

Introduction

Small bottles of hand sanitizer may not be the first thing one thinks about when opening a book about asylum procedures, affect and state power. However, I was struck by their presence during my fieldwork; these small, innocent-looking bottles were placed on some of the desks in the variety of buildings and rooms people need to go through while applying for asylum in the Netherlands. Someone from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (the IND) once told me that ‘many’ people have scabies, especially people arriving on boats from Northern Africa, which was her explanation for the bottles: they directly respond to the effects of Europe’s deadly mobility regime, as health risks are presumed to accompany those who survive illegalized journeys by boat.

This sanitation practice reminded me of what [Mary Douglas \(1966\)](#) called ‘rituals of purification’, which are ways to manage and regulate the dangers of ‘matter out of place’. The bottles struck me precisely because they symbolize categorical anxieties as well as the relationship between Europe and travellers from regions subjected to ongoing Euro-White coloniality.¹ Indeed, the asylum procedure could be imagined as a state apparatus that seeks to ‘purify’ – to keep Europe and the Netherlands safe from ‘undeserving’ or ‘threatening’ applicants, while only permitting the ‘deserving’ ones to stay.

In Catherine Besteman’s words, ‘Containing and constraining the mobility of refugees, who as border crossers are dangerous and mistrusted by the states that take them in as well as by the states that try to keep them out, is a major global enterprise’ (2016: 29). This book examines how one specific Western European state – the Netherlands – engages with the arrival of certain (often illegalized) travellers when they, despite intensive efforts to keep them away, manage to reach its borders and get caught up in the bureaucratic infrastructures of the asylum procedure.

The asylum procedure brings people together, makes them engage with one another and thus exposes their unevenly positioned bodies to each other’s presence and to the urgency of decision. This book delves into the peculiarly intimate and asymmetrical encounters between applicants and the procedure’s professionals – from lawyers to IND officers, as I elaborate on below. It also concentrates on the final decision-making process, where the applicant is excluded from the deliberation and made to await a decision.

Meanwhile, their² documentary body-double – their case file – plays an active role in grounding a decision. As this research deeply engages with life-altering decision-making practices over mobility and il/legalization, it also needs to engage with the question of state power.

With this book, I seek to explore state power in the tensions and affects that are immanent to a routinized process of intimately and suspiciously getting to know a person and deciding over the course of their life. Hence, instead of tracing how power is delegated and how administrative violence is performed by ‘petty sovereigns’ (Butler 2004), I find state power in what I call ‘state intensities’: in the different ways that various bodies are affected and mobilized by the power of decision, one that determines who has access to protection, (human) rights and cross-border mobility. While some must perform state power, others are subjected to it, yet everyone is affected by it in very different ways.

The main question this book explores is clear-cut: how does the Dutch state perform life-altering decisions through its asylum procedures? Consequently, this book takes the Dutch asylum procedure as an insightful case study of how European states govern mobility and nationalized borders through intensive and peculiarly intimate practices of decision-making.

The Figure of Refugee and Asylum Procedures

In the years following the Second World War, the granting of refugee status was generally viewed positively in Europe (Jubany 2017: 47). This positive perception largely relates to the fact that the 1951 Refugee Convention was created as a direct response to the massive displacement of people after the war and was primarily meant to protect European refugees. Initially, the Convention held geographical limitations (restricting obligations to European refugees) and temporal limitations (covering only pre-1951 events). The 1967 Protocol later removed both these restrictions, extending refugee protections globally (Hathaway 1990: 178).

In the 1970s, not long after the change in law, the relatively positive attitude towards refugees began to change. During this period, processes of criminalization started to aggressively converge with efforts to secure Europe’s borders. The rhetoric surrounding those trying to reach Europe increasingly became intertwined with labels such as ‘criminals’, ‘asylum shoppers’ and ‘bogus refugees’ (ibid.: 47). Since then, asylum seekers have been increasingly portrayed as an existential threat to Europe. This narrative has gained traction through the depiction of waves and floods of migrants attempting to ‘overflow’ and ‘swamp’ Europe. Such imagery has been used to justify the implementation of strict procedures, including detention and deportation measures (Charteris-Black 2006).

This recurring discourse of a ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe, highlighted during 2015 – at the time of my fieldwork – has been exacerbated by austerity politics, which have affected border strategies that further legalize and criminalize asylum applicants (De Genova 2013). This climate has had an impact on local-level decision-making processes, particularly those assessing asylum applicants’ ‘deservingness’ of refugee status (Sorgoni 2019: 223). As Borrelli, Lindberg and Wyss (2022) demonstrate, this institutionalized suspicion is deeply embedded in migration control systems, shaping how state workers approach asylum seekers. Hence, the professionals of the procedure work within a time-pressured context of suspicion and securitization.

However, those working within this system do not necessarily concur with the image of their work as predominantly focused on securitization and suspicion. Attending to their daily practices and attachments reveals that they often understand their work as one of refugee protection. At times, most legal allies and some IND officers told me they disagreed with the detention situation and had to put energy into educating guards about asylum applicants – that they should not be treated as criminals. Most professionals I met who worked with the procedure – be it an ally or an IND officer – spoke of sad stories that made them feel their work mattered and that they were part of something that helps people who really ‘deserve’ it. A few told me that this – protecting and helping refugees – drove them to work for the IND in the first place.

At the same time, the very same IND officers also thrive on discovering what they deem to be lies, inconsistencies or other details that reveal the applicant as bogus. In a similar vein, legal allies seem to work harder for applicants who convince them of their ‘deservingness’ than for those who appear less ‘deserving’. Both van der Kist and Rosset (2021) and Wissink (2021) show how bureaucratic knowledge practices actively construct rather than merely document such notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ asylum seekers. Van der Kist and Rosset examine how asylum officials establish ‘epistemic authority’ through institutional practices that make country-of-origin information appear objective, determining what counts as credible knowledge about asylum seekers’ countries and experiences (2021 3–4). In other words, through knowledge gatekeeping, certain experiences are considered plausible while others are seen as inconsistent and too far removed from the ‘objective’ sources officials use themselves. In this way, credibility and deservingness are closely linked, and only those whose suffering can be made legible within these institutional and affective expectations may be seen as worthy of protection.

Within this context, the category of the refugee becomes the prime figure of both knowledge gatekeeping and ‘un/deservingness’. The category itself is a crucial device for separating ‘real’ from ‘fake’, or ‘truly deserving’ from

'less deserving' applicants. Hence, as part of knowledge gatekeeping, the figure of the refugee plays a crucial role in assisting both IND officers and legal allies in their work of assessing asylum applicants. I would like to quote an IND officer to further illustrate how the figure of the refugee assists him in grounding his negative decision on an actor from Iran:

You ask what I think of the decision. That is not an easy question. It is not so often that a case is so borderline. Art touches the issue of freedom of speech, and thus falls under one of the grounds of the refugee treaty. We do not ask a homosexual to hide his sexual orientation behind an illusion of heterosexuality, we do not ask a Christian to hide his faith, and a citizen should be able to give his opinion. Still, it only becomes very severe when the dangers in such a country are substantial. When Christians are persecuted, homosexuals threatened and imprisoned, a claim is accepted. In the case of the Iranian actor the question is, is his persecution bad enough? In this case the person was never tortured, he was never detained and there was no threat that this was ever going to happen. (IND officer, AC Schiphol: 2012)

In the procedure, the suffering of the Iranian actor must be dismissed as not 'severe' enough, as insufficient in relation to the refugee category, a category grounded in notions of a particular violence – one that, importantly, must be actively pieced together, and recognized, in the account that represents the applicant. In the quote, to be a 'refugee' includes suffering threats, torture and/or detention, and the IND officer had not found such suffering in the actor's account. The line had to be drawn there, as the procedure is staged to exclusively protect applicants who match the refugee category according to IND decision-makers.

According to these decision-makers, they work both with policies of refugee recognition and with the formal refugee definition established in international law. The primary legal framework is provided by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (commonly known as the Geneva Convention), which in Article 1(A)(2) defines a refugee as a person who

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. ([United Nations 1951](#))

Additionally, decision-makers rely on protections established in the European Convention on Human Rights, specifically Article 3, which states: 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment' ([Council of Europe 1950](#)).

Furthermore, the EU Qualification Directive (2004/83/EC) provides grounds for subsidiary protection when a person faces serious harm in their

country of origin. According to Article 15 of the Directive, serious harm consists of '(a) death penalty or execution, or (b) torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of an applicant in the country of origin' (European Union 2004).

Hence, the procedure seeks out persecuted people (or those who legitimately fear persecution) and those recognized as abusing stories of (a fear of) persecution. Each applicant must respond to the standards set by the Geneva Convention; however, while the refugee figure is defined by the Convention, much still needs to be interpreted. Anthony Good found the following in the UK asylum system, which is also relevant to understanding the Dutch context: 'Home Office interpretations in the Asylum Policy Instrument are consistently narrower than those of the UNHCR's Handbook' (Good 2007: 97). Bohmer and Shuman show that 'many of the interpretations of the law are patterned after current social trends' (2004: 398). They explain that, for example, gender-based discrimination is currently recognized as a form of persecution, but this was not the case when the Convention was drafted. Hence, conditions are added and the way these conditions are practised differs across nationalized contexts.

In the Netherlands, gender and sexuality have gained more attention in the last few decades and various work manuals have been produced that constantly refine how IND officers should address problems of gender and sexuality at asylum hearings. This, in general, relates to what gets to be recognized as persecution and what might otherwise be recognized as belonging to an applicant's cultural background. Thomas Spijkerboer writes: 'the institutionalized discrimination of women (which may take the form of forced marriage, denial of education, cliterodectomy, forced abortion, sterilization) is often seen as a matter of the general situation in the country and thus of indigenous culture' (Spijkerboer in Bohmer and Shuman 2004: 132). Bohmer and Shuman further note that for a violent act to be considered persecution, it must be deemed public rather than private. Again, the authors quote Spijkerboer (on the Dutch asylum procedure) to make the following argument: 'In Sri Lanka ... it is unfortunately not unusual for women to be the victim of sexual violence ... The applicant is therefore not in an exceptional position' (ibid.: 125). While in some cases this has changed – when, for example, homophobic violence is the general situation – the most important point to be made about procedures is, again, that the notion of persecution itself is constantly being refined, and is subject to various interpretations, which also relates to the procedure's own cultural and national situatedness.

In this book, instead of dwelling on the legal categories of the refugee, my point of departure is to look at the process of separation and 'knowledge gatekeeping' that is always legitimized by a legal category that mobilizes feelings, interpretations and suspicions. By delving into these practices,

I seek to show how the process of testing asylum claims, and their veracity, is intimate and contingent and involves assembling and gatekeeping information. Indeed, bits and pieces of information, self-presentation and interpretation are gathered up into a case file that establishes the person as literally readable. A person with a voice, a scent, a gaze, skin, eyes, beauty (and much more) is made into words – a printed text that may fit or fail the image of the refugee. A study like this thus draws on the understanding that the refugee category is performative. It is the necessity to perform and recognize the refugee that establishes this performativity: in the act of showing oneself as a ‘real’ or ‘fake’ refugee, legal norms of deservingness are reiterated into a (material) reality.

Situating the Dutch Procedure

When I started my fieldwork, there was very little public attention on asylum procedures and their subjects, but this changed drastically in 2015 when the so-called refugee crisis (or European crisis of reception) was named. The ‘crisis’ intensified in Greece, a country that had been struggling with large numbers of reception for years (see [Cabot 2014](#)) as well as with other crises (see [Green 2017](#)). In the first nine months of 2015 more than 487,000 people arrived at the so-called margins of Europe ([Holmes and Castaneda 2016](#): 12). The UNHCR reports that in 2015 there were 65.3 million people on the move seeking refuge, and 86 percent ended their journeys in places near the countries they fled. Over five million Syrians sought refuge worldwide that year, and of the 43,093 asylum applicants in the Netherlands, 18,677 were Syrian.³

The influx of Syrian as well as Eritrean applicants had a marked influence on the Dutch procedure at that time. First, one of the main characteristics of the procedure is that applicants bring stories of violence, persecution and sadness, and that professionals of the procedure become swiftly familiar with certain similarities in those stories. Syrian stories of the war and the revolution became increasingly well-known, as were the people who brought these stories to the procedure. If one were to ask an IND officer or an asylum lawyer to describe a characteristically Syrian story, they would probably be able to give a description of such an account, as well as provide an image of how Syrian applicants, in their mind, typically express emotions. While one may agree or disagree with this tacit knowledge, such knowledge and expectations are undeniably part of the procedure. A second way in which the influx of Syrian and Eritrean applications especially affected the practices I observed was that many temporary workers were hired at the open application centre (AC Ter Apel). These temporary workers were less well-versed in putting categorical suspicion to work, with the result that they were (and still are) assigned ‘simple’ or ‘practice’ cases. At

the time of my research, practice cases meant Eritrean or Syrian cases in which identity documents had been deemed authentic and whose stories had become well-known to (even these newly hired) IND officers. The outcome of their application process would inevitably be positive due to their authenticated nationalities. In these cases, the procedure became more of a bureaucratic necessity than a way to dissect credibility and eligibility. Such ‘practice cases’, as well as the simultaneous influx of temporary IND workers, shows how the increase in numbers of refugees affected the practices that this book focuses on.

While my research does not focus on numbers or specific temporal work pressures, this is telling of the ways the procedure must adapt to changing – fluctuating – numbers as well as a variety of stories of war, loss and fear. This is part and parcel of the procedure’s affective and contingent nature, which coexists quite effectively with its routines and the unchanging discourses and logics that underlie it – namely those of deservingness, bordering and ‘the global infrastructure of nation-states and the bordered management of populations’ (Schinkel and Van Reekum 2024: 2190).

Suspicion and Compassion in a Culture of Disbelief

If there was a way to always be sure of asylum seekers telling me the truth, if they would never lie, then my job would be full of genuine compassion. There would be genuine contact. But most of the asylum seekers lie.

–IND officer, Amsterdam: 2013

I remember vividly the time when applicants from Rwanda came to the Netherlands. They brought along horrible stories about the rebels and how they cut pregnant women open to grab babies from their wombs. I remember that sometimes applicants had to tell the IND officer about the smallest details of what they had witnessed because the IND could not believe this was really happening.

–Lawyer, Amsterdam: 2014

If, quite simply put, compassion can be defined as asymmetrical care for a specific kind of vulnerable and suffering other (Berlant 2004; Levinas 1987; Nussbaum 2003; Sontag 2003), then a procedure that is grounded in the promise of protecting vulnerable people is, in at least some aspects, built on compassion. Yet compassion does not colour the atmosphere in which people are received. Rather, applicants are held in a sphere of securitization, detention and an intricate and shape-shifting suspicion that is grounded in what the first quote above illustrates: the belief that most asylum applicants lie. Compassion, then, is entangled and practised with techniques of suspicion. To make sense of this entanglement, I argue that the procedure

performs a suspicious compassion, as compassion for the ‘real’ refugee is practised through the tests of suspicion that shape how applicants are asked to make their deservingness convincing.

I choose the word ‘suspicion’ because it profoundly shapes the affective atmosphere of the practices I observed in the procedure. Suspicion is not only a hermeneutics (see Ricoeur 1981) – a way of seeing and interpreting – it is also very much part of how people feel for and experience one another. Suspicion appears like a matrix, a context in which fragile relationships are shaped and changed, a situation that affects each person involved but in tellingly different ways. As the first quote above shows, suspicion underlies the IND officer’s way of affectively distancing themselves from an applicant who they are trained to believe will most probably lie. Their compassion would be wasted, they seem to say. They would be foolish to feel for a person who ‘abuses’ their – and the state’s – genuine care. Their move to distance themselves from applicants, while still facing them daily, is an affective move born from suspicion. However, importantly, suspicion also allows IND officers to feel empathy for, and closeness to, applicants who they see as rather exceptionally ‘true’ and ‘genuine’. Hence, suspicion again affects the ways that professionals relate to, and feel for, various applicants who, in turn, are also affected by these professionals and by their own expectations of the procedure.

Suspicion, as the first quote above implies, relates to the uncertainty of truth; while the procedure is searching for truth, its practitioners know that the truth can never be reached. One IND officer told me that they disagree with my choice to call what they are looking for ‘truth’. Indeed, the IND officer said that IND officers do not look for truth as they know very well that they will never find it; instead they look for ‘credibility’. This active turn to ‘credibility’ is crucial, as it enables IND officers to perform their work through carefully designed affective techniques that combine distance and intimacy, scepticism and belief. However, while the IND officer believes that the truth cannot be found, they still feel it is out there. Their job is one of uncertainty, of trying to get as close as possible to what they know to be impossible. In this sense, truth is the driving factor of a suspicion that sharply looks, senses and finds (il)logics, (non-)credibility, (in)coherency and the details (like names and dates) that figure as facts in a procedure that revolves around fear and suffering.

IND officers – and thus legal allies too – must listen and read sharply: they know the truth will never be theirs, but they also firmly believe that most applicants will deceive them if they can. Suspicion – in various shapes and forms – arises in the tension that belongs to the desire for and yet the impossibility of truth. My IND informant’s reluctance to call it ‘truth’ is testament both to the fact that applicants are never fully believed and to the importance of looking, feeling, perceiving, listening and reading with a strong and

sharp suspicion that would reveal lies if there were any. Hence, suspicion is a craft and a method that allows IND officers to do their job of sifting people through a suspicious compassion that limitedly allows for the ‘deserving’ few to receive refugee status.

A number of scholars have analysed the entanglement between suspicion and compassion. [Fassin \(2005\)](#) and [Ticktin \(2016\)](#), studying French asylum procedures, locate compassion primarily in the moral valuation of those seeking asylum based on physical suffering or disease, rather than in encounters with those applying on the basis of fear and persecution, as in the Dutch procedures I studied. [Fassin \(2005\)](#) documents what he calls ‘compassionate repression’, which illuminates how humanitarian concerns coexist with a focus on security, reflecting how the ‘suffering body’ carries more legitimacy than the ‘politically threatened body’. Ticktin, who builds on Fassin’s analysis of repressive compassion, views compassion as contingent and interpersonal, emerging in face-to-face interactions between a suffering person and medical experts trained to recognize ‘severe-enough’ bodily suffering. In this view, compassion becomes an erratic and limited emotion that ‘chooses a few exceptional individuals and excludes the rest – indeed, by its very definition, compassion is unable to generalize’ ([Ticktin 2016: 265](#)).

While Fassin and Ticktin position compassion as the flip-side of state repression, [Kalir \(2019\)](#) challenges this characterization. Based on his research on Dutch deportation practices, he argues that compassion enables state repression by creating an ‘emotional comfort zone’ for caseworkers, allowing them to ‘deflect potentially disruptive affects of the law and move ahead with effectively implementing controversial state policies’ ([Kalir 2019: 70](#)). In this way, compassion itself makes repression possible. However, both approaches understand compassion as a singular emotion – either one that allows state officers to sleep well at night or one that is erratic and untrustworthy. My approach differs, as I seek to move beyond a focus on single encounters or emotions to examine the multiplicity of affective work throughout the procedural itinerary.

To understand how suspicion and compassion entangle in this context, I turn to the conceptual framework of affect. Theories of affect ([Gregg and Seigworth 2010](#)) explicitly attend to relationality, illuminating ‘the reflexive and reciprocal relationships between subjective experiences and [a] social order’ ([Richard and Rudnycky 2009: 61](#)). Focusing on affect allows me to analyse the tensions related to how certain affects – both suspicion and compassion – circulate within this environment, and the effects these have. Affect becomes a medium or atmosphere in which people move and relate to one another, as ‘particular affects enable certain types of circulation and foreclose others’ ([Richard and Rudnycky 2009: 59](#)). This understanding of affect as relational and as integral to composing social environments shows

the importance of taking affect seriously in analysing how state power operates within the set of practices and sites related to the asylum procedure.

A Procedural Itinerary and Its Personae

So, what do these procedures look like? Who is involved in the gathering of intimate information from people seen as both potentially vulnerable and deceptive, and increasingly as an existential threat to European states (Charteris-Black 2006; Jubany 2017)?

While an analysis of such a procedure may (and has) go(ne) in many directions, this ethnographic study highlights how the unknown applicant is made knowable along what I call the procedural itinerary to turn attention to the affective, contingent and intuitive aspects in an otherwise sharply routinized and fragmented process of refugee recognition. The itinerary stages crucial encounters in which differently positioned professionals gather and transform intimate information from applicants into official (Dutch) documents that circulate further along the itinerary and towards an IND decision-maker who reads the (entextualized) applicant in Dutch. The concept of the procedural itinerary seeks to capture that process of routinized and contingent transformation and circulation.

In relation to the procedural itinerary, I use the notion of ‘procedural personae’ to analyse the trained ways of receiving applicants. These personae – the faces and interfaces of the procedure – enable contact between the applicant and the state’s procedure in different ways and at the various ‘nodes’ along the itinerary. Next to the persona of the legal ally, there are both hearing-related and decision-making IND roles. This means that there are IND officers who first meet the applicant to gather and transform their accounts into the official Dutch texts that then circulate to other IND officers. These IND decision-makers consequently analyse the crafted texts that silently represent the applicant (whom they have not met in person) and allow for a distanced and ‘objective’ decision. While the IND personae are there to critically put the applicant’s account to the test, legal allies (asylum lawyers and the refugee council) assist applicants and work with them to convince the IND of the applicant’s ‘deservingness’.

Examining the two positions of IND officers and legal allies as contingent and relational procedural personae enables me to show how state power is generative precisely in the mobilization of contrasting but complementary roles. While legal allies are not state officials, they still need to operate ‘within and alongside infrastructures of state power’ (Cabot 2013a: 146), translating life stories into the kinds of narratives that are legible within state frameworks of credibility and deservingness (Cabot 2013a, 2013b; Wroe 2018). Moreover, even though they work from a different, at times opposed, position to state officers, their work, as this book shows,

actively complements that of IND officers. In that sense, the personae of legal allies form a reluctant supplement to the IND as they work against IND suspicion, engaging with it strategically to move through it, while at the same time supplementing the IND's work by extracting the kind of information needed to make and justify life-altering decisions. By concentrating on the opposed, complementary and asymmetrically positioned personae, this book foregrounds the affective labour needed to actualize state power by examining the trained yet personalized ways of seeing, sensing and affecting – as well as being affected by – asylum applicants.

Because the procedure needs actual persons and their sensitivities to sharply gather (and eliminate) information, the routinized itinerary moves with and through the many local contingencies that belong to such close encounters. Hence, to enact a procedural persona is to be able to look, feel and engage in a very specific way. It means to be exposed to others in a trained manner, which also means that one constantly makes on-the-spot decisions that affect how information is gathered and circulated towards and into a final decision. Because IND officers' and legal allies' bodies, as well as their affective mobilization, are central to the procedure, they inevitably also draw on their own sensitivities, personal history and personality. To put it differently, trained vision and intuition merge with personal sensitivities, feelings, knowledge, privileges, senses of self, likes and dislikes. Think, for example, of a homosexual IND officer who recently had a baby with his partner and their co-parent. He conducts a hearing with an applicant who claims asylum based on homophobic violence. While the IND officer asks all the questions he needs to ask according to the work manuals, he might be extra sharp on certain topics and ask further. He could be more sympathetic to the claim in general, but also specifically critical of applicants he suspects of 'faking' such stories to hide their 'true' intentions. He might be charmed, especially touched by a story of homophobic violence, irritated or tired because the baby woke up every single hour of the night.

This is certainly not to suggest that, in such cases, a childless cisgender heterosexual IND officer would be in a better position to gather these accounts. Rather, it is to emphasize that a procedure that draws on the affective encounters between differently positioned people also invites aspects into the process that ostensibly have little to do with the procedure. This is crucial both to understanding how the itinerary is staged to gather and circulate information, and to analysing the kind of bureaucracy that the procedure performs. In contrast to the Weberian ideal-typical bureaucracy associated with depersonalization, mechanization and a rationality seen as adverse to personal freedom (see [Weber 1946](#)), the procedure also draws on intuition, initiative and the necessary freedom to be creative on the spot (see [Caton and Zacka 2010](#)). Indeed, each application, or better yet, each crucial moment in an application process is both routinized and unique: a

gathering between an IND officer and an applicant, for example, is a routinized and trained moment of encounter, but it is also a unique gathering of people who have never met before and who will never meet again in this precise constellation and at this specific time and place. Hence, while the itinerary is designed to routinize and regulate the process of ‘objective’ decision-making, the decision itself is also contingent on the unique affective encounters that are so essential to suspiciously gathering and analysing vulnerable information from applicants.

Ways of Thinking the State

Throughout my research I have been struck by the question of how to understand that overly mythologized and fetishized construction called the State (Taussig 1997: 3). As anthropological theories on state power make clear, it cannot be reduced to a ‘cold monster’ (Fassin 2015) existing somewhere ‘out there’. Rather, state power seems to be more diffuse, relational and contingent. As Willem Schinkel writes, ‘anyone trying to be a citizen has to pass through a set of practices trying to be a state’ (Schinkel 2020: 557), or in Timothy Mitchell’s analysis, the state is not a full subject of independent decision-making (Mitchell 1991). Rather, state power must be actualized, as its power is incomplete but multiple and, as I argue in this book, immanent to the relations mobilized around the urgency of life-altering decision-making.

Anthropologists have grappled with this elusive nature of state power in varying ways. Bourdieu wrestled with the question of the state and found precisely what Michael Taussig rejects – that overly mythologized and fetishized invented wholeness (Taussig 1997: 3). Bourdieu conceptualizes the state as a god-like omnipresence that is both powerful and invisible (see Bourdieu 2014; Schinkel 2015). He writes: ‘the state is the name that we give to the hidden, invisible principles – indicating a kind of *deus absconditus* – of the social order, and at the same time of both physical and symbolic domination, likewise of physical and symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 2014: 7).

Foucault (1991, 2002), by contrast, takes a well-known approach that moves away from the state as a god-like black box, instead seeing governmental power as diffuse and operative in multiple state and non-state institutions and discourses focused on managing populations. While state power in the form of the sole sovereignty of a king faded, a more diffuse form of state power gained strength in what Foucault calls governmentality. In Judith Butler’s words, ‘governmentality is broadly understood as a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies, the production and regulation of persons and populations, and the circulation of

goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population' (Butler 2004: 51–52).

I quote Butler because they draw on Foucault's governmentality, adding that it is precisely within governmentality that state sovereignty has reinserted itself in the sites and practices situated within what Caton and Zacka (2010) call the 'security apparatus'. According to Caton and Zacka, the 'nodes' along the security apparatus thrive on discretionary decisions and contingencies, which is also where Butler observes what they call 'petty sovereigns' at work to make life-altering decisions without appeal but also without oversight. Butler notes that these sovereigns' 'acts are clearly conditioned, but their acts are judgements that are nevertheless unconditional in the sense that they are final, not subject to review, and not subject to appeal' (Butler 2004: 65).

Caton and Zacka (2010) further argue that the image of a perfect bureaucracy is held together through a thread of discretionary powers. They contrast security apparatuses with disciplinary ones, suggesting that security institutions necessarily operate with improvisation and a degree of arbitrariness because they constantly confront risk and uncertainty. According to their framework, security apparatuses must embrace contingency, while disciplinary institutions strive for predictability and routinization. Consequently, 'agents of a security apparatus have to perform their power differently from those who perform disciplinary power' (2010: 207).

One of the contributions of this book lies in arguing that asylum procedures compose a hybrid form in which aspects of both bureaucratic and security state models are present. Rules and routines, distance and detachment – features of the bureaucratic model – coexist productively with qualities of the security apparatus, such as creativity, contingency and intuition. This shows neither a fully bureaucratic approach nor a purely security-oriented one. Instead, my research into the affective, routinized and suspicion-induced practices of the procedure illuminate how these seemingly contradictory logics operate simultaneously through the affective work of both IND officers and legal advocates positioned along the procedural itinerary.

In addition to showing how the procedure performs both security and disciplinary power as a hybrid form, it is also important to reflect on the resurgent forms of sovereignty that mark the intensity of state power vis-à-vis asylum applicants and other illegalized travellers. As Hansen and Stepputat (2001) explain, sovereignty manifests in the power to inflict violence on human bodies. They argue that the state can be found especially in places where sovereign power is practised. In their words, commenting on Jean Bodin's account of sovereignty: 'what is implicit but never spelled out in Bodin's text is that sovereignty is an effect of these actions, and that

sovereignty needs to be performed and reiterated on a daily basis in order to remain effective, and to form the basic referent of the state' (2001: 7). They explain that although the meanings and forms of such performances of sovereignty are historically specific, they are also always constructing public authority through a capacity for visiting violence on human bodies (2001: 7). This argument regarding state violence comes close to Giorgio Agamben's argument on law and the body:

If it is true that law needs a body in order to be in force, and if one can speak, in this sense, of 'law's desire to have a body,' democracy responds to this desire by compelling law to assume the care of this body. (Agamben 1998: 73)

Agamben coins the term 'bare life' to emphasize the power and violence that sovereignty potentially visits upon the bodies of each person who remains within or enters its power. Sovereign bio-power is concerned with the care as well as the exclusion of different (and differentiated) bodies within the spaces, sites and practices of its regime. The potential condition of bare life thus expresses the ultimate violence of included exclusion, when a person remains within the power of a sovereign but is stripped – bared, undressed – of the sovereign's protection. Hence, it is 'the sovereign' who decides who lives a protected full or an unprotected bare life (ibid.: 44). In that way, sovereignty is enacted in acts of included exclusion or through protected inclusion, showing again how state power seeks to possess and interfere with life, the body and the body's mobility.

Alexander Weheliye (2014), drawing on Black feminist thought, is critical of how the concept of bare life presupposes a pre-cultural or linguistic state of pure biological existence to which sovereign power has access. He argues, rather, that historically contingent infrastructures of power related to gender and racialization are already inscribed into such 'pure biological' life. In other words, bare life does not exist outside markers of race and gender, which must be considered to understand how differentiated bodies are variably vulnerable to the violent actualization of sovereignty (Weheliye 2014: 35). This critique is particularly crucial in the context of global mobility politics and contemporary post- or neocolonial bordering regimes.

Relatedly, Catherine Besteman introduces the concept of a 'militarized global apartheid regime' to highlight how people racialized as non-European (meaning non-White) especially those travelling from the Global South, face a militaristic border regime and various barriers imposed on them by governments and multilateral institutions based in the Global North (Besteman 2019: 26). This relates to what Nicolas De Genova calls the 'brute racial fact of this deadly European border regime' (De Genova 2018: 1766), which is often overlooked because, as he states, 'it immediately confronts us with

the cruel (post)coloniality of the “new” Europe’ (1766). However, such systemic violence is part of the process that illegalizes the mobility of people predominantly from formerly colonized countries. Hence, while Agamben’s framework is important in understanding the relationship between the body and state power, these critiques are crucial in foregrounding the fact that not all bodies are equally exposed to the potential of included exclusion and forms of state violence. The ongoing impacts of colonization and related mechanisms of racialization and White supremacy are crucial for a fuller understanding of the relation between European states and ‘unwelcome’ travellers from the Global South.

In this book, I examine how the law cares for, takes possession of and includes differently marked bodies into sovereign state power: who is mobilized to enact this power, and what does such mobilization mean to those delegated such a powerful position? To engage with these questions, my work combines the theories of state power mentioned above with more ethnographic approaches to the anthropology of the state, such as those made by [Ferguson and Gupta \(2002\)](#), [Das and Poole \(2004\)](#) and [Hansen and Stepputat \(2001\)](#). These authors claim that anthropologists interested in studying the state should examine specific localities and everyday practices where instances of the state appear ([Das and Poole 2004: 5](#)). And with Butler, as well as with Caton and Zacka, I understand sovereignty as the potential power to strip people of protection, to perform violence on bodies, or conversely to protect and include bodies within the realms of citizenship. This power, always in relation to histories of colonization and racialization as noted above, is situated at specific sites, in specific relations, and, in this case, is part of a bureaucratic security apparatus.

My contribution to the anthropology of the state lies in developing the concept of ‘suspicious compassion’, which makes sense of the affective atmospheres belonging to the settings and practices where sovereign state power is performed, and where security and disciplinary bureaucratic powers converge. From this concept I further develop the concept of ‘state intensities’ to capture how state power affects different bodies unevenly, and how that is performed in the intensive affective work and atmospheres produced in the procedure. Hence, I argue that state power cannot be either reduced to the people who make decisions or abstracted into an invisible, ungraspable but powerful whole. Rather, I explore state power in the intensive or affective modes – I call them ‘state intensities’ – that belong to the ways that state power affects and mobilizes the differently positioned people who gather together in the procedure. State power, in this conceptualization, is found in its forceful ways of touching and moving applicants by also (but in essentially different ways) touching and moving others to engage with applicants and to consequently make decisions over life and inclusion.

Ethnography and Folded Access

The way I try to think with that unthinkable thing called the state relates to the ethnographic nature of my research. Ethnography is a way of getting close to the smaller moments, feelings and gestures that belong to, in this case, a complex legal procedure that seeks to control movement, perform borders and govern legal in- and exclusion. Precisely by getting so close, ethnography allows for an understanding of how different scales are folded together in those small but crucial moments. To illustrate this, I want to pause at an excerpt from my fieldwork, a rather general observation of a moment in an asylum hearing:

Three people are seated around a large table. The IND officer is ready to type, looking up while her fingers hover above the keys. The person in front of her, the applicant, starts to talk to the person at the head of the table, a translator, and starts to cry. Immediately the IND officer pushes a little box of tissues towards the applicant, who takes a tissue and wipes his face while speaking on. The translator lifts her hand briefly and the applicant immediately stops talking. Now the translator looks at the IND officer and speaks in Dutch. She says, 'I saw how they killed my mother ...' At once the IND officer starts to type and the familiar bureaucratic sound of concentrated typing fills the hearing room. (Asylum hearing, AC Schiphol: 2015)

The procedure revolves around testing accounts of sadness and deciding whether the applicant 'deserves' inclusion. Consequently, the procedure seeks a one-sided intimacy where only one person is asked to share their fears and experiences of (the threat of) violence while others must carefully assess whether those accounts are both 'credible' and severe enough. To an ethnographic researcher, the small gestures, tensions, silences and moments of understanding (or the opposite) in the excerpt above are particularly fascinating and telling.

Such gestures and tensions demonstrate what ethnography has to offer. An ethnographic researcher learns to sensitively recognize the smallest details of encounter that inherently belong to, in this case, the intensive practices of asylum adjudication. The fragment illustrates the readiness of an IND officer to type the words spoken by the translator into a standard file on her computer screen, and to thus do her job well and produce a firm and full report of the asylum hearing. While the IND officer may or may not add the tears as an observation to the report, she certainly has an object – a box of tissues – that helps her respond to the tears. Tears incite different movements than words, but they very much belong together in the procedure's understanding of truth. Tissues and the sound of typing are telling of a procedure in which texts are produced and emotions dealt with. The box of tissues and the IND officer's readiness to type each word tell a larger story of the procedure.

And while the procedure might explain this moment straightforwardly – an asylum hearing is being conducted – each of these moments also explain crucial aspects of the procedure. The procedure is not only a clearly demarcated, neatly designed and often redesigned legal practice; it also depends on the gatherings of very different people who need to feel and respond to one another. An ethnographic approach seeks to understand both how the procedure explains these moments of gathering and how these gatherings explain the contingencies of such procedural encounters: the procedure's uniqueness as well as its standards. To stick with the procedure inevitably means to be blinded to some of the complexities that are also unfolding in the room. Sticking with the procedure would also mean that the procedure is reduced to itself. This might be useful to its professionals, or to a researcher intent on improving or revising its policies, but an anthropological approach needs to open the procedure up to a critical perspective to understand the smaller affective movements through which suspicion, compassion and state power are actualized. Opening up also means escaping the procedure's own boundaries. Different worlds belong to that closed-off hearing room, and this book aims to show and analyse the productivity of such asymmetrical encounters.

Gaining Access

However, while asylum applicants have a ruthlessly hard time getting out of the procedure, I had a hard time getting in, or even knowing where to find the Dutch asylum procedures. My access to the field started outside the concentrated asylum sites that I ended up focusing on. In fact, gaining access to the procedure was a procedure in and of itself. In what follows I draw on the fragmented and folded process of gaining access to a field that extends beyond its sites and practices, a field that knows formal and informal boundaries guarded by different people, perspectives and concerns.

An IND officer once told me that they prefer to keep quiet about their position at the IND, because telling people they work there would get them into the kinds of long and hard conversations they had grown tired of. In my view this relates somewhat to the difficulty of gaining access to the work of the IND, as it is tainted with a bad reputation and protected from too much publicity and interference from outsiders. Various IND officers told me that while asylum lawyers sometimes talk to the media to 'complain about the IND', they cannot defend their position because they are restrained by the fact that what goes on within the procedure is classified information.

Unsurprisingly, it took me considerable time and effort to gain access to such well-protected practices, which had already started before my PhD research and as part of my research master's programme. As formal access to the IND proved impossible to obtain during my master's, I focused on

contacting lawyers and the refugee council (Vereniging Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, or VVN). The VVN offered me a volunteer position, as I would both contribute to their work of assisting applicants and learn from the job. Importantly, working at the VVN meant engaging with the work of the IND, as it is the VVN's task to monitor the IND and see that the Refugee Convention is properly applied. As a result, I too learned how to work with and sometimes against the IND. I learned how to inform applicants about the decision-making process and prepare them for it. My time at the VVN was crucial in getting to know the procedure as well as building some important contacts. It was this 'getting to know' that, at a later stage, turned out to be important in gaining official access to study the work of the IND.

After my master's studies, when I was hired to work as a fulltime PhD researcher, I had to quit my volunteer position at the VVN as I wanted to analytically focus on both the work of legal allies (the VVN among them) and the IND's work. Quitting my volunteer position helped me keep analytical distance and prevented potential questions about my position as a researcher in that setting. At that time I started my official application for full access to the work of IND officers at the IND's research institute. After eight months, several proposals and an extensive meeting with a few different IND officials, I was granted access to the work of IND officers along the application itinerary and officially started in 2015 (ending 2017⁴).

Ironically, as a research applicant I wanted (and had a hard time) to get accepted into the procedure and study how asylum applicants get out of the procedure. Research applicants as well as asylum applicants are scrutinized by the IND, albeit, of course, in very different ways. A research applicant has to tell a story of research convincingly in order to deserve a form of entrance, and they have to wait, with some tension, for the IND to make a final decision: a process fragmented via a black-boxed procedural itinerary involving various (and variously ranked) IND officers evaluating whether or not the proposed research might be of interest to the IND. Obviously, the format, aim and reasons for evaluating and deciding over research applicants differs in its very essence from the ways that asylum applicants are received, scrutinized and suspected. But these different ways of granting various kinds of applicants access into or out of the procedure are telling of its gatekeepers and the power asymmetries that shape the landscape of the asylum procedure. While the IND protects and enacts nationalized borders, the IND also protects and black-boxes their own practices of in- and exclusion to different publics. This ethnography is one way of temporarily opening those up.

Importantly, gaining official access did not end the process of seeking access; rather, it transformed and multiplied as I now needed to gain access from within. First, I had to convince the local managers of the Application Centre Schiphol and Application Centre Ter Apel of my research intentions

and, especially, of the practical consequences for their employees. In addition to the managers' approvals, my aim to follow asylum cases in depth meant that asylum applicants, their lawyers, the VVN and the several IND officers assigned to a case needed to say yes too. IND officers gave permission to my brief being part of their daily work because the local managers often simply told them to. However, while some IND officers were especially welcoming and seemed to like having a researcher in the room, I was also rejected by IND officers who told me they felt uncomfortable with a researcher present or that they thought the younger applicants in particular would get even more nervous.

While it was hard to gain access to the IND, it was not so hard to convince my former colleagues at the VVN to allow me to observe their work – work that I myself had often done. As I wanted to follow the application process from an applicant's first meetings with the VVN to a final decision made by the IND, I asked the people at the VVN to inform me when an application started. I would then come to the detention centre and wait for the VVN volunteer to ask the applicant permission for me to observe their application. To my surprise, applicants quite easily agreed to my presence. Moreover, several applicants told me that after two or three meetings with various strangers (a VVN volunteer, a lawyer, an IND officer), they appreciated having a familiar face, which is telling: a sense of familiarity would not have developed so quickly if the procedure had not been so demanding, requiring a person to share intimate details to several strangers who ask critical questions.

Since there was no single gatekeeper, gaining access to the procedure never finished. I gained access, officially, and with each new person I met I explained and re-explained my research, hoping they would say yes too. Formal access became folded access, as it allowed for the unfolding of many moments of informal accessing. The process of gaining access shows the procedure as a large field of harder, formal boundaries and of softer ones.

A Brief Overview of the General 'Steps' in Each First-Time Application

The overview presented here details the routine itinerary of the General Asylum Procedure (Algemene Asielprocedure). It is important to note that while formal aspects of the procedure have changed since my fieldwork ended in 2017, such as the EU Asylum Pact implementation (see [Mouzourakis 2020](#)), Dutch political controversies surrounding B-status protection ([Amnesty International Netherlands, n.d.](#)) and changing knowledge evaluations related to, for example, the situation in Syria and other war-torn places such as Ukraine, the ethnographic arguments presented in this book remain highly relevant as the procedural itinerary continues to unfold in

similar ways and through similar sites and relations. The tense encounters between legal allies and IND officers, the peculiar asymmetrical intimacy required from asylum seekers and the documentary practices that transform spoken accounts into ‘quiet Dutch texts’ persist as characteristic of this legal and bordering procedure.

Upon arrival, an applicant is given six days of ‘rest and preparation’, which is the official name of this six-day period. Over these six days, a few important meetings must take place. First, the applicant meets a VVN employee. This employee explains the steps of the procedure, talks about the lawyer and the IND and informs the applicant as to what the procedure expects of them in terms of giving an account of self and past and, importantly, that the applicant must speak the truth (the VVN, lawyers and the IND alike keep repeating that applicants should reveal the ‘truth’ about themselves). The day after an applicant has met the employee and learned about the VVN, they meet the lawyer assigned to their case. The lawyer will go through the procedural steps too, but with a full focus on the reasons the applicant gives for applying. Accordingly, a lawyer gets to help an applicant highlight or remember certain aspects further. Note that part of the work of asylum lawyers is gaining an applicant’s trust, which entails various techniques that may or may not work with different applicants.

Another important meeting within the rest and preparation period is with a nurse from an organization that used to be called Medifirst but is now in the hands of the FFMU (Forensisch Medische Maatschappij Utrecht/ Utrecht Forensic Medical Service). At that voluntary meeting an applicant is given a medical examination that they are told will possibly work in favour of their application process. According to the official form explaining the General Asylum procedure, the medical examination has the aim ‘to ascertain whether you have any mental or physical problems that could have an influence on your interviews with the IND’. The examination can have important consequences for the procedure, for example requiring that the IND focus less on details like names and dates.

After the ‘rest and preparation period’, the procedure officially starts with a first hearing conducted by an IND officer (day and/or step 1).⁵ According to the form for applicants, the first hearing concerns the following:

During this interview, you will not be asked any questions about the reasons why you are applying for asylum. They will be asked in the next interview with the IND officer (see Day 3). The IND officer will ask you many detailed questions about your identity, nationality and your journey so that these are clear but also to check whether you are speaking the truth.

The IND officer records the hearing in the form of typing the questions and answers into an official report of the hearing. The day after the first hearing (day 2), the lawyer visits the applicant in detention (or at another Application Centre) to read the report of the first hearing together. The lawyer checks the

report and, at times, notices that certain dates and details are missing. They ask an applicant to fill in possible gaps and add the information to the so-called Corrections and Additions (C&A) letter. Lawyers, as this shows and as I show throughout the book, need to rather obviously perform a way of looking that is similar to the one the IND teaches its employees, but with a different aim. In a way, this aim incorporates a suspicion for the IND as well: lawyers expect IND officers to read a report against an applicant and, at times, remain strongly focused on filling in each and every potential gap in an asylum report. A decision-maker needs to take the lawyer's C&A letter into account but will, similarly, be suspicious of lawyers as the IND knows well that lawyers only add information if this information is in favour of a positive decision. On day 3 the second hearing takes place. According to the form:

During this interview, you can tell this person the reasons why you are applying for asylum. The IND officer will again be putting questions to you during this interview. It is important that you tell them everything that shows that you need protection. Be clear, honest and exhaustive in telling what has happened to you and the reasons why you can't expect any protection in your country of origin. If you can't remember a particular event too well, tell the IND officer this. The IND officer is aware of the general situation in your country, but it is important that you explain your own situation: the reasons why you, personally, need protection. Give as many relevant details as possible.

Second hearings are long and often exhausting for all involved (in very different ways!). However, sometimes the weight of an application lies in the first hearing, as in some cases the only concern of the procedure is to check a person's nationality: if a person proves to be from Syria, for example, they are given B status, not because of individual fear and persecution but because of the *refoulement* measure, which prohibits states from deporting people to places where they will face persecution. After the second hearing the IND has no need to see the applicant anymore: they will be making a decision on the basis of an applicant's (possible) documents and, most importantly, on the basis of the reports made by the hearing officers. On day 4 the lawyer discusses the report of the second hearing with the applicant. Again, if they find mistakes or feel there is information lacking, they draft a document to add to the report.

Day 5 is defined by an IND employee who will make the first decision. There are three decision possibilities (and in [Chapter 4](#) I focus on this process). Option 1: a person is considered an A or B status refugee and granted inclusion. Option 2: the decision-maker feels the information provided is insufficient and that more research must be done: the applicant is then assigned to the extended procedure and will undergo at least one additional hearing before a new decision is made (often, but not always, this means that the person is released from the detention centre and housed in an open asylum seekers centre). Option 3: the IND decision-maker decides

that a person has not proven themselves to either be an (A or B status) refugee or to have given a truthful account of such refugeehood. The decision-maker drafts a document called ‘intention’ (*voornemen*): this is an intention to reject the application, but the applicant’s lawyer has one day to appeal against the decision (on day 6). Lawyers always appeal against an ‘intention to reject’. Sometimes the lawyer visits the applicant in detention to discuss the rejection, but often the lawyer works on their response against the negative decision without first discussing it with the applicant. Their response is tellingly called a ‘viewpoint’ or ‘way of looking’ (*zienswijze*), and the final decision-maker of the IND must review the reports of the hearings, the first decision (the intention to reject) and the lawyer’s response (viewpoint). This final decision will be made on days 7 and 8.

After the final decision has been made, the applicant has the right to file an appeal. A judge performs a ‘marginal scrutiny’, meaning that they focus on whether or not the IND followed the rules. The judge will thus not evaluate an applicant’s account or their credibility as a refugee but whether or not the IND applied the law in a correct manner. When the judge agrees with the appeal, the IND has to re-evaluate the case. Often, however, the IND appeals against the appeal. As this specific legal situation is beyond the scope of this research I will not further delve into it (see [Spijkerboer 2014](#)). It is important to note that although negative decisions are appealed against, it is always the IND that evaluates credibility and eligibility, and it is thus the IND that decides which applicants are ‘true’ refugees deserving of inclusion.

Anonymity to Fiction

In the process of following applicants in their applications I met many different people. Sometimes professionals and applicants alike worried about anonymity. I never wrote down names or dates, and I neutralized or mixed genders as well as places of origin in my notes. In what follows I want to further emphasize why I, as an ethnographic researcher, value anonymity and extend it beyond changing names. I start by quoting Nancy Scheper-Hughes:

Anonymity makes us unmindful that we owe our anthropological subjects the same degree of courtesy ... Sacrificing anonymity means we may have to write less poignant, more circumspect ethnographies, a high price for any writer to pay. But our version of the Hippocratic oath – to do no harm, in so far as possible, to our informants – would seem to demand this. ([Scheper-Hughes 2000](#): 128)

I agree with Nancy Scheper-Hughes that anonymity might enable a researcher to get away with the kind of critical analysis they were afraid to reflect on ‘in the field’. However, I do not think that sacrificing anonymity means we must write less poignant ethnographies, at least in the case of my

study of a tense, asymmetrical and life-altering procedure. I would say that an anthropological work on such a procedure should not shy away from a critical analysis that, hopefully, invites the (quite powerful and certainly privileged) practitioners of the procedure to think along with us and to disagree or maybe to agree partially with the analysis. Critical social studies of state practices should not ‘hold back’. However, they should be sensitive to the different and, at times, competing struggles and vulnerabilities that the people more embedded in the ‘field’ of study experience, and to make sure to let these struggles and frictions speak. Otherwise, an ethnography would be redundant, as it is precisely the complexity of heavy political situations, values and positions that ethnographic research should be able to attend to. Moreover, there is not one voice of the procedure, and the procedure is not one field to attend to; rather, it is built on a great variety of competing visions and it brings together different people with different positions and coming from different social, legal, cultural and political contexts. To analyse the procedure means to engage with and be positioned within a heavy political situation that quite passionately revolves around doing good through repression.

So, how to ‘do no harm’ through anonymity? One way is indeed to anonymize in a more radical way than changing names of people, villages or dates. Anonymity here consists of leaving out information, which is also part of adhering to legal rules of secrecy. Anonymity, in my view, also consists of thoroughly modifying and leaving out identifying content (names and dates as well as gender, nationality, religion). While sometimes a story of a past of suffering deeply illustrates the work of the procedure, the content itself can be too revealing and too personal to share. As a solution I fictionalize and modify or mix details of stories that should maintain the ‘atmosphere’ of the story but not the person involved. Importantly, this is a study focused on the practices of people encountering applicants in specific ways, and evaluating them and their stories in ways that are mediated by their professional positions within the procedure. I make sure the fictionalized parts will not touch the ‘essence’ of the ethnographic example, but only the surface that makes the example utterly personal and therefore dangerously traceable.

Main Contributions and the Structure of This Book

To make sense of the procedure from within, I draw on the sociology and anthropology of the state in relation to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). STS helps me to analyse knowledge-making practices (van der Kist and Rosset 2021; Wissink 2021) and professional vision (Goodwin 1994; Haraway 1998), which shape how asylum decisions are made (possible) and legitimized. Through STS, I further explore the movement,

circulation and multiple temporalities embodied in the crucial objects of decision-making (Law and Singleton 2005; M'charek 2014). Finally, STS in combination with affect theory allows me to analyse logics and practices of 'objectivity' (Daston and Galison 2007) in relation to intimacy and proximity – particularly how physical closeness and distance between decision-makers and asylum seekers shapes 'objectivity'. Hence, a combination of STS, affect studies and the anthropology of the state lies at the core of my analysis of the Dutch asylum procedures, and of the power of deciding over people's lives and containing and restricting mobility.

This theoretical frame – bringing together STS, affect theory and the anthropology of the state – contributes to a growing field of scholarship concerned with the operation of state power through affective and contingent practices. As such, my work can be positioned within the 'affective turn' in migration and critical borders scholarship, which understands emotion and affective relations as fundamental to the performance of state power (Andreetta et al. 2022; Savio Vammen and Kohl 2023; Vrabiescu and Anderson 2024). As Andreetta et al. (2022) argue, such an affective approach addresses the 'intangible, visceral dimensions and "atmospheres" of power, authority and decision-making' (895). My research contributes to this field by highlighting the affective, rapid and time-pressured asymmetrical encounters that characterize the procedure and how decision-makers affectively perform 'objectivity' in the procedure.

The two broadly formulated aims of this book – to explore the relation between the state, affect and decision-making, and to describe the Dutch procedure in detail – run through each chapter of this book. While the question of the state crystallizes in the conclusion, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 analyse the most important moments of what I call the procedural itinerary and its tense work of moulding the unknown person into a set of legal texts that allow for 'objective' decision-making. Hence, the structure of this book seeks to first take a reader along into the procedure in order to argue for an understanding of state power as manifest in the affects undergone by the various people engaged with the procedure and the decision.

Chapter 1 (The Concentrated Sites and Times of the Asylum Procedure) emphasizes the importance of ethnography to understand how a legal procedure is staged to mobilize various people and affective encounters in order to gain access into the lives and bodies of those fully subjected to the power of one specific Western European state. Furthermore, this chapter introduces what I call the procedure's 'concentrated sites', produced to enact the same kind of politicized difference on which the procedure at large is built. While some people get to move smoothly, others are constantly questioned, monitored, scrutinized and put on hold. As such, this chapter and the notion of 'concentrated sites' is a first step towards arguing for an understanding of state power through its various modes of intensity.

Chapter 2 (Interfacing the Procedure: The Itinerary and the Procedural Personae) delves into the above-introduced concepts of the procedural itinerary and the procedural personae. This chapter argues that these different personae and their enactors – various IND officers and legal allies – engage in what I call an ‘antagonistic cooperation’, which productively allows the procedure to gain intimate access into the applicant’s (inherently suspected) life, past and potential future. By introducing both personae and exploring how they work in practice, I further show the important and shapeshifting role suspicion plays in the procedure’s aim of compassionate separation. With the concept of procedural personae, the chapter demonstrates how state power parasitically draws on different professionals’ trained sensitivities while simultaneously shielding them from full responsibility for life-altering decisions. By concentrating on these opposed yet complementary procedural personae, I seek to foreground the affective labour that actualizes state power by examining the trained yet personalized ways of seeing, sensing and affecting – and being affected by – asylum applicants.

Chapter 3 (Noisy Hearings and Silent Reports) shows how the asylum hearing in all its affective and intimate messiness is silenced in the work of inscribing the applicant into the report. As such, the chapter demonstrates how an applicant is given a crafted visibility and legibility that further circulates in the form of a report that, as a documentary body-double, mobilizes yet more visions and interpretations. This chapter shows that the ‘objective’ decision (as fully analysed in **Chapter 4**) relies on intimate and affective face-to-face encounters. This is important, first, in analysing how the procedure seeks to legitimize its contingent decisions and, second, in demonstrating the crucial process of transformation through which applicants are folded into intelligible and evaluable texts along a procedural itinerary and via the different personae of the procedure.

Chapter 4 (Objective Subjectivities) further investigates how the procedure’s desire for (an unattainable) truth and its aim towards objectivity shapes the tense practice of decision-making. This chapter argues that although the itinerary works towards suppressing subjectivity in terms of shaping distance and affective detachment between an IND decision-maker and the applicant in person, the decision itself is made based on the trained subjectivity and the authority of a decision-maker’s final say. This chapter consequently shows that the procedure works with different conceptualizations of objectivity. Objectivity appears in the multiplication of subjectivity, it is found in practices and objects of distance-making, and it is, finally, enacted in the form of an expertise grounded in experience and suspicion. In relation to the latter, this chapter argues that suspicion crystallizes at the end of the itinerary when a decision-maker engages with the kind of official texts that they are more comfortable with than with an actual person whose life is at stake.

The conclusion (*State Intensities: Being in Touch with the State*) argues for an understanding of state power as an intensive force immanent to the lines that entangle through the practices of decision-making and within the concentrated sites of the procedure. Contributing to critical anthropological approaches to state power, my analysis shifts focus from state margins (Das and Poole 2004) or imaginaries (Gupta 2006) to the concentrated sites where state power is performed through everyday decision-making practices. By doing so, I analyse how state power becomes actual in the ways that very different people are mobilized, moved and affected by the power of decision. Not one person involved escapes the tenseness and affectations of the (pending) decision, as all are multiply and unevenly affected by its nearness.

Notes

1. I use the term ‘Euro-White coloniality’ following Schinkel and van Reekum (2024), who argue that migration as a concept and a (security) ‘problem’ emerges within what they call ‘Euro-White contexts’. They explain that terms like ‘Global North/South’ obscure the (post-)colonial relationships that structure migration – and security apparatuses.
2. Throughout this book I use gender-neutral pronouns – ‘they’, ‘their’ and ‘them’ – when referring to an unspecified person (the applicant, the IND officer or the lawyer in general) or when the gender of the cited person is insignificant in terms of the argument I am making. Hence, I will specify gender in certain ethnographic examples, especially those revolving around encounters, to share as much detail as possible. However, I neutralize gender in other ethnographic examples both to avoid potential gendered stereotypical images around emotions and power positions and also, in some cases, to safeguard anonymity.
3. Numbers (sadly) decreased in 2016 when only 18,677 people applied (2,158 Syrians). This decrease has little to do with improvement in Syria and everything to do with the ever more restrictive policies across the EU, which have seen an increase in the deportation of Syrian refugees (back) to Turkey.
4. In this book I will also draw on some of the observations and interviews I conducted during my master’s, which was done between 2012 and 2013.
5. ‘Day 1’ or ‘step 1’ are how both lawyers and IND officers call the different ‘nodes’ along the procedural itinerary to applicants, to each other and to me.