The Skype State: Digital Pushbacks and the Absence of Asylum on Mainland Greece

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Abstract

States and supernational actors increasingly deploy digital technologies within projects of border enforcement and migration management. This doctoral dissertation focuses on the deployment of Skype video technology within the mainland Greek asylum procedure. Between 2014 and 2022, the majority of asylum applicants on mainland Greece (and some islands) were required to initiate their asylum procedures by calling the Greek Asylum Service on Skype. Skype played a dominant role in the governance of asylum applicants in Greece for approximately eight years, but existing scholarship has not ethnographically explored the digital bureaucratic procedure. Approaching the Skype procedure as a border technology, this dissertation ethnographically explores the experience and embodiment of digital bordering while considering what kind of political events are enabled by the insertion of mundane digital technology within bordering projects.

Building upon fieldwork in Athens, Greece, I demonstrate that the Skype procedure is a powerful tool of internal bordering. I argue that digital bureaucracy can be used as a political technology whose bordering power operates not at the physical border but in the body and minds of asylum applicants.
By directing physical queues to a digital pathway, Greece disappears asylum applicants, distances the state from those seeking to make claims upon it, and makes life unlivable. In doing so, it executes what I conceptualize as a *digital pushback*, which refers to the digitally mediated strategies governments employ to erase unwanted populations from public space and the realm of state responsibility. In the Greek case, this pushback operates through affective violence and exclusion, shaping alienating waiting events that condition migrant life into exhaustion and confinement. At the same time, the distance and obscurity of digital bureaucracy legitimizes state absence and muddles understandings of power. The digitalization of bureaucratic systems can alter the (non)citizen-state interaction in violent and surreal ways.

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For those who call

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and for my parents

(as if a dedication could ever repay the world they have given me)

Chapter 1
Introduction: “Asylum is Unavailable”

1.1 Introduction

When I arrive in the morning, there are sixty men waiting to be ignored. They queue on Spartis street in an orderly line, chatting amongst themselves while the others quietly let the Mediterranean sun rub sleep from their eyes. It is August 2018. Some of the men sit on the dusty Athens sidewalk playing on their phones or having a smoke, but they all leap up when I arrive. I greet them as I fumble for my keys to unlock the door. I take a breath before grabbing the handle; this is one of those doors that never opens properly, not on the first try at least. I push and pull and twist and try a different key (even though I know that this is the right key, the only key that opens the door), muttering under my breath like I do every morning. And like they do every morning, the guys offer to help. One by one they try until finally I hear a click and the door swings open.

Once inside, I plug in the laptops and grab my notepad before going back to meet the crowd. The men are from different continents and countries, and I hear a mixture of languages as I work my way down the queue: Farsi, Pashto, Urdu, Arabic, Bengali, English, and French. I hand each man a sticky note with a date and time I’ve scribbled in blue ink, an informal appointment to come back to the office at a later time. They thank me and start to leave, which I am grateful for. A queue this big can attract attention, and not the good kind. I am left with the ten men who have appointments for this morning’s session and a few of their friends. I invite them inside.

We start calling at 10:00am precisely. The room is quiet except for all the noise. Above each head, the wall fan traces its orbit, pushing hot summer air and the automated sounds that hang in it. Fifteen men sit around three Dell laptops, each screen displaying a Skype video call. Some of the guys pull out their cell

phones and call on those as well. No one speaks above the ringing, which screams out from each device in beats of six. The first calls are ignored, and the second ones too. “Just keep calling,” I remind them. They nod and press the call button again. I hand out bananas and pour cold water, noting the tense energy in the office. I watch their faces mirrored back on each Skype call. Some of the guys stare straight into the camera, grimacing and grinding their teeth. Others look at the ceiling or to the floor, fatigue painted across their faces. A handful have fallen asleep. For a full hour, the calls ring without reply, and for a full hour, we sit and sweat in silence. At the end of the hour, they stand up, thank me, and ask when they can try again. The next group walks in and begins calling immediately. There is no time to waste. There is so much time to waste.

For approximately eight years, the only way of applying for asylum on mainland Greece was by calling the government on Skype. Between 2014 and 2022, applicants were made to initiate the asylum process through video calls with members of the Greek Asylum Service (GAS), the competent authority on issues of international protection in Greece. During this call (which was only allowed during specific hour-long time slots assigned by the caller’s mother tongue), applicants could make themselves and their desire for asylum known. Those who successfully pre-registered on Skype received a date and time to lodge their formal application, as well as an identification card that granted access to healthcare, the labor market, and protection from arrest/detention. This digital pathway was central to the bureaucratic migration apparatus of Greece and central to the lives of those seeking inclusion within it.

The procedure was wildly inefficient. For starters, it was rife with digital administrative burdens (Peters, 2023) that disadvantage those with lower levels of digital literacy. Applicants needed access to stable internet connection, a device with a functioning camera, and knowledge of how to operate digital technology and make a Skype account. At the same time, the Skype pathway was only open for six working hours per day, split into hour-long windows reserved for speakers of specific languages. Further,

only two GAS staffers (together with a language interpreter) fielded all of the incoming calls from mainland Greece.[1]

There is no publicly available data regarding how many calls were made, how many were answered, and how many registrations occurred. However, various NGOs and academics have reported that asylum applicants regularly called without success for months to years (Witcher, 2020). In a 2016 press release, the Greek Council of Refugees asserted that accessing asylum via Skype "has been impossible" (GCR, 2016). In the same year, several applicants began a hunger strike to protest their inability to access the asylum procedure on Skype (Tazzioli, 2023). Meanwhile the Skype procedure received widespread criticism and condemnation from NGOs, journalists, the Greek Ombudsman, and the United Nations. Two successive directors of the Greek Asylum Service themselves called the digital system the "Achilles' heel" of the asylum procedure (Aggelidis, 2018).

Although the Skype procedure has been widely criticized as shaping woefully inadequate international protection standards, it is not particularly well known or studied within policy and academic circles. To date, no one has published an ethnographic study of the system, which is surprising since the Skype procedure was for eight years one of the primary tools of migration control on mainland Greece. The limited work that does exist on the Skype procedure comes largely from journalists or NGOs, noting little more than that the pre-registration system is underfunded, inaccessible, and confusing, posing barriers to asylum and preventing the timely processing of claims. Some scholars have explored the Skype procedure in terms of the experimental deployment of technology, data extraction, and a politics of disorientation (Aradau, 2017; Tazzioli, 2022b; Tazzioli, 2022c), but their work stops short of ethnographic inquiry. As a result, there is little to no knowledge of how the Skype procedure is experienced or what it does to asylum applicants beyond obstructing access to asylum.

[1] This number was confirmed by my interviews with Asylum Service staffers.

This dissertation helps bridge this gap by presenting an ethnographic account of the Skype procedure, drawing from fieldwork conducted in Athens, Greece.

1.2 Introducing the Skype Procedure[2]

In July 2014, the Greek Asylum Service piloted a new system for the registration of asylum seekers on mainland Greece.[3] Previously, applicants would queue outside of the Asylum Service office to lodge a claim, but with the new system, applicants were suddenly required to pre-register their claims (a process legally referred to as απλή καταγραφή, or 'simple registration') on Skype before actually lodging their claims in person (πλήρης καταγραφή, or 'full registration'). In theory, the applicants could call the Greek Asylum Service on Skype to receive an appointment date for their application lodging.

As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the stated goal of this digital pathway was to reduce both queues and the time applicants spent queuing outside by opening an online pathway through which individuals could register their claims. It is unclear exactly how, when, or even if the Skype pilot was publicly announced, especially since the Asylum Service website was taken down in 2020. However, archives of the website accessed on the Wayback Machine, an internet archive, show that in March 2015 (and perhaps earlier; the Wayback Machine does not have prior records), the Asylum Service's online guidance noted that registration could occur in person or virtually, and linked to instruction sheets on how to pre-register with Skype. These guidance sheets comprised the first publicly disseminated guidance for asylum applicants regarding the then-nascent Skype system. The documents explain how to download and use the Skype

[2] Because the system was active during the duration of my fieldwork (and the majority of my DPhil), I choose to write about it in the present tense in the remainder of this dissertation. I also do this to situate my reader within my ethnographic context, which was shaped by the active Skype procedure.

[3] The Skype pathway exists only on the mainland and specific islands, comprising a distinct asylum procedure from the "hotspot" approach taken on the islands that experienced the largest influx of border crossings (Bousiou, 2020; Micinsky 2022). In Greece, the two asylum procedures are colloquially referred to as the mainland vs. the island procedures (even though the mainland procedure encompasses some islands). When I refer to the mainland procedure, I do so with recognition that the Skype procedure exists on both the mainland and select islands.

application, as well as why the digital system benefits applicants. The process of pre-registering through Skype did not meaningfully change since the dissemination of these sheets, which outlined four key steps:

1) Applicants download the Skype application and access it using WiFi or cellular data.
2) Applicants call the Asylum Service on a language-specific line (ie. asylum.service.arabic; asylum.service.farsi.dari) at language-specific hours of operation.
3) An Asylum Service staffer answers the call, asks identifying questions (ie. "what is your name; what is your date of birth; what is your father's name; what is your hometown"), and takes a screenshot photograph of the applicant.
4) The staffer schedules an in-person appointment for full registration and relays to the applicant the time, date, and location of that appointment.

Once these steps are complete, the applicant has completed simple registration and can proceed to full registration (in which the asylum claim is formally lodged). Importantly, the applicant may now pick up their pre-registration card (or "white card," previously called a "pink card"), which certifies their status as an asylum seeker and confers access to various social services and legal protections.

The digital system accords strictly to a specific but oft-changing timetable, whose most recent and final iteration is reproduced below (colors in original):

Schedule for the registration of requests for international protection

As from Monday 12-04-2022 dates for applications for international protection by Skype call shall be given as follows:

ΠΡΟΓΡΑΜΜΑ SKYPE						
From - To	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY		FRIDAY
8:00 - 9:00	Arabic Attica	Albanian Thrace/Leros/Attica	Albanian Crete/Attica/Patras	Albanian Lesvos/Thessaloniki/Samos		Albanian Thessaloniki/ Kos
9:00 - 10:00	Hindi Thrace/ Patras	Kurmanji Crete/Attica/ Thessaloniki	English-French Attica/Crete	Pashto Thessaloniki/Crete/ Patras-Samos-Piraeus		English-French Thessaloniki/Attica
10:00-11:00	Dari-Farsi Thessaloniki/Crete/ Patras	Russian-Ukrainian Thessaloniki/Athens/Samos	Urdu-Punjabi Attica/Thrace/Leros	Farsi 10:00-10:30 Attica	Bengali 10:30-11:00 Piraeus	Georgian Attica/Thessaloniki
11:00 - 12:00	Arabic Crete/Leros/Patras	Arabic Thessaloniki/Kos/Samos	Arabic FAST TRACK- Attica	Turkish 11:00-11:30 Attica	Hindi 11:30-12:00 Attica	Bengali Crete/Kos/Patras/Piraeus
12:00 - 13:00	Urdu-Punjabi Attica/Thessaloniki	Urdu-Punjabi Chios/Patras/Crete/ Kos/Samos	Sorani Attica/Thessaloniki/ Crete	Spanish Attica		Russian-Ukranian Crete/Thrace/Patras
13:00 - 14:00	Georgian Thrace/Patras/Crete	Georgian Lesvos/Attica	Chinese Thessaloniki/Crete/ Attica/Patras	Bengali Thessaloniki/Samos		Dari-Farsi Piraeus

Figure 1: Skype Timetable
Source: migration.gov.gr

As the timetable displays, applicants must adhere to clear temporal and geographic architectures. They can only call at specific times to pre-register their claims, as determined by one's mother tongue and current location of residence.[4] Take for instance asylum applicants whose mother tongue is English or French. As dictated by the above schedule, these individuals can only call between 9:00am–10:00am on Wednesdays and Fridays. At no other time during the week can they attempt to register. Further, the Wednesday hour is only reserved for English and French speakers residing in Athens (Attica) or Crete, whereas the Friday hour is reserved for applicants residing in Athens or Thessaloniki. The mix of

[4] Those whose mother tongues are not represented on the Skype timetable are supposed to register in person (but they are often turned away).

temporal and geographical restriction is even more apparent with the case of Arabic. The above schedule provides four hours in which Arabic speakers can register, but only one of those hours applies to applicants in Athens. Meanwhile, there is a "Fast Track" hour on Wednesdays reserved for Syrians located anywhere in Greece. As the name suggests, this pathway is fast, efficient, and regularly results in successful registration. Clearly national preferences and biases are baked into the system's design.

It is important to note that the schedule is not at all flexible. Applicants cannot call outside the designated hours (or rather, they can, but there is no chance of receiving a reply). Each language has its own Asylum Service Skype account, which only goes online during its designated hours. Similarly, applicants cannot call outside of the designated locations (or rather, they can, but if their call is answered and they receive a registration appointment, they will be required to bring proof of address to the appointment. If they cannot prove residence in the appropriate location, the registration process terminates).

In theory, certain applicants can bypass the Skype procedure. The Asylum Service maintains that applicants able to demonstrate exceptional vulnerability could register in person.[5] At times this is successful, but often it is not. For example, Asylum Service staffers often refuse to believe that minors are in fact minors, or turn other vulnerable applicants away without explanation. Most often, individuals with demonstrated vulnerabilities are not allowed to register in person because they had previously started the asylum procedure on Greek islands whose asylum procedure did not involve Skype. On these islands, applicants are put under geographical restriction upon registering, which means they are not legally allowed to travel to the mainland. If they do, they are in theory unable to initiate or continue the asylum process there.

[5] The following groups qualify as vulnerable: "children; unaccompanied children; direct relatives of victims of shipwrecks (parents, siblings, children, husbands/wives); disabled persons; elderly; pregnant women; single parents with minor children; victims of human trafficking; persons with serious illness; persons with cognitive or mental disability and victims of torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence such as victims of female genital mutilation" (AIDA, 2022).

Many of the asylum applicants in Athens come from the islands having escaped to the mainland because of dangerous living conditions, the threat of physical pushbacks to Turkey, or excessively slow asylum procedures. The Asylum Service lacks guidance on whether or not they can register vulnerable individuals who have geographical restrictions.[6] The individuals who in theory can bypass the Skype system generally end up calling on Skype with everyone else.

When Skype was first integrated into the mainland asylum procedure, it was neither mandatory nor the primary means of accessing international protection. It was, rather, an experimental pilot ostensibly designed to provide access to individuals residing far from Athens and to reduce the queues outside of the Asylum Service gates by directing some applicants online (Aradau, 2022). However, this quickly changed. By July 2015, applicants speaking French, English, Arabic, Farsi/Dari, Urdu/Punjabi, and Bangla (the vast majority of applicants) were required to pre-register on Skype (Stevens and Dimitriadi, 2019, p. 272), while applicants speaking other languages had to queue outside the Asylum Service. By the end of 2015, the Skype pilot had turned into the "Skype procedure" (Aradau, 2022) and was the dominant and sole means through which most applicants on mainland Greece could register for asylum. Soon the Skype procedure further expanded in function so that those who had previously received negative asylum decisions and were seeking to lodge new claims (called subsequent claims) could only do so on Skype. The Skype procedure remained in place for eight years, governing access to the asylum procedure for new and repeat applicants. It was abruptly pulled in August 2022.[7]

[6] A telling example from my fieldwork: after attempting to register an asylum applicant at the Asylum Service by presenting evidence of his torture, I was told by the registration coordinator that he lacked guidance from the Ministry of Migration and was "waiting for future instructions" regarding people with geographic restrictions. When I asked how long he had been waiting for instructions, he told me he had been waiting for years. In the meantime, GAS would not register applicants with documented vulnerabilities who presented themselves in person.
[7] Chapter 7 will discuss the closing of the Skype procedure and the events that followed.

In support of my doctoral fieldwork in Athens, I conducted participant observation at FORGE for humanity (hereinafter FORGE), an NGO I volunteered at in 2018. FORGE provides laptops for applicants to call on, and over a period of several months, I documented the experience of attempting to register via Skype. I recorded 8,835 Skype calls made to the Asylum Service. Only nine received replies.[8] The other 8,826 rang without response before displaying an emoji that reads: "Asylum is unavailable."[9]

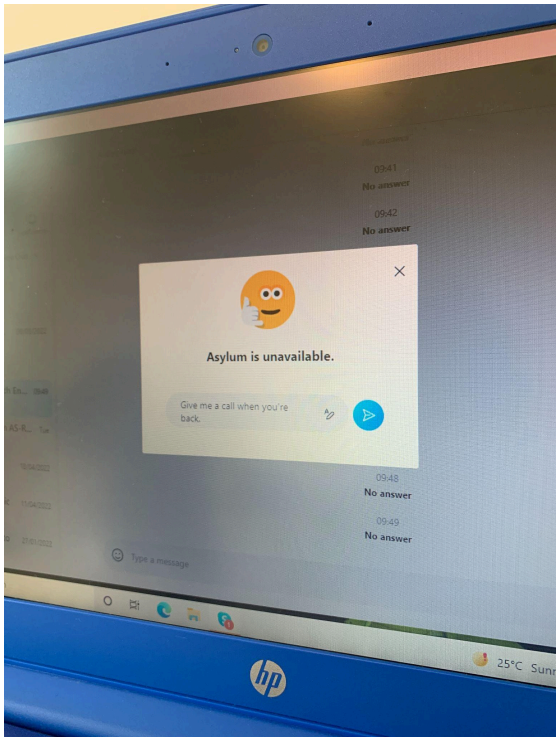


Figure 2: Asylum is unavailable
Screenshot from a Skype call taken by author

[8] This 0.009% response rate from the Asylum Service is reflective only of the calls I observed while engaging in participant observation in Greece. I cannot comment on how these numbers compare to the response rate of all the calls made across Greece (I suspect, however, that the nation-wide response rate would reflect similar levels of unresponsiveness).

[9] When a call recipient does not answer a call on Skype, their first name is listed to say " _____ is unavailable." For example, if someone called me and I did not answer, it would say "Stephen is unavailable." GAS must have put "Asylum" as their first name and "Service" as their last, hence the line "Asylum is unavailable," but the ironic double meaning of this sentence is notable.

For most applicants, this is the face of the state. But don't be fooled: the smiling figure belies something sinister. Without successful registration on Skype, asylum applicants cannot asylum. Applicants call continually for weeks to years without answer, starved not only from international protection but from the legal, social, and material benefits afforded by asylum seeking status in Greece (healthcare, employment, accommodation, protection from detention and deportation, etc). The Skype procedure, this dissertation demonstrates, is a key source of the violence experienced by asylum applicants in Greece.

1.3 Consideration of Other Cases

This project is not only about Skype. I merely use this particular case to consider the realities of processes of governance through which states use digital bureaucratic techniques to ignore and abandon unwanted populations. As such, the dissertation focuses not only on issues of borders and migration, but more broadly on processes of state exclusion. After all, the Skype procedure is embedded within a long and still evolving history of bureaucratic governance that has functioned in different contexts (not all of which involve borders) to keep certain groups away from the affordances of citizenship and inclusion.

For example, Black citizens in America have for centuries experienced both physical violence (slavery, lynchings, police brutality, etc.) as well as more mundane forms of bureaucratic violence. In the Jim Crow era of legal segregation and the decades following, voters faced bureaucratic requirements such as literacy tests and poll taxes that disproportionately disenfranchised African Americans. Writing on voter registration, McGinley (2023, p. 157) explains that, "the arbitrary violence of white supremacy masqueraded as sensible bureaucracy, as county registrars administered baroque and nonsensical tests to aspiring Black voters, who faced violence and economic reprisals for their (usually unsuccessful) attempts to register." In this case, encounters with the state and rights were mediated through bureaucratic controls that, while ostensibly neutral, served to subjugate and exclude. Though Black Americans were legally

entitled to vote (just as my participants were legally entitled to apply for asylum), they faced a series of obstructions designed to block registration and thus inclusion in the society.

The exclusionary effects of bureaucratic registration processes are present in settings all around the world, often through practices of non-recording or de-recording. After Slovenia's succession from former Yugoslavia, for example, ethnic Slovenians automatically became Slovenian citizens while long-term residents of non-Slovenian origin faced bureaucratic hurdles to citizenship; as a result, over 18,000 people were "erased" from inclusion in the polity (Zorn, 2004). More recently, in 2019 India implemented the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state of Assam, an area close to Bangladesh that the Indian state considered full of outsiders and foreigners (Kajla and Jahan, 2022). The documentary exercise meant to identify all legal citizens of India residing in the region so that non-citizens could be deported. The NRC placed the burden of proof on individuals to demonstrate their citizenship through lineage, paperwork, and a series of exclusionary administrative procedures that resulted in mass dispossession of citizenship (this disproportionately impacted female citizens. See Sabhapandit and Baruah, 2021).

In the three cases above, specific subsets of citizenries could not qualify for or meaningfully enjoy the benefits of citizenship due to legal and bureaucratic hurdles. These examples and wider literatures on citizenship map imperfectly onto the Skype procedure, but they nonetheless speak to a larger story of states deciding who they do and don't want to recognize, and employing bureaucratic mechanisms for purposes of inclusion and exclusion. This dynamic is also present in cases where non-citizens who are eligible for benefits or affordances find themselves unable to access them due to bureaucratic barriers. Sutton et al. (2011) write on the case of South Africa, where asylum applicants queued at the Home Affairs office for days in order to secure residence status. One fourth of applicants had to return over five times before finally gaining entry into the Home Affairs office, and in this time, they had no protection from arrest or deportation (this evokes the image of asylum applicants having to call again and again to

reach the Asylum Service). The South African system was exhausting and served to regulate access to residence permits through "the slow yet civil procedure of bureaucratic delay and the violent and capricious practices of exclusion and expulsion" (Sutton et al., 2011, p. 34). Cabot (2014) found a similar dynamic in her study of the Greek Asylum procedure that existed before the introduction of Skype.

Obstructive bureaucratic processes of registration are not unique to the Skype case. Nor is the digital element of the Skype procedure's obstructions; digitalized registration processes have been singled out for their exclusionary effects in contexts such as Thailand's digitalized national verification of migrant workers in (Gruß, 2017) and the usage of biometric registration to operationalize national identification efforts in various African countries (Dalberto and Banégas, 2021). In both cases, digital technologies have entrenched exclusion and non-belonging. This effect is also apparent in the asylum space beyond Greece. Take for instance Borelli et al. (2023)'s study of migration bureaucracies in Italy and Spain. The authors find that the digitalization of asylum bureaucracies (as accelerated by COVID-19) allows state withdrawal by "retreating asylum bureaucrats from public contact" (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 5). This makes the administrative state unapproachable as asylum applicants are displaced to online systems that, much like the Skype procedure and the new digital application procedure, create online queues and obstructions to asylum.

In Spain, asylum applicants must book registration appointments that can only be secured online. However, the website regularly crashes and rarely has appointments available, leaving applicants waiting for months to attempt to secure an illusive appointment.[10] In Italy, asylum seekers are prevented from making their own requests to renew residence permits, and must wait for social workers (who themselves must "wait passively") to receive an email from the *Questura* (police headquarters) saying "send us ten

[10] A similar dynamic affects citizens. For example, my Italian friends have complained to me about their inability to book appointments at the Italian embassy in London on the embassy's digital system. The unreachability of bureaucratic services and state bureaucrats is not limited to settings of displacement.

people next Monday" (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 7). Those whose names are submitted wait outside the *Questura* in the hopes that their name will be called, but cannot otherwise enter the premises. As Borelli et al. (2023, p. 7) write "The physical impossibility of entering the facilities where the decision over the renewal is taken entails that no interaction with the person taking it will ever occur. It all looks like a roulette game, and everyone involved feels the Questura works in mysterious ways." The Spanish and Italian cases closely mirror the Greek case in terms of digital pathways intervening to block bureaucratic encounters, making both the state and its affordances (asylum, welfare, etc.) difficult to access or understand.[11]

There are a wealth of cases, both past and present, where non-recognition and non-registration beget violence. In addition to the cases listed above, see also Razon (2017) on the "bureaucratic invisibility" of Bedouin communities in Israel, Habib (2021) on the Rohingya, Burrell and Schweyher (2021) on migrant exclusion from welfare in Sweden, and Montoya-Galvez (2023) on the Biden administration's *CBP One App* through which which asylum applicants in Mexico must book appointments.[12] This dissertation explores the Skype procedure as another such case, focusing on mundane forms of internal bordering that alienate marginalized communities from the state. It thus adds to existing literature by exploring how the digital plays into (and produces) processes of socio-spatial bordering. Importantly, it explores the daily realities of this evolving digitally mediated politics of exclusion.

[11] Another synergy between the three cases is the cruel irony of each state's ability to simultaneously make itself omnipresent (through policing, exclusionary encounters, and control) and selectively absent. As Borelli et al. (2023, p. 13) write, "just as it [the state] can be hyper-visible and far-reaching, it can make itself invisible, nebulous, and unreachable at discretion."

[12] The app regularly glitches and rarely has appointments. Like the Skype procedure, this digital tool structures illegibility and distance from the state, but unlike the Skype procedure, it governs people who are not yet present on national territory.

1.4 The Digital Bordering Landscape

Border enforcement and migration governance increasingly operationalize digital technologies in efforts of detection, identification, management, confinement, exclusion, and expulsion (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2019; Scheel, 2019; Van Houtum, 2021). A bricolage of digital bordering techniques, including artificial intelligence, drone and satellite surveillance of migratory routes, unmanned aerial and maritime vehicles, sound cannons, biometric databases of registration and identification, automatic speech analysis (matching speech patterns with regional accents or dialects), bone and iris scanning, and data mining of metadata and online identities, operates to govern movement and those on the move (Beirens, 2022; Latonero and Kift, 2018; Nedelcu and Soysüren, 2020). As Beirens (2022, p. 1) writes, "Mapping the digital technologies that asylum, migration, and border management authorities have experimented with makes clear that not a single phase of the asylum process remains untouched."

Specific to the European context, a vast arsenal of digital technologies are imbricated within the European Union's border regime, such as the EURODAC database that biometrically governs registration and national competence over asylum cases, and the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), a European Union program that coordinates with Frontex[13] and EU Member States to monitor and record irregular border crossings with drones, remote sensing devices, submarines, reconnaissance aircrafts, haptic sensors, infrared cameras, and other high tech tools of detection and deterrence that patrol Europe's maritime and territorial borders (Madörin, 2020; Olwig et al., 2019). Europe can be considered a "digital fortress" (Završnik, 2019), and its technologized border control a "fully fledged policing activity" (Marin, 2011, p. 132).

[13] Frontex is the EU border control enforcement agency.

A rich scholarship considers the lived and normative implications of digital bordering from perspectives such as security studies, critical border studies, and science and technology studies, with scholars largely focusing on two interrelated effects arising from technologized bordering practices: hypervisibility and the commodification of refugee bodies. Existing literature evidences the biopolitical functioning of digital technologies in 'datafying' refugees, making them legible, quantifiable, commodifiable, and governable, a dynamic that is especially pronounced within the context of biometric controls (which conduct automated recognition and recording by scanning physiological markers such as fingerprints, irises, voice, facial features, DNA, etc.).

Since the 1990s, European states have employed biometric tools to "identify, categorize and regulate individuals' cross-border movements" (Olwig et al., 2019). Biometric registration has become a leading method for registering refugees and border crossers, and is, in many settings, the default approach. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) registration website notes that PRIMES (the Population Registration and Identity Management Ecosystem), an extensive database of centralized biographic and biometric information, lies "at the center of UNHCR's work with registration and identity management" (UNHCR, 2019). Biometrics have been deployed (often compulsorily; see Maitland, 2018) in a variety of settings and geographies, including camps for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Oh, 2017), displaced Yemeni communities in the Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen (Clausen, 2021), refugee camps in Kenya (Iazzolino, 2021), and island hotspots in Greece (Metcalfe, 2022). Biometrics have become a "global billion-dollar industry" (Olwig et al., 2019, p. 16), and one of great relevance to the European Union, which increasingly outsources identification, data processing, and other elements of border control to private tech actors (Madianou, 2019).

Biometric systems are widely used to provide aid to refugees and asylum seekers, such as housing, legal, yet, mirroring wider humanitarian power dynamics, their deployment is implicated in both care and

control (Jacobsen and Fast, 2019; Malkki, 1996). Extant literature explores the centrality of control to biometric border regimes, which operate to create and constrain the "surveillable refugee body" (Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020), building, storing, and sharing "body-image databases" of border crossers (Grünenberg, 2019, p. 25). The simple scan of a fingerprint or swab of saliva can identify a border crosser, locate records of their previous movements, and categorize them within matrices of good or bad, a worthy recipient of care or a dangerous, intrusive threat.

These technologies exist not only for the purposes of data collection and processing, but also to identify and intervene upon bodies (Mahmoudi, 2020). Biometric and otherwise technologized borders enable identification, detection, and evaluation. In other words, technology moves beyond presence detection, serving to "determine the quality of the presence and, if the presence is defined as a threat, to deter or apprehend the intruding body" (Møhl, 2019, p. 100). Echoing other scholars who adopt military surveillance and critical border perspectives, Madörin (2020, p. 699) notes that digital assemblages form "visibility-generating surveillance apparatuses," which execute and articulate in novel ways long-entrenched projects of policing and repelling the racialized 'Other.'[14] This effectively inscribes racialized bodies with the border, creating what Stenum (2017) calls the "body-border." The border is carried, suddenly, in the iris of an eye, the tip of a finger, the double helix of DNA. Where sound sensors are employed, the border is even carried in the act of breathing, or the beating of one's heart. As Møhl (2019, p. 122) writes, these technological bordering practices have "turned the very bodies of migrants en route into a space of border control."

[14] People who escape the racialized gaze also engage with digital borders while applying for visas or at airports across Europe (e-gates, biometric identification), yet they largely do not experience them as sites of violence and exclusion. The long-standing but newly digital "racialized European border-security complex" (Madörin, 2020, p. 700) is not mobilized against those who are not considered 'Other.' The visibility-generating nature and policing function of digital bordering is an unevenly distributed racial project.

Scholars explore not only how governments and supranational actors employ technologized interventions to "identify, exploit, and control" (Mahmoudi, 2020, p. 7), but also how the hyper-recording of bordered people creates an extractable and lucrative surplus of data. Much of this literature focuses on the transformation of border crossers into data subjects (see Marino, 2021). Human mobility is increasingly 'datafied,' with border technologies not only detecting and deterring, but also generating data on migration routes, patterns of mobility, and individual characteristics of those on the move (Aradau, 2022; Broeders and Dijstelbloem, 2015; Marino, 2021). The datafication of mobility allows, through the insertion of big data into border regimes, for algorithmic governance, predictive policing, and other practices that extend the geographical, spatial, and temporal reach of the border (Aradau and Blanke, 2017; Beirens, 2022; Madörin, 2020). "The surveillable refugee body is constantly reassembled through the digital footprints of displacement data" (Madörin, 2020, p. 699).

Increased securitization of borders drives demand for more clean and rigorous data (Ajana, 2015; Scheel et al., 2019), resulting in greater data extraction and circulation that serves not only to regulate mobility but also to facilitate the capitalization and marketization of migration and humanitarian aid (López-Sala and Godenau, 2022; Tazzioli, 2019). With financial incentives in mind, governments, corporations, and institutions "increasingly treat data about migrants and refugees as the new gold" (Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020, p. 607). Subjected to "digitised dissection" (Amoore and Hall, 2009), bordered bodies are broken into "bits and bytes and reassembled in databases that have become a cornerstone of modern migration policy" (Broeders and Dijstelbloem, 2015, p. 3). Refugees and other bordered people are increasingly subjects of digital extraction (Aradau, 2022), converted into computable and commodifiable data at the intersection of border surveillance and its underlying logics of racial order and capital accumulation.

Border technologies are deployed for the purpose of identification, verification, sustained monitoring, repulsion, data generation, and circulation, meaning that one cannot disentangle digital border infrastructures from considerations of power, governance, and visibility. As Amoore and Hall (2009, p. 444) write, digital border technologies seek to "make the invisible visualisable." In other words, digitalized border governance is a project of knowing: of knowing how many people are hiding in the underbelly of a lorry, of knowing where exactly to intercept a dinghy, of knowing who lies behind a pair of irises, of knowing whether a foreign body is to be embraced or expelled. How, then, to make sense of the Skype procedure, which is overwhelmingly a process of not knowing?

1.5 Scope of Inquiry and Contributions

This thesis seeks to answer two main questions. First, I attempt to unearth the lived effects of digital bureaucracy that operates through absence and distance. More pointedly, I ask how the Skype procedure is experienced by those who seek to pre-register through it. In attempting to paint a phenomenological portrait of the daily experience and embodiment of the Skype procedure, I approach digital bureaucracy as a political bordering technology whose power is located not in the physical border but in the body and mind of border crossers. The second aim of my research is to explore the bordering events enabled by the insertion of mundane technology within projects of border governance. I ask how digital technology and the bureaucratic state apparatus can jointly create insidious forms of internal bordering, and to which effects.

In broad terms, this dissertation contributes an empirical account of how states and technology can interact to produce specific effects of alienation and exclusion. More intimately, it shines light on the digital spaces of exclusion produced by such interactions, exploring the realities of people who exist in those spaces and the strategies they do or do not employ to contest them. This is thus a study of power,

domination, contestation, and subjectivity, one with potential to illuminate wider debates regarding border governance, e-governance, bureaucracy, digital technology, temporality, and subjectivity. While grounding my analysis in refugee studies, critical border studies, and anthropologies of the state, I contribute most meaningfully to literatures on migrant temporality (Bhatia and Canning, 2021; Griffiths, 2014; 2017; 2021; Griffiths et al., 2013; Jacobsen et al., 2021), digital bordering (Beirens, 2022; Madörin, 2020; Scheel, 2019), and affective border violence[15] (Meier, 2020). I additionally contribute to scholarship on structural (Artero and Fontaneri, 2021; Graeber, 2012), administrative (Beaugrand, 2011), bureaucratic (Eldridge and Reinke, 2018), and slow violence (Berlant, 2007; Nixon, 2011).

My primary theoretical contribution involves theorizing pushbacks away from physical borders. Throughout the dissertation, I propose and employ the concept of *digital pushback*. This concept, which focuses on digital mechanisms used to structure distance between the receiving state and border crossers, allows analysis of the insidious tactics governments can employ to digitally erase unwanted populations from public space and the realm of state responsibility. Crucially, I demonstrate how asylum applicants can be expelled from a state even while still residing on its territory. I thus shift focus away from the physical border and its spectacle (Andersson 2014; De Genova 2002) to consider mundane moments of internal exclusion that shape lived realities of exclusion and erasure. This allows for consideration of how the digitalization of bureaucratic systems can alter the (non)citizen-state interaction and reconstitute space. The insights gained from this analysis will be of use for scholars studying borders, technology, and governance in relation to global trends of digitalization, privatization, and externalization (Beirens, 2022; López-Sala and Godenau, 2022). They will be of additional relevance to future studies of digitally mediated politics and exclusion, whether or not those studies explicitly engage borders and migration.

[15] A brief note on the term border violence is necessary. This term is widely employed in academic and activist spaces. However, as I tweeted in March 2022: "I wonder if saying 'border violence' is like saying 'chai tea.' Chai is tea. Borders are violent. 'Border violence' implies the possibility of borders that exist without violence, making it not only a redundant term but a misleading one." Throughout this dissertation, I attempt to show the violence of borders instead of speaking in terms of "border violence."

1.6 A Note on Terminology

Scholars of borders and (im)mobility face a seemingly simple but highly consequential dilemma in deciding how to refer to the people we study. We are not in want of choices: a plethora of labels abound, including refugee, asylum seeker, displaced person, migrant, forced migrant, voluntary migrant, economic migrant, migrant worker, irregular migrant, immigrant, border crosser, person on the move, and more. Each label has its own legal affordances and social importance. As many scholars have demonstrated, however, labels are not objective descriptors or neutral terms. They are, rather, highly politicized markers of categorization that articulate hierarchies of deservedness, desirability, vulnerability, and threat, while serving to legitimate humanitarian intervention and/or state violence (Long, 2013; Sajjad, 2018; Zetter, 2007). Fracturing across national, gendered, and racial lines, hierarchies exist even within these categories, particularly in the context of the increasing securitization and criminalization of migration and asylum (Griffiths, 2015; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018).

The distinction between forced and voluntary migration is central to constructions of "illegal migrants" and "bogus asylum seekers" (Griffiths, 2015). Though this binary is upheld by the law, states, supranational organizations, and many academics, the boundaries between forced and voluntary migration are hazy, fluid, and imprecise, given the interconnected nature of poverty and persecution as well as an extreme diversity of lived experiences that complicates simplistic readings of choice and agency (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). Yet while migration may be "mixed" as opposed to binary, migratory labels nonetheless perform a key function of bureaucratic categorization that aligns (in theory) with protection needs. How to reconcile this tension?

Throughout the dissertation, I refer to my participants with migrant backgrounds as "asylum applicants." This is an intentional choice that follows simple logic: this dissertation focuses on digitalized bureaucracy and access to asylum, and by referring to my participants as asylum applicants, I foreground the

experience of individuals who engage with the Skype procedure rather than their individual motivations for doing so. Unless otherwise stated, I do not concern myself with *why* my participants attempted to apply for asylum, focusing instead on *how* they attempted to apply for asylum.

Indeed, not all of my participants had what the state would consider legitimate protection claims, and some even told me that they considered themselves economic migrants who had come to Europe in search of a better life. Others, meanwhile, had experienced horrific threats, persecution, and violence that compelled them to migrate against their will (some even removed clothing to show me scars from torture suffered in their countries of origin).[16] I could refer to the former as migrants and the latter as asylum seekers, but doing so would risk reinforcing the very agenda of securitization, suspicion, and criminalization that this thesis seeks to counteract. Instead, I choose to refer to all those who call on Skype as asylum applicants. This too is imperfect as its focus on asylum obscures that some people call on Skype for reasons unrelated to international protection itself (for example, to access healthcare or avoid arrest).[17] Regardless, I maintain that the term is more value-neutral than its alternatives, and helps sidestep discursively dangerous debates of voluntariness, free will vs. coercion, and deservedness.

At times, I also refer to my asylum seeking participants as "the guys." Though this may sound too colloquial to be appropriate for an academic text, it stems from the nature of the organization I based my fieldwork at and the nature of my relationship with my participants. As will be discussed in the following chapter, all of the asylum applicants I conducted research with were men, in large part because FORGE only works with individuals who identify as male. The staffers at FORGE uniformly refer to the people the NGO services as "the guys" or "the gentlemen." I adopted this language while volunteering at FORGE in 2018, and its usage in this dissertation reflects my respect for the non-hierarchical and casual

[16] I never once asked anyone for proof of persecution, nor did I ask to see scars. At times, however, my participants expressed that it was important that I bear witness to their suffering by viewing their scars or listening to their stories, and I always obliged.

[17] See Chapter 4.

space that FORGE cultivated. It is also an attempt to bring my reader as close to the ethnographic setting in which I researched as possible. Lastly, this language reflects the friendships I built during fieldwork. The guys are not only research participants or asylum applicants: they are people I am privileged to know and, in many cases, fortunate to call friends.

Lastly, a note on the term digitalization. Throughout the dissertation, I discuss digitalized forms of bureaucracy and bordering; I do not use the term digitized, though this term abounds in literature. As noted by a recent report by the Migration Policy Institute, the terms digitalization and digitization are often used interchangeably, but have different meanings. This research focuses mostly on digitalization, which refers to "the transformation of processes to incorporate digital tools and new technologies." Digitization refers to "the conversion of analog documents and media into digital formats (e.g., paper to electronic files)" (Beirens, 2022, p. 1). The term digitalization is most appropriate for the present interrogation of the integration of digital technologies within border regimes.

1.7 Dissertation Outline

This doctoral dissertation is structured into seven chapters.

Chapter 2 outlines the project's research design and methods. I describe the origins of the project and the methodologies and intellectual traditions that ground my inquiry. In particular, I explain and justify the critical phenomenological lens through which I collected and interpreted data. The chapter then turns to the practicalities of the research process, outlining my fieldsite selection as well as the processes of data collection and analysis I employed. Next it provides a brief profile of my main research participants before discussing key ethical considerations raised by this project's subject matter and chosen methodological approaches. This includes reflections on conducting research during a pandemic,

conducting research on mentally distressing topics with traumatized communities, the risk of creating false expectations as a researcher, and positionality.

The dissertation then turns to the first of four empirical chapters. Chapter 3 employs interview material to present a history of the Skype procedure's emergence, interrogating how it came to pass that the Greek Asylum Service integrated Skype into its mainland asylum procedure. The chapter reveals invisibility and distance as central to the design and logic of the Skype procedure, and that digital means can be deployed to disappear populations from public sight and public space. I propose the term *digital pushback* to make meaning of internal bordering events that operate through exclusion and erasure. Digital pushback refers to digitally mediated measures taken by states to create distance (symbolic or otherwise) between the receiving state and border crossers, *de facto* forcing migrants and asylum seekers outside of the nation state and the realm of social, legal, and political inclusion even if they remain within that state's borders. The chapter closes with consideration of digital pushbacks in relation to wider literatures of digital bordering, visibility, and surveillance.

The next three chapters further explore the Skype procedure as an example of a digital pushback. Chapter 4 employs the lens of encounter to trace the moments and settings in which asylum applicants come into contact with the Skype procedure. Analyzing expected and unexpected encounters, this chapter charts the geographies of exclusion that extend from the Skype procedure across the city and self, locating the spatial, temporal, and psychological sites of the digital border. I analyze the embodied experience of calling the Asylum Service on Skype as well as the three key settings in which asylum applicants unexpectedly encounter the procedure: healthcare settings, the search for employment, and public space. I demonstrate the centrality of affective harm to the Greek digital pushback, outlining the realities of alienation, exclusion, and confinement structured by encounters with the Skype procedure.

Chapter 5 inverts the focus of Chapter 4, analyzing not on encounters with the Skype procedure, but rather how the digitalization of bureaucracy blocks encounters with the Skype procedure's administrators. I explore how the digital procedure restructures space and erected digital burdens in ways that makes asylum applicants experience the Skype procedure as unreachable and unknowable. I further explore how these dynamics shape social discourse, revealing how the discursive meanings the Skype procedures take on serve to muddle understandings of power and the inner workings of the digital pushback. This results in a particularly surreal waiting event which not only bewilders asylum applicants but legitimizes a digital system that they largely consider farcical.

Chapter 6 focuses on the decisions of my participants to stop calling on Skype. It asks why asylum applicants delete Skype from their phones and lives, interrogating the motivations behind this decision and the effects of divesting from the Skype procedure. This chapter demonstrates that individual choices to stop calling on Skype are not reflective of a lack of resolve but rather a politics of refusal in which asylum applicants refuse to subject themselves to the temporal, psychological, and existential harms of the digital pushback. I explore how refusing the Skype procedure allows for multiple reclamations, including reclamation of time and control over one's mental state and daily choices. However, I find these refusals to be contradictory and messy, allowing for agency in a highly constrained environment while also further cementing ties to exploitation and marginalization.

In Chapter 7, I conclude with a summary of research findings and contributions. I additionally provide context and commentary on the end of the Skype procedure and the new digital system that took its place before entertaining other cases where governments employ bureaucratic and digital tools to keep unwanted populations at a distance. The chapter then proposes important directions for subsequent research that this dissertation, limited by space and access, did not interrogate. These include considerations of digital rights and data extraction, the administration of digital bureaucracy, brokers and

corruption, and the role of Microsoft and other private actors in contributing to accountability voids. The dissertation closes with concluding thoughts and a call to action.

Chapter 2
Research Design

2.1 Introduction: Research Origins

I arrived in Athens in June 2018 as a volunteer, keen to work with asylum seekers in Greece after years of experience volunteering with resettled refugees in America. My grandparents live in Athens, and I moved in with them during my stay. I knew the city well, and felt comfortable volunteering in a city I had visited annually since I was an infant. My volunteer placement fell through the day before I arrived, and I unexpectedly landed in Athens without anywhere to work. Not knowing what else to do, I posted in a Facebook group I had previously joined called Immigrant and Refugee Support in Athens. My post, which noted that I could offer "6 weeks of work as well as journalism skills, research abilities, an understanding of asylum law, and basic conversational Greek," caught the attention of Jessica Webster, who messaged to ask whether I would be interested in volunteering at the NGO she co-directs, called FORGE for humanity.

FORGE is an Athens-based NGO that supports unaccompanied male refugees and asylum seekers with occupational, housing, psychosocial, legal, and community-based support. It is unique in the Athens humanitarian space for its focus on men traveling solo,[18] and has, as written by co-founders Jessica (Jess) Webster and Alejandra (Ale) Cábez in an internal memo, grown into the "go-to information point" and community center for male migrants and asylum seekers in Athens. In 2020 alone, FORGE worked with approximately 2,700 men from 45 countries of origin.[19] And yet the NGO is incredibly small: it is run by two individuals highly trusted by the community (Jess and Ale), and has an on-the-ground team that ranges from around two to five people depending on funding. The space is largely egalitarian and informal. Everyone pitches in, and the clients ("the guys") themselves often participate in the provision of services by helping with language interpretation and other tasks. Jess invited me to join as a short-term

[18] See Section 2.3.
[19] Data from FORGE's internal records.

volunteer supporting various aspects of the organization's work, including social media, casework, and more. I started on June 11, 2018.

I heard the office before I saw it. Walking down Spartis street with my laptop, a snack, and two frozen water bottles (Jess had warned me that the office was extremely hot and I should come prepared), I heard a small crowd, seemingly comprised of male voices. Soon I saw a long queue of men stretching around the block, and as I got closer, I heard something else: ringing. As I tentatively stepped into the office (feeling self-conscious about jumping the queue, and about being new), the ringing got louder, and I saw about fifteen men crowding around three laptops.

At the time, I was not familiar with the Skype procedure and didn't know who these men were calling, what made the atmosphere tense, or why the calls rang and rang and rang without reply. Nor did I know that FORGE was one of the only organizations in Athens that provides laptops, WiFi, and a dedicated space for asylum applicants to call the Asylum Service on Skype. The men queueing outside were waiting to use this service, and over the coming weeks, I would regularly walk up and down the queue handing out makeshift tickets to mark people's space in line so they could come back when it was their turn to call.[20] I would also help run the Skype service, sitting with the guys as they made their calls, showing them how to use Skype, explaining the procedure, and listening to their frustrations.

The ringing I had heard on my first day would become the soundtrack of my summer. Whether I was drafting CVs and cover letters for individuals seeking employment, distributing clothes and sleeping bags, conducting casework, making medical referrals, or offering green tea and sweet dates to the guys,

[20] There was not enough space for everyone to wait in our overcrowded office, and we worried that long queues might draw police attention, facilitating a roundup of individuals who lacked legal documentation. In addition, we worried about people standing in the heat for hours on end.

there was a constant drone of unanswered Skype calls in the background. Beyond its inescapable auditory presence, the Skype procedure felt omnipresent in other ways too: almost every person who came to our office complained that their inability to get through on Skype translated to an inability to access social services, money, public space, mobility, and international protection. They always asked for an appointment to call on Skype with the FORGE laptops and requested a FORGE "protection paper" to show to the police if apprehended. These informal papers explained that the individual was calling weekly on Skype but was unable to get through, and should not be arrested since it wasn't his fault that his calls were not answered by the Asylum Service.[21]

That summer, I quickly became aware of how central the Skype procedure was to the lives of asylum applicants in Athens, how it seemed to govern life and serve as a gatekeeper to rights and livelihoods. Yet there was an intrinsic tension between the centrality of the Skype procedure and its inaccessibility, obscurity, and mysticism. Not once in my six week volunteer engagement did I witness the Asylum Service pick up a Skype call. How could something be so present and so absent at once?

After leaving Athens to finish my undergraduate degree in America, it was the ringing that most quickly came to mind when recalling my time at FORGE. The sounds of summer 2018 were not easily forgotten, not when contextualized by the multiple suspensions I had witnessed them shape. I eagerly searched for existing scholarship on the Skype procedure, but was both disappointed and surprised to find that very little existed. No published study accounted for the design, implementation, or effects of a system I had observed as central to the asylum and migration landscapes on mainland Greece. Two years later when I began to pursue a doctorate, I decided my research would attempt to bridge this empirical gap by focusing squarely on the Skype procedure and the lived experiences of those engaging with it.

[21] While at FORGE in 2018, we produced hundreds of "protection papers." These papers were printed on FORGE letterhead and signed by FORGE staffers. We always took care to explain to the guys that the papers were not legal documents and might not have any effect on a police officer.

2.2 The Research Process

In order to assess lived experience and its ties to structures of power, this project employs qualitative, ethnographic methods. This project adopts an interpretivist epistemology of social constructionism over positivist approaches, embracing the dynamic emergence of research questions and themes in an attempt to uncover complexity and the multiple meanings of phenomena as perceived by individuals, rather than any notion of objective reality (Creswell and Poth, 2016). In particular, it approaches analysis through the lens of critical phenomenology, which, following Desjarlais (2005, p. 369), refers to an analytical account that "attends at once to the concerns and lifeworlds of [our subjects] and to the interrelated social, discursive, and political forces that underpinned those concerns and lifeworlds."

In broad terms, critical phenomenology interrogates phenomena as they are lived, experienced, and made sense of, grounding analysis in both respect for first-person expertise as well as awareness that social, cultural, and political conditions shape lived experience intersubjectively. Critical phenomenology moves beyond description of events and towards unearthing the political practices and social conditions that influence experience. In relation to studies of bordering, it attends to the conditions of structural violence that shape status and precarity while interrogating the impact of those conditions on the lived experiences of migrants and asylum seekers (Willen, 2007). Importantly, critical phenomenology centers affect and the sensate as well as their relationship to sociocultural and historical power assemblages, opening a "rich analytic space in which to think through the embodiment of structure, how this may be felt, and the ways in which structure and experience can be understood to produce action" (Chandler, 2019, p. 1363).

Tools from critical phenomenology allow interpretation of embodied experience and their interlinkages with social worlds and structures of power, allowing analysis of the realities structured by the Skype procedure and consideration of how obstructed access to asylum may contribute to emotional and physical violence that extends beyond the restriction of international protection. This approach allows me

to explore how the ways in which individuals engage with the Skype procedure are closely intertwined with the ways in which those individuals are oriented towards—and against—a power-laden world. Following Willen's (2007, p. 13) insistence upon using critical phenomenology to demand a focus on "the conditions of structural inequality and structural violence that shape migrants' position and status…[and] the impact of these contextual factors on migrants' individual and collective experiences of being-in-the-world," I employ critical phenomenological analyses to highlight how the Skype procedure shapes specific lived realities, affects, and subjectivities, attending ethnographically to my participant's self-reported relationships to embodiment, time, and space.

Fieldsite selection

Shortly before starting my doctorate, I called Jess and Ale to float the possibility of returning to FORGE as a researcher. My friends and former colleagues expressed excitement at the idea: they could use additional help in the office, they explained, and wanted someone to run the FORGE Skype service so that they could focus on casework and office administration.

There are other locations I could have based my research at. As explained in the introduction, the Skype procedure is not only used in Athens but also in Thessaloniki and some of the islands. I decided to research in Athens, though, because of my familiarity with the city and the ease of access I would enjoy. From a practical level, Athens (and FORGE specifically) made for an obvious selection of fieldside. I already had awareness of the local setting, connections to the community, and institutional knowledge, as well as colleagues, friends, and a free place to stay. FORGE provided a space where I could conduct research with access and local understanding I had begun negotiating years prior. From an empirical level, FORGE provided a rare window into a phenomenon that can be very hard to observe. The Greek state does not provide a call center for applicants attempting to pre-register on Skype, meaning that the calls are decentralized and multilocational. Applicants call from apartments, park benches, refugee camps, and

any place in which they have data coverage. FORGE is one of the only organizations in Athens that provides a dedicated space for Skype calls with WiFi, laptops, Skype accounts, and information, with applicants arriving hourly to call from the office. FORGE is a privileged space of observation.

Data Collection

My data collection was conducted in both remote and in-person stages. I initially planned on traveling to Athens in late spring 2021, but travel restrictions related to COVID-19 made this impossible. Policies from the University of Oxford and the UK government barred almost all in-person fieldwork, while local restrictions in Greece forced FORGE to close its office and stop running Skype sessions. I postponed travel to Athens and decided to conduct my initial fieldwork remotely.

In preparation, I took a course on digital methods and digital ethnography taught by Professor William Kelly at the Oxford Internet Institute. This course attuned me to the complex ethical challenges raised by digital data collection with at risk communities, and ultimately led me to focus my virtual efforts on learning more about the Skype procedure from the perspective of those who engage with it not as applicants but as aid workers, bureaucrats, and policy actors. I decided to focus on three groups: NGO workers in Athens, members of the Greek Asylum Service and/or Ministry of Migration, and staffers at supranational bodies such as UNHCR and EASO (European Asylum Support Office, now called the European Union Agency for Asylum). My goal was to explore how actors at local, national, and supranational levels understood and thought about the Skype procedure, reflecting my interest in not only how the Skype procedure is experienced but also its use as a tool of governance.

My data collection at this stage consisted solely of interviews. Since I was conducting research virtually, my outreach occurred remotely. With NGO workers, this outreach was mostly facilitated by Jess and Ale who connected me with their colleagues at other organizations in Athens that work with asylum

applicants. With regard to bureaucrats and policy actors, my initial outreach was far less personal, with recruitment largely taking place on LinkedIn or through cold emails. When successful, these efforts frequently facilitated snowball sampling, as I asked each participant if they could connect me with other willing participants. I cast a wide net, reaching out to various different individuals who worked in migration governance or humanitarian aid in Greece and the EU broadly.

In total, I interviewed 37 individuals working within the Greek and European migration landscapes. These interviewees included:

- 14 current or former Asylum Service staffers[22]
- 9 current or former United Nations staffers
- 9 NGO workers (from FORGE, Khora Asylum Support Team, Refugee Legal Support, HIAS Greece, Mobile Info Team, Mazí Housing Project, and Caritas)
- 3 European Asylum Support Office (EASO) staffers[23]
- Notis Mitarachi, the Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum (January 2020–May 2023)
- Steve Crown, Vice President and Deputy General Counsel for Human Rights at Microsoft

I conducted virtual interviews on Microsoft Teams, and recorded the audio (with consent) before personally transcribing each interview recording.[24] The interviews were semi-structured. Semi structured interviews refer to a type of interview where the researcher "develops categories or topics to explore, but remains open to pursuing topics the participant brings up" (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p. 181). My topics

[22] None of the GAS interviewees worked specifically on the Skype procedure and most had only passing impressions of it.
[23] EASO, which is an EU agency, has since been renamed the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).
[24] I chose Microsoft Teams since it is widely recognized as more compliant with GDPR than other platforms (such as Zoom). Teams is the preferred platform for online (interview-based) data collection by many universities including the University of Oxford. Microsoft Teams is the University of Oxford's only approved virtual tool for the handling of confidential and/or sensitive subject matter. To exercise additional caution, I did not interview any asylum applicants over Teams or online at all, nor did I use the video recording function which allows users to record the video and audio of meetings on Teams.

of interest at this stage included perceptions of the Skype procedure, the procedure's inception/history, the procedure's continuity over time, and institutional workings of power. Most often I opened by asking the participant about their work before inviting reflection on the Skype procedure and the Greek migration landscape broadly. It was common for the participant to take control of the interview, speaking at length about topics of interest to them while I asked follow-up questions.

The data collected with these groups provided relevant contextual information and are secondarily employed in this dissertation, with the primary focus on the data I collected with asylum applicants. The bulk of my analysis stems from data collected during my in-person fieldwork in Athens once travel and field-based research were approved.

Over three months in 2021 (with short visits in 2022), I conducted participant observation at FORGE, supplemented with semi-structured interviews. I engaged in daily participant observation, yielding approximately 160 pages of typed fieldnotes. To further themes raised in my fieldnotes, I additionally conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 asylum applicants I connected with during my participant observation.

Participant observation is appropriate for studies interrogating lived experience and the meanings individuals attach to phenomena, particularly when the phenomena at hand are observable in daily life (Jorgensen, 1989). Practically speaking, participant observation allowed me to build credibility, meet people interested in the study, and foster relationships of trust (Otto, 2020). From an empirical standpoint, I selected participant observation because I considered it necessary to not only analyze discussions of the Skype procedure, but also interactions with it and the context within which those interactions were embedded. I supported all aspects of FORGE's programming, such as casework, distribution, and community building. During most business hours, I was at the NGO, ready to pitch in where needed. At

times this work took me out of the office, accompanying applicants to the Asylum Service or entering refugee camps with them. This allowed me to more fully understand the worlds of my participants, and to observe the Skype procedure in practice.

When Jess and Ale agreed to house my fieldwork at FORGE, they offered to let me help facilitate the organization's Skype service. As previously mentioned, FORGE is one of the only spaces in Athens that provides a designated space for people to call the Asylum Service on Skype, and many people come to FORGE explicitly to use this space, its WiFi, and one of the three FORGE laptops. I helped facilitate this service by arranging attendance, setting up the call room each morning, and monitoring calls. Initially, this took place at FORGE's old office and then a nearby NGO called ANKAA Project (hereinafter ANKAA), which holds classes and trainings for people with migrant backgrounds interested in learning languages, skills (ie. tailoring), and more. FORGE was in the process of moving to a new location when I began fieldwork, and had not found a new office when I arrived, so I reached out to ANKAA, and they kindly offered me one of their classrooms to hold Skype sessions in. Between October 4 and October 29, 2021, I held Skype sessions at ANKAA ahead of the opening of the new FORGE office in November.

Jess and Ale gave me access to the NGO's WhatsApp account, which I used to contact individuals who had 1) previously attended Skype sessions at FORGE or 2) expressed interest in calling on Skype. Writing in English or in languages translated by FORGE interpreters, I invited these individuals to upcoming sessions, slotting those who replied affirmatively into a calendar shared with Jess and Ale. I attempted to recruit three individuals per session and fill as many Skype hours as possible. I also arranged interpreters for the non-English sessions, which proved challenging as interpreters were often unavailable (this at times led to the cancellation of sessions).

Each morning I arrived early to set up the room, and was often the first one there, unlocking the office with my set of keys and disarming the alarm. I turned on the laptops, opened Skype on each, and laid out tea, biscuits, and bananas. When the applicants arrived, I welcomed them, positioned the laptop(s) around them, and, if they had not called on Skype before, delivered a short info session about how the procedure works. Each time, I (re)explained my role as a researcher and (re)confirmed consent preferences regarding my ability to take fieldnotes and write down quotations.[25]

Calling began on the hour, and I sat with the attendees as they made their calls. I here existed as participant and observer: while sitting with the guys, I not only made observations and scribbled notes in my fieldnote journal (or typed them on my laptop), but I actively monitored the calls (ie. making sure applicants were calling the right Skype accounts, reminding individuals to press the call button again after the previous call expired, etc.). In addition, I sat next to the guys and called from my own laptop, ready to spin the camera towards the applicants if my call was answered. I intentionally chose to integrate myself so actively into the call space primarily to maximize calls for my participants and thus their chances of successful pre-registration, but also to gain an intimate understanding of what it feels like to call again and again and again for the full hour session.

After each session, I answered questions, disinfected the laptops, and counted the number of calls that had elapsed during the session, noting the number of calls, replies, declined calls, and successful registrations in my records.[26] I returned to my initial fieldnotes after each session and fleshed them out with descriptive

[25] In most cases, I discussed consent preferences before Skype sessions, though at times, these discussions occurred right as the Skype sessions were starting. I always made clear that I would provide assistance with the Skype calls regardless of each person's willingness to support my research. Indeed, there were some applicants who did not consent to participating in my research but who still attended sessions with me. Their individual experiences and voices are not reflected in this dissertation. Though the issue of consent is particularly complicated in settings of service provision, I made clear that I was primarily there to provide support and secondarily there to collect data. The fact that I previously volunteered at FORGE before my doctorate helped build trust that I was there for the right reasons, and that support was not contingent upon research participation.

[26] Most of the calls rang and rang without reply. Some, however, were declined (most often this occurred at the end of the call hour). Of the 8,835 calls I observed, 44 were declined.

detail and ethnographic care. My notes from call sessions reflect extensive observation attentive to the act of calling on Skype as well as how the waiting event it shapes is experienced. These reflections explore both my own embodied response to the calls in my fieldnotes as well as the visible and auditory embodied responses of my participants, focusing on sounds and silences, body language, meaning making, affect, and the passage of time.

In total, I held 32 Skype sessions attended by a total of 27 male asylum applicants. Some of these sessions were one-on-one, while others had three applicants calling simultaneously (this depended on interpreter availability, individual schedules, urgency of individual cases, individual motivation to keep calling, and more). Some applicants came once and not again, while others attended multiple times per week for the duration of my fieldwork. The applicants in my Skype sessions were men from Mali, Togo, Congo, Cameroon, Guinea, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Russia.[27] Not everyone shared their ages with me, but the known ages of the attendees ranged from 16 to 40 (the majority of applicants were in their 20s and early 30s). Sessions and interviews were conducted in English and, with the paid support of interpreters from the community, French, Farsi, Pashto, Arabic, Urdu, and Punjabi.

By facilitating Skype sessions, I built connections with individuals who were interested in engaging further with my research, and this allowed me to supplement participant observation with interviews. After sessions, I asked if anyone would be interested in having a conversation with me about how they experienced the last hour, and how they experience the Skype procedure more broadly. Sometimes the guys agreed to chat then and there, others scheduled an interview for another time, while still others chose

[27] I invited people on the basis of their interest in pre-registering on Skype. Jess and Ale had a list of people who had either called previously in the office or who had expressed a desire to pre-register, and I sent out invitations to these individuals. I additionally invited those who had made known through my participant observation at FORGE that they wanted to try (or try again) on Skype. My sampling was shaped by individual interest, organizational networks, and interpreter availability, not by attempts to build a demographically diverse or representative sample.

not to engage with the research further. In total, I interviewed 19 asylum applicants. The interviews ranged from from 15 minutes to one and a half hours long.

These interviews oscillated between unstructured and semi-structured. They began open-ended, addressing general biography and life story before moving towards structure as I raised patterns and themes emerging from my participant observation and interviews. I employed what Patton (2002) calls "truly open-ended" questions, which encourage the interviewee to respond in their own words and scope, as opposed to questions which imply or endorse specific categories of response. I sought to facilitate the interview space by engaging in what Kvale (2007) calls "active listening." This involves posing follow-up questions to invite the interlocutor to expand upon responses and deepen the narrative, and it requires restraint from cutting the interlocutor off, which risks suppressing information, exerting undue influence, and priming the interviewee to provide the type of response he senses the researcher desires (Elliot, 2005; Thompson, 1978). In addition, I encouraged my interlocutors to talk for as little or long as they desired, and to conclude the interview whenever they wanted to.

I conducted interviews in locations of my collaborators' own choosing. Qualitative researchers note that allowing the interviewee to chose the interview site(s) may empower them in their interactions with the researcher, and that choice of location reveals subtle clues about power and positionality as well as an understanding of the spaces in which interlocutors feel comfortable (Elwood and Martin, 2000; Quinney et al., 2016). Often my interpreters elected to chat in the FORGE office immediately following a Skype session, but other times they suggested meeting in a nearby park, at a coffee shop, or a local restaurant.

I conducted interviews in the language of my collaborators' choosing, recognizing that language use shapes meaning making and power dynamics in interview settings (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) and that inviting the participant to choose can increase comfort and help restore agency to the interviewee

(Ingvars, 2019). For interviews in which the interlocutor elected to speak in languages other than English, I enlisted the paid assistance of interpreters who themselves were asylum applicants. This methodological choice reflects: 1) my desire to work with insiders who needed to negotiate less trust than an outsider might, 2) an understanding of the importance of reciprocity (tied to the benefit of providing opportunities for individuals structurally barred from formal employment), and 3) the opportunity to discuss with the interpreter hidden cultural meanings or understandings that may get lost in simple translation.[28]

My interviews and participant observation yielded the vast majority of my data. However, there is one additional data source worth mentioning. In 2021, I interviewed a staffer at Mobile Info Team (hereinafter MIT), a Greek NGO that works to support local migrants and asylum seekers with up-to-date information on asylum procedures. During the interview, I became aware that the organization was working on a report about the Skype procedure. MIT conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with migrants and asylum seekers about their experiences with the Skype procedure, and after receiving consent from the interviewees, they kindly shared these transcripts with me to integrate into my doctoral dataset. I pull loosely from these in the dissertation: the interview transcripts were, in my assessment, not particularly rich or in-depth, but I employ them at times to help fill gaps.

In May 2022, I returned to FORGE to partake in continued conversations and to engage in member checking with several of my participants as well as Jess and Ale. Member checking is the process whereby researchers present significant themes and findings to participants as an opportunity for them to confirm, refute, or add additional context, clarifications, and alternative interpretations (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). This was my final stage of data collection.

In summary, my data collection took three forms: remote interviews with actors in the Greek migration landscape, participant observation at FORGE (including 32 hours of Skype call observation), and

[28] Lee Ann Fujii notes that it is important to select a translator who is not only a language interpreter, but a "cultural translator and guide in all phases of the research" (Fujii, 2009, p 32).

interviews with individuals attempting to pre-register on Skype. I additionally accessed pre-existing data from MIT, though I employ it sparsely within the dissertation.

Data Analysis

I transcribed each interview the day it took place (usually in the evening after getting home). This choice reflected my desire to transcribe while the interview experience was still fresh in mind. I transcribed interviews manually and verbatim, playing and replaying the audio to catch each word and to identify moments of nonverbal communication such as pauses, silences, laughter, and crying (I included nonverbal communication in brackets). Once transcribed, I anonymized the transcripts and uploaded them to a secure online storage site.

My methods of data analysis borrowed from thematic and phenomenological approaches. I analyzed interview transcripts and fieldnotes with the intent of generating codes and thematic typologies. The thematic analytic process with interviews begins at transcription, with the researcher noting emergent themes in the transcript margins, and visiting and revisiting both audio and transcript. I systematically read each transcript (or fieldnote), highlighting recurring words, ideas, and sentiments. Using NVivo software, I developed shorthand notation in code to facilitate identification of patterns. This iterative process required the multiple-transcription and (re)reading of interviews and fieldnotes, and ultimately contributed to the construction of a dynamic master code list to which I added, removed from, and referred to as I analyzed subsequent scripts. As the process continued, I condensed codes into categories of most relevance to assist with interpretation (Riley and Hawe, 2005).

Phenomenological analysis seeks to explore the meaning making of lived experience (Finlay, 2014). After conducting initial rounds of coding, I coded for "meaning units" (Giorgi, 2009) in an attempt to locate essential indicators highlighting the essence of the phenomenon at hand. In other words, I looked within and outside of my initial codes to determine themes specific to how "people interpret and make sense of

experiences" (Wills, 2001, p. 5). This process operated at several levels; within phenomenological traditions, such analysis is considered a "'double hermeneutic,' whereby participants are seen to make sense of x while researchers make sense of the participants' sense making" (Finlay, 2014, p. 172).

My approach to this analysis was strongly influenced by Ashworth's (2003, pp. 148–150) phenomenological fragment framework, which advocates consideration of seven interlinked "fragments" of experience:

1. *Selfhood*: "What does the situation mean for social identity; the person's sense of agency, and their feeling of their own presence and voice in the situation?"
2. *Sociality*: "How does the situation affect relations with others?"
3. *Embodiment*: "How does the situation relate to feelings about their own body, including gender, including emotions, including 'disabilities?'"
4. *Temporality*: "How is the sense of time, duration, biography affected?"
5. *Spatiality*: "How is their picture of the geography of the places they need to go to and act within affected by the situation?"
6. *Project*: "How does the situation relate to their ability to carry out the activities they are committed to and which they regard as central to their life?"
7. *Discourse*: "What sort of terms—educational, social, commercial, ethical etc.— are employed to describe—and thence to live—the situation?"

I approached these fragments not as a checklist of necessary variables, but as heuristics to guide my interpretation of individual and shared experience. These heuristics helped me interrogate the interplay between codes/meaning units, as I attempted to unearth "the structure of the experience" as narrated and observed (Olive, 2008, p. 90).

2.3 Participant Profiles and Sampling Considerations

Throughout the dissertation, I quote several of the asylum applicants I interviewed and conducted participant observation with. Some I quote extensively, while others I only mention in passing. I list them below with their nationalities and ages, both of which can contextualize and inform lived experience. All participants were given the choice to be referred to by their real name, total anonymization, or a pseudonym they themselves selected. The majority of names in the dissertation are pseudonyms chosen by the referenced individual, though some are real. I have taken care to remove identifying information. Some of the individuals did not share their ages with me, and in these cases, I provide an estimate.

Abdul Karim: Sierra Leonean male, 19 years old

Adnan: Pakistani male [likely in his 30s]

Ayman: Syrian male, 26 years old

Ivan Ivanovich: Russian male [likely in his mid-20s]

Izmo: Sierra Leonean male, 22 years old

Jean-Claude: Congolese male, 31 years old

Junior: Sierra Leonean male, 35 years old

Kashem: Afghan male, 21 years old

Mojtaba: Afghan male, 27 years old

Momoh: Sierra Leonean male, 19 years old

Mooslam: Afghan male, 32 years old

Moullel: Guinean male [likely in his early 20s]

Nabiullah: Afghan male, 28 years old

Serge: Congolese male, 33 years old

Super Med: West African male,[29] 19 years old

[29] Nationality removed as requested by the participant.

Prince Meddo: Sierra Leonean male, 21 years old

Raja: Pakistani male, 24 years old

Rody: Congolese male [likely in his mid-20s]

Stefan: Gambian male, 26 years old

This thesis makes no claims that these individuals or their experiences are representative of all those who interact with the Skype procedure in Greece, not least because all of my asylum seeking participants were men (this is a consideration to which I will soon turn). The goal of this study is not wide generalizability, but rather a careful account of the encounters and lived realities of my participants. My sample is reflective of those who were affiliated with FORGE and had interest in pre-registering on Skype. The sample is also reflective of interpreter availability, as there were some people who had interest in calling on Skype, but spoke languages that I could not find interpreters for.

Over half of the men interviewed for this study hail from Western African nations, which says less about my methods of sampling and more about who regularly engages the Skype procedure. As mentioned in the introduction, the timetable dictates access to the asylum procedure on the basis of mother tongue, and, by proxy, nationality. Speakers of different languages have different levels of access to the Skype procedure in terms of the number of hours available for them to call. Others meanwhile, have their own pathways entirely. After the Russian invasion, for example, Ukrainian nationals could bypass the Skype procedure by registering in person. Syrians for many years had their own line called “Syria Fast Track” in which people with Syrian passports were to call on a separate line from the Arabic language line: the Syria Fast Track line was largely responsive, and Syrian asylum applicants regularly pre-registered on Skype without extreme waits. Meanwhile people from Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, have a

lower number of hours available to call as well as far lower rates of responses on Skype.[30] People from Iran who call on the Farsi/Dari line sometimes receive a reply from the Asylum Service only to be told "we are only registering Afghans."

In other words, the nationality-based preferences of the government are baked into the infrastructure and implementation of the Skype procedure. As a result, those with more hours to call and who more often receive replies are, unsurprisingly, more likely to keep calling. As one Asylum Service staffer told me about English and French speaking African applicants, "If they insist, most likely they'll eventually manage [to get through]. Arabs, no." This quote is extremely telling, and serves as a reminder that when I talk about the Skype procedure, I am talking about a tool of bordering that is mobilized against and experienced differently by different applicants. A critical phenomenology of the Skype procedure must reflect the fact that the phenomenon at hand is differentiated along racial and national lines.

Questions of race and nationality intersect with questions of gender. As mentioned above, all of my primary participants were male asylum seekers. It is important to justify and reflect upon this. The decision to foreground only the voices of male participants is not mere androcentrism. Rather, it is reflective of the fieldsite I selected as well as my personal desire to contribute to growing (but still limited) scholarship on the lived realities of displaced men.

FORGE exclusively provides support to men who are traveling solo, a focus that is somewhat rare in settings of both research and humanitarianism. Jess and Ale opened FORGE in response to a service gap they noticed while previously working in Greece; across NGOs and refugee camps, there was a clear lack of gender-sensitive services (or any services at all) for men. This is not exclusive to the Greek context. In

[30] I do not have data about the different response rates, but it was common knowledge in Athens that while people from some countries might eventually get through on Skype, others certainly never would. As I note later in the dissertation, an Asylum Service staffer once told me bluntly: "We don't do appointments for people who speak Bengali."

resource-constrained settings, aid generally goes to those considered most in need, which can disadvantage men since refugee men are often excluded from humanitarian sympathy and understandings of vulnerability, with aid workers viewing men as either less deserving than women, or undeserving troublemakers (Turner 2016; 2017; 2019). Men tend to challenge humanitarian notions of deservedness (Olivius, 2016) and often receive restricted access to aid, resettlement schemes, and international sympathy (Krystalli and Wilson, 2018; Turner, 2015).

The phrase "refugee women's vulnerability" is cited extensively in literature, media, and NGO reports (Aoláin, 2011; Callamard, 1993; Farmer, 2006; Friedman, 1992), with discriminatory gender norms, exclusion from economic opportunity, susceptibility to sexual and gender-based violence, and lack of educational opportunity as reasons that women are considered particularly vulnerable in settings of displacement. This focus on female vulnerability renders notions of male vulnerability "essentially unimaginable" (Myrttinen et al., 2017, p. 110), putting displaced men, unless identifying as queer (Kahn and Alessi, 2017; Murray, 2014; Turner, 2017) "at the bottom of the vulnerability priority list" (Clark, 2007, p. 288).

These gendered assumptions have racial undertones. Single racialized men are often perceived by host communities, governments, and humanitarian actors as either potential terrorists, rapists, or cowards who "flee rather than staying to fight" in their home countries (Rettberg and Gahhala, 2016, p. 180; Allsopp, 2017; Leenders, 2009; Szczepanik, 2016). Young Muslim men in particular are considered dangerous by host communities and governments, associated with terrorism, rioting, criminality, and uncontrolled migration (Archer, 2003). Migrant masculinity is often depicted colonially as emblematic of backward and uncivilized culture, with non-white men considered vessels of untamed hypersexuality, archaic patriarchalism, and abusive practices that threaten European values and society (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016).

Politicians and the media across Europe and beyond have played a decisive role in cementing the relationship between migrant men and perceived threat. A defining moment in this conflation occurred around New Years 2015/2016, when over 1,200 women in Germany reported assaults by assailants they described as North African or Arab migrants. Politicians across Europe quickly capitalized on the opportunity to legitimize stricter border regimes, cloaked in rhetoric of public order and women's safety (Edenborg, 2018). In particular, Muslim refugees who were unaccompanied, young, and male were singled out: media outlets and politicians argued that these men would arrive without wives or families and would channel their uncontrollable lust and misogynistic masculinity into violent and sexually violent attacks (Scheibelhofer, 2017). The messaging was clear, and has continued since: migrant men will *penetrate* Fortress Europe.

This racial, colonial, and Islamophobic fearmongering contributed to the mass-stigmatization of migrant men, particularly with regard to asylum processes, where additional scrutiny and suspicion is applied to "male bodies in transit" (Ingvars and Gíslason, 2018). Host governments and local communities often view male asylum seekers through the lens of security and risk. Perceptions of criminality and deviance motivate and legitimize police discrimination, abuse, and the criminalization of migrant men (Bhatia, 2015; Papatzani and Knappers, 2020). Men become cast as adversaries in both criminal and immigration law, cementing gendered exclusion and harsh treatment within regimes of "crimmigration" (Stumpf, 2006). This contributes to constructions of the "bogus asylum seeker," a highly-stigmatized label disproportionately applied to male asylum applicants (Griffiths, 2015; Ingvars and Gíslason, 2018).

In Athens, FORGE has attempted to counter these harmful perceptions by creating a welcoming space for displaced men that recognizes each individual not as a threat or a problem, but instead as an individual with experiences, ambitions, and needs that deserve attention. Although my methodological decision to

work mainly with male asylum applicants stemmed primarily from considerations of access (I had already negotiated access with FORGE, an organization that only works with men), I elected not to diversity my sample in terms of gender so as to contribute to growing scholarship on the lived realities of displaced men. This sampling choice also allows for reflection of how masculine subjectivities inform experiences with digital bordering technologies (Chapter 6 engages most directly with this).

2.4 Ethical Considerations

This project was approved by CUREC, the University of Oxford ethics board. In my data collection, analysis, and writing, I adhered to rigorous standards involving ethical research, data privacy, confidentiality, secure data storage, representation, and more. I also read extensively on the ethical implications of rendering refugee voice as a non-displaced scholar (see Cabot, 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014; Wilson, 2021). However, there is a difference between procedural ethics and situational ethics, the latter of which refers to the "everyday ethical issues that surface during research encounters" (Bilotta 2021, p. 438). Several ethical dilemmas presented themselves during my research, most commonly relating to 1) COVID-19, 2) mental health, 3) the risk of disappointing my participants, and 4) researcher positionality.

On conducting research during a pandemic

Conducting research during COVID-19 required extra precautions. I followed the University of Oxford's guidance on fieldwork as well as local Greek regulations. I received my first COVID-19 vaccinations before starting fieldwork. I wore a KN95 mask during the entirety of my in-person fieldwork and required that all participants wore face masks (over their noses and mouths) for the full duration of the research encounter. In addition, I maximized social distancing while facilitating Skype calls by placing laptops far apart from each other, disinfected all surfaces and objects, and only researched in indoor spaces that I judged to be well ventilated. When possible, I held interviews/informal conversations outside. As an

added precaution, I took two COVID-19 tests per week and severely restricted my social life so as to minimize the risk of transmission.

On mental illness

Themes of depression, anxiety, and suicidality often arose in my informal conversations, participant observation, and interviews. This placed me in a complicated position as a researcher, especially when participants voiced that the Skype procedure specifically contributed to their mental anguish. Was I, by asking about the source of their suffering, engendering further suffering? Did my requests of reflection upon experiences they perceived as traumatic risk retraumatizing?[31]

In order to minimize harm, I read extensively on trauma-informed research approaches (Alessi and Kahn, 2023; Campbell et al., 2019; Connelly and Reilly, 2007; Winfield, 2022). While in the field, I continually asked my participants about their comfort levels and whether they were happy to keep talking or if they would instead prefer to either change the subject or stop conversing at all. When I sensed distress around a certain topic, I swiftly changed the subject, allowing the participant to circle back if they so pleased. I frequently reminded my participants that they did not have to talk about anything they didn't want to, and that we could take breaks or stop at any time. Recognizing that I am not a trained healthcare professional, I always reminded my participants of mental health resources in Athens accessible to people with migrant backgrounds, and offered to make referrals if they desired. In the isolated instances with people discussed self harm or vocalized suicidal ideation, I asked for consent to make referrals to Babel, a local NGO that provides free mental healthcare to refugees. In these instances, I continued to monitor the situation with Jess and Ale, making sure the individual attended his Babel appointment and checking in to provide additional support.

[31] See De Haene et al. (2010).

On disappointment

Thankfully the situations mentioned above were few, and most frequently, my participants expressed that it was cathartic to talk about their experiences with someone who cared about their humanity, rights, and the torment they were experiencing. Even still, I puzzled over the ethical murkiness of inviting people to Skype sessions when most applicants told me that they despised calling on Skype. As will be discussed later, almost all of my participants referred to the Skype calls as "psychological torture." An excerpt from my fieldnotes exemplifies the ethical discomfort this raises.

Monday September 28, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> At 9:58am Prince Meddo says "ok done." I tell him there are two minutes [of calling] left, and he laughs. It's a sad laugh, an "are you kidding me?" laugh. I feel embarrassed. 58 minutes of being ignored, and I'm really going to ask him for two more? Jess jumps in to save me: "This is the time when everybody gives up," she says. "This is the time when it's really important to keep calling." "Ok" he says, and calls again. It's ignored. The clock hits 9:59 and he says "one minute," and calls again. He's a victim of torture and in this moment I feel like we are torturing him.

At times, I felt like inviting people to attend Skype sessions was like offering seats on a plane I knew would crash. I felt this most acutely at the end of sessions (especially morning sessions that the applicants woke up early to attend) in which not a single call was answered, or when the Asylum Service account did not go online at all (this will be discussed in Chapter 5). The participants often expressed that these hours felt like a complete waste of time, making me wonder if I was actively wasting their time for the benefit of my research. Of course this question is complicated by the fact that some of the sessions did result in pre-registrations, and during my fieldwork, the Skype procedure remained for most people the only viable way of accessing documentation. Those who came to sessions that resulted in registrations certainly did not feel their time had been wasted, and many others who heard about these sessions continued coming in hopes that they would soon have similar luck. But in the many hours when not a single call was answered and the guys slouched in their seats next to me, shouted their frustration, or shook their heads in dismay, I had to ask myself the uncomfortable question of whether I arranged Skype

sessions so that they could access asylum, or so I could observe their (largely) futile attempts. The answer, of course, is partially both. But it is challenging to confidently assert that attending Skype sessions was always mutually beneficial. From hours of calls without reply from the Asylum Service, I received data. All my participants received was disappointment.

I attempted to offset this dynamic by managing expectations, telling applicants ahead of time that many sessions transpire without pre-registration. I reminded attendees that they did not have to attend the Skype sessions and could stop at any point. Most importantly, I tried to ensure that the sessions were not devoid of meaningful interaction even if they failed to result in connection with the Asylum Service. During sessions, I chatted with individuals, answered their questions about the asylum procedure, provided information, conducted ad hoc casework, and escalated concerns to Jess and Ale or even the Asylum Service on their behalf. For example, on several occasions after hearing about a certain applicant's situation, I went to the Asylum Service to (try to) receive information. I thus worked to make sure that even if applicants felt ignored during sessions, they did not feel ignored by me.

On positionality

Research with forced migrants is shaped inherently by the researcher's positionality, and the power differentials it can cement (for a summary, see Clark-Kazak, 2017). This is particularly true in qualitative research, which requires attention to how the researcher's identities, experiences, circumstances, preconceptions, and understandings (ie. theoretical orientations, epistemologies) impact the collection and interpretation of data.

When I began my fieldwork, I was particularly attentive to the complexities arising from being a white male researcher from the West writing on the experience of racialized non-Western men. On an ethical level, I worried that my whiteness and association with the Western world (both as an American citizen,

and as a student affiliated with European universities) could impact expectations relating to my financial status, proximity to power, and ability to influence individual cases. This concern was informed by my volunteer work in 2018 when I supported Afghan translators applying for Special Immigrant Visas to the United States; I observed then that when cases stalled, applicants expressed frustration and shock that I could not pull strings or talk to U.S. government officials on their behalf. They assumed I had undue power to yield over their lives: my position distracted from practical constraints, contributing to what Suerbaum (2018) describes as "false hopes" of success.

When I returned to FORGE in 2021 to conduct fieldwork, I knew it was possible that the guys might foster misunderstandings about what I could and could not do for them with regard to the Skype procedure. Such misunderstandings, if allowed to persist, would present both normative and methodological challenges. On a normative level, misunderstandings of this nature would risk exploiting and disappointing participants, raising hopes beyond what is feasible or even appropriate. Methodologically, misunderstandings stemming from my positionality could impact the type of data I received. For example, participation in my study could be associated with my perceived ability to influence their chances of success on Skype, with willingness to participate or the content of interview responses considered a quid pro quo for assistance (Suerbaum, 2018). I made clear, from the beginning, that I had no ability to influence the likelihood of reply on Skype, communicating repeatedly that even if I wanted to pull strings, I had no strings to pull. Clearly communicating my role as a researcher without ties to the Asylum Service helped assuage assumptions about participation in my project.

Positionality shapes not only research encounters but also the research process. My identities shaped my data collection and analysis in part because I experience the themes of my research (borders, policing, race, etc) differently than my participants do. In a similar vein, my gendered experiences differ from those of my participants, and thus require consideration. Ingvars (2019) notes that male researchers often forgo

consideration of their gendered positionality, other than noting that men tend to confide in male more than female researchers, increasing access for men in the field. While I did experience higher levels of access and trust with the men whilst working at FORGE, I nonetheless recognize that the perceived sameness of our sex extends only so far: our experiences and perceptions of maleness and masculinities vary enormously along racial, classed, colonial, and sexualized lines (Liu, 2005; Sinha, 2017). My participants and I perform, consider, are measured against, and command different standards, stereotypes, and strata of hegemonic masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), all of which impact the sharing, analysis, and interpretation of storied experience and self-concept. I made sure to consistently reflect upon differences in positionality in my fieldnotes, and to take these differences into account while analyzing data.

Feminist methodology stresses that reflexivity should not only be noted by the researcher, but must serve as a guide for action (Huisman, 2008). This ties considerations of positionality to the notion of reciprocity, which refers to strategies aimed at balancing the power between the research and the researched, enacted by baking into the research design interactional "give-and-take" that benefits the participants (Cushman, 1996; Powell and Takayoshi, 2003). Sensitive attentiveness to ensuring that participants gain from their relationships with the project and the researcher is especially important when the researcher is not from the community.

Many scholars write on the exploitative relational dynamics encouraged by ethnographic research, wherein the line between researcher and friend blurs in academic manipulation. Cotterill (1992, p. 599) notes that "close friends do not usually arrive with a tape-recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically...and then disappear." Huisman (2008) reflects on this harmful dynamic, recalling the moment where upon completing the final interview of fieldwork, her participant-friend asked with sorrow, "Does this mean you're not going to come visit me anymore?" I had a similar experience while

volunteering at FORGE in 2018: I had become close with an unaccompanied minor I assisted, and when I left Greece, he expressed dismay. He messaged me often on Facebook, and called daily on WhatsApp. “Am I a bad boy? Did I do something to make you leave?” he asked in one message, after I failed to answer his call.

There is widespread criticism of researchers who do not engage meaningfully or reciprocally with their research contexts. This form of research is referred to as “parachute” or “helicopter” research, and can be “parasitic” (Bockarie et al., 2018, p. 593). As Galán et al. (2021, p. 34) write, when white scholars research racialized communities but fail to ensure those communities meaningfully benefit from the work, they enable the “continued exploitation of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] communities to advance the academic careers of white researchers.” Researchers must safeguard against helicopter research if they are to conduct ethical work that is both decolonial and antiracist.

My Greek heritage does not absolve me of the harms of parachute research. With this in mind, I implemented research reciprocity according to the individual circumstances of my individual participants. Each time I met with someone in a research encounter (for example, a potential participant), I began by explaining my project and what involvement would and would not entail. When engaging with participants who were trying to pre-register on Skype, I made sure to communicate that I could had no influence over the Skype procedure and their chances of registration, but that I would be happy to help in terms of demystifying the system, providing access to laptops and call sessions, and going to the Asylum Service on their behalf should they have any pressing concerns or appeals. I additionally made clear that I would be leaving the field upon completing my fieldwork.

Moving beyond the basics of informed consent, I worked to understand each participant’s boundaries, needs, and visions for meaningful engagement with the project. As Bilotta (2021, p. 438) writes,

"consultation between researchers and refugee participants is critical to ensure a climate of culturally-responsive respect and reciprocity in the research context." I approached these consultations as ongoing negotiations, and over the course of my fieldwork I continually engaged in dialogue regarding the participants' comfort with and understanding of the project, as well as negotiations regarding their roles within it. These conversations comprised oral and iterative consent, but also allowed me to ascertain the specific conditions that would make each participant feel valued within the research space.

I engaged in several different types of reciprocal action during my fieldwork. Upon arriving in Athens, I spent weeks helping FORGE move from their old office to their newly rented space, packing and unpacking boxes, scrubbing floors, building furniture, and painting walls. Though I had not planned on spending the first weeks of fieldwork building an office rather than collecting data, I was happy to assist FORGE and contribute to their most urgent needs. I enjoyed using this time to give back to an organization that had so clearly influenced my research direction and would serve as my primary fieldsite. I also enjoyed reconnecting with Jess, Ale, and the guys who volunteered to help as we hauled boxes, picked paint from our fingernails, and shared falafel wraps from the Egyptian shop around the corner.

Once the office opened, I continued to give back to the NGO by pitching in wherever needed with casework, flow management, and cleaning (in addition to running the Skype service). It is here that my reciprocity with the NGO merged with my reciprocity with my collaborators. So as to ensure my participants benefited from their engagement with me, I led info sessions about the Greek asylum procedure, organized Skype sessions, answered casework questions, made referrals (medical referrals, COVID-19 vaccine referrals, etc.), explored accommodation options for individuals experiencing homelessness, and more. On a less technical level, I provided tea and snacks, organized seating space for the guys to pop by and share in community together, and made time to talk with individuals in and out of the office (in response to complaints from several of the guys that they often felt ignored by NGO

workers in Athens who either deprioritized unaccompanied men or were too busy to listen to their needs, concerns, and musings). In addition, I regularly followed Skype sessions and/or interviews with distribution in a back room we set up to mirror a clothing store, the items of clothing arranged by style and size on hangers, I also engaged in distribution with non-participants: access to resources was not contingent upon research participation.

These efforts of reciprocity were intentional efforts to contribute to a "space of welcome" which would stand warmly "in the shadow of laws, policies, and practices explicitly designed to make people...feel unwelcome" (Willen, 2014, p. 86). They were also designed to counteract colonial approaches of extraction in favor of arrangements of mutual benefit.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined this dissertation's research design. It opened by describing the project's origins, before discussing the qualitative, ethnographic, and phenomenological methodological orientation. Next it justified the fieldsite selection, before explaining the methods of data collection (participant observation and interviews) and data analysis. It then provided brief information regarding the key informants, before raising ethical considerations prompted by the project.

The rest of the dissertation presents results from this study in four parts. First it interrogates the advent of the Skype procedure, proposing the concept of digital pushback to make sense of a bordering event that operates through digital forms of nonrecording. The subsequent chapter explores encounters with the Skype procedure, detailing how the Greek state executes its digital pushback through affective violence and the conditioning of unlivability. Next it considers how the digital nature of the Greek asylum bureaucracy forecloses the possibility of engagement with bureaucrats, with extreme effects of alienation, disorientation, and absurdity. Lastly, it focuses on individual decisions to stop calling on Skype, analyzing

these decisions in terms of a politics of refusal in which asylum applicants refuse the effects of the digital pushback. The dissertation concludes with reflections about digital bordering, bureaucracy, and accountability.

Chapter 3
The Skype Border: Exploring Digital Pushbacks

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the emergence of the Skype procedure. The limited existing scholarship that addresses the usage of Skype within the Greek asylum procedure either mentions its emergence in passing or not at all (Aradau, 2022; Tazzioli, 2023). To date, the administrative landscape and politics that shaped the Skype procedure remain obscure. Academic and policy circles lack understanding of why and how Microsoft technology became ingrained within bureaucratic structures of Greek migration governance. What was the process by which the Skype procedure was conceptualized and ultimately initiated? Why were certain decisions of technopolitical governance made? Most importantly, what do the procedure's history and governing logics reveal?

The following analysis sheds light on the obscure origins of the digitalized asylum procedure in order to build a useful conceptual framework for understanding both the bordering power of the Skype procedure and the effects of digital bordering more broadly. The chapter proceeds in five main parts. It begins with a brief institutional history of the Asylum Service. Next it unearths the logics governing the design, emergence, and ongoing usage of Skype as an pre-registration pathway in Greece in order to consider the role of distance and invisibility in border governance. With reference to the physical pushback of boats and bodies occurring on the Greek borders, the chapter then interrogates contemporary understandings of pushback practices in an effort to find the appropriate vocabulary for a digital bordering event that operates through distance and disappearance. Next, it proposes the term *digital pushback,* which underscores how digital technologies can be mobilized to hold people at distance from their rights and the land they reside upon. Lastly, the chapter situates the notion of digital pushback in relation to literature on digital bordering that focuses on surveillance and hypervisibility.

With regard to the Skype procedure, I demonstrate that what is widely considered a dysfunctional system is in reality a highly functional tool of digital bordering and social control. By directing physical queues to a largely unresponsive digital system, Greece hides backlogs from view and distances the administrative state from those seeking to make claims upon it, with effects akin to those of physical pushbacks. Employing the notion of digital pushback, I suggest that the bordering power of the Skype procedure can be fruitfully understood through a largely underexplored effect of digital bordering: the deployment of technology to govern through nonrecording, nonrecognition, and invisibilization. In other words, digital processes of *not knowing* can constitute and enforce the border as much as digital processes of *knowing* can.[32]

I argue that technology can be used to intentionally structure illegibility and render entire populations invisible to the state. With this lens, the effects of the Skype procedure emerge not as manifestations of bureaucratic inefficiency but instead as strategies of statecraft facilitated by technologically-induced erasure. This argument makes two key contributions. First, it deviates from scholarship on technologized borders by revealing how digital bordering techniques can function not as visibility-generating apparatuses (Madörin, 2020) but rather as invisibility-generating systems that function to disappear entire populations from state spaces and vision. Second, it challenges the geography and nature of pushbacks as they are currently understood. I posit that pushbacks can occur within the boundaries of a state, and that unanswered Skype calls constitute a form of digitally mediated state violence that not only can be understood, but must be understood, as an underexplored form of pushback practice.

3.2 The Greek Asylum Service

In January 2011, the Greek Parliament passed legislation establishing a semi-autonomous body within the Ministry of Citizen Protection competent on issues of international protection. The Greek Asylum

[32] This work contributes to the field of ignorance studies. See Aradau and Perret (2022); Gross and McGoey (2015); and Proctor and Schiebinger (2008).

Service, as it was named, was tasked with "the mission of applying the legislation on asylum and other forms of international protection for aliens and stateless persons, as well as contributing to the development and the formulation of the national policy" (Law 3907, Art 1.2). The Asylum Service was to oversee the registration and processing of asylum claims, with additional authority over drafting asylum policy, conducting country of origin research, producing and dispatching legal documents, managing family reunification applications, and facilitating reception conditions. The Asylum Service would become the primary authority on issues of international protection in Greece.

Importantly, this new body was established as a civilian authority separate from the police. This marked a distinct departure in Greek border policy, as up until the establishment of GAS, the competent authority responsible for the registration and assessment of applications for international protection had been the Hellenic Police. At borders and on the mainland alike, members of the Greek police oversaw registration and examination of first instance applications, Dublin procedures (which concern family reunification, the determination of which EU member state is responsible for asylum applications, transfers to other member states, etc.), and the apprehension, detention, and deportation of migrants and asylum seekers (AIDA, 2013a). The 2011 legislation, however, moved asylum policy and procedures beyond the reach of the police departments that had for decades overseen them,[33] and created a new civil agency in a time when austerity-stripped Greece was forbidden from hiring more civil servants. How did such a dramatic reworking of the asylum system come to pass?

The creation of a civilian authority on asylum uncoupled from the police served as a public and structural response to mounting international pressure regarding long-standing deficiencies of international protection in Greece (Triandafyllidou, 2014). For upwards of ten years, observers had highlighted low

[33] Except for 36,183 pending asylum claims lodged prior to June 7, 2013 (the day the Asylum Service opened). The police retained responsibility for this backlog (UNHCR, 2012).

migration state capacity (Micinsky, 2022) and widespread failures of the Greek asylum procedure, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, lengthy backlogs, recognition rates that ranged from 0.68% to 2.05% between 2005 and 2014 (UNHCR, 2014), and allegations of racism, violence, and corruption.[34] These criticisms came from bodies such as the Greek Ombudsman, the Greek National Commission for Human Rights, the European Parliament, the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the UNHCR.

These critiques singled out as particularly troublesome the registration of asylum applicants by the Hellenic Police; various NGOs and professional associations publicly expressed concern over the "unacceptable situation of denial of access to the asylum system in Greece" (Statewatch, 2012, p.1). Although asylum seekers could in theory register their applications at any local authority, reports suggest that police officers at ports of entry and around the country were rarely trained to hear or examine asylum claims (Cabot, 2014) and that they often refused to register applications, simply directing all asylum seekers to the Athens-based Attica Aliens Directorate for registration (AIDA, 2013a). Cabot (2014) evidences the bureaucratic dysfunction, violence, and legal limbo that awaited applicants in Athens. At the main directorate called Petrou Ralli, applications were accepted only on Saturdays from 6:00am, when the police would at random select around 20 applicants (sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes

[34] It is important to situate contemporary Greek policies in relation to a national history of imperialism, geopolitical marginality, economic restructuring, and weak migration state capacity. Though Greece surfaced at the center of the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015, its relationship with borders and foreigners took shape long before then. As Micinsky (2022, p. 3) notes, "any account of the refugee situation in the EU cannot start in 2015; the events of today are institutionally linked to past interests and failed projects." As will be discussed later in this chapter, the Skype procedure was not designed as a long-term solution but instead as an exceptional stop-gap measure of improvisation in the face of extreme pressure. Its implementation exhibits continuity with previous Greek border policies, which traditionally exhibited situational reactivity rather than preemptive readiness. Greece has historically failed to develop comprehensive long-term migration policies, governing instead through presidential decrees, ad hoc approaches, and informal policies (Micinsky, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2009, 2014; Tsourapas and Zartaloudis, 2022). Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Greek response to migration was, in the words of Skleparis (2017, p.2), "characterised by unpreparedness, inconsistencies and short-termism." The approach to migration policy exhibited in these decades mirrored pre-existing patterns of half-baked policy, legislative deprioritization, and neglect. For example, although the Greek government signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and transposed it into law in 1959, Greece lacked a national asylum procedure until 1991 (Micinsky, 2022, p. 19). Scholars attribute Greece's reticence to invest meaningfully in migration infrastructure to two key factors: concerns over the ethnoreligious composition of Greece, and an unwillingness to comply with the European assumption (and its implications) that frontline states must accept vanguard status on issues of migration (Micinsky, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2009, 2014).

none) for registration from crowds that reached 2,000. Applicants began queuing as early as Wednesday or Thursday morning, waiting for days without access to food, water, bathrooms, or protection from the elements (AIDA, 2013a). To discourage days-long queueing, the police routinely dispersed crowds with batons and gas (Statewatch, 2012), tactics that were also employed on Saturdays when individuals attempted to present themselves for registration (Cabot, 2014, p. 50).

As a result, most applicants were forced to return every Saturday for weeks to months in order to have an arbitrary chance at registering, while others simply gave up. Without successful registration, neither group could access documentation or legalized status, and thus stood at risk of arrest in the police sweeps and raids that were prevalent at the time (Amnesty International, 2012). These factors and more contributed to the sentiment, scorchingly phrased by Cabot (2014, p. 31), that under the Hellenic Police, "it [was] difficult to account fully for the exclusionary and sluggish qualities of the Greek asylum system."

Cabot was not alone in her assessment. In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found in *M.S.S v. Belgium & Greece* that Greece lacked a fair and effective asylum system, that asylum seekers in Greece often faced violence and restriction of rights, and that these conditions constituted breaches of the European Convention on Human Rights. As a result, the Strasbourg Court ordered Belgium to halt deportations to Greece occurring under the Dublin Procedure. In doing so, the Court ruled that the Greek asylum system could not provide for the rights or safety of asylum seekers (Moreno-Lax, 2012). The ECtHR's findings were mirrored in December 2011 by the Court of Justice of the European Union, which, in referencing the Greek situation, noted that Member States must not transfer asylum seekers to any state where "they cannot be unaware that systemic deficiencies in the asylum procedure...in that Member State amount to substantial grounds for believing that the asylum seeker would face a real risk of being subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment" (De Baere, 2013, p. 11).

These cases mounted a stinging rebuke of the Greek asylum system, and resulted in many European countries suspending Dublin returns to Greece (Amnesty International, 2012). Successive Greek governments viewed the suspension of Dublin transfers as a source of international embarrassment and shame, since it communicated that Greece was incapable of implementing European regulations and standards. As a result, Greece increasingly embraced cooperation with the EU on migration governance (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis, 2022, p. 7). Several supranational interventions followed, such as EU emergency funding, increased European Asylum Support Office (EASO) personnel, and Frontex deployments. The Greek government responded by proposing a series of reforms in their National Action Plan on Asylum Reform and Migration Management to the European Commission, all with the goal of transposing EU directives on common standards and increasing institutional and state capacity to manage migration (Micinsky, 2022, pp. 21–22). Primary among these reforms was the creation of the First Reception Services, an Appeals Authority, and, crucially, the Greek Asylum Service.

The Asylum Service was designed to be both autonomous and decentralized, consisting of several Regional Asylum Offices (RAOs) and reception centers in areas with large migrant populations. Though the Asylum Service was conceived by reforms passed in early 2011, it was not functional for another two and a half years due to recruitment and operational issues (Amnesty International, 2012). In the interim, the Hellenic Police retained responsibility for the registration and examination of first instance applications (AIDA, 2013a). The first Asylum Service office opened its doors in Athens on June 7, 2013.

Although the existence of the Asylum Service heralded a structural shift in migration management, when it came to registration access, little changed except the competent authority. Understaffed and just finding its feet, GAS suffered from capacity issues and a heavy workload. Registration moved from weekly to daily, starting at 7:00am, but GAS still struggled to accommodate its would-be applicants. By the end of 2013, GAS staffers were picking approximately 30 people to register from daily queues of around 140,

though some were simply given an "unofficial paper with a number indicating the date in which they should go back or a priority number" (AIDA, 2013b). This paper was not, of course, a legal document and granted no formal protection from arrest or detention.

The issue of capacity would only deepen, as Greece soon began experiencing exponential increases in border crossings. In 2014, approximately 43,500 border crossers arrived by sea, comprising a 280 percent increase from the previous year (UNHCR, 2014, p. 3). By the end of 2014, the Athens Asylum Service was staffed at only 75 percent, and only five out of the eleven RAOs prescribed by the 2011 legislation were operational (UNHCR, 2014, p. 3). It is within this landscape that the Skype pilot was born.

3.3 The Skype Procedure: Emergence

An October 2022 report by the Migration Policy Institute notes that while many governments around the world began experimenting with remote registration systems following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, registration processes were, prior to the pandemic, "largely an in-person activity, with registration officers and asylum seekers interacting face-to-face" (Beirens, 2022, p. 9). The Greek case provides an intriguing outlier to this trend given that the Asylum Service began integrating digital means of registration in 2014.[35] Why did the Greek Asylum Service embrace digitalization when and how it did? This section and the next draw upon publicly available material as well as interviews I conducted with current and former members of the Greek Asylum Service who were present when the Skype pilot launched, contributing novel insight into what is largely a hazy history.

In July 2014, the Greek Asylum Service piloted a new system of pre-registration that used Skype as its platform. It is unclear exactly how, when, or even if the Skype pilot was publicly announced, especially

[35] Greece did however escalate its usage of digital technologies in the asylum procedure following COVID-19, conducting asylum interviews for fully registered applicants over Skype.

since the Asylum Service website was taken down in November 2020. However, archives of the website accessed on the internet archive the Wayback Machine show that in March 2015 (and perhaps earlier—the Wayback Machine does not have prior records), the Asylum Service's online guidance on where and how to apply for asylum noted that registration could occur in person or virtually, linking three PDF instruction sheets on how to pre-register on Skype:[36] Skype for French and English-speaking third-country nationals, Skype for Arabic-speaking third-country nationals, and Skype for Farsi/Dari-speaking third country-nationals. These guidance sheets comprise the first publicly disseminated guidance for asylum applicants regarding the then-nascent Skype system. The documents explain how to download and use the Skype application, as well as why the system benefits applicants. Taking the example of French, the text is replicated below (the punctuation in this text was present in the original. I did not alter the punctuation to align with academic convention):

> To apply for asylum in Greece there is an easy solution: it is to apply for asylum by Skype, through a computer! This way you avoid queueing!
> *But Skype? What is this again?*
> Skype is an Internet program that allows you to talk remotely. So it allows you to request asylum through a computer connected to the Internet or even through a "smartphone" type mobile phone, capable of connecting to the Internet!
> *But I just arrived in Greece! So how do I find a computer?*
> There are three solutions!
>
> The three options for requesting asylum by Skype without queuing!!!
>
> Internet Cafe
> This is the easiest solution, it is inexpensive and it is accessible to everyone! It's easy: you look for an Internet cafe in the neighborhood where you live and you ask the manager of the cafe to help you. You connect, you search http://www.skype.com/fr/ You open an account on "Skype," you look for "asylum.service" among the users, you call, you talk and you fix your meeting! It's easy! ... and it's not expensive!
>
> Computer
> Can a friend lend you his computer? Perfect! You go online and ask him to help you connect to "Skype" For this you need:
> -A computer with fast Internet access;
> -Headphones with a microphone and a camera;
> • You connect, you search http://www.skype.com/fr/

[36] This material is sourced from the former Asylum Service website, which no longer exists but is accessible via the Wayback Machine at https://web.archive.org/web/20160529063323/http://asylo.gov.gr/?page_id=1196.

> • You open an account on “Skype” you search for “asylum.service” among the users, you call, you talk and you fix your meeting! It’s easy! ... and it’s not expensive!
>
> Smartphone
> Do you have a “smartphone” type cell phone? Great!
> -You install the “Skype” application on the screen
> - You connect, you open a “Skype” account and through your “Skype” account you search “Asylum.service” from the list of users; you call and you talk!
> - *But how then to speak?*
> You connect to “Skype,” you search for users and you find “asylum.service”: you follow the following procedure (in English):
>
> 1. Contacts
> 2. Add Contact
> 3. Search Skype Directory of the user asylum.service
> 4. After having added the user to your contacts, make the Skype call.
>
> Remember: no need to pay on “Skype:” the connection between users is done free!

Each guidance sheet presents this same text, with different Skype accounts (asylum.service; asylum.service.arabic; asylum.service.farsi.dari depending on the language) and different times of operation listed (for French/English: Wednesdays from 11:00am to 1:00pm; for Arabic: Wednesdays from 1:00pm to 2:00pm; and, inexplicably, for only eleven minutes of Farsi/Dari: Tuesday from 11:00am to 11:11am). Other differences include that the Farsi/Dari document notes that “You must speak Persian or Dari very well,” and the Arabic sheet concludes with “We wish you good luck.” The French/English sheet notes that Skype registrations will begin on Wednesday, July 30th, 2014, and that the Skype service is only available for applicants fluent in English or French.

When these guidance sheets were disseminated, Skype was neither mandatory nor the primary means of accessing the asylum procedure. Nor was it codified in any way: it was not then nor ever transposed into any directive or law. Instead, the info sheets framed the Skype pathway as an easy and convenient registration option that applicants might or might not elect to make use of. “You call, you talk and you fix your meeting!”

In April 2015, the website noted that "you must submit your application in person," but also suggested that for those who fell under the Attica RAO's jurisdiction—and especially for those whose lived far from that RAO—there was "the possibility of booking a date for the registration of your asylum claim via the internet application of Skype." This wording remained through the beginning of 2017, but was updated in May 2017 to say:

> "You must submit your application in person to one of the Regional Asylum Offices or Asylum Units...Due the large number of persons who wishes to submit an application you may not be able to actually submit your application if you present yourself to the Asylum Service. Therefore, you might book an appointment for the submission of your application (full registration) via Skype"[37]

This language, which remained until the website was taken down in 2020, presented the Skype system as something that could be used instead of registering in person, when in reality, most applicants could not go in person and had to use the digital system. Shortly after the introduction of Skype into the mainland asylum procedure, the centrality of the Skype system's role quickly cemented: by July 2015, applicants speaking French, English, Arabic, Farsi/Dari, Urdu/Panjabi, and Bangla (in other words, the majority of applicants) were required to register using Skype (Stevens and Dimitriadi, 2019, p. 272), while applicants speaking other languages had to queue outside the Asylum Service. By mid-2015, the Skype pilot had functionally turned into the "Skype procedure" (Aradau, 2022 p. 3), and was the dominant and sole means through which most applicants on mainland Greece could pre-register for asylum.[38] The Asylum Service had completed an "obligatory insertion of Skype into the asylum registration process" (Aradau, 2022, p. 33). This remained the status quo for years, a pilot with no seeming end. In 2022, the Skype pathway abruptly closed, eight years after the pilot launched.

This history helps clarify the Skype procedure's emergence, yet key questions remain. Who designed the pilot? How did it come about in the form that it did? What political logics shaped its emergence and

[37] Accessible via the Wayback Machine at https://web.archive.org/web/20170520180152/http://asylo.gov.gr/en/?page_id=72.
[38] Excluding those able to demonstrate exceptional vulnerability.

sustained usage? These questions are difficult to answer (and even more difficult to evidence) given the lack of public information about the Skype procedure as well as a culture of institutional secrecy at the Greek Asylum Service that makes fact-finding difficult.[39] Interview material with current and former Asylum Service staffers who agreed to speak on the record prove helpful.[40]

When the first Greek Asylum Service office opened, only one of the 13 RAOs stipulated by law was operational. This created tremendous pressure on the one functioning office, located in Athens (Attica). As mentioned above, this RAO was staffed at only 75 percent by the end of 2014. Apostolos,[41] a United Nations staffer who was present in the early planning of the Asylum Service and also for "cutting the cord on the opening day of the asylum office," recalled:

> "In the beginning everyone who wanted to apply for asylum had to come to Athens, and this created a significant pull factor to this one office and this entailed a lot of pressure to manage people crowing outside in a dignified manner, a lot of pressure to be able to handle not only their applications and to register them which required coordination with interpretation and [interpreter] availability, but also a lot of additional coordination for capacity on the day of interviews,

[39] One day in November 2021 after I waited hours at the Asylum Service attempting without success to pre-register a survivor of torture, a staffer named Elias (pseudonym) told me that he had personally reached out to five or six interpreters who support the Skype service to ask if they'd be willing to speak anonymously with me about the Skype procedure. Each interpreter declined, because "they were all suspicious" and because they were afraid. "It's like a secret service," he told me. "Everyone is scared. It feels like we are living under a dictatorship sometimes. I cannot understand it." My data do not rigorously support whether or not the Asylum Service imposes a culture of secrecy or pressures workers into silence regarding the deficiencies of the Skype procedure, but the data do suggest both that personnel at various levels of the organization were aware of the Skype procedure's obfuscations and did not readily feel comfortable, safe, or even interested in commenting upon them. This finding was strengthened by my attempts to snowball sample, which proved challenging at GAS. At the end of each interview with former or current Asylum Service staffers, I asked if they could think of anyone within the Service who might be willing to speak with me about the Skype procedure, and most often they were unable to connect me with anyone.

[40] When the Skype pilot began, the Asylum Service was under the leadership of Maria Stavropoulou. Stavropoulou, a human rights lawyer with decades of experience within the United Nations system, was selected as the inaugural director of the Asylum Service, and was instrumental in the organization's design, founding, and management. Stavropoulou served as the Director of the Greek Asylum Service from its opening in 2013 until early 2018, and recently finished serving as the UNHCR representative to Mauritania. She currently serves as a Deputy Representative at UNHCR, and is barred from speaking on the record about her previous roles in other countries, including her time at GAS. However, I was able to connect with Eleni Petraki, who previously served as the Greek Asylum Service spokesperson and worked closely with Stavropoulou. Petraki left the Asylum Service in July 2020 and has since been working in the Directorate of Social Integration in the Department of Interculturalism at the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum, and she emailed me a written statement about the Skype procedure and its origins. In addition, I interviewed a handful of individuals who were involved in the creation and early functioning of the Greek Asylum Service, and together their testimonies shed light onto what is otherwise a concealed history.

[41] Apostolos is a pseudonym.

> fingerprinting, documents, and then renewal of documents because they expired three months initially and then six months [later]."

Eventually other RAOs opened, and while the offices on Lesvos, Evros, and Rhodes (all located on islands or land borders) were able to register almost all of their applicants, the Attica RAO continued to struggle. In the first half of 2014, the Attica Asylum Service was responsible for 68 percent of all applications in Greece, and had a self-estimated capacity of 150 registrations per week although queues reached around 250 people per day (UNHCR, 2014, p. 17). "Imagine hundreds of people outside the Asylum Service—Attica Regional Asylum Office—and a few dozen employees who had to log requests in accordance with the legislation submitted by so many people," Petraki recalled. "Requests that were not just recent but also older ones submitted by people who previously could not formally submit their request to the Greek state."

Petraki served as head of the Attica RAO until spring 2014, and emphasized over email that she and her colleagues faced this logistical challenge without the appropriate resources or experience: "We started from scratch!!" She explained that many of the employees staffing the new office lacked experience in the forced migration sphere and had to learn on the job. "Some of us were civil servants in other ministries, some had just been recruited as civil servants…challenges were ahead of us, and we had to respond in the best possible and dignified way!!" A current staffer who started at GAS in 2013 (and asked to remain anonymous) spoke to this exceptional moment and the need to act quickly, explaining that "Skype was not the best solution, but it was a solution."

Although staffers worked diligently to respond to need, applicants nonetheless queued for "weeks at a time" (Stevens and Dimitriadi, 2019, p. 272), raising concerns for the Asylum Service that ranged from humanitarian to security-related to procedural. On a humanitarian level, the Asylum Service had concerns

about the safety and discomfort of asylum applicants standing in physical queues. Irini,[42] who has worked at the Asylum Service since 2013 and now directs the asylum unit for a third country national group at a RAO, said that the queues were on a "very central road and people were outside with children, small babies as I said before, and there is also the risk of an accident. And the risk of a riot. Police were coming to this events [sic] and no one wants to create pressure or develop a situation to become more dangerous." She maintained that Skype was "better for these people" because they did not have to wait in the rain or extreme temperatures.

Echoing Irini's focus on the dangers of uncontrolled queues, Petraki similarly remembers "overcrowding, pushing, tensions, risks of accident, fainting, violent behaviors between asylum seekers of different nationalities, [and] 'strange rings' that had the 'know how' from the previous process i.e., when requests for international protection were 'assessed' by the Hellenic Police." These remarks reveal that GAS staffers worried about unrest, agitation, uncontrollable crowds, as well as potential corruption. Panagiotis,[43] a former member of the Asylum Service who was present for the planning and early days of the Asylum Service, explained:

> "We had throngs outside our gates when we opened. Throngs! We had 2,000 people at any given time, it was such a big security risk for them and for the staff as well that there had to be regulated access…and corruption was a very very big issue in the system before the Asylum Service. If you read on stories about Petrou Ralli, you ask anyone to tell you about what the system looked like in Petrou Ralli, people were lining up, they were paying the mafias to get a spot in the line and then they were beaten up."

Artemis,[44] who worked as a caseworker at the Greek Asylum Service in Athens from 2013 until 2019, said that corruption in the queues was a "well known story." Apostolos also addressed these themes, while additionally expressing concern over the fairness of accessing the asylum procedure in crowded queues:

> "It was noticed that only the well-built, healthy, [people with] no disabilities would be first in the queue, and even if somebody said 'well ok, I cannot go and stand first in the queue because I'm

[42] Irini is a pseudonym.
[43] Panagiotis is a pseudonym.
[44] Artemis is a pseudonym.

> not as strong and fit or I'm holding a newborn baby in my arms,' maybe these people would have to pay somebody to allow them to stay there from the mafia that would instantly develop outside and manage the queue in this way. We didn't want first come first serve, it was very vulnerable to exploitation."

He continued:

> "Sometime in 2014, it was suggested and decided to pilot, [to] try and direct people instead of coming spontaneously outside the office and trying to walk in and apply and most will be turned away time after time after time to the extent where people would come very angry and aggressive and demand to come in, causing minor security instances, instead direct them to Skype where they would call and there would be an interpreter and a person working from GAS who'd respond on Skype and give out appointments."

These quotations suggest that early members and collaborators of the Asylum Service worried about the risks imposed by large queues on safety, security, and procedural integrity. But they worried also about reputational risks, particularly within the context of a newly formed civil service that was replacing a failing asylum system just recently shamed on the international stage. Irini expressed that this was "a very important part" of the development of the Skype pilot, which Panagiotis further explained:

> "People were betting actually at the time as to whether the Service would manage to ever become operational, and many people in the police would say 'We can't wait for you to start,' but I think many were secretly hoping that we wouldn't manage to get it off the ground because having succeeded, our success was their failure, you see? So the stakes were very high, we had to succeed you see, we couldn't shut our doors, that was the worst that could happen, you see?"

Apostolos agreed with Panagiotis' assessment, noting:

> "There were a lot of concerns about that [long queues]. Some were reputational. What do people think about the public authority where you see hundreds or thousands of people queuing outside to lodge an application?"

Petraki also emphasized the urgency of eliminating queues, pointing to international criticism and reputational concern:

> "EU condemnations against Greece and negative press comments as regards the inexistence of a credible system to assess applications for international protection in accordance with international treaties and EU law left absolutely no room for manoeuvre."

These accounts suggest that the elimination of physical queues was crucial to the effective functioning of the Asylum Service. More accurately, the elimination of physical queues *from public sight* was crucial;

the Skype procedure was not designed to process registrations quickly and thus procedurally eliminate queues, but rather to hide backlogs and the people comprising them. Several sources I spoke with expressed that this motivation most directly influenced the inception of the Skype pilot. Irini told me that "Skype was part of a solution to the problem of the long queues outside the office. So instead of having these people outside the office, we chose to have them online…as far as I know, it [Skype] was because of the pressure we had outside our gates." Markos Karavias, the second Director of the Greek Asylum Service, similarly confirmed this organizational logic of the Skype pilot, noting in 2018 that the Skype pathway was "an operational emergency solution designed to avoid congestion in front of the service gate" (Aggelidis, 2018). Petraki also confirmed this in writing.

According to conversations with individuals involved in the design of the Asylum Service and its early policies, the decision to use Skype to eliminate physical queues was made internally and by a small team. "The Director [Stavropoulou] decided, in consultation with the political leadership, to 'install' the Skype platform," Petraki told me. This is a key detail: the Skype pilot was not conceived at a policy level by politicians, nor did it stem from a formal partnership with Microsoft, the United Nations, EASO, or other relevant actors (though Petraki did comment that "many discussions both with UNHCR, NGOs and the civil society took place"). An inner circle of Asylum Service leadership discussed possible solutions to the pressures outlined above, and decided to pilot a digital system, with the final decision falling to Stavropoulou. Stavropoulou enjoyed a wide mandate in her role. Irini explained that at the time of the Skype pilot, the Asylum Service was an autonomous agency under the umbrella of the Ministry of Citizen Protection, "so it was, let's say, more easy for Asylum Service to take decisions on its own and be in a position to implement them immediately."

The selection of Skype technology in particular appears to have been practical in nature rather than tied to specific affinity for Microsoft or its products. As one informant explained to me, while talking through

the practicalities of a remote system that could eliminate visible queues, an Asylum Service staffer suggested that video calls (rather than landline or mobile calls) would afford additional security as they would allow Asylum Service personnel to take a screenshot of incoming video calls and use that to verify applicant identity at full registration. This, I am told, was intended to combat corruption by preventing people from selling their full registration appointments upon completing pre-registration. According to Panagiotis, "That's why we instituted Skype and it wasn't just an email thing or a simple phone call, because we would ask people to sit in front of the camera and take a photo of them, and when they arrived on the day of the interview, it had to be them, it couldn't be someone else."

Apostolos and my other participants maintained that the pilot aimed to "give out appointments" and that for a time, it did (though slowly). Regardless, my data suggest that the pilot was primarily a tool to disperse queues and disappear them from public view. Rather than using batons and gas (as had been used to disperse crowds under the previous asylum system; see Cabot, 2014; Statewatch, 2012), Stavropoulou's Asylum Service decided that a digital queue was the answer. This served to invisibilize queues, most of the people waiting in them, and the pressures they formed. Panagiotis further contextualized the Asylum Service's decision to pilot a digital system of pre-registration:

> "We had to put in place a system that would regulate the inflow. And that was basically what lay behind it [the Skype pilot]...it was totally imperfect, nobody disagrees with that. Now having said that, it did regulate entry and also it meant that we didn't have security problems. But also, and remarkably, we didn't have any corruption issues, which was the most important risk."

The above accounts shine light on an otherwise obscure origin story, illuminating how the introduction of Skype into the Greek asylum procedure was influenced by concerns regarding large queues. Digitalization presented a pressure valve for the Asylum Service in response to both logistical and reputational pressures in a time of high institutional stakes for the newly-created Asylum Service. Interestingly, Panagiotis criticizes the Skype system as flawed, a criticism he suggests was shared across the Asylum Service ("nobody disagrees"). He characterizes the Skype pilot as a gatekeeper and a means of controlling

crowds. The Skype pilot emerges as a tool of bureaucratic management and a security-oriented technology of population control.

When I asked if the Skype pilot was meant to continue indefinitely or if it was conceived as a short-term fix to an exceptional situation, my informants confirmed that the pilot was indeed intended to be temporary. Panagotis said:

> "It was never designed to be forever. It was designed as a stop-gap measure in the beginning when it was clear that the security risks were becoming so serious that the alternative would have been to shut down the Service. And that would have been the ultimate, it would have been bad for the refugees, but it would have been worse for the Asylum Service."

This digital intervention was experimental. According to Petraki, Stavropoulou "decided to 'test' Skype to avoid overcrowding outside the Asylum Service premises." She explained that "a small area with a screen and two chairs was created. One for the office's employees and two for the interpreters depending on the language planned on that day and time. A weekly schedule with available slots in Arabic, Farsi, English, French, Urdu was drafted."

This reveals an ad hoc style of governance in which technologies are deployed without protocol. My interviewees explained that the idea of using Skype was suggested in passing while trying to find emergency solutions to eliminate queues, and that the pilot was designed in a makeshift and impromptu way. For this reason, Aradau (2022) describes the Greek Asylum Service's implementation of the Skype pilot as an example of "experimentality" whereby social and political pressures are governed through experiments that lack protocol. Building upon scholarship that documents the centrality of improvisation and bricolage to border enforcement (Bourne et al., 2015; Eule et al., 2019; Rozakou, 2017; Sciortino, 2004; Walters, 2015), Aradau situates the Skype pilot (and the eventual Skype procedure) in relation to a wider proliferation of mundane digital devices used experimentally within borderzones. Quoting De Genova (2017, p. 24) she notes that European borders present a "remarkable site of unprecedented

experimentation and improvisation, a transnational and intercontinental laboratory for the regimentation and subordination of human powers and freedoms."

The interview material presented above substantiates how experimental rationalities shaped the deployment of Skype technology in Greece. This turned the mainland Greek asylum procedure into what Tazzioli (2019) calls the "Greek migration laboratory," where the relationship between asylum applicants and the state are restructured in untested and uncontrolled ways. Olwig et al. (2020, p. 6) note that border technologies are often deployed in illogical and "unstable assemblage[s]" marked by the "absence of an efficient, coherent master plan." The design and governance of the Skype pilot can be similarly characterized.

3.4 The Skype Border: Invisibility and Distance

Recall Apostolos' words: "What do people think about the public authority where you see hundreds or thousands of people queuing outside to lodge an application?" Many GAS workers expressed this same sentiment (both on and off the record). Their testimonies suggest that the key consideration in the decision to digitalize asylum pre-registration in Greece, and in the design of the Skype procedure broadly, was the removal of queues from the public eye. In other words, the insertion of Skype within the asylum procedure served a key function of governance by rendering invisible those whose visibility threatened institutional credibility.

The Skype procedure continues to perform this role, though in a different context. The individuals I spoke with at GAS expressed a shared awareness that the Skype procedure restricts access to asylum, and that it structures distance between the state and those seeking to make claims upon it. Melina,[45] who worked at GAS from 2015 to 2017, said:

[45] Melina is a pseudonym.

> "I don't really want to judge it but I might do. I know that it wasn't working. I know that it was not working. I know that there were workers and interpreters working there, I know that for sure, I'm not saying they weren't working, but the whole system doesn't work properly."

As we discussed further, Melina explained that while employed at GAS, she became convinced that the Skype procedure existed to shift the organization from "protecting asylum seekers' rights to ignoring them and stopping them from having a legal and decent procedure." She told me that within GAS, it is "not a secret" that the Skype procedure obstructs access to asylum, and that staffers were instructed not to engage with or register asylum applicants who could not get appointments on Skype. Elias,[46] who works in one of the Athens-based Asylum Service offices, told me that he's considered filing a report detailing exactly how the Skype procedure obstructs access to asylum, but "if I wrote to my supervisor and Asylum Service leadership that people can almost never access the asylum procedure through Skype, they'd all laugh and say 'In what world does he live? Does he live under a rock? Did he not know this already? Is he silly?'"

Melina, Elias, and several other colleagues I interviewed viewed the digitalized procedure as a means of hiding or ignoring asylum seekers.[47] Elias told me that "the only thing I can think of is that it's on purpose…sometimes I think the [Skype] system is designed like this on purpose, that the goal is deterrence." These sentiments mirror those of the police officers Rozakou (2017) interviewed who characterized nonrecording practices on Lesvos in 2015 as "a deliberate strategy of the state" (p. 37).

[46] Elias is a pseudonym.

[47] Not all of the GAS staffers felt this way, though. Several of the individuals I spoke with acknowledged the Skype procedure's inadequacies but accepted them as necessary. "If you don't have Skype, what [do] you have?" asked Artemis. "You have queues, lines of people waiting from four in the morning waiting, or even people sleeping in the pavements waiting to catch a place. I don't know, you should not be in a position to lose your dignity in order to apply for asylum."A former Asylum Service staffer who asked to remain anonymous explained that the Asylum Service continues to "use the Skype although it is not working because it is the least worst scenario. Otherwise the refugees would wait in the line for hours." These comments focus only on the harms that can be seen or experienced in person, erasing digital harms and the violence that can occur while "wait[ing] in the line for hours" online.

NGO workers and civil servants shared similar opinions of the Skype procedure. Spiros Apergis, a Greek lawyer specializing in refugee law who previously chaired the Greek chapter of Amnesty International and sat on the GAS appeals committee, expressed[48] his deep concern with what he considers an intentionally restrictive design of the digitalized system. Apergis sits on the (Greek) National Committee for Human Rights while working also in support of the European Asylum Support Office (now EUAA), and explained that he believes that the Skype procedure exists not in spite of its nonrecording effects, but because of them. "I think it's their policy to do that," he told me over the phone. "They [the Greek government] don't want so easy access to the asylum procedure. That's why they keep this system as the main system of access of asylum seekers to the Asylum Service." FORGE co-founder Ale Cábez agreed, telling me that "if it were for Europe's convenience, the registration system should be better, because they would want people to be registered in Greece to be able to trace them. Hundred percent. But that's not convenient for Greece."

These sentiments were echoed by every NGO staffer I interviewed in Athens. There is a wide consensus in the NGO space, as well as some consensus among people I spoke with at GAS, that it is convenient for Greece to disappear asylum seekers by directing them to an unresponsive digital platform where they will remain out of view, illegible, and outside the realm of state responsibility. Nonrecording here emerges as a digitally mediated tool of statecraft. The notion of nonrecording (or selectively restrictive recording) is not novel; several scholars explore how states strategically 'look away' to produce illegibility as a project of statehood (Brandt, 2018; Gandhi, 2017; Kalir and van Schendel, 2017; Rozakou, 2017; Vrăbiescu, 2017). Recording has been described as a "double-edged sword in the hands of states" (Kalir and van Schendel, 2017, p. 2), one that provides both increased legibility as well as accountability for the people or matters that legibility reveals. In other words, "comprehensive legibility is not always desired by state

[48] Spiros Apergis spoke to me in his capacity as a lawyer, sharing personal opinions that are his own and are reflective only of his experience; his comments are not reflective of the view of Amnesty International, the National Committee for Human Rights, EASO/EUAA, or any other organization with which he is affiliated.

administrators" (Brandt, 2018, p. 10). As such, processes of nonrecording can be motivated by "the goal of not intervening" (Razon, 2017, p. 60).[49]

Rozakou (2017) argues that states are "far from the guarantors and promoters of idealized regularity," and that "irregular bureaucracies and counterfeit recording are ways of producing the state effect" (p. 45). In the Greek context she studied, nonrecording practices facilitated onward migration. Officials chose not to record fingerprints or instead issued documentation that included faulty/incomplete information, allowing border crossers to leave the country and continue on their journeys. Rozakou suggests that these practices constituted a "politics of invisibility" enacted by the state whereby the government intentionally turned a blind eye to border crossers and thus facilitated their onward movement, making "border crossers disappear" (p. 42). The Skype procedure also makes border crossers disappear, but in a very different way. The digitalized procedure does not make people disappear from the country, but rather from the country's scope of responsibility.

The notion of nonrecording may not be novel, but the deployment of digital bordering technologies for the purpose of nonrecording is;[50] border technologies are almost universally understood as tools of visibility and hyper recording (Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020; Mahmoudi, 2020; Madörin, 2020).

[49] States often use legal and bureaucratic means to avoid responsibility and the people they are responsible for. In the 1990s and 2000s, successive Greek governments adopted several strategies to shirk the legal responsibility assigned by the Dublin Regulations and other EU laws. Triandafyllidou (2014) details how Greek governments on different sides of the aisle passed reforms throughout the 1990s and 2000s to transpose EU directives into law so as to satisfy their obligations as a member state, but nonetheless obstructed implementation in protest of a legal system they perceived as prioritizing the interests of member states that lack external borders at the expense of frontline countries like Greece, Italy, and Spain. Micinsky (2022) notes that at the height of the so-called "refugee crisis," the Greek government deliberately slowed its construction of refugee camps to discourage permanence and encourage border crossers to continue onward into Europe, while Greek officials refused to fingerprint border crossers, "essentially circumventing the Dublin system so those migrants would not be later returned to Greece" (p. 43). Put simply, "because implementing Dublin was never in Greece's interests, they [Greece] had no incentive to build a strong migration state capacity" (Micinsky, 2022, pp. 27–28).

[50] For an exception, see Aradau (2017).

However, in this case, the insertion of digital technology into the asylum procedure conditions illegibility, allowing Greece to hide itself from asylum applicants while hiding asylum applicants from view. The digital nature of the Skype procedure both eliminates people from view and erases them in the eyes of the state. For example, while interviewing Notis Mitarachi, the then Minister of Migration and Asylum, I asked about asylum applicants on the mainland who are unable to access the asylum procedure. He replied: "We're not aware of any group that hasn't pre-registered on the mainland. Everyone who is on the land are registered and are in queues for interviews, so we don't consider that there is an issue."

The Minister's response is illuminating. My data suggests that the existence of a large number of people unable to access the asylum procedure is well known within the Asylum Service, yet the Minister of Migration claims that no such group exists. This disconnect can be interpreted through the politics of invisibility Rozakou mentioned: those who are not recorded through the Skype procedure are cast aside and denied recognition of existence in alignment with political aims. As Kalir and van Schendel write (2017, p. 2), nonrecording allows states to "disregard, outsource, desert, expel, sanction, exploit, or victimize nonrecorded subjects." Through the Skype procedure, asylum applicants are disregarded and deserted, trapped in a digital limbo of unanswered calls.

The analysis now proposes a new vocabulary through which to understand this bordering event. The Skype procedure, I argue, should be considered a novel form of the obstructive practice and rights violation known as a *pushback*.

3.5 Physical Pushbacks

In recent years, civil society actors and scholars alike have paid increasing attention to instances of individual and/or collective expulsion whereby migrants and asylum seekers are forced out over national or maritime borders without assessment of their individual needs or the ability to apply for asylum.

Though not a new phenomenon, these practices, referred to as 'pushbacks,' have escalated in scale and intensity at the EU's external borders[51] (Stefan and Cortinovis, 2021); working in Italy, Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary, for example, the Border Violence Monitoring Network identified 1,247 people affected by pushbacks in 2017, and 6,046 in 2020, with a total of 12,654 pushback survivors recorded between 2017 and 2020 (BVMN, 2020, p. 12 V1).

Pushbacks occur outside of legal protocols or frameworks. The forced returns are coordinated but informal and without due process (Kogovšek Šalamon, 2020; Koka and Veshi, 2020; Spryszak, 2019). Scholars and human rights monitors agree that pushbacks are not rare or isolated incidents, but a systematic and increasingly preferred method of migration management (Drakopoulou et al., 2020; Koka and Veshi, 2020; Koros, 2021). As Davies et al. (2022, p. 1) write: "From the treacherous waters south of Malta, to the land borders of Croatia, Hungary, and Poland; and from Ceuta in North Africa to the Turkey–Greece frontier, the "pushback" has become a dominant strategy adopted by EU states to illegally reject unwanted—and racialized—asylum seekers."

The term pushback is used widely in academic, policy, and activist spaces, but it lacks rigorous theorization (Augustova et al., 2023). It additionally lacks a universally agreed upon definition, though there is general convergence between supranational actors, civil society actors, and academics who deploy the term. For example, in a Human Rights Council report, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants Felipe González Morales defines pushbacks as various measures taken by states and/or non-state actors "which result in migrants, including asylum seekers, being summarily forced back, without an individual assessment of their human rights protection needs, to the country or territory, or to sea, whether it be territorial waters or international waters, from where they attempted to cross or crossed an

[51] This analysis focuses on pushbacks occurring within Greece in the context of the European Union's border regime, but pushbacks are not a European phenomenon and occur in many border contexts. See Yesmin (2016) for consideration of pushbacks enacted by Bangladesh and Thailand against Rohingya refugees.

international border" (González Morales, 2021, p. 4). The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights defines pushbacks as "a set of state measures by which refugees and migrants are forced back over a border – generally immediately after they crossed it – without consideration of their individual circumstances and without any possibility to apply for asylum or to put forward arguments against the measures taken" (ECCHR, n.d.).

A joint report by Oxfam, the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, and the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association considers pushbacks "the practice by authorities of preventing people from seeking protection on their territory by forcibly returning them to another country. By pushing back those seeking safety and dignity over a border, states abdicate responsibility for examining their individual cases" (Oxfam International, 2017, p. 4). In its 1,500 page long *Black Book of Pushbacks*, the Border Violence Monitoring Network says simply that pushbacks occur when "POM [people on the move] are forced back over borders without being afforded the opportunity to apply for asylum" (BVMN, 2022, p. 8).

Academics conceptualize pushbacks in similar ways. Kogovšek Šalamon (2020, p. 144) defines pushbacks as "informal collective forced returns of people who irregularly enter the country back to the country they entered from, via procedures that take place outside legally defined rules in protocols or agreements signed by the neighbouring countries," while Stefan and Cortinovis (2021, p. 180) use the term to describe "practices of refusal of entry at the border as well as expulsions of individuals from a state territory without an assessment of their personal protection needs and with disregard for basic procedural guarantees." Bužinkić and Avon (2020, p. 158) conflate pushback with expulsion and "forcible return," while Koros (2021) uses pushback interchangeably with "illegal refoulments" and "removal." Central to each of these deployments of the term is the notion of territorial expulsion (or refused entry) and denial of access to the asylum procedure, with a clear movement of people from one nation to another.

As conceptualized in extant literature and advocacy, pushbacks signify relational trajectories between two or more territories: they require both somewhere to be pushed from and somewhere to be pushed to. The 'from' and the 'to' differ in each specific case. For example, the pushback may occur from Croatia to Serbia, from Italy to Bosnia, from Greece to Turkey, or may be part of a "chain pushback" in which various states coordinate refoulement, such as if a person is pushed, for example, from Slovenia to Croatia, and from Croatia immediately to Bosnia (BVMN, 2020, p. 12). The subgeographies of pushbacks also vary. Pushbacks occur at the immediate land border, at various locations inland, and on the sea. As Spryszak (2019, p. 292) writes: "Reported pushbacks concern actions toward migrants who have clearly crossed the border and find themselves inland, but also toward migrants who are present near or at the border, attempting to cross it."

Testimonies from pushback survivors and human rights monitors highlight the diversity of location, tactic, and actors involved (BVMN, 2020; Hayes and Vermeulen, 2012; Koka and Veshi, 2020; Spryszak, 2019). Pushback practices include (but are not limited to):

- Abduction and transport in unmarked vans that drive across a border;
- Abduction, detention (in police stations or warehouses), and transportation in police, army, or unmarked vehicles;
- Forced marching across a border (often after shoes and clothes have been stripped or burned);
- Apprehension at a border and refusal of entry;
- Apprehension at a refugee camp, forced boarding of vehicles, theft of clothes and belongings, physical violence; forced boarding of dinghies that are ferried to across rivers (for example, across the Evros river from Greece to Turkey);
- Seizure of boat engines and/or piercing of rubber boats that are subsequently abandoned without means of navigation and positioned to drift into another state's territorial waters, interception of

vessels and ferrying back to the port of origin, physical assault/beating, theft of belongings, detention on a ferry, return to port of origin.

The actors who execute the pushbacks include national police, military personnel, Coast Guards, vigilante groups, Frontex, and, increasingly, asylum applicants or migrants to whom the driving of vehicles is outsourced (it is unclear the extent to which coercion is involved) (BVMN, 2020). Almost all pushback testimonies include some combination of graphic accounts of physical violence, sexual violence, verbal abuse and mockery, physical confinement, theft or destruction of belongings, and humiliation (ie. being made to cross a border in a state of undress or completely naked, being made to watch officials burn their clothes and destroy their belongings, not having access to bathrooms, not having access to interpreters, forced signing of documents written in languages they do not understand, etc.). Testimonies and relevant scholarship reveal techniques that are designed to be cruel and dehumanizing, with physical and psychological degradation deeply ingrained in pushback practices (BVMN 2020; Davies et al., 2022; Koka and Veshi, 2020).

Pushbacks are widely (and thus far, exclusively) conceptualized in terms of physical confrontation, territorial expulsion, demeaning attacks, and excessive force. Below I argue the utility in expanding existing understandings of pushbacks to account for digitally mediated forms of exclusion and expulsion that occur within territorial bounds.

3.6 From Physical to Digital Pushbacks

The increased deployment of digital technologies within bordering regimes signals a new kind of pushback practice in terms of technique, form, and geography. I propose the term *digital pushback*, by which I refer to digitally mediated measures taken by states to create distance (symbolic or otherwise) between the receiving state and border crossers, *de facto* forcing migrants and asylum seekers outside of

the nation state and the realm of social, legal, and political inclusion even if they remain within that state's borders.

In direct opposition to existing frameworks, I posit that pushbacks can and do occur within the boundaries of a nation state, and that digitally mediated abandonment constitutes a systemic manifestation of state violence that not only can be understood, but must be understood, as a novel form of pushback. This has analytical utility and increasing urgency given the proliferation of digitalized "technologies of expulsion" which operate to obstruct access to rights for migrants and asylum applicants (Tazzioli, 2023, p. 6).[52] It thus helps render legible the invisible internal expulsions that occur through virtual means.

This theoretical expansion unsettles the epistemological primacy of the physical border, which is necessary when studying processes of governance that are increasingly digitalized. In only recognizing pushbacks that result in the crossing of national or maritime borders, scholars reify territorial boundaries and the nation state as the singular arena in which people can be denied access to asylum and mobility. The existing territorially-bound scope of pushbacks does not fully account for the inland encroachment of migration control and risks eliding the lived reality of asylum applicants who experience symbolic, political, and legal expulsion from a nation state while remaining physically present within it. A wider understanding of pushbacks sensitive to the dynamics of digital bordering can illuminate how power, space, and time are wielded and reconfigured by technology.

The impetus to conceptually innovate upon the term pushback stems from an evolving landscape of digital bordering as well as risks of epistemological violence and missed opportunity: what knowledge remains hidden so long as the term pushback is chained to physical borders? There is both normative and

[52] My research heeds Tazzioli's (2023) call to "investigate the assemblages of routinised low-tech technologies" (p. 7).

intellectual value in challenging a core assumption hidden in the word pushback itself, that pushback practices inherently push people back to the territory (or territories) from which they came. Implied in the word pushback is the word "to;" people are not just pushed, they are pushed somewhere else. Conceptualizing pushbacks that occur entirely within a nation state allows for the possibility of a more robust analytic focused not on the word "to" but instead on the word "from." From what are people pushed? Through which means are they pushed, and what occurs when those means are digitalized? What does it mean to be pushed from as opposed to pushed to?

The following chapters attempt to answer these questions by focusing on the case of Skype in Greece. On the most basic level, I posit that by obstructing the ability to apply for asylum in Greece and minimizing the public presence of asylum applicants on Greek territory, the Greek Asylum Service uses Skype to shape a bordering event whose lived realities and political functions mirror those shaped by physical pushbacks. Further I display how confinement, distance, and disorientation are central to the functioning of digital pushbacks. The digitalized system of (non)recording allows the state to distance itself from those seeking to make claims upon it. As the following chapters explore, applicants who cannot get through on Skype are physically turned away from the Asylum Service and from inclusion in Greece. Without pre-registration, they are turned away from hospitals, pharmacies, housing projects, employment opportunities, public space, and other places they seek access to. They are made to disappear.

In this way, the Skype procedure mirrors traditional pushbacks, effectively expelling people from Greek territory by expelling them from public space. Though they remain on Greek soil, asylum applicants cannot actually access Greek territory, at least not fully or meaningfully. People who call unsuccessfully on Skype have not been physically pushed out, but they have been pushed back: pushed back from the asylum system, pushed back from inclusion in Greek systems of social protection and welfare, and pushed back from Greek territory. Their ability to access asylum and Greek territory is extremely limited,

although they reside on Greek soil. In other words, those who call on Skype without reply are "situated within and outside" of Greece (Coutin, 2000, p. 27). It is the element of "outside" that I am interested in. What does it mean for digital forces to hold someone outside of a nation state regardless of their physical presence within it? Conceptualizing digital forms of pushback practices provides a toolkit for approaching this question.

I expect that my argument will receive, for lack of better words, pushback. The Skype procedure does not seemingly fit under the umbrella of violence that comprises physical pushbacks; it is marked not by confrontation but avoidance, and the entire procedure usually takes place away from territorial or maritime borders. In stark contrast to physical pushbacks, the violence of the Skype procedure is levied from a distance. There are no human actors present to transport, taunt, or physically attack asylum applicants.

The biggest difference, of course, is the territorial and spatial elements of pushbacks. The Skype procedure takes place on a digital plane, and does not directly result in physical removal from Greece. The ultimate aim of physical pushbacks is to remove people from a given nation state or territory, whereas with the Skype procedure, the majority of individuals engaging with it remain in Greece (except for those who choose themselves to leave through illicit means). The nature, form, and function of physical pushbacks differ immensely from that of the Skype procedure. The intentionality of each bordering technique also differs, at least according to available evidence. Whereas physical pushbacks exist for the sole purpose of expulsion, the Skype procedure cannot be thus reduced by even its most cynical critic. Lastly, some might argue that the obstructions of the Skype procedure cannot qualify as a pushback because they do not result in territorial expulsion and because individuals whose calls have not yet received reply might eventually receive reply, meaning that access to asylum has not been denied but rather delayed.

These crucial differences notwithstanding, I argue that the Skype procedure must be considered a form of pushback. Though there are vast differences between pushbacks (as they are presently conceptualized) and the Skype procedure, there are also striking similarities in terms of implication and lived experience. With recognition of these shared traits, I contend that the lens of digital pushback helps articulate the bordering power exhibited by the Skype procedure. By approaching the Skype procedure as a pushback, I advocate for a broader definition of pushbacks that centers notions of visibility and disappearance rather than territorial expulsion. This recognizes a greater diversity of violence, a wider range of actors involved, and a more complicated pushback geography relevant to settings of digital bordering. And in conceptualizing the Skype procedure as a digital pushback (as opposed to simply a pushback) I highlight the ability of digital technologies to invisibilize and hold people at distance from their rights and the land they reside upon. Whereas physical pushbacks focus on expulsion, the digital pushback proposed in this chapter focuses on erasure. Digital pushbacks operate with indirect violence, erecting borders that extend far beyond the devices from which they spawn.

3.7 Digital Pushbacks and Digital Bordering

As explained in Chapter 1, the Skype procedure is hardly the only instance in which states employ technology to govern borders or the people who cross them. In most cases, however, technology is employed to make border crossers legible. For some asylum seekers in Greece, the Skype procedure operates much like other digitalized borders do, initiating (or reinitiating) a process of visibility and data collection.[53] If an asylum seeker's call is answered by the Asylum Service, the short call consists of the applicant providing basic demographic information (ie. full name, date of birth, place of birth, father's name, mother's name, cell phone number, location of residence), before being instructed to switch on

[53] The Skype procedure also operates like other borders in terms of articulating a process of national and racial exclusion that is unequally distributed. At the most basic level, this is evident in the different number of hours allotted to different languages, and thus, different nationalities.

their camera and ensure their face is well-lit so the Asylum Service staffer can take a screenshot. This photograph is used for verification purposes at the full-registration appointment. At this point, the applicant has completed pre-registration, a step of the Greek asylum process that centers on visibility and data collection. Answered Skype calls commence a deepening of legibility, since following the initial collection of data in the pre-registration stage, applicants attend a full-registration appointment in which the Greek Asylum Service takes biometric information and issues a state-issued temporary identification card.

For the majority of applicants, however, this process never actually begins. As mentioned previously, the Skype calls regularly ring and ring and ring without reply: 99.9% of calls I observed during fieldwork went unanswered. Without reply on Skype, would-be asylum applicants "join the ranks of the unknown and unregistered" (Møhl, 2019, p. 116). While the government may have recorded their entry into Greece on the islands or a land border, the state no longer knows where they are. The Skype procedure does not map neatly onto trends that Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty (2020, p. 607) call *data craving*, whereby governments and private actors act upon an "intense desire for the extraction, storage and processing of different forms of data about displaced persons." Nor can it be read through frameworks of detection or en-route deterrence.

In other words, the Skype procedure, for the majority of people attempting to make claims through it, is not a primarily extractive technology;[54] it does not turn their bodies, identities, or movements into quantifiable data that can be stored, sold, and surveilled. More often than not, people who call are ignored, and their registration attempts do not leave a digital footprint beyond the record of missed calls on the Asylum Service Skype accounts. Most commonly in digitalized spaces of care or control, "refugees

[54] See Aradau 2022 for consideration of how the Skype procedure may extract surplus data from those whose calls are answered.

become datified, made legible as digital data, in order to be made governable," (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020) but in this case, the opposite happens. The majority of people who engage with the Skype procedure do not encounter "invisible infrastructures of data extraction and circulation" (Tazzioli, 2022a, p. 73), yet invisibility shines through nonetheless as key to the governance of the asylum procedure and experience of engaging with it.

Focusing on the digital rendering of illegibility allows for more nuanced readings of the ways in which states operationalize digital technology to govern borders and border crossers. Although this specific usage of technology seems contrary to existing literature on digital bordering, its effects map on closely to global trends of border enforcement. Although it is less common for technology to render migrant populations invisible (as opposed to visible, interceptable, and governable),[55] it is extremely common for governments to disappear migrant populations. For example, states and supranational bodies (such as the EU) increasingly embrace the externalization and offshoring of asylum (Mountz, 2020) through visa policy, offshore processing centers (Amnesty International, 2016), offshore detention centers (Morris, 2022), private outsourcing (Menz, 2011), quarantine ships (Giacomelli and Walker, 2022; Jerrems et al., 2023), and other means. Territorial expulsion and removal from public view are central to these practices.

As Ghezelbash (2022) explains, externalization policies allow governments to "ensure the invisibility of the human impact and harm of hard-line migration policies…one of the central rationales behind governments' use of externalization policies is that it allows asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants to be dealt with in geographically remote locations where independent oversight is difficult or impossible" (Ghezelbash, 2022, pp. 3, 5). Davies et al. (2021, p. 2317) concur, writing that the offshore is "imagined as an invisible space, elsewhere, out of sight, somewhere in which normal rules do not count,

[55] Note, however, that physical pushback practices increasingly deploy technology in attempts of detection and repulsion. Examples include drones, sensors, unmanned aerial vehicles, wave machines, and more.

where undesirable people can be placed...into ambiguous and indefinite forms of abandonment." In the context of Skype, digital space mirrors offshore space, keeping asylum applicants hidden and at distance from the state and its services.

This chapter demonstrates that digital means of rendering populations illegible should be considered forms of bordering precisely because of—and not in spite of —their nonrecording effects. From institutionalized policies of offshoring and externalization to extralegal physical pushbacks, states are finding novel ways to remove unwanted asylum applicants from their territories and public sight.[56] Digital pushbacks join this lineage, even though they do not physically remove people from territory. With traditional forms of offshoring or externalization, governments create spatial locations designed to hide people from the public gaze and sidestep human rights obligations (Ghezelbash, 2022), and with the Skype procedure, digital means are employed to a similar effect. By directing applicants to go away and call on Skype, the Greek government constructs a digital elsewhere to send its undesirables, moving applicants from outside Asylum Service gates to an invisible digital queue they will unlikely reach the front of. "The digital" emerges both as a technology of control and a discreet space, in the sense that it facilitates governance while creating new geographies of abandonment. If, as Davies et al. (2021, p. 2320) suggest, offshore space should be considered alongside "the colony (Mbembe 2003), the plantation (McKittrick 2011), and the camp (Davies and Isakjee 2019) as vital topographies" of racialized neglect and control, then digital spaces of abandonment merit similar consideration.

The remainder of the dissertation grants this consideration in detail. In Chapter 4, I further develop the concept of digital pushback by interrogating how asylum applicants encounter pushback effects within and beyond the Skype call space; in tracing the geographies of exclusion drawn by the Skype procedure, I

[56] At times, this territorial removal is only partial, such as in the case of recent British plans to "house" (detain) 500 male asylum seekers on a barge off of the British coast (BBC, 2023). The offshore is not always far offshore. Sometimes it is, though, as evidenced by the British government's plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing and potential resettlement.

reveal the centrality of affective violence to digital pushbacks. In Chapter 5, I consider digital pushbacks in relation to digital bureaucracy, considering how the Skype procedure structures illegibility while itself remaining illegible. In Chapter 6, I consider the ways in which asylum applicants push back on the digital pushback, arguing that digital pushbacks are not wholly dominating practices that remove all forms of migrant agency. Taken together, these chapters explore how the Skype procedure is employed, experienced, and resisted as a pushback tactic.

3.8 Conclusion

Existing literature on the role and impact of digital technologies in the bordering space focuses almost exclusively on hypervisibility and efforts to make border crossers legible either as bodies to be expelled, surveilled, or datafied. This chapter focused on a largely underexplored aspect of digital bordering, asking what it means for digital bordering techniques to render asylum applicants invisible rather than visible. The chapter argued that nonrecording can be a vital function of digitalized border regimes, with digitally mediated state violence occurring through nonattendance and nonrecognition.

Invisibility is central to the logic and governance of the Skype procedure. Analysis of interview material sourced from individuals involved in the early operation of the Asylum Service reveal that the Skype pilot was designed in large part to disappear asylum seekers from public view. Digitalizing the asylum procedure enabled the Greek state to hide queues and backlogs while structuring distance between the state and those who seek recognition from it. By directing applicants to a largely unresponsive digital platform, the Greek state can ensure that encounters between the Asylum Service and its would-be beneficiaries simply do not occur for most applicants. The Skype procedure renders the Asylum Service, and thus the state, inaccessible. Instead of borders or walls, access to the state is restricted by video call.

This obstructive digital practice has important synergies with pushback practices employed to prevent asylum applicants from stepping foot upon national or supranational territory and applying for asylum. It serves, in essence, to remove an entire population of people existing within a nation state's territory from that state's vision, responsibility, and public space. I argue that digital bordering techniques that deploy nonrecognition to keep people at distance from the state can be understood as pushback practices in terms of the political, spatial, and experiential events they shape. This evolves the notion of pushback from a descriptive term explaining rights violations to a theoretical lens that helps to make sense of diverse practices of bordering.

In particular, I contend that the Skype procedure exhibits as a novel form of pushback I call a digital pushback, which refers to digitally mediated measures taken by states to create distance (symbolic or otherwise) between the receiving state and border crossers, *de facto* forcing migrants and asylum seekers outside of the nation state and the realm of social, legal, and political inclusion even if they remain within that state's borders. This highlights how digital border technologies can restructure the spatial ordering of border crossers, the state, and rights violations. My expansion to the term pushback has analytical and normative utility, moving focus away from physical borders and highlighting the experiences of those who face rights violations akin to those of physical pushback survivors but who still remain within the boundaries of a nation state. This shines light onto those who suffer symbolic and practical expulsion even though they have not been territorially expelled.

Chapter 4
Ghosts Among People: Encountering the Skype Procedure

4.1 Introduction

"*The boat took them halfway across the river and then they were told to get out, including the woman with her baby. The water was up to waist height.*"[57]

"*They told me to undress. While I was taking off my clothes, one of the officers in the room started punching me, telling me to hurry up, but I couldn't hurry because of my body, so he kept hitting me with the [plastic] baton to make me go faster…I was totally naked. Even the officers were laughing at me and one of them—when I was naked—told me to turn and look at the wall and then he kicked my back.*"[58]

"*We arrived at the river and they took us out of the van. And once they took us out they gathered us in a group—taking only the women out from the line – and started beating us with branches…every time we screamed from the pain they beat us more to shut us up.*"[59]

The quotations above are taken from the testimonies of asylum applicants who endured physical pushbacks at Greek borders. Collected by the Border Violence Monitoring Network, these accounts and others help build understanding of how pushbacks are experienced by asylum applicants. They reveal the centrality of brute force and cruelty to the lived experience of physical pushbacks, raising a key question: in the absence of violent altercations at physical borders, what defines the digital pushback experience?

This chapter explores the experience and embodiment of digital pushbacks through the lens of encounter. Following scholars who trace "geographies of encounter" (Andersson et al., 2012; Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018; Koch and Miles, 2021; Valentine, 2008), I analyze moments of contact or confrontation (encounters) between asylum applicants and the Skype procedure, as well as the production, awareness, and contestation of difference resulting from those collisions (Wilson, 2017). The notion of encounter provides a fruitful organizing concept for the chapter as it attunes the reader to the anticipated and unanticipated settings in which asylum applicants are confronted with the Skype procedure, and the ways

[57] BVMN, 2022, p. 660.
[58] BVMN, 2022, p. 573.
[59] BVMN, 2022, p. 633.

in which marginality and exclusion are generated by those encounters. Crucially, the lens of encounter helps elucidate the mechanics and geographies of digital pushbacks, revealing how exactly the Greek Asylum Service uses the Skype procedure to distance, deplete, and desert asylum applicants residing on Greek territory.

The following analysis is organized in terms of expected and unexpected encounters, with expected encounters referring to moments of planned engagement with the Skype procedure, and unexpected encounters referring to moments of unplanned confrontation. Exploring both forms of encounter illuminates the multiple geographies of exclusion that define and extend beyond the Skype call space. Encounters have spatial, temporal, and affective elements (Ahmed, 2000; Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020), and for this reason I trace encounters across the city and the self, interrogating the fixed and unbound sites of struggle that the state generates through its digital pushback.

The chapter begins with analysis of expected encounters with the Skype procedure. Focusing on the act of calling the Asylum Service on Skype, I interrogate the embodiment of waiting for recognition on a digital platform, revealing boredom and isolation as central to the Skype encounter. After exploring Skype call sessions in terms of the embodied, psychological, and sensory realities they structure, I discuss unexpected encounters, tracing three core sites where asylum applicants come into contact with the Skype procedure outside the scope of asylum: healthcare settings, the search for employment, and public space. This allows exploration of the various suspensions maintained by the Skype procedure, outlining how digital bordering techniques can produce destructive realities of exclusion and confinement.

My analysis takes as its starting point the idea that “encounters are unavoidably affective” (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2020, p. 1240). Feminist political geographers note that key to locating the border and understanding its power is interrogating the “intimate spatialities of border enforcement” (Williams,

2019), or the ways in which states mobilize emotion as a tool of governance by transforming intimate spaces into sites of intervention. Attention to the affective resonance of encounters reveals how border actors "use[] emotions to draw and reaffirm an exclusionary geography" (Vammen, 2022, p. 1412). Following Meier (2020, p. 2) and other feminist geographers, this chapter attempts to "look beyond the examinations of everyday borders in terms of access, rights and discourse [since] state machineries are always also circulated and multiplied through affect, emotion and the body."

I argue that affective harm is central to the lived experience of engaging with the Skype procedure: the Greek state executes a digital pushback by conditioning exhaustion while making life increasingly unlivable (Butler, 2004) through digitally structured exclusions. When people call without reply on Skype (at detriment to their mental health) and wait for recognition without access to healthcare, employment, or public space (at detriment to their mental health and physical health), they encounter a multi-sited border that reminds the caller that the Greek state cares neither for nor about them. This makes daily survival increasingly difficult as asylum applicants navigate a psychologically ruinous waiting experience while suspended in conditions of mental and physical decay.[60] Exploring digital pushbacks through the lens of encounter reveals the Skype procedure as a mode of confinement, one that shapes affective experiences of suffocation and shrinking spaces of existence.

4.2 Expected Encounters: Skype Calls

The most common encounter with the Skype procedure is the act of calling the Asylum Service to pre-register. This is obvious of course, but less obvious is what occurs within that digitalized space of entreaty. Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed 32 hours of Skype calls hosted by FORGE for humanity. FORGE is one of a handful of organizations in Athens that holds call sessions for asylum

[60] My analysis is influenced by Berlant's (2007) notion of slow death, which refers to the "physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people…in the space of ordinariness" (pp. 754, 761).

applicants, providing laptops, Skype accounts, internet access, and a designated call space.[61] As the Greek state provides none of these resources, the physical geographies of expected encounters are informal and fluid; asylum applicants make Skype calls from park benches, internet cafes, select NGO offices, their beds (particularly since many of the call hours are in the mornings and early afternoons), their workplaces (such as a restaurant kitchen, recycling plant, orange grove, etc.), friends' apartments, refugee camps, and anywhere with cellular service. The FORGE call center constitutes a physical site of planned encounter (since people come to the NGO for the purpose of engaging with the Skype procedure) as well as a privileged space of observation as a researcher.

The Skype sessions I facilitated each adhered to a similar script. When participants arrived, I sat them in front of laptops carefully configured across the room to maximize social distancing and so that participants could face each other and interact naturally if they so pleased. Calling commenced promptly on the hour that the Skype lines opened or as soon as the participants arrived (if they came late). The sessions ended with similar punctuality sixty minutes later. Each session utilized a minimum of three laptops, and participants often called on their cell phones as well. Every participant had a minimum of one device ringing for them at a time, though depending on how many people attended, I sometimes arranged as many as five devices around one person.

The sessions followed predictable arcs, most clearly because of their likely conclusion and also because the act of calling on Skype is mundane. Individuals attempt to register for asylum simply by pressing the video call button on the Skype application and then pressing the call button again each time the ringing stops and the unanswered call expires. The act is monotonous and tedious. It requires people to engage ad

[61] As mentioned in the methodology chapter, FORGE was looking for a new office when I began my fieldwork, and after it sold its original office, there was no physical space from which to host call sessions. Colleagues at a nearby NGO called ANKAA generously allowed me to hold Skype sessions in their office from October 4–October 29. After this time, I held sessions at the new FORGE office.

nauseam in a simple but repetitious activity. In my sessions, participants averaged 76.3 calls to the Asylum Service per hour.

The sessions were noisy due to the constant ringing. The Skype call tone bounces between two notes for six beats, in sequences of just under four seconds that repeat until the call is answered or terminates without reply. While temporarily holding sessions at ANKAA's office (whose NGO staffers had not previously encountered the Skype procedure in their work) we were often interrupted by people inquiring about the noise. "What are those bells?" asked Hassan, the receptionist, on our first day in the ANKAA office. Shortly later one of the project coordinators, Nikos, popped his head in and said: "You have my sympathies—it sounds like madness!" When he left, I heard ANKAA's Greek language teacher whisper to him: "Did you ever find out what that annoying sound is?" I described the ringing in my fieldnotes:

> The rings are off-sync as people press call at different times, and the unaligned sounds seem to bounce off the walls of the tiny office. It's a constant drone: since we have five devices calling, if one call is ignored and there's a lull before they press call again, other devices are already ringing, which means there is always noise. The sound, while not inherently unpleasant, is annoying, and it takes on the effect of mosquitos buzzing in your ear.

Before analyzing how my participants experienced this soundscape, it is methodologically relevant to note that I witnessed these sounds as both participant and observer, since I sat with my participants and made calls alongside them during sessions, either on my laptop, the FORGE laptops, or both. Often I sat with each hand hovering over different laptops, like a pianist playing melody and chords, ready to refresh the call or swivel the laptop to my nearby participants if the Asylum Service picked up. Though my positionality certainly colored the experience (unanswered calls were annoying, but had no impact on my rights, safety, or livelihood), I nonetheless agree with Lefebvre (2004, p. 21) in positing that in order to understand the rhythmic workings of time, one must "experience the rhythms oneself, through one's own body." As a researcher, I experienced the calling as tedious, tiresome, irritating, and, above all, dull. The act of calling, and the sounds associated with it, took on increasingly negative associations. As my fieldnotes recount from Monday October 4, 2021:

> I just jumped out of the shower and am drying off when suddenly I hear the Skype ringtone: *dun dun dun, dun dun dun.* It's coming from upstairs, and loudly. I gasp and immediately feel a pit in my stomach. I peer at myself in the mirror, and notice that I am cringing. It's a silly sight: half-naked, dripping with water, and looking like I am bracing myself...for what? I hear my grandfather answer the call—a check-in from his friend Michalis—and I immediately feel foolish. I quickly get dressed and pull out my fieldnote journal to record this moment. How is it that such a mundane sound provoked such a negative response? Why do I feel so uneasy? Clearly the Skype sound has taken on adverse associative meanings, which does not surprise me, but what does surprise me is how powerful an embodied response it provoked in me. In the office, I steel myself to it; I am ready for the sound, what it means, and what it will and won't do. But here, in the comfort of my home, it has appeared without warning, and my guard is down. I am embarrassed by how shaken I feel.

Far more important than my own embodied responses to Skype calls are those of my participants. The next section explores the lived experience of calling the Asylum Service on Skype as an asylum applicant, remaining attentive to sensory and affective dynamics of the waiting event.

4.2a The Skype Sessions: Bored and Bordered

Skype call sessions presented a complicated space of observation as they were marked by constant digital sounds as well as human silence: rarely did anyone speak over the rote ringing. I was at first intimidated by this soundscape, and contemplated filling its vocal absence before realizing the silences were organic and therefore revealing.[62] Session after session, I watched my participants stare wordlessly into their screens, towards the walls, or at the floor, and I struggled to characterize what I was observing. Was it a sad silence? A silence of anticipation or nerves? Was it pregnant in any way?

Consideration of body language affords deeper understanding of these silences and what they illuminate about seemingly mundane moments of digitalized bureaucratic waiting. When trying to make sense of lived reality and its ties to wider social structures, critical phenomenologists take note of bodily articulations of experience, such as movement, tension, and stillness (Chandler, 2019; Willen, 2007). During the Skype sessions, I continually observed physical manifestations of boredom and listlessness. At

[62] Fujii (2018, pp. 3–4) notes that active listening requires the researcher to consider "what the interviewee says and leaves unsaid through words, silences, and body language...words can hide just as silences can reveal."

the beginning of each hour, participants sat up straight in their chairs and stared directly into the cameras, ready in case their calls were answered, but as the minutes ticked away, their demeanors changed. With time they were slouching and yawning, pressing call again and again without so much as a glance at the laptops. Often they pulled out (or stopped calling on) their cell phones in order to scroll through Instagram and TikTok. Sometimes they called friends on WhatsApp and chatted away, even walking out mid-session to continue their conversations. By the end of each hour, most participants were staring blankly at the ceiling or walls. Many had their heads down on the table or cradled in their hands. Some had fallen asleep. Fieldnotes written during the Skype sessions highlight these dynamics:

Wednesday September 22, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> Again no one is speaking…that strange noisy silence once more. Joseph looks over at 9:34am to see if the other guys are having more luck than he is: he does a quick scan of their screens. By 9:35am Giv is not looking at his laptop at all anymore; he's playing with his jeans and rummaging through the bag he's brought. He's still calling though, just not looking at the screens, and certainly not acting as if he thinks anyone will pick up. It looks like something he has to do for this hour now, sit here in this chair, and not like something anticipatory. In other words, it seems like *waiting until* instead of *waiting for.* I hear Joseph yawn. No one has talked for about 20 minutes. At 9:37am I hear a sound come from Giv's phone: he's stopped calling on his phone and is watching videos. Alex has stopped too and is doing other stuff on his phone, I can't see what. He steps out for a personal call.

Monday September 28, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> At 9:52am Alex is scrolling on Instagram, Prince Meddo is tracing patterns on the desk with his finger, and Joseph is just staring into the laptop without any expression or focus in his eyes. Prince Meddo lets out a big yawn and stretches. Rody looks over and nods.

Monday October 4, 2021, ANKAA office: Farsi session

> We have four laptops and one phone going now, for two people. Milad is playing on his phone. For one strange moment, the ringing seems to sync. Rafi is looking at his lap, texting. Only Adil is looking at his laptop. Milad falls asleep, and Rafi reaches over to press call again. Milad wakes up and says 'I'm so sorry, I'm falling asleep.'

Scholars show that forced waiting is not only endured, but also embodied (Bissell, 2007; Donà and Meier, 2021; Peteet, 2018; Straughan et al., 2020). The above excerpts show that the Skype waiting event shapes corporeal experience, inscribing onto bordered bodies a mix of emotions commonly found in spaces of

extended waiting: boredom, lethargy, irritation, exhaustion, melancholy, and malaise (Auyero, 2012; Bishop 2013; Vitus, 2010). My participants seemed to be waiting out the hour as opposed to waiting for the Asylum Service, embodying a specific temporal engagement "where one is not waiting for something but rather waiting for something undesirable that has come, like a spell of cold weather or a disliked guest, to end or to go" (Hage, 2009, p. 77). The observed silences and patterns of body language track a depletion of energy and deterioration of focus as my participants waited for each hour to end, contributing to the ennui that marked each Skype session.

When I asked participants how they felt while calling on Skype, they overwhelmingly responded that they felt bored and secondarily that they felt tired and stressed. This highlights the intensifying erosion of comfort that occurs when people are made to wait in contexts of passivity and meaningless uncertainty, an erosion that my participants communicated in verbal and nonverbal ways. In call sessions, this protracted exhaustion[63] was visible on the bodies of my participants and audible in their sighs and yawns, increasingly so as each hour progressed. The Skype procedure emerges as an affective technology that operates, as other asylum techniques do, by "setting up a system of endless discomfort and depletion" (Meier, 2020, p. 1).[64] Boredom is inscribed onto bordered bodies through digital means.

I agree with O'Neill (2017) in positing that "boring space…constitutes an empirically observable field" (p. 16).[65] In the context of Skype call sessions, exhaustion and boredom are more than affective states; they are experiences of bordering, liminality, and confinement. In oppressive settings, boredom is often associated with feelings of powerlessness and being stuck (Vitus, 2010). As O'Neill notes in his study on

[63] My usage of the term exhaustion borrows from Ansems de Vries and Guild (2019), who write of a *politics of exhaustion* (2019, p. 2157) that highlights the "felt effects of the stretching over time of a combination of fractured mobility, daily violence and fundamental uncertainty" (p. 2157).
[64] In many cases, boredom and depletion are not side effects but rather comprise a central strategy of border enforcement. As explained by a deportation officer in Amit and Lindberg's 2020 study on rejected asylum seekers and detention, the goal is "to remove any purpose of life" (p. 253) so as to make life unlivable and encourage people to voluntarily leave the country.
[65] See also Wagner and Finkielsztein, 2021.

homelessness, when boredom is experienced by marginalized people, it "becomes something chronic (rather than passing) and cruel (rather than petty)" (2017, pp. 15–16). My participants largely viewed the Skype call hours as time to be killed, and turned to digital distractions (such as Instagram and TikTok) to mentally escape the nothingness of their immediate present.[66] Consumed with both situational boredom and the wider "dragging of time" (Bishop, 2013, p. 142), they regularly asked "can I please go now?" when each hour neared its close, sounding trapped and desperate to leave. This speaks to how boredom can construct "a cage one is caught in" (Musharbash, 2007, p. 313). Boredom is found, inscribed, and lived in the Skype call space, in ways that my participants experienced as cruel and carceral. This form of affective violence is "boring, humdrum, yet omnipresent" (Graeber, 2012, p. 105).[67]

Clearly the Skype procedure shapes an acute waiting event of slowness and limbo,[68] with effects that bleed beyond the temporal realm and into the psychological (Seitz, 2017). Following critical phenomenological approaches that encourage scholars to "link modalities of sensation, perception and subjectivity to pervasive political arrangements" (Desjarlais, 1997, p. 25; see also Willen, 2007), I approach the emotional exhaustion and depletion observed during call sessions as revealing of how the Greek government's digital pushback operates through technologies of affective control. The following section explores this dynamic, taking a closer look how encounters that are characterized by monotony

[66] Here my participants used digital means to mentally escape a digitally alienating experience. In order to cope with the boredom and exhaustion of calling on Skype, they turned to digital platforms that facilitate stimulation, connectivity, and co-presence, like WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Though spatially and temporally immobilized during Skype call hours, my participants found ways of using technology to make the waiting time less totalitizing.
[67] Boredom is central to this waiting event, but so are other destructive affectivities such as anxiety, panic, and chronic fear. See Vigh (2008) and Beckett (2019).
[68] This waiting event takes place within a wider context of slowness and limbo common to settings of bureaucracy and migration governance around the world (Griffiths, 2014; Lilja et al., 2019; Tuckett, 2018).
It is inaccurate to present the Skype procedure as creating limbo in an otherwise dynamic landscape. The Skype procedure shapes one of many experiences of immobility and stuckedness (Hage, 2009) experienced by asylum applicants in Greece. This waiting event is unique, however, in how it punctuates daily landscapes of waiting with specific hours of heightened waiting (this will be discussed in Chapter 6). While calling on Skype, my participants juggled both situational boredom and existential boredom (Vitus, 2010), grappling with the meaningless tedium of Skype sessions as well as the wider suspensions they shape within a pre-existing context of immobility and boredom.

and exhaustion mold political conditions of slow death.[69] In particular, I explicate the psychological implications of encounters with mundane moments of exclusion.

Scholars highlight the dangers that boredom and uncertainty pose to mental health (Griffiths, 2013; Jeffrey, 2010; Vitus, 2010). As the following analysis explains, these dangers emerged clearly and repeatedly in my research. A critical phenomenology of mental health views mental wellness and mental illness as intersubjective markers of difference that are systematically produced and differentially distributed, as well as lived, embodied, and made meaning of (Lajoie, 2019; Ritunnano, 2022). In this vein, I illuminate the affective harms of encountering the Skype procedure in terms of the "existential, relational, and sensory annihilation" that oppressive systems can generate (Lajoie, 2019, p. 54). I demonstrate that digitalized bureaucracy can not only platform these harms, but seriously intensify them.

4.2b Mental Health Impacts: Psychological Encounter

On a brisk morning in November, I sat with Prince Meddo in front of five devices. He manned two laptops and his cell phone while I operated the others. Instinctively, we lowered the sound on each device to the lowest bar, trying to mitigate the sonic annoyance of five calls ricocheting off each other. After ten minutes of sitting without speaking, Prince Meddo looked up and said: "I want to ask a question. The Skype we are calling, is there someone who is sitting close to the phone?" I paused to refresh the calls. "Yes," I replied. Prince Meddo took a sip of water. "So they can answer whenever they like?" I nodded: "Yes." His face fell, and we fell with it into solemn silence.

No one spoke for the remainder of the hour, though a mutual and unspoken awareness that Prince Meddo's calls were being actively ignored felt present nonetheless. I studied him briefly, noting his

[69] See also Povinelli (2011) for reflection on how political realities of exclusion and abandonment are often experienced through mundane moments of "ordinary suffering" whose violence never "never quite achieve[s] the status of having occurred or taken place" (pp. 13-14). See also Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) on the "geographies of everyday endurance" (p. 156).

expressionless face as he peered into the cameras, his likeness mirrored back on each Skype call. I wondered if he recognized himself in the five floating heads before us. How strange, I thought, to watch your own waiting, your own abandonment. He stared deep into the cameras as I stared at him; perhaps we were both trying to discern what was inside that which we viewed. *What does it feel like*? I wondered. *What is he thinking?*

I didn't have to wait long to find out, because after the session (in which we made 218 calls, five of which were declined and none of which were answered) Prince Meddo shared his thoughts on the Skype procedure. In an hour-long interview, he described deep affective and existential turmoil that he attributed to the digital system:

> S: "Can you help me understand what it feels like to call and call and call and have them not pick up?"
>
> P: "Um...[laughs] it's very stressful. You're calling for something that is very important for your life in the present situation which you are in, and you don't get any answer about it. I feel like I'm left alone, like no one cares about me and nobody wants to help me. You know? Sometimes I just feel like 'Why am I even living in the first place? Why am I even living my life in the first place?' I don't think anybody needs me anymore. So like, a lot of things come up, confused confused, sometimes when I'm calling my head is just banging *bam bam bam bam bam*! I'm stressed, it's stressful, and I'm asking myself this question: Why is everybody just rejecting me like that? What have I done? What is my problem? What is wrong with me? Am I not a human? Am I not supposed to live in any communities? I was living my life very peacefully in my country [Sierra Leone] doing my own business. I'm not a criminal, I'm not a killer, I'm not a drug seller, I'm not a drug addict, I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't even do anything like that."

In explaining his experience of calling on Skype, Prince Meddo looks inwards and speaks in existential registers to connect his personhood and identity to the unanswered calls. His remarks reveal a profound sense of injustice and alienation. The nonattendance of the Asylum Service, as manifest through unanswered calls, makes him question his deservedness as both an asylum seeker and as a human being. His remarks highlight the dehumanizing effects of the Skype procedure, as well as the insult of digitalized systems that force people to become distant "spectators rather than immersed participants in their own legal proceedings" (McKay, 2018, p. 262). He developed these themes further:

> P: "If you are sitting close to a phone and seeing a phone call for the past two to three years, you have been seeing the same call, Prince Meddo, Prince Meddo, Prince Meddo, and you don't pick it: why? Do you have any problem with that person in particular? Do you have any problem with him, or the name? The nationality? The color?"
>
> S: "So it feels like a personal rejection?"
>
> P: "Yes, something like that."

Prince Meddo calls from the same Skype accounts each week, and thus concludes that the Asylum Service (or 'Skype,' as he says) recognizes him but chooses to not answer his calls. These last two words are key: Prince Meddo feels that his calls specifically are ignored (and perhaps the calls of all Sierra Leoneans, or all Black applicants), and that the authority behind the Skype procedure does not view him or his suffering as worthy of recognition, let alone validation. Prince Meddo was not alone in grappling with muddled feelings of rejection and invalidation. Abdul Karim, an asylum applicant from Sierra Leone, expressed similar sentiments:

> A: "We have been calling for the past six months and they do not pick up for one day. So we are tired. Because maybe they don't want to speak to us. Because our number is regular in Skype now, I'm sure they know our number. If you have been calling someone for the past six months, the person should know this number, they should say: '[He calls] every time, let me just pick up so I can know why this person is calling. Maybe it's an emergency.' But they don't do it. They don't pick…you've been calling someone every day, the phone is ringing and the person does not answer. Maybe that person does not want to speak with you."

Momoh, who is also a Sierra Leonean asylum applicant, similarly interpreted unanswered calls as referendums on his deservedness and belonging:

> M: "I'm trying to call them and they are not picking my call. I think that maybe they are done with me, they don't need me in this country no more…they're ignoring me, they are ignoring me because probably they know that people calling through Skype are people with rejections, but they just keep on frustrating me. It's like you don't need me in this country. That's what I feel, that they don't want me in this country."

Prince Meddo, Abdul Karim, and Momoh all experience unanswered Skype calls as painful personal rejections.

An emerging scholarship considers racialized migrant men, masculinity, and the politics of desire. Migrant men are often seen as too brown, too Muslim, or too dangerous for Western partners, and in an intimate realm of their lives, they experience rejection through the digital interface of online dating (Shield, 2019). Here too male migrants receive online rejections (prompting reflection and conjecture as to the reasons for rejection), but instead of their desirability being rejected, their claims to suffering and personhood are rejected.[70] The meanings people give to this rejection can be distilled into a question that was posed to me again and again by different participants: "Is my suffering not enough?"

Most often, their suffering was not, legally speaking, enough. As previously mentioned, individuals who are considered highly vulnerable can, in theory, skip the Skype procedure and register in person. Unaccompanied men traditionally fall outside the humanitarian imaginary of vulnerability (Clark, 2007; Turner, 2016), and in Greece, some men went to great lengths to try and prove that they were in fact vulnerable, going from doctor to doctor asking—and often paying—for diagnoses of a grave disease. One Greek lawyer I interviewed mentioned that some of her clients presented blood from their sick friends as their own at a hospital in order to be considered vulnerable enough to bypass the Skype procedure. In her words:

> "They preferred for their administrative file to have this diagnosis of Hepatitis or HIV, I don't remember which it was, they preferred that to waiting for another month and month and month…they considered it less humiliating than not having any papers and not being able to access work or not being able to access anything, being invisible, not even being able to say 'that's my name' and having papers to be able to say 'that's my name.'"[71]

This testimony speaks to the personal erasure and emotional harm of being ignored in a digitally structured space of nonexistence (Coutin, 2003). Stefan, a 26-year-old from Gambia who received two

[70] The digital alienation shaped by the Skype system highlights a divergence from literature that explores how technology allows migrants to maintain connection with social and familial networks through "digital kin work" (Baldassar 2022, p. 5; Eide, 2019). In this case, technology did not facilitate connectivity. It further entrenched isolation.

[71] For parallels, see Ticktin (2011) on biological involution.

asylum rejections over his five years in Greece, invoked this erosion of self in describing the Skype procedure:

> S: "I don't think it's fair. I have to call and there are no possibilities to reach someone, to be rescued. If we speak of human rights, in my own world I don't believe there is human rights and justice, I don't believe them anymore. I learned them at school and try to understand them, but I see them confused in the world I live today."
>
> SD: "Can you explain that more to me? Why does the Skype system not make you believe in human rights?"
>
> S: "I don't see justice. It's the only place someone can get rescued so they have to answer your call to put you in the system—not to have flying documents or traveling documents— but to be human. Now in my situation, what am I? Goats, dogs, they are better than me. They have something to represent them. I don't have."

Scholars of law and bureaucracy note that engagement with legal systems partially stems from what Butler (1997) describes as a "desire to be beheld by and perhaps also to behold the face of authority" (p. 112). This desire is evident in Stefan's account, as are the dehumanizing elements of attempting to contact state authorities through video technology (Rowden, 2018). Trapped in a digital border space defined by distance and a lack of human connection, Stefan has "no possibilities to reach someone." He calls out for rescue from an online place of spatial, corporeal, and existential isolation, and without reply is left feeling like he is no better than an animal. His wounded words bring to mind Prince Meddo's plea: "Am I not a human? Am I not supposed to live in any communities?"

This waiting event is fundamentally shaped by its digital landscape, which my participants experienced as extremely isolating. This is not unique to the Skype procedure: studies of digitalized migration enforcement have found video call technologies to be alienating to migrant users when employed in legal processes (McKay, 2018; Castañeda, 2019). Interrogating the experience of migrant interactions with authorities over video link, McKay (2018) details the sensorial obliteration video technology can form. "Computer screens flatten our multi-sensorial experience," she explains, adding that video conferences deny natural peripheral vision while making users "distanced, detached and isolated" (p. 256). Rowden

(2015) notes that this may cause remote callers to lose conceptions of place, space, participation, and co-presence, and can be experienced as disorienting and dehumanizing. As she writes, "A whole, warm-blooded, 'live' person is reduced to an audio and visual feed. The rest of the sensory field is denied" (p. 273).

This dynamic is present in these accounts of calling on Skype, revealing the importance of analyzing not only mundane bureaucratic encounters but also the spatial, sensorial, and affective landscapes within which their monotony unfolds. The ethnographic material employed above highlights the double punch of non-recognition occurring within a digital space of alienation, erasure, and dehumanization. Most applicants on Skype are refused recognition and are left to make sense of their reality within a deeply impersonal and isolating digital landscape. As Prince Meddo explained, this digital isolation cuts particularly deep because "sometimes you are really in a situation where you just need someone to talk to," and if trapped in a virtual space that denies co-presence,[72] "maybe you do something bad to yourself."

The Skype service is not designed to provide therapy, of course, but unanswered calls and the "corporeal and spatial segregation" (McKay, 2018, p. 259) that the digital infrastructure mandates make applicants feel alone. They remain "digitally encased on screens" (McKay, 2018, p, 251), staring at their pixelated faces while remaining temporally, legally, and emotionally dependent upon an audience they do not even know will arrive. Prince Meddo continued:

> P: "I don't think I have a future. I don't think of the future. How can I think of the future when I don't even exist? I'm a ghost among people. A ghost among people…I don't exist anywhere in my life."
>
> S: "That must be a horrible feeling, I can't imagine."

[72] I borrow from Goffman (1963, p. 22) to refer to co-presence as a form of virtual togetherness where humans become "accessible, available, and subject to one another." As Bulu (2012, p. 155) writes, co-presence is a primarily psychological experience of meaning making in virtual space consisting of "perceiving others and having a sense of feeling that others were actively perceiving us."

> P: "It's too much for me. Sometimes I hope when I'm crossing the street, a car just hit me up and I die. Maybe it will happen. Sometimes I think of crossing the street at the same time so a car come and hit me. Maybe I will just walk on the streets and I think of something very bad, so maybe, I don't know, maybe I'm on the streets and I don't see the cars, some drivers are very very [aggressive], you know. Sometimes when I cross the street, my mind is not on me. It's far away, and I'm just walking. And sometimes the car will come close and go *beeeeeeeep*, and I'm like 'oh sorry, I was in the street!'"

Prince Meddo notes that at times, his mind is "not on" him. He frequently used this language, explaining that while making Skype calls his mind "leaves" and he just floats. The notion of floating is again invoked when Prince Meddo refers to himself as a ghost, a phantasmic being whom others cannot (or will not) see, one that lives but does not meaningfully exist (see Cabot, 2016). He admits that he struggles with suicidal thoughts and sometimes contemplates stepping in front of oncoming traffic to end his ghost-like life. His account explicates the emotionally and existentially destructive power of the Greek government's digital pushback, as well as its potentially fatal ramifications.

Unsurprisingly, many of my participants cited their encounters with the Skype procedure as fueling mental illness and suicidal ideation. Almost everyone I spoke with described the Skype waiting event as "psychological torture," which is striking given that several of my participants were survivors of physical torture suffered in their home countries (and thus would be unlikely to use the word 'torture' lightly).[73] They universally attributed their mental illnesses and suicidal ideation in part to the digitalized monotony and isolation of calling on Skype. Abdul Karim, who told me he has been unable to sleep at night since starting to call on Skype, said that when someone ignores a person and makes them wait, they are "killing the person slowly." This "killing" can, in some cases, be interpreted literally, as in the instance of individuals who need medical attention but cannot access treatment due to their undocumented status.

[73] Most accounts of physical pushbacks detail psychological and/or physical violence. The Border Violence Monitoring Network, for example, notes that approximately 90% of the pushbacks it recorded in Greece contained "one or more types of torture or ill-treatment" (2020, p. 530). While the Skype procedure does not directly enact physical violence, it does enact psychological violence that may be experienced as a form of torture.

More generally, this killing speaks to a condition of "slow death" (Berlant, 2007) and mental deterioration, one that shines forth in accounts of exhaustion, suicidality, and isolation.

Mojtaba, an asylum applicant from Afghanistan, said that when calling on Skype without reply, he "started feeling cold of my life" and tried to "throw myself from somewhere to harm myself." Momoh told me "I don't see any way that they ['Skype'] can protect me, so I feel the only way sometimes is to commit suicide because my life is hopeless, useless." Moullel, an asylum applicant from Guinea-Conakry, said that receiving no reply on Skype gave him "very bad ideas." He explained:

> M: "Sometimes I think that I can hurt myself because I am desperate of what I am living."
>
> S: "You can hurt yourself?"
>
> M: "Because I'm desperate of what I'm living. Sometimes when I feel a lot of pains, I think of killing myself to finish this life I'm living…I don't go in front, I don't go behind, I'm just in the same spot, so sometimes I think of ending my life so I should not have any problem again."

The sample size of my study is small, but it is notable how frequently my participants implicated their encounters with the Skype procedure in their mental health struggles. Mooslam, an employee of EPAPSY (Ε.Π.Α.Ψ.Υ), a UNHCR partner organization that provides psychosocial support to refugees and asylum seekers, told me in an interview that his office often fields calls from suicidal people who cannot get through on Skype. He told me of a recent call from a young man in Eleonas camp who warned: "I don't have control of myself, I want to do suicide because Skype is not working." Mooslam reported that when people fail to get registered on Skype, they "lose themselves," and call EPAPSY to say, "we get fed up of that [Skype procedure] and we cannot do it and am going to do suicide."[74]

[74] Mooslam explained that in this instance and others, he phoned the police to make sure the caller would not harm themselves, since he is responsible to his bosses at UNHCR to minimize instances of self-harm and suicide. The decision to call the police is complicated by the fact that the police often detain individuals who don't have documents. This exposes a direct tie between the emotional harms shaped by engagement with Skype procedure and carceral outcomes.

It is challenging methodologically to separate the extent to which the suicidal ideation referenced above is informed by the alienating experience of calling the Asylum Service on Skype versus the multiple sociolegal suspensions maintained by obfuscated access to asylum which are experienced by undocumented people broadly.[75] My data strongly support the finding that the tedium, digital isolation, and perceived rejection of the Skype encounter shape psychological harm. However, the Skype procedure is but one technology of control within a wider landscape of forced waiting and precarity, and as such, I do not argue that the Skype procedure is the only—or even the primary—source of affective harm within the Greek migration context. I nonetheless posit that the Skype procedure's digital interface interacts with the monotony and absence it creates to make the Skype encounter particularly psychologically ruinous. It is because of this effect of the digital pushback that people "lose themselves."

Thus far, this chapter has explored how seemingly banal encounters with digitalized bureaucratic systems can structure alienation and internalized rejection, revealing boredom and affective violence as central to the Skype encounter. The encounters, though expected, generated unexpected results for the Skype supplicants: instead of asylum, calling on Skype led to boredom, isolation, alienation from self and others, perceived personal rejection, and suicidality. Due to the structure of the asylum system at the time of my study, if my participants were to apply for asylum, they had to continue engaging with a system that ignored their claims and personhood, with dire implications for their ability to sustain their mental and physical health.

The next section explores unexpected encounters, or the moments and places in which asylum applicants come into contact with the Skype procedure in unplanned and at times surprising ways. Focusing on exclusion from social services and public space, it considers the affective harms and effects of

[75] See, for example, Suarez-Krabbe et al., (2018). Their work, titled "Stop Killing Us Slowly," explores how rejected asylum seekers in Denmark are simultaneously abandoned and trapped, highlighting how state practices can create "mental warfare…[and] suicidal non-citizens" (p. 38).

confinement that the Skype procedure maintains in spaces that do not necessarily involve asylum but nonetheless govern the lives of asylum applicants. It thus traces the physical and affective "intangible internal borders" (Artero and Fontanari, 2021, p. 636) erected by the Greek government's digital pushback.

4.3 Unexpected Encounter: Exclusion from Social Services and Public Space

Asylum applicants encounter the Skype procedure in unexpected places. This is due to the fact that the Skype procedure functionally regulates all aspects of social and political life. During fieldwork, I observed that some applicants call on Skype because they want international protection, but others call because they want documentation and the benefits that flow from legal status (healthcare, employment, accommodation, protection from the police, etc).[76] This mirrors Cabot's (2014) findings that migrants in Greece sought asylum seeker cards (then called "pink cards") for protection from the police and not for asylum itself.

Under Greek law, applicants for international protection are eligible for a number of benefits once they are legally considered asylum seekers: the three main benefits include PAAYPA (healthcare), AFM (tax number), and free internal movement. Since "full registration" officially launches asylum claims, individuals who have not had that appointment cannot access social services or rights. For the vast majority of applicants, the Skype procedure is the only way to receive an appointment for full registration, meaning that without "simple registration" on Skype, "full registration" and the benefits it grants are out of reach. As Ale explained:

> "The fact is that if you don't get registered, your options are pretty limited. You cannot work legally, you do not have access to cash, you cannot apply to any of the housing programs, you basically cannot access anything. Nothing. You are in here by yourself with no help and no way of accessing anything that will make your situation better...[and] there's a fear, because if you are

[76] These desires are not mutually exclusive.

> undocumented, you are at risk of being arrested, and once you get arrested, you don't know how long you're going to be in detention. It can be two months or it can be 18, and you don't know."

Noting the "impossible" access to asylum via Skype, the Greek Council of Refugees stated in a 2016 press release that the digital procedure increases the "risk of arrest and detainment of such interested persons and prevents them from the enjoyment of the appropriate reception conditions (such as access to healthcare, employment, education, etc.)" (GCR, 2016). Efi Stathopoulou, a Greek lawyer who works at Refugee Legal Support, an organization that provides pro bono legal aid to refugees and asylum seekers, similarly highlighted the social services that the Skype procedure both affords and forecloses:

> "Skype is the door, it is the gate, to people accessing rights. Not only applying asylum [sic], which is their fundamental right, but also accessing other benefits as asylum seekers, like accommodation, cash assistance…it's not only an obstacle to claiming asylum as a right to international protection but also to social care, accommodation, social rights, rights to private life."

The imagery of a door is compelling, and equally concerning when considered alongside the fact that most often, the digital pushback slams and bolts the door shut. When individuals call on Skype, they knock and knock until their knuckles bleed, knowing that behind the door stands both the promise of asylum and tangible benefits of life-saving social support.[77]

But where exactly is this door located? Asylum applicants encounter the Skype procedure in unexpected ways and unplanned places, with the geography of encounter extending well beyond the Skype call space. The following sections interrogates these encounters, considering how restricted access to healthcare, the labor market, and free movement shape multiple exclusionary encounters that reverberate across the city and the self.

[77] The Skype procedure joins other policies across Europe that govern inclusion and exclusion through "welfare bordering" (Guentner et al., 2016), a form of governance that allows states struggling to control their external borders to exercise internal bordering practices that restrict access to social rights and welfare provision for those deemed undesirable (see also Misje, 2020).

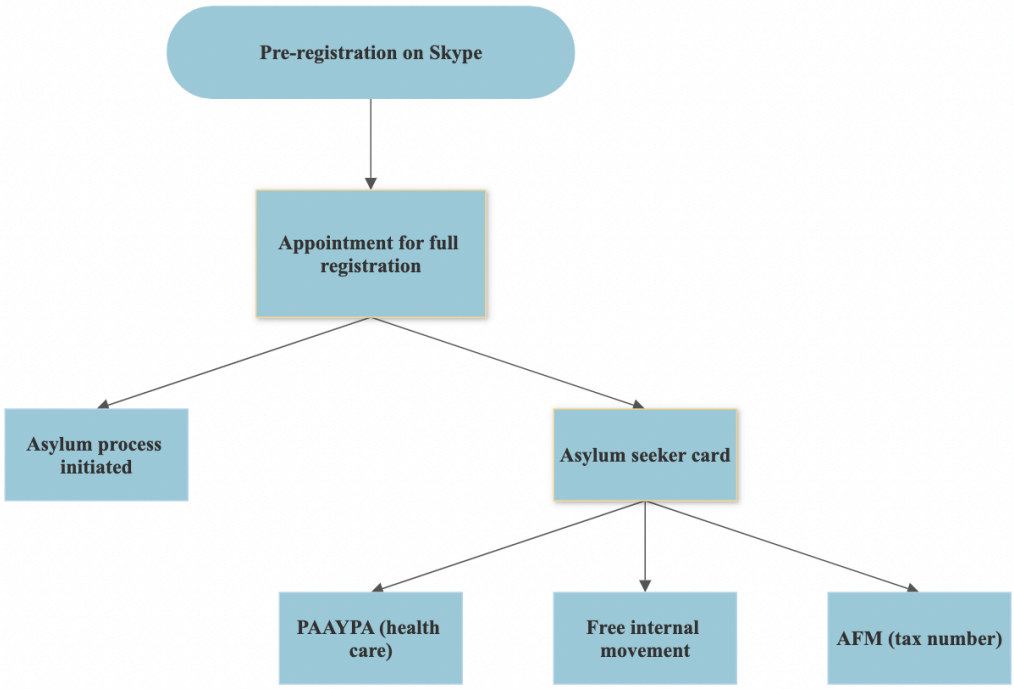


Figure 3: Mapping Pre-Registration and Registration
Graphic by author

4.3a Healthcare

According to Law 4636/2019 Art. 55, applicants for international protection shall receive a temporary insurance and health coverage number called PAAYPA (Προσωρινός Αριθμός Ασφάλισης και Υγειονομικής Περίθαλψης Αλλοδαπού*, or Foreigner's Temporary Insurance and Healthcare Number*), which grants access to public medical and pharmaceutical care as well as temporary social security. This number is a requirement for engagement with the labor market (as stipulated in Law 4368/2016 Art. 33).[78] PAAYPA generates automatically with the lodging of an asylum claim, and is awarded to the beneficiary along with their asylum seeker card, upon which the PAAYPA number is printed. As with the other

[78] These were the relevant regulations at the time of writing/when the Skype procedure was still running.

benefits that come with "full registration," PAAYPA remains active during the examination period of the asylum claim, and is immediately deactivated if the applicant's claim is rejected. If the claim is accepted, PAAYPA stops working after a short time, after which the new beneficiary of international protection must apply for AMKA (a permanent social security number).

In Greece, asylum applicants are routinely refused medical care if they are unable to pre-register on Skype. Under Greek law, undocumented people can in theory receive medical care, but only in situations deemed emergencies and when doctors agree to treat the patient. Medical assistance for conditions that are chronic or not immediately life threatening proves elusive. While in Greece, I heard of frequent requests for assistance from individuals who had been turned away from hospitals while seeking medical help for ailments including Hepatitis B, severe migraines, jaundice, heart disease, gastrointestinal diseases, kidney problems, and broken limbs, among others. I was even told of pregnant women being turned away, some of whom were living on the streets (anecdotally, one woman gave birth to her baby in the hospital, but the medical team refused to give a birth certificate unless the mother paid around 200 euros). Those with medical needs were usually told to go to private clinics, for which they would have to pay out of pocket. Many reported similar treatment at pharmacies.

While interviewing NGO workers across Athens, I learned that case workers frequently reply to requests for medical help by suggesting that the individual "call Skype." Case workers regularly give this advice, as for many asylum applicants, there is no other avenue for accessing medical care beyond registration, other than from medical organizations such as Medical Volunteers International or Médecins Sans Frontières, which are often understaffed and require referrals.

The result is that asylum applicants who seek medical attention encounter not doctors or nurses, but the Skype procedure. Chryssa Mela, the administrator of an information-sharing and migrant referral

organization in Athens, told me over the phone that, "It's weird that the answer to your health problem will be 'call Skype,' because this is your way to get your white card and to get PAAYPA or AMKA." Noam Harris, the project coordinator at Mazí, a housing project for displaced men in Athens, spoke similarly. He explained that when asylum applicants asked his team for medical help, "There was nothing we could do…we said 'we're sorry, before you can even discuss options, you need to call Skype. If you want to access housing or healthcare, you have to call Skype first and then you can see a doctor." Chryssa and Noam's comments call attention to the unexpected nature of this Skype encounter, how in a setting unrelated to asylum or the call space (hospitals, pharmacies, etc.), asylum applicants are confronted with the Skype procedure.

Like those previously discussed, these encounters are affectively charged. The men in my study voiced distress over their suspension from the Greek healthcare system and frustration at the exclusion upheld by the Skype procedure. Stefan, who lost access to healthcare upon receiving his second asylum rejection, said:

> "If I go to hospital today, maybe they will not let me enter. That happened to me when I lost the AFM a few years ago. I had pain, my face was swollen, and I could not enter hospital because I didn't have document…you feel like you are nothing. Anything you look at is better than you. It's very big pressure for someone."

Super Med, an asylum applicant living with Hepatitis B, expressed anger at his inability to access treatment, focusing both on the mental toll of medical exclusion and the corporeal cost of restricted healthcare:

> "Some organizations help to book an appointment in hospital, they book an appointment for me, but the doctor will not help with no AMKA. And I'm a refugee, where can I? If the government won't give me AMKA, where can I get AMKA? This [Skype] system needs to change because it's terrible for us. How can I claim an AMKA?"

I regularly heard my participants express similar sentiments of distress and anxiety about their health. Take for example Abdul Karim, who has respiratory problems that require (according to a doctor on the

island of Kos) specialized treatment. Since arriving in Athens, he hasn't been able to access medical support because his calls have not been answered on Skype. As he told me over coffee: "If you are sick, you die, because you don't have AMKA. You don't have nothing to go to hospital, or you go to private hospital and spend a lot of money." Izmo told me that he has severe gastrointestinal problems but has been unable to receive treatment. Like Abdul Karim, he spends the little money he has on over-the-counter medication that does not require prescriptions:

> "I have gastric problems but I never have access to go to the hospital. When it's paining me, if I have money I go to the pharmacy and take some pills but otherwise I just stay home. When it pains for three, four, five days, it stop itself. If I have money and buy pills, I'm better now."

Not everyone could afford to pay for medicine, though, and some of my participants expressed anxiety about the unknown damage of living with untreated illnesses. Super Med said it was "disturbing" and "very scary" to live with a diagnosis but no medication. "As I'm talking to you, I feel all over my body heat," he told me with a grimace. "Terrible heat, my brother. And that's my main concern, I need medication. I'm suffering." Abdul Karim also worried about living without treatment:

> "The only thing I have in my mind is I need help with this registration for my health problem. Even if you feel in pain and go to the pharmacies, they will tell you you have to bring prescription from the doctor, and of course I cannot go to the doctor! I don't have no PAAYPA, no AMKA, how can I go to the doctor? I need help for these people to register me so I can go to the hospital and see because since they told me I have a problem that I don't know before so I want to know if this problem is serious or not yet serious so I can cure myself before it gets worse. Maybe it's not serious but is getting serious because I'm not taking medication. Before the time I realized to take medication, it's already worse."

Super Med and Abdul Karim express deep anxiety about their suspension from healthcare and the possibility that this exclusion will further contribute to bodily breakdown. Inability to access healthcare confines them in sick bodies, blocking the possibility of release from illnesses. This draws attention to the linkages between the emotional dimension of borderwork and the physical destruction of bordered bodies through exclusion and abandonment. Interrogating unexpected encounters with the Skype procedure in medical settings illuminates how "states organise the reproduction of life in ways that make it very difficult for specific bodies to maintain mental and bodily health" (Meier, 2020, p. 3).

One of the only ways that applicants can pre-register for asylum without the Skype procedure is if they can prove a medical vulnerability. However, many cannot pay for or access the medical tests needed to certify medical vulnerabilities without the support that comes with registration, and even if they can, there is no guarantee that the Asylum Service will accept the medical vulnerability and facilitate pre-registration. Super Med told me that he brought medical evidence to the Asylum Service, but was told it needed to come from a Greek hospital. When he went to the public hospital, he was turned away. He expanded on this catch-22:

> "The doctor said he cannot write that I should stay in Athens for treatment because I don't have AMKA. And the treatment is supposed to last at least six months, that's what the doctor told me. Even more than that, yes! And as for now I don't have the opportunity to get treated, so how am I? I'm just here loafing. Because there is no hope for now…how can I get this report with no AMKA, no PAYPAA? That's my biggest thing."

As the above quotations reveal, the Greek government's usage of Skype prevents individuals from accessing the medical support they need, which risks compounding medical vulnerabilities. It thus turns hospitals and pharmacies—and the healthcare system more generally—into sites of exclusion. Since somatic health bears the burden of this marginality, the (bordered) body itself becomes a site of exclusion and violence.[79] These sites have both geographic rootedness (the hospital, the pharmacy), as well as unbounded spatiality; for example, Izmo is made aware of his exclusion when denied treatment at the hospital, but also while suffering a Hepatitis flare up in the park ("As I'm talking to you, I feel heat all over my body. Terrible heat"). For those whose bodies are excluded from healthcare and thus deemed disposable, the Skype procedure maintains the threat of illness and death as an unspectacular, mundane, and omnipresent element of everyday life (see Round and Kuznetsova-Morenko, 2017).

[79] For similar dynamics within the American healthcare system, see Jimenez (2021): Exclusion from healthcare forces migrants "into a waiting game where, for many, the outcome is death. Both consequences attest to the legally violent effects of intersecting immigration and healthcare laws when low-income migrants are undocumented and illegible" (p.1).

The encounters analyzed in this chapter expose the banal violence of digital pushbacks and the physical geographies of exclusion structured by digital means. As applicants wait for recognition on Skype, they suffer a slow death (Berlant, 2007) of prolonged deterioration, one that lacks moments of physical brutality but nonetheless causes sustained bodily decay. The implications of waiting for (and without) access to healthcare are corporeal, existential, and spatially diverse, charting geographies of exclusion that, together with the previously discussed linkages between Skype calls and suicidality, reveal how the Skype procedure sustains proximity to suffering and death.[80] Whether or not exclusion from healthcare actually results in death is less pertinent than the Skype procedure's role as a gatekeeper of who receives care and who does not, situating certain bodies at greater risk of illness and death than others. Though the selection of which Skype calls the Asylum Service answers may be somewhat arbitrary, the selection of whose health is dependent upon the Skype procedure is not. The procedure functions to exclude racialized asylum applicants from healthcare,[81] relegating unwanted segments of society to unlivable (and largely invisible) conditions of physical and mental harm. The digital pushback operates through an "unequal distribution of exposure to emotional [and physical] harm" (Meier, 2020, p. 2).

Asylum applicants come face-to-face with the exclusionary effects of the Skype procedure while seeking healthcare. Those who call without success on Skype engage in drawn-out struggles for recognition that shape drawn-out struggles for bodily and mental health. In Athens, the digital pushback erects physical and embodied borders across the city and the self.

[80] My analysis is influenced by work on necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003). See, for example, Davies 2018; Inda, 2020; Mayblin et al., 2020; Round and Kuznetsova-Morenko, 2017.

[81] The racial relevance of this border becomes especially visible in the wake of welcoming discourses and policies that underscore the extreme desirability of Ukrainian refugees in Europe compared to that of non-white and non-Christian refugees. Within this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian refugees in Greece were not to call on Skype and could pre-register in person on an expedited pathway designed just for them. Even those who do call on Skype experience an unequal distribution of proximity to harm since the Skype timetable grants differential access to the asylum procedure depending on mother tongue and country of origin (with some nationalities having more hours to call and others having fewer hours). The Skype system joins other digital bordering techniques that have pointedly racializing effects (Parmar 2019; 2020).

4.3b Tax Identification Number

Applicants for international protection may work legally in Greece if and only if they have officially lodged their asylum claims. As an online UNHCR info page for asylum seekers reads: "If you are a pre-registered asylum seeker, you cannot access legal employment, until you complete the procedure for full lodging your asylum application."[82] Until the end of 2019, the right to work was accessible immediately upon lodging an asylum application, granted through the generation and activation of an AFM (Αριθμός Φορολογικού Μητρώου, or Tax Identification Number). After the introduction of new legislation in January 2020, however, asylum seekers were required to wait six months after applying to receive their AFM, which is granted only if a first instance decision has not yet been delivered by the Asylum Service. As with PAAYPA, AFM is deactivated upon issuance of a negative decision.

Even with AFM, access to the labor market remains highly constrained for asylum applicants (see AIDA, 2021). Nonetheless, it is a necessary prerequisite for legal employment and public transactions such as renting or buying accommodation (even housing programs that provide free accommodation often require AFM). The most common inquiry I received during fieldwork was how to get a white card (slang for the identity card given to asylum seekers) so as to access AFM and thus legal employment and accommodation. This emerged in the Mobile Info Team interviews as well. A Pakistani man named Manzoor said, "right now, I have one wish: to have a white card. It is better for me when I receive a white card, then I can work and receive some money and live a good life." Femi, who is from Egypt, said, "the problem is I haven't got a job yet because each job asks me about the paper and without paper I cannot work." Manzoor and Femi both reify the physical card as a gateway to economic opportunity and a sense of belonging. As another migrant from Egypt put it: "I don't really care about asylum, I just want some papers so I can live here. So I can work, get a bank account and pay taxes. I just want to live like a normal human here."

[82] UNHCR: Access to Employment https://help.unhcr.org/greece/living-in-greece/access-to-employment/

For the majority of applicants on mainland Greece, legal employment is only possible if they can secure asylum registration. The men in my study expressed exasperation over this bind. Izmo told me that it's "impossible" to find legal work in Greece if the only pathway is Skype, and that out of all his friends, only one is working. Moullel told me that he has lost hope in receiving a reply on Skype, but has no choice but to keep calling if he is ever to access the labor market:

> M: "If it's just one or two months before they answer you, then you can have faith, but after a year, you cannot have faith again. I don't have faith that they will answer to me."
>
> S: "So why do you keep calling then, if you don't have faith?"
>
> M: "I try because I need papers to work. I have nothing to do so I keep trying because I don't know if I can work one day. I want to work and only by having papers can I work, so I keep trying."

Moullel's motivation to call on Skype mirrors that of many of the men I spoke with, including an Afghan asylum applicant who explained:

> "I was working in some places with my friend and then they told me if you don't have any papers that shows that you are legally here I cannot work anymore, but I was working for a period of time illegally and then I realized it's difficult to work without any papers and then I tried to call through Skype."

My participants encountered the Skype procedure while searching for or being turned away from employment opportunities, much like how they encountered it while searching for or being turned away from healthcare settings. In what is now a familiar story, some of my participants recounted being told by potential employers to go away and "call Skype." As with the other encounters discussed in this chapter, these are embodied and affective encounters, most immediately because exclusion from the labor market structures bordered lives into states of stress and material precarity.

My participants often complained of hunger, quickly eating the bananas and biscuits I laid out each Skype session, or lifting their shirts to reveal protruding ribs. I frequently followed sessions with distribution,

handing out food, sleeping bags, blankets, socks, and warm coats.[83] Almost all of my participants were homeless or living in squalor, confined to small spaces with other unregistered/undocumented individuals. Izmo, for example, shares a tiny room with eleven men. Prince Meddo squats with a handful of men in an abandoned storefront, the windows of which he's covered with magazine paper so no one can see through. He brought me there once, to show me how unregistered people "live like animals." After a brief tour that included the kitchen (one rusted stove burner) and the bathroom (a hose and a stained toilet without a seat), I asked where he sleeps, noticing there were no beds. He unfolded a paper-thin sleeping bag and laid with it on the cold cement floor. "I can feel the cockroaches and rats crawling all over me at night," he said with disgust. As if on cue, a cockroach darted out from a corner and over my foot. Prince Meddo shook his head and pulled the bag up past his ears. He hides like this, he explained, to prevent the vermin from crawling on his face as he sleeps.

"The woundings of poverty," Mayblin et al. write, "are slow but relentless" (2020, p. 116). Through the Skype procedure, the Greek state assembles abject poverty and slow death, with dire implications for bodily and emotional health. As with exclusion from healthcare, exclusion from employment can lead to progressive physical and psychological decay, particularly since it increases susceptibility to exploitation. For instance, Benjamin, an asylum applicant from the Congo who attended two Skype sessions with me, came to Athens from Kos and slept in Platia Amerikis, a nearby park and popular meeting point for people of African origin. Benjamin continually tried without success to register on Skype. After a while, a West African man befriended him and offered a place to stay for free. Benjamin happily moved in, and "at first it was fine," but soon the man began to savagely beat and rape Benjamin, who was sixteen at the time.[84] Though the abuse was severe, he struggled to leave, stuck between enduring sexual violence with a

[83] I also facilitated distribution for non-participants. Access to resources was not contingent upon research participation.
[84] In theory, minors can register without the Skype procedure, but many, like Benjamin, fall through the cracks and end up calling on Skype.

roof over his head and sleeping on the streets. After several months of abuse ("that left me bleeding from places you shouldn't bleed"), he left.

Benjamin's case is extreme but it speaks to a shared reality that many unregistered people experience: the inability to access housing and legal employment drives survival strategies that further entrench proximity to harm and exploitation. One common strategy involves informal labor. Several of my participants told me that while they wanted to work legally, they had no choice but to engage in informal labor. Abdul Karim explained:

> "You cannot work because you don't have documents, except maybe someone has container, so offload container. Maybe they'll call you, some kind of odd job. At least they don't ask for documents, so you go, just to have something. Or you go to the bush, the farm, and do this work because you don't have papers to work."

Informal labor brings the promise of income, but it also brings risk. As many scholars have shown, the undocumented workforce is particularly exploitable (De Genova, 2002; De Genova and Peutz, 2010). Without formal contracts, work is never guaranteed, and my participants struggled to find consistent work; as Junior told me of his work for a recycling company, "You cannot find work every day. [Some days] they say there is no work, so in the month you maybe only have six or seven days." My participants lamented long hours, low pay, and physically taxing jobs (such as olive, orange, and strawberry harvesting), as well as their inability to demand better standards. Many experienced anxiety about police raids or sweeps at their places of employment, again revealing linkages between the exclusion, affect, and confinement maintained by the Skype procedure. In mobilizing Skype to limit access to legal employment, the Greek Asylum procedure encourages survival strategies that place people in tension with the law.[85]

[85] I observed this with those who worked informally as well as with those who engaged in survival strategies that explicitly break the law (i.e., survival sex work, involvement in smuggling networks, drug dealing, etc.). I also observed this with participants whose inability to access documentation and legal employment drove risky decisions of onward migration, such as Raja, who planned to smuggle himself to Spain, or Milad, who bought a fake passport to fly to another European country because "I didn't find any work or jobs here."

Asylum applicants feel the exclusionary and affective consequences of the digital pushback in locations all across Greece, from olive groves to recycling trucks. Abdul Karim told me that whenever he puts himself forward for a job, the employer asks, "Do you have AMKA? AFM? ID?" and in that moment, he is ashamed and reminded that "I don't have nothing like that." Moullel said he feels "discouraged," because when he asks for work, "they always tell me about the papers, the AMKA, the AFM, such things." Raja said that he has "high plans" for his life but cannot advance upon them without papers. "[Without papers] what are we here? Just like garbage. No one cares about garbage."

Just as the Skype procedure gatekeeps who can access healthcare, so too does it dictate who can access legal employment. This shows how digital restrictions to the labor market form physical geographies of exclusion across the city, each of which serves as a space of affective suffering. The bordered body again emerges as a site of violence, with the digital pushback resulting in geographies of physical exclusion and affective harm that extend far beyond the Skype call space.

4.3c Free Internal Movement

Without fail, all of my participants lamented what they perceived to be an overwhelming police presence in Athens. Many avoided public places for this very reason, restricting their movements so as to avoid the police. Sometimes when I invited people to attend a Skype call session, they declined, saying they were too afraid to venture out. Others said they would assess the police presence that morning before committing. As one participant told me in Eleonas, a refugee camp on the outskirts of Athens: "I'll come, but I'm afraid. If the police let me, I'll come."[86]

[86] Eleonas has since been demolished.

This fear was widespread among my participants. When I met Izmo for an interview near Platia Amerikis, for example, his eyes darted around as he told me that every time he or his roommates go outside, they embrace and say goodbye as if they might never see each other again. You have to expect, he explained, that one day someone will leave for a few hours and never come back. As a result, Izmo and his friends minimize their movements and spend the vast majority of their time indoors. He explained:

> "They're everywhere [the police], but we don't always walk, we are inside the house. Outside you don't have internet and inside you can watch videos and the time will go faster for you than walking around until you meet the police…we don't even have a place we can go do exercises like playing football, nothing, we don't have that space, so it's better we stay at home and we stare at our phones…that's all we can do."

After our interview, I accompanied Izmo to the bus stop and rode with him until he got home. He said he felt less afraid with me (a white, passport-holding man) by his side. Fear was the dominant affect that emerged when my participants spoke about public space. Amun, a 20-year-old Egyptian man, said he spends his days inside, "not going out because I am afraid of the police if they catch me." Raja explained that: "When I go with friends or I go alone, inside I have fear, oh my God, maybe police see me and they can catch me!" Mojtaba said: "I live in so much fear," telling me that he sometimes goes outside, but only in "the place[s] where there are no police." Kashem, an asylum applicant from Afghanistan, told me over the phone that he is too afraid of the police to venture outdoors, and thus gave up on seeking necessary medical treatment:"I cannot go to see doctor for my medical treatment. I am scared of the police and can't go outside."

During Skype sessions with my participants, it was common to observe fear when the hour ended without successful pre-registration. Bobo from Ghana, for example, counted down the minutes in each session, before moaning: "18 months. 18 months! If police catch me today, 18 months [in detention]. I'd rather die!"[87] Skype sessions laid bare the tenuous tie between legality and "illegality," mobility and immobility,

[87] At the time of my fieldwork, asylum applicants could be legally detained for a maximum of 18 months at a time while awaiting their decisions. Note that this refers to continuous time: a close friend of one of my participants was detained for 18 months, let out, and then after two months was arrested and detained for another 18 months.

and the arbitrary nature of a digital system that regulates each. Participants expressed awareness that unanswered calls tethered them to "illegality," often asking as the last calls expired if I could produce police papers for them.[88] FORGE advises all applicants, if stopped by the police, to open the Skype app and show their record of calls so as to highlight that their "illegal" status stems from the unreachable Asylum Service rather than a personal lack of will. Yet it remained unclear to both FORGE and the guys whether this would actually help, fueling anxious uncertainty. As Shokrullah, an asylum applicant from Iran, told me, "The police don't ask about Skype. They just put you in prison."

My participants expressed deep distrust of public space, their states of "illegality" and "deportability" (De Genova, 2002) bringing both physical and affective risks. As Femi explained, to face indefinite detention would "destroy me from the inside." He wasn't alone in this. An asylum applicant from Gambia who had been arrested and held in detention for "one year, one month, and 12 days" told me that he experiences extreme anxiety about being arrested again because he has no papers and "Skype doesn't work." Stepping off the street and into the safety of our office, he said that he'd rather go back to Gambia than be detained again. "I'll sign the deportation now," he declared. When I said I wished I could help more and that all I could do was invite him to another Skype session, he looked as if I had punched him. "Only God can help us," he said as he left. "In this country, only God can help us."

[88] As mentioned in Chapter 2, I helped produce hundreds of "protection papers" while at FORGE. This consisted of creating a document with the individual's face, biodata, and a signed declaration from FORGE that the applicant had been regularly attending Skype sessions but had not yet received a reply. Printed on FORGE letterhead, the letters asked for understanding and leniency from the police given that the asylum applicant was making every effort to register and access documentation. I heard anecdotal reports of instances in which the police honored the request set out in these letters and expressed sympathetic understanding that the Skype procedure obfuscates access to asylum. I am also aware of instances in which the letter had no effect, with arrests continuing undeterred. FORGE eventually stopped producing these papers out of concern that 1) those who held them mistook them for legal documents, and 2) the increasingly large crowds of people coming to FORGE to request protection papers created risks of police roundups/raids.

Some of my participants focused less on the physical pains of detention and more on the dehumanization inherent in the carceral gaze. As racialized men, my participants confronted acute associations with criminality. Griffiths (2015, p. 473) writes: "Conceptualizations of danger and illegality are often correlated with racialized and gendered identities," with male asylum seekers considered deviant, cunning, and dangerous. In media and discourse, migrant, African, and Middle Eastern masculinities are constructed as 'Other' to hegemonic Western masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018). In contrast to (white) 'civilized' men, Black and brown men are colonially portrayed as animalistic, violent, savage, and predatory (Gale, 2004; Jazmati and Studer, 2017; Scheibelhofer, 2016). . Of particular relevance to this discussion, racialized men are widely considered "bogus asylum seekers" and vessels of criminality, which further legitimizes police aggression.

One asylum applicant told me how embarrassed he felt about the time he had to hide in a bush for two days to avoid the police. Others spoke with resentment about how they don't commit crimes but nonetheless are treated like criminals. "It's really scary," Raja told me. "When they catch us, the police they think we are animals." With anger, Prince Meddo recounted a time when the police stopped him and his friends on the street, demanding that they sit cross-legged and watch silently as the police roughly emptied their backpacks onto the ground. After all their belongings were rolling over the dusty sidewalk, the policemen had a smoke, waited for a while, then ordered them to stand up and leave.[89] Many of my participants described this same experience of temporary street detention, usually describing it in terms of humiliation, powerlessness, anger, and fear.

Political geographers and scholars of criminology have in recent years called for wider conceptualizations of carceral space, in recognition of the increasing "mobility of carceral tactics" (Martin, 2021, p. 741). This work, which falls under the discipline of carceral geography (Moran et al., 2012), orients focus towards the practices, spaces, and encounters of incarceration that occur beyond prison walls. Importantly,

[89] I witnessed this policing practice several times while walking around Athens.

carceral geographers note that carcerality does not always command total immobility, and that detention should be thought of not only in terms of physical immobility but also as a process of temporal, affective, and spatial control operating through containment, mobility, bordering, and exclusion (Mountz et al., 2013). Unlike inside of prisons, practices of containment outside of prisons do not always involve spectacular displays of power (Murray, 2019). As Eife and Kirk (2021, p. 70) write, "carceral logics of punishment and control operate outside of jails and prisons and become embedded in routine, bureaucratic practices."

Many of these containment practices involve digital technologies (Elwood, 2021; Gill et al., 2018; Jefferson, 2018; Moran and Etchegoyen, 2017). In his 2019 study, Gacek (2019, p. 44) finds that among released offenders whose post-prison movements are tracked with electronic monitoring, feelings of stuckedness (Hage, 2009) and exclusion "parallel[] the feelings associated with the carceral," even though the individuals were no longer physically confined. While surveilled through digital technology that monitored both movement and temporal adherence to curfews, Gacek's participants articulated stigma, isolation, and stuckedness as pains of confinement that complicated their ability to psychologically distance themselves from prison life. In this sense, although they had been physically liberated from prison, they continued to experience ongoing psychological confinement. Eife and Kirk (2021) similarly find that the ability to control affect extends the reach of carceral power, conceptualizing humiliation, exhaustion, and confusion as punitive tools. In their assessment, forced waiting and experiences of disorientation can be considered carceral practices since they structure "punitive confinement, an extension of the conditions of the jail itself" (Eife and Kirk, 2021, p. 77).

The Skype procedure operates with comparable effects, similarly expanding spatial, temporal, and affective confinement through encounters that restrict access to public space, multiply anxiety and fear, hold people captive to strict government timings, and enclose people within suffering bodies and minds.

Encounters with the Skype procedure are manifestations of "oppressive abandonment….mirror[ing] the space of the prison" (Murray, 2019, p. 72). Daily encounters with public space and the police are affective encounters with the Skype procedure and carceral encounters with the Greek state. Asylum applicants internalize the affective violence of borders into restricted mobility and embodied hypervigilance, exhibiting "somatic modes of attention" when they elect to enter public space (Willen, 2007, p. 17).

Scholars agree that "illegality" is more than a juridical category, encompassing also a socio-political condition and way of being in the world that structures "subjective experiences of time, shape, embodiment, sociality, and self" (Willen, 2007, p. 10; Coutin, 2003; De Genova, 2002; Khosravi, 2010; Willen, 2007). This section highlighted how encounters with the Skype procedure inscribe "illegality" onto migrant bodies and shrinks people's worlds by relegating them to a decreasing number of spaces deemed safe. Evie, a British physician and volunteer with Medical Volunteers International, told me that she had recently accompanied an unregistered patient to the hospital, and a policeman came to check for AMKA, making the patient panic. "A hospital should be a safe space, but it's not," she said. As the above analysis shows, encounters with the Skype procedure minimize both safety and space. Though pushbacks traditionally turn borders into discrete sites of violence, the digital pushback allows the Greek state to chart sites of bodily tension, anxiety, and terror throughout the mainland. From the market to the metro, the hospital to the home, risk, exclusion, and decay stalk those who venture out. As one asylum applicant explained to me, the Greek asylum procedure is a "prison with open sky."

In summary, asylum applicants come into unexpected encounter with the Skype procedure while attempting to access healthcare, employment, and public space. These encounters chart the far-reaching geography of the Greek government's digital pushback, and its ability to confine the minds and mobilities of asylum applicants through exclusionary, affective, and carceral means.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter interrogated the ways in which the Skype procedure is experienced and embodied as a digital pushback. Using the lens of encounter, I traced the key moments in which applicants come into expected and unexpected confrontation with the Skype procedure, highlighting the borders and exclusions generated by those collisions. In tracing geographies of encounter, I considered not only instances in which asylum applicants come into contact with the Skype procedure, but where, how, and from what asylum applicants are digitally pushed. My analysis centered emotion and the ways in which the Skype procedure operates as an affective technology of control. Both the Skype calls and the wider suspensions shaped by the Skype procedure structure oppressive forms of exhaustion and alienation that play out on the minds and bodies of applicants, inflicting forms of "psychological torture."

Asylum applicants encounter the Skype procedure while seeking audience with the Asylum Service and while seeking access to healthcare, the labor market, and public space. Each encounter is affectively charged. While calling on Skype, applicants experience boredom, alienation, and internalized rejection, with effects of psychological decay. Applicants further experience exhaustion and forms of physical decay when pushed back from healthcare, employment, and public space. These expected and unexpected encounters make life increasingly unlivable, revealing that on one level, the Greek government's digital pushback operates by restricting access to territory and welfare, yet on a more intimate (and destructive) level, it operates through affective violence. Using Skype, the Greek state pushes asylum applicants back from access to asylum, territory, and the possibility of maintaining bodily and mental health. The digital pushback manifests in unspectacular moments that border crossers experience as spectacularly alienating, destructive, and carceral.

Chapter 5
Ghosts Among Ghosts: Encountering the Skype State

5.1 Introduction

"*Before they were brought to the trucks, they were beaten by the aforementioned six persons wearing balaclavas and black clothing. The respondent explained that they used their batons and if someone fell down, they would kick them.*"[90]

"Inside the van, there were two men wearing baggy blue pants, black athletic jackets, and balaclavas, with nothing to signal that they were officers"[91]

"After being held in that cell for two days, the respondent reported that nine uniformed men took the group of people at around 1 am or 2 am to the river. They were described as wearing camouflage short sleeve Jackets [sic] over a black shirt and black pants; some of them were dressed in civilian clothing, and all of them were wearing balaclavas. Their clothing didn't have any insignia or logo which would indicate some authority. They were reportedly carrying tree branches with which they beat the group for 1 minute to go faster and get in the vans. There were several vehicles at the site: 2 white vans, one red Mercedes van, and some Ford civilian vans, but all of them were reportedly without license plates"[92]

In the accounts of physical pushbacks quoted above, asylum applicants confronted aggressors they could only partially perceive: civilian clothing, balaclavas, and unmarked vehicles helped shield the identity of state actors.[93] In this chapter, I consider how the Skype procedure has a similar effect of intelligibility.

The previous chapter explored the moments and spaces in which asylum applicants confront the Skype procedure. This chapter takes a different approach, focusing not on contact with the Skype procedure but on lack of contact with the Skype procedure's administrators. In doing so, I move my analysis beyond daily encounters to consider how the Greek government blocks encounters between asylum applicants and state bureaucrats, with lived effects of obscurity. Engaging anthropological literature on borders, bureaucracy, and the state, I assess the impact of distance, intelligibility and the near impossibility of

[90] BVMN, 2022, p. 555.
[91] BVMN, 2022, p. 632.
[92] BVMN, 2022, p. 647.
[93] Note that physical pushbacks in Greece are not always executed by masked individuals. See BVMN (2022) for instances in which the pushback actors did not cover their faces and wore official state uniforms displaying the Greek flag.

human interaction that digitalized bureaucracy structures.[94] I explore, in the words of Borelli et al. (2023, p. 2), "what happens when encounters between the state, impersonated by street-level bureaucrats, and its clients (in this specific case asylum-seekers), do not take place or take place through intermediaries."

This approach allows me to question how encounters with digital bureaucracy impact asylum applicants' perceptions of the state and the self. More specifically, it enables reflection of how people make sense of seemingly senseless systems of control that operate through digital obscurity and impenetrability. I am interested, in particular, in how the unreachability and unreadability of the Skype procedure influence understandings of the state and the self-in-relation. I demonstrate that the digital elements of the Skype procedure both enable and legitimize state withdrawal, with deeply disorienting effects on those attempting to access state services. These effects are central to the deployment of digital pushbacks. Digital bureaucracy emerges as a tool to shelter the state from demands, one that restructures the relationship between bordered people, private corporations (ie. Microsoft), and the state in surreal ways.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. It begins by interrogating the spatial dynamics and digital burdens that make applicants experience the Skype procedure as distant and disorienting. It then explores intelligibility through discourse, analyzing the social meanings that the Skype procedure acquires and how they muddle understandings of state power. This section demonstrates that the Greek government's digital bureaucracy makes asylum and the Asylum Service unreachable and unknowable. Finally, I discuss how this intelligibility shapes surreal lived realities, pulling from absurdist literature and theater to consider how the Skype procedure legitimizes a system that many experience as a farce, with haunting implications on asylum applicants.

[94] I am inspired by Borelli et al.'s (2023) recent work on "ghost bureaucracy," which analyzes digitalized migration bureaucracies in terms of their absence as opposed to their presence. This chapter's title is partially a tribute to their work.

I argue that intelligibility and disorientation are integral to the Greek government's digital pushback.[95] For applicants calling on Skype, disorientation stems from experiences of accessing the asylum procedure which are shaped by obscurity and distance. When applicants call an unknown entity from remote locations around Greece on a commercially branded platform, they engage in guesswork about who is (or is not) on the other end of the line using the cultural and contextual resources available to them. The identity and administration of the Skype procedure remain masked by the reality of calling without reply on a digital system that bears a corporation's name and forces applicants to imagine an entity they can neither speak with nor see. This influences everyday understandings as asylum applicants attempt to make meaning of a non-responsive digital interface and the surreal waiting event it shapes. In turn, this shapes absurd processes of meaning making which give rise to discursive imaginations of power that muddle understandings of the state and displace responsibility over migrant life, absolving the Greek state by constructing a mystical intermediary border actor known as 'Skype.' Spectral not only in its shadowy and immaterial presence, the digital pushback haunts the lives of those who encounter it.

5.2 Distance and Digital Bureaucracy

Shifts towards digital administration necessarily precipitate shifts in spatiality and materiality. As Lindgren et al. (2019, p. 431) explain, "In the recent past, public service provision was very much associated with visiting an office at a particular time to meet with a particular public official. E-government solutions in the form of digital public services have changed the setting of the public encounter from a public official's office, to a technical device." In settings of physical bureaucratic waiting, beneficiaries are usually able to go in person to offices to make human contact and ask for clarifying information, and it is largely through these interactions that the state materializes (Auyero, 2012; Tuckett, 2018). In settings of completely digitalized bureaucracy, this possibility does not exist.

[95] See Whyte (2011) on uncertainty and the asylum "myopticon."

For a time, however, it was possible for applicants calling on Skype to connect face-to-face with government workers. Asylum Service staffers told me that in the early days of the Skype procedure, applicants regularly went to the Asylum Service to try to pre-register in person after failing to connect on Skype. As explained by Melina, who worked at the Asylum Service from September 2015 until November 2017:

> "I saw the applicants who came to the office long before COVID times so they could actually come physically come to the Asylum Service offices. Every day we had people telling us 'please we want to make an appointment and we cannot' and the only thing we could do was remind them and give them a paper with the Skype addresses, and they were like 'ok but I have this,' and you know we had to say 'there's nothing else I can do,' which is something you say a lot when you work there."

Elias, who works in the Info Box (a reception desk outside of the Asylum Service office), detailed a similar experience, recalling:

> "Complaints, complaints, every day complaints. Every day complaints! They cannot reach Skype. They cannot reach Skype. Especially on the main languages, Arabic, English, and French. Arabic is by far the most difficult thing, they keep trying, many applicants have been trying for months. I see people coming, I have to tell them that they have to reach Skype, and I see them a month after, two months after, three months after and they're showing me the calls on their mobile phones. They are trying, every day. And they cannot reach the line. They cannot reach the line."

In these cases, applicants made contact with bureaucratic officials by showing up in person and attempting to pre-register for asylum. This did not last. Asylum Service policy changed so that asylum applicants were not allowed to enter Asylum Service offices without appointments, which were only given on Skype or by email.[96] COVID-related restrictions later solidified this regulation of inflow. Unlike when asylum applicants queued outside the central Athens police station to pre-register in person before the Skype procedure began (Cabot, 2012), and unlike when they presented themselves at Asylum Service offices to try to get Skype appointments in person, applicants could no longer interact with the people managing the asylum system and "come face-to-face with the regulatory power of the state" (Cabot, 2012,

[96] Lawyers, especially Greek lawyers, could sometimes get appointments in person on behalf of paying clients. But even this was not always successful.

p.14). As a result, applicants engaging with the Skype procedure were made to interpret the state from a distance.

I witnessed this policy in action as well as its effects. At the front gates of Asylum Service offices, security guards always asked: Εχεις ραντεβού σήμερα; *Do you have an appointment today?* In theory, the applicant was allowed inside if they had an appointment.[97] Without an appointment, however, the individual was turned away, often with two words: "Call Skype." I observed this at various Asylum Service offices in Athens, and got used to a soon predictable exchange:

> Asylum Service guard: *Εχεις ραντεβού σήμερα; (Do you have an appointment today?)*
> Applicant: *Όχι (no)*
> Asylum Service guard: *Call Skype*.

At times the exchange was more elaborate, with the applicant pleading his case or explaining that he did not have an appointment because neither his Skype calls nor his emails had received reply. The response was always the same: "Call Skype." Sometimes these words were not spoken but acted out instead, with the agent pointing wordlessly to a printed Skype schedule before walking away. As recalled in my fieldnotes after watching an asylum applicant engage with a guard at the Katehaki Asylum Service office:

> The guard points to the Skype schedule and walks back in. He does not say a single word—he just points and leaves. There is no explanation, no opportunity for the man to ask questions about the schedule he's just been referred to. I watch the migrant peer at the schedule for a bit before taking out his phone and snapping a picture.

After observing the above exchange, I approached the man with my interpreter and asked what had happened. The young man, who was from Bangladesh, had an appointment at Katehaki to receive the decision on his first asylum claim in Greece. The decision was negative. My fieldnotes recount the conversation:

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[97] Applicants are often refused entry even with appointments, or are otherwise given new appointments for dates months in the future. I witnessed this at the Neos Kosmos Asylum Service location when staffers gave frustrated applicants new appointments on sticky notes and asked them to leave. Some of the applicants told me that they had been given new appointments three, four, or five times in a row. As Valia Charalampopoulou, a lawyer at FORGE, told me: "If you are not accompanied [by a lawyer], then your appointment is not taking place."

> ‘They told me to call Skype,’ he says. I ask if they told him anything else (how it works, what the address is, etc.) and he says no, they said nothing else, they only gave him his rejection and as he was walking out, said ‘call Skype’ with a gesture to the posted schedule.

Almost all of the asylum applicants I spoke with had been told by state officials to “call Skype,” whether in the process of being turned away from a state office, while asking for help in camps, or at the end of appointments. The experience of being pushed back from state spaces and redirected to an online platform also took place via email, another avenue through which applicants attempted to connect with the Asylum Service. Take for example the following responses to emails sent by FORGE staffers requesting registration appointments on behalf of the guys, all sent by the Regional Asylum Office of Piraeus:

> *“He has to call skype for registration appointment and follow the standard procedure. If he lives in Thessaloniki area, he has to book an appointment for Thessaloniki”* (January 21, 2019).
>
> *“Good afternoon. he needs to call SKYPE in order to be registered”* (April 1, 2019).
>
> “*The applicant has already been informed about his case when he received his decision from the Appeal's Authority. If he wants to apply for second time he has to call skype. Kind regards, Regional Asylum Office of Piraeus*” (March 12, 2020).
>
> *“The applicant has to call skype to get appointment for registration, that is the standard procedure according to our capacity. For more Information about the skype procedure you may refer to the following site: http://asylo.gov.gr”* (September 18, 2020).
>
> *“The applicant has to call skype to get new appointment and do the procedure from the beginning. Yours sincerely Regional Asylum Office of Piraeus”* (October 2, 2020).

These five responses are largely representative of the communication FORGE and its clients had with Asylum Service offices.[98] Whether physically outside of an Asylum Service office or via email, applicants are pushed back from state spaces and services, told, in effect, to go away and call Skype. Of course when they do call on Skype, their calls are almost always ignored. Here the “day-to-day production of indifference” (Infantino, 2017, p. 78) is particularly visible. With two dismissive words and calls that ring without reply, the state discursively and digitally shields itself from demands.

[98] Jess and Ale granted me access to the FORGE email accounts. I searched for emails with the Asylum Service that included the word “Skype,” allowing me to analyze the communications.

In her book on outsourced visa processing in Morocco, Infantino (2017) notes that states govern not just at distance but through distance. Focusing on how partnerships with private actors allow states to deflect responsibility, Infantino argues that states intentionally implement policies that keep policy recipients physically separated from government workers. She writes that in settings where policy recipients encounter private workers (ie. visa contractors) but not state workers, the recipients are "reduced to silence because of the impossibility of coping with bordering practices by bargaining, seeking special consideration for their particular case as well as sympathy, and seeking redress." These strategies additionally serve to "keep policy recipients away from sight and away from mind" (Infantino, 2017, p. xi).

Though Infantino's insights stem from a case where physical bureaucracy is outsourced to private actors who operate in person, they resonate nonetheless in the context of digital bureaucracy. The digital distance structured by the Skype procedure similarly functions to keep asylum applicants out of sight and out of mind while rendering impossible attempts to physically access state bureaucrats. Thus deployed, digital bureaucracy makes the Asylum Service inaccessible. Inability to access the administrative state is a key tactic of digital pushbacks.

As this section has demonstrated, asylum applicants in Greece must attempt to make sense of the administrative state from a distance. The next section explores ways in which obstructions stemming from the digital interface complicate this endeavor.

5.3 Digital Obstructions

On the most elementary level, digital bureaucracy can be experienced as confusing and illegible because not everyone possesses skills of digital literacy. Several scholars have discussed the risks of digital

illiteracy and the digital divide[99] when access to state services is dependent upon technology. Focusing on elderly communities, for example, Martínez-Alcalá et al. (2021) explore how digital illiteracy can lead to exclusion in an increasingly digital age. Alexopoulou et al. (2022) note that digitalized welfare services across Europe result in the exclusion of segments of society who struggle with technology/connectivity, thus amplifying pre-existing inequalities. Warren (2007) argues that this exclusionary dynamic shapes a "digital vicious cycle" for marginalized communities. In the American case, Early and Hernandez (2021) detail the outcomes of economic oppression, racial injustice, and perilous health that occurred when communities lacking internet access attempted to access services that were increasingly digitalized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on the effects of "digital disenfranchisement," Early and Hernandez (2012) discuss the "devastating loss of life from COVID-19" in communities of color where people struggled to book vaccine appointments online (p. 607).

Lack of access to and knowledge of digital technologies can harm social, political, and corporeal welfare. This aligns consideration of digitalization with scholarship on administrative burdens, which studies the experience of policy implementation as onerous (Herd and Moynihan, 2018; see also Peters, 2023 on "digital administrative burden").[100] As Herd and Moynihan explain with reference to abortion access, healthcare, food assistance programs, and other cases, administrative burdens allow state actors to govern through bureaucratic obstruction. Instead of passing restrictive policies, states implement seemingly liberal policies with endless paperwork, dysfunctional websites, delays, and poor coordination that alienate and exclude would-be beneficiaries. Key to this dynamic are the "confusion costs" of administrative burdens, or the ways in which lack of understanding creates barriers to rights and services (Herd and Moynihan, 2018, p. 160).

[99] Digital illiteracy refers to the lack of technical or cognitive knowledge and the lack of ability to effectively use digital tools, whereas the digital divide refers to unequal access to digital technology. For more nuanced definitions of each term, see Yu et al., (2017). See also Alexopoulou et al., (2022).

[100] Of particular relevance is the understanding that "administrative burdens are the product of deliberate choice occurring via political processes and a function of basic administrative capacity" and that "burdens are distributive," impacting certain segments of society more than others (Herd and Moynihan, 2018, pp. 3, 6).

I observed widespread confusion costs among individuals calling on Skype, confusion that was directly linked to the digital nature of the bureaucratic procedure. Although many of the asylum applicants I met in Athens were tech-savvy, many others were not (this difference tended to fall upon national lines, with people from certain countries having more comfort with and knowledge of technology than others). For those who were not digitally literate, various elements of the bureaucratic encounter were puzzling and frustrating. Three moments of confusion were especially common: operating the Skype application, interpreting the Skype timetable, and calling the Asylum Service while its account was offline. It is partially in these three mundane moments that the digital pushback is assembled.

In order to call the Asylum Service on Skype, applicants must search for and locate the Skype application, download the app, make an account, navigate the app, input the call recipient's username, and start a video call. For people who either do not have comfort with digital devices or have never used Skype before, each of these steps can be onerous. While talking to residents at Eleonas camp, for example, several people told me they had never called on Skype before because they didn't know how to download the app. One resident asked that I download the app for her, and after I did (which took a long time because the cellular service in the camp was poor), she told me she was "overwhelmed" because the app was asking her to input her phone number to make an account, which she did not know how to do.

During call sessions at FORGE, I often witnessed participants struggle to log into Skype on their phones.[101] As my fieldnotes recall from one session where Prince Meddo downloaded Skype on his cellphone:

[101] During the call sessions I facilitated during fieldwork, I logged onto Skype with the FORGE accounts before applicants arrived so that they would not have to waste time navigating the technology, though I always offered to show my participants how to make an account and log in if they wanted. My observations about people struggling to navigate the app mostly stem from watching calls they made on their cellphones during Skype sessions.

Wednesday September 8, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> I watch as Prince Meddo struggles for several minutes trying to make a password (must be 8 digits, not all letters). He's having a hard time: the password doesn't fit the requirements, his new password doesn't match when he's asked to confirm it, etc. He pauses from trying to make a password to press call again on the laptop. I ask if I can help him and after a bit he says yes. I make a password for him: _____ [*password redacted*]. I write it down on the Skype sheet[102] along with the correct Skype ID and the times to call, and ask him to take a picture in case he loses the sheet.

Barriers to accessing the Asylum Service arise far before applicants even press the call button, leaving applicants feeling confused and distressed. Becky Brown, a British volunteer at the Athens-based NGO Khora Asylum Support Team (KAST), told me:

> "In KAST we have to assist people in downloading the Skype app but even that, imagine being in a position where you need aid to download that. We help people come up with passwords and have places to keep them so they [don't] lose them. Some people didn't know what capital letters are; to make a Skype account you need a capital and digital letter. It's a weirdly digital system without providing access for it and assuming digital literacy."

Passwords and capital letters proved complicated, but they were not the only source of confusion. Creating a Skype account requires waiting for and entering an SMS code from Microsoft after entering your phone number. Most of my participants did not know what an SMS code was or how to access it. Time and time again I observed anger, frustration, and confusion as my participants struggled to access the Skype application after struggling to download it.

Even after applicants successfully downloaded the Skype application and made an account, I noticed continued bewilderment related to the technology. Take for example the two following excerpts from my fieldnotes:

Friday October 1, 2021: FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> Bobo shows up and asks if he calls on Skype will they give him a card again. It's his subsequent claim, so I explain the complicated situation. He's the only one here, so I set up three laptops

[102] FORGE created and distributed "Skype sheets" that listed the questions the Asylum Service would ask if it picked up the call. The sheet was designed so that applicants could write down their answers/personal information (ie. name, DOB, place of birth, phone number, etc) to refer to during the call session. FORGE started this practice after noticing that sometimes when the Asylum Service picked up calls, the applicant was so shocked that he froze and/or blanked, resulting in the Asylum Service hanging up.

> around him. He doesn't know how to use the laptop, and can't figure out how to use the mouse or where the video call button is. I help him until he can do it on his own.

Monday November 22, 2021: FORGE for humanity office: Farsi session

> I instruct them to keep pressing call as I explain things [how the Skype procedure works] but Habib doesn't. Norul tells him again [to keep calling] and I see that he doesn't know how to use the laptop or how to use the Skype application. I point to the video call button and tell him to press it, and he touches the screen with his hand. I realize that he doesn't know how to use the mousepad. I show him how to make a call.

As these examples show, digital illiteracy can make digitalized bureaucratic procedures challenging to reach and challenging to read. Further illegibility stems from the Skype timetable. Posted online by the Asylum Service, the timetable changes seemingly at random and without announcement. Many times while volunteering at FORGE in 2018 (and later as a researcher) I had to print new schedules for the office after noticing by chance that the Skype schedule had changed on the Asylum Service website. NGOs such as FORGE and MIT regularly make posts online alerting applicants of the updated schedules, but the changes can be difficult to keep track of, even for NGO workers (it was common for Jess, Ale, and me to have to remind each other about the changes. Jess told me that the last time the schedule changed, "I don't think we found out until months later").

As Tazzioli (2022b, p. 208) writes, "un-legib[ility]....is the result of the active production of opacity through repeated changes that asylum seekers are not informed of." My participants experienced abrupt and unexplained changes as extremely opaque. The guys regularly messaged me to ask what the "real" times were, and they showed me records of Skype calls they had lodged at incorrect hours or on incorrect days. These times ranged from hours that accorded with outdated schedules to times wildly outside any past or present version of the timetable (such as on weekends, in the middle of the night, early in the morning, etc.).

Illegibility and confusion surrounding the Skype timetable included the Skype usernames as well as the call hours. The Asylum Service publishes the official usernames for each language's Skype line on its

website, but it can be difficult to locate the correct one on the Skype app. For example, the Skype name (essentially the username) of the Urdu line is *asylum.service.urdu* and the profile name is *Asylum Service Urdu*, but between July 2018 and September 2019, the Skype name was inexplicably changed to "live:68dfbd8c11b07edc," although the official Asylum Service schedules still listed it as asylum.service.urdu (Linnecar, 2021, p. 20). The name was eventually changed back, but if you search for "Asylum Service Urdu" on Skype, 39 different accounts appear (at the time of this writing), most of which have the official Asylum Service logo as their profile picture and are called "Asylum Service Urdu" or a similar variant (such as "Asylum service Urdu;" "Asylum service punjabi;" "Asylum.Service.Urdu" etc.). The other languages have duplicate accounts as well, though they have fewer.[103]

As a result, my participants experienced confusion about which accounts were legitimate and which were not. Just as they message to ask about the real times, they also messaged to ask about which accounts were real. This confusion stems both from the proliferation of mimic accounts as well as the unresponsiveness of the official accounts. When applicants locate the correct account but do not receive replies to their calls, they wonder if they are perhaps calling the wrong account and try calling the other ones. I regularly observed my participants calling fake accounts for the correct language as well as official accounts for languages they don't speak.[104] As detailed in my fieldnotes:

[103] It is notable that the vast majority of unofficial accounts are related to Urdu. Searching for Asylum Service Urdu yields 39 accounts, whereas the same search for every other language yields between one and six accounts. A comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon falls outside the scope of this study, but more than any other nationality, the Pakistani men I met during fieldwork alleged corruption in the Asylum Service and spoke of underground markets and Asylum Service backchannels related to the acquisition of documents and/or Skype appointments. Several described Skype calls receiving replies only to be met with demands for money in exchange for registration (it is unclear whether these calls were on the official Asylum Service line or the other ones). Men from Bangladesh and India alleged the same. NGO workers in Greece told me that they have heard of lawyers paying Asylum Service staffers to pick up calls from specific Skype accounts. One NGO staffer even said that she had seen money exchange hands between lawyers and Asylum Service registration staffers within the Asylum Service building. The focus of this chapter is on intelligibility and disorientation, but subsequent research should explicitly interrogate the forms of corruption that digital bureaucracy can enable, particularly with regard to systems that provide different levels of access depending on nationality.

[104] I refer to unofficial accounts as fake accounts because there are many fraudulent accounts that seek to scam applicants into paying for appointments that do not exist. This was commonly known among asylum applicants,

Friday September 24, 2021: FORGE for humanity office

> I write down the correct Skype address and the time on Stefan's sheet, and ask if I can see his phone to look at Skype. He has made a few calls before, but to the wrong accounts. First he called *asylum.service.shqip* (the official Albanian account, not a language he speaks) two times on April 2, 2021 at 9:19am, and then 5 times on April 2 he called an account called *Asylum service*, which has a profile picture of a bracelet that says "love." I think this second account is probably fake, and I ask him who told him to call this account: a friend, he tells me.

Wednesday September 22: FORGE for humanity office

> [...He's been calling the] wrong account: it's in his phone as "Asylum service athina" and the profile says the Skype name is "live:.cid.ef56958a95154ce2."...I explain that he's been contacting the wrong account, and I give him the right one, and write it down on the Skype page I've just filled out for him. I see that he's also been calling the Georgian Asylum Service line. Why? I ask if he speaks Georgian and he says no. I ask why he contacted this line and he says he doesn't know. He messaged the Georgian line at 19:17 on Monday, with a smile waving emoji and "Hi dear good afternoon how are you. Is me _____ [*name redacted*] I want the appointment to Skype for my asylum."

In these two instances, applicants called a combination of fake accounts linked to their mother tongue and official Asylum Service accounts for languages they do not speak and thus are not eligible to pre-register through. Both men expressed confusion when I explained that they would not be able to connect with the Asylum Service through these channels, as well as when I tried to explain the difference between Skype profiles that share the same profile pictures but differ slightly in username. One more fieldnote exemplifies the confusion of locating the correct Skype account:

Wednesday September 28, 2021: FORGE for humanity office

> I look at his Skype app and he tells me that there are δύο [two] accounts: predictably, neither is correct…I count the calls he's made on *Asylum.Service.Urdu.Greece.Gov* and *asylum service urdu punjabi*. In total, 85 calls to the wrong addresses over three months. He also messaged the Skype accounts: 'sir g 2o2o k rabta kr rhy hn mhrbni krn koi jvb to dain' and 'Sir ak saal sa rbta kr rha hn ap call ni utha rhy urdu asylum pr.' [*This is a written form of spoken Urdu. The translations are:* 'Sir I've been trying to contact you since 2020, I would really appreciate if you could at least do me a great favor in replying back something to my repeated outreach' and 'Sir

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NGO staffers, GAS workers, and supranational bodies. A page on the UNHCR website that has since been taken down read: "Warning: Skype Fraud to Make an Appointment with the Greek Asylum Office. We are aware that fake SKYPE accounts are being used to mislead asylum-seekers into thinking that they are contacting the Greek Asylum Office. Access to all asylum services, including SKYPE, are completely FREE of charge. Official staff of the Asylum Office do NOT request an exchange of services or money for these appointments. If you have been a victim of this scam, we encourage you to file a complaint with the local police authority" (UNHCR: Applying For Asylum, https://help.unhcr.org/greece/applying-for-asylum/. Accessed via the Wayback Machine).

> I've been trying for over a year to try to connect with you but you're not picking up my call on the Urdu Asylum.']

[105]

The applicant in this excerpt had spent three months calling two different accounts, neither of which was the Asylum Service account. The messages he wrote to the accounts show his insult and confusion at not receiving a response, although the sad irony that he would never receive a reply from the Asylum Service on these accounts was lost on him.

Taken together, the material presented in this section shows that the Skype app and the timetable that governs its usage are widely experienced as disorienting, which debilitates applicants' ability to access and understand the asylum procedure. A third and final element of the Skype procedure makes the digital encounter particularly intelligible. As previously mentioned, applicants must adhere to a strict temporal schedule, with the language-specific lines only opening for small windows of time each week. Outside of these hours, there is no possibility of contacting the Asylum Service on Skype. As GAS employees explained to me, the registration officers and their language interpreters only staff the Skype accounts during the specified hours, meaning that at all other times, the Skype accounts are offline. A perplexing oddity, however, is that the Skype accounts are sometimes offline during the designated call hours as well.

There were several sessions I facilitated where the line did not go live until well into the session, and many others where the Asylum Service never came online at all. This was most common on the Urdu line, but it also occurred with other languages. It was impossible to predict when and if the Asylum Service would come online, meaning it was impossible to predict whether or not applicants had any chance of connecting with the Asylum Service during the designated call hour. It was additionally unclear

[105] I am grateful to Professor Reena Kukreja for her assistance in translating this text. I am also grateful for her reflection that the deference to authority implied in the speaker's grammar implies that the speaker assumes there is an authority figure on the other side of the digital interface even though that figure is not perceivable.

why the line was offline, leaving applicants dumbfounded and angry. The calls drop after failing to connect, leaving the applicants with the following emoji on the screen:



Figure 4: Asylum isn't online

Screenshot from a Skype call taken by author

Below I provide an extended fieldnote reconstruction of a Skype session in which the confusion and frustration this shaped are evident. Note, for reference, that when the Asylum Service is online, applicants' calls ring and ring, but when offline, the calls make a beeping sound instead as the account tries to connect.

Monday November 15, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: Urdu session

> [12:00pm] We start calling on five laptops (the FORGE laptops, mine, and the one that they've brought). The line is offline as we call, and, as usual with Urdu, I'm nervous that it won't come online at all and I will have totally wasted their time. Raja shakes his head and says "I don't like this system," and I tell him that I don't either. They ask when it'll go online and I say I don't know. Raja says it's unfair to only have an hour in the day for Urdu calls and then not actually start on the hour/be late to an already limited and time-constrained session. A few minutes later Raja looks at his phone and says "12:05 and they are still offline," sounding not surprised but still disgusted. It goes online at 12:05pm right after he says this and he says "Ok let's do it. Jesus help us!" putting his hands together in prayer and looking towards the ceiling. After a few minutes I hear Yusuf's laptop connecting instead of ringing, and he says they're offline. I look, and he's been calling the Farsi line. I fix it, and the calls resume. Raja says: "Skype, come on, what is that

> system? No one knows." Yusuf mutters "*malakia*" [a Greek profanity/slang word used to describe nonsense, a waste of time, or stupidity].
>
> At 12:20pm the line goes offline, having only been on for 15 minutes. We keep calling, and I wonder if it's offline for the day. I note that maybe they hit their quota (do they have quotas?), or perhaps their WiFi broke, or maybe they just stopped for lunch. It's offline for a while and Raja laughs, and says "What a system!" We talk more about how unfair it all is and Raja says "They shouldn't do that [go offline] because they give us this time to call, it's unfair. So what about these people who are calling? What about the people who have been calling for a year? And someone can get through one time, then what about the people who have been calling for a year. It's unfair." We keep calling with it offline, and I tell them I'm sorry this is happening. "That's ok, this is not us mistake, they are fucking crazy so what can we do? But we hope the system soon change," Raja responds.
>
> The line comes back on at 12:33pm, which surprises us all. Yusuf says "Oh my God!" Raja says "Oh my God guys, come on, pick up just one call, please." Raja excuses himself to answer a Whatsapp call from his friend, and chats in the hallway for a while as we keep calling. Yusuf asks "Just only this way, call on Skype?" I say yes. "Why not receive call, why, why?" he mutters to himself as he presses call again. The line is offline again—it's been offline more than it's been online this session.
>
> Strangely, the line goes online again at 1:00pm, when the session is supposed to end and when the line usually goes offline. All our laptops start ringing at once. Yusuf is looking into the camera saying "come on, come on, come on," almost pleading, willing them to answer. I remark that it's very strange that they're online right now, especially after being offline for most of the session. I tell them they probably won't pick up since it's now after 1pm, but if they want to keep calling they can—it's up to them. Raja says they don't have anything else to do and they'll keep trying if that's ok, since they're online now and weren't before. We keep calling.
>
> At 1:13pm, all of our calls are declined, and the line goes offline. So strange…maybe they were compensating for being offline for most of the hour? I'm not sure. But did that mean the next line (Georgian) was offline for the first 13 minutes? It's impossible to know what's going on here.

I provide this account in extended form to show how confusion can unfold and amplify over the call hour, with moments of unpredictability punctuating the waiting experience. In the session above (and many other sessions) unknowability filled the call space. The applicants and I waited in states of not-knowing, continually expressing confusion and frustration as the Asylum Service went on and offline without explanation. Sometimes we filled the space with guesswork and speculation, and sometimes we sat in

silence, at a loss for words. There was, of course, no way to contact the government for answers:[106] the bureaucracy maintained its ghostly presence at a distance.

It was common during sessions for the applicants to look to me for answers, asking why the Skype account was offline and when it would come online again. Yet even as a researcher conducting a multi-year study of the system, I found myself completely baffled in these moments, unable to provide answers and starting to second guess myself. As I reflected in my fielotes:

Wednesday September 28, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: Urdu session

> Zeeshan arrives around 10:25am, and I invite him in to start calling, but he waits outside to have a smoke first. Classic—again we see time at play, in really interesting ways: he is already late, and is making himself later by indulging in a smoke, even though the thing he has come is very time sensitive. When he comes in, I tell him we'll start calling immediately to maximize the 30 min we have left. We start calling and the Urdu account is offline, at 10:30am. I check the schedule and the ID...did I put the right account in (asylum.service.urdu)? Maybe I somehow messed up the timetable? But no, it's the right account and the right time. They're just offline, halfway through the call.

Thursday Nov 18, 2021: *FORGE for humanity office: Urdu session*

> Farsi is still offline, and I double check the schedule, thinking maybe I got the time wrong and it's not actually the Farsi hour. I did this yesterday too when the Urdu line was off. I know the schedule like the back of my hand, but sometimes GAS' antics make me feel like I don't. The system can be so intelligible sometimes, even to me. But no, it's the right time, and for some reason it's not online.

[106] Whenever the line was offline for most of the session, I generally called the Asylum Service (on a landline phone) to complain. Each time I was presented with a list of options and after clicking the option to speak with an agent, elevator music preceded an automated message that explained that the Asylum Service was unable to take my call. The call then terminated. A similar dynamic occurred when trying to seek answers in person. FORGE lawyer Valia Charalampopoulou once went to the Katehaki Asylum Service office to ask questions about why the Skype lines were offline, but was not allowed inside. "Even as a Greek lawyer, I couldn't get in" she told me. "They are unreachable."

The digital procedure presents as illegible to all who engage with it.[107] In her 2014 book on the Greek Asylum system, Cabot writes of the "unpredictable, even nightmarish 'magic' of the state" that confronted asylum seekers through indecipherable policy implementation, with effects of confusion, disorientation, and frustration on migrant communities and aid workers alike (p. 52). I find a similar dynamic with the Skype procedure, though unlike in Cabot's case, I find that it stems from the disorienting effects of a digitally unreachable and unreadable state. Digital illiteracy, the inaccessibility of the Skype timetable, and the unpredictability of whether or not the Asylum Service will be online during call hours shape deep confusion that is experienced as impenetrable and ultimately operationalizes state retreat.

This section has explored experiences of unknowability and confusion shaped by the reality of engaging with non-responsive digital bureaucracy. These experiences, I argue, are key to the Greek government's digital pushback.[108] The following section explores how experiences of unknowability and confusion shape social discourse, analyzing how the Skype procedure circulates in the talk of asylum applicants. As Gupta (1995) asserts in his seminal work on imagining the state, ethnographies of the state must interrogate both bureaucratic practices and discursive constructions of statehood: discourse is one of the primary channels through which "the state, citizens, and other organizations and aggregations come to be

[107] Aid workers across Athens expressed total confusion about the procedure, as did some members of the Asylum Service, who viewed the procedure as frustratingly mystical. For example, Valia went to Katehaki because all of the Skype lines had been offline for weeks in a row and she wanted to ask what was happening. The staffer she spoke with at the Info Box said, "We have nothing to tell you because it's a big issue and we don't know what's happening." At times Asylum Service staffers seemed unbothered by these issues. One day at the Neos Kosmos Asylum Service office, for example, I approached an Asylum Service worker who was calling out names from a clipboard and told her that the Urdu Skype line hadn't been online for weeks. She said that she didn't know anything about it, and to go ask at Katehaki (the main Asylum Service office). I told her that the Bangla line had also been offline and she nodded, saying "Μπενγκάλι Skype δεν λειτουργεί" [*The Bengali Skype line doesn't work*]. I asked her why not, and she replied: "Δεν κάνουμε ραντεβού για άτομα που μιλούν Μπενγκάλι" [*We don't do appointments for people who speak Bengali*]. I asked why they keep Bengali on the Skype timetable if they have no intention of registering Bengali speakers, and she simply shrugged, said she didn't know, and walked away.

[108] See Tazzioli (2022b, 2022c) on governance through disorientation.

imagined" (p. 376). Following Gupta, I consider how Skype is mythologized in speech and how those discursive engagements abstract state meaning from seemingly meaningless bureaucratic encounters.

5.4 Discursive Constructions: Speaking the Skype State

In early October 2021, I visited Eleonas refugee camp. Accompanied by my French interpreter Alex, I wandered without direction, speaking to various inhabitants and asking if they had ever heard of or engaged with the Skype procedure. Soon a crowd formed, perhaps because some of the inhabitants assumed I was a lawyer (I quickly dispelled this myth). I explained my research and one by one, people expressed either confusion, apathy, or resentment of the Skype procedure, until one man stepped forward to say that he successfully pre-registered on Skype. He had called weekly from January 2021 until his call was answered in July of the same year. "Skype told me to bring medical papers," he explained, recounting the brief conversation that occurred and asking which papers he should bring. After we chatted some more, he asked: "Will Skype give me a white card at my appointment?"

As this conversation continued, I noticed a woman peeking her head out of the container-like structure she resided in. We made eye contact and she waved me over, tentatively at first and then with enthusiasm. I excused myself to meet the beaconing woman, who told me she was Iranian and had two young daughters (who peered out shyly from behind her skirt). "I need Skype!" she proclaimed. Assuming she was requesting assistance with downloading the app, I explained how to download Skype and make an account, but she shook her head and pulled out her phone, the cracked screen displaying a seemingly endless record of Skype calls. "Skype doesn't answer me," she said. "You help me get Skype?" I responded that regrettably I could do little more than share the most updated schedule and check whether she was calling at the right times. "You call Skype for me?" she asked. When I explained that applicants have to register themselves, she walked wordlessly back into her unit. As I left to re-join Alex, another woman approached me and said simply: "A lot of people here need Skype."

In these quotations, the Skype procedure is consistently conflated with the telecommunications product that platforms it. These discursive engagements are rife with ambiguity. When the man who successfully pre-registered asked whether Skype would give him a white card, was he actually asking about Skype (the Microsoft product), or did he mean the Asylum Service? When the Iranian mother asked if I could help her "get Skype," who or what did she want me to get for her? And what exactly did the third woman mean when she said that people "need Skype?" Was she saying that they need a reply from the Asylum Service Skype accounts, or that they need asylum, a legal protection that could only be accessed through Skype and therefore took on new associations? Or perhaps none of these proposed interpretations are correct, and the word Skype had been "vitalized" (Cabot, 2014, p. 56) with social meanings unknown to me.

Cabot (2014) explores the meanings and associations (which she calls "lives") that asylum documents gain. As she explains, social lives and discourses are epistemic practices that allow asylum seekers to "make sense of each other, the law, the state, and bureaucracy" (2014, p. 9). In her book on immigration bureaucracy in Italy, Anna Tuckett (2018) also finds that while encountering bureaucratic systems, migrants draw upon "their own understandings of the legal processes that blur[] 'official' and 'unofficial' versions of law" (p. 53). For both scholars, exploring the social lives of bureaucracy allows understanding of meaning making, subjectivity, and power. I take a similar approach, considering the discursive trajectories of the Skype procedure as illuminative of digital bureaucracy and those who engage with it. Tsing (1993, p. 25) writes that "the magic and power of the state are formed in everyday discursive practice;" I attempt to locate the magic and power of digital bureaucracy (and digital pushbacks) in the everyday discourse of asylum applicants.

Literature on the anthropology of the state approaches states not as perfectly ordered, rational, and unified entities, but rather as disjointed constructs "suspended between a rational and magical presence" (Das, 2006, p. 163). Ethnographic approaches attempt to understand the everyday workings and experiences of this hazy state-construct. The focus of these inquiries is not primarily on public statism, ritual, iconography, or spectacles of power, but rather on the quotidian practices through which 'the state' comes to be imagined and interpreted (Blom Hansen et al., 2001). According to this literature, the state is not merely a collection of rationalities or institutions, but is also something that "lives on in the fantasies of its subjects" (Navaro-Yashin, 2002, p. 5). In other words, the state is comprehended and constituted through the ways in which it is imagined. States can thus be studied in terms of myth (Blom Hansen et al., 2001), fetish (Nuijten, 2004), fantasy (Navaro-Yashin, 2002), discourse (Mitchell, 1999), and magic (Das, 2006), all of which help scholars answer the question phrased by Aretxaga (2003, p. 395): "How does it [the state] become a social subject in everyday life?"

A key way that the state materializes is through bureaucracy. Far from the rational model Weber predicted (Beck Jørgensen, 2012), bureaucracies in practice are unpredictable, uncertain, and messy, which has destabilizing effects on those who engage with it while vitalizing the state with mystical, unknowable associations (Das, 2006; Hoag, 2010). Scholars note that states and bureaucratic procedures are often illegible (Das, 2006), resulting in both bureaucrats and beneficiaries of bureaucracy experiencing the state as inscrutable (Eule, et al., 2018; Hoag, 2010). This is particularly pronounced in settings of migration control, where bureaucracy tends to be characterized by anxiety, misinformation, randomly changing policies, lost documents, protracted waiting, and other disorientating effects that can imbue bureaucratic authority with "phantasmal dimensions" (Cabot, 2014, p. 52; Hoag, 2010; Rozakou, 2017; Tuckett, 2018). All of these encounters are key to producing "state effect" (Mitchell, 1999), or the practices, technologies, and objects through which the state transitions from an abstract concept to a tangible presence in people's lives.

As Gupta (1995, p. 378) writes, for most people "the most immediate context for encountering the state is provided by their relationships with government bureaucracies at the local level." Citizens (and noncitizens) experience state power through seemingly mundane encounters in spaces like the tax office, the welfare office, housing authorities, the post office, visa processing centers, the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles), and more (Auyero, 2012; Sheehan, 2018; Tuckett, 2018). Anthropologists note that government and states become knowable through materialities such as documents (Gordillo, 2006; Gupta and Sharma, 2006; Hull, 2012; Tuckett, 2018), face-to-face meetings, and even "chairs, desks, buzzers, and teacups, the things that form the material infrastructure of the social relationships in the bureaucratic arena" (Hull, 2012, p. 66). For this reason, scholars have long focused on the physical interactions between street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) and the public in order to analyze how bureaucracies play key roles in processes of statecraft, national imagination, and inclusion/exclusion.

Physical spaces, objects, and people form material resources from which the state "comes to be imagined, encountered, and reimagined by the population" (Sharma and Gupta, 2006, p. 12). States become "multiplied [and] literalized" through bureaucracy and its infrastructure (Das, 2006, p. 178). What happens, then, when bureaucratic infrastructure is digitalized, or otherwise made intangible? If the material enables the state to materialize in everyday life, what results from processes of digital transformation that disrupt the materiality and territorialization of state presence?

As bureaucratic systems become more digitalized, the actors that govern them become less visible. In the Greek case, Skype emerges as "the sole visible face of the state for asylum applicants" (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 8). This was reflected in discourse. During my fieldwork, it was uncommon to hear my participants mention the Asylum Service. Skype, however, featured prominently in conversation. Perhaps the most frequent invocation of Skype stemmed from asylum applicants constructing Skype as their

object of hope and desire. Take for example Khanullah, an Afghan asylum seeker who came to FORGE to call on the Pashto line. As I set up three laptops around him, he turned to me and said, "Thank you for helping. It's a big opportunity to connect with Skype." I quickly scribbled his comment in my notebook, underlining the words "connect with Skype," which seemed to present Skype not as a channel of communication, but instead as the desired recipient of communication. Adnan spoke similarly, telling me over coffee: "If I have an opportunity to call to Skype, I [will] tell him the problem. I tell to Skype my problem. If they attend my call, after this I get appointment, [I will] tell them my problem, and they'll fix it. You know?"

Khanullah's words can be interpreted in several ways: in discussing the opportunity to "connect with Skype," Khanullah might have been expressing gratitude for the opportunity to call Skype itself (the telecommunications platform), he might have been conflating Skype with the Asylum Service, or he might simply have been expressing gratitude that FORGE provides laptops and WiFi so that he could have access to Skype calls. Adnan personifies Skype with less ambiguity, constructing Skype as someone or something capable of receiving his call, listening to him, and fixing his problems. This discursive practice was extremely commonplace: my participants frequently told me that they hoped for a reply "from Skype," and that their problems would go away if "Skype" attended to them.

This opaque Skype actor was not only constructed as a figure of hope but also as a figure of blame. "Why doesn't Skype answer me?" asked Yunusa, an asylum applicant from Gambia: "Skype is my big problem. How do I get them to answer me?" Abdul Karim told me: "I'm starting to lose hope in Skype. They don't pick my call…we are calling Skype for us to be registered, but Skype, they are not picking. And we don't have access to go to Asylum office!" Junior complained "I'm calling Skype...they are doing nothing." Meanwhile an Afghan asylum seeker who left Athens to find informal labor texted me: "There should at least be at least one Skype staff member who can answer a phone call…there is no staff to answer."

In these instances and more, the telecommunications application that platforms bureaucratic border work seems to take on new meanings, and, crucially, new responsibilities.[109] One further anecdote proves illustrative. Kashem told me a story about someone who supposedly had an established line of communication with the people operating the Skype procedure and charged money to let applicants call from his phone. As he explained:

> K: "There was a man who had [the] contact number of the Skype office peoples and he was taking money from the people and giving them numbers to them and they will answer to his phone. I have seen this person, he had connections with Skype office peoples."

Taken literally, Kashem's account suggests that the middleman in question was engaging in a corrupt practice with Microsoft staffers. In reality, Kashem is referring to alleged backchannels within the Asylum Service. Skype —the word, the product, and the digital procedure—has taken on obscure and deeply contextual meanings stemming from technological mediation of the relationship between asylum applicants, their rights, and the state. The above quotations reveal deep confusion about the Skype procedure, resulting in social meanings that displace the Asylum Service and the Greek state as the institutions governing migrant life. Asylum Service staffers disappear in conversation as "Skype staff members" and "Skype office peoples"—or the nebulous "Skype" itself—surface instead.

These were not isolated instances. Reflecting upon the deep confusion she observes during call sessions, Jess explained to me that for most of the guys, "Skype is just a random pie in the sky," a fanciful entity they place their hopes on without fully understanding. Time and time again, people told me that they wanted to "apply for Skype," "have an appointment with Skype," "go to the Skype office," or receive a "Skype card" that would allow them to work and could be presented to the police. One individual even

[109] In her book, Infantino (2017) notes a discursive conflation between the Italian embassy and the visa application centers run by transnational corporations VFSGlobal and TLSContact that the embassy contracted. Her commentary focuses on how outsourcing border work to private companies can obscure understandings of power and displace responsibility away from the state.

asked me for "Skype's landline number," communicating confusion not only about who Skype is, but what Skype is.

This confusion arises from the disorientation shaped by a non-responsive digital bureaucracy[110] as well as the linguistic choices made by the Asylum Service. The previously mentioned language of "call Skype" is notable not only for its frequency but also its dismissive implication: Asylum Service staffers instruct applicants to "call Skype," rarely saying "call us on Skype." While this is most likely a linguistic shortcut stemming from lack of native fluency in English as opposed to an intentional tactic of distancing, my data suggest that this rhetorical engagement reflects and reinforces a disorienting cognitive distinction between the Asylum Service and the Asylum Service's Skype procedure. By saying "call Skype," Asylum Service officers construct a border actor who can be considered responsible, allowing them to point elsewhere while "detach[ing] themselves from the negative consequences of the implementation of restrictive reception policies" (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 10). In doing so, they seem to deflect responsibility away from themselves and towards applicants (who must simply have patience and keep calling) and Skype.[111]

As they attempt to make sense of realities they perceive as senseless, asylum applicants talk about Skype in ways that reflect both the murkiness of digital bureaucracy and the way that Asylum Service staffers talk about Skype. I say that the language of "call Skype" *reinforces* a cognitive distinction rather than

[110] Just as the non-responsiveness of the Asylum Service creates confusion about which Skype accounts to call, so too does it create confusion about what Skype is. I noticed, for example, that it was common for the guys to call their friends on WhatsApp, perhaps to invite them to attend a Skype session or for some other reason. If their friend didn't pick up the call, they would turn to me and say, for example, "Amin didn't pick up my call" or "Mohammed is not answering right now." I never once heard someone say something to the effect of "WhatsApp didn't pick up" or "WhatsApp is not answering." This is most likely because 1) they know who they are calling on WhatsApp, and 2) the application in this context facilitates communication between caller and recipient (instead of hindering it). If my participants rarely received replies to their WhatsApp calls, WhatsApp would likely take on new social meanings as well.

[111] Infantino (2017) argues that states outsource policy implementation to private actors in order to displace responsibility onto non-state actors. She notes that "physical remoteness is paired with the relocation of state responsibility" as policy recipients come face-to-face not with state actors but with private actors implementing state policy (p. 77). Her argument does not map perfectly onto the Greek case as the Greek asylum procedure is platformed but not implemented by a private actor, yet her insights are useful nonetheless, highlighting how distance, disorientation, and displaced responsibility go hand-in-hand.

produces a cognitive distinction because distance from the state is not merely a discursive construction. It is, rather, baked into the phantasmic experience of attempting to pre-register on Skype. Instead of calling from administrative offices, applicants call from wherever they have internet connection, and instead of street level bureaucrats, their claims are met with automated ringing. Skype, and not the Asylum Service, has the dominant presence in the call space.

Applicants begin the bureaucratic encounter not by joining a queue or walking into a government office, but by logging onto the Skype application. Instead of hearing voices of the state, they hear the recognizable ring of Skype calls and engage with the Skype interface (featuring the Skype logo) during the entirety of the encounter. The Skype interface dominates visually and auditorily, while the Asylum Service is relegated to the fine print of the account name entered at the beginning of the hour.[112] Even when the Asylum Service does answer a call, it leaves its camera off, leaving the lucky applicants to encounter a disembodied voice emanating from the Skype application. As Moullel noted with frustration, "If they answer you, you will not even see the person!"[113]

The procedure is not bound spatially, materially, or visually to state spaces. This makes the state difficult to locate for applicants. Granted, the Skype usernames for each language are formulated around the Asylum Service (for example, asylum.service; asylum.service.pashto; asylum.service.farsi.dari), signaling that the call recipient is in fact the competent authority on issues of asylum in Greece. However, there are

[112] I observed that most often, applicants do not enter the Skype username multiple times. After calling once, they simply continue calling the same account. While looking at people's record of calls, I even observed that some called the wrong username for weeks to months.

[113] As with physical pushbacks, the violence of the Greek digital pushback is clandestine. Scholars note that pushbacks are "deliberately concealed" from the public eye (Davies et al., 2022, p. 4; Stefan and Cortinovis, 2021), taking place at night, in remote areas, or only when there is no one watching. The bordering practice is "practically invisible, thus rendering scrutiny fundamentally weak" (Koros 2021, p. 241). Reports indicate that pushbacks are most often administered by agents wearing balaclavas and other face coverings to conceal their identities (BVMN, 2020; Koka Veshi, 2020). In these cases, the actors doing the 'pushing' are hidden, and the people being 'pushed' are unable to perceive who exactly is enacting violence upon them. The Skype procedure operates with similar obscurity.

no other apparent indicators that the platform is aligned with a governmental service. The state retreat discursively implied in "call Skype" (ie. don't call the Asylum Service, call 'Skype') is reinforced by a disorienting digital landscape devoid of cues as to the relationship between Skype and the state. As this chapter has shown, the effect is confusion, displaced responsibility, and the seeming insertion of an intermediary actor.

It is important to note that while the vast majority of individuals I engaged with discursively conflated 'Skype' with either the Asylum Service, the Greek state, or notions of international protection, this was hardly ubiquitous. That the word 'Skype' has taken on widely shared meanings in the Greek context does not mean that those meanings are shared by everyone. Take the example of Serge, a Congolese asylum applicant who came to one Skype session at FORGE. From the start of the session, Serge distinguished between the Skype platform and the people he hoped to connect with on Skype. "I call for help from the Asylum Service," he said. "I'm wondering what asylum means with Skype. It means nothing." Here Serge constructs the Asylum Service as the object of his desired validation, and notes the futility of accessing asylum on Skype. His language of "asylum with Skype" as opposed to "asylum from Skype" signals a clear understanding of Skype as the platform and Asylum Service as the actor. Speaking about the Asylum Service, he continued:

> S: "The Skype system is from them because they organize their administration so it's their choice. They did this to facilitate the access to the Asylum Service because they could have chosen another way, like send[ing] an email but you would never have an answer if you keep sending and sending and sending but actually it's the same with the Skype service because you call and call and you never get an answer."

Serge presents the Asylum Service as an agentic body ("it's their choice"), and interprets Skype as a tool strategically employed by GAS administration, one that has the same effect as unanswered emails. Others communicated similar understandings. Christian discussed "call[ing] through Skype" (as opposed to "call[ing] Skype"), and referred to the digital system as the "Skype system to call the asylum."

Ali, an asylum applicant from Iran, told me: "I've been trying to connect with the Asylum Service in other ways, not Skype." Jean-Claude, a Congolese asylum applicant, similarly drew a distinction between Skype and the Asylum Service, saying that the problem is not Skype but "the system of asylum. It's just a service [Skype]. We call and they should answer."

In these cases, my participants expressed awareness that Skype is merely a telecommunications channel that platforms government work. This signals that not all who engage with the Skype procedure are completely disoriented by it, showing the disparate outcomes resulting from attempts to see past the veil erected by the Greek Asylum Service's digital bureaucracy. The point is not to argue that digital bureaucracy always results in total delusion, but rather that it can result in a blurring of legibility that gives way to complex processes of individual meaning making. This illegibility is produced by a messy arrangement of digital bureaucracy, spatial (re)ordering, and abandonment. In turn, this produces disorientation, a faceless state, and the cognitive primacy of Skype as an actor. If the state can be located in public discourse (Gupta 1995; Mbembe, 2001), then among asylum applicants in Greece, the state is both found and disappeared in discussions of Skype.

In summary, the digital nature of the Skype platform combines with the distance from the state it structures and the absence it allows to blur understandings of both Skype and the state. This mixture of inaccessibility and illegibility are vital elements of the Greek government's digital pushback. The disembodied administration of the Skype procedure hides behind a screen, the inner machinations of its pushback cloaked in digital disguise. A black box to applicants and aid workers alike,[114] the digital system reveals very little and blurs the relationship between the state, its would-be subjects, and the technology that platforms the absent encounter. The Skype procedure and the landscape of its violence takes on a

[114] The NGO staffers I interviewed all expressed confusion about the Skype procedure and deep frustration at their inability to predict whose calls would be answered, when, if the lines would even be online, and by what logic decisions were made regarding the Skype procedure.

"magical presence" (Das, 2006, p. 163), one that stems from its illegibility, the spatial ordering it imposes (ie. distance from the Asylum Service), the institutional abandonment it enables, and the social meanings it acquires. Asylum applicants are held at digital distance but are unable to discern what or who pushes them back. They thus engage in tenuous guesswork, locating the face of the state in a nebulous actor called Skype. In Pradeep Jeganathan's words (2004, p. 70): "I can think of no better place where the state performs the magic of its illegibility with such breathtaking precision."

5.5 The Absence and Absurdity of Digital Bureaucracy

Due to its digital interface and the distance it sustains, the Skype procedure is experienced as messy, illegible, and mystical, giving way to complex processes of meaning making. This is not, of course, entirely specific to the Greek case: migration bureaucracies around the world have been studied for their incoherent, inconsistent, and illogical practices (Cabot, 2014, p. 52; Hoag, 2010; Rozakou, 2017; Tuckett, 2018). I demonstrate in this section, however, that the processes of meaning making shaped by such illogical practices exemplify an underexplored element of digital bureaucracy: absurdity. Encounters with the Skype procedure shape surreal realities whose effects stretch beyond mere confusion or intelligibility and into the realm of the absurd. In "taking the absurd seriously" (Phelps, 2018), I consider the cruelty of irrational violence that masquerades as rational bureaucracy. By making asylum applicants wait in states of extreme disorientation for something that will unlikely come, the Greek digital pushback conditions confusion and intelligibility that is experienced as existentially oppressive. Asylum applicants are taunted and haunted by something they can neither see nor understand but nonetheless remain bound to. This has destructive effects on individual applicants while ironically serving to legitimize the absent and absurd asylum procedure.

In discussions of bureaucratic procedures, the word "absurd" is often invoked but loosely employed.[115] Eule et al. (2018), for example, conflate "bureaucratic absurdity" with unpredictability, arbitrariness, obscurity, and confusion. There is, however, a rich intellectual history in absurdist literature and theater that imbues the term with specific meaning and the potential to illuminate the power of the Greek government's digital pushback. This tradition is widely associated with the writings of philosopher Albert Camus, who uses the notion of absurdity to describe the relationship between humans and the world. It is fundamentally absurd, Camus mused across his writings, for humans to seek meaning in a world of meaninglessness, and any attempts to try to understand or rationally explain the world will necessarily be futile. As he writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1942, p. 15).

Camus was heavily influenced by the literature of Franz Kafka, a novelist whose writing is often cited in bureaucratic scholarship. Kafka's work spotlights characters experiencing crises of meaning, and it finds absurdity (and dark humor) in the attempts of individuals to make sense of systems that seem indifferent to humans and the human need for meaning. His tragicomic novels such as *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926) feature characters navigating senseless bureaucratic systems that are defined by obscurity and interminable waiting for deliverance from affliction. In these tales and more, bureaucratic experiences are considered absurd in their tragic hopelessness, and in the tragic hope maintained by those who continue trying to navigate them.

Kafka's work provides insight into the "enigmatic, contradictory, and dystrophic aspects of modern bureaucracy" (Hodson et al., 2013, p. 1252), as well as the "socially constructed meaninglessness, managed inaction and taught helplessness" shaped by absurd bureaucratic encounters (Clegg et al., 2016:

[115] For an exception, see Sutton and Vigneswaran (2011).

169). This explains the popular usage of the term *Kafkaesque* to refer to bureaucratic encounters that are "fuelled by contradiction, irony, despair and futility, [and] characterized by a dark enigmatic shadow cast such that nothing is ever what it seems to be yet what it might actually be is never revealed" (Clegg et al., 2016, p. 158; see also Beck Jørgensen, 2012; McCabe, 2015). Kafkaesque systems are characterized by unpredictability, chaos, ambiguity, and, more than anything, a sense of absurdity that stems from "impenetrable forces of labyrinthine complexity; forces that might rip us from our beds at night without charge or explanation" (McCabe, 2015, p. 62).

Absurdist work, then, seeks to demonstrate how disorientation and unknowability can be experienced as oppressive. The absurdist lens indicates that those encountering Kafkaesque bureaucracy are not merely aggrieved by it, but are tormented by it: the lack of rationality, the weight of meaninglessness, and the inability to escape either contributes to mental anguish akin to the psychological torture described in the previous chapter of this dissertation. This is also apparent in the Theatre of the Absurd, which refers to a tradition of plays largely written in the wake of World War II that present the nightmarish realities of characters whose worlds are defined by anguish and absurdity (Esslin, 1960). Associated with the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov (among others), these pieces staged futile processes of meaning making similar to those captured by Camus and Kafka. Like its literary counterpart, the Theatre of the Absurd is "preoccupied with the idea of the 'void,' the struggle to find meaning in a world empty of sense" (Starkey et al., 2019, p. 596).

Ideas of meaninglessness and voids are particularly evident in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), in which the two main characters spend the entire play waiting for someone (or something) named Godot who sends word that he will arrive but never actually does. The expectation of Godot's eventual arrival is central to the play, as is the notion that the figure's arrival will bring salvation, even though Godot's identity is unknown. The thing that is expected—the thing that was promised—never actually

materializes ("*Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow*" a messenger tells the two men towards the end of the play).[116] The men continue to wait and wither, to wither and wait, wondering who they are waiting for, why they must wait, and when their torment will end. This and other absurdist plays employ seemingly endless repetition, circularity, mundane moments, and incoherence to highlight the existentially crushing nature of absurd realities, the cruelty of unmet expectations, and the inescapability of alienation. In doing so, they challenge audiences to find meaning in nonsense by perceiving, naming, and analyzing absurdity (Hussain, 2012).

This challenge can be fruitfully applied to the study of digital pushbacks. Which elements of the Skype procedure are absurd, and what does their absurdity reveal?[117] The data presented in this chapter show that there is something pointedly absurd about not being able to perceive the state while making claims upon it. Asylum applicants cannot see who they are calling on Skype, do not know if their call will ever meet human interaction, and must stare, for hour-long periods, at a digital application that bears the markings of a private enterprise.[118] Meanwhile they encounter baffling oddities that defy rationalization (such as the Skype account going on and offline at random). Considering the absurdity of this waiting event reveals not only that the digitalized asylum procedure shapes confusion, but that the confusion it shapes is experienced as oppressive, taunting, and annihilating.

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[116] See also Gao Xingjian's absurdist play *The Bus Stop* (1981), in which the characters similarly wait for something they are told will arrive but never does. Note that absurdism is often considered a European phenomenon, but there are robust intellectual traditions stemming from other regions and cultures. See Xie (2020) for reflection on Chinese absurdism, and McGinley (2023) for discussion of Black intellectual thought and the Africana absurd.

[117] In connecting absurdity with the study of borders, bureaucracy, and violence, I draw inspiration from Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains.* Omid Tofighian, the philosopher who translated Behrouz Boochani's 2018 book *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus Prison*, describes Boochani's account of indefinite detention and his rendering of it as one of "horrific surrealism." Tofighian employs the term to foreground the horrors of Boochani's experience as well as the elements of absurdity that characterized both the subject matter and Tofighian's reproduction of it. According to Tofighian, "the surrealist lens creates new knowledges" by highlighting the "disrupted, fragmented, disjointed and shattered nature of the experience." To consider the surreal elements of suffering is to foreground the "ridiculous quality" of a waiting experience, and the elements of absurdity that "can be tapped into in order to unlock new levels of meaning" (Bennett and Tofighian, 2020, p. 750).

[118] Scholars note that e-governance increases citizens' expectations of the government's ability to deliver timely and quality services (Mergel et al. 2019; Twizeyimana and Andersson, 2019). In this case we see the opposite, as well as the absurd reality of waiting for something that will unlikely come.

Absurdist literature and theater explore futile searches for reason, and throughout my fieldwork, I continually observed my participants search the Skype procedure for any form of reason. Like the protagonists in *Waiting for Godot*, asylum applicants wait painstakingly for a mystical presence to reveal itself, and are left in the meantime to engage in practical and existential guesswork regarding the duration, nature, and perpetrator of their neglectful torment. I received varied responses when I asked my participants who they were calling on Skype, and more broadly, what Skype actually is. In terms of who they were calling, many people landed on Skype: they were calling Skype on Skype. When I pushed further to ask exactly who this Skype was, I was usually met with blank stares. Some told me that the United Nations answered the calls, while others told me that Skype is the United Nations. Kashem told me that "a Pashto interpreter" answers the calls, but that he didn't know who that interpreter works for. Moullel said he had no idea who is behind the Skype calls, and when I asked him to hazard a guess, he said: "I don't know if it's the UN or the Skype organization," before thinking more and suggesting that perhaps a Greek authority answers the calls "because I am on Greek territory." Very few confidently responded that Asylum Service staffers answer the calls, and that Skype is merely the platform. The most common reply (shared across nationalities) was one of uncertainty: "I don't know."

My participants continually advanced new theories as to why they were being ignored, and who exactly was ignoring them. Many asylum applicants from African countries suggested that "Skype" only answers calls from white applicants (by which they meant people from the Middle East or Asia), but not from Black applicants, ignoring calls on the French/English line while answering Arabic, Farsi, and other lines. "Skype is racist!" proclaimed Prince Meddo. Adnan and several other Pakistanis fiercely believed that only those who bribed the "Skype peoples," lawyers, or Asylum Service staffers to answer calls had any chance of getting through. Abdul Karim (who also characterized the Skype procedure as racist), said he and his friends think "Skype is on strike," because "the government stopped paying them like six months

[ago]...so that's why Skype is not working." When I pushed for clarification, he expressed that "Skype" is someone or something that works for the Asylum Service but is distinct from the Asylum Service; he wasn't sure exactly who or what, only that they must be waiting for money from the Greek government and were thus on strike.

In talking about "Skype," asylum applicants pull from the contextual resources available to them to try to make sense of state absence and a ridiculous digital experience.[119] The Skype procedure takes on new lives, as do the company that platforms it and the state that it shields. In the process, applicants legitimize the Skype procedure by making excuses for the state. Pre-registration is unavailable because "Skype" is racist and because "Skype" is on strike, not because the Skype procedure is an obstructive pushback technology that allows the Greek state to make itself unreachable. These dazed attempts to make meaning of their exclusion and the digital interface it stems from further insulate the state from accountability.

Reflecting on the absurdity of his indefinite detention on Manus Island, Boochani (2018, p. 209) writes that "The greatest difficulty is that no-one can be held accountable, no-one can be forced up against the wall and questioned, no-one can be interrogated by asking them, 'You bastard, what is the philosophy behind these rules and regulations? Why, according to what logic, did you create these rules and regulations? Who are you?'" According to Boochani, total obscurity has devastating psychological effects, inducing perpetual unknowability that "completely baffles…the mind of every prisoner is caught up with these perplexities" (2018, pp. 206–207). The absurd sensibilities present in Boochani's writing closely parallel the experiences explored in this chapter. In Athens I observed that my participants, like Boochani, were haunted by unknowability and disorientation. Kafkaesque and reminiscent of *Godot*, the

[119] It is notable that the discourses employed reflect wider dynamics the men encounter in Greece, such as racism, corruption, strikes, and neglect.

Skype procedure invokes absurdity as applicants are left to "suffer from a form of oppression, the origins of which are hidden from him" (Boochani, 2018, p. 2010).

In his memoir, Boochani takes his readers through a processual journey of making sense of the absurdity around him. Suspended in time, space, and obscurity, he attempts to understand the system of suffering that engulfs him, struggling to believe that his reality is in fact real. In poetic stanzas he writes:

> "*It isn't as though it is impossible to believe /*
> *It is just extremely hard to believe /*
> *It is painful to be in a situation where it is difficult to believe so many things /*
> *When an individual is in a situation in which it is difficult to believe that so many things are a certain way /*
> *…That situation becomes the cause of suffering*" (Boochani, 2018, p. 221).

For my participants, the Skype procedure was extremely hard to believe. In text messages and in person, my participants continually asked: "Is there some other way?," expressing distress and disbelief when I said no. They often called the system "fake," a "scam," or, as one Afghan asylum seeker told me: "It's a lie." And yet, they have to engage with the lie if they seek asylum or the affordances of registration. They have to let themselves be scammed. They have to show up again and again and again, presenting their real needs and real lives for validation from an absent authority they deem to be fake. In the process, they subject themselves repeatedly to mundane moments of exclusion that reek of political urgency, existential significance, and cruel absurdity.

The digital pushback engenders a type of suffering that stems from the insults above as well as the fact that the system is both obfuscating and obfuscated: it structures illegibility while itself remaining illegible. Like Beckett's characters, like the perpetual waiters of *Godot*, and like Boochani, my participants struggled to understand the system that dictated their suffering, confused about the length of their waiting and the mysterious entity that enforced it. The most punitive form of waiting, Schwartz (1975) writes, is that when a person is "not only kept waiting but is also kept ignorant as to how long he must wait" (p.

38). When people call on Skype to register for asylum, they confront a mixture of boredom, fear, and radical uncertainty. An agent of the state could appear at any moment, but it is entirely unclear when or if that will happen. In every session, at least one participant asked: "When will Skype pick my call?" It was, of course, an impossible question. A handful of the thousands of calls made during my in-person sessions received replies, and each injected the call space with shock and randomness. As my field notes recount from the first session in which I witnessed an answered call:

Thursday September 20, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: Farsi session

> I can sense Riz getting antsy by 10:30am. He's fidgeting, looking outside, looking around the office, etc. He's put his phone down on the desk instead of holding it in his hand to call. He had it pointed to his face previously, now the camera faces the ceiling. Mahmud has slumped a bit in his chair and looks tired. The laptop call ends and Riz stares at the floor for a while and plays with his hands before calling again: previously he would call immediately after. I can see the fatigue of calling play out on his body. I can't believe we've only been calling for 30 minutes, and I imagine he feels the session is long too. When the calls started his eyes were glued to the laptop, and now his eyes wander to everything except the laptop. I see him yawn behind his mask. Mahmud is resting his chin on his hand, cupped in his palm, like his head would fall to the desk without support.
>
> What happens next is a blur: as I write in post, I struggle to remember the exact moment it starts. The same nothing is happening, until suddenly, randomly, a commotion. Mahmud says something into the laptop and sits up straight. In an instance his entire demeanor changes: he is at attention. Malik leaps up. Riz straightens and stares towards Mahmud's computer. Mahmud takes off his mask. A male voice comes from Mahmud's laptop speaking Farsi, and I understand that what I deduced might be happening—but couldn't really believe—is in fact happening: the Asylum Service picked up. What I thought would be a celebratory moment actually feels incredibly tense. I am aware of my heart beating very fast. The guys look anxious too: here in front of them, the state.

There is neither rhyme nor reason to whose calls are answered (or when), which further fuels conditions of uncertainty. There is not even consistency with regard to what happens when the calls are answered: sometimes the Asylum Service worker registers only the person on camera, sometimes they agree to register everyone in the room, and sometimes they simply hang up, registering no one. In the session described above, only one individual was registered, leaving the others (who eagerly poked their faces into the camera in hopes of registration) frustrated and confused.

Bourdieu (2000) writes that "absolute power is the power to make oneself unpredictable and deny other people any reasonable anticipation, to place them in total uncertainty by offering no scope to their capacity to predict" (p. 228). The Greek Asylum Service exercises such power through its digital pushback. My participants continually expressed puzzlement over whether their calls would receive reply, when, and what would happen if that finally occurred. A mundane madness characterizes the Skype procedure and people's engagement with it. When attending Skype sessions, I observed, as Boochani did on Manus, "feelings of futility and absurdity and an overbearing terror begin to fuse in astonishing ways" (Boochani, 2018, p. 29).

Migration scholars have written convincingly on the manipulation of time as a tool of domination.[120] Vitalizing research on digital bureaucracy with insights from absurdist fiction allows for consideration of how digital pushbacks operate not only through temporal domination but also existential domination. Unlike other waiting techniques that structure uncertainty and anxiety about the future (Vitus, 2010), the Skype procedure structures uncertainty and anxiety about both the future and the immediate present. Applicants engaging with the Skype procedure are haunted by a sense of "not quite knowing" (Auyero, 2012, p. 79) that extends to the waiting event (the Skype calls), the waiting period (the wider process of attempting to receive asylum/documentation/regularization), and the powers that dictate both.

My participants expressed total confusion about almost every element of the digitalized system, revealing the absurd and exclusionary elements of digital pushbacks. "It's like a dream," explained an asylum applicant from Afghanistan. "You want to get asylum but no one will respond to your phone, but you need

[120] Particularly relevant is Melanie Griffiths' work on sticky, suspended, frenzied, and ruptured time (2014). In most Skype sessions, time seems *suspended*, in that it is "pointless and halted time [which] entrenches alterity" (Griffiths, 2014, p. 1998). At times, like in the above fieldnote excerpt, it becomes *frenzied*, with rapid and unpredictable acceleration that can contribute to destabilizing temporal *ruptures*. See also Jacobsen, 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2021; Lilja et al., 2019; McNevin and Missbach, 2018; Reneman and Stronks, 2021.

to try every week." The double meaning of 'dream' is noteworthy: dream as aspiration and dream as indecipherable fantasy. Perhaps a third meaning, dream as nightmare, is also implied.

5.6 Conclusion

> *"Trying to understand the perpetual flux of everything /*
> *Trying to avoid tipping over the edge /*
> *Trying to avoid tipping into insanity"* (Boochani, 2018, p. 208).

This chapter explored the Skype procedure in terms of the distance it structures and the absence it legitimizes. Whereas the previous chapter interrogated encounters with the Skype procedure, the analysis in this chapter focused on how digital bureaucracy restricts encounters with the administrative state. The analysis focused on how asylum applicants make sense of digital bureaucracy that they perceive as senseless, obscure, and impenetrable. I found that the digital nature of the Skype procedure makes the Greek state challenging to access and understand. A combination of digital obstructions (involving digital illiteracy, an inaccessible and oft-changing timetable, and confusing patterns involving the Asylum Service Skype accounts) conspire to make the experience of calling on Skype one of disorientation and illegibility. This unknowability is visible in (and simultaneously reinforced by) social discourse, with slippages in meaning between Skype and the state. The social meanings that the Skype procedure acquires muddle understandings of power. Redirecting applicants to an unresponsive digital platform branded with the logo of a private enterprise not only allows the state to hide asylum applicants from public view, but allows the state to itself hide from asylum applicants behind an intermediary border actor called "Skype."

Digital disorientation and state retreat are central elements of digital pushbacks. In the Greek case, the Skype procedure makes the administrative state unreachable, unknowable, and unaccountable. This shapes effects that stretch far beyond mere confusion or annoyance, molding cruel realities of inescapable irrationality and nonsense that afflict asylum applicants while legitimizing the asylum procedure. The digital bureaucratic landscape emerges as one of absurdity as baffled applicants struggle to apply rationale

to realities they experience as senseless. The absurd absence of the digital procedure reveals a tormenting bordering technique that shapes asylum applicants' relationships to the state and to themselves. As they return week after week to call "Skype" on Skype, they remain suspended in states of disorientation, disbelief, and dismay, haunted by a ghost they cannot—and may never—see.

Chapter 6
Deleting Skype: Exit and the Quiet Politics of Refusal

6.1 Introduction

Wednesday October 6, 2021, ANKAA office: English/French session

> I arrive at 8:40am and set up the laptops. Alex [my French interpreter] arrives at 8:50am, and we wait for the guys to come. We are still waiting at 9:30am, halfway through the session. No one comes. I sigh and pay him for his time.

Thursday September 23, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: Farsi session

> Today was a mess to arrange, as usual. The Pashto guys I invited didn't respond, nor did the Arabic, and most of the Farsi. I think we have just one person coming in, with an interpreter I wrangled last minute at 11:00pm last night. I'm pretty tired of this, of not being able to fill sessions and waking up to wait in an empty room.

Wednesday September 8, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> [At the end of the session] Prince Meddo stands up and says "am I done?"...He seems sad, but not angry. This was the expected outcome, afterall. I remind him to call every Wednesday and Friday from 9:00am–10:00am and he says "I only care about Wednesday." I ask him why he wouldn't call on both days, which would maximize his chances, and he laughs. "Maybe I have other things to do," he says, and I am struck again by the absurdity of what I am asking him to do: I am asking him to waste his time.

While conducting research in Athens, it was challenging to find individuals who were interested in engaging with the Skype procedure or willing to continually commit to calling. In particular, it was common to observe that my participants would gradually—or quite quickly—stop replying to my messages and stop attending sessions. In other words, I observed a prevalent and soon predictable discarding of the Skype procedure.[121] Throughout my fieldwork, I struggled to understand why so many people, when presented with one and only one pathway for legalization and social support, stopped calling on Skype. The procedure is harshly onerous and punishing, without doubt, but it is also for most people the only ladder that can lift them from limbo. *Why*, I asked myself, *are they giving up?*

[121] See Gruß's (2017, p. 11) discussion of "(In-)Significant Bureaucracies" for further consideration of migrants exhibiting lack of interest in registration processes.

Building upon literature that establishes refusal as a distinct political act from resistance and an agentic exercise generative of new possibilities, this chapter recasts the observed absences not as erosions of personal will or strength, but instead as a politics of refusal in which individuals refuse to allow themselves to be subjected to temporal, psychological, and existential harms. I argue that in the case of exiting the Skype procedure, refusal generates new social, personal, and geographic possibilities that make the experience of digital pushback more livable. I distill these possibilities into temporal, psychological, and existential typologies: refusal as reclamation of time, refusal as respite, and refusal as regaining control.

This chapter proceeds in three core parts. I begin by exploring literature on refusal as a political act. Next, I interrogate refusal in relation to time, psychological harm, and notions of agency and control. Finally, I consider the complexities and contradictions of refusal. My analysis reveals that choices of refusal are enacted through give-and-take evaluations as asylum applicants weigh the legal and material benefits teased by the Skype procedure against the immaterial benefits of dignity and agency that exiting the procedure can afford. These refusals comprise trade-offs whereby asylum applicants forfeit that which is desired (asylum, legal status) so as to reclaim that which is deemed of higher value and necessity (self-respect, control, humanity). These acts are strategies employed by asylum applicants to shield themselves from violence of the digital pushback, and I find that their embrace of non-recording and non-recognition can kindle meaningful processes of "self-recognition" (Ali, 2018, p. 22). However, I find these refusals to be incomplete and contradictory, allowing strategic maneuvers of personal agency while simultaneously sustaining ties to "illegality" and exploitation. In refusing the Skype procedure, people attempt to regain a sense of dignity, but they hold that dignity alongside suffering they further entrench. Refusal is not, in other words, a wholly emancipatory act; it binds as it frees.

6.2 Deleting Skype and the Politics of Refusal

Social scientists have long been taken by the concept of resistance, employing it in diverse settings to approach questions of domination, power, struggle, and agency. Defined broadly as a counter-hegemonic act in which subordinated peoples challenge the power of dominant groups (with the goal of social change and transformation), the term resistance has proliferated with convergence across disciplines (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Prasse-Freeman, 2020) in analyses of institutionalized, ubiquitous, and everyday forms of opposing domination (Foucault, 1978; Scott, 1985). However, scholars like Ortner (1995) highlight the limitations of resistance studies, pointing to what Weiss (2016, p. 355) refers to as "flattening effects" which fail to account for the political, cultural, and subjective richness at hand. The once-unified focus of resistance studies fractured, with scholars either attempting to revitalize the field or subsuming their scholarship under different titles (Theodossopoulos, 2014).

In recent years, a burgeoning scholarship has emerged that focuses on refusal as an act distinct from but related to resistance. Following Audra Simpson's 2014 monograph conceptualizing the assertions of sovereignty by Mohawk peoples along the Canadian-American border as political acts of refusal to acknowledge the authority of settler-colonial states, several scholars embraced refusal as a key analytic (Kowal and Paradies, 2017; McGranahan, 2016; Simpson, 2016; Sobo, 2016; Weiss, 2016). Though different scholars give different and at times conflicting meanings to the term, they all differentiate refusal from resistance, with resistance accepting a hierarchical power dynamic between the resisting oppressed and the resisted oppressor, and refusal asserting a relationship of equals (McGranahan, 2016). Bhungalia (2020, p. 389) articulates this difference as "I oppose you" (resistance) vs. "your power has no authority over me" (refusal). In synthesizing emergent refusal literatures, Prasse-Freeman (2020, p. 1) explains the distinction as follows: "Where resistance describes opposition to direct domination (sovereign modes of power, following Foucault's schema), refusal describes the disavowals, rejections and manoeuvrings with and away from diffuse and mediated forms of power (governmentality)."

Scholars theorize refusal as a productive act that generates new political possibilities and subjectivities. For example, McGranahan (2016) outlines how the refusals of displaced Tibetans to accept refugee status in South India generates fertile ground for claims of future Tibetan statehood and citizenship: refusal here articulates a political project of creation and hope. Bhungalia (2020, p. 400) discusses how refusal to perform fear allows Palestinians to laugh in and to the faces of their Israeli oppressors, generating reclamations of joy and an assertion that Palestinian affectivities are outside the reach of the apartheid state. McKee (2019) argues that refusals to pay water bills in Palestinian villages can summon an otherwise negligent state, and in a completely different context, Sobo (2016) reveals how in refusing to vaccinate their children, anti-vax parents produce new social affiliations and ethical performances. In each case, refusal is understood as abstention rather than opposition, and a means of forging political or social reinvention with an eye towards new possibilities of being.

Much of the literature on refusal focuses on settler-colonial contexts, often with respect to Indigeneity. However, the theorization has rarely been extended to a different kind of border-related violence: forced migration. What does a politics of refusal illuminate about the Skype procedure, migrant subjectivities, and the ability of undocumented individuals to forge their own spaces of agency without waiting for or demanding recognition from the state?

Many men I spoke with in Athens told me that they used to have the Skype application on their phones but had since deleted it. “I tried a lot with Skype when I first came,” said one of my Farsi interpreters from Afghanistan, “but nobody answered my calls so I deleted [it].” Izmo told me that he shares a room with seven undocumented men, all of whom have removed Skype from their phones: “They said ‘this app is occupying space in my phone, and I’m trying to call [but] they’re not picking my call, so it’s better to delete it.’” Raja emphasized that it’s rare to meet someone who still has the app, because people are

"tired." Sayyid, an asylum applicant from Afghanistan, certainly sounded tired as he explained that, "I tried once, twice, more than a hundred times, but nobody answered. Then I deleted the Skype."

Throughout my fieldwork, it became clear that people "deleted the Skype" in more ways than one, discarding not only the software from their mobile devices but also the Skype procedure from their lives. This was evident in unanswered WhatsApp messages I sent inviting individuals to Skype sessions, empty rooms as attendance fell off by week, call records on Skype accounts showing an atrophy in volume and frequency, and conversations outside of the Asylum Service and in refugee camps in which the Skype procedure did not surface unless I explicitly raised it. The following section engages this absence, exploring how individuals in Greece attempt to "delete" the Skype procedure from the temporal, psychological, and existential dimensions of their lives. It approaches these strategies as telling examples of refusal that highlight personal projects of reclamation and reinvention occuring in the shadows of digital pushbacks.

6.3 "I'm just wasting my time:" Refusal as Reclamation of Time

"*I get so very tired of calling. This is my life, if I spend all my life calling Skype it will be passed.*"
-Nabiullah

Wednesday September 8, 2021, FORGE for humanity office: English/French session

> Prince Meddo doesn't talk too much and I don't know what to say in this moment of continual rejection. Then he says something really interesting: **"**I told my friend I had this appointment and was going to call Skype and he was laughing. I said 'I'm going to call Skype and they're going to pick up.' He was just laughing. I said 'Why are you laughing, why are you laughing?' He was just laughing at me, laughing at me." As he tells this story, he laughs too, and I sense that he is laughing at the absurdity of the situation: he too seems to think it's crazy that he's subjecting himself to this, that he's wasting his time on something that isn't going to work. When they don't pick up, he doesn't get angry or even shake his head. He just laughs.

In almost every Skype session I held, participants bemoaned a strong feeling that their time was being wasted. For Prince Meddo, this feeling linked to a shared association his friends held with the procedure: they mocked him for trying to call on Skype, meeting his hope for a reply with laughter. "Why are you

laughing at me?" he asked them, but the answer was clear: they were laughing not at Prince Meddo, but at his willingness to have his time wasted. Our September 8th session marked Prince Meddo's first time calling on Skype since he had stopped months prior, and he expressed to me that he didn't blame his friends for laughing since he had previously left the Skype procedure and had himself laughed at those who remained. Speaking about his on-and-off again calling, he said:

> P: "They [people who call] have been calling but there's no answer, they've been calling several times. Sometimes I say 'this is no good, I'll never call again, I will not waste my time.' I don't know why they keep calling."

Prince Meddo's initial refusal to keep calling stemmed at least partially from a refusal to have his time wasted. He says as much: "I'll never call again, I will not waste my time." And yet, he did call again, highlighting the incomplete and non-concrete nature of the refusals I observed. Two months later, after several more call sessions together, Prince Meddo explained that he continued calling only because I reached out to invite him and he enjoyed feeling like someone cared about him. But mentally, he had exited the system, or at least deprioritized it, as suggested by his remark quoted at this chapter's opening that he would call on Wednesdays but not on Fridays because perhaps he had "other things to do." In an interview conducted at the end of October, he developed this further:

> P: "I don't have time to call them. I don't have patience, even one minute, to call Skype."
>
> S: "Because you're busy with work?"
>
> M: "It's not because I'm busy with work. I can call even when I'm at work. But I don't want to call them because they're not going to pick up, so I'm just wasting my time. And I don't want to spoil other things because of calling Skype. I think that I spoil things because of calling Skype and they're not going to pick. It's the most stressful. Ok for example, I'm at my job calling Skype, maybe the boss come out and saw me and sack me. Is Skype going to be responsible for me, or taking care of me? Or give me any needs for my own life? No. So I just lost my job of [for] calling Skype, for which there is no benefit. So it's very stressful, so that's why I don't waste my time calling Skype."

When Prince Meddo said he would call on Wednesdays but not Fridays, I interpreted his remark as displaying a lack of commitment. When he stated that he didn't have time to call on Skype, I assumed a

conflict between his work hours and the Skype timetable. Both interpretations were misguided. Prince Meddo technically does have time to call, but he doesn't have "even one minute" of patience for his time being wasted. Further, he worries that this particular usage of time could perhaps "spoil" other elements of his life, such as his employment, presenting a sorry situation for which "Skype" would provide no redress. Thus contextualized, Prince Meddo's refusal to keep calling constitutes a refusal to have his time controlled, and it generates renewed ownership over how and by whom his time is used.

Prince Meddo was not the only person to tell me he did not have time to call on Skype. In fact, it was common for individuals to state that they would call "if they had time," or that they were busy this week but would maybe try next week. At first I perceived this as ironic and slightly perplexing, because the same individuals who told me they didn't have time to call on Skype often complained about boredom, dead time, and having nothing to do; it was not uncommon for me to run into these very people playing on their phones in the park or drinking beer with friends, not looking the least bit busy. And even when people did agree to attend Skype sessions, they often came late or not at all. While some individuals came consistently early or on time, many others regularly arrived between 10–20 minutes late, or later. This too I found perplexing since the Skype lines are open only for 60 minute windows, windows which shrink substantially with each minute that passes.

At times this tardiness bore no apparent consequence, but sometimes late arrivals or absences were harder to swallow. The example of Stefan proves illustrative. Stefan stopped by the office late September to ask how to get documents after receiving two asylum rejections. He spoke with panicked urgency as he implored me to help him, explaining that he is a skilled football player who continually gets close to signing a contract with Greek football clubs until management asks for papers and everything unravels. "I need to play," he told me, explaining that football is his greatest passion and his only source of joy in

Greece. “Time just goes here. I’m not 13 anymore. I’m not 18 anymore. In sport age matters. I need to train and I cannot.”

His eyes moistened as we spoke, and I sensed Stefan was mourning a dream he was close to, a dream he was aging out of. I told him, as I told most people who asked for assistance, that he’d have to call on Skype to reinitiate his asylum process, and Stefan scoffed, saying “A lot of people try to call each day at the same time. Skype is the mother of luck.” I murmured my apologies for the difficult asylum system and invited him to attend the next session for English and French speakers. He thanked me and agreed. “I will be here tomorrow morning at nine o’clock,” he said.

I arrived at 8:30am the next morning to set up the laptops, and Amos, an asylum applicant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, arrived 10 minutes later. We started calling promptly at 9:00am, manning four devices between Amos, Alex (my French interpreter), and myself. Stefan was nowhere to be found, and I texted him at 9:07am asking where he was. Stefan read the message but did not reply. At 9:32am, Amos stiffened, and shouted “Bonjour, bonjour!” at the laptop. I leapt out of my seat. “Did they pick up?” I whispered, and Alex nodded, giving me a fist bump just outside of the camera’s frame. Amos pulled down his face mask so the Asylum Service staffer could take a screenshot, revealing a shocked smile. At the end of the call, Amos had a pre-registration number and an appointment for full registration in December. The three of us sat in what my fieldnotes describe as a “euphoric but also dazed” silence, processing the rare event that had just occurred. Soon we were laughing and cheering.

Stefan walked in at 9:42am, coffee in hand. We stared at him in silence, unsure who would break the news. “What?” he asked. I shuffled my feet and looked at the floor. “Why did you come late?” demanded Alex. Stefan shrugged and took a sip of his coffee. “They answered!” shouted Alex, “they just answered!” Now it was Stefan who stood in silence. I opened the laptops and pressed the call button on each, advising

Stefan not to give up on the remaining 18 minutes. He collapsed onto a chair and finished out the hour. When the session closed at 10:00am, I invited him to come to next Wednesday's session, and reminded him to arrive on time. He nodded, and said that he would. Stefan never came again.

Stefan's neglect of the Skype timetable clearly disadvantaged him that day, and on other days when the Asylum Service answered and Stefan was absent. In disengaging the Skype procedure, he removed himself from the only pathway from which he could conceivably access the rights and privileges of international protection in Greece. Months later, he accepted this reality and began the process of voluntary return back to Gambia.

It is easy, tempting even, to focus only on the negative consequences of temporal non-compliance, but that obscures the complicated ways in which showing up late (or not at all) can be understood as an act of self-preservation and a productive display of agency. I contend that a politics of refusal provides a useful analytic for understanding the choices that Stefan, Prince Meddo, and others made regarding their time, though I do not contend that these choices always resulted in emancipation. A lens of refusal adds texture to what otherwise masquerades as laziness or apathy, illuminating how disregard for the Skype timetable can constitute a powerful refusal to have one's time scheduled and paced by the Greek government. Put differently, disregard for the Skype timetable can be understood as a refusal to submit to the rhythms, tempos, and waiting patterns that are designed and demanded by the Greek digital pushback.

Literature on temporalities and mobilities establishes that migration is regulated not only through territory and legal status but also through time, with scholars increasingly calling attention to the temporal elements of mobility and migration governance (Fontanari, 2017; Griffiths et al., 2013). This scholarship highlights how states employ specific tempos as bordering tactics (Meier and Donà, 2021), shaping

mobilities and subjectivities through what Reneman and Stronks (2021) call “temporal governance,” or the disciplining of migrants through time.

A growing body of literature substantiates how temporal governance imposes specific speeds and cadences that structure migrant and asylum seeker life (Jacobsen et al., 2021; Tazzioli, 2018) through unpredictable tactics of deceleration, acceleration, or stagnation (Griffiths, 2013; 2017; Henriksson and Baaz, 2019; Jacobsen, 2020; McNevin and Missbach, 2018). As individuals engage with migration apparatuses, their time is increasingly ordered by a broad structure of actors and regulatory technologies whose clocks of control produce waiting and uncertainty, compelling bordered people to adhere to life paces and timelines they had little to no say in drafting (Bhatia and Canning, 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2021).

Border regimes govern migrant time and thus reduce migrant agency. As noted by Bhatia and Canning (2021, p. xvi), “this power is exercised by states and their representatives, supranational states (such as the European Union) and—increasingly in the context of neoliberal governance—by corporations.” This places individual time within a broader “power chronology” (Sharma, 2014) of control, where waiting is produced and maintained in relation to power relations and webs of migration governance. The border regime can thus be conceptualized as a “timescape,” a contested space of bordering in which temporalities are modulated and manipulated through administrative, bureaucratic, legal, and affective means (Adam, 2003; Meier and Donà, 2021).

In general terms, the Greek asylum procedure shapes migrant time much like how other states do, bureaucratizing international protection through tedious processes of legalization that involve lengthy interviews, obfuscated access to assistance, indeterminate waiting for appointments and decisions, and prolonged periods of detention (Tuckett, 2018; Yahya, 2021). But in practical terms, Greece’s mainland asylum system creates an additional timescape of waiting, one marked by a strange combination of

technological mediation, rigid yet randomly changing timetables, and sustained waiting that is sometimes indefinite and at other times interrupted. Of interest is the Skype procedure's overtly temporal architecture: it imposes a timetable upon asylum applicants, structuring their time according to the capacity of Greek Asylum Service interpreters and the political agenda of the government. Applicants cannot call the Asylum Service when they want to, but only when the government says they can.

Through the Skype procedure, the Greek state produces what I conceptualize as *temporal dispossession*, or the loss of ownership over one's time. This is most clearly exemplified by responses to morning Skype sessions. As previously mentioned, the Skype schedule opens with an 8:00am–9:00am window, followed by hourly sessions ending at 2:00pm. For individuals calling on the Arabic, Albanian, Hindi, Kurmanji, English-French, Pashto, Dari-Farsi, Farsi, Russian-Ukrainian, Urdu-Punjabi, Bengali, and Georgian lines, at least one session per week starts at or before 10:00am. This means, of course, that anyone calling on those lines needs to be awake at or before 10:00am.

With the exception of individuals who had found informal work in the mornings, everyone who attended early Skype sessions told me that they would be asleep if not for the session. Others told me that they set an alarm and called just one time per morning, before going back to sleep if there was no reply on the first ring. Still others confirmed sessions with me the night before, then didn't show up, their WhatsApp profiles revealing that they hadn't been online since the previous evening (suggesting that they were asleep). Several times individuals fell asleep mid-session, their heads resting on the laptop keyboard, the desk, or between their hands. They always woke up shortly later and apologized, saying that it was too early in the morning and that they were tired.

The men I worked with regularly woke late in the afternoon, often between the hours of 2:00pm and 4:00pm. Sometimes they awoke even later, sleeping into the evening. I recall one afternoon in which Jess

and I required the assistance of one of our interpreters, Abas. His WhatsApp had not been online since the previous night. Jess suggested calling repeatedly, like an alarm on snooze: Abas finally replied at 6:40pm, saying he had only just woken up. The sun had set, and Jess and I were heading home for dinner, yet Abas was just starting his day.

Some might find these sleeping patterns aberrant or peculiar, but they were not uncommon or without reason. The guys expressed that they sleep away the days to burn dead time, bypass boredom, hide from the police, or simply because of depression.[122] This points to a key way in which the Skype procedure strips people of ownership over their time: many of the guys would, if they controlled their own schedules, wake up late, perhaps after the entire Skype timetable closed and likely as a strategy of self-preservation.[123] Instead the procedure requires that if they want to register, they must wake up early, disrupting preferred sleep cycles and transferring ownership of morning hours from individuals to the Asylum Service.

Several migration scholars conceptualize the waiting imposed by border regimes as a form of theft (Bhatia and Canning, 2021). The lens of theft is particularly illuminating of the Greek context as it encourages reflection on the ways that the Skype procedure enables the Greek state to not only waste time, but actively dispossess asylum applicants of it (and of their agency over it). Most basically the Skype procedure steals by robbing people of sleep, but the Skype procedure steals more than slumber. The rigidity of the Skype timetable structures time by the government's clock, and in doing so, it forecloses personal usages of time during specific hours. In other words, Greece imposes a temporal servitude through the Skype procedure, a bondage of sorts. If individuals seek legal recognition and regularization, they must submit to the control of clocks they did not themselves wind. As my fieldwork

[122] See O'Neill (2017, p. 151) on the "somnolent escape" of homeless shelter residents who sleep the day away.
[123] Coutin (2000, p. 39) notes how in El Salvador, people slept through the days to avoid being captured by death squads. Sleep can be a strategy of hiding and shielding oneself from danger.

shows, this submission is accompanied by loss. The Skype procedure both squanders and siphons, forcing decisions of priority in which asylum applicants must decide if they would rather register for asylum or sleep, register for asylum or work, register for asylum or use their time as they please.

Within this landscape of theft and temporal harm (Canning, 2021, p. 116), refusal resurfaces as a useful analytic, highlighting how by exiting the system, asylum applicants contest a process of temporal dispossession and reclaim their time. When individuals decide to sleep in rather than call on Skype, or when they decide to go to a morning work shift instead of a morning Skype session, they choose their own schedules, their own wants and needs, over trying temporal obligations that were thrust upon them. Sleeping in is an embodied form of refusal, allowing asylum applicants to physically develop "counter-rhythms to the pacing of the state" (Byler, 2018, p. 201). Refusal thus allows individuals to "counter-temporali[ze] spaces of control and migration management" (Meier and Donà, 2021, p. 40), imbuing spaces of waiting and rejection with strategies of self-preservation.

This section opened with a quotation from Nabiullah: "I get so very tired of calling. This is my life, if I spend all my life calling Skype it will be passed." In the context of the preceding discussion, Nabiullah's words speak to a strategy of shielding oneself from temporal harm and dispossession. Approaching asylum applicants' relationship and adherence to the Skype timetable through the lens of refusal allows for consideration of what Meier and Donà (2021) call the *micropolitics of time*, which refers to "the ways in which different temporalities are used to articulate and negotiate state power in the context of everyday bordering experiences" (p. 39). In showing up late to Skype sessions or not calling at all, individuals like Nabiullah, Stefan, and Prince Meddo disrupt the temporal domination arranged by the Greek state, even if doing so limits (or entirely eliminates) their chances of receiving asylum.

Through their refusals, asylum applicants assert that their time is in fact theirs, and that it is more valuable than the promise of legal recognition. Those who choose to stop calling or to call only when they desire to (as opposed to when the government-produced timetable demands) contest both the asylum timescape and the submission that forced waiting entails. Theirs is a struggle of ownership, a struggle that does not entirely liberate from suffering, but does fuel renewed agency over time. Individual decisions about the Skype timetable highlight how temporalities are "sites of struggle and possibility" (Meier and Donà, 2021, p. 40), illustrating a micropolitics of time that enables and is enabled by a politics of refusal.

6.4 "I'm so tired:" Refusal as Respite

"*People get tired from this. To call anybody — even not Skype, anybody — if you call five to six times [without reply], you get tired, you mentally disturbed, you say 'oh, ok leave it.' People are going mad*."-Adnan

On a chilly night in November, I sat at a Pakistani restaurant with Kalla (one of my French interpreters) and Moullel. As Kalla ate a two euro chicken plate, Moullel sipped a soda and described his engagement with the Skype procedure. After escaping to the mainland from Kos, he called on Skype for one and a half years before stopping, and when discussing his experience with Skype, Moullel invoked a discourse of pain:

> S: "What made you decide to stop calling?"
>
> M: "It is something that makes you really feel pain, to be calling them all the time and they're not responding. I kept calling because I asked people how I could get papers apart from Skype, and they said the only way is calling Skype. But I really feel pains when they don't respond."
>
> S: "What do you mean pains, can you explain that?"
>
> M: "I am trying to say that it pains me because the people I'm calling have the responsibility to answer my call to have my papers, so I feel pains when the people who have the job are not doing their job. If the calls were busy, I'd understand, but the calls are ringing, I see them ringing and they are not answering, and that really discourages me. But if I were seeing someone was already online and you understand someone else got through already, but you're calling and they're not picking your call, they're ignoring you."

As Moullel and I discussed further, he continued to characterize calling on Skype as a painful act, citing both physical and mental suffering. He explained that he develops headaches when calling, and that his entire body swells with stress. Like others, he interpreted unanswered calls as personal rejection, and implicated this rejection in his poor mental health and suicidal ideation. In doing so, he used evocative language of affliction attributed to the specific moments in which he engaged with the Skype procedure:

> M: "The pain I feel when I call and they don't respond to me is why I'm thinking of killing myself. Why do I feel that kind of pain? Nothing is working for me and I'm trying to call those people, so afterwards I feel the pains of killing myself and everything. So after, when I sit and realize what I'm thinking, all that pain is like burning…it's like a burning pain in the heart and it feels very bad, all that I'm thinking. So it's like a pain. I really don't know how to explain, but it's really burning in me."

After relaying Moullel's words to me, Kalla said that he wanted to clarify something. In explaining his pain, Moullel had used a specific phrase: *ça me pique le cœur*. Kalla noted that in French, this phrase implies a hurt that goes beyond mere burning, and it was important I understood the depth of pain Moullel was trying to convey. He went back and forth with Moullel to discuss the phrase and land on an acceptable translation, before offering two options: "it stings my heart," and "it pierces my heart." We agreed that both translations were devastating. Shortly after, I ended the interview, concerned that talking more about the Skype procedure would prove emotionally destructive for Moullel. With his consent, I arranged to refer him to a psychologist, and we went our separate ways. But for days after, Moullel's words stayed with me: *ça me pique le cœur*.

The burning, stinging, and piercing pain that nearly drove Moullel to suicide but instead drove him to exit the Skype procedure was tied not simply to rejection but to specific rhythms of rejection.[124] Moullel's account makes clear that within the wider timescape of limbo and temporal harm in Greece are particularly acute moments of suffering, moments that shape timed patterns of pain. For Moullel, his

[124] In using the word rhythm, am influenced by Meier and Donà (2021, p. 52), who define rhythm as the "arrangement and order of different temporal experiences in time," as well as Griffiths et al. (2013, p. 17), who conceptualize rhythm as "variation that consists of regularly recurring or alternating phenomena."

"pains" increased markedly during Skype hours and in the anxious lead-ups and disappointed comedowns. His account exhibits how the Skype timetable structures more than time, structuring also cycles of anxiety and distress. These affects can be conceptualized as "emotional borderwork" (Meier, 2020), a taxing form of emotional labor that results from engagement with border regimes.

Chapter 4 revealed the Skype procedure as a deeply damaging tool of psychological harm, and psychological violence is painfully clear in Moullel's account. The purpose of this section is not to rehash the harms outlined in Chapter 4, but rather to focus on the embodied rhythms they shape[125] and the role of refusal in subverting those temporal arrangements. I argue that many asylum applicants in Greece employ exit as a strategy of safeguarding their wellness from timed cycles of psychological assault, with refusal generating marginally improved mental health and a break from the emotional borderwork that the Greek asylum system forces them to perform.

Many of my participants expressed that they experienced heightened levels of physical and mental discomfort, stress, anxiety, and depression while calling on Skype. They made clear that while they often grappled with these feelings, they reached a particularly dark and distressed headspace during the specific hours in which they made their calls. Momoh noted that the act of calling on Skype "makes me feel danger." When I asked for clarification, he said that calling makes him feel suicidal, echoing the sentiments of many of the men with whom I spoke. Mojtaba, who was homeless and sleeping in a nearby park, told me that when he calls on Skype, he "gets fed up with my life." He expressed that he feels especially suicidal while making Skype calls, and even when talking about the Skype procedure. The following excerpt shows how mere mention of Skype could trigger visceral responses of pain and emotional distress:

[125] In referring to embodied experience, I refer to both psychological and bodily phenomena, since many of the men I worked with described psychological harms and physical psychosomatic manifestations that were intricately linked to both mind and body.

> M: "I think it's better for police to arrest me and to kill me than this life of calling with no answer."
>
> S: "Tell me a little more about that, it's a very powerful statement and I just want to understand it. So you're saying you feel like it would be better for them to kill you than to keep calling and being ignored?"
>
> M: "Right now when I'm talking about my feelings to you, I think I will be blown up, you know? [He gestures with his hands over his head, mimicking an explosion]. It's too much pressure when I'm talking about this situation."

When I mentioned the Skype procedure, Mojtaba became visibly irritated and anxious. He fidgeted in his chair, his voice shook and quieted, his face contorted into an anxious taut, and he displayed through word and body that just talking about the procedure—let alone engaging with it—was enough to cause psychological pain and bodily discomfort.

> M: "Right now it's a kind of torture, right now talking to you my head will blow up [he taps his temple repeatedly with force]. I feel too much. When I'm talking [about Skype] I feel my head will be blown up."
>
> S: "Let's not talk more about it then. I don't want to bring more stress to you."

Clearly the system invokes emotional distress, and for some, physical discomfort. My fieldwork findings suggest that these maladies were particularly severe during the designated hours of calling and in the time immediately surrounding those windows. In other words, the Skype procedure allows the Greek state to impose a specific pacing of pain, repeating rhythms of suffering that transcend and compound the general temporal architectures of suffering commonly found in limbo settings. In addition to the widespread psychological and embodied harms of bordering that abound in contexts of precarity, "illegality," and waiting (Willen, 2007), the Skype procedure schedules recurring patterns of acute anxiety that inflict asylum applicants at the same times each week.

In their study on the waiting experience of forced migrants in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, Meier and Donà (2021) assess how specifically timed patterns of experience create specifically timed

patterns of affect. Their work highlights the emotional dimensions of waiting, and how legal and administrative structures create rhythms of affect that can be repeated ad nauseam or randomly disrupted. Such rhythm analysis holds relevance to the present discussion, calling for consideration of the affective rhythms that the Skype procedure thrusts upon asylum applicants.

The Skype procedure structures affective rhythms that are strictly aligned with the Asylum Service timetable. If the Skype calls occur on Wednesdays and Fridays from 9:00am–10:00am, for example, then so do the emotional and bodily responses that stem from calling. In setting a firm schedule for calling, the Asylum Service orders emotions such as anxiety, anticipation, boredom, stress, hope, disappointment, and frustration into distinct and reliable calendar arrangements. GAS thus creates tempos of feelings that organize specific affects of discomfort into predictable rhythms. These rhythms, though not always audible, were readily observable nonetheless. An excerpt from my fieldnotes paints the picture:

Wednesday October 13, 2021, ANKAA office: English/French session

> Momoh gasps sharply then throws his head into his hands: it's the kind of sound someone makes when they receive unexpected bad news, or a punch that knocks the wind right out of you. I leap up, unsure what's wrong. He's shaking his head back and forth in his hands, moaning "ohhh ohhh ohhh." Is he in pain? Did he receive a message on his phone that upset him, or scared him? "Are you ok?" I ask? "What happened?" His head is still in his hands, and he speaks through his fingers without raising his eyes to meet mine: "I call them on my phone too, not just laptop, and they're not picking up" he says with disgust, then raises his phone to show me the five calls he's made. He looks up at me, and I don't know what to say. "I know," I tell him, patting him on the shoulder. "It's horrible." He stares wordlessly at the record of unanswered calls while I reach around him to start the call again. Beside him, Prince Meddo has his head down on the table. He hasn't moved in a few minutes, and only looks up to press call, which he does with less and less urgency.

A variation of this scene played out every time that Momoh and Prince Meddo attended sessions. The point, however, is not the specific affective responses but rather how the Skype procedure orders such responses. Over time, I could predict which individuals would exhibit which emotional responses during call sessions. I knew that Momoh would exhibit anguish and despair, Behrouz would express anger, and

Kamal would panic. I knew that Michael would be hopeful, Abu would be stoic, and Bobo would anxiously count down the minutes ("twenty minutes left, guys!"..."only three minutes left!"..."one minute!").

This speaks to the routinization of affective suffering and how the Skype procedure conducts and conditions rhythms of discomfort. The Skype procedure punctuates daily affectivities of waiting with moments of crescendo: every time applicants log onto Skype to attempt to pre-register, they experience bodily tension, heightened anxiety, boredom, or whichever cocktail of affectivities is specific to them. These rhythms are timed to a strict schedule, but also bleed outside the Skype timetable. For instance, the guys commonly expressed that they struggle to sleep the night before Skype sessions. Nabiullah noted that on nights ahead of sessions, he could not "relax to sleep because of the stress." Prince Meddo expressed a similar sentiment, as did Junior, who bemoaned "sleepless nights:"

> J: "You don't want to miss the time, so you cannot sleep, you understand? You lie down a little bit, you check the time. Because if you miss the time maybe you will think, 'The fault is mine, maybe they would have picked my call today.' So you get up very early, you prepare yourself, you get your phone, you're just waiting for nine o'clock."

That individuals struggle to sleep specifically on the nights before Skype sessions further highlights how the Asylum Service imposes a temporally arranged order of anticipation, anxiety, and stress. Taken together, these rhythms reveal the Skype procedure as an affective technology of governance that structures both time (as the previous section discussed) as well as schedules of emotional and bodily discomfort. The Skype procedure rhythmically inscribes distress onto the bodies and minds of asylum applicants.

Though my participants did not always articulate their refusals explicitly in terms of safeguarding their wellness, they uniformly used a language of exhaustion. An Afghan asylum applicant outside of the Neos Kosmos Asylum Service office, for example, told me he stopped calling on Skype since "I'm so tired

because they didn't pick up." These exact words resurfaced time and time again in my interviews and informal conversations (with little variation) as people expressed both that they were tired of calling, and, on a deeper level, that *they were tired*. As Prince Meddo said: "I'm tired of calling Skype because they're not going to pick up…I'm just tired, I'm tired of everything, I'm just tired of my life."

Almost everyone I spoke with cited being "tired." Regardless of country of origin, language, or interpreter, this word circulated in justifications of refusal. Crucially, my participants expressed that they became more and more tired the longer they engaged with the Skype procedure, suggesting that the affective rhythms it imposes produce corrosive and compounding effects over time. Within this context, refusal to keep calling can be read as a refusal to submit to rhythms that erode mental and bodily health, and, by proxy, a refusal to submit to the temporal governance and affective violence that the digital pushback shapes.

This is an act of self-care with implications on self-concept and subjectivity. For example, when Stefan called me in November to explain his decision to stop calling on Skype, he said of the system: "[It makes people] desperate. Psycho. Out of mind…I don't want to lose my mind so I felt like I am tired, losing my mind, [and] I cannot wait for that." Adnan expressed a similar sentiment when he said that while calling on Skype, "...you get tired, you mentally disturbed, you say 'oh, ok leave it.' People are going mad."

Both Stefan and Adnan speak to the impact of caustic rhythms of affective violence, highlighting refusal as a measure individuals can take to protect themselves from present and future harm, a strategy to take control of their mental state. "I don't want to do this to myself," said Stefan after explaining how people become "psycho," mirroring Adnan's decision to stop calling so he does not go "mad." They join others who repudiate the affective violence of borders, negotiating agency by refusing to be subjected to rhythms

of discomfort and distress that the Greek state inscribes through its digital pushback. In doing so, they contest conditions of "slow death" (Berlant, 2007) imposed by the Skype procedure.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, this contestation is contradictory, because by refusing to call on Skype, would-be applicants resign themselves to undocumented life, which tends to be rife with conditions that make life "unlivable" (Butler 2004, 2012). But for individuals whose engagement with the Skype procedure conditions chronic exhaustion and emotional depletion, refusal generates rest.

6.5 "I need to find another way:" Refusal as Regaining Control

"*We must do more with our lives than just hoping on Skype to pick your call*"-Junior

On a Wednesday morning in November, I met two of Prince Meddo's friends at Platia Amerikis. When Junior and Super Med arrived, I suggested we sit at the nearby Best Time cafe, but Super Med shook his head, saying "not here...too many police." They guided me away from the square, crossing Patision street towards Kipseli, dodging motorbikes and looking nervously about as the Parthenon peered from her perch. After about ten minutes we settled onto a wooden bench beside a dumpster, and Super Med stepped away to take a call, leaving me with Junior and the flies that orbited small halos above our heads.

Junior is soft spoken and has kind eyes, eyes that narrowed as he told me about arriving to Kos by boat in May 2019 and the flashbacks to his experience of torture in Sierra Leone that he frequently suffers. Junior received one rejection on Kos but couldn't find a lawyer to help him appeal, so he escaped the closed camp in which he was living ("it's like a prison, almost like a prison," he told me) and came to Athens. In the city he paid a lawyer 100 euros to help him submit an appeal, and waited seven months until he was told that his decision was ready but only retrievable on Kos. Junior was unwilling to return to Kos because he feared that if his appeal were rejected, he would be taken "back to the prison" or returned to

Turkey. He asked his lawyer what to do, and she said: "call Skype." He called for two months before stopping.

Over the thirty minutes I spent with Junior, he outlined a choice of refusal that was motivated partly by temporal and psychological concerns, but most prominently by a sharp desire to take control of his life. As he swatted at flies, Junior articulated his refusal through existential registers, framing the decision as an empowering and subjectifying act with implications on his survival, self-concept, and imagined future(s). His account is revealing of a particularly productive rationality of refusal, and I reproduce it at length below:

> S: "How did you decide to stop?"
>
> J: "I've been trying and they are not picking. Like I said, it's discouraging. So I said 'ok, let me just leave anything, whatever happens, happens.' That's my fate. If I have another way, I will try. I will look for a part-time job, try to make something of myself, I need to find another way...because I've been just waiting for Skype to pick my call and it's not going. As a young man I decided 'ok, let me leave this one and try.'"
>
> S: "Is it partially about taking control and doing other things or...?"
>
> J: "In this country if you are not in the system, you do not get any help, so you have to find a way to survive. You have to find a way to live. So it's better I forget about Skype....let me just forget about Skype and try another way. In Omonia I go out, ask people in the streets 'I want to work, do you have a job?' until I finally get a part time job, which I did for months. I tried to raise the amount I paid the lawyer to apply for me back again in the system."

Junior signals resignation that the system will not work for him, but he expresses resolve to make something else work instead. He uses agentic language that highlights his desire and ability to take things into his own hands ("I need to find another way"), centering himself as the only actor upon which he can reliably depend while rendering irrelevant the system upon which asylum seekers are meant to depend ("it's better I forget about Skype"). Importantly, he speaks of refusal as enabling a project of self-making: rather than continue to be ignored on Skype, he will grasp the reins and try to make something of himself. He explains further:

> J: "No one is there to help you. And I am a young man. I need to step up. I've been through a lot, seriously, but I still have life, I still have hope. Yeah! So I decided 'let me start, let me try something else, let me forget about Skype.' They are not picking my calls, let me leave everything. I have to encourage myself, I have to talk to myself to be strong again. It's not over."
>
> S: "Where do you get that hope from?"
>
> J: "Um, it's something I built inside myself. With what I've been through at home and how I managed to escape to be here, I know that I'm a strong person."

Junior characterizes his exit from the Skype procedure not as an ending but as a beginning ("I decided let me start, let me try something else"), his decision framed in terms of personal strength and resolve. His words highlight the generative power of refusal, with exit prompting new possibilities for survival and self-recognition. Interestingly he ties his need to take control to his age and sex, articulating refusal through a discourse of masculine expectation. He continues to deepen these themes:

> J: "My life keep going down and down but I have to give meaning to my life, so I have to stand up. Like I told you, I'm a young man."
>
> S: "How old are you?"
>
> J: "I'm 35 now. So I'm a young man, I'm strong, and I can do work. So let me look for something, let me keep my life. Because if I continue to stay in that depression, it will just keep me down. It will go from bad to worse, and if you go to worse, it's too bad because these people don't care. So you don't allow yourself to go down there, you have to stand up. That's what I did. No support from them. Nothing nothing, my brother. So I have to do what I have to do."
>
> [...]
>
> J: "From the present state I have to lift myself up. That's what I think other young men should be doing, lift themselves up and try to do something else with our lives. By doing something else you hope you have a future."

The above excerpts reveal Junior's refusal as both a practical project (ie. I must do what I must do to survive) and a personal project (ie. I have to stand up for myself). His logic is simultaneously rooted in a masculine corporeality and existential concerns regarding the construction of self and future,[126] centering the strength and productive potential of his male body. In saying "let me keep my life," he implies that the

[126] See Mbatha and Koskimaki's (2021) work on "dual waithood" for discussion of informal labor as a means of filling waiting time and building futures, as well as the importance of interrogating migrant temporality in relation to notions of youth, employment, and hopeful aspiration.

Skype procedure was taking it, and that he personally has the capacity to reverse that theft. Interestingly, he invokes a gender-based duty to support oneself without the help of others and to create a life of significance. His body—his male body, in particular—features prominently in this appeal, as does a hegemonically masculine mentality (Connell, 1987).

Junior's refusal is rooted deeply in the desire to reject dependency in favor of self-help, a desire he communicates through his own register of masculinity. The Skype system is framed as something that holds him down, something from which he and other men must lift themselves up. In lifting themselves up, young men can lift themselves not only away from an undesirable reality, but towards more meaningful existence and futures that previously seemed foreclosed. Refusal generates hope for new realities and a regained sense of control.[127] It also generates new subjectivities, which Junior develops along the lines of an agentic, resilient, and masculine self:

> J: "I've been rejected, it's all down and it's enough easy for me to be down as well. Skype is not going, I've tried, I've tried, over two months! So it's enough reason for me to just give up. *But I decided to do more than to just give up* [emphasis added]."
>
> [...]
>
> J: "Forgetting about them [Skype] at the moment and looking for something else to do with my life, do with my time, that really makes me a man. I feel really proud of myself. As a man you must do something, as a young man you must find a way to make it happen, you know? You cannot just sit and waste the rest of the day just like that, hoping on a response from Skype, hoping for them to pick your call and give you an appointment and go for registration so you can start life all over again. If they are not picking, then you need to look for something else to do. So for me, that really makes me a man and I'm so proud of myself for taking this step and doing something different."

Junior reveals refusal's potential for radical productivity. In the face of a deeply debilitating asylum procedure, refusal allows him to imagine new ways of living and new possibilities of self. Specifically, Junior's refusal enables him to proudly assert himself as a man, and further as a man in control, thus

[127] See Kallio et al. (2021) on the temporal dimensions of "radical hope."

initiating a process of subjectification that safeguards his masculine identity by allowing him to meet the expectations and obligations that he feels apply to young men. His refusal shares "grammars of masculinity" with those observed by Newhouse in her 2021 study of men who refuse asylum in South Sudan, whereby men refused international protection so as to discard the dependency imposed by juridical categories such as "refugee" or "asylum seeker," instead pursuing economic activities in Juba that reinforced their masculine self-image. In exiting the Skype procedure, Junior similarly took action to protect his sense of masculinity and remove himself from wider structures of forced dependence.

I recounted Junior's testimony at such length to illustrate refusal as a potent strategy to exercise agency in disempowering settings. By exiting the Skype procedure, Junior negotiated control and initiated a meaningful process of self-recognition and subjectification. He displays awareness of the productive nature of his refusal, noting "I decided to do more than to just give up." For Junior, to stop calling is not to give up, but to refuse to give up on himself. In doing so, he inscribes himself, and not the Asylum Service, with power, refusing the Skype procedure—and by proxy the Greek state—as the ultimate authority over him.

Junior was not the only person who articulated refusal in terms of control. Several of the men I spoke with characterized exit from the Skype procedure as a strategy to exercise agency and realize alternative realities. Often these characterizations framed refusal as one of two kinds of investment: investment in self and investment in building pathways of exit from limbo. In terms of investment in self, several of my participants echoed Junior's insistence that refusing to call on Skype allowed them to meet and live up to their masculine obligations. Take for instance Raja, who called on Skype every day of the week from 7:00am–9:00am,[128] but stopped after one month.

[128] As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, it was common to hear that individuals called at times outside of the Skype timetable, when there was absolutely no possibility of the calls receiving reply (the Asylum Service Skype accounts are only staffed during the designated hours). One person even showed me a record of Skype calls lodged at 11:00pm, while others showed me months-worth of weekend calls. It is difficult to know whether this disregard of

Following our second session together, Raja told me that he'd like to share his story, so we met in Victoria Square that evening, a pen in my hand and a cigarette in his. We sat on the ground while Raja, sipping one beer and then another, explained to me the pressures he feels as a young man in Greece. Like many men who have migrated from their home countries (Maycock, 2017), Raja feels culturally compelled to send remittances and provide for his family, an obligation Raja described as explicitly masculine. He explains how the duty to support his family was once a badge of honor, but is now a burden:

> R: "It's all about the stress of being a man, a Pakistani man. Anyone Pakistani you can speak with him, 'Do you support your family?' he will most likely say yes...When we are little children, like 12 years or 13 years, my mom or my dad every time speak with me, 'You are everything for us.' And this time I feel better."
>
> S: "Did they say that to your sisters too, or…?"
>
> R: "Just me."
>
> S: "So it is about being a man then?"
>
> R: "Yeah. And when I'm child I feel really good, like I am for them, it's my job. But now I understand it's really hard."
>
> S: "It doesn't feel good anymore."
>
> R: "No."

As we discussed further, Raja explained precisely why "it doesn't feel good anymore," noting that the Skype procedure stands in the way of him meeting the duties his parents set out for him as a child:

> R: "They are old now, my mother and father. They didn't working. I have to work because Pakistan culture is so different, really different. When my sister get married, I have to support because she also not working. [In] Pakistan only boys working, not girls working. Sisters when they get married I give them money. It's not normal really, I have only 24 years. I want to enjoy my life but I can't enjoy. [Points to beer] This is not enjoying. Sometimes I drink sometimes, I go out with friends, but in here [points to head] I am so dispirited."
>
> [...]

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the Skype procedure stemmed from confusion, refusal to comply with an imposed temporal architecture, desperation, or something else entirely. When I asked Jess about this, she hypothesized: "They think 'fuck it, it's not going to make any difference, I'll just call now.'"

> R: "I'm just thinking if they ["Skype"] pick up, they can give us this fucking card and we can get easily this work, just we need work, so we can support the family. And one day we can finish the family responsibility, we finish soonly if we get soonly work, we can finish soonly and then we can think about us. But how if for five years you don't have work, if for ten years you don't have work, how you finish your responsibilities?"

Without the ability to work, Raja cannot "finish" his responsibilities, which involve supporting his sister and elderly parents. He speaks to the anguish this brings him: at 24-years-old, he should be enjoying life, but instead he worries constantly about how to support his family. Although he does not explicitly articulate this through a language of masculinity, he nonetheless implies a cultural castration of sorts, a loss of that which allows him to fill the roles of son and provider. Viewed through this lens, the Skype procedure can be considered an emasculating technology. Can refusal restore wounded masculinities? When discussing his decision to stop calling on Skype and look for informal work instead, Raja said the following:

> R: "I want to own myself."
>
> S: "You want to own yourself?"
>
> R: "Yeah."
>
> S: "And right now do you feel like you own yourself?"
>
> R: "I feel I am helping me own myself. I never said to you 'I need this,' I never said to other people 'I need this,' I just found work. Sometimes I find work, sometimes not, but I'm ok. Slowly slowly I made myself. And I know one day I'll make myself a better thing, but slowly, very slowly, just like a turtle. You know turtles run very slowly? I'm running like that."

Similar to how Junior portrayed his refusal to keep calling on Skype as an act of self-preservation, self-fashioning, and even salvation, Raja implicates his refusal in a struggle for control ("I want to own myself") and an ongoing project of personal development. He rejects the fruitless dependence of the Skype procedure and in doing so, asserts with pride that he has never asked anyone for assistance or relied upon external support. Again he speaks in masculine registers without explicitly signposting a discourse of masculinity, as he implies that his refusal to keep calling on Skype allows him to begin reclaiming his

sense of self and his dignity as a man.[129] Running slowly but moving nonetheless, he crawls closer to the version of himself that he craves, closer to a standard that previously felt unreachable.

Investment in self often intersects with investment in pathways of exit from limbo. One evening in November, I joined Raja in his apartment for dinner. After expressing his desire to introduce me to Pakistani culture, he generously invited me over to enjoy a traditional meal he spent hours cooking. I sat with a handful of his friends, and over cold whisky and a chicken biryani so spicy it made me sweat, we discussed their shared plans to focus on making enough money to leave Greece.[130] Raja told me that he was done calling on Skype and was instead going to fully commit himself to finding work and raising money to fund a new future. He explained his decision in terms of investing in geographical exit:

> S: "Are you going to keep calling on Skype or are you going to stop?"
>
> R: "No, I will stop. I stopped before, just two or three times I will call with you in your office this time [referring to an upcoming session we had arranged]. Another time I am going to stop."
>
> S: "How come?"
>
> R: "Because I'll be leaving this country. I can pay 650 euro, I pay already one person, and 450 euro I have to pay more then he will give me some papers illegally and then I can go...What can I do? I'm calling one and a half year and no response. What you do, what you feel? You think 'oh I am stupid.' This is all, you think 'I am stupid,' and I feel I am stupid."
>
> S: "Really? Why?"
>
> R: "Because one year I keep calling, I keep calling and no one respond me, what am I going to think? What do I have to think? Better that I choose illegal."

Having previously grounded his refusal in a desire to take control of himself, he now frames his refusal as a resource-building act, one that contributes to self-sufficiency and geographic mobility. With relevance to

[129] See Belloni (2020) for another example of displaced men stepping away from digitalized communication systems to safeguard masculinity.

[130] The observed refusals were most clearly enacted through individual decision making. For example, it was common for individuals to exit the Skype procedure while their friends continued calling, and vice versa. Yet I also observed groups of friends leave the procedure together, or do so at the suggestion of others. Future research would benefit from exploring the extent to which refusal results from group strategizing, shared aspirations, and collective decision making, particularly with regard to masculine sociality.

Weiss' (2016) assertion that "abstention should be understood as an affirmative investment in another possibility" (p. 352), Raja's refusal shows refusal as engendering possibility. In Athens, I observed several individuals refusing the Skype procedure as part of a financial investment in other possibilities. Usually this involved either purchasing fake documents such as falsified asylum cards, fake passports, or medical documents from doctors who certify medical vulnerabilities the patient does not have, or payments to middlemen such as lawyers or brokers who claim to have connections to the Asylum Service. Take for example the account of Adnan, who over the city screams of bustling Omonia Square justified his refusal in terms of investment:

> A: "Every time you call and they do not pick up, so it's like 'fuck it!' What can you do? It is not in your hands…You have one hope here in Greece, by Skype you can get asylum, appointment and anything. The only one way is Skype, no other way. And if nobody is picking up your call, what do you do? You say 'ok I'll pay somebody to get the card.' Now people mostly pay in Alexandroupoli, it's behind Thessaloniki. Most people go this way."

Adnan acknowledges that the Skype procedure strips control from applicants ("it is not in your hands"). However, in the same breath as asserting that the only way to get support is through Skype, he suggests that there is in fact another way. This avenue is not free, though. He develops the idea of investment further:

> A: "Look, if you have girlfriend, I give you example, if you call her one time, two times, three times, after this you'd say 'What the fuck? Leave her.' It's as simple as that. If you have one option only, you'll try it one month or two month or three month, you'll try it, and after this you'll say 'What is that? Why am I wasting time? I'll just work for one month and take money and pay, it's easy.' But there are many agents who take money and after a few months, no call. It happens. So what do people do? They again try to find another guy and another guy, because it's [a] necessity to survive."[131]
>
> [...]
>
> A: "They look for work, so when they begin work, mostly people forget about Skype and they say 'look, leave it, that not is good.' They try to find agents like some guys who make paper for him like that, they try that way, not going on Skype."

[131] Interestingly, another one of my participants invoked the image of a female partner when discussing the Skype procedure. Shokrullah said: "Skype is like when your girlfriend breaks up with you and you call her and call her, but she doesn't want to talk to you, so she just ignores."

Adnan ties questions of temporality to ideas of investment: why waste time when he can meaningfully put that same time towards earning enough money to pay for fake documentation? With this logic, time shifts from something wasted to a resource. One of the most common replies I received to my WhatsApp messages inviting people to Skype sessions was that they appreciated my concern for them, but had decided to use their time for something more likely to benefit them: work. Every week I received messages from individuals saying that they had left both the Skype procedure and Athens. They were now in Argos harvesting olives, in Manolada picking strawberries, or on the islands working in kitchens.

Sometimes this involved an explicit rejection of the Skype procedure, as with Milad from Iran, who told me he was going to stop calling and would instead find work to afford a fake passport and fly to a northern European country, since "I cannot depend on Skype." Other times it involved a more implicit rejection in the form of de-prioritization, as with the countless men who told me simply did not have time to call on Skype because they wanted to work. In both cases, individuals outlined a willing choice to focus on sustaining themselves as opposed to relying on an unreliable system, often (but not always) with the goal of purchasing false documents that would allow them to either stay in Greece 'legally' or leave.

Others took the same approach but zeroed in on legal aid as the goal. Abdul Karim stopped calling to "focus on the lawyer," explaining that lawyers could provide protection papers and potentially help circumvent the Skype procedure, so he would focus on finding enough money to pay for legal help. Prince Meddo expressed a similar logic when discussing how he removed the Skype procedure from his mind:

> P: "Only you tell me to call Skype, try to call Skype, but I don't think about Skype. I don't think they are the solution for me, Skype. Because I've been trying to call Skype and they're not picking...I don't have time for it anymore. I was just busy thinking about how am I going to get the right lawyer that can free me from these problems. I was just thinking about how much am I going to raise to pay the lawyer, yes."

Whereas Milad and Raja's comments signal geographical exit (refusal as enabling one to leave Greece), Prince Meddo signals a mental exit: he doesn't think about the system any more, and doesn't have time to think about it. Instead he focuses on raising money to pay a lawyer. Themes of control and investment again arise, with individuals choosing to spend their time and mental energies in ways they feel allow them to exert influence on their situation.

One last example powerfully merges these themes. After trying unsuccessfully to register on Skype, Stefan called me in November to say he was initiating a process of voluntary return. He explained that the Skype procedure nearly drove him to suicide, but that his role as a father stopped him:

> S: "I felt many times I want to kill myself. Just my son stop me from that. This is why I want to go home. I think 'how is he going to survive?' He hasn't seen me since he was a kid. Now if I die also, he'll never see his daddy and he's going to fail, so I want to go home."

Stefan ties his fatherly presence to his son's chances of success. In further conversation, he told me that his son, now eight, would be sad to see him return because he'll "want to see his father succeed in Europe before coming back to him, not spending ages and coming back with two buttons to him and not even buy [a] gift for him," but he nonetheless recognizes that his role as a man and as father is to protect the family. In Stefan's assessment, he had no choice but to exit the Skype procedure, braving embarrassment and shame to return home.

> S: "It doesn't feel responsible [to keep calling on Skype]. I feel like [a] father, I have to go home to protect my kid. What else can I do, stay here living like what?...Same way I'm living here is same way I'm going there. If I end with only my kiss, it's what I have. So I'll start from there."
>
> SD: "So you'll start from being a father."
>
> S: "Yeah, I'll go just like that. My son goes to school, I go to bring him. Let him concentrate on football, I'll go there to support him. Maybe he'll be lucky to have contract, but I have to go there and support him, not to watch him. If he cannot be around me, I have to be there. This is reality of life."

Stefan's refusal stems from his need to rise to specific standards of fatherhood and familial care, standards his current situation precludes. Refusal would allow a transition of masculinity from failure and perceived irresponsibility to a model of responsible adult masculinity defined by presence and fatherhood. This would enable him to contest the emasculation of the digital pushback and undo the emotional and geographic borders of intimacy and closeness encountered by transnational fathers (Kilkey et al., 2014). His refusal sparks transition from a traditional breadwinner model of migrant fatherhood to a new model of active fathering grounded in moral and affective commitments rather than financial responsibility (Pustułka et al., 2015). His refusal invests in geographic exit as well as mental exit from perceptions of failed fatherhood. Stefan initiated refusal to generate new geographic possibilities and prospects of masculine self.

According to Bourdieu (2000), individuals whose time is dominated by political agents are required to "wait for everything to come from others" (p. 237). The refusals I observed exhibit an entirely different approach, with my participants finding what they need within themselves. This section opened with a telling quotation: "We must do more with our lives than just hoping on Skype to pick your call." Spoken by Junior, these words carry additional insight in the context of the refusals just examined, highlighting that refusal can be catalytic, allowing individuals to move from mere hope (or hopelessness) to action. In the cases analyzed above, refusal allowed existential pursuits of meaning making and self-recognition, with exit fueling investment in new possibilities of survival, self, and mobility. Refusal was articulated as a tool of regaining partial control, a small island of agency in an otherwise sapping sea.

6.6 Unpacking Refusal: Complexities and Contradictions

The analysis presented above highlights how refusals can generate new possibilities, with potential to remove individuals from structures of temporal, psychological, and existential harm. However, there is risk of romanticizing what in reality is a messy and uncertain act, distracting from the ways in which the

refusals I observed produced freedoms while also sustaining unfreedoms. This section dives deeper into the contradictory effects of these refusals, with an eye towards their social and political effects related to the self and the state.

It is not immediately apparent who refusal serves, or to which extent. Scholarship has long illustrated how states employ strategies of recording and identification in an effort to control populations. This governmentality approach centers the importance of knowledge (in addition to discipline) in governing populations (Foucault, 2007), focusing on techniques of power that make individuals "legible" and therefore governable (Scott, 1998). Kalir and van Schendel (2017) go so far as to refer to increased legibility as "one of the most salient characteristics of the modern nation-state." Specific to forced migration, practices such as registration, identification, enumeration, and legal documentation are regarded as regulatory techniques of statehood (Caplan and Torpey, 2001; Lyon, 2009; Riles, 2006; Yngvesson, 2006). As Rozakou (2017, p. 39) notes, "numbers, documents, fingerprints, and photographs, among other modes, are essential technologies of state power." Following this logic (and as discussed in Chapter 3), the Skype procedure should theoretically exist as a tool of surveillance and control, serving the state in its endeavor to render all resident populations legible and governable.

However, as scholars show in other contexts, processes of non-recording can also benefit governments (Anderson, 2010; De Genova, 2002; Hoag 2010; Kalir and van Schendel, 2017), with practices of non-recording existing not as bureaucratic breakdown but rather as "deliberate strateg[ies] of the state" (Rozakou, 2017, p. 37). Do refusals that embrace non-recording produce similar effects?

My data reveal that it is far too reductive to suggest that refusal benefits only those who refuse: the refused also benefit, in ways that allow them to exert further control over asylum applicants. The Greek state benefits from refusal by reducing pressure on its asylum apparatus and producing an exploitable

workforce. When people refuse to call on Skype, they help decongest an overburdened asylum system. Though some individuals stop calling and find other avenues through which to make claims on the state (ie. fake documents), many others simply remove themselves entirely from the asylum system, like Nabiullah, who although he was eligible to lodge a subsequent application on Skype, said: "No, I will not apply again, I will be illegal here like other people. I will continue like that." It was not uncommon to hear such a sentiment, especially from individuals who had very little money and could not conceive of paying for documents. In opting out of the asylum system, individuals reduce the number of claims to rights and belonging that the government should in theory attend to.

Nabiullah planned to stay in Greece and carve out an (undocumented) existence for himself, but others cast aside the Skype procedure and the country altogether, with plans to leave Greece and try their luck elsewhere in Europe. Both strategies benefit the Greek state by taking pressure off an asylum system that has since 2015 been overwhelmed, and some people thought this an intentional effect of the Skype procedure. For example, one Syrian asylum seeker named Ayman, who did not receive an answer on the Arabic line but was registered on the Syria Fast Track line, told me he thinks the "main reason" for the Skype procedure is to deter and drive out asylum seekers. As he wrote over WhatsApp: "In my opinion, they are making the process VERY slow for people so that they get bored of it and go back to Turkey by themselves. As Greece is trying to get the goal where there's 0 ASYLUM SEEKERS."

Several of the guys shared this theory, arguing that the Skype procedure is designed to be so restrictive and taxing that people give up on receiving asylum in Greece. It is impossible, of course, to definitively confirm or deny this theory with my data, but its logic speaks to a non-conjectural reality: whether intentional or not, the Skype procedure does deter and it does drive out. As previously mentioned, many people stop calling on Skype so that they can focus on leaving the country. In the context of a government whose political messaging outlines decongestion, deterrence, and the reduction of asylum claims as the

Migration Ministry's top priorities, refusal to keep calling on Skype emerges as a personal decision with political ramifications that directly help the government achieve their restrictive goals.

The preceding analysis revealed that refusal can generate purpose and control, enabling individuals to exit the Skype procedure in favor of finding employment. However, this refusal also generates an exploitable labor force. Non-recording has been shown as a strategy to irregularize workforces and deepen the precarity of laborers, with non-documentation and non-recording implicated in a system of global labor subordination and phenomenological disciplining (De Genova, 2002; De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Willen, 2007). In Greece, refusal to keep calling on Skype deepens an irregular labor force which, within the context of capitalist structures and their relation to legal statuses of belonging and not belonging, can be maintained as cheap and docile.

I observed this tension while discussing employment with my participants. For example, Prince Meddo often told me that he feels his employers exploit him and his undocumented colleagues. "They treat us like we are inferior," he said. Prince Meddo works for a food preparation company in one of the most expensive suburbs of Athens, working 12–14 hour days that start at 7:00am (though his commute begins at 6:00am). He earns just 16.2 euros per day, or approximately 1.25 euros per hour. Junior works for a recycling company, where he is paid by an agent who arranges part-time work for undocumented people. The work is physical and dirty, as described by Junior, and for eight hours of work, the agent pays Junior 20 euros. Junior, who articulated his refusal through discourses of control, hope, and agency, makes 2.5 euros per hour on the days when he is called to work. "It's hard," Junior told me. "Very unfair, but that's the treatment you get from the people here."

An in-depth analysis of working conditions falls outside the scope of this study, but it is worth noting that many of the individuals I spoke with characterized their employment as exploitative due to their

undocumented status, and this exploitation was partially enabled by refusal. In other words, I observed that with the exception of people who paid for false documents, refusal contributed to resignation to irregularity that bound individuals to exploitable states of "illegality" (Willen, 2007). These refusals also removed the possibility of receiving asylum in Greece. The contradictory effects of refusal shine forth, highlighting the freedoms and unfreedoms they feed, and the ways in which the refusers benefit and simultaneously suffer.

These acts of refusal are socially and politically complex, but in ways that differ from the types of refusals usually theorized in the social sciences. As noted at the start of the chapter, refusal is approached as an overtly political act that challenges authority or rejects specific hierarchies of domination. In these cases, refusal is an intentionally subversive undertaking, a political act and a "political stance" (McGranahan, 2016, p. 338). The refusals I observed in Greece were quite different, rooted more in the practical and the personal than the political. People refused to call on Skype not to transform hegemonic structures of domination, but instead to recapture small parts of their humanity, even if doing so meant resigning oneself to "illegality" and material precarity. In doing so, they prioritized fidelity to themselves over fidelity to the state, which highlights the "relations that such a refusal affirms—in this instance their self relation as men worthy of respect" (Newhouse, 2021, p. 183). Through refusal, the men in my study engaged in an evaluative process of determining which moral and political commitments they judged to be most important, ultimately deeming agency and dignity more valuable than the (tenuous) promise of legal status that the Skype procedure teases. The price was to disengage from structures that present as practically bankrupt but nonetheless sustain hope.

The lens of refusal reveals the ability to take ethical positions of measured concession, to proclaim that enough is enough, and in doing so, to give up the chance of something material (status, documents, etc.) in exchange for the immaterial value of dignity and reclamations of self. The refusals analyzed in this

chapter are deeply implicated in self-making and self-understanding, and thus signal a distinct breed of subversive action that aligns neither with revolution, protest, nor small-scale organizing. These refusals comprise low-level acts of political behavior cast as projects of personal reclamation and reinvention rather than political reimagination. Transgressive but not transformative of hegemonic structures, they are distinct from both the refusals explored in extant literature as well as the "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985) traditionally explored in studies of non-violent resistance in marginalized populations. And yet, they hold vitalizing relevance to both pockets of literature.

The dominant frameworks of resistance and refusal embrace sociopolitical transformation as the aim of political action, with resistance employing conscious opposition to power and refusal employing conscious rejection of that power's authority. The choices and behaviors of my participants are not entirely legible within these paradigms, as they speak through a distinct political grammar that maps sloppily onto notions of resistance as confrontation or concealed subterfuge (Scott, 1985) and refusal as aspirational disavowals that reimagine geometries of power. Existing literature approaches refusal in settings of domination as an act to "refuse the eliminatory efforts of the state" (Simpson, 2016, p. 331); the refusals observed with the Skype procedure are slightly different, in that they refuse the eliminatory *effects*—not the efforts—of the state.

The intimacy of each refusal and the target of its action (the self rather than systems of oppression) suggest a different form of politics through which subjugated individuals can assert and articulate their humanity in (digitalized) dehumanizing settings. The ability to recapture aspects of self speaks to a process of self-recognition and subjectification within a space marked by non-recognition and the production of negative subjectivities. The logics underpinning these refusals allow scholars of borders, power, and agency to acknowledge the ability of marginalized peoples to engage in self-preservation and self-creation *in spite of* dominating forces that erode and erase. This allows for a broader study of

resistance and refusal, one that shines light onto what it means to exercise agency under severe structural constraints without necessarily imagining new polities or configurations of power.

Without a doubt, survival in the face of erasure is inherently political and dissident. So too is the normative implication of each refusal: in refusing to engage with the Skype procedure, asylum applicants deliver a quiet denunciation of the Greek state and the inadequacy of its international protection standards. Their refusals locate and act upon perceived injustice, deeming farcical the asylum apparatus of a liberal democracy in the European Union. Through refusal, the men in my study demonstrated awareness that "the rules have already been fixed, and that the field is not level" (Newhouse, 2021, p. 178), revoking their consent to the conditions of abjection and absurdity that the asylum procedure structures.

Still, it is important to separate an action's intent from its political effects. In exiting the Skype procedure, the guys did not seek acknowledgment, response, confrontation, or restructuring from society or the state. But again, intent and effect differ: the refusals I observed in Greece did in fact restructure the relationship between asylum applicants and the state, altering which claims were made and where, and disrupting hierarchies of complete subordination.

In refusing to continue calling on Skype, individuals reconfigured their relationship to the Greek asylum system, rendering irrelevant their previous source of validation, affirmation, and recognition, instead looking internally at the self as authority and agent. This is not to say that in refusing the Skype procedure individuals reject all authority of the state over them (as seen in Bhungalia, 2019; Simpson, 2014), but rather that they recognize that the state does not hold *ultimate* authority over them. Refusal can thus be considered a form of antipolitical maneuvering that bypasses the state (Weiss, 2016).

When oppressed peoples decide to reclaim their own time, mental health, and sense of control, they assert independence within and from relationships previously marked by total debasement and submission, and in doing so, they reject the notion that life is only liveable when, where, and how the state so decides. Although refusals to continue engaging with the Skype procedure do not produce wholly emancipatory effects or transformations of the political contexts in which they are embedded, they nonetheless challenge the effects of the digital pushback by affirming that there is in fact "life beyond the state" (Weiss, 2016, p. 357).

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter focused on exit from the Skype procedure, approaching decisions to stop calling as acts of refusal made by individuals who evaluate the material and legal offerings of the system as simply not worth the degradation and humiliation that their potential acquisition requires. In particular, it argued that these refusals negotiate renewed ownership over time, mental health, and sense of control, with refusal enabling individuals to shield themselves in small but meaningful ways from affective violence of border regimes. The refusals were discreet and unspectacular, but nonetheless generative of new temporal rhythms, affectivities, mobilities, and subjectivities. At the same time, they produced complex and contradictory effects regarding personal freedoms and unfreedoms. Refusals fueled expressions of agency while tightening ties to irregularity, exploitation, and "illegality."

Analyzing these refusals as productive political acts allows for careful consideration of the ability of highly constrained people to assert humanity within deeply dehumanizing settings, contesting the subjective realities imposed upon them without necessarily contesting the hegemonic structures of imposition. The refusals were personal projects of self-making and protection that neither denoted nor demanded projects of political transformation. Rather, asylum applicants demonstrated which commitments and aspects of self they were and were not comfortable parting ways with. The refusals

analyzed in this chapter disrupt both the image of passively waiting subjects as well as cunning or rebellious insurgents, shining light onto the quiet strategies people employ to safeguard their dignity and senses of self while subordinated. In deleting the Skype procedure from their lives, asylum applicants refuse to be ignored, but in doing so, they do not demand an audience. They simply set their own clocks, refusing to be told they must wait to live.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

On one of my last days of fieldwork, I told Raja that I would be leaving Greece soon. I was somewhat nervous about how he would respond since we had built a friendship and it is challenging to leave the field after becoming close with participants. When I told him, Raja immediately burst out with laughter, which startled me. His laughter was a blessing, because it momentarily drowned out the incessant ringing around us, but it was also confusing. What was so funny? I asked what he was laughing at, and he just smiled. "You'll be back," he told me, "because you're the only person in this country who is interested in Skype."

The contents of this dissertation make clear why investigating such a mundane and unspectacular technology is not only interesting, but extremely important. After all, my interest in Skype is not actually about Skype, but about the insidious forms of violence and alienation enabled by digital bordering practices. This is not an ethnography of Skype. It is an ethnography of digitally mediated violence. It is an ethnography of waiting. It is an ethnography of absence. It is an ethnography of suffering, an ethnography of absurdity, an ethnography of hope held and hope lost.

7.2 Summary of Findings and Research Contributions

Greece has for many years been central to policy and media debates regarding the so-called "refugee crisis." More recently, Greece has come under fire for its hostile treatment of asylum seekers, particularly with regard to the islands and land borders where illegal pushback practices are widely observed. Increasingly this attention focuses on the technologies employed by the Greek government, including drones, thermal cameras, sound cannons, sensors, and artificial intelligence, as well as a militarized Coast Guard that shoots the engines of incoming boats and slashes holes in rafts so that they will drift back to

Turkey. In comparison to this military-grade technology (which is largely funded by the European Union), far less attention is paid to "routinised low-tech technologies" (Tazzioli, 2023, p. 7) and the subtle mundanities of internal bordering.

This dissertation took a different approach, shifting attention to the largely invisible violence enabled by the deployment of Skype within the mainland asylum procedure. As previously mentioned, the Skype procedure has not previously been the subject of ethnographic care. The limited work that does exist on the Skype procedure tends to come from journalists or NGO reports, noting little more than that the pre-registration system is underfunded, inaccessible, and confusing, posing barriers to asylum and preventing the timely processing of claims. Emergent academic work considers the Skype procedure in terms of tech experimentality, data extraction, and a politics of disorientation, but stops short of ethnographic inquiry. No one has, to the best of my knowledge, conducted an ethnographic or phenomenological study of the digital procedure. Grounding itself in critical phenomenological approaches, this project has attempted to fill that empirical gap with an account of the Skype procedure that privileges the voices and experiences of asylum applicants.

The primary aim of this project was to interrogate the lived realities structured by the insertion of digital technology within border bureaucracies. It sought to understand the impact of the Skype procedure on asylum applicants and their rights, exploring what the digital procedure does to bordered lives and the bored people who live them. More specifically, it sought to understand how the Skype procedure is intimately experienced by those attempting to pre-register through it. This phenomenological lens oriented inquiry to the levels of affect, embodiment, psychology, temporality, and meaning making, among others. At a more macro level, the research attempted to unearth the governing logics of the Skype procedure and the waiting events it shapes.

My analysis revealed the Skype procedure as a bordering technique with extremely alienating effects. The Skype procedure operates as an internal border that allows GAS to hide backlogs and keep claimants at bay. Applicants come into contact with this border while calling the Asylum Service on Skype, of course, but also while seeking healthcare, employment, and access to public space. These exclusionary encounters keep asylum applicants invisible and immobilized. The Greek case highlights the ability of digital technologies to hold people at distance from their rights and the very land they reside upon. Those who engage the Skype procedure suffer a digital pushback, meaning that they have been forced outside the realm of social, legal, and political inclusion even if they remain within the state's borders.

The digital pushback operates in part through affective violence. Planned encounters of calling the Asylum Service on Skype have unexpected effects of boredom, alienation, and perceived personal rejection, with deeply damaging psychological effects. Meanwhile unplanned encounters additionally condition exhaustion and depletion while maintaining suspensions that make life unlivable. These suspensions chart an expansive geography of exclusion, revealing the ability of states to employ digital pushbacks to erect multi-sited borders that confine the minds and mobilities of asylum applicants.

Nonrecording and invisibilization enable this violence and emerge, in contrast to existing literature on digitalized governance, as central to the digital bordering project. Digital processes of knowing and not knowing here co-constitute the border (and its violence). Processes of not knowing also serve to shield the state. The digital nature of the Skype procedure enables and simultaneously legitimizes state absence, thanks in part to the distance and disorientation it structures for asylum applicants. Digital bureaucracy shelters the state from demands as well as from accountability. The social meanings acquired by the Skype procedure muddle understandings of power, particularly given the obscure relationship between asylum applicants, Microsoft, and the Asylum Service.

In addition to affective violence, distance, disorientation, and intelligibility are key to the Greek government's digital pushback. The lived reality of this pushback is one of absurdity, shaping surreal processes of meaning making that asylum applicants experience as existentially oppressive: the state maintains a "suffocating presence, yet distant in a confusing and irrational way" (Allard and Walker, 2016, p. 19). However, the digital pushback does not create total domination. When applicants decide to stop calling on Skype, they engage in a politics of refusal whereby they reject the conditions of temporal, psychological, and existential harm shaped by the digital pushback. These refusals generate new temporal possibilities (reclamation of time), psychological possibilities (refusal as respite), and existential possibilities (refusal as regaining control). At the same time, they have deeply contradictory effects, allowing asylum applicants vital exercises of agency in an otherwise constrained existence while simultaneously entrenching proximity to exploitation, exclusion, and "illegality."

Each chapter in this dissertation offered insight on a phenomenon that has not otherwise received ethnographic attention. However, the contributions of this dissertation do not rest solely on claims of novelty. Empirically, the dissertation contributes rich understanding of how digital bordering is experienced, internalized, made meaning of, and contested. It presents an empirically grounded and phenomenological account of how digital tools can intervene to shelter the state from demands, with devastatingly alienating effects. Crucially, it reveals that mundane digital bureaucratic tools that operate through absence and affective harm can create insidious violence that operates without spectacle. This dissertation has shown that the marriage of digital technology and the bureaucratic state apparatus can create either designed violence, accountability voids of neglect, or both.

Throughout, the concept of digital pushback has provided a useful framing through which to consider how the digitalization of bureaucratic systems alters the (non)citizen-state interaction. In particular, it has allowed for a productive grounding of empirical findings regarding exclusion, alienation, temporality,

absurdity, and refusal. As previously mentioned, prevailing pushback definitions center on territorial expulsion and curtailed ability to apply for asylum; it is these two considerations that make the Skype procedure most legible as a pushback. In all accounts of physical pushbacks, there is a "clear pattern of denied access to international protection" (Bužinkić and Avon, 2020, p. 161), one that occurs without assessment of individual protection needs (Spryszak, 2019). Like physical pushbacks, the Skype procedure indiscriminately obstructs access to the asylum procedure. Without being able to pre-register on Skype, asylum seekers cannot begin (or reinitiate) their asylum process, since for the majority of applicants on the mainland, the Skype procedure is the only viable pathway that exists to register for asylum and access the documentation and social services that affords. Applicants who cannot get through on Skype are pushed away from the Asylum Service and from inclusion in Greece. Without pre-registration, they are turned away from hospitals, pharmacies, housing projects, employment opportunities, and other places they seek access to. They are made to disappear.

Of course the experience of someone who has been pushed back to Turkey, for example, and the experience of someone who remains in Greece but has been pushed back from the asylum system and from public space are not entirely the same.[132] But when it comes to accessing the Greek state and its territory, the realities are not entirely incongruous. Whether relegated to the confines of an overcrowded flat in Athens or residing in a refugee camp in Turkey, the border crosser cannot access asylum in Greece, nor can he meaningfully access Greek territory. Those who are physically in Greece are not symbolically or politically in Greece; they inhabit what Susan Bibler Coutin calls a *space of nonexistence* (2000). Coutin's work demonstrates that people can be physically present and even socially active within the bounds of a nation state, while nonetheless suspended legally and practically outside of that nation state.

[132] There are privileges that come from being in Greece even if movement is highly constrained (for example, being on European soil with the potential to move northwards through illicit means), and there are differences between expulsion from territory and restricted access to territory. Still, I contend that the lived experiences of exclusion for those who have been physically pushed back and those who call unsuccessfully on Skype are comparable on an experiential and conceptual level.

This “disjuncture between physical and legal presence” (Coutin, 2000, p. 29) is evident in the Skype procedure, where unanswered calls shape political, spatial, and temporal voids within Greek territory.

Restricted access to asylum and Greek territory are only two elements of the Skype procedure that share striking characteristics with physical pushbacks. In describing “the anatomy of a typical pushback,” Davies et al. (2022, p. 3) highlights brutal violence, degradation (including theft of personal belongings), physical confinement (ie. in a van or a police station), and clandestine operations (often taking place in remote areas and at night). As the empirical chapters reveal, the Skype procedure shares this anatomy. Cruel affective violence (Chapter 4), humiliating states of waiting and confusion (Chapters 4 and 5), physical and mental confinement (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), and extreme intelligibility (Chapter 6) define the digital pushback experience.

My contribution is not simply to compare physical pushbacks with obstructive digital bureaucratic systems, but rather to widen both the geographies and tactics of pushback practices. My conceptualization of digital pushbacks contributes to the diversification of pushback geographies, exhibiting how pushbacks can be not only initiated far from borders, but contained entirely within the boundaries of a nation state. In recognition of the increasing digitalization of borders as well as global trends of privatization and externalization, I contribute an approach that challenges the primacy of the territorial border and considers how digital technologies can reconfigure power, space, time, and the relationship between the state and those who seek to make claims upon it. This conceptual innovation, I believe, is useful in addition to novel. It allows future scholars of bordering to study not only where asylum applicants are pushed, but from what, through which means, and to which effects. In shifting the focus from highly visible displays of violence to quiet internal expulsions, I provide an analytic with which to consider how states find novel ways to remove unwanted populations from public space, public sight, and the remit of legal responsibility.

Finally, a brief note on the title of this dissertation and its relation to the study's findings and key contributions. In the title and various subheadings of the thesis, I have referred to "the Skype state." I have not, however, defined it. This was an intentional choice meant to reflect the uncertain and hazy perceptions of power that dominated asylum applicants' experiences with the Skype procedure. Where and what is the state? Who and what is Skype? Who and in relation to whom is the asylum applicant? While attempting to pre-register, the applicant shifts unexpectedly between state subject and Microsoft user. A citizen-in-waiting, the applicant becomes a customer in (his) waiting.[133] Meanwhile, the line between the state and the corporation that both platforms and legitimizes its absence blurs. With no one to encounter or point fingers at, the applicants are left to make sense of the absurd waiting state they inhabit and the nebulous state-like entity they implore. As a result, they endure, embody, encounter, and imagine the Skype state.

7.3 The End of Skype and The Continued Digital Pushback

On August 22, 2022, I received a text from Jess that read: "Skype is officially finished." She sent a link to the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum website, where I found the new digital pre-registration portal that was replacing the Skype procedure. Called "registration appointment application," the digital portal contains two different applications, one for the initial application registration appointments (for those lodging their first asylum application), and another for subsequent application registration appointments (for those who have submitted asylum applications before). For the first time since the Skype procedure had begun several years prior, asylum applicants no longer needed to call the Asylum Service to pre-register. They could, in theory, simply fill out a digital form with relevant personal information (DOB, country of origin, language, address, number of family members, asylum case number if relevant, etc.) and book an appointment for registration.

[133] See Haas (2017) on asylum applicants as "citizens-in-waiting" and "deportees-in-waiting."

A rigorous analysis of the new digital procedure falls outside the scope of this dissertation, and I have not collected data on the experience of individuals encountering the new procedure. However, it is important to note that while the Skype procedure has ended, its obstructive effects have transformed rather than disappeared. In the months following the implementation of the new procedure, I became aware through informal conversations with Jess, Ale, and the guys that the new registration appointment application bore concerning similarities with the Skype procedure. On the most basic level, the digital application requires a high level of digital literacy: applicants must provide a contact email and retrieve from it a one-time password used for authentication (this must be completed every time the applicant logs in). Applicants now come to the office so that FORGE staffers can make an account and fill out the application for them, similar to how applicants used to come to the office so that FORGE staffers could download the Skype app and make a Skype account for them.

In addition, applicants must input key information such as demographic data, passport number (if possible), and their date and point of entry into Greece. As Jess explained to me, applicants often struggle to find or remember this information. Regarding their point of entry into Greece, "they're like, 'I don't know, Thessaloniki?' They have no idea if it was Evros or Zanthi or Drama, they don't know." Those registering subsequent claims must provide their case number and file name, which poses additional barriers to those who either do not know what those entities are, or where to find them. The digitalized procedure continues to structure confusion.

The largest similarity between the Skype procedure and the registration appointment application is that applicants are required to use a digital pathway that often obstructs access to registration. Asylum applicants are still unable to present themselves at the Asylum Service or police stations to express their

willingness to apply, and all applicants, including those who can evidence severe vulnerabilities, must go through a digital pathway that can take months to years to complete. As Jess explained over the phone:

> "To begin with we were like, 'Ok awesome, at least people will have an appointment which means that when the police ask them, they can show them this appointment and the police will leave them alone and understand that they have expressed the will to claim asylum.' Then about two weeks in, every time you tried to book an appointment after you filled out the online form, it would say there were no dates available, so that means that it's exactly like the Skype system because now people don't know when they're going to be able to get an appointment so what we tell them to do is that they need to check every week, which is pretty much the same as the Skype system. They come to the office and we go through their application again and see if there are any dates available. The platform has been closed more than it's been open."

Almost immediately after launching, the online registration application ran out of appointments for first asylum applicants. In August 2022, for example, the only available appointments were in October 2023, meaning that pre-registered applicants would be without any form of support or protection from the police for the next fourteen months. The lawyers at FORGE confirmed that people with appointments on the digital system regularly get arrested, since the appointment itself does not legalize residence in Greece. This continues the carceral legacy of the Skype procedure, though in a different digital domain.

The carcerality of the digital application procedure is multiplied by the fact that upon receiving an appointment date online, applicants must go to one of two locations for processing once that date arrives. When they arrive, they are kept in a closed processing center for up to 25 days (the idea is that the entire asylum claim will be processed within this timeframe). However, several of the men FORGE works with have been held in processing for longer than 25 days and are still there, uncertain when or if they will be released.[134] In addition, one of the two locations (Diavata) is near the Evros River that flows between Greece and Turkey, a location where physical pushbacks have been widely reported by civil society actors and investigative journalists (Bathke, 2020; Schmitz et al., 2020). FORGE is aware of cases where asylum

[134] On the other extreme, one of the first people from FORGE to go to the processing center was a Pakistani man who went through the entire asylum procedure in 48 hours. Within two days he had a rejection and had been released from the center. It is notable that this expedited review concerned someone from Pakistan, since the Greek government largely views Pakistani applicants as fake or bogus asylum seekers (this was reflected in the Skype timetable and the frequency with which the Urdu Skype account was offline).

applicants registered online and upon arrival in Diavata were pushed back to Turkey. In these instances, a digital system helped facilitate physical pushbacks.

Jess explained that asylum applicants who managed to get online appointments are extremely afraid of attending them, fearing that they will be physically pushed back. In fact, so many people decided not to attend their appointments that the Ministry of Migration announced in November 2022 that they were going to reschedule existing appointments to earlier dates since they suddenly had openings and capacity.[135] A complex interconnectedness of physical pushbacks and digital pushbacks is evident here, as applicants choose to avoid registration and asylum processing in order to avoid the risk of physical pushback, a risk shaped by a digital procedure whose material spatiality structures proximity to expulsion. Meanwhile, the would-be applicants remain unable to meaningfully access Greek territory or its social services. In this way, the new digital procedure mirrors the Skype procedure. As Jess told me:

> "It has many many of the same problems as Skype other than that I suppose it's a less painful procedure than sitting and calling for an hour, but in my opinion, it's equally bureaucratically violent and still prevents people's access to asylum and still means that many people are then put unnecessarily in detention."

Jess' account highlights how different forms of digital bureaucracy can shape similar results of violence. Although the Skype procedure ended, the digital pushback endures. I will note, however, that the altered form of the digital pushback necessarily alters the lived experience of being digitally pushed back. Without extensive knowledge of the new procedure, I tentatively agree with Jess that the digital application system appears to enact similar bureaucratic violence, but I stop short of suggesting that the lived reality of that violence is the same. This dissertation revealed the Skype procedure was not merely painful, as Jess suggests in the quotation above, but deeply debilitating, psychologically ruinous, and absurd. Future research may well find similar effects associated with the new procedure, but it is important to emphasize that while both procedures shape exclusions and limbo, the Skype procedure

[135] However, the Ministry sent out the date change notifications via email, which, as Jess explained, "most people don't know how to use, so people missed their appointment that had been rescheduled for an earlier time."

shaped unique temporal rhythms of torment and decay. The waiting experience of checking an online website for openings once per week and the experience of spending hour-long sessions continually calling on Skype likely have synergies, but they almost certainly invoke different affectivities and embodiments of the digital pushback.

7.4 Future Research Directions

When the Skype procedure was abruptly discontinued, I felt conflicted. As someone who intimately observed the violent horrors of the procedure, I was relieved to know that asylum applicants would no longer have to subject themselves to such a cruel and absurd waiting event. I thought with excitement about each of my participants and how happy they would be to never hear the terrorizing taunt of endless ringing again. At the same time, I admit (with a hint of shame) to having experienced a brief moment of selfish panic. With the Skype procedure gone, would my research still be relevant?

This concern was ill-founded. Rather than derail my research, the closing of the Skype procedure served to remind me that my dissertation was never actually about Skype: the dissertation is about processes of digitalization that have deeply obstructive effects, of which the Skype procedure is simply one example.[136] More specifically, this thesis is about how bureaucracy and technology can intervene to shield the state from demands, resulting in alienation and violence. The Skype procedure is by no means the only such case: there are many settings where, as Street (2021, p. 2) writes, "the state exerts its presence as both an absence and an object of desire."

Research that investigates these dynamics is increasingly necessary given that systems of governance around the world are rapidly undergoing digitalization (Ranchordás, 2021). Stemming from desires for

[136] In considering the Skype procedure part of a broader phenomenon of digitally mediated exclusion, I follow Anderson's (2019) call for "methodological de-nationalism," which serves to "demigrantize" issues of migration by recognizing that there are necessary connections to be made "between the formal exclusions of noncitizenship and the multiple, and sometimes informal exclusions within citizenship" (p.1).

increased efficiency as well as the promise of technological innovation involving information and communications technology (ICT), artificial intelligence, big data, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, and more, governments increasingly embrace e-governance and digital self-service (Eom, 2022; Lindgren et al., 2019, p. 431). The COVID-19 pandemic has in many cases accelerated digital transformation by making digital service provision a necessity (Iida, 2020; Kummitha, 2020). These trends of digital transformation have spurred novel research on service provision through digitalized infrastructures.

As Kim (2021) writes, "The virtual state predicted as a new form of government...is now being technologically and physically realized" (p. 362). Scholars note that the "virtual state" can benefit both governments and beneficiaries. As Eom (2022, p. 176) explains, "AI and other ICT can reduce business latency, reduce administrative costs, overcome resource shortages, and free public officials from routine and repetitive tasks to perform higher-order tasks. Such technologies can also increase the accuracy of business predictions and help make the work process more informed and evidence-based" (see also Bullock, 2019; Gil-Garcia et al., 2016). Others, though, have highlighted darker effects, pointing to exclusion, algorithmic bias, the digital divide, the elimination of individual discretion, dehumanization, reduced empathy, decreased ability to remedy errors, and other "curses of digital government" (Peeters and Widlak, 2018, p. 176; Peeters, 2023; Borelli et al., 2023; Ranchordás, 2021). Emerging scholarship sheds light onto this phenomenon as specifically applied to the migration space, including Burrell and Schweyher (2021) on the digital identification of migrants in Sweden, Safarov (2023) on migrant access to digitalized welfare systems in Finland, and Castañeda (2019) on virtual asylum trials in America. In each of these cases, digital infrastructures erect internal borders and serve to alienate migrant communities from the state.

This dissertation similarly highlights the importance of studying the virtual state in terms of the harms it structures and the people who suffer at its margins. Future research would benefit from further exploration of the findings centered in this dissertation as well as some of the considerations I chose not to interrogate. There are several rich avenues of exploration that this dissertation, limited by time, resources, access, and scope, has not meaningfully engaged. Each presents a worthwhile opportunity for future research, particularly since the questions raised in this project are not going away, but will only multiply in the coming years.

7.4a Digital Rights

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the deployment of technology within bordering projects cannot be disentangled from questions of how the digital turn transforms migrants and asylum seekers into surveillable bodies and extractive data subjects. I noted throughout the dissertation that since the vast majority of calls were ignored in the Skype procedure, the technology served functions of nonrecording and invisibilization as opposed to surveillance and extraction. However, it is inaccurate to suggest that the Skype procedure does not produce data through its interactions with asylum applicants. While the procedure may not produce data for the Greek state, it does produce data for Microsoft. Writing on the experimental deployment of mundane technologies within humanitarian space, Aradau (2022, p. 39) notes that:

> "Alongside the data that migrants have to give in the process of registration and identification, they also produce 'surplus data' as their data enters capitalist circuits of exchange through the digital platforms that Microsoft owns. The use of Skype depends on agreeing to Microsoft's privacy policy, which allows Microsoft to collect a wide range of data from users."

Much like other major platforms (Newlands et al., 2020), Microsoft collects copious data from its users. Whether they know it or not, and whether they consent to it or not, asylum applicants engaging the Skype procedure are transformed into Microsoft users. At the same time, the "experimental users" of Skype are told nothing about privacy or the protection of their data (Aradau, 2022). This is worrying from the

standpoint of autonomy and digital rights. Scholars have at different points identified security concerns such as the storing of private information scraped from messages and calls on Skype in China (Villeneuve, 2008), while noting that data from Skype calls can be "easily collected and used to identify" users (Tan and Pivot, 2015, p. 862). And even if the data were not accessible or corruptible by non-Microsoft actors, it is unclear exactly which data Microsoft collects during the Skype calls that are answered and what it does with it. It is similarly unclear whether Microsoft collects data on the calls which are not answered (note that while the applicants call without reply, their cameras remain on the entire time).

There is abundant reason for concern given that tech giants regularly give data to governments and other actors. Take for instance the case of actors like Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Yahoo, and Apple giving user data to the American government's National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013; this involved Microsoft sharing audio and visual Skype data with the NSA (Aradau, 2022; Der Derian, 2022). Even though the Skype procedure had finished, the surplus data collected during its eight-year run certainly still exist somewhere. Who has access to this data? Where is it stored? Could it be sold (or simply given) to governments who through an increasing use of artificial intelligence and facial recognition attempt to identify, criminalize, and expel displaced people?

Questions of digital rights, data privacy and security, data extraction, commodification, and function drift must be central to the ongoing study of digital bordering practices. Given the "invisible infrastructures of data extraction and data circulation" (Tazzioli, 2022a, p. 71) that undergird digitalized asylum procedures, there is urgent need for deep exploration of these questions and how to safeguard migrant rights within a digitalized landscape.

7.4b The Black Box of Digitalized Bureaucracy

In studying the Skype procedure, this dissertation focused almost exclusively on the lived experience of those engaging with digitalized bureaucracy. It did not, however, rigorously analyze the bureaucracy itself. Though I tried and tried again to gain access, I was ultimately unable to interview the Asylum Service workers who themselves staff the Skype accounts and answer (or don't answer) the incoming calls. As a result, there are several key questions that remain unanswered. How did the Asylum Service decide which calls to answer and which to ignore? Was it random or was there some sort of internal logic? Were there quotas, and if so, did the quotas change from country to country? Is it true that lawyers and brokers could pay for calls from certain usernames to be answered? What exactly was the chain of command, and to what extent did individual staffers have discretion?

Scholars have approached bureaucracy as a "black box" that obscures understandings of power while complicating efforts of transparency and accountability (Jarvis, 2014; Ozkul and Jarrous, 2021; Thomson, 2012). The impenetrability of black box bureaucracy is only augmented by digital technologies, which bury decision making in algorithms, codes, complex infrastructures, and distance from human contact (Aradau et al., 2019; Smith, 2020). Bureaucracies and bureaucrats remain inscrutable, and the internal workings of power continue to operate in the dark.[137] In order to understand the full power of digital bureaucracies, future scholarship must attempt to shine light onto and into this black box, interrogating both the impact of digitalization as well as the implementation of digitalization. Specific to this study, future exploration of digital pushbacks would benefit from studying those who execute the pushback, and the processes of carrying out policies that result in digital pushbacks.

[137] This is ironic in the asylum landscape since digitalized systems demand total transparency from applicants while themselves remaining opaque. See Thomson (2012).

7.4c Brokers, Maneuver, and Corruption

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 5, the challenge of successfully reaching the Asylum Service through official channels has given way to a proliferation of unofficial pathways and actors. During fieldwork, I became aware of lawyers charging hundreds of euros for documents that can be shown to the police or sent to the Asylum Service demanding pre-registration. Of course neither document has legal legitimacy, and I met several asylum applicants who had paid exorbitant sums for these papers only to be arrested and detained immediately upon showing them to the police. In addition, I heard prevalent rumors about lawyers who would bring their client's Skype username to the Asylum Service with a sum of money, and the next session, that client's call would receive reply.

Although I was unable to verify this rumor, my colleague in Athens confirmed that she once saw money exchange hands between a lawyer and an Asylum Service staffer while in the Asylum Service, and my GAS interviewees confirmed that both lawyers and doctors are regularly involved in attempts to attempt to bypass the Skype procedure on behalf of their paying clients. Meanwhile, there is a proliferation of fake Skype accounts, some of which answer calls and offer fake papers in exchange for money. Often my participants spoke of brokers they had paid and individuals who professed to have backchannels with Asylum Service Skype staffers.

That I encountered these dynamics is perhaps unsurprising: in several other settings of inaccessible rights and slow bureaucracy, scholars have observed the central role of brokers and maneuver (Bonizzoni and Artero, 2023; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021; Tuckett, 2018). I did not have the time or space in this project to interrogate how these actors and dynamics impact the experience, power, and contestation of the Skype procedure, though. Subsequent research might fruitfully explore the impact of brokers, community maneuver, and corruption on digital pushbacks.

7.4d Microsoft and Accountability Voids

Chapter 5 revealed the frequency with which various actors in Greece evoke Skype in conversation. My participants largely discussed their relationship to their rights and the Greek state in terms of their relationship to a telecommunications platform. Whether intentionally or not, these discursive practices make Microsoft (the company that owns Skype) legible as a border actor. There is sharp tension, however, between the centrality with which asylum applicants talk about Skype and the passivity of Microsoft, which platforms border work but does not otherwise intervene.

My dissertation does not meaningfully interrogate this tension, in large part because I do not have the requisite data to do so. For approximately nine months, I tried unsuccessfully to find anyone at Microsoft willing to speak with me about the situation in Greece. Eventually I was put in touch with a Greek product marketer at Microsoft who expressed willingness to poke around and try to connect me with the right people. After sharing that "Skype has been mostly replaced by Microsoft Teams," she went quiet for several months. When I circled back in December 2021, she noted that her outreach had been met mostly with "dead ends," but that she'd try once more. Shortly after she messaged to say that Skype had been phased out globally the year prior (linking a FAQ sheet titled "Upgrading from Skype for Business to Teams"), and that the people she reached out to replied but "the topic is quite sensitive, so I am not sure that they can speak about it with you." She suggested I reach out to UNHCR, and wished me luck.

I was intrigued not only by the seeming impossibility of accessing Microsoft as a researcher at the University of Oxford (and the irony of my inability to reach Microsoft while my participants were unable to reach "Skype"), but also the suggestion that this matter was of concern to UNHCR and not Microsoft. This prompted several uncertain questions. Is obstruction of asylum facilitated by a Microsoft product actually of concern to Microsoft? Should it be? More broadly, how does the insertion of private actors into bordering projects alter conceptions of accountability?

Skype is a Microsoft product, meaning that the technological infrastructure of the Greek pre-registration pathway is built, maintained, and provided by Microsoft. With the exception of the WiFi or data provider used by each party, the entirety of the digital exchange between the Asylum Service and asylum seekers took place on a Microsoft platform. In other words, if Microsoft and all its products had suddenly ceased operation, the pre-registration system would have immediately disappeared with it, leaving a gaping hole in the mainland asylum procedure. The Greek Asylum Service relied upon Microsoft for the functioning of its digital registration pathway, and asylum seekers (whether they recognize it or not) relied upon Microsoft for access to their rights.

But while Microsoft was central to the technological infrastructure of the procedure, it was equally absent from its governance and daily administration. My interviews with Asylum Service personnel suggested that Microsoft was not involved in the initial decision to start using Skype within the asylum procedure, and my findings do not indicate that they at any point intervened or engaged beyond providing the platform. The employees staffing the Skype line were members of the Greek Asylum Service, supported by language interpreters from a Greek NGO called Metadrasi. The design of the Skype timetable, the relative access afforded to different language speakers, the hours in which the line is unpredictably on or offline, the calls answered and the calls left ringing, and other key decisions fell to Greek bureaucrats and policy makers, not Microsoft. Microsoft provided infrastructure, and by proxy, a service (potential digital connectivity with applicants and the elimination of physical queues), but unlike in other settings where states outsource border work to corporations (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013; Infantino, 2017; López-Sala and Godenau, 2022; Stavinoha and Fotiadis, 2020), this case of privatization did not seemingly result in a transfer of responsibility, labor, decision-making, or governing power.

How, then, to conceptualize the role and responsibilities of Microsoft in this case? Microsoft itself vehemently denies responsibility. I conducted an interview with Steve Crown, Microsoft's Vice President and Deputy General Counsel of Human Rights, and speaking in his official capacity, he strongly rejected the notion that Microsoft should concern itself with how people use its technology. Microsoft is aware, of course, that digital tools can cause harm, whether intentionally or unintentionally: the 2021 Microsoft Annual Human Rights Report, for example, notes that "while digital transformation holds great promise, the world has turned information technology into both a powerful tool and a formidable weapon" (p. 5). Nonetheless, Crown told me:

> "In my mind is another analogy that comes up of hammers and nails and somebody owns a lumber store and sells hammers, nails, and wood, and if people are not building houses that are needed, is that a problem with the lumber store or is that a problem elsewhere? For us as a technology creator and licensor, if the Greek government is not using Skype as fully as it could to get more positive outcomes, is that a problem with the technology or is that a problem with something else that's extraneous?"

It is outside the scope of this project to analyze Microsoft's role and their response to the rights abuses enabled by the Skype procedure, but it is telling that Crown so firmly separates the functioning of the technology from how it is used. This in essence erases Microsoft as a border actor, which is ironic because asylum applicants continually invoked Skype, and Microsoft indirectly, as a key border actor. Often this involved constructing Microsoft as an agent of harm and neglect, like when Abdul Karim said "I don't think Skype is doing their work," or when Mooslam fielded a call from someone in distress who said "I want to do suicide because Skype is not working."

Is Microsoft, who provided the technical infrastructure that for many years was the only possible way of accessing asylum, a pathway that served largely to obstruct asylum, at all responsible for these harms? Is that responsibility altered in any way by the meanings that "Skype" takes on within the Greek context and the effect the technology has of restructuring the relationship between asylum applicants, Microsoft, and the state? How should scholars and practitioners think about issues of responsibility and accountability

when a company passively platforms rights violations while simultaneously posing as a socially conscious and rights-oriented corporation?[138]

These questions are both legal and normative in nature, and they have enduring relevance even though the Skype procedure no longer exists. For starters, almost all leading tech companies and many other major corporations have established partnerships with the United Nations, humanitarian organizations, and governments (Microsoft, Meta, Google, Amazon, Palantir, Accenture, IBM, and Mastercard, to name a few) (Madianou, 2019). In addition, the rapidly expanding privatization and externalization of migration governance promises to further complicate questions of protection, responsibility, and liability in border contexts across the world. These questions thus demand investigation so that scholars and policy makers can fully understand the ways in which private companies can contribute to the "impunity that border violence can enjoy" even without directly enacting harm (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022, p. 33). Future research should attempt to unearth the complete enabling structures of digitally mediated violence and the accountability voids formed by intermediary actors.

7.5 Final Thoughts

"There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express." -Samuel Beckett[139]

Throughout my three-year doctoral journey, I have struggled to find the right words—or any words at all—to describe the Skype procedure. For months I found myself entirely unable to write, paralyzed by the task of creating something meaningful from a source of meaningless suffering. I typed and deleted,

[138] Note that Microsoft has since 1999 engaged in official partnerships with UNHCR in settings of displacement and humanitarian need (Suder and Nicolas, 2009). Often these partnerships involved providing technology to support the registration of displaced people.

[139] This quotation comes from Beckett's *Disjecta* (1983, p. 139). It was likely influenced by the writings of Maurice Blanchot, who in his essay *From Dread to Language* wrote that "The writer finds himself in this more and more comical position in of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it." See Willits (2005).

typed and deleted, overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of accurately representing the mundane monstrosities I observed in Greece. How to explain the absurdity and bewilderment that marked each Skype session to people who did not themselves hear the ringing, who did not themselves watch hope breathe and burn as each hour stretched on? How to communicate the insult of having to attempt registration during tiny windows of time, only to find the Asylum Service offline? How to convey the desperation of calling on five devices at once, the marathon of 76 calls averaged in one hour, the shocked and shocking silence, or the farce of 8,835 calls and only nine replies? This is a tragically boring and bizarre violence beyond comprehension. Even now, at the end of my doctoral journey, I cannot pretend that my attempts to render it have been sufficient. Words on a page cannot fully capture an event that is deeply embodied, affective, and sensorial, let alone an event whose destruction I closely observed but did not myself suffer.

In my last Skype session with Prince Meddo, he told me that he had no hope that "Skype" would answer his call and he had mentally given up long ago. I asked why he still attended each session if he had no hope that it would result in success, and he replied: "Because you always ask me and because of your research." I quickly clarified that he did not have to keep engaging with the Skype procedure simply because I invited him to call sessions, and that he was free to stop participating in my project at any point. Prince Meddo shook his head. "You are the only one who cares. When you text me, I am glad. When I call Skype, you listen and watch and ask questions. It feels good. Then you will write. That is good too. I want someone to know that I've been calling for all these years."

The calls that my participants made are only a sliver of the hundreds of thousands of calls asylum applicants have made in Greece "for all these years." This dissertation bears witness to these calls and the people behind them. It documents that for eight years, asylum applicants experienced absurd forms of insidious violence whose malignant effects live on. This is both a record and a warning. The Skype

procedure is no longer in operation, but that does not erase the legacy of its harm. As evidenced by the new digital registration system in Greece and the increasing digitalization of migration governance globally, the Skype procedure's governing logics endure and will likely continue to spread across Europe and the world. Scholars of borders, bureaucracy, technology, and human rights must remain attentive to novel forms of internal expulsion and digitally mediated state violence, particularly those which operate in obscurity. This dissertation has shown that the marriage of digital technology and the bureaucratic state apparatus can create violence through absence, accountability voids, and deeply cutting affective harm. These risks of digitalization rang out loudly in every one of the 8,835 calls I recorded. This dissertation is a response to each, and a call to action. It is my sincere hope that this call is not ignored.

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