
LES BACK
sociologists and local people all to be present in the discussion of its findings. The final empirical chapter discusses the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 London bombings. In particular it argues for the role that sociological listening might play in challenging the political copyright that has led claim to the meaning of these attacks and also their significance for British multiculturalism. The book concludes with a summary of the main arguments and a discussion of writing and the nature of scholarship itself.

I have argued that sociology is best envisaged as a listener’s art and in this chapter I have sketched some of its qualities and contrasted these with news journalism and the pseudo-realities of extreme television. My own attempt to practise this art is demonstrated in the remaining pages of this book.

CHAPTER 1

Falling from the Sky

Bomb alerts are common at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) in Croydon, south London. Among the high-rise office blocks the Home Office administers immigration policy, constituting one of the largest employers in this part of the city. In 1938 George Orwell characterized southern England as ‘the slackest landscape in the world’. Croydon at this time was a place of suburban somnolence and tranquillity. Orwell pondered:

the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barriers on the weary river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Tradelair Square, the red buses, the blue policeman – all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.5

It was not just the howl of Nazi ‘doodlebugs’ that disturbed the suburban peace. The bulldozers and jackhammers tore away its fabric as the intense pace of the post-war reconstruction and urbanization erased and remade the landscape.

The ‘redevelopment’ of Croydon started in 1956. At the time central Croydon was also a place of nascent teenage rebellion. ‘The youth of Croydon were notorious’, remembered Jamie Reid, who grew up in Shirley:

The place was full of gangs: Pretty Boys, Cool Boys and early Teddy Boys. Teenagers hung around the city centre and its coffee bars: for the price of a cup of coffee, they could sit around in a Lyons’ Corner House all Saturday. They would parade the streets in their dreads: this was their patch. It was obvious that this sort of thing had to stop and the authorities found the perfect justification in one single incident.6

The ‘incident’ was the murder of a policeman on the rooftops of Croydon. The botched robbery involved Christopher Craig and Derek Bentley, both from Norbury. Craig had fired the fatal shot but because he was under age
escaped the death penalty. While in the clutches of a policeman Bentley shouted 'Let him have it, Chris!' For this ambiguous utterance he was condemned and hanged. An orgy of panic ensued about 'juvenile delinquency' – Craig was the son of a bank official – and teenagers became an unwanted presence to be 'designed out' of the new centre. In the shadow of the skyscrapers and the stained-glass edifices of commerce, artists and musicians flourished often unnoticed. It is against the concrete surfaces of corporate architecture that Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid sketched the design of punk rock. Croydon Art College became a hub of activity precisely because it was engulfsed by 'single-minded public space' to use Michael Walker's phrase. In the 1960s boom, commerce and finance overshadowed all else. Croydon's sterile shopping centres and council estates provided the ultimate expression of capitalist modernism. Yes, they equally provided the perfect canvas for situationist slogans and the stylistic refusals of youth subculture.

During the 1960s, forty-nine tower blocks were built in Croydon and, by April 1971, some 5 million square feet of office space existed in the central area alone. The space was designed for business interests decentralizing from central London. The millions of tons of concrete that made the flyovers and office blocks displaced working-class communities in neighbourhoods like Old Town and depopulated central Croydon. An intense residential segregation was enforced along class lines by building vast council estates such as New Addington on the outskirts. So the movement of people is integral to the nature of this landscape. These transformations were also coupled with an intensification of racism as Croydon also became a kind of urban frontier for the defenders' racially exclusive Englishness.

In the minds of most overseas visitors and migrants, Croydon is associated with the Immigration Office located in 'Lunar House' on Wellesley Road (see Figure 1.1). The high-ribs were all erected in the age of space flight. This building is perhaps sply named; the moon is probably a more hospitable place to visit. Most who have been through its doors remember the experience with disdain. On any given day confused people clutching copies of the London A-Z can be found wandering around trying to make their way to the offices of the IND. Lunar House is notorious for losing passports and documents (Figure 1.2). It was this issue that focused the anger of users and led to a campaign that resulted in an enquiry led by local people.

Concern was first raised by a parishioner at St Dominic Roman Catholic Church in Waddon, named Mary. The IND lost her French identity card and she spent seven hours queuing up only to be dismissed in minutes. The parish priest, Father Ian Knowles, acted as an advocate for her, trying to find out what had happened to her lost documents. Father Knowles concluded that the IND are: "Unable to take criticism from outside, unable to engage with us as

Figure 1.1 Lunar House, Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Croydon (photograph by author)
In the summer of 2005 I was a member of a delegation who visited Lunar House as part of the London Citizens Investigation into the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. We waited in an adjacent building before meeting the senior civil servants. A young British Asian security guard checked our credentials while we waited. It was just a few weeks after the 7 July bombings in central London. I asked him if security was particularly tight. ‘We get a lot of bomb alerts but mostly it’s nothing to worry about. You see, what happens is that when people send in their immigration applications they sometimes put flowers or flower petals in with the form for good luck. In the Asian community this is quite common, it’s like putting a prayer in the envelope’, he explained. ‘Only thing is when they arrive here the flowers have turned to dust and when we open them we think, “this could be a letter bomb.”’ Prayers are interpreted as bombs.

This anecdote contains something very telling about the misunderstandings and tensions that surround the issue of immigration and the global movement of people. This chapter will examine how the terms of reference surrounding the immigration debate are coded and determined by the legacies of empire and racism, and how the conception of movement itself might be rethought.
The Art of Listening

Predicament is in fact the same as that of the true victims, that is, a false metaphorical universalization of the fate of the excluded. 12 Zizek touches something here but perhaps there is something else at stake, namely the desire to challenge the distinction between immigrant and host.

Under a succession of home secretaries, the Labour government has reinvigorated the idea that the ‘immigrant’ is a moral and political problem. During his tenure as Home Secretary, David Blunkett claimed that the problem of integration was that South Asian communities needed to speak English to their children in order to ‘overcome the schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships’. 13 Responding to the public outcry, he dismissed being an assimilationist and professed ‘integration with diversity’. There is little doubt on whose terms integration is defined. In this sense the language of ‘shared citizenship’ and ‘mutualism’ is merely a way of saying that the responsibility for ‘embodied multiculturalism’ is laid at the door of the Black and Asian communities. Social order, another one of the new assimilationists’ favourite phrases, is centred on a normative whiteness that defines the terms on which the game of assimilation is played out.

New Borderlands and Pariahs

In Britain and the United States the issue of race and difference is usually located in the social container of the ‘inner city’. It is very different in Sweden and France where it is the suburbs that are associated with ‘dangerous otherness’. In Britain today there has been a shift in the geography of public concern and small provincial towns on the coast (like Margate, Dover and Hastings) have become the focus of anxiety about illegal immigration and asylum. These seaside towns occupy a special location in the national imaginary as places of saucy recreation brilliantly drawn in the essays of George Orwell. 14 The death of twenty-four Chinese ‘cockle pickers’ in Morecambe Bay, Lancashire in February 2004 is an indication of this shift. These ‘illegal workers’ had been brought by gangmasters to harvest shellfish and were trapped by the notoriously treacherous night tide. Sister Gina Tan said during the memorial service held in Morecambe for the dead on 15 February 2004, that: ‘They came to this country thinking they were going to have a better life – they didn’t realise that the sea would take them away’. 15 These towns where cockles and seafood are consumed as a quintessentially English habit, have become the new frontier for the defenders of exclusive national culture and ‘rights for whites’.

The venality and crudeness of the public outcry that revolves around the image of refugees as ‘beggars’ and their alleged involvement in ‘violent crime’ is a routine reference point in the media. The general context is that asylum seekers are living below the poverty line, surviving until recently on vouchers that can only be traded for goods and subject to a dispersal policy that is aimed at preventing them from settling in particular areas together. Meanwhile, liberal or even left wing politicians try to justify these measures introduced by the Labour government since 1997 as being ‘faster, firmer, fairer’. According to the 2002 government White Paper there is a need: to expose the nonsense of the claim that the people coming through the Channel Tunnel, or crossing in container lorries constitute an invasion when it patently demonstrates how difficult people are finding it to reach this country. 16 So, being tough is a matter of placating the delirium of racist scaremongering. The security of these borders also creates the market of desperation that lines the pockets of smugglers and criminals who are making small fortunes out of illegal traffic. Another layer has been added to this situation since the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The figure of the refugee and the asylum seeker has been transformed from a political emir to de facto criminal, and now terrorist. The levels of surveillance and monitoring have increased considerably with the introduction of electronic fingerprint systems and ‘Application Registration Cards’ or identity cards. This is in many respects the product of the harmonization on a European level of immigration policy that seeks to deter applications for asylum. The contract for the controversial ‘voucher scheme’, now being phased out by New Labour, was awarded to a French company, Sodexho Pass International, who also implemented this system in Germany.

Despite Prime Minister Tony Blair’s routine references to Britain’s ‘multi-cultural nature’ and proud tradition of tolerance, a clear distinction is made between the ‘border questions’ relating to new migration and the domestic settlement around the issues of race and racism. Seemingly incommensurable political commitments can be held at bay within New Labour’s political formation. The relic of imperial nationalism lingers and provides the touchstone for the debate on identity and citizenship. Indeed, at the heart of the conception of the state and citizenship is a distinction between a human existence that is common to all of us and a particular formation of human conduct embodied in the citizen.

Giorgio Agamben has pointed out that the Greeks had no single term for life. Rather, they used two terms: namely, zoe which expressed the simple fact of living, and, biou, which indicated the ‘form of living proper to an individual or group’. 17 For Agamben the production of a ‘biopolitical body’ is the original activity of sovereign power. In Agamben’s analysis a stark distinction exists between the life that is created through the language of sovereignty and citizenship and what he calls bare life. He claims ‘that the fundamental categorical
pair of western politics is not that of friend and foe but that of bare life/political
existence, as such, exclusion and inclusion. He also introduces a figure
from archaic Roman law— _homo socius_—to characterize the quality of this bare
life, that is, a person who can be killed and yet not sacrificed. There is some-
thing here that is deeply resonant with the conditions of the displaced people
of the globalized world.

The Named and the Anonymous

The desperation contained in the stories of those people trapped at the border
needs to be reckoned with. While we have heard much of the victims of terror
since the attacks on New York and London, almost nothing is known of the
thousands of people who die in desperate attempts to gain entry to freedom’s
province. This is often simply a matter of who is named and who is nameless.
The philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin, himself an asylum seeker from
Nazism who was shown a closed door with fatal consequences, wrote in his
last essay: “It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous
[Namedness] than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated, not
excluding poets and thinkers. The historical construction is dedicated to the
memory of the anonymous.”

Reckless stowaways are literally falling out of the skies along London
Heathrow Airport’s right-path. In the summer of 2001 a young Pakistani called
Mohammed Ayne fell out of the undercarriage of the Boeing 777 descending
thousands of feet only to land in a Homebase car park in suburban Richmond,
west London. He had sprinted through the darkness of Bahrain Airport and
hauled himself up into the cavernous opening above the plane’s wheels. He was
long dead before he reached British airspace. Or, seventeen-year-old Alberto
Vazquez Rodriguez and sixteen-year-old Michael Fonseca from Cuba who fell
out of the undercarriage of an aeroplane to their deaths in a Surrey field just
outside London’s Gatwick Airport. Sometimes they drop without trace. In the
summer of 2002 a man driving round the M25 motorway close to Gatwick
Airport saw a human figure fall from the sky. The body was never found;
England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ ate it. It is not just that these stowaways fall
from planes. They are sometimes found dead at the roadside. In June 2006 a
suspected stowaway was found dead on the roadside of the A12 in Waltham,
Essex. Two others were also discovered severely dehydrated. In the soaring
temperatures of an English summer they had been dumped there by the traf-
fickers who had smuggled them into the country in the back of a lorry.
Meanwhile, hospitals suffer from acute staff shortages and search the globe
for nurses and doctors. In 2006 it was estimated that 31 per cent of doctors
working in hospitals and general practices in the United Kingdom are
migrants and 13 per cent of nurses working in the National Health Service
were born abroad. There are chronic labour shortages and the facilitation of
the global movement of skilled labour is an essential priority. The British gov-
ernment has introduced a Highly Skilled Migrants Programme in an attempt
to encourage skilled workers, particularly doctors, information technology
workers and scientists, to migrate to Britain. The recruitment of skilled inter-
national workers is happening throughout the developed world. In 2001 the
United States relaxed the annual quotas reserved for professional and skilled
workers, increasing the quotas by nearly 70 per cent. In August 2000 the
German government instituted a Green Card programme, which resulted in
5,600 computer and technology specialists entering Germany. Similar things
are happening in Australia where there are attempts to attract skilled workers
in the new technology fields.

There are huge tensions here between the necessity for global population
flows in a context where the British population is ageing and not reproducing
itself, and the unspeakability of the people-flow debate. Indeed, the very
nature of the term ‘immigrant’ is overdetermined by the legacy of the way in
which movements of labour have been coded racially. Britain faces chronic
skills shortages but at the same time the legacy of racism and the discourse
of immigration mean that New Labour is reluctant to have that debate. Yet the
huge scale of the growth and the demand for labour cannot be hidden.

The London Plan of 2004 produced by the Mayor of London suggests ‘that
under different migration scenarios London’s population could increase by
between 690,000 and 964,000. The most plausible “central” scenario suggests
an increase of 810,000 to 8.1 million by 2016.’ Perhaps the only way to open
up these questions is to abandon the language of ‘immigrants’ and “immigra-
ton” in favour of less coded terminology. One alternative would be to speak of
the necessity of global movement, which is both fluid and not necessarily per-
manent, within an international pool of labour. This view is starting to be
voiced in a surprisingly wide range of places on the political spectrum.

In November 2002 the _Economist_ magazine ran a cover story on the issue of
migration and economic growth. It concluded that there was an economic case
for relaxing immigration policies among the lower skilled as well as the elite
global professional class: “It is impossible to separate the globalisation of trade
and capital from the global movement of people.” Economic benefits like
filling vacancies in which settled communities were reluctant to work would be
achieved through the recruitment of deracinated, work-hungry hands. This
kind of sentiment has been echoed in the responses to the estimated 600,000
migrants from the eight former Soviet bloc nations who have come to Britain
since the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004. In 2006, with the
further enlargement of the EU imminens, which would make it possible Bulgarian and Romanian workers to seek employment in Britain, the Business Group for New Europe – which includes Sainsbury’s and British Petroleum – signed a letter calling for the British government to resist pressure to limit immigration. For these businesses the great success of the 2004 enlargement was the injection of skilled labour into areas of skills shortage in the British economy. Martin Sorrell, the chief executive of the WPP Group, the world’s largest advertising business, commented: ‘The Polish plumber has become a much loved feature of British life. The migration has plugged gaps in the labour market and boosted economic growth.’ Free flow of migration even dwarfs free trade rhetoric in this version of economic liberalism; for them it is simply a matter of letting mobile workers earn from moving and selling their labour where it is most wanted.

The Economist conceded that opening the borders could involve a ‘political cost’. This, it argues, is best addressed through an assimilationist approach, and if necessary unbashful and premeditated discrimination:

Winning consensus for an orderly policy may mean trying to pick the migrants most likely to bring economic and social gains. It may also mean (although liberal democracies detest the implications) choosing those whose education and culture have prepared them for the societies in which they will live. In Europe, that may mean giving preference to white Christian Central and Eastern Europeans over people from other religious groups and regions.

It is telling that a racial logic is being admitted openly: certain nations and ethnicities are close relatives to the white English and others are not. This is ultimately about a version of whiteness that places Central and Eastern Europeans within a shared, or at least compatible, racial genealogy. Yet, such a vision is little more than a description of the current state of play. There are literally hundreds of thousands of unnoticed economic migrants coming to Britain each year. A study conducted by Janet Dobson and Gail McLaughlin concluded:

that migrants from developed countries formed around three-quarters of the inflow from the mid-eighties onwards – nearly 80% in 1995–99. Contrary to common perceptions, the biggest contributors to the increase in employed people coming from overseas were countries in the developed world, particularly the Old Commonwealth (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Republic of South Africa) and the European Union and EFTA (Ireland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). These mobile workers do not count as ‘migrants’ because the mask of whiteness renders them invisible.

There were 282,000 asylum applications between 1995 and 1999; approximately half of those will have been turned down. During the same period the inflow of workers from developed countries into the UK was 381,000. In 2001 the government published figures that asylum applications were 11 per cent lower than in 2000. This trend was reversed in 2002 when published figures showed a 20 per cent increase. However, it was not the beginning of an upward trend. Applications are falling and the number of asylum applications has halved since 2002 reaching a figure of 33,030 applications in 2004. The legal right to asylum was articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under Article 14: ‘Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries, freedom from persecution’ and this was elaborated in the 1951 Refugee Convention. This right does not amount to universal protection for all human life. Rather, it is the gift of each state underscored by the political laws of citizenship and the difference in interpretation between states is very wide-ranging. In 2004, 90 per cent of Iraqi refugees in Jordan were given convention status and granted asylum as compared to 52 per cent in the USA and just 0.1 per cent in the United Kingdom. New Labour’s strategy is making clear ‘how difficult (some) people are finding it to reach this country’.

In 2005 the Blairite journal Prospect opened up a debate about the limits of diversity. This debate has its origins in 1998 and was stimulated by the Conservative ideologue David Willetts who argued that ‘at the heart of the contemporary political formation in Britain is a “progressive dilemma”. Diversity in values and by extension “culture” he argued would mean that the British people wouldn’t be willing to pay for welfare provision. Willetts claimed: “This is America versus Sweden. You can have a Swedish welfare state provided that you are a homogeneous society with intensely shared values.” David Goodhart summed up the debate when he concluded: “To put it bluntly — most of us prefer our own kind.” While he tried to hedge around the issue of who exactly is included in “our own kind”, this is essentially little more than a nativist ontology that is directly connected to the legacy of new and old forms of race thinking. He continued: “The implicit “calculus of affinity” in media reporting of disasters is easily mocked — two dead Britons will get the same space as 200 Spaniards or 2,000 Somalis. Yet every day we make similar calculations in the distribution of our own resources.” Goodhart and his kind perform an extraordinary act of historical revisionism when they claim that diversity is the cause for concern. As Paul Gilroy has commented: “The racism of Europe’s colonial and imperial past preceded the appearance of migrants inside European citadels. It was racism not diversity that made them a problem.” It follows that it is the legacy of racism and not diversity that inhibits affinity and mutuality.
The ‘calculus of affinity’ has nothing to do with a state of nature but is rather a particular legacy of the creation of a racialized *bloc* in which the nation is constructed as the extension of the heterosexual family. Here ‘cultural diversity’ is about the limits on what can be assimilated. The etymology of the word ‘integrate’ is to make into ‘the whole’. In this sense, it is about being made ‘the same’ as the social totality. I want to argue that there may be other ways to configure a politics that is agile enough to lay bare the degree to which this is a product of history and not some natural affinity for one’s own.

Globalization has produced a tremendous movement of people. It is estimated that some 145 million people are living outside their countries of birth; in 1975 the number was 85 million. The global economic and political elites are able to move across borders at will; yet there remains profound anxiety about the global movement of persons. As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out: ‘the riches are global, the misery is local.’

In his article ‘Inequality of world incomes: what is to be done?’ Robert Wade points to the uneven distribution of wealth on a global scale. The richest 20 per cent control 82.7 per cent of the world’s income; the poorest 20 per cent have just 1.4 per cent of world income. Hunter Wade claims that this pattern is becoming more marked, with the result that the world will be divided into two zones. The first he calls the *Zone of Peace*, or what we might call relative peace, centring on the informational centres of the Pacific Rim, North America and Western Europe. The exploitation of natural resources is supplanted by the pursuit of technological innovation. We might also add that these places also become targets for terrorism. The second he calls the *Zone of Turmoil*. A rising proportion of the population finds access to basic necessities restricted while at the same time seeing others driving around in Mercedes. He argues: ‘Large numbers see migration to the wealthy zone as their only salvation, and a few are driven to redemptive terrorism directed at the symbolic centres of the powerful.’ We cannot understand what drives the desperate to hide in the undercarriages of planes without taking account of the extreme economic polarizations that divide our world. There is evidence to suggest that one of the benefits of migration is the redistribution of wealth. The World Bank’s Committee on Payment and Settlement Systems found that the flow of funds from migrant workers back to their families in underdeveloped countries was a significant source of income. In 2005 it estimated the total worldwide value of such remittances as over US$230 billion involving some 175 million migrants. For some poor countries the remittance from people sending money home is as high as a third of the gross domestic product.

The *Economist* is right to highlight ‘the line between those whose passports allow them to move and settle reasonably freely across the richer world’s borders. and those who can do so only hidden in the back of a truck, and with forged papers.’ The deadly consequences have already been outlined, yet, as Paul Gilroy has put it, a lingering ‘imperial topography’ creates hierarchies between those whose lives are cherished and the bare life at the border. The 3,000 dead of September 11, 2001 are remembered in the exercise of patriotic *Gemeinschaft* and civilized outrage. The unnamed and undocumented migrant workers who perished in the World Trade Center on that day direct us to the development of a broader conscience, which connects with the plight of today’s migrants.

What of the 3,000 and rising who have died invisible, stateless deaths at the borders of Europe? What of the wretched at the border and those who fall from the sky?

The Wings of Icarus

Bruegel’s famous masterpiece *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* depicts a scene where a young boy falls into the sea while people are going about the business of their day – be it ploughing a field or watching a flock – indifferent to the tragedy of the boy tumbling from air (see Figure 1.3). In the Greek myth, Icarus took flight from imprisonment wearing fragile wings that his father – Daedalus – made for him. Ignoring his father’s warning, Icarus, full of escape’s promise, flew too close to the sun, which melted the wax holding the feathers of his wings together and hurled him downward to a watery death.

While the reference is to Greek antiquity, Bruegel’s landscape is a sixteenth-century one. He lived through violent times in which purges against Protestants were taking place all over Europe. His painting outlines a landscape that is indifferent to suffering, the ploughman keeps his head down and the herdsman looks upward as Icarus’s legs disappear into the ocean. The picture, I think, is as relevant to the twenty-first century as it was when bloody orgies of religious persecution ravaged Europe almost 500 years ago. Today’s Icarus is carried skyward by metal wings that are not melted by the sun but his flight is no less risky. Rather, the fall from the sky is produced under the white heat of globalization.

Bruegel’s painting has prompted poets to contemplate the nature of human indifference. In 1938 W. H. Auden wrote in his ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ of how ‘everything turns away’ from ‘something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky’. Similarly, American poet William Carlos Williams ends his poem ‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus’ with the sober accusation:
Both poets are alert to the acute inaction on the part of citizens who turn away or play deaf to Icarus. All these issues are pointedly relevant to the anonymous people who are falling from the London skies today. As the modern Icarus hides in the undercarriages of planes and is carried toward Gatwick and Heathrow his corpse passes over Lamur House in Croydon. Yet the stories of those who fall tragically are hidden and appear only fleetingly in the public realm—a new flash across the screen of conscience.

On 2 August 1999, Flight 520 from Conakry, Guinea touched down at Zaventem International Airport in Brussels. The 200 passengers, who included businesses, bureaucrats and holidaymakers, disembarked quickly after the long flight. At 10:10 a.m., an airport worker pulled up at gate B-40 where the plane was about to be refuelled. He smelled something. He brought a ladder and looked into the undercarriage wheel well. He saw a skinny brown leg dangling, with a blue and white sandal on its foot. He called the airport police. They found there the dead bodies of two boys: Yaguine Koita, aged fourteen, and Fode Toukara, aged fifteen. With them was found a plastic bag stuffed with birth certificates, school report cards, photographs and an envelope containing a letter.

On the envelope, in Yaguine’s handwriting, was written in French: “In case we die, deliver to Messrs. The members and officials of Europe.” Their message reads:

Excellencies, Messrs., members and officials of Europe,

We have the honour and pleasure and great confidence in you to write this letter to talk to you of the objective of our journey and the suffering of us, the children and young people of Africa.

But first of all, we present to you our sweetest, most adoring and respectful salutations in the world. To that effect, be our support and our aid. You are for us, in Africa, the ones whom we must ask for help. We appeal to you, for the love of your continent for the feelings you have toward your people and above all for the affinity and love you have for your children whom you love like life itself. Moreover, for the love and meekness of our creator, almighty God, who has given you all the good experience, wealth and power to build and organise well your continent to become the most beautiful and admirable of all.

Messrs., members and officials of Europe, we appeal to your solidarity and kindness for help in Africa, we have problems and several shortcomings regarding children’s rights.

Regarding our problems, we have war, disease, malnutrition, etc. As for children’s rights, in Africa and above all in Guinea, we have too many schools but a great lack of education and training. Only in private schools can one have a good education and training, but it takes a great sum of money, and our parents are poor and they have to feed us. Nor do we have sports schools where we can practise football, basketball or tennis.

That is why we, African children and youth, ask you to create a great efficient organisation for Africa to allow us to progress.

And if you see that we have sacrificed and risked our lives, it is because there is too much suffering in Africa and we need you to struggle against poverty and put an end to war in Africa. Nevertheless, we want to study and we ask you to help us in Africa to study like you.

Finally, we appeal to you to excuse us very, very much for daring to write this letter to the great personalities to whom we owe much respect. And do not forget that it is to you that we must bemoan our weakness in Africa.

Yaguine Koita and Fode Toukara

The letter reads like hope’s spectre and evidence of the human cost of world divisions in wealth and opportunity. Yet, it is not simply a matter of calling for compassion for those caught in this terrible fate. In fact, compassion itself can be a damaging thing, as pointed out earlier by Žižek. Richard Sennett, writing
in a different context, has talked about the kinds of compassion that wound, where compassion imposes a division between the magnanimity of those who give it and the compulsory gratitude demanded of those who receive it. Hannah Arendt offers a similar caution when she writes, ‘compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world.’ It is not, then, just a matter of taking notice of the splash made by Lear or the sound of the jets overhead. Indeed, we might think about the ways in which the ‘grid of immigration’ sets up relationships of debt and gratitude. Here, at best, the ‘host’ is always cast as being gracious and as granting the exile a favour. The ‘immigrant’ is forced to express gratitude. One of the things that I find hard to listen to is the expression of thanks made routinely in meetings with refugees and asylum seekers. The script is already written regardless of whether one wants to perform the role or not. Meanwhile, the words that ring in my mind are the cacophony of racist complaints about the ‘new strangers’ that confront one at every turn in the ‘host’s’ world.

It is time to think differently about the global movement of persons, to develop a new language, or at least to try to reach beyond the ‘grid of immigration’ that constructs the relationship between immigrant and host. Who is not an immigrant in a global world where culture, money, music and even imagination travel without the necessity of physical movement? And if everyone is an immigrant then no one is, and it is here that I have some sympathy for Žižek’s complaint discussed earlier. Countries like the ‘illegal immigrant’ and ‘bogus asylum seekers’ retain their power and currency precisely because they provide the liminal point of who belongs and who does not. As Paul Gilroy suggests: ‘The figure of the immigrant is part of the very intellectual mechanism that holds us – post-colonial Europeans, black and white, indeterminate and unclassifiable – hostage.’

It is time to make a case for the normality of movement; at the same time there are difficult questions to be faced. Is it simply about opening national borders and ‘putting people to work’ as some on the left have argued? The danger here is of creating an unregulated licence for capital to exploit the deracinated and desperate. It is chilling to read that economic analysts on the right come to the same position and conclude with glee: ‘migration probably raises the living standards of the rich (think of all those foreign nannies and waiters) and the returns to capital (hence the enthusiasm of employers for more flexible policies).’ In the world of liquid rights and individual insecurity the argument for the liberalization of immigration controls may also play into the hands of unscrupulous and exploitative interests. However, it is hard to imagine a situation for the displaced persons of the twenty-first century worse than it is now. Prey to those who profit from illegal traffic, the indifference of immigration officers and hostile street racists, they are at the sharp end of globalization.

Perhaps the argument for more liberal immigration controls couched within an economic logic is necessary. This may be an opportunity to bring further state-sanctioned border killing to an end, where the bare life at the border is little more than the archaic figure of homo saccer who can be killed without sacrifice. It is clear that economic liberalism and the Third Way agree on one thing, and that is the necessity of the project of assimilationism; put simply, that immigrants have to become like the wider society. While both can applaud a cosmetic cosmopolitanism in the urban mix of colours, sounds and flavours, neither is willing to question the interconnection of race and nation that defines the terms of citizenship and belonging. This is ultimately about the legacy of racial thinking and whiteness that continues to provide a privileged passport to those who seek to move across the lines drawn around European nation states.

Conclusion: The Look to the Sky

The jets carrying the bodies of tragic snowbirds pass over the offices of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at Lunar House and Apollo House in Croydon. Before they fall, these bodies pass through the ‘immigration lane’ both physically and metaphorically. The pressure of the asylum system is felt intensely within these moonscrapers, whose names celebrate space flights. Every time a scaremongering headline appears in the Daily Mail or Daily Express it translates into political pressure and reaction inside Lunar House. The irony of the situation is that while a ferocious debate about immigration raged during the 2005 general election campaign, the government policy had been draconian and uncompromising for a long while. Removals of failed asylum seekers had doubled since 1997. In 2004, 12,000 people including children were deported. The backlog of asylum seekers waiting an initial decision is under 10,000, its lowest level for a decade. There is nothing wrong with fast decisions, as long as they are good ones. Part of the purgatory of having to suffer the present system is the waiting and uncertainty (Figure 1.4). The public odium directed at immigrants and asylum seekers is paradoxically not really about the stranger in our midst. Rather, this rhetoric is concerned with the shape and the shaming of the ‘us’, nationally and locally.

A remarkable story is partially hidden in the dust raised by the public row over immigration. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate is not always a happy place to work. The political pressure to process asylum claims quickly
results in frequent mistakes. Independent adjudicators upheld 20 per cent of asylum appeals in 2004; papers and passports are routinely lost, causing massive anxiety to those awaiting judgement. Staff in the IND feel beleaguered and this part of the Civil Service has a reputation for the highest number of staff suicides. Even the immigration officers feel trapped in a way that C. Wright Mills would recognise. 51 One frontline worker at Lunar House commented that this imperfect system leaves her feeling ‘anxious, frustrated and depersonalised’ so that she feels disappointed in herself because she ‘has to act in an uncaring, unsupportive way when dealing with customers’. Activists and members of the community dissatisfied with how the immigration service works set up an organisation called South London Citizens. One of its early meetings was held at Goldsmiths College. In November 2004 they decided to conduct an enquiry into the workings of Lunar House, which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. They took the inspired decision to take evidence from both immigration officers and asylum seekers. At one meeting there was the extraordinary moment when an immigration officer stood up in a crowded room and apologized to the users present for the misery caused by the workings of Lunar House. The cynic might say one apology does nothing to change the Kafkaesque workings of the institution, but the enquiry ruffled the government and made it take notice. Indeed, I think the South London Citizens group is the realisation of what Edward Said would call ‘the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment’. 48

The alliance between the workers and the users of Lunar House did not continue, however, and the Public and Commercial Services Union – the main representative of IND workers – decided not to give written or oral evidence to the enquiry, citing job insecurity and fear that the workers would being held responsible for the ‘political decisions concerning draconian immigration laws’. 46 The employees are placed in an ambiguous position with regard to their economic well-being and the distress and anguish caused by the nature of the system. Some IND employees enjoyed their work and benefited financially and socially from the quality of life that it afforded them. There is also evidence that immigration officers abuse their power. The Observer newspaper conducted a covert investigation at Lunar House showing that James Dawute, immigration officer, promised Tanya, an eighteen-year-old Zimbabwean girl, help with her asylum case in exchange for sex. Video, text and mobile phone evidence posted on the newspaper’s website showed that over a two-week period the young woman – who had been a rape victim – is promised help. The video camera is the young woman’s witness. At a noodle bar in East Croydon, Dawute’s intentions are captured on tape. ‘I’m very honest and I keep my word’, he reassured Tanya. He arranges for a hotel and while the young woman, still uncertain, is reassured by Dawute, ‘I will tell you when we are alone … because we are going to have sex’. 50

Such cases are extreme abuses of the system. Yet, I would suggest these are simply exaggerations of the inequalities and vulnerabilities that are part of the architecture of the system. There are two entrances for users of Lunar House. ‘Managed Migration’ receives its visitors through the front door. The sight of people standing in line is blocked from external view by screens (Figure 1.5). Those entering the building pass through a security check similar to passport
controlled at an airport. Asylum seekers, on the other hand, enter the building through an austere entrance at the back; they are dealt with separately and this simply reinforces the distinction between a ‘managed’ and an ‘unwanted’ human presence. Inside, users wait in the immigration halls on metal seats that are bolted to the floor. The immigration officers sit behind a glass screen. In June 2005 a senior Home Office official who was showing round the delegation of which I was part joked that the seats were bolted to the floor so that users couldn’t throw them through the glass windows. In these very public places users have to explain their claim for asylum, including sometimes traumatic accounts of rape, torture or violence. They are not places for sensitive hearing. A student who gave evidence to the enquiry commented: ‘The seating for those being interviewed was unusually far from the desk of the interviewing officer. The only chance of communication was when your body tilted strongly forward and you sat on the edge of the bench. People slightly shorter than me would not be able to speak to the Officer and sit at the same time.’

Applicants are literally on the edge of their seats; the whole system is predicated on the idea that human mobility is a problem, that if you move across the borders of a state then you become a problem. Yet, at the same time the mobility of persons is an essential fact of life. Much to the embarrassment of the government and the Home Office ‘illegal immigrants’ had been employed to clean the IND’s offices.

Amid the wave of controversies about the immigration service, Home Secretary John Reid told a Parliamentary Select Committee in May 2006: ‘Our system is not fit for purpose. It is inadequate in terms of its scope, it is inadequate in terms of its information technology, leadership, management systems and processes.’ Despite such a public admission, there is still little sign of an open public debate about the need for global movement and public investment in an infrastructure that could deliver a humane immigration system in keeping with the complexities of population movement in the twenty-first century.

However, the South London Citizens’ enquiry suggests a kind of opening and the development of a global sensibility. Zygmunt Bauman wrote: ‘All communities are imagined. The global community is no exception to that rule ...’ 94 Similarly Paul Gilroy has pointed towards a way of re-imagining a sense of global community through the idea of the planetary, which captures both a sense of movement and a worldly reach. 95 I am appealing to a hope for the emergence of a consciousness of planetary belonging; this sounds very weak, I know, even as I write these words. Jean Anouilh comments that the only universal human quality that we all carry in our bodies is time: ‘Time is always within us, just as space is around us.’ 96 It is this sense of time being deposited within us at each breath and on every heartbeat that might provide the meter for a shared sense of planetary belonging. A sense of worldly time alerts us to the shared vulnerability in living now without recourse to the clichés of universal common humanity. We are each living this sense of shared global time but from an unimaginably diverse range of vantage points scattered throughout the world.

When we look into the sky what do we see? Is it a window or a mirror? If it is a mirror does it simply reflect back the image of us and the parochial concerns of nations? ‘The sky that hangs over our head is no longer domestic’, remarked Primo Levi. 97 Raising our eyes to the sky might offer another kind of invitation to see the refracted or deflected traces of global routes that are drawn in it by the contrail of a jet threading its way toward the horizon (Figure 1.6). Here is one place we find the scale of global sociology. It is only from space that a sense of the globe as a whole can be apprehended and perhaps as we contemplate the sky we will find the impression of a truly global human society.

It is not just a matter of raising our eyes skyward. The task is to link individual biographies and the questions they raise with larger global, social and historical forces. As we zoom in from the global process to the local dispute,
Figure 1.6 'The sky is no longer domestic': a jet passes over the offices of immigration in Croydon (photograph by author)

from the jet at 13,000 feet to the town hall meeting below, the distance spanned by the falling body of the unnamed victim of globalization, we find the scale of global sociology. This seemingly uncanny occurrence reveals the profound ways in which belonging and movement are regulated by the immigration line. I have argued here that the conception of human movement through the grid of 'immigrant/host' is implicated in the face of bare life at the border. As Paul Gilroy comments, the notion of 'illegal immigrant' and the 'bogus asylum seeker' holds us hostage. In order to break free it is necessary to confront the legacy of empire and racism and its impact on the political debate about migration. The task of sociology here is to make explicit the assumed terms of the debate, point to the hypocrisy and double standards of the present system and pay attention to that which is ignored. The following chapter explores the legacy of racism and belonging from a very different angle. This discussion deals with the ways in which people are both defined and situated in the cityscape through racial grids and divisions. Focusing on the ways young people navigate safe and dangerous places in London, it examines how home and belonging are negotiated and remade in surprising and often counter-intuitive ways. While this chapter has focused on the nature of