

## **Governing refugees through disorientation**

### **Fragmented knowledges and forced technological mediations**

The governing of migrants and refugees consists not only of a panoply of laws and policies but also of a peculiar politics of knowledge. Categories of “risk”, “anticipation”, “situational awareness” and “management” are at the core of migration governmentality. One of the declared challenges for states and European actors is to improve “knowledge, skills and competences”<sup>1</sup> to understand migration trends and make them governable<sup>2</sup>. International agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) play a key role in standardising knowledge and policies on migration on a global level<sup>3</sup>. Yet, despite such an attempt to share and standardise criteria and practices for controlling unruly mobility, migration governmentality is actually characterised by fragmented and dispersed knowledges which migrants need to navigate through. Fragmented and dispersed knowledges, this paper contends, disorient migrants and obstruct them from getting access to asylum, humanitarian support and rights. This article engages with modes of governing through disorientation in the asylum system, with a specific focus on Greece. The Greek context constitutes a case in point in Europe, since asylum seekers are forced to deal with the highly fragmented and dispersed knowledges of the asylum regime, which depend on the frantic changes in the law as well as in the administrative measures. The paper moves beyond the binary opposition between knowledge and non-knowledge, and draws attention to the dispersal and fragmentation of knowledge that migrants are confronted with.

The governing of refugees through disorientation is further increased by the compulsory technological mediations between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors. The piece investigates how the fragmented knowledge of the asylum regime impact on migrants<sup>4</sup> subjectivities, and how these latter end up in being constantly disoriented. By analyzing together the fragmented and dispersed knowledges of the asylum system and disorientation as a political technology of refugee governance<sup>5</sup>, the paper

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<sup>1</sup> Frontex, Pooling Resources: <https://frontex.europa.eu/operations/pooling-resources/>

Feldman, Gregory. *The migration apparatus: Security, labor, and policymaking in the European Union*. Stanford University Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Frowd, Philippe M. "Developmental borderwork and the International Organization for Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44.10 (2018): 1656-1672.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the paper I use the term “asylum seeker” to refer to those people who are temporarily included in the asylum system and, therefore, are targeted by specific humanitarian and control measures that this paper speaks about, and “migrants” as a more general term that does not refer to any specific legal status.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term “political technology” from Michel Foucault’s work. According to Foucault, political technologies refer to the set of techniques, practices and knowledges used for disciplining, regulating and governing bodies and populations. See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage, 2012.

shows that, far from removing uncertainty, digital technologies enhance the obstacles that migrants face in getting access to the asylum procedure and to rights.

The article builds on official documents as well as on material I collected during the fieldwork I conducted in Greece - in Athens and in Lesbos - between 2017 and 2021<sup>6</sup>. As part of that research, I interviewed officers from the Greek Asylum Service, UNHCR, the Red Cross, the NGO Caritas, and the financial provider of the Cash Assistance Program Prepaid financial services, and lawyers from the organizations HIAS and Lesbos Legal Center. I have witnessed the card distribution procedure in Lesbos and in Athens, after obtaining the authorisation from the UNHCR, and as part of my participatory observation I spoke to asylum seekers in the city of Athens and outside the Hotspot of Lesbos. In all these cases, I was not volunteering in NGOs: I was there as an academic researcher, and all my interviewees were aware of my role<sup>7</sup>. The interviews I conducted were oriented at understanding how migrants get access to key information about the asylum procedure and the financial-humanitarian support, as well as to explore how forced technological intermediations between migrants and humanitarian actors obstruct the access to asylum. In particular, I could observe that more than not-knowing the rules, asylum seekers are confronted with the dispersed knowledges of the asylum system, and with unexpected changes in procedures that end up disorienting them. An insight into the Greek asylum system enables shedding light into the disjointed and fragmented knowledges that asylum seekers need to grapple with in order to get access to the asylum procedure as well as to financial and humanitarian support.

The article is structured in three main sections and proceeds as follows. It starts by drawing attention to the multiple technological steps and forced digital intermediations that asylum seekers in Greece deal with, focusing in particular on the Cash Assistance Programme in Greece, and it illustrates how asylum seekers need to deal with dispersed knowledges. The paper moves on by analysing the governing through disorientation which underpins the asylum system in Greece, focusing on how this debilitates asylum seekers and hampers them from accessing rights and humanitarian support. The final section shows that asylum seekers are racialised and treated as deceitful subjects, and argues that not only their speech<sup>8</sup> but also their conducts and behaviours are assumed to be deceptive<sup>9</sup>, and therefore their knowledge turns out to be pointless. It concludes by challenging claims for more transparency and more knowledge as a response to the governing through disorientation.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2021, all interviews I conducted have been online, due to Covid-19 restrictions.

<sup>7</sup> Before conducting the interviews I gave a consent form to my interviewees which stated the goal of my research and how the anonymised data will be used.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between forced speech, subjectivity and power see: Foucault, Michel. *Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice-cours de Louvain*, 1981. Presses univ. de Louvain, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "The North African Syndrome." *Toward the African Revolution*, Grove Press, 1967: 3-16.

Governing through disorientation should not be considered a side-effect of refugee humanitarianism but, rather, a constitutive political technology of governmentality. While scholars have discussed how (in)visibility<sup>10</sup> and lack of transparency are unfolded in migration governmentality, little has been said about the ways in which migrants and asylum seekers are disoriented by fragmented and scattered knowledges. On the one hand, fragmented knowledges and the uneven and unpredictable changes in criteria disorient and debilitate migrants. Yet, on the other, claims for more transparency might be turned against migrants, as long as opacity at times opens up a leeway for getting access to rights and for dodging exclusionary and restrictive criteria. As I illustrate later in the paper, the asylum system is characterised by partial and fragmented knowledges more than by the production of full non-knowledge. Thus, a focus on fragmented knowledges and its nuances enables stepping out of the binary oppositions between knowledge and non-knowledge as well as between knowledge and ignorance, and to highlight the disorienting effects it generates on asylum seekers.

The article intervenes in debates about the production of confusion and disorientation in refugee governmentality<sup>11</sup> through the angle of fragmented and dispersed knowledges. It investigates how asylum seekers are confronted with unpredictable changes in legal and administrative procedures and need to deal with mandatory technological steps. In fact, the communication between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors is increasingly mediated by digital technologies. In this piece I bridge critical migration and refugee studies scholarship with works in critical security studies and sociology that investigate the production of ignorance and non-knowledge as modes of power. A growing migration and refugee scholarship has explored how migrants are governed through uncertainty<sup>12</sup> and not-knowing<sup>13</sup>, through discretion in the asylum procedures<sup>14</sup> and bureaucratic chaos<sup>15</sup> which disorients asylum seekers<sup>16</sup>. As Jessy Nassar and Nora Stel point out, ambiguity plays a constitutive role in

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<sup>10</sup> Ansems De Vries, Leonie Ansems. "Politics of (in) visibility: Governance-resistance and the constitution of refugee subjectivities in Malaysia." *Review of International Studies* 42.5 (2016): 876-894; Villegas, F. J. (2010). Strategic In/Visibility and undocumented migrants. *Counterpoints*, 368, 147-170.

<sup>11</sup> Borrelli, Lisa Marie. "Using Ignorance as (Un) Conscious Bureaucratic Strategy." *Qualitative studies* 5.2 (2018): 95-109.

<sup>12</sup> Griffiths, Melanie BE. "Out of time: The temporal uncertainties of refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40.12 (2014): 1991-2009.

<sup>13</sup> Biehl, Kristen Sarah. "Governing through uncertainty: Experiences of being a refugee in Turkey as a country for temporary asylum." *Social Analysis* 59.1 (2015): 57-75; Khosravi, Shahram "Stolen time" *Radical Philosophy*, 2.3 (2018). Available at: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/stolen-time> (last access March 31, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Gill, Nick, Rebecca Rotter, Andrew Burridge, and Jennifer Allsopp. "The limits of procedural discretion: Unequal treatment and vulnerability in Britain's asylum appeals." *Social & Legal Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 49-78.

<sup>15</sup> Rozakou Katerina "Nonrecording the "European refugee crisis" in Greece: Navigating through irregular bureaucracy" *Focaal*, 77 (2017): 36-49.

<sup>16</sup> Gill et al. The limits of procedural discretion.

governing refugees governmentality<sup>17</sup>: “uncertainty, precariousness, and unpredictability”, they argue, constitute “a specific form of governance” that migrants are subjected to<sup>18</sup>. Some scholars working at the crossroad of migration studies and critical security studies have shifted the attention from modes of governing through knowledge towards modes of governing through strategic ignorance, investigating the unknowns that underpin migration management<sup>19</sup>. In his research on the VISA regime, Stephan Scheel has argued that “it is precisely this discretion of consular staff, and the resulting heterogeneity of consular practices that makes visa application unpredictable regards to its procedures and outcomes”<sup>20</sup>.

More than focusing on “instances of not-knowing and not-acting on the side of formal authorities”<sup>21</sup>, I explore how fragmented and dispersed knowledges disorient asylum seekers and debilitate them. More precisely, I consider how asylum seekers need to navigate fragmented and dispersed knowledges and, as a consequence of that, are repeatedly disoriented about the asylum system and the techno-bureaucratic steps to follow. Sociology and critical security studies literature has discussed the “epistemological relationality of ignorance”<sup>22</sup> and the ways in which “strategic unknowns”<sup>23</sup> modes of “not-knowing”<sup>24</sup> and ambiguity<sup>25</sup> are enacted in the different fields of governmentality - such as security, finance, markets and surveillance. Scholars have focused on the articulation of

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<sup>17</sup>Oesch, Luca “The refugee camp as a space of multiple ambiguities and subjectivities”. *Political Geography*, 60 (2017): 110-120.

<sup>18</sup>Nassar, Jessy, and Nora Stel. "Lebanon's response to the Syrian refugee crisis—Institutional ambiguity as a governance strategy." *Political Geography* 70 (2019): 45..

<sup>19</sup>Scheel, Stephan, and Funda Ustek-Spilda. "The politics of expertise and ignorance in the field of migration management." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37.4 (2019): 663-681.

<sup>20</sup>Scheel, Stephan. *Autonomy of Migration?: Appropriating Mobility Within Biometric Border Regimes*. Routledge, 2019.

<sup>21</sup>Nassar, Stel, Lebanon's response. p.46

<sup>22</sup>Croissant, Jennifer L. "Agnotology: Ignorance and absence or towards a sociology of things that aren't there." *Social Epistemology* 28.1 (2014): 4-25.

<sup>23</sup>McGoey, Linsey. "Strategic unknowns: Towards a sociology of ignorance." *Economy and society* 41.1 (2012): 1-16.

<sup>24</sup>Aradau, Assembling (non) knowledge.

<sup>25</sup>Best, Jacqueline. "Ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk: rethinking indeterminacy." *International Political Sociology* 2.4 (2008): 355-374; Best, Jacqueline. "Bureaucratic ambiguity." *Economy and Society* 41.1 (2012): 84-106.

knowledge, non-knowledge and ignorance, as well as on the “tension between transparency and secrecy”<sup>26</sup> in different sectors of governmentality, such as development<sup>27</sup>, weapons circulation<sup>28</sup>, knowledge economy<sup>29</sup>, border crisis<sup>30</sup> and surveillance<sup>31</sup>.

Lindsey McGoey has demonstrated how “practices of deliberate obfuscation and insulation from unsettling information”<sup>32</sup> are at the core of power mechanisms. Claudia Aradau has gestured from a focus on ignorance towards an analysis of modes of non-knowledge and of how controversies emerge over what counts as knowledge and non-knowledge”<sup>33</sup>. This paper deals with these debates engaging in a twofold move. First, it focuses on fragmented knowledge at play in the asylum system, showing how these are also the outcomes of technological obstacles as well as of unpredictable changes and arbitrary implementation of the law. In fact, what asylum seekers are confronted with is not full non-knowledge nor ignorance but, rather, dispersed and fragmented knowledges which render asylum procedures unintelligible and opaque<sup>34</sup>. That is, even when asylum seekers know the rules they need to follow, such knowledge does not automatically guarantee to them a straightforward access to rights nor to humanitarian support. Second, the article shifts the attention from what migration agencies know, don’t know or disregard, towards the disorientation that fragmented and disjointed knowledges generate on asylum seekers and how these latter are discredited and racialized as deceitful subjects.

### **“We know how it works, but we are wrong-footed anytime”:**

An insight into the digital technologies which mediate the interaction between refugees and humanitarian actors foregrounds the obstacles that asylum seekers face<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, while digital technologies are promoted by humanitarian actors as ways for streamlining asylum procedures, in practice they

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<sup>26</sup>Birchall, Clare. "Introduction to 'Secrecy and Transparency' The Politics of Opacity and Openness." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28.7-8 (2011): 7-25 (p.13); see also Walters, William. "Everyday secrecy: Oral history and the social life of a top-secret weapons research establishment during the Cold War." *Security Dialogue* 51.1 (2020): 60-76.

<sup>27</sup>Bakonyi, Jutta. "Seeing like bureaucracies: Rearranging knowledge and ignorance in Somalia." *International Political Sociology* 12.3 (2018): 256-273.

<sup>28</sup>Stavrianakis, Anna. "Requiem for risk: non-knowledge and domination in the governance of weapons circulation." *International Political Sociology* (2019).

<sup>29</sup>Birchall, Clare. "Introduction to 'Secrecy and Transparency

<sup>30</sup>Canning, Victoria. "Border (mis) management, ignorance and denial." *Ignorance, Power and Harm*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018. 139-162.

<sup>31</sup>Aradau, Claudia. "Assembling (non) knowledge: Security, law, and surveillance in a digital world." *International Political Sociology* 11.4 (2017): 327-342.

<sup>32</sup>McGoey, Lindsey. "The logic of strategic ignorance." *The British journal of sociology* 63.3 (2012): 533-576 (p.555).

<sup>33</sup> Aradau, Assembling (non) knowledge, p.5.

<sup>34</sup> The notion of opacity is under-theorized in migration literature. It should be distinguished from akin notions like obfuscation and transparency. Unlike obfuscation, opacity is not necessarily the outcome of an intentional act. Opacity refers to both an epistemological dimension and to questions around (in)visibility. By saying that fragmented knowledges render the asylum system more opaque I do not only simply refer to lack of transparency but to the obstructions and to the effects of disorientation that they generate on migrants.

<sup>35</sup>Jacobsen, Katja Lindskov. "Experimentation in humanitarian locations: UNHCR and biometric registration of Afghan refugees." *Security Dialogue* 46.2 (2015): 144-164.

multiply the hurdles that asylum seekers need to navigate<sup>36</sup>. Over the last few years, people who seek asylum in Greece have been confronted with a series of technological obstacles and mediations. This starts from the moment they decide to lodge an asylum application: since 2016 migrants need to pre-book an appointment with the Asylum Service via Skype. Asylum seekers who organized a collective protest in Athens<sup>37</sup> against the Skype system stressed to me that by booking the appointment with the Asylum Service via Skype is a struggle in itself, since they can call only during specific time slots and the line is always busy. Plus, for some it is not easy to use Skype and they might encounter difficulties in finding internet connectivity. Actually, asylum seekers are given flyers by UNHCR and NGOs which explain the functioning of the Skype system, and explanations can be found also on some websites - like Mobile info Team<sup>38</sup>. However, the key information needed to apply for asylum in Greece is extremely scattered and fragmented - and the Skype slots are in some cases provided only in Greek language. The forced technological mediation - Skype - ultimately enhances asylum seekers' disorientation, as it complicates the steps that these latter must take in order to lodge an asylum application and the difficulty in fully understanding how the procedure works. In this respect, it is noteworthy that on the website of the Greek Ministry of Migration & Asylum there is no mention of the Skype procedure: people who intend to apply for asylum are directed by NGOs and UNHCR to the online application form, which however cannot be completed without an asylum pre-case number that can be obtained through the Skype system<sup>39</sup>. Overall, the digitalisation of the asylum process, which has been boosted in 2020 due to Covid-19, has multiplied obstacles for the asylum seekers. In fact, to date migrants who want to claim asylum need to go through three technological steps: as an officer at the Greek Asylum Service stressed to me, "first, they need to call the Skype number and pre-book an appointment with the Greek authorities; then they need to complete the preregistration on the online platform and, thirdly, some of them will be told to conduct the asylum interview remotely"<sup>40</sup>.

In 2017 the European Commission launched in Greece the Cash Assistance Programme which consists in a monthly financial support given to asylum seekers and uploaded on prepaid cards. Until September 2021, UNHCR ran the Programme<sup>41</sup> with the collaboration of two NGOs - Caritas and the

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<sup>36</sup> Jacobsen, Katja Lindskov, and Kristin Bergtora Sandvik. "UNHCR and the pursuit of international protection: accountability through technology?." *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1508-1524; Tazzioli, Martina. "Refugees' Debit Cards, Subjectivities, and Data Circuits: Financial-Humanitarianism in the Greek Migration Laboratory." *International Political Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2019): 392-408.

<sup>37</sup> Athens, August 2018. Other refugees' protests against the compulsory skype mechanic

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.mobileinfoteam.org/skype>

<sup>39</sup> <https://apps.migration.gov.gr/selfregistration/login?lang=en>

<sup>40</sup> Online interview with the Greek Asylum Service, February 28, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> In September 2021 UNHCR handed over to the Greek authorities. To date, it is still unclear whether and how the Greek government will continue providing financial aid to asylum seekers in camps. Actually, in

International Federation of the Red Cross - and Prepaid Financial Services is the financial provider, which is based in the UK. In migration and refugee studies literature, scholars have scrutinised the modes of control and value extraction which stem from the use of digital technologies in refugee camps<sup>42</sup>, and some have aptly pointed to asylum seekers' destitution associated to cashless economies<sup>43</sup>. For instance, Kate Coddington has shown that Cash Assistance Programmes are part of broader state financial tactics which “have become key mechanisms in disciplining migrant populations”<sup>44</sup>. Here I am interested in exploring how the use of digital intermediations in refugee camps supports and enhances modes of governing through disorientation. These latter mainly depend on the highly scattered and fragmented knowledges of the techno-bureaucratic conundrums that migrants must navigate in order to get access to the asylum procedure and to humanitarian and financial support.

Unlike the Skype system, which is a clear-cut obstacle to migrants who want to claim asylum, the Cash Assistance Programme is conceived as a mechanism for providing financial and humanitarian support. Nevertheless, in order to access the financial support and to use the prepaid cards, asylum seekers are obliged to mediate their interaction with humanitarian actors via apps (Viber, Whatsapp) and need to comply with spatial restrictions<sup>45</sup> living in the accommodations provided by the Greek authorities or by the UNHCR<sup>46</sup>. To get the monthly top up, asylum seekers as “card beneficiaries”<sup>47</sup> need to pass a monthly verification check, during which UNHCR and NGOs officers verify that they are still eligible for the financial support. The verification procedure differs from site to site, and in particular from the mainland to the islands. On the islands, asylum seekers have to queue outside the UNHCR offices on a scheduled day and reporting any change regarding their personal situation - for instance, regarding family members or if they found a job<sup>48</sup> - and the legal status. With the outbreak of Covid-19 UNHCR has cut down the verification procedure on the Greek islands from a monthly

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October 2021, on the basis of a ministerial decision, the Greek authorities have left without food provisions and financial support both those who have been granted refugee status and those whose asylum application has been rejected.

<sup>42</sup> Cheesman, M. (2020). Self-Sovereignty for Refugees? The Contested Horizons of Digital Identity. *Geopolitics*, 1-26; Tazzioli, Martina. "Extract, Datafy and Disrupt: Refugees' Subjectivities between Data Abundance and Data Disregard." *Geopolitics* (2020): 1-19.

<sup>43</sup> Coddington, Kate, Deirdre Conlon, and Lauren L. Martin. "Destitution Economies: Circuits of Value in Asylum, Refugee, and Migration Control." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* (2020): 1-20; see also Zimmermann, Susan. "Why seek asylum? The roles of integration and financial support." *International migration* 48.1 (2010): 199-231.

<sup>44</sup> Coddington, Kate. "The slow violence of life without cash: borders, state restrictions, and exclusion in the UK and Australia\*." *Geographical Review* 109.4 (2019): 531.

<sup>45</sup> Tazzioli, Martina. Refugees' Debit Cards, Subjectivities, and Data Circuits: Financial-Humanitarianism in the Greek Migration Laboratory. *International Political Sociology*, 13. 4 (2019): 392-408.

<sup>46</sup> However, since 2019 the asylum seekers who are on the mainland can also live autonomously, in apartments they rent, provided that they are able to show an official rent contract.

<sup>47</sup> Designation used by the UNHCR in official documents as well as on the ground.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, those who receive a salary are excluded from the Program.

basis to one verification every three months “in order to avoid unnecessary physical contact with card beneficiaries”<sup>49</sup>. Nevertheless, far from introducing technological innovations to facilitate the access to cash and communication with humanitarian actors, UNHCR has slowed down its activity inside the hotspot of Moria, in Lesvos. If on the one hand “now many technical card glitches can be solved from remote”, on the other the main ways that humanitarian actors and authorities started to use in Moria in 2020<sup>50</sup> to inform asylum seekers about the verification are the megaphone and word of mouth inside the hotspot: “indeed, we realised that many change sim card very often, so texts are not very efficient system of communication; and the refugee population is too big by now to reach them all individually”<sup>51</sup>.

On the mainland asylum seekers are confronted with a series of technological obstacles in order to fully use their debit cards and to receive the monthly recharge. First, if they have a technical problem with the card or delays in getting the monthly amount, they can communicate with the NGOs exclusively by sending texts via Viber. “actually we also have a phone number they can call, and that we have written on the information sheet” an NGO officer told me in Athens “but they waste their time if they call, as we are too busy to answer, so Viber chats is the only effective way for reaching us”<sup>52</sup>. Second, asylum seekers are informed via text only few days before the monthly verification takes place, and only on the same day they receive a second text with the location where they should go - as this changes every month to prevent that asylum seekers could gather outside or organise protests. Hence, as I could observe while I was witnessing the card verification procedure in Athens during my fieldwork and interviewing some card beneficiaries there<sup>53</sup>, the compulsory technological mediations between card beneficiaries and humanitarian actors enhances the epistemic disorienting that asylum seekers experience. Both the UNHCR and the two NGOs distribute flyers to asylum seekers to inform them about the procedure to follow; and, nonetheless, the many techno-bureaucratic steps to comply with are unevenly altered over time, adapted to local emergencies and tailored for preventing asylum seekers from dodging the rules:

“We know how the system overall works” a Syrian asylum seeker in Athens told me: “those who just arrived in Greece might not know or some might know less than others but we managed to get the key information, also thanks to word of mouth among us. However, this information is quite useless,

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with UNHCR coordinator, Lesvos, August 24, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> The information related to 2020 concerns the period of time before the fire that destroyed the hotspot on September 8, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with a UNHCR officer, Lesvos, August 24, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Caritas, Athens, July 18, 2019

<sup>53</sup> I had the opportunity to assist to card distribution and monthly verification procedure at the Caritas office in Athens in August 2018, April 2019 and July 2019. I got the authorization from Caritas which is a partner of UNHCR in the Cash Assistance Program.

as we are often wrong-footed; there is always a new step introduced or a small exception or some change which is communicated only at a late stage. Other times, you know how it works, but then you also know that in reality things go differently”<sup>54</sup>.

The perception of being wrong-footed is widespread among asylum seekers: they know that next time they will need to follow the procedure or interact with humanitarian actors to solve technical problems on their card, things will work differently from the last time. Lesvos, July 25 2019: asylum seekers were queuing inside Pikpa camp<sup>55</sup> waiting for the monthly verification procedure. A UNHCR officer was updating on an I-Pad the personal data of every card beneficiary, noting down changes in their legal or job status or in the number of family members. Two Pakistani asylum seekers came out from the registration office remarking: “we have been told that there is a problem with our monthly payment, we asked why but they did not provide any explanation; they said that we need to go tomorrow to Moria camp and speak with other people from the UNHCR”. When I met them the day after, they were trying to find someone who could explain them what happened: “in Moria they told us that we are out of the Cash Program, we are no longer eligible; but why?”. According to a law enforced in 2019, asylum seekers are excluded from both the accommodation and from the cash assistance one month after they receive the final outcome on their asylum application. However, the information that asylum seekers receive about such a recent change is ultimately not helpful for them understand what will happen concretely: indeed, in an uneven way, some card beneficiaries are not informed at all; some others know about the new procedure but they don’t know when the UNHCR will actually stop giving them the financial support. As I have been told by both NGOs and refugees, there are card beneficiaries who keep receiving the monthly payment despite having refugee status, while others have been taken out of the system.

Asylum seekers are intermittently informed about the changes that take place in the Cash Card Program, in the accommodation system scheme (ESTIA) and in the asylum procedures. That is, modes of governing through disorientation do not depend on secrecy nor on full concealment and production of ignorance but, rather, on fragmented and dispersed knowledges. Indeed, although some asylum seekers are aware of the rules to follow, the actual functioning of the asylum system depends on a series of discrepancies, leeway of manoeuvre and small exceptions that are used by humanitarian actors for adjusting it on the basis of the local context and temporal deadlines. In addition to that, even if asylum seekers know the single steps to take, they might not know how one is connected to

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with M. an Iranian asylum seeker, Athens, April 28, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Pikpa is a camp on the Greek island of Lesvos that hosts vulnerable asylum seekers as well as those who had been denied of the international protection by the Greek authorities. The camp is run by the Greek association Pikpa.

the other – for instance, card beneficiaries they are informed about the monthly verification only few days before, but they must have a phone and their number should remain the same.

Methodologically, I contend, a critical analysis of the fragmented knowledges that asylum seekers are confronted with, and of disorientation as a political technology of governmentality involves shifting away from questions about state's linear intentionality<sup>56</sup>. Indeed, the different actors involved in refugee governmentality - state authorities, international agencies, NGOs - do often have different or conflicting positions among them; and thus, we cannot find a linear strategy at play in disorienting asylum seekers. Therefore, in the place of questioning states' intentionality to actually deceive asylum seekers, the attention can be shifted towards an analysis of the politics of containment enforced in order to prevent migrants from accessing rights, financial support and protection. In fact, the boundaries between states' intentionality or non-intentionality are often quite blurred - due to the co-existence of an active migration deterrence politics and actors with conflicting interests. Ultimately, raising the question of state's intentionality means assuming that there is something like a homogeneous or dominant governmental rationale at play. Certainly, as long as subjects "remain ignorant, they cannot be expected to act"<sup>57</sup>; hence, the recursive disorientation partially hampers asylum seekers from protesting. The exclusion from the asylum system appears to them as the outcome of a nebulous and complicated bureaucracy.

Forced technological mediations had been officially implemented for streamlining the communication with asylum seekers and for avoiding discriminatory treatment. Yet, in practice, they are turned into hurdles for the asylum seekers. Viber is one of the apps which gained most traction in Greece: when the Cash Assistance Programme was launched, Viber became the main digital channel for asylum seekers for being in touch with the UNHCR and with the NGOs that were working on the Programme. In fact, as part of the Cash Assistance Programme, which consists in a monthly financial support uploaded on prepaid cards, asylum seekers could contact humanitarian actors only via Viber - and for a short period Whatsapp too - if they had any technical issue with their card. As some refugees stressed to me, it is not easy to download and use Viber if you don't have data on your mobile phone and if you are not familiar with that app.

### **Disorienting refugees:**

The forced technological intermediations and the fragmented knowledges about the asylum procedures exhausted asylum seekers and generate widespread disorientation on them, ending up in hindering their access to rights and humanitarian support. Athens, July 20, 2019: outside the building

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<sup>56</sup> Oesch, "The refugee camp as a space of multiple ambiguities and subjectivities".

<sup>57</sup> Stel, Nora. "The agnotology of eviction in South Lebanon's Palestinian gatherings: How institutional ambiguity and deliberate ignorance shape sensitive spaces". *Antipode*, 48.5. (2016): 1400-1419 (p. 1409).

where the NGO Caritas conducts the monthly verification procedure, around 200 people were queuing and waiting to get their payment renewal. Some asylum seekers were complaining that they have not been receiving the monthly support over the last three months. While I was there conducting my fieldwork, an Eritrean couple asked me if I could explain to the officers from the NGO Caritas that they had not received their first monthly payment yet: “if you tell the NGO, maybe they will believe you; they said that we need to follow the procedure and wait. We have followed it, but with no success”. After discussing with two Caritas officers, I was informed that the two Eritreans were temporarily excluded as they could not prove their home address, and after that the UNHCR called them and they did not answer the phone. The reason of the exclusion was not deliberately concealed to the two asylum seekers; rather, it was the outcome of rules and criteria that are vaguely defined and that are subjected to temporal borders, that is, to deadlines that asylum seekers need to comply with.

In some cases, it is the cumulative effect of few consecutive non-compliances that lead to the exclusion of asylum seekers from the Programme, according to a sort of punitive logics: the two asylum seekers in question did not answer the phone call they received from UNHCR, and they did not bring their house contract. Actually, asylum seekers’ disorientation is not only the outcome exclusively of the technological intermediations they need to navigate but, more widely, of the functioning of the asylum system as such. This emerges blatantly in the Greek context, where the asylum procedure has been changing a lot over the last few years and is characterised by a series of temporal borders that hamper asylum seekers from appealing against rejection as well as from getting access to rights and services. Thus, people seeking asylum are often unable to find out how to proceed, how quickly they should do it, and how they could do it without being addressed as deceitful subjects. The most recent reform of the Greek asylum law was enforced in January 2020: the new measures not only have further hindered the access to the asylum, they also boosted asylum seekers’ disorientation. As a lawyer from the NGO HIAS told me in Lesbos, “the Greek refugee system is a kind of minefield that people seeking asylum need to navigate; and it is predicated on a punitive logic that craft asylum seekers as individuals who want to fool the system”<sup>58</sup>.

According to the new law, asylum applications can be rejected on the basis of the “implicit withdrawal” on the part of the applicants. This means, as lawyers interpret it, that asylum seekers might be denied of the refugee status as they are deemed not to cooperate enough with the authorities - for instance, if they refuse to be relocated somewhere else in Greece, if they miss the asylum interview or if they fail to renew their asylum cards online, as they are requested to do since the outbreak of

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with E., a lawyer of the organisation HIAS in Lesbos, August 24, 2020.

Covid-19<sup>59</sup>. The “failure to comply with the obligation to cooperate with the competent authorities [...] in particular non-communication with the authorities and non-cooperation in the establishment of the necessary elements of the claim”<sup>60</sup> are considered in the Greek asylum law sufficient elements for considering an asylum application unfounded.

The Greek Asylum Service contends that asylum seekers do not want to appeal against their rejection, “but actually it is because they don’t know how to do it; even for lawyers it is an extremely complicated procedure to understand and even if asylum seekers know how it works, cannot comply with the rules”<sup>61</sup>. Indeed, asylum seekers are expected to go to the tribunal in Athens to finalise their appeal against asylum rejection; and yet, those who are on the islands are subject to geographical restrictions that came into force in March 2016 with the signature of the EU-Turkey Deal<sup>62</sup>, and therefore de facto they cannot comply with the law, unless they manage to get a justification paper from local authorities that. Thus, the fragmented and scattered knowledges of the asylum procedures and the discrediting of the asylum seekers as deceitful subjects are mutually intertwined and contribute to illegalise and preventively exclude many from getting the refugee status.

As part of the new law, temporal borders were enforced differentially, on the basis of migrants’ arrivals date: the asylum procedure of those who arrived before January 2020 had been kept on hold, while migrants who entered the country in 2020 are processed under an accelerated procedure that, de facto, means it is very likely their asylum claim will be rejected<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, as part of the accelerated procedure asylum applications are processed in the span of few days, without leaving time to asylum seekers to prepare for it. These uneven temporal borders can be hardly grasped by the asylum seekers: those who have been waiting for months on the Greek islands do not understand why others who arrived later had been prioritised. In fact, the accelerated temporality of asylum procedures and the scattered knowledges about the temporal borders of the asylum system enhance migrants’ disorientation<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> HIAS, “Observations on the implementation of law 4636/2019 on international protection and other provisions at the Hotspot of”. Report written in May 2020 by the following NGOs; RSA, HIAS, Legal Center Lesbos, Praxis and European Lawyers Lesbos.

<sup>60</sup> Article 78 of the Greek International Protection Pact (IPA), enforced in January 2020. [https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/annex-i-transposition-ceas-national-legislation?fbclid=IwAR3Zl99pB6AcudboiZG\\_4NYi293aVasTzd4Rfx8Iyaal3W4NAGFuDT5C3ME](https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/annex-i-transposition-ceas-national-legislation?fbclid=IwAR3Zl99pB6AcudboiZG_4NYi293aVasTzd4Rfx8Iyaal3W4NAGFuDT5C3ME)

<sup>61</sup> Interview with the Legal Centre Lesbos, August 21, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> EU-Turkey Deal (2016): <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

<sup>63</sup> Oxfam, “Diminished, derogated, denied. How the right to asylum in Greece is undermined by the lack of EU responsibility sharing” (2020). Available at: [https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621011/bp-diminished-derogated-denied-greece-refugees-020720-en.pdf?fbclid=IwAR32PJ4ooBixZCE\\_RnLDZuyM2btsNI3n9ruvXrbkQIGWDsDwhPZGDM5zvY](https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621011/bp-diminished-derogated-denied-greece-refugees-020720-en.pdf?fbclid=IwAR32PJ4ooBixZCE_RnLDZuyM2btsNI3n9ruvXrbkQIGWDsDwhPZGDM5zvY) (last access, October 7, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> De Genova, Nicholas et al. "Europe/crisis: New keywords of ‘the crisis’ in and of ‘Europe’." *Near Futures Online* 1 (2016): 1-16.

As a result of the multiple legal obstructions as well as of the fragmented knowledges, many lose the possibility of appealing against first instance rejection, due to the illegible and constantly changing bureaucratic steps they need to take and the uneven temporal borders. Struggles over knowledge and non-knowledge have tangible effects on migrants' lives at different moments of their journeys. Migrants are repeatedly disoriented due to frantic changes in laws and criteria, as well as due to the difficulty in finding out information. In migration scholarship, the question of knowledge has been analysed by assessing how asylum seekers are poorly informed<sup>65</sup> and the strategic ignorance used by street-level bureaucrats<sup>66</sup>. Actually, more than being secret or removed and concealed from refugees, the knowledge about the rules and criteria of the asylum regime is communicated to them in a partial and fragmented way; and sometimes they know rules which are not up to date<sup>67</sup>.

Asylum seekers do not only need to be aware of the criteria and changing rules; indeed, the knowledge of the criteria might turn out to be not-actionable and relatively useless as long as migrants are turned by states into deceitful subjects and, thus, appear as individuals who, if they know the rules, cannot but lie. Few days after the burning of the Moria hotspot in Lesbos on September 8, 2020, the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum launched "Migration Greece Info"<sup>68</sup>, a Viber community through which asylum seekers receive updates on different matters - such as relocation, asylum applications and temporary closure of the asylum office. The community chat has also been used for warning asylum seekers from being in touch with NGOs and blackmailing those who refused to enter the new camp in Lesbos: "the Greek state guarantees your security. Do not believe anyone else. Your life is safe only in the new camp [...] From today on, water and food supplies will only be available inside the camp"<sup>69</sup>. In practice, more than facilitating access to protection and rights, the app is used for intimidating asylum seekers and communicating a series of restrictions regarding mobility, humanitarian support and services. That is, the logics behind this is that asylum seekers should exclusively rely on information that come from the Viber community chat, although this might not be accessible to many.

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<sup>65</sup>Pinelli, Barbara. "After the landing: Moral control and surveillance in Italy's asylum seeker camps (Respond to this article at <https://www.therai.org.uk/publications/anthropology-today/debate>)." *Anthropology today* 31.2 (2015): 12-14.

<sup>66</sup>Alpes, Maybritt Jill, and Alexis Spire. "Dealing with law in migration control: The powers of street-level bureaucrats at French consulates." *Social & Legal Studies* 23.2 (2014): 261-274; Eule, Tobias G., Lisa M. Borrelli, Annika Lindberg, and Anna Wyss. "Migrants Before the Law." *Contested Migration Control in Europe*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (2019).

<sup>67</sup> I include here both the knowledge of refugees' rights, and the knowledge of bureaucratic procedures but also of the eligibility criteria to get cash card or other forms of financial support, as well as the ways in which it functions. In a nutshell, it refers to the knowledge about how to navigate the asylum system - both to lodge an asylum claim and to get access to rights and support.

<sup>68</sup> <https://invite.viber.com/?g2=AQBwbnVKr3AU-HUv7i1F8blVpQ6t6fqUHHHqTaIVCMvoPy3ty6b4DM6Lio%2BryaTS0&lang=en>

<sup>69</sup> Viber chat sent to the asylum seekers in Lesbos on September 29, 2020.

Hence, more than just a matter of knowing, it is a question for them to comply with a panoply of technological and bureaucratic steps and, as I will show in the next section, of not being discredited and racialised as deceitful knowers. Arguing this might appear as counter-intuitive, if we consider the many flyers and informative documents that migrants receive from humanitarian actors, local NGOs and state authorities. Soon after landing in Greece or in Italy, migrants are identified in the hotspots or are hosted in a reception centres where they receive basic information – either from UNHCR or from the state authorities – about the asylum procedure. Nevertheless, this is not the case everywhere, and there are places where migrants know very little about the procedures they need to go through, about the European laws, such as the Dublin Regulation, as well as about the rights they are entitled to. And yet, the disorientation experienced by migrants that I discuss here does not concern the amount of information nor the transparency of the procedures per se. Thus, it is not in positivist terms of “more knowledge” that the politics of disorientation can be countered. Refugees are indeed often overwhelmed by the fragmented and dispersed knowledge and information they have to put together, to assemble. Furthermore, even if the whole puzzle of dispersed knowledge is composed, this is only at times sufficient to access financial and humanitarian support. The widespread disorientation that asylum seekers experience should be situated in a broader politics of containment, apt at hampering migrants’ access to asylum.

The majority of the asylum seekers I interviewed in Lesvos and in Athens did not ignore the eligibility criteria nor how the monthly verification procedure works. Nevertheless, they turned out to be disoriented because of the frantic changes in the criteria and rules and, relatedly, due to the need of assembling diverse information all together. In order to get access to the humanitarian support, asylum seekers are requested to navigate a whole chain of associations, made of technologies, bureaucratic steps and disciplinary measures. Importantly, as Lisa Marie Borrelli has pointed out “besides the general uncertainty existing in migrants’ everyday life, [uncertainty] strongly produced through ignorance during bureaucratic encounters”<sup>70</sup>. Therefore, the widespread production of uncertainty is not just a side-effect of migration governmentality but, rather, is a constitutive component of it. The governing of refugees through disorientation is less predicated upon the epistemic binary between knowledge and non-knowledge than on the combination of unpredictable changes, compulsory technological steps to take and knowledge that turns out to be pointless due to the racialization of refugees as deceitful subjects.

### **Refugees as deceitful subjects**

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<sup>70</sup> Borrelli, Lisa Marie. *Using Ignorance as (Un) Conscious Bureaucratic Strategy*, p.98.

In her book *Epistemic Injustice* Miranda Fricker has introduced the concept of “testimonial injustice” to designate situations in which “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility”<sup>71</sup>. Testimonial injustice, Fricker contends, generates harm on the knowers and inequalities and hierarchies in the “economy of credibility”. Testimonial injustice is widespread in migration governmentality, as long as migrants’ speech is constantly discredited as untrue or misleading, and people who claim asylum are ultimately posited as guilty until proven otherwise<sup>72</sup>. The generalized “depreciation of the asylum seeker’s word”<sup>73</sup> is a common feature of the current refugee politics. In fact, what is at stake “is not simply the removal of knowledge, the creation of “black-out” spaces, or the drawing of boundaries through the multiplication of categories of classified documents but, equally, the crediting or discrediting of subjects of knowledge”<sup>74</sup>. Claudia Aradau’s argument echoes feminist literature that has notably highlighted racializing and power mechanisms that posit some individuals as subjects of knowledge and others as untrustworthy subjects<sup>75</sup>: these scholars have critically questioned “what kind of subject one must be in order to be (seen as) a knowing subject”<sup>76</sup>.

An insight into the use of technologies in refugee governmentality sheds light on a complementary way of discrediting asylum seekers, that consists in assuming that they always try to dodge the rules. Indeed, asylum seekers as forced techno-users are deemed to cheat the system, as long as they know these, in order to get money even if they are no longer eligible. In other words, not only refugees’ speech is deemed to be untrue or misleading: also their conducts and behaviours are seen as deceitful. That is, they are racialised as subjects unable and unwilling to tell the truth<sup>77</sup> and, jointly, as deceitful conducts<sup>78</sup>. On this point it is worth recalling Frantz Fanon’s analyses on the pathologisation and discrediting of the colonised subjects. In fact, as he has remarkably observed, colonised subjects are deemed to be deceitful not only for what they say, but also for their behaviours: it is the conduct itself

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<sup>71</sup>Fricker, Miranda *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press, 2007 (p.1).

<sup>72</sup>Beneduce, Roberto “The moral economy of lying: Subjectcraft, narrative capital, and uncertainty in the politics of asylum”. *Medical Anthropology*, 34(6), (2015) 551-571.

<sup>73</sup>Fassin, Didier, and Estelle d’Halluin. “The truth from the body: medical certificates as ultimate evidence for asylum seekers.” *American anthropologist* 107.4 (2005): 597-608 (p.107).

<sup>74</sup>Aradau, Claudia. “Assembling (non) knowledge, p.10

<sup>75</sup>Code, Lorraine. “Ignorance, Injustice and the Politics of Knowledge: Feminist Epistemology Now.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 29.80 (2014): 148-160; Collins, Patricia Hill. “The social construction of black feminist thought.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989): 745-773.

<sup>76</sup>Tuana, Nancy. “Feminist Epistemology: The subject of knowledge 1.” In Kidd, Ian James, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. Routledge, 2017. 125-138.

<sup>77</sup>Beneduce, Roberto. “The moral economy of lying: Subjectcraft, narrative capital, and uncertainty in the politics of asylum.” *Medical Anthropology* 34.6 (2015): 551-571.

<sup>78</sup>De Genova, Nicholas. “The “migrant crisis” as racial crisis: Do Black Lives Matter in Europe?.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41.10 (2018): 1765-1782; Tazzioli, Martina. *The Making of Migration: The Biopolitics of Mobility at Europe’s Borders*. SAGE Publications Limited, 2019.

of the colonised which is considered to be “inconsequential” and “insincere” (Fanon, 1964: 10)<sup>79</sup>. More precisely, the pain of the colonised was “judged to have no consistency, no reality. Now the North African is a-man-who-doesn’t-like work. So that whatever he does will be interpreted a priori on the basis of this”<sup>80</sup>. Building on Fanon’s analysis, Roberto Beneduce has stressed the economy of credibility and disbelief at play in refugee governance, arguing that “asylum-seekers’ condition echoes conflicts and contradictions of the colonial situation and colonial suspicion of the colonised”<sup>81</sup>. The substantial mistrust towards asylum seekers’ conducts and behaviours is in fact widespread in the asylum regime. As a UNHCR officer remarked, “we know that many card beneficiaries try to cheat the system in order to get the monthly payment twice, for instance by moving from camp to camp and using the cards of other migrants who left the country without notifying UNHCR”<sup>82</sup>. Similarly, asylum seekers are deemed to “complain about their prepaid cards even when there are not real issues; they abuse of the Viber chat mechanism we put in place, as sometimes many just want more money and are not able to wait”<sup>83</sup>. Even if asylum seekers know how overall the Cash Assistance Program works and are updated about changes, their actions and conducts might appear as untrustworthy: that is, they are usually depicted considered by both state authorities and international organisations deceitful subjects. Asylum seekers are mistrusted as subjects who might tactically use such a knowledge to dodge the rules. Actually, an insight into the Cash Card system shows that asylum seekers are also deemed to know too much - as they are able to use the information they gather to dodge the rules. Thus, they are not only victims of “testimonial injustice” and racialised as untruthful knowers<sup>84</sup>; they are also racialised as deceitful conducts, who make an unfair use of the knowledge they have - what we can call “behavioural injustice”. Indeed, this latter does something different from generating an “epistemic wrong” which affects an individual “qua knower”<sup>85</sup> and by generating an “illocutionary disablement”<sup>86</sup>. By being turned into deceitful subjects, asylum seekers are de facto

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<sup>79</sup> In fact, as Fanon stresses in the text “The North African syndrome” (1952), the colonised subjects are constantly mistrusted by the doctor: “the behaviour of the North-African often causes a medical staff to have misgiving as to the reality of his illness” (Fanon, 1967: 4)

<sup>80</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Grove press, 2008; Fanon, *The north African syndrome*

<sup>81</sup> Beneduce Roberto. “The moral economy of lying”, p. 553

<sup>82</sup> Interview with UNHCR officers in Lesvos, April 23 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with UNHCR in Athens, July 18, 2019

<sup>84</sup> Millbank, Jenni. “‘The ring of truth’: A case study of credibility assessment in particular social group refugee determinations.” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 21.1 (2009): 1-33.

<sup>85</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic injustice*, p. 44. Nor, I suggest, can the racialisation of refugees as deceitful subjects be opposed through a fight against prejudices and by gesturing towards responsible and virtuous hearers. Indeed, in the field of technohumanitarianism it is not a matter of prejudices, or of lack of reflexivity but of the fundamentally disqualified speech and conduct of the asylum seekers as suspect and as guilty until proven otherwise.

<sup>86</sup> Hornsby, Jennifer, and Rae Langton. “Free speech and illocution.” *Legal Theory* 4.1 (1998): 21-37.

obstructed in accessing humanitarian support and rights. Hence, the illocutionary disablement experienced by refugees is intertwined with a bodily disablement that is in this case mediated by digital technologies.

The racialisation of asylum seekers as subjects entrapped between the unwillingness to tell the truth and the misuse of the knowledge of the system highlights a key aspect of refugee governmentality and of the induced disorientation. It shows that it is not exclusively a matter of ignorance and lack of knowledge of the rules but, rather, of how these are actually implemented and subjected to uneven changes which are unpredictable to migrants. In fact, card beneficiaries might be even informed about how to act and, yet, be obstructed in their agency as long as their conducts are mistrusted. If on the one hand prepaid cards are presented by UNHCR as technologies that empower refugees<sup>87</sup>, on the other as technological mediations between humanitarian actors and asylum seekers they are part of a refugee system that actively hampers the access to the asylum. By being discredited and criminalised as deceitful subjects- whose speech and conduct are deemed to be unreliable - asylum seekers' knowledge is ultimately non-actionable.

Therefore, epistemic disorienting might be the result of obfuscated knowledge or partial knowledge but also of the widespread mistrust towards refugees which results into a diminished or obstructed agency, given that more knowledge - of the system - does not necessarily correspond to a more successful action. Being considered deceitful subjects, asylum seekers as card beneficiaries are demanded to constantly prove that they are not abusing the information they have to dodge the system. Ultimately, the same knowledge of the system might lead to different outcomes if this is put to work not by migrants alone but with the support of citizens; and this is not because migrants know less than locals about the Cash Assistance Programme but, rather, because the intervention of these latter is often taken into account more seriously than if migrants claim something by themselves. This is a frequent experience among asylum seekers as card beneficiaries in Greece, as many managed to obtain their delayed monthly payment only after that locals or activists intervened, most of the time by following the same procedures that migrants were requested to comply with. K. an Iranian asylum seeker I met in central Athens in summer 2019, was waiting for weeks, to get his monthly debit card recharge, and so I started sending messages via Viber to the Helpline number, and I also phoned them but without getting any answer. When I called the same number using my mobile phone someone answered after few seconds: after providing all details requested by the NGO, and complaining that K.'s payment was unfairly delayed for weeks, they confirmed the monthly recharge that K. finally received the day after.

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<sup>87</sup><https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2019/12/5b6c40f04/cash-assistance-gives-refugees-power-choice.html>

This episode shows that the knowledge of the system turns out more useful if it is enacted by what might be called the “refugees’ proxies”, that is by individuals who are not discredited as deceitful subjects and who act on their behalf. Thus, the possibilities of navigating the technological conundrums of the Cash Assistance are far from being equally distributed. On the contrary, the racialized “economy of credibility”<sup>88</sup> is intertwined with a political technology of asylum which is predicated upon exclusionary criteria and obstacles in accessing rights and services<sup>89</sup>. In this respect, Claudia Aradau has pointed out contra Jacques Ranciere’s theory of the equality in ignorance, that “there is hierarchy in ignorance inasmuch as there is hierarchy in knowledge”<sup>90</sup>. Similarly, it often happens that migrants struggle more in getting the useful and right knowledge; but, in addition to such an argument, it is important to stress that to be at stake is an unequal distribution of credibility - between “migrants” and “natives” - and possibility to put knowledge in practice.

Here, I suggest, it is useful to dwell upon such an argument and expand and complicate such a conceptual trajectory further. That is, we should take seriously the assumption that the “exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge”<sup>91</sup>. So, in this case it is worth exploring how modes of illegalisation and preventive exclusion from the asylum system are connected to a peculiar economy of uncertainty. More than a question of production of ignorance, it is a matter of fragmented knowledges, unpredictable changes in the laws and arbitrary enforcement of this latter which generate disorientation on the migrants and debilitate them. In other words, more than the reversal of knowledge, we are confronted with disjointed, fragmented knowledges and the fundamental discrediting of refugees’ conducts and discourses.

The discrediting of asylum seekers as deceitful subjects and the uncertainty and disorientation they experience are not a specificity of the increasingly digitalised asylum system: they are at the core of the exclusionary functioning of the EU’s asylum politics at large<sup>92</sup>. Yet, the incorporation of financial and digital tools in refugee governmentality has enhanced the obstructions in getting access to the asylum procedure and the effects of disorientation generated on asylum seekers. Indeed, the forced digital intermediations between asylum seekers and humanitarian actors complicate the analysis of how migrants cope with such a disorientation, as long as the technologies that asylum seekers are confronted with, are not perceived by these latter as oppressive. If on the one hand they can resist and

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<sup>88</sup>Fricker Epistemic injustice, p.1

<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the appearance of the asylum seekers as deceitful subjects cannot be disjoined from states’ attempt to keep them outside the channels of the asylum.

<sup>90</sup>Aradau, Claudia “Become a permanent migrant to the UK!” *Radical Philosophy*, 2015 <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/become-a-permanent-migrant-to-the-uk> (last access, February 3, 2020).

<sup>91</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Prison talk*. In Foucault, M. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Vintage, 1980: 37-54 P.52).

<sup>92</sup> See for instance De Genova, Nicholas. (Ed.). *The borders of" Europe": autonomy of migration, tactics of bordering*. Duke University Press, 2017 and Squire, Vicki *The exclusionary politics of asylum*. Springer, 2016.

try to escape modes of control, on the other, as this article has shown, on the other some of these technologies (Skype, Whatsapp, Viber) constitute the only channel of communication for interacting with humanitarian actors or what allows them to get access to financial support (prepaid cards). Hence, the governing through disorientation is in part tactically appropriated and twisted by some migrants who need to tactically deal with such a blurred knowledge in order to dodge the system - and for instance getting the card payment twice.

Yet, in part disorientation and fragmented or disjointed knowledges obstruct migrants' access to the asylum system and they weaken and incapacitate them in their possibility to act - generating modes of "obstructed agency"<sup>93</sup>. The bureaucratic conundrum in which K., the protagonist of *The Trial* (1925) by Franz Kafka, is visibly at play, it could be argued, in the asylum system as well<sup>94</sup>: the final execution of K. is indeed grounded on a series of unknowns, as long as the reasons of the accusation and of the trial remain obscure both to the reader and to protagonist. The disorientation that affect asylum seekers echoes K.'s experiencee. Indeed, similarly to K., irrespective of the knowledge of the system they might have, this turns out to be pointless and non-actionable by asylum seekers.

### **Conclusion:**

The partial illegibility of the asylum system contributes, as this paper has shown, to obstruct migrants' access to rights and international protection. However, such illegibility - produced by fragmented knowledge and unpredictable changes - also represents a dynamic field of struggles between asylum seekers on the one hand and state authorities and humanitarian actors on the other. Recalling Edouard Glissant's argument about the irreducibility of opacity in its interplay with transparency and about opacity being turned into a tactic of resistance<sup>95</sup>, governing through disorientation and knowledge dispersal opens up leeway for asylum seekers to twist the system their favour<sup>96</sup>. This does not mean romanticising disorientation and fragmentation - which as this paper has demonstrated, are actually source of harm and obstruction for migrants. Rather, it is a question of highlighting the possibilities of tactically playing with disorientation and dispersal: what is partial illegible for migrants might at times be mobilised by them to circumvent bureaucratic conundrums and to get access to financial and humanitarian support.

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<sup>93</sup> Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly feelings*. Vol. 6. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005 (p.27). See also Jasbir K. The right to maim: Debility, capacity, disability. Duke University Press, 2017 and Walters, William. And Lüthi Barbara "The politics of cramped space: Dilemmas of action, containment and mobility". *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 29.4 (2016): 359-366.

<sup>94</sup> Kafka, Frantz *The Trial*. New York: Penguin, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Glissant, Édouard *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press., 1997.

<sup>96</sup> In fact, opacity also evokes tactics of appropriation, refusal and resistance that colonized subjects and migrants engage in against techniques of control

For instance, some asylum seekers have managed to get the monthly financial support twice, by moving from one camp to another, or to give their prepaid card to other migrants, before leaving Greece. The increasing amount of data that state and non-state actors need to store and manage, and the cumbersome functioning of an increasingly digitalised asylum procedure contribute to render the refugee system partially illegible to state authorities and humanitarian actors themselves. And this generates a space of manoeuvre for asylum seekers, who seize the opportunity of technical glitches and partial lack of data sharing. Yet, playing with disorientation and fragmented knowledge is far from being an easy task for asylum seekers. As this paper has shown, they are repeatedly discredited and treated as deceitful subjects and the proliferation of technological steps has further increased with Covid-19, partially entrapping them in forced digital intermediations with humanitarian actors and narrowing leeway of refusal and subtraction.

The fragmented knowledges that asylum seekers deal with is far from being exclusively an epistemic quarrel: rather, these affect and shape subjectivities and generate effects of disorientation on the migrants. Indeed, asylum seekers' widespread disorientation does not stem (only) from lack of knowledge. Rather, as this paper has illustrated, even when asylum seekers know all rules, this might turn out to be useless to them because their conduct is often treated as deceitful and the because of the exclusionary mechanisms of asylum. The frantic changes in laws and measures shed light on the "unpredictability and turbulence of contemporary migration movements"<sup>97</sup>, that is to the excesses of migrants' movements and subjective drives with respect to the politics of control. In fact, state actors need to constantly reinvent modes of capture and bordering mechanisms that come to grips with the partial ungovernability of migration. At the same time, the uneven and unpredictable functioning of techno-humanitarianism should be situated within a proactive politics apt at disrupting migrants' access to international protection, humanitarian support and rights.

This pushes us to shift from an exclusive focus the epistemic level - about knowledge, non-knowledge and ignorance - towards an account of the debilitating effects of disorientation that asylum seekers experience<sup>98</sup>. This involves undoing the binary opposition between claiming more knowledge and transparency on the one side, and praising uncertainty on the other. Ultimately, as Michel Foucault pointed out, a critique of knowledge "does not in fact consist in denouncing what is continually [...] oppressive under reason, for after all, believe me, insanity (déraison) is just as oppressive"<sup>99</sup>. Not

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<sup>97</sup> Mezzadra, Sandro and Neilson, Brett. Between inclusion and exclusion: On the topology of global space and borders. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29.4-5, (2012): 58-75 (p.69); see also De Genova, Nicholas The queer politics of migration: Reflections on "illegality" and incorrigibility. *Studies in social justice*, 4.2 (2010): 101-126.

<sup>98</sup> Puar, Jasbir K. (2017). *The right to maim: Debility, capacity, disability*. Duke University Press.

<sup>99</sup> Foucault, The birth of biopolitics p. 36.

accepting the binary opposition between transparency and uncertainty is the starting point for developing an analytics that takes disorientation and fragmented knowledges as lenses for grasping forms of subjection enacted in the grey area of partial unknowns.