

Capturing the Spirit of Bureaucratic Images: Photo IDs, Biometrics, and Passing in Border-Free Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at how the biometric surveillance of migrants in the European Union interweaves border-passing with the embodied capacity to pass as, or against, one's bureaucratic image. Despite biometrics' promise to eliminate photographic mediation, photo IDs are embedded in biometric regulation, which further entangles bodies and photographs. Based on ethnographic research in the Turkish city of Izmir, the migrant hotspot of Chios in Greece, and Athens' counterfeit document market, this article examines the material, embodied, and performative experiments migrants employ to pass borders while negotiating their bureaucratic images (both authentic and fake). Photographs emerge as a regime of practice through which European citizenship is enacted and exercised.

KEYWORDS

bureaucracy, migration, counterfeit, photography, embodiment

Better Work

Come back with better work next time! the Greek border official at Athens Eleftherios Venizelos Airport chided Amjad as he studied the photograph on his fake Italian ID (Figure 1). Amjad,¹ a 25-year-old asylum seeker from Southern Yemen, bought the ID of an Italian national named Antonio Romano from a Sudanese *smuggler* in central Athens for EUR 150.² He planned to use the document to fly out of Greece, where he had been caught in an excruciating bureaucratic limbo after arriving on a refugee boat to Belgium 2 years earlier, where some of his friends had secured asylum. Unfortunately, luck was not on Amjad's side that day. Airport security apprehended him just before the gate. The picture on the ID did not seem to match.

You should look for something good, an officer at the same airport told Maher, a 30-year-old asylum seeker from Aleppo, Syria, as he ripped a fake French visa from Maher's passport. *This is obviously a fake, it's not good work,* the officer reproached him. He looked more disappointed than enraged, Maher recalled. The visa cost Maher EUR 400, draining him of months of savings (his monthly food allowance from the United Nations was EUR 90 at the time). Still, he was relieved that the officer ultimately let him go, just like during his previous failed passing attempt. It does not always end this way. Using illicit papers often results in criminal charges, arbitrary detention, deportation, and loss of migrant legal protections. For example, Ahmad, a friend of Amjad and Maher, was held in an Albanian prison for more than a year for using a similar document as he tried to board a ferry to Italy.

It was neither Maher's nor Amjad's first fake-ID-passing attempt. They would spend days trying to figure out how to

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FIG. 1 A counterfeit biometric Belgian ID offered for sale from CounterfeitBreak website. Source: Photo by CounterfeitBreaks, 2022.



FIG. 1

make their new IDs *work better*. Amjad memorized some key sentences in Italian. Maher got an off-white linen shirt—a Greek vacation staple that marks tourists from refugees. Once apprehended, they knew the drill: the officer takes you to a side room, holds you for about an hour, and eventually releases you without your documents. Sometimes, they say, the officer would not even bother to probe their real identity. This time, Amjad had the courage to ask the Greek officer if he had any advice for him. *Are you crazy? Now beat it, malakas!* the officer responded, using the Greek equivalent for *wanker* (*malakas, μαλάκας*). *Malakas* is a demeaning slur, highly inappropriate in official encounters. But *malakas* is also commonly used as a term of endearment, or at least familiarity, among male acquaintances.³

Photographic Identification as a Regime of Practice

This article takes the Greek officer's idiom of the photo ID as *good work* as its point of departure.⁴ Photographic documentation is “rooted in the state's faith in the camera's powers of indexical transcription and its own ability to map appearances reliably onto ‘identity’” (Strassler 2010, 21). Yet, border officers at the Athens airport addressed the ID not as sealed evidence but as a work in progress, implying a practice of refinement and improvement that presupposes indexical unmapping and remapping. How exactly a European ID can be reindexed to facilitate successful passing is a question that preoccupies many asylum seekers trapped in Europe's convoluted asylum system.⁵ The work of the photo ID across Europe's border regimes bears on migrants' intentions to move, thwart deportation, and attain legal recognition. But, as this article explores, it is also a mode of action whereby migrants explore and enact European citizenship by interrogating and cultivating its body techniques (Mauss 1973; Morris 1995).

Rather than a static representation, the photo ID emerges here as a medium that is worked up and expected to do certain things in the future, beyond and against its intended purpose. At the same time, as this article explores, the work of the paper document transcends the various physical elements it encapsulates and ties together, be it paper, biographic data, or the photographic portrait. From a migrant's perspective, for a paper to work or be counted as *good work*, it must be effective. This efficacy depends on the paper's material aspects as well as on the flexible performances that aim to capture the paper's spirit. Compelling performances cultivate adjustability to the fluctuating circumstances migrants encounter while navigating Europe's contrasting and fickle documentation regimes.

Photo IDs are increasingly embodied for unauthorized migrants in Europe, interweaving borders, bodies, papers, and photographic representations of facial features and fingerprints (Amoore 2006; Farraj 2011; Guild 2016; Jacobsen 2015; van der Ploeg 1999). At the same time, biometric representations distribute the body so that it becomes devoid of “center or original unity,” rendering it “open for multiple alliances with people, objects, and documents” (Rao 2018, 71). This interweaving is not merely a scholarly interpretation of the current state of the visual regulation of migrants and borders but a stated EU migration management policy for the twenty-first century to turn the migrant body into a readable document (van der Ploeg 2003). In the European Union (EU), migrants are subjected to exceptional biometric surveillance through a network of databases from which European citizens are exempt.⁶ As of 2022, the most pervasive of these large-scale information systems is Eurodac, a pan-European biometric database that stores the fingerprints (and soon the facial scans)⁷ of Europe’s asylum seekers and irregular migrants.⁸

Eurodac was promoted through the anxiety that photo IDs are an illegible and unreliable visual regulation technology. Gilles de Kerchove, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, stressed this rationale: “We need it [automated biometric regulation] because many people entering Europe are traveling with no documents or false documents or stolen documents. Biometrical data is the only way to identify these people” (Simon 2017). A transition into a total archive (Sekula 1986) of migrants’ biodata was meant to overcome the photograph’s legibility weakness by supplementing the photo ID—the fundamental migration visual regulation technology since the late nineteenth century (McKeown 2008; Pegler-Gordon 2009)—with automated biometrics. In this vision, Eurodac would ultimately turn the non-European body into a readable document, fixing bureaucratic identities onto bodies and rendering precarious photographic representation obsolete.

In addition to turning the body into a readable ID, the biometric regulation of migrants in Europe is designed to turn the body into a carrier of borders—the formally abolished internal EU borders. In the 1990s, members of the Schengen Zone abolished passport and border controls at their common borders, and the area now functions as a single migration jurisdiction with a unified visa policy and a shared external border.⁹ To compensate for the loss of control in the form of physical borders, European policymakers sought creative technological solutions for more dispersed monitoring of specific categories of unwanted non-European nationals excluded from free movement in Europe. Biometrics was seen as a way

to transpose Europe's diminished borders onto migrants' bodies so that the border encounter would become ubiquitous and independent from the space of the physical border.

A crucial Eurodac function links migrant fingerprints and data to the EU member-state in which a migrant was first apprehended. This link is deemed vital for the enforcement of the Dublin Regulation, a European law that allocates asylum responsibility to the state through which the asylum seeker first entered the bloc. The Dublin Regulation is controversial and detested by many member states as it relegates asylum responsibility to countries on the external border, where illegal migration is routed in the absence of legal pathways. By utilizing biometrics for Dublin Regulation enforcement, Eurodac is deployed to trap the migrant under the jurisdiction of a particular state (mainly Greece, Italy, and Spain), even if they are present in another.

While scholarship on surveillance has addressed how biometric regulation inscribes border points and photo IDs onto bodies (Agamben and Murray 2008; Ajana 2013; Amoores 2006; Guild 2006; Kuster and Tsianos 2016; van der Ploeg 2003), it has rarely substantiated these concepts ethnographically. Captivated by the image of the embodied passport and curious about how it transforms the historical experience of migration and border crossing, I embarked on an ethnographic study of the European biometric governance of migrants in 2017, 2 years into the so-called European *migration crisis*. I soon realized that despite biometrics' promise to collapse the boundaries between bodies and photographic representations, photo IDs were still ubiquitous in the migration experience in, and en route to, Europe.

Migrants engage with various photographic documents: passports from their origin country, papers procured (legally and illegally) in transit, and state-sanctioned asylum documents. Papers from home are often the only tangible object migrants have from their homeland. They carry mixed memories of belonging and displacement (Navarro-Yashin 2007). They are seen as invaluable evidence in the truth economy of asylum regimes, as well as *ticking bombs* that, at certain junctures, can be utilized against their holders, assist state authorities in carrying out deportation, or help smugglers conduct extortion. The physical vulnerability of papers and photographs, and their fickle efficacy to work for or against their holders, means that migrants must constantly be conscious of their physical journeys and the very literal trails and physical conditions of these documents. Papers are physically placed on migrant bodies as they move, but their fickle utility calls for episodes of separation and guardianship by friends with less precarious

legal status (Lewkowicz 2021). In this sense, migrants talk about *having papers* even if they often do not *have* papers in a physical sense. Even as papers beget risks of deportation or theft, migrants cannot discard them entirely as they are seen as a means to secure legal status and establish a credible asylum claim in the future.

Remarkably, this paper economy does not disappear once migrants are registered on the biometric database. While the biometric record is often advocated for as more credible evidence than the photo ID, registration officers at biometric hotspots rely on migrant photo IDs to forge data pairing between fingerprints and various identifiers.¹⁰ As Pollozek and Passoth (2019) note, and many migrants report, documents such as passports, IDs, or refugee cards fast-track the registration procedure. While experts are deployed to authenticate documents and flag suspicious or fraudulent-looking ones, the photo ID is widely seen as more credible evidence in establishing a biometric data set than migrant speech. However, once the photo ID identifiers are relinked to a fingerprint image on Eurodac in a new data set, this data set becomes a superior form of evidence to the very types of photo IDs that authenticated it to begin with.

Etymologically, biometrics means the measurement (*metron* in ancient Greek) of the body (*bios*). Biometrics originated in nineteenth-century colonial India in attempts to scientifically demonstrate physical racial difference, as well as in Victorian and fin de siècle preoccupation with the bodily manifestation of social deviancy (Sekula 1986). However, biometrics exploded in the twentieth century precisely because it failed to substantiate the racist ideology of its pioneers. Rather than proving physical racial difference, fingerprint classification led to the discovery of minutiae that are shared by all humans but are uniquely composed in each individual (Rao and Greenleaf 2013, 294). Today, fingerprints—as well as facial scans and iris patterns—are used to identify individuals. The automation of biometric identification in the 1980s and its association with both securitization and fraud reduction have pushed biometrics beyond policing and bordering to fields like banking, security, health, gaming, travel, and humanitarian aid allocation.

The digitalization of biometrics did not eliminate analog photographic identification. It even produced new biometric photo IDs where the photograph is digitized to create a biometric stamp authenticated through facial recognition. The biometric documents of European citizens are not linked to a centralized database and are therefore perceived as advanced facilitators of mobility rather than surveillance or entrapment.

Yet, these documents are not scrutinized inside the Schengen Zone, a space premised on exercising the long-fought European right to free movement. The EU photo ID, in this context, becomes a marker of the privilege not to show one's papers at all. Rather than an identity verification object, the EU photo ID emerges here as a status symbol of subjects entitled to privacy, whose identities are protected from unnecessary identification.

Embodying the Spirit of the Free-Moving European ID

In Europe, photo IDs are entangled not only with the surveilled migrant body but also with the racialized embodied habitus of the free-moving European.¹¹ Against this backdrop, this article questions not only the binary between automated biometrics and paper but also the binary between the photo ID and the body. It does so not merely by showing that there is still a lot of paper, and new types of paper, but by foregrounding how photo IDs are inseparable from embodied practices.

I use the term *embodiment* to denote efficacious bodily actions whose mastery and perfection rely on practice and experimentation rather than pre-prescribed rules or dictations. Embodied practices, Talal Asad writes,

help in the acquisition of aptitudes, sensibilities, and propensities through repetition until such time as the language guiding practice becomes redundant. Through such practices, one can change oneself—one's physical being, one's emotions, one's language, one's predispositions, as well as one's environment. (Asad 2015, 166)

Marcel Mauss used the term “techniques of the body” to address “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies” (Mauss 1973, 70). A body technique is an efficacious action passed through traditional transmission strategies that vary between societies or generations. While body techniques such as swimming or walking are learned, their knowledge is cultivated in bodily practice, that is, people may know how to swim or walk without being able to explain how they do it. In what follows, I argue that the same applies to the body technique of the free-moving European and that the efficacy of the EU photo ID is interdependent on such techniques.

To capture the spirit of the EU photo ID, migrants study and perform the habitus of the free-moving European and, with time, make it their own. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) uses habitus (a concept he borrows from Mauss) to describe how social structures and class positions are reproduced through embodied dispositions

unconsciously acquired in childhood rather than through consciously articulated rules or imperatives. While Bourdieu argues that these “structuring structures” create an embodied ability to improvise in various social situations, structured improvisation nevertheless reproduces predetermined class hierarchies and ideological structures. In exploring how migrants consciously attempt to perform the habitus of others (or their future selves), this article adds to the growing literature on conscious attempts to perfect normative sets of embodied features in contexts that range from Islamic revivalism (Asad 2015; Mahmood 2001) to experimental jazz (Wilf 2010). Nevertheless, whereas migrants may be conscious of their attempts at passing, they have no clear idea of what that passing entails, no stable rules to guide their practice, and no clear sense of which sensitivities they cultivate through the ritualized performance of the border encounter. This is because such passing is not primarily about particular ethnic European appearance but rather about the mastery of the spirit of the free-moving subject worthy of privacy whom they associate with Europeanness.

In what follows, I examine how asylum seekers use illicitly procured European photo IDs to navigate physical and bureaucratic barriers.¹² Asylum seekers’ intended goal is to reach another EU state to secure asylum recognition under their real identity, not to permanently steal an identity. Yet, through multiple attempts at capturing the spirit of (fake/stolen) European photo IDs, migrants cultivate the habitus of the free-moving European. Doing so becomes a way of enacting citizenship without formal state recognition.

The Border Guard Encounter—Geopolitical Context

Returning to the Athens airport encounter, it may seem peculiar that asylum seekers from Syria and Yemen—countries with high asylum recognition rates in Greece and most of the EU¹³—spend so much money on fake documents, risking imprisonment and hunger. It may also be puzzling how some Greek border officers are casual about migrants’ illicit document practices, even urging them to try again with *better work*. Maher and Amjad, like most asylum seekers arriving in Greece by sea, are fingerprinted on Eurodac.¹⁴ A simple biometric scan anywhere in the EU would show that they were fingerprinted in Greece and must return there. Why, then, would they attempt to leave Greece at all?

The Dublin Regulation puts states on the bloc’s external border, such as Greece, in a double bind. On the one hand, they are pressured by the EU to fingerprint every incoming migrant, else they risk losing fundamental EU benefits such

as Schengen membership and the free movement of their citizens. On the other hand, comprehensive biometric registration means that external-border states become responsible for every migrant entering the EU through the external border.

Many migrants speculate that since Greece cannot force other EU states to share its refugee-hosting responsibilities, Greek authorities encourage refugees to conduct their own distribution. While asylum seekers struggle to make ends meet, they must wait months—if not years—for an asylum interview. Amjad and others contend that these unsustainably long wait times are the Greek government's way of signaling to refugees that they must illegally leave for another EU state.

When migrants resort to using illicit photo IDs to move within Europe, the aim is not to create a false identity but rather to move to a state where they can use their own identity to lodge an asylum claim. This ordeal puts asylum seekers in an impossible dilemma: If they stay in Greece, they could wait indefinitely for an asylum interview while struggling to make ends meet. Conversely, fleeing to another country not only offers the opportunity to apply for asylum in a less overwhelmed asylum system but also carries the risk of being caught with fraudulent papers and sent back to Greece. Yet, if Greek state officials informally push migrants to leave to other states in breach of the Dublin Regulation, why do they keep turning Maher and Amjad away at the airport? Sometimes, it is just about *luck*, Amjad contends, which is beyond his control. But perhaps, he thinks, he has not completely mastered how to make EU documents work (Figure 2).

Finding a Match at the Smuggler ID Archive

On a sweltering summer morning in Acharnes, Athens, Maher, and I sat at a local café. At the adjacent table, a group of men drank Turkish tea and smoked *shisha* while the radio blasted Lebanese pop hits. A tall Sudanese man in his 40s walked between the tables and greeted Maher in Arabic. After Maher received his tea, the man handed him a cell phone. Maher looked at the screen and scrolled through images of various photo IDs: European identity cards, passports of multiple nationalities, visas, and residence permits. Later, he would reiterate that these were authentic papers, *not a fake*. He was looking for a match, a picture of someone who vaguely looked like him. Maher is thinly built and tall; his hair is dense, curly, black, and kept short. His thick black eyebrows overshadow deep-set hazel eyes. He has a thin nose and pale skin dotted with two beauty marks and dimples that pop when he is clean-shaven.



FIG. 2

Maher hands the phone back to the Sudanese smuggler, shaking his head to sign *no match*, just as he did when he came here last week and the week before. He knew from friends that finding a good match could take months. He sent his pictures to about 20 smugglers, with information on his height and age, but nothing came back with a match. While some high-end smugglers can produce high-quality papers that incorporate the buyer's photo, Maher cannot afford those and has to rely on his smuggler's existing inventory.

In 2016, Maher was 1 month away from completing his archaeology degree at Damascus University when the Syrian Civil War forced him to flee and leave his family behind. His parents and siblings became internally displaced, split between Raqqa and Idlib. Maher was smuggled into Turkey and traveled across the country to Izmir, where, in 2017, he boarded a crowded refugee dinghy headed toward the Greek Islands. A Greek sea patrol pulled him out of the water and brought him to the island of Chios. He was detained at Vial Camp, where Frontex recorded his fingerprints on the Eurodac database.¹⁵

According to the 2016 EU–Turkey deal, all Syrian asylum seekers coming to Greece from Turkey (like Maher) were considered ineligible for asylum in the EU and were to be sent back to Turkey (although Turkey thwarted most deportation efforts).¹⁶ After his asylum was rejected a second time, the

FIG. 2 Counterfeit passports and IDs on a table at an Athens police station, confiscated from smugglers who intended to sell them to refugees. Source: Photo by Alamy, 2019.

local police arrested Maher and sent him to a deportation center on the neighboring island of Lesbos. When the deportation efforts faltered, he was returned to Chios and was detained at the police station in solitary conditions for almost 3 months. Upon his release, he did not know what to do. He was a refugee from Aleppo, a city symbolic of the devastation caused by the Syrian Civil War, but he was caught in a legal trap. He was not allowed to leave Chios for mainland Greece and was technically illegally in Chios, even if authorities failed to deport him. It took 2 years of crippling uncertainty and legal intervention before he could lodge another appeal in Athens. Once in Athens, Maher was under the impression that Greek authorities expected him to remove himself. But, if he were to do this with a fake ID (or another person's real ID), he would need to learn how to pass with a document from his smuggler's inventory.

Illicit European IDs are a booming economy run by smugglers-turned-entrepreneurial-bureaucrats. Access to papers is determined by migrants' class dispositions or their ability to secure loans from their networks. Passing as a European requires finding papers that are a *good match* but also deciphering the racialized assumptions and gendered expectations that undergird the free-moving subject who is entitled to privacy. Being a single man already puts one at a disadvantage, many migrants stress. *An Arab man alone with a backpack?* Maher says, laughing. *They will come to you immediately!* It was widely perceived that the lighter your skin, the easier it would be to pass. Maher thinks that if his hair were brighter, he would have received more offers from smugglers. *Smugglers prefer refugees with brown hair because they succeed fast, and the smuggler loses less money*, he says. Many refugees believed that Syrians from particular areas had a higher chance of passing as Southern Europeans than African migrants or Arabs from other areas, like Iraq or Yemen. If you look too distinctively Arab, they say, you had better aim for a refugee residence permit rather than an ID that belonged to a white European, but these were harder to find, and more expensive. While a *whiter* racial appearance is perceived as an advantage, it does not automatically translate to successful racial passing. Maher knew it well: he was one of those fair-skinned northern Syrians who was supposed to pass easily, but while his friends were passing and securing asylum, he was routinely stopped at the airport.

Amjad, a civil engineer from Sanaa in Yemen, was similarly befuddled as to why so many refugees who arrived after him were now in Germany, Switzerland, or the United Kingdom. He was using the same paper merchant as them—maybe even the very same papers that got his friends across the border, later resold to him. He tried no fewer than 20 times,

from three different airports. But, the same papers that worked for his friends kept failing to work for him.

After several unsuccessful attempts with Italian IDs, the smuggler proposed that a Spanish passport would be a better fit for Amjad's skin tone. In the lead-up to the attempt, Amjad read about Spain, taught himself Spanish words and phrases, and fashioned himself according to how he imagined a Spanish tourist in Greece would look. That did not work either, as one of the airport officers spoke Spanish. A friend suggested he try a Czech passport. The odds the airport officers would speak Czech were low, and this fact alone made that passport among the most expensive. He was also contemplating using his own Yemeni passport: he would wear a Saudi *thawb* (white robe), and if anyone asked, he would insist that Yemen was a wealthy Emirate!

Finally, the smuggler decided to change strategy and handed Amjad the passport of a French national with Moroccan ancestry. Amjad traveled to an airport in one of the islands, assuming security would be less strict there than in Athens. *Where are you from?* the security officer asked Amjad. *From France*, he replied. *Then why are you traveling to the Netherlands?* she asked. *I am a European citizen. I can go wherever I want!* Amjad answered assertively. For a moment, it seemed to have worked. Amjad was free to proceed without having to submit his fingerprints for inspection. But shortly after, a different officer approached him speaking French, and Amjad struggled to compose a reply. This triggered a biometric scan, which led to his deportation back to the biometric hotspot on Chios.¹⁷

Conclusion: Photo IDs as Embodied Citizenship

At first glance, the fake and stolen paper cabinet of Athens merchants may look like a simulacrum of the biometric archive, or even as its perversion: if the conceit of security ideology underscoring projects like Eurodac is that bodies, photographic representations, and identities can be fixed, the counterfeit cabinet allows for a constant unfixing and rematching. Doing so reverses the order of ordering: if EU bureaucracy produces papers to capture the truths of bodies, in the counterfeit cabinet, bodies attempt to capture the spirit of photo IDs. In the former, bodies are fetishized as loci of truth; in the latter, photo IDs are marketed as potential bearers of privilege.

While migrants consider the strategic handling of papers a crucial aspect of their self-preservation, they are highly aware of the document's capricious and unstable capacity to work for or against them. This instability is congruous with both legal



FIG. 3

and fake papers. The organizing principle through which migrants differentiate between papers is, therefore, not legality or authenticity but rather efficacy (Lewkowicz 2021). While some papers are more desired and grant more stable protections than others, efficacy is rarely seen as inherent in certain documents. Indeed, the goal for many is asylum protection, materialized in the form of asylum or naturalization papers. But, states increasingly refrain from granting full international protection in favor of temporary or revocable status. Even citizenship is not immutable, as displaced people know too well.

While efficacy is neither inherent nor guaranteed in formal or informal photo documents, it depends on an embodied regime of practice in both cases. Looking for a *match* in the smuggler ID archive, migrants seek a photograph that bears a physical resemblance to them. They would also consider changing aspects of their appearance to capture the spirit of the photo, advising a network of friends for whom such documents *worked*. But, attaining physical resemblance to a photograph is not the crucial element of the practice. As noted above, migrants do not use fake papers to create a lasting impersonation nor do they think other people's papers can substitute for legal protections. In capturing the spirit of papers, migrants impersonate not a particular person but an ideal type or habitus: the habitus of the free-moving European (Figure 3).

In so doing, migrants pay more attention to Mauss's (1973) "bodily techniques" than strictly visual imitation: the casualness of tourists, the confidence of the businessman, and the psychological momentum of the cosmopolitan wanderer. It is an interpretive endeavor premised on observation and refinement. On the surface, these

FIG. 3 Stock photo: A businessman walks with a carry-on at an airport. Source: Photo by Rawpixel.

engagements seem instrumental and brief: their immediate aim is to move to a less-migrant-populated country to lodge their asylum claim while *faking it right* for the border guards. But, the experimental cultivation of the free-moving habitus extends beyond the border encounter. It transforms citizenship from a state-sanctioned allegiance to a regime of practice where migrants enact citizenship by acting as citizens, and insist that they already are (Mezzadra 2010, 1). These passing experiments often fail, but they allow migrants the opportunity to exercise—even fleetingly—what it feels to move and dwell *wherever I want, like a European*.

Endnotes

1. To preserve the privacy of interlocutors, this article uses pseudonyms and alters some personal identifying information. Stock photos are similarly used to protect anonymity but also to convey the centrality of generic images in the experience of capturing the spirit of bureaucratic artifacts.
2. Migrants use the term “smuggler” to denote various agents and occupations. These range from facilitators of border movement (“big smugglers”) to what I call entrepreneurial bureaucrats, who offer diverse services, such as fake and stolen papers, paper guardianship, travel arrangements, employment, and housing brokerage. For more on the elaborated smuggling economy and how migrants morally evaluate and differentiate between smugglers, see Achilli (2018); Alkan (2021); Bhagat (2022); Capasso (2021); Chu (2010); Sanchez (2017); and Lindquist (2012).
3. I was not present in any of the border security encounters discussed in the article. I present them here as my research interlocutors recounted them. While I cannot attest to the accuracy of each account, interlocutors of different nationalities who did not know each other told similar stories to their friends and me. Further research incorporating border guard perspectives is crucial to get a fuller picture on these encounters. Nevertheless, I include these accounts as they were recounted not only because I evaluate them to be largely truthful but because the circulation of these stories among migrants makes them a social fact and practical knowledge that migrants rely on in their passing attempts.
4. The research for this article was conducted during my fieldwork in Izmir, Chios, and Athens from 2017 to 2019.
5. While photo IDs are premised on iconic representations of their bearers, migrants’ border-passing attempts aim to index themselves with the amorphous habitus of the free-moving European rather than achieving a mimetic resemblance to the photograph.
6. These databases include Eurodac, VIS (Visa Information System), and SIS (Schengen Information System). See Vavoula (2017).
7. In 2016, the Eurodac regulation was amended to include facial scans, but as of 2022, the policy has yet to be implemented.
8. An EU policy term for migrants whose movement is criminalized.
9. The Schengen area includes 27 European countries that have given up control at internal borders to guarantee the free movement of citizens, goods, and capital.
10. The hotspots are a group of Greek and Italian islands that the EU turned into Eurodac bio-data extraction centers in 2016.

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11. Many states in the Global South promote biometrics as a tool for democratization and for making marginal populations visible for welfare distribution. In Europe, however, a post-communist and post-fascist anti-surveillance ethos prompted robust privacy concerns, restricting state biometric experimentation primarily to noncitizens. While EU passports incorporate biometrics, the data are decentralized and surveillance capacities are structurally limited. See Breckenridge (2014, 16–17).
12. Turning illegal paper practices into public knowledge presents an apparent ethical dilemma. My interlocutors and I devised precautions to ensure that the border apparatus cannot utilize research findings to criminalize asylum and migration further. The article employs pseudonyms and includes only information interlocutors disclose during their asylum procedure, which they often do to convey credibility.
13. In 2019, the asylum recognition rate in the EU was 85 percent for Syrians and 82 percent for Yemenis.
14. If they survive the increasingly deadly sea route or routine Greek pushbacks (see BVMN 2022).
15. The European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union.
16. See European Council (2016).
17. Eight months after his deportation, Amjad managed to travel to a Western European country on a “real” stolen passport. After his arrival, he had to send the passport back to the smuggler, who probably sold it to another client. His authentic papers, which a friend was taking care of, arrived a month after he did, and Amjad submitted them to asylum authorities. As I write these words, he still awaits the result of his asylum appeal. Maher ultimately gave up trying to leave Greece. As of 2022, he was in Athens, working with international volunteers to assist incoming refugees.

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