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The social aesthetics of eligibility:

NGO aid and indeterminacy in the Greek asylum process

ABSTRACT

On the porous EU border of Greece, where both fiscal and migration management are said to be in a state of crisis, NGOs figure crucially in the provision of legal and social aid to asylum applicants. I explore the dialogical engagements underpinning the determination of client eligibility at one such NGO in Athens. As workers and aid candidates coproduce “pictures” of lives eligible for protection, profound uncertainties and indeterminacies emerge. I argue that this indeterminacy gives testament to an often overlooked form of agency: how aid candidates and service providers alike reshape and even refuse dominant images of deservingness, victimhood, and vulnerability from within systems of aid distribution. [*aid, asylum, social aesthetics, indeterminacy, NGOs, Greece, EU*]

In the spring of 2008, I sat chatting with the gruff, chain-smoking lawyer Dimitris as the afternoon light filtered through the city smog and the dusty windows of his office. The Athens Refugee Center (ARC, a pseudonym) was quiet, having closed for the day, and we were discussing the determination of client eligibility: how workers at this NGO decide which asylum seekers they will support among the many who request legal and social assistance. I asked Dimitris what he considered most important in making eligibility decisions, and he pulled out some paper and compiled a list. Some factors were relatively concrete and empirical, including the applicant’s country of origin, Dimitris’s research and notes from meetings with the applicant, and advice of his coworkers. Yet the list overwhelmingly reflected much more nebulous elements: the applicant’s effort to communicate, to gain trust, to express his or her situation, and to be sincere; the applicant’s display of the appropriate degree of emotion; and both Dimitris’s and the interpreter’s opinions and emotions. Finally, however, Dimitris emphasized that eligibility depended primarily on the *sinoliki eikona* (whole picture) of the case, comprising, in his words, both subjective and objective elements.

Official ARC parameters of client eligibility mirror the pathways of rights-based protection that Greek, EU, and international law carve out. The organization is devoted primarily to those whom NGO workers deem to meet the criteria for refugee status according to Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Geneva Convention. Additionally, the ARC extends eligibility for “humanitarian reasons” to those who suffer severe health problems and to claimants who come from zones of generalized violence but may not have experienced personalized persecution. Finally, the ARC supports “vulnerable groups” (*evalotes omadhes*), including families with children, unaccompanied minors, “victims of trafficking” (*thimata tou trafficking*), and victims of abuse or torture. Eligibility is thus partially embedded in juridical potentialities: the categories of legal protection that particular persons could be said to fit. However, Dimitris’s model of a “whole picture,” which takes shape through the shared efforts of both lawyers and aid candidates, highlights eligibility determinations as supremely composite and dialogical, grounded not so much in formal articulations of law as in the sociabilities and sensibilities of NGO encounters.

Taking Dimitris's commentary as a provocation, I explore how pictures of cases are produced and how they render persons (in)eligible for aid services. I show that these pictures—and, likewise, eligibility decisions—emerge through dialogical forms of “mutual co-authorship” (Duranti and Brenneis 1986) between lawyers and aid applicants. Donald L. Brenneis (1987) coins the term “social aesthetics” to indicate the informal, often implicit, conventions through which performer–audience interactions unfold (see also Cavanaugh 2009). Such conventions guide performers and audiences in execution and interpretation and also compose fluid frameworks through which a performance is judged (in)coherent or (un)successful. In the theater of the law, such conventions have a powerful role: Diverse participants act simultaneously as performers and audiences, who interpret, play on, anticipate, analyze, shape, or conform to the expectations of others. As Dimitris suggests, social aesthetics are also entwined in knowledge practices.¹

Images of what constitutes an “eligible” human life reflect, at base, configurations of sovereignty, delineating who or what is included in (or excluded from) the juridico-political realm (see also Allen 2009; Ticktin 2006, 2011; Wilson 2010). Recent ethnographic literature on asylum explores how such images are produced and assessed within dominant regimes of truth (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005; Griffiths 2012), morality and ethics (Fassin 2005; Fassin and Rechtman 2010; Kobelinsky 2008; Ong 2003; Rozakou 2012; Ticktin 2006, 2011), and legal and bureaucratic classification (Gibb and Good in press; Gill 2009). Studies in semiotic anthropology also consider the crucial, and often normative, role of narrative, performance, and speech in these adjudicative practices (Blommaert 2001, 2009; Eastmond 2007; Good 2011a, 2011b; Jacquemet 2009, 2012; Maryns and Blommaert 2006; McKinley 2009).² Here I show that in addition to engaging with dominant regimes of truth, morality, and law and normative dimensions of narrative, affect, and performance, aid candidates and service providers are also deeply engaged in seeking to respond to and make sense of each other, through highly personal, contextualized, and unpredictable sets of encounters. These intersubjective dynamics and the social aesthetics through which they unfold reflect, invoke, but also sometimes undermine normative frameworks of assessment.

Like other forms of aid distribution, eligibility practices at the ARC entail what Didier Fassin calls a “politics of life,” implicit and explicit hierarchies regarding “which existences it is possible or legitimate to save” (2007:501). He argues that such life politics produce a “figure” (Fassin 2007:512) of the deserving aid recipient, framing him or her as a victim in need of protection (see also Ong 2003; Ticktin 2006). He suggests that successful aid candidates “willingly submit to the category assigned to them: they understand the logic of the construction, and they anticipate its poten-

tial benefits” (Fassin 2007:512). Similarly, Dimitris's “whole picture” serves as a kind of template that designates particular applicants as (in)eligible. However, by attending to the social aesthetics of eligibility, I make two further interventions to complexify and deepen ethnographic understandings of aid distribution. First, I show that, rather than seeking to “fit” existing templates of victimhood and vulnerability, aid candidates actively participate in producing and even reshaping the pictures through which their eligibility is assessed. Second, I demonstrate how they engage in refusal as well as submission, as they—knowingly or not—(mis)read and (re)interpret the expectations of audiences, consisting variously of lawyers, medical assessors, peers, journalists, asylum adjudicators, and even ethnographers.

This article thus highlights how aid candidates and service providers together shape, refigure, and even resist dominant images of deservingness, victimhood, and vulnerability from within systems of aid distribution. Recent literature locates the agency of migrants and asylum seekers largely in the realm of political action, platforms where “alien” subjects make claims to civil entitlements (Alexandrakis 2013) outside infrastructures of support and care (see Feldman and Ticktin 2011). Miriam Ticktin (2011:19) distinguishes “political” action, aimed toward radical change that disrupts the status quo, from the “antipolitics” of humanitarianism (see also Ferguson 1994; Fisher 1997). She argues, following Giorgio Agamben (1998) that, in claiming to stand outside politics through the moral imperative to offer care and support, humanitarian organizations reproduce structures of power and violence; the migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees they serve often remain caught within these dynamics of exclusion. Therefore, she argues compellingly, rather than enabling radical change, aid organizations often reinforce the “established order.” Sally Falk Moore, however, reminds us that the establishment and perpetuation of order is inextricably wed to indeterminacy. She writes that “cultural, contractual, and technical imperatives always leave gaps” (Moore 1978:39) requiring adjustments and reinterpretations, which are themselves full of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and often contradictions (see also Friedrich 1986). My intervention here is to track the indeterminate effects and potentialities of encounters in sites of “antipolitics.” I argue that even as they reinforce frameworks of exclusion, aid encounters may give rise to a circumscribed agency. These modes of agency may not be intentional, proactive, or revolutionary in the sense of “political” action; indeed, they may be better described as a kind of tactical maneuvering (De Certeau 1984:34), or what Susan Coutin (2007) calls “maneuvering within a particular set of conditions” and constraints (see also Mountz et al. 2002).³ “Maneuvering within” can, however, have powerful effects.

The dialogical qualities of eligibility practices and the maneuverings they entail do not, however, imply a

symmetrical relationship between aid applicant and aid worker. While the picture of a case is always coproduced, it emerges across axes of radical inequality based on gender, race, class, country of origin, and other less obvious forms of exclusion. At the ARC, gaps in power also reflect gaps in knowledge. Some aid candidates display only partial awareness of lawyers' expectations, while others may have more sophisticated or reliable knowledge acquired through social networks, literacy, or exposure to refugee regimes in countries of origin and transit. Workers and aid applicants meet across spatial, temporal, and evidentiary gaps entailing profound epistemological lacunae. Applications for assistance are grounded on events that happened in the past, in another country, which may or may not be substantiated by documentary evidence (Bohmer and Shuman 2008). Others, for whom assistance would mean recognition as victims of trafficking or torture, may have cases that NGO workers find suspicious, risky, or dangerous, owing to the illegalities associated with their claims. Eligibility practices are persistently haunted by "epistemic anxiety" (Stoler 2008; see also Bubant 2009): pervasive uncertainties that manifest in an endemic climate of mistrust and which, for workers, reflect the epistemological problem of how to know, really, about those whom they must judge.

ARC workers rely on bureaucratic practices to rectify these epistemic anxieties by generating information about aid candidates. A *synendefxi* (interview) between lawyers and applicants is the primary event in ARC eligibility determinations. Guided by a series of questions on an interview form, the interviewer and applicant, and, frequently, an interpreter, together coauthor a life history. Crucial in the assessment of asylum claims at both state and nongovernmental institutions, life history interviews are highly consequential objects of intense scrutiny (Good 2011a), with extraordinarily asymmetrical (Blommaert 2001) and even "coercive" qualities (McKinley 2009).⁴ Through the interview process, however, the bureaucratic penchant for producing and assessing information becomes tightly entwined with the "art" of storytelling. Walter Benjamin writes that storytelling, grounded on "experience that passed from mouth to mouth" (2002:144), carries authority over radical difference and distance. "Information," in contrast, lays claim to "prompt verifiability"; it must "sound plausible," appearing "understandable in itself" (Benjamin 2002:147). In both ARC eligibility assessments and state adjudication procedures, however, a hybrid form emerges: The story itself must simultaneously produce and substantiate information about the applicant.

The story may or may not be supported by documents or verifiable by country-of-origin reports (though external indicators of legitimacy certainly are important). Yet ARC workers proceed under the assumption that applicants may not be able to produce reliable documents or external evidence. The story—as both performance and

textual artifact—then becomes the primary object through which a case is deemed (in)eligible. As the picture of the case emerges, questions of form, plausibility, affect, and the applicant's comportment—the social aesthetics through which the story unfolds—take center stage. Social aesthetics thus generate new ways of knowing and perceiving when bureaucratic forms of knowledge production fail. While social aesthetics may allow NGO workers to "fill in" epistemic gaps, they nevertheless also generate new forms of uncertainty. Even when aid encounters invoke normative, even stereotyped, notions of race, class, and gender and moralized conceptions of truth, deservingness, and credibility, those on all sides of the encounter may finesse or adjust dominant conventions and the power relationships that they invoke. Eligibility determinations are, at base, deeply indeterminate.⁵

Borders

The current terrain of refugee protection in Greece is overlaid on long histories of Greek emigration and Greece's involvement in forced population movements in the early and mid-20th century. These include the "population exchange" incited through the treaty of Lausanne (Hirschon 1989, 2003; Tsimouris 2007, 2001), "return" migrations of Black Sea Greeks from the former Soviet bloc (Voutira 2003), and expulsions following the Greek Civil War (Danforth and Van Boeschoten 2011). In the past ten years, however, increasing numbers of asylum seekers and migrants from beyond the Balkan regions have entered the EU via the Aegean islands and Evros, the northern land border between Greece and Turkey. This stems not just from more intensive policing at other EU borders (Spain and Italy), which has redirected migration routes, but also from Greece's geographical proximity to sites experiencing profound political and economic instability (notably, Iraq and Afghanistan). This is changing somewhat, owing to the 2011 Arab Spring and its aftermath, which has made Italy again a primary entry point into Europe.⁶ Yet Greece and its border regions (in particular, Evros) remain the most porous EU peripheries.

While only a fraction of those who enter the country apply for asylum, since 2004 Greece has had one of the fastest-rising rates of asylum application in the EU. It has struggled deeply with its emergence as a country of asylum, with limited and inadequate reception infrastructures and an extraordinarily oversaturated, sluggish asylum process (Cabot 2012). Moreover, according to the 2003 Dublin II Regulation, asylum seekers must apply for protection in the first EU country of entry and remain there while their claims are assessed; if apprehended elsewhere in Europe, they may be forcibly returned to that arrival country (see Collyer 2004; Papadimitriou and Papageorgiou 2005). With recent critiques of the Greek asylum process, including a damning decision by the European Court of Human Rights asserting

that asylum seekers in Greece are at risk of cruel and degrading treatment (*M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece*, Application no. 30696/09, Council of Europe: European Court of Human Rights [January 21, 2011]), most Dublin signatories have, on an individual member-state basis, suspended returning asylum seekers to Greece. Nevertheless, given that most arrivals to Europe take place by foot (via Evros) or by sea, this legislation has placed obvious pressures on Greece and other member states at the EU's Mediterranean borders (see McDonough and Tsourdi 2012).

Between 2005 and 2011, I conducted 22 months of ethnographic research on the asylum procedure and legal aid in Athens. I collected much of my data through long-term participatory fieldwork at the ARC between 2006 and 2008. Drawing on methodologies that couple advocacy work with ethnographic fieldwork (Coutin 2007; Fortun 2001), I served as a volunteer in the ARC legal service, observing and encountering directly the legal quandaries of aid applicants, lawyers' strategies for addressing these difficulties, and ARC eligibility practices. In some instances, I also served as an interviewer and assisted lawyers with their cases, which raised ethical and methodological questions that were often difficult to navigate. In particular, my encounters with asylum claimants at the ARC were always deeply mediated by my own role as a volunteer and the power asymmetries endemic to that position. Yet I also engaged extensively with many current, rejected, and potential asylum seekers through other modes of contact outside ARC offices, largely through community organizations and social networks, through which I explored some of the broader realities that migrants and asylum seekers face in Greece. Moreover, by navigating, to a certain extent, the power-freighted positions that advocates inhabited, I approached workers themselves from a ground of common rapport that recognized the uncertainties, anxieties, and other challenges that characterize their work.

Another key methodological issue regards language. The multilingual character of the ARC posed distinct challenges for aid applicant, worker, and ethnographer alike. Encounters across diverse linguistic repertoires were the norm, not the exception. Most aid candidates were able to communicate in multiple languages, with varying degrees of ease; these included not just regional or local languages and dialects but often a lingua franca as well, such as Arabic, Dari, English, French, Russian, or Urdu. Many spoke Greek, with varying degrees of proficiency. Overall, however, interpreters were crucial to making ARC work possible. Yet, since interpreters were always overstretched, workers and aid candidates were often forced to negotiate extraordinarily partial and fraught linguistic terrains. While most of the employees were Greek, there were also staff members from various sites in northern Europe, Asia, and Africa, some of whom spoke Greek and others who relied on English. English had a powerful role in every facet of the orga-

nization's daily operations. Legal documents addressed to agencies of the Greek state were all produced in Greek, but EU-related documents, policy papers, country-of-origin reports, and correspondence with other European NGOs were generally in English. While I speak and read Greek, at the ARC I found myself drawing on remnants of elementary-school French, ragged college Russian, and a little bit of Bangla that I learned in the field, in addition to my native English. While language does not have a central role in my analysis here, I outline the complexity of the ARC linguistic field not just for the sake of methodological transparency but to enable readers to extrapolate how this might further complexify social aesthetics and produce additional forms of uncertainty.

Because the Greek state offers negligible legal aid to its large numbers of asylum applicants and very little social assistance, the ARC and a handful of other organizations provide much-needed services (Cabot in press; Rozakou 2012). Each weekday morning, I found dozens of applicants (even as many as 100 or 150) gathered at the ARC to request assistance or simply to register with the organization on the advice of acquaintances or even police. When ARC workers were caught between the enormity of need and the limitations of resources, eligibility practices enabled them to reject many of those seeking assistance, though not without anxiety and frustration. Structural pressures generated through geography, political economy, and policy in the European migration management system (Feldman 2012; Menz 2009) result in profound dilemmas of decision making at organizations offering aid and support.

If deemed eligible, an ARC aid applicant becomes a beneficiary, or *exipiretoumenos*, "one who is served." That person is then entitled to receive pro bono legal aid and limited forms of social assistance, including small stipends, help obtaining housing, and, if needed, medical and psychiatric care. If found ineligible, he or she may still be offered legal advice, yet support for those deemed ineligible depends entirely on individual caseworkers and does not entail any formal institutional commitment. ARC assistance never guarantees the ultimate success of an asylum claim, but beneficiaries have, at the very least, the promise of pro bono legal assistance in a country where the state provides none and when money to pay for a private lawyer is hard to come by. Moreover, the support of an ARC lawyer may grant an asylum case additional legitimacy at the state level. This is particularly owing to the many private lawyers now working in the field of asylum in Greece who, in the eyes of many state and NGO workers alike, are of uneven credibility and quality.⁷ An asylum adjudicator commented to me in the summer of 2011 that having a lawyer does not always strengthen one's case, since (in his words) many will do anything for money; yet, if an applicant is supported by an NGO lawyer, he or she is more likely to be seen as a "real" refugee, since NGOs take on only the most "serious cases."

Although ARC workers frequently displayed acute awareness of the seriousness of eligibility determinations, the bureaucratic mechanics of eligibility practices often enabled workers to render rejections somewhat unproblematically. Only on rare occasions did workers speak of having encountered an individual who immediately appeared to be eligible. Many cases, however, were borderline, with some elements that were compelling and others that did not quite work, and, as a consequence, both the applicant's account and worker expectations underwent adjustments and reinterpretations. Applicants often were asked to retell their stories, and NGO workers actively elicited and recrafted their narratives before issuing a decision; as I show below, social aesthetics had a central role in this dialogical process. James Clifford (1988) highlights how borderline cases render "powerful ways of looking" problematic; from one side, a case may appear one way, while from the other side it may look like its opposite. Borderline cases are important vehicles for rending and reconstituting ways of perceiving and the pictures that they generate.

The ethnographic centerpiece of this article is a borderline case involving an applicant named Sarah, whom Dimitris initially identified as a possible trafficking victim but later considered to have a possible case for asylum, though ultimately her eligibility remained unresolved. In Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel's (2002) classic sense, this was a "trouble case," in that it forced conscious attention and the defining of issues for both the claimant and the lawyer. This case, which shifted between various frameworks of (in)eligibility yet retained powerful points of indeterminacy, underscores the epistemic anxieties of eligibility determinations and the dialogical engagements that they demand from both lawyers and applicants. First, I discuss the narrative and performative dimensions of the interview process and the role of social aesthetics in eligibility determinations. Then, through Sarah's case, I explore the flexible, open-ended, indeterminate nature of these assessment practices and the partial forms of agency that they engender.

Narrating and performing lives

The social aesthetics of eligibility are intimately tied to the design aesthetics of documentary and bureaucratic forms (Riles 2001, 2007). Modeled on a format designed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the ARC interview form—printed in English—asks for detailed family and kinship data; religious, ethnic, and linguistic background; work history in Greece and before arrival; routes of travel to and entry into Greece; reasons for leaving one's country; and, finally, the question, "What do you think would be the consequences of your return to your country-of-origin at this time?" At the very end of the form is the heading "assessment" and, under it, space to record

comments addressing (1) main elements of asylum seeker's claim; (2) general credibility; (3) contradictions; (4) officer's thoughts on asylum seeker's claim/other points; and, finally, (5) decision.

Life histories—both as narrative forms and, indeed, as the lives of particular people—are always contextual, taking shape within existing, though dynamic, webs of human relationships (Arendt 1998; Greenhouse 1996). Despite the bureaucratic, informational thrust of eligibility interviews, applicants' life histories emerge through the active work of all parties involved (see Coutin 2007:87): interviewers, interviewees, and, often, interpreters as well. Although these life histories frame the aid applicant as both the subject of the story and the storyteller, the social aesthetics of the interview process render questions of authorship and agency dynamic and unclear. When called on to perform their life histories, many asylum seekers actively attempt to conform to yet also shape the expectations of audiences.

In an informal discussion over tea at the ARC, Mahmud, an elderly man from Sudan, reflected on why he had acquired refugee status: Giving me a sly, sidelong glance, he commented that he was "a very good actor." He then reproduced a performance asking the state asylum adjudication committee to allow him to stay in Greece, a simple old man wanting to live in peace; with a chuckle, he indicated the single tear that he had mustered during his asylum interview. This account highlights how some asylum seekers learn to execute such performances with expertise, engaging powerfully with audience expectations in adjudicative contexts. Yet the distinction between the performance that he describes and his own performance to me points to the deeply contextual, and always shifting, terrain of social aesthetics. Whereas to the adjudicators he presented himself as a vulnerable person in need of protection, to me he highlighted his canniness, fluency regarding asylum law and its adjudicative demands, and his capacity to play with or even "game" the system. This does not make Mahmud any less a "real refugee" but, rather, underscores the intensive work that applicants put into becoming recognizable as such and how they shift and adapt their own self-presentations depending on the interactional context. Ethnographic knowledge, like legal knowledge, is also imbricated in the dialogisms of social aesthetics.

The same is true of the narrative dimensions of life histories. Through observations of eligibility interviews and ethnographic interviews that I conducted both inside and outside the ARC, I noticed that many asylum seekers learned to incorporate particular narrative elements into their life histories. These included emotionally charged tropes of flight and violence, which often figure centrally in how displaced people narrate their lives (Améry 1980; Ballinger 2003; Malkki 1995). Of course, such narratives often reflect broadly shared experiences, yet applicants often must learn to present such experiences in a specific

manner that is compelling for particular audiences. Some life histories produced in eligibility interviews emerge as “refugee stories,” with recognizable arcs of flight: a particular “problem” in a home country that compelled one to leave, a protracted period of travel, and, finally, arrival in Greece. More experienced asylum seekers and recognized refugees often tell more polished stories, most likely having told them many times before, to both NGO workers and representatives of the state. These more polished ways of narrating and performing also leaked into ethnographic interviews with me, as I too was interpreted as an audience seeking a “refugee story.”

Most of the life histories that unfolded in eligibility interviews were, however, messy, vague, scattered, demanding that lawyers actively renarrate the accounts of claimants as they emerged both orally and on the interview form. Applicants’ diverse ways of remembering and narrating were, in turn, inflected through interpreters’ diverse styles of translation. The interview form, with its formulaic questions, thus produced highly variable responses, which rarely fit neatly into the arc of flight, travel, and arrival. By rephrasing questions, changing interview prompts, and giving examples, interviewers sought to make their own aesthetic norms clear to interviewees, to tame narratives, locate them in space, situate them chronologically, and contain them on the form itself. Yet disciplining these life stories was difficult, as they persistently fell outside the form, often literally, in the scribbles, crossed-out sentences, and margin notes of interviewers. Practice and repetition helped not just applicants but also interviewers refine interview styles, producing cleaner, more logically progressive, visually pleasing texts on the interview form.

The majority of ARC aid applicants were, however, found to be ineligible. ARC institutional norms often streamlined eligibility assessments, making rejections appear simpler, even self-evident. Rejections were largely grounded on the content and structure of the narrative, the performance, or a dissonance between the two. In July 2005, I observed an interview between a Bangladeshi man and a lawyer named Effie; the applicant spoke at times on his own in English and at other moments with the assistance of the interpreter. To her question asking why he came to Greece, he responded, “I don’t get a job.” At the end of his interview, Effie asked if he wanted to add anything, and he answered, “I am a refugee. Economic refugee.” For Effie, the decision was obvious: ineligible. As she explained to me later, for her, this man was a migrant, since asylum law does not recognize economic violence as legitimate grounds for protection. Yet his ineligibility was also, I would suggest, grounded on the poor correlation between his story and narrative tropes more appropriate to his claim and his audience. In his final statement, he leveraged a partial discourse of refugeeness by invoking a widely circulating phrase—“economic refugee”—which was, nonetheless,

woefully inadequate for his purposes here, suggesting a lack of knowledge regarding the formal legal definition of the term *refugee*. He did not accurately interpret his audience’s expectations, and he presented ineffective narrative material as a result.

Lawyers found other cases to be ineligible on questions of character or “general credibility,” and stereotypes associated with country of origin mattered deeply in these assessments. For instance, NGO workers often described West African applicants as engaging storytellers who were also utterly untrustworthy. Stories often referenced popular-culture notions of a wild, strange, “primitive” “Africa,” yet, to lawyers, they often appeared too fantastical, particularly when combined with performances that (for lawyers) may not have presented the appropriate emotional valence. Take, for example, the woman from Nigeria who—with wide eyes, big gestures, and loud voice—told the interviewer that her father had tried to sacrifice her. Or the Ghanaian man who asserted in an even tone that he came to Greece because the villagers in his town were going to cut off his head and bury him with the tribal leader. Such stories not only bore content and narrative structures that, for workers, skirted the edges of the possible but they also suffered from performances that, to workers, appeared too dramatic, not dramatic enough, or otherwise ineffective.

Bureaucratic practices enabled workers to streamline eligibility decisions, particularly when the social aesthetics of the interview deviated strongly from workers’ sensibilities. Yet when they encountered a borderline case—an applicant they thought could be eligible—epistemic anxieties emerged in sharp relief. Borderline cases ruptured routinized, bureaucratic habits of perceiving and judging, making the normative assumptions undergirding eligibility processes “present-at-hand” (Heidegger 1962): objects of reflection, interrogation, and debate. I now turn to the case of Sarah and the series of encounters through which her eligibility was assessed. Throughout, Dimitris’s assessments of her case not only reflected on its workability but also indicated profound dilemmas of knowledge and judgment: how to know, really, the truth of her account, and how to render a decision based on unreliable knowledge. Moreover, my own participation in these encounters highlights the entanglement of ethnographic knowledge in the social aesthetics of eligibility, reflecting common epistemological problems entailed in seeking to know, or render knowable, the other.

Sarah

It was a warm afternoon in April 2008, and most of the ARC lawyers were absent owing to work commitments outside the office. Louis, the Congolese gentleman who manages the waiting room, asked if I could help him find someone to do an interview with a *ghynaika* (woman) from Ghana.

I mentioned her to a couple of lawyers who were still in the office, but they were engaged in other meetings. A little while later, I spoke with Louis again; it was almost 3 p.m. (the ARC closes to the public at 3:30), and he explained that she had been waiting all day. I told him that, because no one else was available, I would meet with her myself.

After a few minutes, she arrived at the upstairs office where I was sitting. I was struck immediately by her pleasant smile, but when she introduced herself, as Sarah, I understood why Louis was concerned about her; her hands trembled slightly and her voice shook. She sat down, saying that she had been ill, that the day was very warm and her head was hurting. When I asked to see her appointment card, she told me that she did not have an appointment but that she had come to see “Mr. Dimitris.” She took out a piece of paper: a deportation order stating that she must leave Greece voluntarily on May 17—in approximately a month. This meant that her asylum claim had been rejected, and her only option was to appeal to the *Symvoulío tis Epikrateias* (Council of State) to ask for her case to be reexamined, an expensive and labor-intensive procedure.

She did not know her ARC registration number, so I plugged her name into the database but found no trace of her file. She said that she had done an interview at the ARC months ago and had even gone to the hospital for an examination, because “Mr. Dimitris” had insisted. Improvising, I decided to collect some information to give Dimitris when I next saw him, and, taking out an interview form, I asked her to tell me briefly what she had told Dimitris (while Sarah remembered him, he may not have remembered her). Without hesitation, she explained that she left Ghana with the help of a man who promised to arrange a job for her to “work in a house” in Europe. He told her to call a certain number when she arrived, and when she got off the boat—at a place that she did not know—she called the number, and a man came and met her; he took her to a house with other African women, where he told her, “There is no house work for you.” She concluded, again without hesitation, “They wanted to send me into prostitution. I tell them that I will not do that kind of work—women from Ghana don’t. He beat me. I escaped.”

I was startled by Sarah’s brief but shocking story, delivered with such directness. It appeared to be an unambiguous description of sex trafficking, which would make her immediately eligible for ARC assistance as a “vulnerable” category of person. I took her phone number, put copies of her documents in a folder, and told her that I would call her once I had more information. I tried unsuccessfully to reach Dimitris on his mobile to discuss Sarah’s case, but the office manager explained that he was up in the north for a big trafficking hearing. The office was closing and would not open again until Monday, but I thought about Sarah throughout the weekend.

Possible victims

Sarah’s direct and unselfconscious description of an experience akin to sex trafficking was incongruous with dominant ARC institutional assumptions regarding trafficking victims. In coherence with EU law, the legal protection afforded to trafficking victims in Greece is contingent on both their admission or confession to having been trafficked and their willingness to testify against their traffickers. On numerous occasions, ARC workers explained to me that, owing to victims’ fear of traffickers, representatives of the state, and NGO workers themselves, they rarely tell the truth in eligibility interviews, making a moment of confession very rare. Such assumptions frame possible trafficking cases as intrinsically problematic, based on the “double bind” (Bateson 2000; Fortun 2001) of a true victim with a credible case who does not speak the truth. This dilemma heightens the epistemic anxieties of eligibility determinations, making the identification of victims a kind of guesswork.⁸

Owing to the (presumed or actual) rarity of direct confessions, applicants deemed eligible through the ARC trafficking program were usually characterized as those whom workers suspected of having been exploited. Employees who carried out client registration—Louis, Melike, and Hadi, themselves legally recognized refugees—screened for such possible victims according to gender and country of origin. Generally, they identified most women from Nigeria and some women from Ethiopia, Ghana, and elsewhere in Africa as possible victims, even before they were interviewed. Women from Balkan and former Eastern Bloc countries were also marked according to trafficking criteria. Yet, with the exception of Georgians, who lodge significant numbers of asylum applications, most women from non-EU European countries do not apply for asylum but, rather, follow pathways of economic migration; many African women, however, do apply for asylum and are frequent visitors to the ARC. These screening criteria reflected informal guidelines that had emerged through conversations among ARC workers and administrators, as the organization sought to focus on groups deemed particularly at risk for trafficking.

Country of origin and gender were concrete, if extraordinarily stereotyped, elements in initial screening, yet lawyers described their methods for identifying possible victims primarily in terms of feelings, impressions, narrative cues, and visual tropes—social aesthetics through which trafficking was signaled but rarely confirmed. When discussing a woman from Nigeria with whom he had just done an interview, Dimitris explained that she was likely a trafficking victim, though she had not said anything directly. When I asked why he thought so, he explained that her Nigerian origin was a signal but so was how she was dressed—she wore tight pants and a revealing shirt and had long nails and carefully braided hair. Similarly, Nikos,

another lawyer, observed with evident embarrassment, “Some of these women take such good care of themselves.” A pronounced or “exotic” (and deeply racialized) beauty thus came to signal possible victimhood.⁹

Indications of possible victimhood also acquired narrative shape through mundane sections of the interview form (the question of why someone came to Greece is not particularly useful in trafficking cases, as victims are assumed not to speak the truth). Dimitris alluded to vague details regarding transit to Greece and spoke of “women coming here who have no idea where they were, no idea about the names of the streets in places where they have stayed, or even here [in Greece].” Another lawyer, Kyriaki, referred to the interviewee’s work history, explaining that women who say they work in nightclubs or “do hair” are often victims. She added that some trafficking victims also say they are living with friends they met when they arrived in Greece. Interviewees’ stories, and their details or lack thereof, were thus crucial identification criteria.

The gendered and racialized social aesthetics associated with trafficking cases reflected political and moral economies embedded in Europeanization and international human rights, including an increase in EU funds targeting trafficking as an area of concern. In September 2006, when I began my primary fieldwork, the ARC board of directors had recently hired three lawyers to form an *omadha* (team) on trafficking, consisting of Dimitris, Kyriaki, and another lawyer, Vasso. While they did fundamentally the same work as other ARC lawyers, their hiring was partially funded through an EU countertrafficking program. At the ARC, an organization that consistently has difficulties paying its staff, this award was significant, making trafficking a central theme in meetings, divisions of labor, and, of course, eligibility determinations. One of the directors reportedly commented on more than one occasion that trafficking would ensure the “future” of the ARC.

At the time, Greece was at the center of European anxieties about trafficking, one of the few EU countries that the U.S. Department of State had identified as a “tier 2” country regarding its countertrafficking measures.¹⁰ In fall 2006, I attended a Council of Europe–funded conference in Athens on the challenges of trafficking, and the opulence of this event attested to the significance of EU financial support for such initiatives and, by extension, the importance of trafficking in negotiations of Europeanness. At a luxurious hotel near the city center, speakers from throughout the EU, both practitioners and scholars, spoke on trafficking and its challenges for civil society, EU member states, and governing bodies. As interpreters translated these talks into Greek and English, I repeatedly heard the sentiment expressed that there is no place for trafficking in a “civilized” Europe. EU legislation identifies two general types of trafficking: labor trafficking and sex trafficking (also a form of labor). Frequently, however, “trafficking” is conflated with

“sex trafficking,” making “sex” the discursive and imaginative sphere in which the theme of “trafficking” often circulates (Vance 2011). This is particularly evident in the video that played in the hotel lobby throughout the conference. Opening with a shot of a white thigh against a black backdrop, the camera pulled back to display bodies moving in shadow on a bed. Then the video cut to a lithe woman crouched in a dark room, her face buried in her hands, her legs and arms posed to cover her naked body. This incongruously sexy clip was later played on televisions all over Europe to encourage people to say “No” to trafficking.

Trafficking evokes the contradictory aesthetics of pleasure–pain, danger–enticement, and darkness–nakedness (see Vance 1984), which, in turn, are entangled in desires for mobility and consumption (Rofel 2007; Tadiar 2005), patterns of migration and labor (Agathangelou 2004), and notions of civility, wealth, and Europeanness. With its small program on trafficking, the ARC itself engaged in an important form of consumption, tapping into funds coined in the halls of Brussels for protecting the civility of Europe. Trafficking also evokes the tantalizing attraction of what is hidden, imagined, and unknown, reflecting the mystery attached to zones of criminality but also an epistemological umbra. Trafficking is relegated to the shadows of the law, widely discussed but rarely observed directly, and victims are characterized as silent, ashamed, or afraid to speak the truth. Social aesthetics surrounding the identification of “trafficking victims” intersect with broader aesthetic constellations, as lawyers seek to perform an epistemological unveiling: find victims, expose traffickers, and in a sense render naked these shadowy economies. As the trajectory of Sarah’s case makes evident, the methods through which lawyers identify, assess, and assist “victims” invoke broader relationships of power (McKinley 1997). Yet the social aesthetics of eligibility may simultaneously destabilize these frameworks of exclusion and violence.

“What if there were a different story?”

When Dimitris returned almost a week after my meeting with Sarah, he explained that he had initially taken her on as a possible trafficking victim, but her case “was not going anywhere.” She had given him very vague information, which was a problem, because the police want names, locations—details she had claimed not to know or remember. He also presented me with her file. There were few details on Sarah’s original interview form—not much more than the brief account she had given to me—but the file included photocopies of her identity card, the rejection of her asylum claim, and notes from various medical examiners. The latter attested to respiratory problems, mental anguish (anxiety and an inability to sleep), and back and knee irritation that may have been caused by trauma. Citing his familiarity with such reports, Dimitris emphasized that the

medical examiners' language framed her injuries as rather minor; indeed, while medical examiners are not officially entitled to rule on a claimant's credibility, their certificates often render implicit judgments (see Fassin and D'Halluin 2005; Fassin and Rechtman 2010). Dimitris explained, however, that the biggest problem was that he had scheduled Sarah an appointment with the police committee that handles trafficking, but she had not appeared. This had undermined her credibility with the police and put his in jeopardy. Given the urgency of her situation, however, Dimitris agreed to reconsider her case, because, he explained, he still had the feeling that she did, indeed, have a "real problem." He asked me to reinterview her.

A few days later, Sarah returned to the ARC, and I initiated a formal interview, asking her to tell me in detail why she had left Ghana. I advised her not to leave anything out, even if she had already told Dimitris. Our discussion lasted nearly two hours. Below I outline in broad strokes the narrative that emerged.

Sarah left Ghana because of a problem with her husband, whom her father had forced her to marry because her family was very poor and her husband wealthy. "I didn't like him. He would beat me in order to be with me." Her husband was a businessman, and everyday he went to work, sometimes going on long trips. She started selling vegetables because she did not want to ask her husband for anything, not even money, but he did not like her selling vegetables and would sometimes come to the market and beat her, just like he beat her at home. When I asked if anyone else knew that this was going on, she answered that her father knew, but he was not willing to help, and her brothers are younger and unable to help. But one day, when her son was sick, she took him to see a doctor and, by chance, she met a man at the hospital who seemed to offer a solution. She was crying, and he talked to her, telling her that he helps women go to Europe "to work in the house." She decided to go, paying him \$1,000, which she had saved from selling vegetables and hidden away. She left her son with her cousin in Accra and departed on a ship, which later arrived in Greece.

She then repeated her account of what happened upon arrival, but with a few more details: When she arrived, she did not know where she was. She called the number the man in Ghana had given her, and an English-speaking West African man met her (she thought he was Nigerian). He took her to a house with other African women, who she thought were also from Nigeria.¹¹ There, "they told me I would have to prostitute myself, and I said no. He beat me." That night, she pretended she was sleeping, and when everyone else was asleep, she opened the door—the key was on the inside—and ran away. She got on a bus, where she met "a black woman," who told her where to find other Ghanaian people. She then met a man and his wife from Ghana, who gave her a place to stay, and "everything, everything."

She spoke with the directness that I had noted in our first meeting, in a voice that was clear though often shaky, without changing her pleasant expression, though at times she raised her voice in a way that appeared to indicate heightened emotion. Sarah thus convinced me that I could provide Dimitris with what he needed to help her. When I later presented him with the interview form and the summary that I had typed up, he examined it for just a few minutes, frowning in concentration. Then he stated simply, "I don't believe her." This, he explained, was owing to a contradiction in her story: "Would her husband, who tries to control her, who knows that she does not like him and beats her, let her go to work? And if he did let her work, wouldn't he watch her money very closely?" Dimitris wanted to know where she had saved the money and how had she hidden it. He concluded, "I do not think that this story works."

But after a brief pause, he suggested, "What if there were a different story? Let's say her husband has more than one wife. Sarah falls into disfavor. Her husband is not pleased with her any more. To take care of her child, and herself, she goes to work in the market and gives her husband the money. Until one day she decides to leave." That, he asserted, was a story that could work and would explain why her husband allowed her to sell vegetables. This was not a trafficking case but an asylum case, he emphasized: "A special social group—women. Husband forces her to be a slave!" When I asked Dimitris how he had thought of such a story, he told me that he had done extensive research on gender mainstreaming and had read about similar, successful cases of women from Ghana. The task, then, was to get Sarah to tell the "truth"; Dimitris told me to invite her back and we would both interview her.

Credibility, trust, and truth

In our exchange, Dimitris expressed doubt about Sarah's "credibility," her *axiopistia*, which in Greek means "deserving of faith," questioning her trustworthiness, cooperativeness, and the truth of her story. In his assessment, she did not provide details to assist the police and her story was not consistent—factors with significant repercussions for the workability of her case. Moreover, her trustworthiness (or lack thereof) had important implications for his own credibility. Nonetheless, he also cited an overarching impression that she had a "real problem," suggesting that she might, indeed, have a credible case. These contradictions thus provided a way for him to imagine a different "true story," one that would allow him to find her eligible.

In our many conversations, and during the many times I watched him work, Dimitris advocated an approach to eligibility that was practical and strategic. I never heard him comment on the "character" of a potential client, as some other lawyers did, and seemingly outlandish stories did not appear to try his patience; rather, he often treated them as

sources of humor amid otherwise joyless work. At times, I even saw him push the boundaries of eligibility, taking on a number of cases that other lawyers had dismissed on grounds of credibility and feasibility. When it came to trafficking cases, however, Dimitris's criteria appeared to become notably more restrictive, perhaps reflecting the particular challenges of the criminal trials that they entail. Unlike an asylum applicant, who is interviewed at a closed meeting by a committee of adjudicators, a trafficking victim must appear as a plaintiff or witness in criminal court; trafficking cases, therefore, proceed not unlike rape trials in the United States, in which the "victim" must undergo rigorous (often demeaning) questioning (see Matoesian 1993). These cases, arguably, demand especially thorough preparation by the lawyer and the plaintiff; Dimitris explained that he had once prepped a client for 24 hours before a trial. Dimitris, moreover, had a reputation to protect. In just a short time, he had attained remarkable success in bringing criminal cases against traffickers and acquiring legal protection for victims. As the victim's capacity to perform in these trials matters deeply, client credibility and cooperativeness themselves become issues of legal pragmatism, directly related to the potential success of the case in court.

These concerns about trust–mistrust, credibility, and truth (or lack thereof) also take shape through dialogical engagements between lawyers and aid applicants. Lawyers must, somehow, get potential clients to tell them the "whole story," a workable story, or the "truth." This, however, requires that lawyers convincingly perform their own credibility to aid candidates and, thus, gain their trust. Lawyers often cite lack of trust on the part of applicants or, more strongly, fear or anger, as rationales behind an incomplete or apparently false story; they do so especially with regard to suspected trafficking victims. In Sarah's case, more than her own credibility and the truth of her story are at stake, but Dimitris suggests that her mistrust, shame, and fear of him (of us) may be a root cause of her contradictory story.

"Credibility," however, also depends on whether applicants are able or willing to meet lawyers' expectations regarding how they should behave and the story they should tell. As I have noted, candidates for legal aid are best served when their comportment and self-presentation fall within a particular range of aesthetic conventions corresponding to notions of gender, country of origin, and phenotype and race; when interviewees diverge from this spectrum, problems often result. In Sarah's case, this is markedly evident, owing to the extraordinarily gendered context in which her "picture" emerges. While Dimitris does not say so directly, another contributing factor in her lack of credibility may be the unselfconscious, direct way in which she "confesses" to being trafficked, which diverges dramatically from the expected shame and silence of trafficking victims. The "other story" that Dimitris suggests, in fact, refashions the "pic-

ture" of Sarah in a way more appropriate to ARC institutional conventions: She is not a trafficking victim but a victim of persecution who is, nonetheless, a spurned and abused woman ashamed to speak the truth. The conventions that would augment Sarah's credibility remain entangled in a social aesthetics of shame and fear tied to her exploitation as a ghynaika, a woman.

"I have told you all that I know"

Dimitris's goal for our next meeting was to convince Sarah to trust him and tell the "truth," to garner a confession he could use to find her eligible as a victim of persecution. She came in the following Monday, and she and I went together to the office across the hall from Dimitris. He arrived a few moments later, greeting her warmly and offering her his hand, then he took a seat next to her, his elbows on his knees in a gesture of informality and intimacy, while I sat at the table across from her. Then, speaking softly, he asserted, "Sarah, I don't believe that you are telling us the whole truth."

I recognized this as a tactic that Dimitris employed to encourage trafficking victims to confess. In an earlier conversation with me, he explained that, by telling a victim that he does not believe her, he attempts to push her to an emotional catharsis wherein she admits that she needs help and provides him with information he can use to help her. He credited this tactic for his impressive success in trafficking cases, but it was controversial among some of the women lawyers. Kyriaki stressed that she never forced anyone to admit victimization or stated directly when she suspected exploitation. Instead, she emphasized rapport building, vagueness, and indirection in establishing trust and eliciting the "truth." Vasso told me that she admired the effectiveness of Dimitris's paternalistic approach but that it would never work for her, explaining that he could get away with it because "he is a man and he is kind." Dimitris himself emphasized that his approach was based on gender stereotypes and the violence that they entail, explaining that many exploited women have learned to respond best to fear; moreover, he added ironically, "I look like a pimp," suggesting that this form of performance was especially suited to his comportment and appearance. For Dimitris, however, the crucial issue was that an urgent problem required urgent action: "This is your one chance to help this woman. When she leaves, she will never come back. What are you going to do?"

Such tactics are not just based on the "pictures" of victims that lawyers entertain. They also reflect lawyers' attempts to understand their own image in the other's eyes and the power relationships—gendered, raced—that shape how aid applicants interpret lawyers' own performances. The performative work through which ARC lawyers approach aid candidates reflects deeply gendered

norms of behavior amid the complexity of Greek gender politics (Dubisch 1986; Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991; Paxson 2004; Placas 2009). While Vasso and Kyriaki invoke a sense of intimacy grounded on gender symmetries in their encounters with potential victims, Dimitris performs a gruff, confident, even paternalistic Greek masculinity (a disposition that he often presented to me, the young *Amerikana*, as well). Through the social aesthetics of aid encounters, amidst gendered and culturally inflected behavioral norms, lawyers strive to imagine clients' subjectivities and the most effective way to approach them. However, even as Dimitris responds to his own picture of Sarah, his tactic for engaging her implies a fairly narrow range of acceptable responses. He asks Sarah, in a sense, to take her cue: to perform the very catharsis and confession that he seeks to elicit.

Sarah, however, did not respond. Dimitris proceeded by speaking clearly and sternly, asking, "Did your husband have more than one wife?" Sarah's jaw hardened, and when she answered, she looked at me, not him: "I don't know." Dimitris then continued, in a coaxing voice, "Sarah, a woman knows if her husband has found another." She remained silent. Finally, after continued unsuccessful attempts to elicit information more in line with the alternate scenario that he had imagined, Dimitris grew somber.

Dimitris: Sarah you are not helping us.

Sarah: I have told you all that I know.

D: You have to trust us, but you do not. Heath wants to help you. I want to. But for me, we will not support you. You are not telling us everything.

S (finally): But I don't want to lie. I have told you all that I know.

In the end, Dimitris told her that he could not support her with the story she had given us. He told her pointedly to go home and see if she could remember more, and if she did, she should come back the following week at the latest. If not, she would have to find a private lawyer.

Conclusions: Images and indeterminacy

The lawyer Effie commented early in my fieldwork that "it takes awhile to convince someone they are a victim." In our final encounter with Sarah, Dimitris, unable to elicit the performance and story that he seeks, is ultimately unsuccessful at this task. Sarah continues to claim a charged and problematic category of protection (that of "trafficking victim") and refuses to adapt her performance and story in a way that might make her eligible as an "asylum seeker," the category that Dimitris has, in a sense, offered her. In so doing, she both fails and refuses to become a victim.

Despite her multiple previous visits, Sarah never did come back to the ARC. We do not know if this was because she would not tell Dimitris the "true" story (owing to shame, fear, or mistrust), she missed her cue, so to speak, or she simply did not have an acceptable story to tell. Sarah's choice not to perform the role that Dimitris has asked her to undermines the efficacy of her request for legal aid and his attempt to find her eligible. Yet her refusal also destabilizes the very notion of victimhood, exposing the complicity of practices of aid distribution in buoying up that category. She explains that to perform the role that Dimitris asks her to, she would have to tell a lie; this "lie" might not simply have factual grounds but perhaps more crucially would entail a simplification and reiteration of her life history, experience, and subjectivity in a manner to which she, as she makes very clear, does not want to submit. Her refusal grants us a window into unpredictable, circumscribed forms of agency through which aid candidates push back against dominant images of deservingness and vulnerability.

Sarah's case demonstrates how persons persistently exceed the ways in which law, humanitarian aid, and ethnographic practice seek to assess and codify, even under inexorable conditions of inequality (Biehl and Locke 2010). Social aesthetics both reproduce and undermine dominant frameworks of knowledge making and judgment, often at the very same time. The fraught and partial forms of agency that emerge within systems of aid distribution, while always circumscribed by structural inequalities, may destabilize normative frameworks of assessment from within. Even more important, by attending to the indeterminacies of aid encounters, we highlight modes of subjectivity that do not fit within norms of either victimhood or redemption, both of which are grounded in a notion of liberal subjectivity. Sarah's case contests not just the category of victimhood but also that of the liberal subject who must choose and, in choosing, seek freedom. While Sarah's refusal is, indeed, a choice, her intentionality remains—and must remain—outside the picture; the future she has chosen may include suffering, loss, what some might call "exploitation," and even death.

Slavoj Žižek (2000) describes how the image of the other always remains fuzzy when looked at straight on. Rather, such images become clear only when looked at "awry," distorted by one's own desire and perception; in the image of the other, the subject always "sees itself seeing" (Žižek 2000:10). Through the social aesthetics of eligibility, those on both sides of the encounter respond to pictures in which they are both seen and seeing. Yet cases such as Sarah's leave us with an image that is blurry, indeterminate, unclear.¹² The radical indeterminacy of this blurry image entails, simultaneously, violence and agency. This picture indexes a failure of knowledge, humanitarian aid, and rights-based protection, but it is also a site of opening: into an indeterminate trajectory through which a

“victim” (knowingly or not) undermines the structures of power and violence in which she has been caught.

Notes

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1. As Kant outlined in his *Critique of Judgment*, the Greek root of *aesthetics* refers not simply to visibility but to the broader domains of feeling or sense and their role in knowledge and judgment. This more holistic notion of aesthetics is often eclipsed in its English variant (which tends to refer to the arrangement of visual terrains) but is very much present in contemporary Greek: As Nadia Seremetakis writes, the Greek verb *aesthanomai* means—often simultaneously—“I feel or sense, I understand, grasp, learn or receive information” and “judge correctly” (1996:5). The mutual performances entailed in aid encounters draw on a panorama of sensorial cues in the formation of knowledge and judgment. However, in a manner resonant with Michael Herzfeld’s (1997) “social poetics” (a not dissimilar model of dialogical social performance), these sensorial dimensions are never unmediated but are themselves saturated with essentialisms, stereotypes, and other normative qualities that participants also regularly invoke.

2. Ethnographic literatures on other cultures of aid and assistance (in particular, development work and medical interventions) highlight their deeply dialogical, intersubjective qualities (Biehl 2005; Biehl and Locke 2010; Davis 2010; Englund 2006; McKay 2012), yet the intersubjectivities underpinning asylum processes remain underexplored.

3. I describe agency here as a kind of tactical maneuvering, not an explicit, clear, or necessarily even intentional form of resistance. Coutin’s notion of “maneuvering” is very close to my idea of agency (see also Ahearn 2001; Ortner 2006), as she contests theories that locate agency in the dyad of control–resistance. Here I call attention to forms of indeterminate agency, which make use of gaps in ordering practices with often unpredictable effects. Michel De Certeau is also relevant here. He writes of “indeterminate trajectories,” “sentences that remain unpredictable within the space ordered by the organizing techniques of system” (De Certeau 1984: 34).

4. Anthropologists and other social scientists have also, of course, long depended on life history interviews as primary research methodologies. I encountered significant but instructive difficulties in employing the interview format in my research, since interviews had such specific (and often negative) connotations for both lawyers and asylum seekers.

5. Research on the role of narrative and performance in legal settings highlights how the aesthetic dimensions of speech often encode and reproduce normative frameworks of knowledge, interaction, and judgment (Conley and O’Barr 1998; Matoesian 1993, 1997, 2001). Here, however, I draw on scholarship that also emphasizes the flexibility enabled through normative modes of speech and performance (Hirsch 1998) as well as the “indeterminacies” underlying the interpretation of legal practices and categories (Richland 2010).

6. The terrain of labor- and asylum-related immigration to Greece is also changing with Greece’s current economic difficulties (the “crisis”), which have led to increasing incidences of race-related violence. Both long-term and more recent migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are relocating elsewhere in the EU, formally and informally. Others risk returning to home countries rather than remain in Greece. Yet, during the financial crisis, the Greek asylum process has also undergone major reforms, which by many accounts have increased its transparency and accountability (see Cabot in press for a full discussion). For a more comprehensive discussion of the crisis, from a critical anthropological perspective, see Athanasiou 2012, Vradsis and Dalakoglou 2011, and Theodossopoulos 2013; also see Herzfeld 2011.

7. The distinction between an NGO lawyer and a “private” lawyer is by no means clear. Many NGO lawyers in Greece work in other offices or consortiums serving private clients (though, to my knowledge, not usually asylum seekers) to supplement salaries. A few years after the events described in this article, Dimitris opened his own private firm but still took on significant numbers of pro bono clients—or, as he described them, clients who could not pay. He observed that even the fiction that they were able to pay for his services increased their trust in him, since he treated them as “clients” (*pelates*) and they, in turn, approached him as “their” lawyer, as opposed to their being his “beneficiaries,” like those who receive services at the ARC.

8. The ARC does not conduct any field research on its clients or potential clients, particularly those suspected of being victims of trafficking. This contributes to the epistemic anxieties surrounding trafficking cases at the ARC. However, agencies of the state do carry out criminal investigations of trafficking cases.

9. These aesthetic factors also reflect the increasing racialization and criminalization of sex work in Greece. This is a complex topic, which I can only touch on here: Sex workers have occupied an important, and not necessarily dangerous, place in Greek public consciousness. (See, e.g., Melina Mercouri’s much-loved character in the classic film *Never on Sunday* [Dassin 1960]). Currently, Greece has a legal, regulated sex industry, in which workers, many of whom are of non-Greek origin, are subject to state biopolitics aimed toward monitoring a legal, healthy, and productive population. Regulatory measures include mandatory testing for disease. Yet unregulated sex work has also increased, a phenomenon that, among dominant publics, is associated with the intensified visibility of the racialized bodies of women of color (primarily of African origin) on Athens streets. The (actual or perceived) loosening state grip on the sex industry is caught up in public anxieties and increasingly violent and militarized attempts at regulation. Such anxieties were thrown into particularly high relief when the Athens police posted the names and photos of sex workers who had been found to be HIV positive; these workers were also charged with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm.

10. According to the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report, 2011, "tier 2" refers to "countries whose governments do not fully comply with the US's Trafficking Victim's Protection Act's [TVPA] minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards." While the TVPA is U.S. legislation, it has had a significant role in articulating international parameters for the protection of trafficking victims. Before September 2003, Greece was, in fact, classified as "tier 3," designating countries that "ignore or promote" trafficking. Following the approval of comprehensive legislation to protect victims of labor and sex trafficking (Presidential Decree 223/2003 and law 3386/2005), Greece was upgraded to "tier 2" and remains classified according to this designation. Other relevant legislation includes the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (otherwise known as the Trafficking Protocol, UN TIP Protocol, or "Palermo" Protocol), adopted in Palermo, Italy, in 2000 (see Warren 2007 for a full discussion), as well as EU legislation on the prevention of trafficking and the protection of victims. Other EU countries that are currently listed as "tier 2" are Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Portugal, Hungary, Romania, Malta, and Cyprus ("tier 2 watch list").

11. From both my first interview with Sarah and the account she gives here, it seems clear that she is also drawing on stereotypes that label women from Nigeria as trafficking victims. By differentiating herself from Nigerian women, Sarah not only seems to be recognizing that aid workers are approaching her through a lens associated with Nigeria (dominant in discussions of trafficking) but also to be pushing back against this assumption.

12. Susan Bibler Coutin employs the notion of "resolution" as both a legal and visual descriptor to characterize the unresolved statuses of Salvadoran migrants to the United States. She writes, "Just as a photographic image with low resolution produces a blurry picture, these migrants had difficulty clarifying their legal status, social location, and individual futures" (2007:117).

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