Film as an Anti-Asylum Technique:

International Law, Borders and the Gendering of Refugee Subjectivities

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Synopsis

In 2015, the Australian government commissioned a telemovie as part of its strategic communication campaign to deter would-be asylum seekers from travelling to Australia unauthorised by boat. In this article we explore this film as one instance of state practices that seek to control migration at their borders, and a form of state messaging which uses gendered story-telling techniques and characterisations to do so. Officially termed 'public information campaigns' (PIC) by states or 'information strategies' by international organisations such as the UNHCR, the use of such practices has increased in volume, frequency and prominence in recent years. While there has been some academic attention to PICs, to date, the gendered dimensions of these campaigns have remained largely unexamined. In this article, we argue that a feminist analysis of PIC is critical to understanding both how state borders 'gender' refugee subjectivities as well as international law's authorisation of the violence of state borders more generally. By allocating blame and responsibility on individual refugees and their gendered choices, rather than on state actions and state violence, the film reveals how the institution and policing of state borders simultaneously rest upon gendered imaginaries of refugee responsibilitisation and the invisibilisation of state responsibility.

1.   Introduction

In 2015, the Australian government commissioned a telemovie as part of its strategic communication campaign to deter would-be asylum seekers from travelling to Australia by boat without state authorisation. This movie — entitled *Journey* — was initially screened in 2016 to large audiences in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan, at a cost of over $6 million for its production and distribution.[1] Now available on YouTube, the English-language version of the film has since attracted over 2.5 million views (as of February 2021).[2] The film is focused around the stories of four main characters, and performs for viewers the disastrous effects of a boat that sinks before it reaches Australia, killing almost all who were on it. As a piece of Australian government propaganda, it lays the responsibility for these deaths upon everyone besides the state forces who create this situation. Asylum-seekers, their families, their support networks, people smugglers, and fishermen are variously identified by the film as being responsible for deadly refugee journeys and mass drownings at sea. The Australian state, in contrast, is almost entirely absent in the film, despite the deaths occurring on its watch, at its borders and as a foreseeable consequence of its ever-more-militant refugee deterrence policies.

In this article we explore this film as one instance of state practices that seek to control migration at their borders, and a form of state messaging which uses gendered story-telling techniques and characterisations to do so. Officially termed 'public information campaigns' (PIC) by states or 'information strategies' by international organisations such as the UNHCR, the use of such practices has increased in volume, frequency and prominence in recent years. While there has been some academic attention to PICs, to date, the gendered dimensions of these campaigns have remained largely unexamined.[3] In this article, we argue that a feminist

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[1] Whyte (2016).
[2] 'Journey The Movie International Version - Full HD (English subs)', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKnPhSb9lhg.
[3] A key exception here is Williams (2020). On Australian PICs more generally, see Watkins (2017); Hightower (2013). In a European context, see, eg, Musarò (2019); Oeppen, (2016); Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud (2007); Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud (2020).

analysis of PIC is critical to understanding both how state borders 'gender' refugee subjectivities as well as international law's authorisation of the violence of state borders more generally. We understand this film as part of a program of state refugee deterrence campaigns which demonstrate a particular concerted attempt and technique of migration control, putting the focus, blame and responsibility on individuals and their choices, rather than on state actions and state violence. Through this film, we can understand how the institution and policing of state borders simultaneously rests upon gendered imaginaries of refugee responsibilisation and the invisibilisation of state responsibility.

In this article, we adopt a feminist sensibility to take seriously the use of film - and the genre of 'migrant melodrama' in particular - as a novel practice within recent state-orchestrated PIC. The genre of melodrama has a long tradition of feminist theorising and critique. To bring these insights to an analysis of international law and state imaginaries, we offer a close reading of the film, analysing its foundational premise, tragic narrative arc, gendered character tropes and imagined political function. Like international refugee law, the film offers a particular narrative and adjudication of refugee subjectivities against a backdrop of violence. Drawing on feminist scholarship, we show how the depiction of the film's main protagonists rely upon and mobilise gendered tropes to advance the particular emotive deterrence script, and analyse how the depiction of decisions of whether to go or to stay and wait rely on gendered ideas of how refugees do, and should, behave. Looking at the ways that particular characters inhabit gendered archetypes – the aggressive male, the caring mother, the innocent child, and so on – reveals how the Australian government wants to portray asylum seekers and refugees to other potential asylum seekers. Through this lens, we can understand how the film is a demonstration of a neoliberal anti-refugee discourse which mobilises ideas of refugee agency and choice in order to promote a logic and message of refugee deterrence, exclusion and border securitisation. Paying attention to the film's gendered 'deterrence scripts' allows us to see how

states valorise particular forms of refugee agency for their own ends, including the kinds of legal worlds and forms of authority that such valorisations envision and authorise. It thus lays bare the imaginaries and limits of international refugee law, and international law more generally.

The examination of the film as case study is an important methodological tool within both feminist and queer studies, as it enables us to understand the complexity of one instance of an effect in order to open up a broader understanding of histories, structures and the ways in which international law is formulated.[4] Not only does the case study allow us to appreciate how the commissioning and screening of the film gives rise to new sites of extraterritorial government activity and new techniques of power that seek to craft the attitudes and behaviours of would-be asylum seeker subjects, it also allows us to appreciate the fundamental gendering of state borders. Through this study, we show the ways in which this film - and its characterisation of asylum seekers and their families, as well as people smugglers and boat journeys - acts as part of a project of what Jennifer Hyndman has termed 'disciplining displacement'.[5] We can understand this film as having been part of a historical moment in which for recent Coalition governments in Australia, 'asylum seekers [are portrayed] as wartime enemies'.[6] Put simply, we argue that the film tells us much about how state obligations towards asylum seekers within the regime of international refugee law are imagined and visualised.

This article begins by situating *Journey* within the broader context of the international refugee law regime, suggesting that its 'educational rationale' is a logical albeit perverse extension of the 'information strategies' pillar under the UNHCR's refugee protection

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[4] See, for instance, Lang, Damousi and Lewis (2017).
[5] Hyndman (2000).
[6] Peterie (2016), p. 441.

framework. We next focus on the film, explaining and exploring its narrative; form; the political environment of its production; its characterisation of refugees and their families, people smugglers, and Indonesian fisherman; the use of the tragic form in its plot; and the way that the film creates an effect of asserting Australian sovereignty and narrating and producing refugee abandonment.

2.   International Law, Film and the Making of Violent Border Regimes

Films have the capacity to 'tell stories' about international law.[7] While all story-telling is political, this is perhaps most overtly so of the genre of propaganda films. The use of propaganda films about migration has a long history, including within international organisations such as the UNHCR and as part of state practice.[8] In seeking to deliberately 'influence the attitudes and behaviours of the many by the manipulation of symbolic communication',[9] such films have variously sought to encourage or celebrate particular types of migration, to craft public attitudes about migration, or to deter unwanted asylum seekers from migrating to or from a particular place without state authorisation. Despite such intended missions, propaganda films are always open to multiple interpretations, contestations and even failures, as we explore in our below analysis of *Journey*.

In recent years, there has been a growing enthusiasm for studying the relationship between international law and film within international legal scholarship. The main register for framing this relationship has been through analysing how international law appears *within* and is given life in popular cinema. Here, film becomes a specific medium for communicating and legitimating ideas about international law, global justice and legalised violence, 'screened to

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[7] Ainley, Humphreys and Tallgren (2018), p. 3.
[8] See, eg, the UNHCR and UNRWA's use of film in the 1950s and 1960s: Gatrell (2011), pp. 170-5.
[9] Qualter (1985), p. 122.

global audiences both as entertainment and as advocacy'.[10] In addition to a focus on depictions of international law *within* film, international law scholars have analysed the use of film as particular techniques of law-making *within* international institutions. For example, Peter Rush and Maria Elander have importantly offered a method for reading the encounter between international law, and international criminal law in particular, and film through the practices of procedure and technique. They show how film acts as a 'particular media-technique through which images of law' become legible to and within legal institutions, particularly along evidential, testimonial and representational registers.[11] Building on their attentiveness to questions of authority and legal relations, in this article we unpack how the use of film as a specific communicative medium in state-orchestrated PICs has become a way of *authorising* international law's organisation of the world into territorially-bounded states that have the right to exclude non-citizens and to police their borders. The effect of this, we argue, is the creation and authorisation of violent borderscapes, including state practices of refugee deterrence, extra-territorial jurisdiction and border securitisation.

Under international law, a person is only entitled to the rights and protections of the *Refugees Convention* once they are physically present in a state's territory (or under a state's 'effective control').[12] This means that a person only becomes a refugee once they are outside their state of nationality or habitual residence, and the central obligation of non-refoulement in the *Refugees Convention* – that is, the obligation on states not to return a refugee to a place where they have a well-founded fear of persecution – only applies once a refugee is within the territory or jurisdiction of that state. Put differently, in order to be protected, a refugee must 'reach the shores of a state'.[13] International refugee law thus is premised on and operates

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[10] Joyce and Simm (2015).
[11] Rush and Elander (2018).
[12] *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951*, 189 UNTS 150 (entered into force 22 April 1954) (*Refugees Convention*).
[13] Catherine Dauvergne, for example, shows how this 'asylum crisis' stems from the fact that there are 'many more people in the world entitled to asylum than Western industrialized states want to welcome as refugees': Dauvergne (2016), p. 45.

through a principle of territoriality. While international law recognises that all people have a right to *seek* asylum, in practice, states have adopted a range of deterrence measures in order to prevent people arriving within their territories in order to do so. These 'remote border controls' measures include complex visa regimes, airport pre-departure screenings, airline carrier sanctions, 'third safe country' agreements, boat turnbacks and border securitisation cooperation agreements.[14] In this spectrum of remote border control practices, PICs have frequently been dismissed by refugee law scholars as mere 'scare tactics', 'dissuasion through advertising' or 'harmless interventions in the sense that migrants' safety or integrity is not directly affected'.[15] Nonetheless, we argue that these practices are in fact significant in how they give rise to new practices of extraterritorial state activity as a form of migration control as well as for how they narrate and authorise the borderscapes in which they are enacted.[16] That is, in this article we are taking seriously the power of cultural representations to produce borders and ideas of those who transgress them.[17]

International organisations, too, have embraced and promoted visual 'information' campaigns directed towards potential asylum seeker communities.[18] The UNHCR, for example, has utilised visual communication as a tool for 'managing' refugee populations since its outset, although it only adopted the term 'mass information' from 1989 onwards in relation to its work to deter unauthorised migration of Indochinese refugees under the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA).[19] Increasingly, the UNHCR has come to frame PIC through the language of human rights and migrants' right to information. The UNHCR's *10-Point Plan in Action*, first published in 2007 in order to provide practical guidance to UN agencies, states and civil society, names 'information strategies' as one of the 10 main pillars within its 'best practice'

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[14] Zolberg (1997), pp. 111–121. See also FitzGerald (2020).
[15] Carling and Hernández-Carretero (2011); Crock, Saul and Dastyari (2006), p. 50.
[16] On practices of authorisation, see Dorsett and McVeigh (2012), p. 11; Hasan Khan (2020), p. 414.
[17] See also Crofts and Vogl (2019).
[18] See, eg, Pécoud (2010), p. 184.
[19] UNHCR Inspection and Evaluation Service (1998).

refugee protection framework. Information strategies, the UNHCR suggests, have two main goals:

> to prevent irregular movements by ensuring that persons are sufficiently informed about the potential risks; and to sensitize host communities to mixed movements thereby reducing xenophobia, promoting tolerance and raising awareness about the protection needs of some of the persons involved.[20]

Although the UNHCR acknowledges that PICs on their own will not deter unauthorised migration 'if push factors are sufficiently serious', it nonetheless insists that such campaigns in countries of origin and transit can 'influence an individual's decision-making process' and allow migrants to 'make informed decisions'.[21] Some recent high-profile campaigns that the UNHCR has initiated include the 'Telling the Real Story' online initiative that seeks to communicate and educate people in Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia (all considered refugee-source states by the UNHCR) about the 'dangers of onward irregular movement'. The platform includes short 'authentic' interviews with refugees and asylum seekers themselves in order to help potential asylum seekers understand the 'full extent of risks and suffering that lie ahead of them when they decide to leave'. It also incorporates short animation clips of refugee children at different stages of perilous journeys, including in immigration detention.[22] The UNHCR campaigns often incorporate legal language, restating that seeking asylum is a 'basic human right'. While the *Journey* telemovie appears to argue against this 'right', we nonetheless locate the Australian government's commissioning of the film within this broader turn within the international refugee law protection regime and its institutions to valorising the power and

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[20] UNHCR (2016). On UNHCR campaigns targeted at host populations, see eg Balabanova (2019).
[21] UNHCR (2016).
[22] UNHCR. 'Telling the Real Story' https://www.tellingtherealstory.org/en/.

value of 'information strategies' as a core practice, rationalised through their purported educational and humane purposes.

Our interest here is in understanding how the film's gendered depictions of refugee decision-making and refugee suffering have come to be used to authorise violent and increasingly militarised state border regimes. In our reading of the film, the production and distribution of the film constitute practices of authorisation that seek to frame refugee deaths at sea not as the problem and consequence of a world of increasingly militarised state borders and the 'shrinking spaces' of asylum,[23] but rather the product of individual reckless decision-making on the part of asylum seekers themselves. This film naturalises the inevitability of deaths at sea, making it seem as though this is the inevitable and natural way in which the stories of many asylum seekers will end. Or, more precisely, that this is how the story ends for those who take matters into their own hands. Those who remain where they are, waiting in imaginary queues or stuck at home, are depicted as the 'good refugees', who know their place. This is a highly gendered understanding, which we will return to below.

In the Australian context, such visual communication campaigns form one critical pillar within Australia's increasingly violent and brutal borderscape. The adoption of Operation Sovereign Borders by the newly-elected conservative government in 2013 explicitly positioned 'strategic communication campaigns' as one key plank within the broader militarised approach to border securitisation that included more overt exclusion techniques of boat turn-backs and offshore detention.[24] Suvendrini Perera has described this borderscape as a 'protean and

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[23] Mountz (2013).

[24] Under Operations Sovereign Borders, this strategic communication campaign includes both an onshore and offshore component. The onshore component targeted at specific migrant diaspora groups in order to use them as conduits to communicate messages to their families and networks in so-called refugee-source countries. The offshore component instead directly targeted to would-be asylum seekers, or people termed as Potential Illegal Immigrants (PIIs) in the Department's official terminology, with deterrence messaging. Across both components, campaigns are designed to promote four key 'messages': 'highlighting the realities of hazardous sea journeys, the financial risks of engaging people smugglers, the deceptions and lies of people smugglers and the consequences of illegal migration by sea to Australia'. These campaigns take a range of forms, ranging from cartoons to billboard advertising, to radio, film, social media and street theatre. Testimony to Senate Estimates, Hansard, 25 May 2015, p. 124.

changeable geography of punishment and lethal force' that operates through 'violent excesses and horror' and mobilises technologies of isolation, exclusion and abandonment.[25] Similarly, Honni van Rijswijk has shown how Australia's borderscape, and migration laws in particular, operate on a sado-masochistic register.[26] Here, both Australian law and policies, including visual communication campaigns, seek to instrumentalise the pain of asylum seekers in order to further the government's overarching deterrence strategy. Sado-masochism, van Rijswijk argues, helps us understand how the representation of asylum seeker suffering – both fictionalised and material – is central to the Australian government's particular deterrence scripts: here, asylum seeker suffering 'is not incidental or collateral, but one of its main, intended effects'. For van Rijswijk, paying attention to how the Australian government constitutes the figure of the asylum seeker through such imaginaries, then, 'allows us to understand the affective realm of authority and how authority is deployed through specific genres'.[27] Yet, as we shall see, it is a very particular kind of asylum seeker suffering that is made visible through such deterrence campaigns (often, primarily, the pain caused by making the 'wrong' choices of taking risky sea journeys to defy border regimes) while other forms of pain (the pain of waiting in precarious situations and legal limbo for illusive safe alternatives to seek protection, or the pain of remaining in a situation of persecution) that remains invisible in such sado-masochistic representations.

3.   The Film as Refugee Deterrence and Responsibilisation

We turn now to the case study of one so-called PIC: namely, Australia's commissioning of a telemovie in 2015 called *Journey* as one output of its anti-refugee 'offshore strategic

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[25] Perera (2015).
[26] van Rijswijk (2018), pp. 189, 201.
[27] van Rijswijk (2018), p. 202.

communications campaign' under Operation Sovereign Borders. Dubbed a 'refugee traumathon' by media commentators,[28] the film provides a fictionalised depiction of the choices and suffering of four main protagonists (and to a lesser extent their families) at different stages of their attempt to travel to Australia by boat to seek asylum, without having received prior authorisation. It traces the individual departure stories of the film's four protagonists, each from a key refugee source state (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan), whose journeys ultimately collide in the final section of the film as they all board the same boat to travel to Australia, a journey that ultimately ends in the boat capsizing and the drowning death of most, if not all, of its passengers. Yet, distinct from many earlier PICs that 'maintain a kind of nondescript anonymity' in which asylum seekers 'are counted in numbers and referred to and addressed en masse, without backstories, motivations, or voice',[29] the film deliberately seeks to humanise the four main protagonists in order to promote its anti-refugee deterrence message. This project of humanisation relies heavily on gendered deterrence scripts that target the emotional register of its viewers, mobilising ideas of maternal love and destructive masculinity in crafting the various figures of the asylum-seeking protagonists in the film, as we will discuss below.

Throughout, the film imagines a binary between a highly visible 'third world' or global south set of locations and people, who navigate leaving their homes, making the journey by plane, car, bus, and dealing with the bureaucracies of international organisations who are set up to manage refugees, and an invisible Australia that is talked about but never seen.[30] Australia here is removed as an actor in a scenario in which they are, in reality, in complete control. They

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[28] See, eg, Ryan (2016); Ryall (2016); Jackson (2016); Brady (2016).
[29] Bishop (2020), p. 1107.
[30] As Bina Fernandez writes, the common story of border-crossers is this one, that is, 'the limited narrative of such individuals crossing international borders to 'escape repression in the global South and gain freedom in the global North'.' See Fernandez (2017), p. 194.

may not kill with their own hand, but in their invisibility they make clear that they will make die.[31]

We never learn in detail about the characters' lives and experiences, and this opaqueness is vital to the narrative of the film. These characters are presented as archetypes, as possibilities for everyone who would watch the film. But the film maintains a clear sense of story throughout. In the opening scene of the telemovie viewers are introduced to Sara and her son Amir, as well as her brother Nima and his pregnant wife Marjan. While Nima and Marjan are keen to board a plane from Iran to Kuala Lumpur, Sara is hesitant, and Nima immediately works hard to convince her that this is the right thing to do, before Sara moves to board the plane, making clear to Nima that it was his decision that they should all go. Thus from the opening scene of the film we have inscribed racist and gendered tropes of Middle Eastern men as overbearing and controlling of the women in their families, and of women as hesitant and meek, unwilling – or unable – to take control of their own lives.[32] Within the story of this family, they will travel to Kuala Lumpur and then on to Indonesia where Sara will bond with another of the main characters, Nadim. When minibuses eventually take them all to the boat which they will take to Australia, Nima and Marjan are not able to get on but Sara and Amir are.

We then meet two brothers from Pakistan, Hassan and Najee, who are already in Indonesia and are celebrating their friend's final night there before taking a boat towards Australia. They attend a meeting at a 'refugee processing centre' in Jakarta, where they are told that it will take an indeterminable number of months to process their refugee claims.[33] After some arguing between the brothers, Najee decides to take a boat to Australia, while Hassan

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[31] On the way that the Australian state sees asylum seekers who take (political) action as trouble-makers who threaten the nation and thus require a response see, for instance, Szörényi (2012), p. 300.
[32] See, for instance, Hussein (2016).
[33] For a recent first-hand account and exploration of the experience of waiting in Indonesia as a refugee see 'The Wait' podcast. 'The Wait,' https://www.thewaitpodcast.com/. See also Mountz (2011).

prefers to wait with his Indonesian girlfriend. Hassan offers Najee his share of their money, which he takes and heads off. Bilal, from Afghanistan, is a teenager who we meet in a detention centre in Indonesia, where he is imprisoned by himself in a cell with other men, one of whom is helpful and aids him to escape before getting Bilal's relatives to pay his way on the boat as well. Although he never makes it onto the boat – there is a violent encounter on an Indonesian street that leaves him unable to travel – another man from the detention centre, who is portrayed as being erratic, irrational, and troublesome, ends up on the same boat as well. Bilal is travelling by himself with plans to bring his family to Australia once he is there.

Finally there is Nadim – a sensitive, guitar-playing, gentle Iraqi man – whose uncle in Sydney secures the money and passage for him by negotiating with people smugglers there and in Indonesia. We meet Nadim's family, and they all say a sad farewell as Nadim heads off on a long journey to Indonesia, and eventually to the boat. On the boat he tries to take care of the child Amir, as well as Sara, holding onto them in the water. All of these characters – whose stories have been portrayed through short scenes cut together, flitting between the people – are shown to face a tragic end. The film concludes with images of the family-members of those on the boat receiving the news of their relatives' death, with the voice of Sara – who has been telling a story to Amir throughout, a parable of the refugees and the people smugglers – playing over the top.

People smugglers are portrayed in this film as greedy, selfish, and ultimately a source of danger, mirroring their depiction by the Australian government to Australian audiences across the twenty-first century.[34] The people smugglers throughout are Middle Eastern men, shown to be busy businessmen: working the phones, handling large amounts of cash, and cajoling and threatening clients. Again, there is a clear racialised depiction of them as

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[34] See Briskman and Mason (2015), p. 145; Missbach (2015).

overbearing and hyper-masculine. They engage two Indonesian fisherman brothers who are portrayed as simultaneously weak and desperate for money, as well as skilled at piloting a boat but ultimately disorganised, lazy and incapable of protecting the passengers on the boat. While the people smugglers survive the boat sinking – as they are not on it – the fishermen drown too. There is thus a dual demonisation of 'people smugglers', of both those from the Middle East (who are wealthy, sneaky, callous, take advantage of everyone, aggressively masculine and violent) and those from Indonesia (who are naïve, not properly prepared, lazy, and incompetent).

Through these characters the film offers up a portrayal of many different types of family relationships, but all of them sit within the heterosexual family and deploy the emotions associated with those family ties. Obligations towards family members are heightened through the use of these dynamics and it is shown that non-family members are untrustworthy. The film thus deliberately operates through an emotional register, appealing to people perceived by the Australian government and its consultants to be potential asylum seekers to see any decision to travel to Australia by boat without state authorisation as reckless, harmful and ultimately futile. Here the film as propaganda seeks to elicit an emotional response from its viewers and, as Ruth Buchanan has written, aims to 'reproduce for the spectator an untroubled identification with a film's subject matter'.[35]

In what now follows, we analyse the film through a number of registers: first, by examining its form as a melodrama and its use of time; second, second, by looking at its production and its governmental motivations; third, by examining the gendered characters which it develops and portrays; fourth, by exploring its plot as a form of gendered depiction of refugees choices to move or to stay; and finally, critically re-reading how the film authorises

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[35] Buchanan (2020), pp. 559, 567.

particular economies of abandonment towards both asylum seekers travelling to Australia unauthorised by boat and their fellow compatriots (the target audience of the film) living in the four states where the film was screened and distributed: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.

3.1 Filmic Form: On Migrant Melodramas

Described by a journalist as a 'soapie-style telemovie,'[36] *Journey* tells its story through the use of emotional tropes and Western stereotypes of people's lives and gendered roles in a manner which we identify as being akin to a melodrama. Melodrama can be understood as a 'filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more "dominant" modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative.'[37] It has historically revolved around a type of 'theatre form that reflects nineteenth-century bourgeois values whereby the family at all costs will prevail, remain united and in order'.[38] With the emergence of melodrama as a cinematic genre in early-to-mid 20th century, these films continued to uphold a patriarchal worldview including representing and perpetuating simplistic gendered stereotypes on screen. However, Susan Hayward notes that melodramas, in depicting family conflict within the home, did provide a limited 'space' for 'a woman's point of view'.[39] In this way, *Journey* takes on these attributes of the genre, showing conflict and life within the family home while also providing spaces for the fictional women to make their claims for how they want to live their lives. Sara is the best example of this, as she asserts herself to her brother and to Nadim when he gets closer to her than she would like. Ultimately however, Sara is shown to be doomed, her willingness to take control punished within the filmic landscape.

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[36] Whyte (2016).
[37] Williams (1991), pp. 2, 3.
[38] Hayward (2013), p. 141.
[39] Hayward (2013), p. 141.

That is, this film fits into what Ana Elena Puga has termed 'migrant melodramas': films that use migrant suffering as a cinematic device in depicting migrant journeys crossing borders.[40] Such films, Puga argues, often contribute towards 'the commodification and circulation of undocumented migrant suffering in a global market'. More broadly, Matthew Buckley has argued that the genre of melodrama within a theatrical tradition is 'bound intimately to exile', with the archetypal characters in classic English melodramas being 'the orphan, the mute witness to crime, the dispossessed heir, the exiled aristocratic villain'.[41] Melodramas, according to Buckley, have come to inculcate a 'belief in the sublimity of spectacular violence and the nobility of passive suffering'.[42] This means, as Carolyn Williams has written, the staging of melodramas depends on the interruption of 'the ongoing action with its silent, composed stillness – calling for the audience to be likewise arrested yet all the while to be actively feeling and interpreting'.[43] Melodramatic cinema then valorises an oscillation between 'absorptive, introverted moments of sympathetic identification and highly spectacular, extroverted scenes of shocking violence'.[44] We see this sharply in the film, as it moves between beseeching audiences to identify with its characters and showing high-energy action wherein there is much at stake. Whether the violence is on-screen or implied - and there are moments of both throughout, climaxing with the boat filling with water and sinking, with the passengers ending up suffering and drowning in the sea - it is spectacular in its use of emotion.

Through its portrayal of time, the film further demonstrates its allegiance to forms of narrative which encourage viewers to be overwhelmed by an emotional response, and to abandon critical awareness. As Sara Ahmed has shown, emotions are not static but rather 'stick' people together through a social process which encourages them to identify and connect

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[40] Puga (2016).
[41] Buckley (2009).
[42] Buckley (2009), p. 189.
[43] Williams (2014), p. 105.
[44] Buckley (2009), p. 182, discussing Carolyn William's work cited above.

with each other in a shared emotional experience.[45] Feeling sad, happy, scared or anxious together builds a community of people, and cultural texts such as films are one way in which emotional knowledge and communities are built. The pacing of the film does similar important work in shaping the viewers experience. The vast majority of the film proceeds through short and sharp scenes, moving incredibly quickly as it tells many stories within a compressed amount of time. Not until the main characters are on the boat does it linger in any way on a scene, and once the boat has sunk and they are in the water, the film dwells on them and their drowning for an extended period of time. This suffering is lingered on, as the film makes clear that viewers understanding the horror of this drowning is key to understanding the film. There is no mistaking the message here: the end-point for the boat trip is long, drawn-out, relentless, suffering.

In what is a highly didactic text, the use of quick scenes mirrors what Joyce Dalsheim has referred to as the 'busyness' of the school classroom, wherein 'a sense of busyness is a powerful technique of hegemony': it ensures that there is no time for questions and that the information provided by the teacher is understood by students as all-encompassing truth.[46] Teachers frame what information is needed and which questions will be asked. In the same way, *Journey* presents a totalising narrative. The film reduces the options available: get on the boat or don't get on the boat. Nothing else is visible as a possibility. As Miriam Ticktin points out, the timeframes of emergency act as a dehistoricising agent. An emergency, or a crisis, seems to 'require immediate action. With this temporal perspective,' she says, 'there is no way to understand events in a larger historical context, no time to think of the past or plan for the future.'[47] The very opposite of a queer narrative which would open up space for pondering the ways in which the border operates and what possible options characters have in their encounter

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[45] Ahmed (2004), p. 8.
[46] Dalsheim (2004), pp. 158–59.
[47] Ticktin (2016), p. 262.

with it, *Journey* instead deploys a storytelling framework which is heteronormative and totalising in its characters and its narrative form. As Eric Santner has shown in his discussion of Holocaust narratives, these types of narratives are fetishised as a way to produce meaning by holding everything securely in place.[48] The chronologically-flowing narrative fully contains the story, limiting what can happen, making each next step seem logical and leading to the inevitable ending – it is a totalising, controlling, form of narrative. While Hayden White might have usefully noted that 'we do not *live* stories, even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories,'[49] the film casts peoples complex lives as neatly contained stories, presenting a vision to viewers of the outcome of taking a boat from Indonesia towards Australia as inevitable and pre-determined. The knowledge of who has made that pre-determination - Australia - and why - in order to authorise and control Australia's borders - is obscured, made irrelevant. The Australian state, as narrator and controller of the story and the borders, retains its masculine determinative power.

3.2   *Production: The Political-Legal Economy of Journey*

Although the official rationale for the film was framed as being part of an educational and humanitarian mission to 'save lives at sea', the political-legal economy around the film's production makes clear its embeddedness in, and authorisation of, Australia's violent borderscape. Then DIBP Secretary Michael Pezzullo described the telemovie as a 'realistic' portrayal of the journey taken by many asylum seekers to Australia by boat, based on 'previous experiences' and 'inspired by true events'.[50] Pezzullo suggested that the film:

> portray[s] the risks and dangers of travelling illegally by boat, the falsehoods peddled by the people smugglers in order to induce people to take a journey with them, how

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[48.] Santner (1992), p. 144.
[49.] White (1998), pp. 23–4 (emphases in original).
[50] Michael Pezzullo, Testimony to Senate Estimates, Hansard, 25 May 2015, p. 55.

they then encountered the Australian maritime protection system and how they were dealt with.[51]

The film was produced by a Sydney-based digital production company, Put It Out There Pictures, for a reported total cost of around AU$6 million.[52] Much of the production company's past work has been funded by international donors such as the US Department of Defence or UN agencies, and been aimed at audiences in post-Taliban Afghanistan, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea and Nigeria.[53] While the government expenditure allocated to the production and dissemination of the film attracted media headlines, this is in fact only a fraction of the cost that the Australian government has spent on such PICs in the last decade. In 2015 alone, the Australian government allocated around AU$20 million to PICs.[54] The film was screened in the first half of 2016 on local television several times in four key 'refugee-source' states: Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and translated into five local languages: Farsi, Dari, Arabic, Urdu, Pashto.[55] Audience engagement was further encouraged via crafted social media posts. Interestingly, an English-subtitled version of the film was not released until the Australian government was prompted to do so through a freedom of information request. Thus we can understand that the telemovie was clearly designed principally for overseas consumption and screenings, demonstrating the production of new sites of extraterritorial government activity and new forms of projecting state authority beyond its territorial borders.

The film's production and distribution rests upon a 'neoliberal deterrence' approach in that the logic of its effectiveness rests upon the necessity of 'effective communication of risk'

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[51] Michael Pezzullo, Testimony to Senate Estimates, Hansard, 25 May 2015, p. 55.
[52] Engel Rasmussen and Doherty (2016). The Department of Immigration and Border Protection contract with Put It Out There Pictures was reportedly AU$4.3 million, with the remaining $1.6 million costs allocated to Lapis Communications to market and broadcast the movie.
[53] Put It Out There Pictures, 'Past Projects,' http://putitouttherepictures.com/our-content/#anc_dr.
[54] Barker (2015), endnote 7.
[55] According to a DIPB representative, the film was to have three major broadcasts and nine repeat broadcasts. Testimony to Senate Estimates, Hansard, 25 May 2015, p. 130.

to would-be asylum seekers.[56] Moreover, it rests on the (false) assumption that asylum seekers undertake dangerous boat journeys because they have not been properly informed of the risk, they do not understand the situation they face, or that they are not sufficiently fearful. The film presents the narrative that it is inevitable that refugees defying border regimes will die at sea: that is where all stories of refugees who are on the move converge, as the stories of the disparate asylum seekers in the film, coming from different locations, thus converge. Within the logic of the film, it is not a result of a series of decisions by states that bring this event into being, but it is natural and inevitable that this will happen when asylum seekers make the 'wrong' decision, when they take matters too much into their own hands. The Australian state, through this film, asserts its ability to narrate deterrence and thus to maintain control through the spreading border, which reaches into people's homes in countries far away. As Bina Fernandez has written, state borders are not simply physical places or markers, but rather 'ideological constructs that generate particular identities, denote power relationships and the ontological boundaries of political space.'[57] The use of film - and its particular diffuse mode of dissemination and consumption - thus enables the Australian border to transform and travel, becoming as much a didactical project as one of exclusion.

Despite this logic behind the film, a 2015 review of a range of state deterrence communication campaigns found that there was 'extremely little evidence on the impact or effectiveness' of such campaigns.[58] Even research funded by the then DIBP suggests that asylum seekers are all too well informed about the risks of travelling to Australia by boat, unauthorised. For example, a 2015 survey of 33 asylum seekers from Afghanistan who had

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[56] Pickering and Weber (2014).
[57] Fernandez (2018), p. 194.
[58] Brown (2015).

arrived in Australia by boat, without prior authorisation, found that the overwhelming majority 'knew of the risks of seeking asylum':

> They were aware of the risks of being detained and deported, through knowing others who had died or through media coverage of boats sinking, and also of the physical dangers of the travelling itself. Several people knew about the detention centres. 30 of the interviewees said that they knew others had died, and that they could die. This knowledge, however, did not act as a barrier to selection of Australia as a destination, even for families travelling with children, who believed that the route to Australia was safer than other routes.[59]

Such studies show that the possibility of death as part of a dangerous journey to safety is often not a 'strong enough deterrent' for people seeking asylum in the context of the conditions that they face in their home states. Nonetheless, the Department continues to maintain that PICs – including novel campaigns such as *Journey* – are able to induce 'behavioural change' among potential asylum seekers.[60] Irrespective of the efficacy of the film's deterrence message, we argue that there is a need to pay attention to the productive work that the film does in authorising new anti-asylum governmental practices of border control and new governmental activities of refugee management within and beyond the Australian border that simultaneously rest upon gendered imaginaries of refugee responsibilisation and the invisibilisation of state responsibility.

To date, the film as an anti-asylum technique has received limited scholarly attention. A key exception to this is Emma Patchett's importantly exploration of the film's postcolonial spatial imaginaries, including the paradoxical positioning of Australia as both a 'desirable',

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[59] Every (2015), p. 15.
[60] Australian Customs and Border Protection (2012). See also Watkins (2017), p. 5.

idealised space of civilisation and progress while also disavowing the material violence of Australia's anti-asylum policies of boat turn-backs and offshore processing as well as its foundational colonial violence of Indigenous dispossession.[61] For Patchett, the spatial imaginaries informing the film figure Australia as a place that:

> must fight to "protect" the novel borders of a fledgling state while simultaneously bearing the historical legacy of a predetermined haunting from a colonial past, where it is not only the threat of aliens in which those "othered" must be kept out of space, but also those exorcised as internal "others" (through negation of Indigenous sovereignty, and as well as linguistic, ethnic, political and cultural ties beyond the state) which threaten to reveal ruptures in the spatial imaginary.[62]

Patchett's analysis of the film also draws attention to the particular framing of Sara, as the 'ultimate maternal feminine figure', who at times is pictured akin to 'a Virgin Mary cradling her son'.[63] Indeed, the female body 'occupies an enduring visual tradition in refugee imagery'.[64] Our analysis below builds on Patchett's work to explore how the 'deterrence scripts' in *Journey* mobilise deeply gendered constructions of the would-be asylum seeker subjects, and what this reveals about international law's authorisation of the violence of state borders.

3.3   *Characters: Maternal Love and Destructive Masculinity in Journey*

In *Journey*, two main tropes animate the depiction of the film's protagonists in order to advance the film's emotive deterrence script: that of maternal love and destructive masculinity. Through these tropes, the film mobilises deeply heteronormative gender identities as archetypal refugee

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[61] Patchett (2017), p. 195.
[62] Patchett (2017), pp. 203-4.
[63] Patchett (2017), p. 200.
[64] Zarzycka (2017), p. 87.

subjectivities. Such tropes not only rely upon and re-articulate structures of sexual difference in a general sense, but they also seek to articulate refugee deterrence scripts through very particular gendered refugee subjectivities. According to the film's narrative, the undoing of the protagonists is their willingness to defy state border regimes, although how this willingness and defiance is understood is articulated in fundamentally gendered terms. Kristen Phillips has explained that 'As with other wars, stories about gendered bodies have been pivotal in authorising violence and control in Australia's war at the borders, and in making certain incidents of violence invisible,' and this film offers examples of the ways in which this gendering functions and is produced.[65]

Constructions of motherhood operate and circulate within particular cultural and historical contexts, with the very institution of motherhood itself shaped through changing social, often patriarchal, structures. Motherhood then is not simply an always available or 'unquestionable part of female identity,' but rather is an always-ongoing project, made differently and anew in various contexts.[66] Here, the construction of Sara relies upon the simplistic trope of 'the Good Mother' as an archetypical standard against which Sara's decision-making and subsequent failures are measured. By implication, the film suggests that the Good Mother is an emancipated, self-determining woman who is law-abiding and creates safety for her children within their 'proper' homeland while also resisting the pressure of patriarchal authority within the family unit. In this sense, Sara's projected failings as a mother are scripted through her inability to resist the plans and pressure of her brother to persuade her to accompany him by boat to Australia. This is particularly evident in one scene where Sara laments:

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[65] Phillips (2009).
[66] Greer (2017).

"Oh God, what have I done? What kind of mother am I?"

Journey's depiction of Sara as a maternal tragic figure follows a melodramatic script, placing her at the 'centre of the narrative and afford[ing her] privileged audience identification and knowledge'.[67] Her role in the film is limited to that of the maternal caregiver, primarily made legible through and reduced to her reproductive and caring capacities alone. The films depiction of Sara thus relies upon tropes of women as loving mothers and as self-sacrificing carers acting to provide their offspring with a future, as well as relying on the category of 'womenandchildren', as Cynthia Enloe described it: that category of person who is the ultimate imagined vulnerable category of person, living at the mercy of men.[68] Here, the film deploys love as an 'affective strategy' in order to induce identification between viewers and the character. But throughout there is included a certain maternal 'impossibility' to providing protection for her son.[69] This is a mother who will fail. Moreover, when Nadim attempts to offer himself as a companion to Sara she refuses his intimacy, refusing, that is, the offer of a heterosexual relationship and the possibility of heteronomative safety. Ultimately, when the boat sinks however, it is Nadim who holds on to Amir and keeps him afloat for as long as possible. Sara's refusal, her 'willfulness,' is punished.[70]

Such fictionalised failures operate within a historical context in which anti-refugee state officials and xenophobic discourses more generally have gained traction through questioning the authenticity of refugees' parental bonds towards their offspring, and scripted maternal bonds of care and protection in particular.[71] In the Australian context, this is most evident in the Australian government's false accusation in 2001 that refugees at sea en route to Australia were throwing their children overboard in order to be intercepted and rescued by the Australian

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[67] Mercer and Shingler (2004), p. 15.
[68] Enloe (1990).
[69] See generally Zarzycka (2017).
[70] On willfulness, see Ahmed (2011).
[71] Silverstein (2016).

navy.[72] As Marta Zarzycka has written, these types of governmental narratives present refugee parents as negligent and harmful to their children. They imagine a scenario wherein refugee parents' willingness to 'risk' their children's lives through dangerous sea journeys – or to use their children as so-called 'anchor children', or as ploys to gain entry into a state's territory without authorisation – mitigates their moral eligibility for future citizenship.[73] It is here that we see the connection between the heteronormative scripting of familial bonds and the construction of the projected borders of national belonging and ideas of 'the good citizen'.[74] The government here is attempting to inform refugee and asylum-seeking parents that the government is in fact the better parent: that it knows more, cares more, and is more protective of the children with whom its borders come into contact. *Journey* imagines itself telling its audience: we know what will happen and we care about you and your children too much to let you drown. In this imagining, the Australian government's role in producing and authorising the deathly border is erased.

In contrast to the trope of maternal love, the film also mobilises notions of the destructive power of masculinity in order to advance its cinematic narrative. Najee is presented as a young and ambitious Hazara man who is unable to heed the advice of others, most notably his older brother Hassan who tried repeatedly to prevent him from boarding the boat. Meanwhile, 16 year old Bilal is depicted as the helpless victim of his self-assured albeit loving grandfather who has arranged and paid for Bilal's trip to Australia and whose judgment Bilal is unable or unwilling to bring into question, even if it means risking his own life at sea.

While they are writing from a UK context, the analysis offered by Katharine Charsley and Helena Wray applies here, as they explain that 'In popular governmental and legal

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[72] Silverstein (2020).

[73] Zarzycka (2017), p. 92.

[74] On ideas and practices of citizenship see, for instance, Rubinstein (2007), Rubinstein (2008), Rubinstein and Lenagh-Maguire (2011), Jenkins (2014), Lester (2018).

discourse, migrant men are often cast in a negative and homogenizing light — as patriarchs abusing power or criminal evaders of immigration regimes.'[75] Moreover, they assert, 'Representations of male migrants have become more devious and sinister, as states sought to justify policies of closure but also reflecting changed modes of entry'.[76] This is precisely the vision of refugee masculinity on offer in this film: there are many types of dangerous men. Single men are shown to be reckless, as in the seemingly irrational and violent man who we first encounter in the immigration detention centre and again on the boat. We also see this in the older single man, also in the detention centre, who aids the unaccompanied child Bilal before taking financial advantage of him and his family, and finally helping him to escape from the men who stab him. While there are some exceptions along the way, the men in this film are overwhelmingly dangerous while the children (of all ages) are helpless and pitiful, innocent and subject to the whims and moods of the men who ultimately control them.[77] As is common in Australian discussions of refugees and other subjects of humanitarianism, women and children are differentiated from men throughout the film.[78]

Thus all the protagonists, in their own gendered ways, are united by a kind of refugee subjectivity that appears irrational, as operating through, as Liisa Malkki has written, a 'loss of moral and later, emotional bearings'.[79] Sara is depicted as blinded by her maternal love for her son such that she is no longer able to make a 'rational' decision, while Najee is animated by a dogged and senseless determination to enact his goal of reaching Australia at all costs. The protagonists' emotional decision-making is presented as becoming dangerous or unhealthy - and certainly abnormal - precisely because the protagonists are 'out of place' (beyond their 'proper' location in their state of nationality). Unlike the 'genuine' refugee who is framed as a

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[75] Charley and Wary (2015), p. 404.
[76] Charley and Wary (2015), p. 406. See also Griffiths (2015).
[77] On refugee children's innocence, and innocence amongst refugees more generally, see Ticktin (2017).
[78] For another example, see the discussion of reporting about refugee camps in Lebanon in Phillips (2009), p. 136.
[79] Malkki (1997), pp. 52, 65.

perpetual victim in need of protection,[80] the protagonists are seen to be too agentic such that it leads to their destruction. They are shown to disrespect the borders and the regimes of international law that authorise states to control them. It is here that the film puts emotions to work in a double-edged way: on the one hand, emotions are scripted as dangerous forces that can lead to the death of the protagonists; and on the other hand, the film's deterrence mission relies upon eliciting emotional responses from its viewers that are intended to act as restraining forces and didactic lessons for other would-be asylum seekers. The film thus treats emotions paradoxically: seeing, for example, the pain of asylum seekers both as an enabling force (that motivates asylum seekers to flee situations of persecution, even if this puts their life at risk or leads to situations of precarity and insecurity) and as a potential deterrent (that could prevent would-be asylum seekers from undertaking dangerous journeys, and that serves as an emotion capable of being instrumentalised in governmental campaigns). As we discuss in the next section, such emotional forces are mobilised in highly gendered ways and have gendered connotations.

3.4   Plot: On Tragedy and Failure in Journey

The problem of refugee deaths at sea, according to the film's deterrence script, is that the protagonists fail to heed the lessons of deterrence and make the 'wrong' and 'irresponsible' choice to board a boat. Rather than seeing this decision as an informed, calculated albeit risky choice, the film's script presents it as a tragic one. Building on its foundations as a melodrama, the film locates the protagonists within the specific genre of a liberal tragedy. Raymond Williams describes the genre of tragedy as a 'conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy him'.[81] Within a liberal tragedy there is an individualisation of human experience, wherein tragic action is 'rooted in the nature of a particular man', rather than the social world.

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[80] See, eg, Raj (2011).
[81] Williams (2006), p. 113.

Here, the protagonist of liberal tragedy 'ends by finding his limits: tragic limits, including the absolute limit of death'.[82] The film's narrative arc aligns with the genre of liberal tragedy narratives, in which the protagonist's punishment comes from their 'own guilty conscience', unlike Greek tragedy where punishment is seen to be the domain of the Gods.[83]

As one example of this, the film depicts Sara's primary duty as arising from her position as a mother, a duty that is owed exclusively to her son. The film's implicit message and lesson then is that Sara ought to have endured the (implied but never depicted) impossibility of her life in Iran, rather than seeking to change her circumstances, to pursue a life free from oppression or to actively take her fate into her own hands. Here, Sara's suffering is thus 'presented as self-inflicted, as an act of folly from which people (especially children) need to be protected'.[84]

What makes this narrative scene one of tragedy is that the heroes are doomed to repeat the failings of earlier asylum seekers. But through this tragedy the film makes a claim for its role - and thus the Australian government's role - in changing people's possible futures. That is, ultimately, in order to be successful, the film's attempt to encourage identification with the protagonists is ambivalent. On the one hand, the viewers are encouraged to see themselves in those who take the journey, but on the other hand, too much identification is dangerous, as rather than repeating the 'wrong' decisions of the protagonist, the viewer is instructed to learn from their mistakes and make different choices.

Importantly though, any such attempted interpellation of the film's viewers or shaping of their emotional identifications with the film's protagonists always gives rise to the possibility of failure. In the case of *Journey*, failure from the perspective of the film-makers

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[82] Williams (2006), p. 115.
[83] Manolova (2017), pp. 131, 148.
[84] van Rijswijk (2018), pp. 189, 197.

(and the Australian state that has commissioned them) may come in a range of forms: of the viewer not seeing themselves in the position of the film's protagonists; of the viewer not empathising with the lead characters; and of the viewer not learning the lessons of deterrence. This can be for a variety of reasons, including inappropriate script, unsuccessful acting, a failed understanding of the cultural milieu depicted in the film, or the passage of time changing the social and political context in which a film is viewed. While for viewers and film critics, the film's failure may be evidenced by a boring or unsatisfying viewing experience or a clichéd depiction of tired themes, for the Australian state, on the other hand, evidence of the film's failure would be its inability to have achieved its stated 'mission' of deterring unauthorised migration from the key refugee source states in which the film was screened.

The central tragic decision in the plot, and the central source of didacticism – whether or not to take a boat across the seas without prior authorisation – is highly gendered. The imagined clear divide in the narrative between taking an unauthorised boat, or choosing to wait in an imaginary 'queue', rests on a distinction between a masculinity of taking charge and a femininity of remaining in place. Writing from a mobility studies perspective, Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles explain that they 'contend that refugees who stay in camps or safe countries of the global South on temporary status are not seen to be as great a threat as those on the move. Those who remain "in place" are both feminized and depoliticized.'[85] Refugees who are on the move, who refuse to wait, are seen by governments as threatening and they are demonised. The 'good refugee' is the one who waits for the state to tell them what to do. This dynamic is made hyper-visible in *Journey*, as those who wait in their home countries or in Indonesia - whether under the care and instruction of family or of a migration agency - are shown to make the less dangerous decision: they are the ones who survive, while those who make a move, who take a boat, are shown to be doomed. Taking control is coded as masculine

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[85] Hyndman and Giles (2011), p. 362.

in this film as elsewhere, and it is demonised. This film, then, is claiming a space for itself as an incarnation of a politics and law which tries to keep people in their place, and create what Hyndman and Giles have described as a group of people 'dispossessed of much access to mobility'.[86] It is similarly part of the project which Alison Mountz identifies as being one wherein 'nation-states are shrinking spaces of asylum, moving borders violently to the bodies of asylum-seekers'.[87] Those borders, which are part of a politics of supporting stagnation and demonising movement, are highly violent and masculinised in the way they control. This control is represented through strategically gendered discourses.

3.5   Effect: Sovereignty and the Production of Economies of Abandonment

The final time the viewers spend with those who took the boat journey rests in a long scene wherein they are in the water, swimming, finding something to hold onto to float, floating, and ultimately drowning. There is a cinematic depiction of the watery borderscape which is achieved through gradual widening of the frame, until the people in the water become mere objects viewed from a distance. Here the film enacts what Nicolas De Genova has termed the 'spectacle' of a purported 'scene of exclusion' that fetishises migrant transgression in which the production of 'illegality' is located at the site of the migrant's body moving through space, rather than in the particular border regimes that outlaw particular forms of mobility. Unauthorised migration at the border thus becomes a localised 'scene of the crime', a scene in which the migrant's presence and act of crossing the border are the infractions.[88] Although a boat eventually comes, it is too late to serve as a proper vessel for rescue. This water is a space of death, an eternal border of a necropolitical state that governs through death.[89] This is the watery 'mobile, unstable, racialized border traversed by the tortuous itineraries of bodies

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[86] Hyndman and Giles (2011), p. 365.
[87] Mountz (2011), pp. 381, 394.
[88] De Genova (2013).
[89] See Mbembe (2019). On the relevance of Mbembe's theorisation of necropolitics to international law, see Dehm (2021).

seeking asylum' that Suvendrini Perera describes,[90] as she notes the ways in which Australia creates a border which 'contracts and expands' in order to exert jurisdiction in the waters between Indonesia and Australia.[91]

This near-final scene of refugee drownings doesn't make for easy viewing, in part because of the 'truth' of the scene: an estimated 1,100 people have died as a result of drowning en route to Australia in the last 10 years, and the IOM estimates globally over 60,000 people have died on 'international journeys' that cross state borders since 2000.[92] The film's implied message to its would-be asylum seeker viewers here is that people travelling to Australia by boat, unauthorised, cannot rely upon state authorities to rescue them. That the ocean is a place beyond the 'protection' of state sovereignty or the obligations of international law.[93] Yet, in localising this scene of death, it conceals more than it reveals in several respects. On the one hand, this scene refuses to acknowledge the assemblage of state practices that have contributed to making asylum seekers routes more dangerous and deadly. This includes, for instance, greater surveillance in Indonesia that forces asylum seekers to take longer, more dangerous routes, as well as so-called 'disruption' campaigns that the Australian government funded that sabotaged fishing boats in Indonesia to make them unseaworthy. On the other hand, this watery border scene hides the complex and sophisticated array of surveillance practices and technologies deployed by the Australian coastguard to detect, capture and turnback asylum seeker boats. Joseph Pugliese has called these 'regimes of statist visuality'.[94] The parallel to actual shipwrecks that saw mass drownings are disturbingly uncanny. For example, in 2001, 353 people died en route to Australia in what became known as the SIEV X incident, and subsequent evidence revealed that Australian authorities knew about the SIEV X hours before

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90 Perera (2009), p. 55.
91 Perera (2009), p. 57.
92 IOM (2017).
93 On the legal imaginary of the ocean, see Jones (2016).
94 Pugliese (2013).

people drowned, but decided not to respond to distress calls because they were deemed to be insufficiently serious as to warrant investigation and considered to be merely 'refugee chatter'. In this sense, the filmic scene is constituted through, and saturated by, state laws and actions, rather than being a simple scene of abandonment or sovereign absence.[95]

Yet, rather than being merely deceptive or misleading, we argue that this scene is representative of how migrant deaths at sea have become enrolled in a discourse of *protection through militarised deterrence*. Herein we see a government exploiting narratives of care in order to exert violent control.[96] There is a long colonial history of this within Australia: colonial histories of protection testify to the violence and paternalism that can be done - and has been done - in the name of enacting a claim to care and furthering a conception of a universal humanity in which peoples individual and collective differences, and their ability to live different lives, is refused and erased.[97] Indeed, this is an expression of Australia's claim to sovereignty, articulated most precisely and infamously by John Howard when he stated 'we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.'[98] Through this film we see that sovereignty pushed outwards through the instantiation of the colonial border, which seeks to tell people (who have not yet interacted with the Australian state) that they should not attempt to breach that border. Sovereign 'care' here is located in the government's narrative of deterrence. And this is a deterrence, it is well known, which does not prevent death or violence, but rather which attempts to ensure that violence and suffering is located elsewhere, outside Australia's actual landmasses but still within their control. Thus

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[95] See also Dehm (2015), 155.
[96] Silverstein (2020).
[97] The literature on this is voluminous. See, for instance, Moreton-Robinson (2009); Watson (2009); Lester and Dussart (2014); Holland (2017).
[98] 'John Howard's 2001 Election Policy Speech,' 28 October 2001, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxlunUpz-Nc&t=891s, uploaded 22 February 2013 by Malcolm Farnsworth. See also Peterie (2016), pp. 442-44; Blair (2021), p. 146.

in this film visual images of migrant suffering, rescue and shipwrecks are utilised in order to authorise and further a draconian deterrence regime toward unauthorised asylum seekers.

As noted above in our discussion of the gendering of decisions that asylum seekers make about when and whether to travel without authorisation, the film ambivalently foregrounds narratives of refugee agency as a way of nonetheless instructing asylum seekers to make the "right choice". This is closely attached to decisions which a state makes about a person's 'vulnerability', which the film closely depicts. But in the way they do, they participate in what Mahmoud Keshavarz has identified as being a 'spectacle of vulnerability', which

> ignores what has made the subjects vulnerable in the first place and ignores the demands voiced by migrants themselves. Rather than being recognized as subjects who are resisting and exposing a historically racist and colonial mobility regime—one that secures an exclusionary wealth for already wealthy Europeans—the refugees are understood as objects of Western compassion and humanism.[99]

That is, the work of Australian sovereignty is obscured, made invisible. In her study of 'economies of abandonment,' Elizabeth Povinelli usefully asks 'how late liberal modes of making die, letting die, and making live are organized within and through a specific imaginary of the event and eventfulness. Who and what are made accountable for various kinds of events?'[100] Moreover, she asks, 'How is eventfulness utilized— put to work—by market and state actors to make sensible the social distribution of life and death?'[101] This film is such an event, created by the government and pushed outwards to people in states in the Global South that have been subjected to Western military interventions and policing practices, to let them know what the Australian government thinks of their lifeworthiness. How, that is, the

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[99] Keshavarz (2020), p. 20.
[100] Povinelli (2011), p. 134.
[101] Povinelli (2011), p. 134.

Australian government anticipates both controlling them in anticipation of their potential travel, and abandoning them if they disobey these orders. The film instructs its viewers that they will not be offered protection or rescue at sea, no matter how compelling their grounds to asylum are, if they come through unauthorised means. Through this filmic event, then, the Australian government asserts its sovereignty, spreading its control - like its border - across the seas and into people's faraway homes.

Viewers of this film are not left with a sense of a shared planetary co-existence in which life is celebrated, but rather with a meditation on stark individual choices and the way that a foreign government imagines the choices they face. In this sense, the film's near-final watery scenes echo the familiar imaginary of earlier anti-asylum visual campaigns such as graphic novels or official poster campaigns. Justine Poon, for example, has illustrated how the 'No Way' poster campaign, initiated as part of Operation Sovereign Borders, projects an idea of a 'muscular, all-seeing sovereignty performed through the maritime drama of interdiction and interception'.[102] For Poon, the boat becomes a passive object which nonetheless 'makes visible the border that it has breached by suddenly becoming a forbidden object upon the previously indistinguishable sea'.[103] Thus this film is an exercise in defeating the self-determination of the would-be asylum seekers who the film both represents and imagines itself as never representing, for within it contains a hope that the viewers will never travel. Through calls to them to maintain their own lack of mobility, to make 'good choices', the Australian state asserts its sovereign ability to both control and abandon. This is a move which is double-edged, but with both sides is conscious and knowing of the diabolical violence it creates and inflicts.

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[102] Poon (2018), p. 114.
[103] Poon (2018), p. 113.

4 Conclusion

In this analysis of the Australian government's propaganda film *Journey*, we have shown the way that this one example of a state-produced PIC authorises – and further establishes – the division of the world into the bordered states that international law imagines and creates. Using stereotyped characters and situations, presented to an overseas audience with the aim of keeping them overseas, a form of violence and mass death that is narrated as being the responsibility of the viewers is positioned as inevitable. This is where the maintenance of the border leads. Refugee deterrence, the film narrates, is always the story of the seas, the inevitable conclusion to the lives of those who attempt to go against the control of state sovereignty.

There is a hope – or perhaps a belief – within this film that the viewing public will passively watch, believe and follow the instructions which the film outlines. But we know of course that this is untrue. Despite Australian, and more generally Western, attempts to control the world and all its people, such a colonial task will always already be failing. Indeed, the very existence of this film points to the fact that the project of maintaining the border is a constant project, requiring continual brutal work.

Through the gendered analysis of the film that this article has presented, we can move beyond simple binaries in representations of refugeehood, that present the choice as one between depicting refugees either as active/present/emotional or as passive/absent/emotionless subjects. While this film attempts to flatten asylum seekers lives and possibilities – to present an all-encompassing and totalising narrative – gendered refugee subjects in fact live within the interstices of the state system that is produced by the regimes of international law. And it is in those interstices, in those queer gaps, that movement and the attempted evasion of state violence, can be found. But still the Australian borderscape continues to relentlessly, violently, expand.

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