

## Forced migration management and politics of scale: how scale shapes refugee and border security policy

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## Forced migration management and politics of scale: how scale shapes refugee and border security policy

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### ABSTRACT

This article shows how politics of scale influence states' conceptions and performances of asylum-seeker and refugee responsibility and risk. The resettlement and border security initiatives that result have dramatic consequences for the forcibly displaced, shaping their experiences in displacement based on who they are, where they are and how they got there. Using Australia's refugee, asylum-seeker, and border externalization policy from 1976 through 1999 as a case, I document the Australian Government's embrace of the idea that proximity engendered special responsibilities to 'regional' asylum-seekers, yet that over time the Government came to reject 'the regional' as a unique scale of responsibility, replacing it with 'the global'. The article also demonstrates how social contexts influence conceptions of risk and obligation and become codified into moral geographies of forced migration management; embodied and territorialized through programmes of refugee resettlement, border militarization and externalization.

### KEYWORDS

Politics of scale; migration management; moral geography; border externalization; refugee resettlement

In this article, I demonstrate how states use politics of scale to shape refugee, asylum-seeker, and border security policy. In referencing 'politics of scale', I mean actors' performances of spatial imaginaries like the 'body', 'household', 'regional' or 'global', also known as scales, as part of political agendas (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2008; Moore, 2008). I show how the Australian Government has used politics of scale to conceptualize, justify, and perform the state's moral geography of forced migration management. By 'moral geography', I am referring to norms structuring how people think about and behave in particular places (McAuliffe, 2012; Watkins, 2020), the socially constructed ideas policing how we act in certain places and notions about who 'belongs' where and why (Cresswell, 2005, pp. 128–130). As I have pointed out elsewhere (Watkins, 2020), to empirically document a moral geography is not to argue the discourse identified is ethical, but instead to analyse how actors have furthered such claims. Given their social construction, the logics articulated and embodied through moral geographies are not absolute. Rather, they are overdetermined, contingent, and resisted (McAuliffe, 2012).

Moral geographies of forced migration management emerge through assemblages of (1) securitizations and border enforcement practices targeting certain displaced peoples as deviant, irregular, or illegal and (2) resettlement and aid programmes targeting others as distressed, worthy of assistance and asylum. Across this article, I demonstrate how moral geographies of forced migration management are influenced by politics of scale that shape access to aid and resettlement

for the forcibly displaced as well as states' border security initiatives. Since 2001, Australia's asylum-seeker policy has received significant attention, specifically the border security and detention initiatives the Pacific Solution (2001–2007) and Operation Sovereign Borders (2013–present). Scholars have examined the Australian Government's use of detention (Neil & Peterie, 2018; Nethery & Holman, 2016), maritime securitization (Ghezelbash et al., 2018), transnational border security initiatives (Watkins, 2017b), and anti-asylum-seeking media campaigns (Watkins, 2017a) for how they target and immobilize asylum-seekers.

Much scholarly emphasis has focused on Australia's use of border externalizations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. This makes sense given the Government's scalar discourse of the Pacific Solution and Operation Sovereign Borders working toward a 'regional solution' to irregular migration. Yet, as I have shown elsewhere (Watkins, 2017b), Australia's border externalizations have extended well beyond Southeast Asia and the Pacific and into the Middle East, East and South Asia, and Africa.

Using Australia's refugee resettlement, asylum-seeker, and border externalization policies from 1976 through 1999 as a case, the sections below demonstrate how the use of scale to govern asylum-seeking operates through relationalities between practices of inclusion and exclusion that far predate the Pacific Solution. I document how starting in the 1970s the Australian Government structured its moral geography of forced migration management around the idea that proximity engendered special responsibilities to 'regional' asylum-seekers, yet that over time the Government came to reject 'the regional' as a unique scale of responsibility, replacing it with 'the global'. I also show how the performativity of 'the regional' and 'the global' failed to fully align with the Government's rhetoric; the Government's politics of scale being performed through sites and embodiments of migration management of varying geographic scope.

This politics of scale influencing Australia's treatment of asylum-seekers did not occur in a political vacuum. Instead, shifting moral geographies of forced migration management have intersected with international displacement trends, social anxieties and racializations, and the securitization of asylum-seeking, more broadly. However, a constant has been the structuring of governmental obligations and securitizations as contingent upon an asylum-seeker's relative location and cross-border mobilities; some mobilities being authorized, others being disqualifying, some locations privileged, others deemed unworthy.

## Scale and forced migration management

Scale is a concept most closely connected to human geography. Within human geography, there are many works critically examining scale's ontology and epistemologies (Blakey, 2020; Brenner, 2001; Cobarrubias, 2020; Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2008; Marston et al., 2005; Moore, 2008). Following Kaiser and Nikiforova (2008), the approach to scale I find most useful is analysing scale as a performative discourse that is part of the broader embodied production of space (Gregson & Rose, 2000). Conceptualizing scale as a performative discourse draws from the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and Butler (1993). These scholars challenged views of discourse as being solely ideational or linguistic, emphasizing the materiality of discourse.

At issue is not whether there is a world external to thought, but instead whether humans can conceptualize objects or enact actions free of the human-made discourse that constrains us (Butler, 1993; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 108). It is through discourse that we come to believe this or that object, place, or action is real, material, or in the process of becoming (Butler, 1993, p. 188). Through our embodied actions, or performances, people 'reiterate, repeat, and cite' discourse –

discourse evolving through thought and embodiment (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Conceptualizing discourse as performative thus argues discourse to be more than representational. Rather, discourse is argued to have material qualities, as being part of material action and in turn being reiteratively shaped by it (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. 107–110).

A performative approach to scale, as Kaiser and Nikiforova (2008) explain, examines how scalar imaginaries and knowledges are performed by actors through the ‘scalar stances they take’ which over time work to produce ‘scale effects’, scale effects being the phenomena scalar discourse names and thus helps (re)produce (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2008, pp. 541–543). This does not necessarily occur through linear discourse-then-effect relationships however, as performative scale effects emerge and change in reiterative ways – ideas and actions influencing each other. Scale effects are relational and overdetermined, connected to other scalar knowledges and with non-scalar discursive fields (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2008, pp. 543–545). Thus, we can think about how a certain place may be (re)produced by scalar performances of the household, global, and local, for example, along with non-scalar discourses like race, class, or gender, and the intersectionality of these scalar and non-scalar discourses.

Human geography’s literature on scale and migration management provides useful examples of these dynamics. This literature has been significantly influenced by feminist geopolitics (Hyndman, 2004). As Williams (2020) explains, feminist geopolitics has worked to shed light on how geopolitics and international relations are embodied at the scales of everyday life and intersect with other subjectivities (1203). Migration scholars have drawn on this approach to understand how migration policy is imagined, enacted, and lived in ways performing, but also complicating, states’ securitized and technocratic migration management discourse.

The individual embodiment of migration policy has been a major focus. Mountz (2004), for example, has shown how nation-states are embodied in the management of forced migration via performances of civil servants and migrant bodies. As Dempsey (2020) highlights, ‘migrants become the discernible embodiment of violence generated through exclusionary rhetoric and labeling, migration policies, and asylum laws’ (9). How this occurs through detention and deportation has been of particular interest. Conlon and Hiemstra (2014), for example, showed how detainees are produced for-profit through ‘micro-economies’ of detention, whereas Hiemstra (2012) has demonstrated detention and deportation to be embodied by migrants and their families as a transnationally lived experience. Hiemstra’s work is a fascinating example of how performances of migration policy work to co-produce experiences, subjectivities, and locales across space.

Other studies have focused on how migration management intersects with other discursive fields, particularly debates over national identity (Bose, 2020), and how migration governance is rescaled to target certain migrants as undesirable. For example, Gorman (2019) demonstrates how US asylum claims adjudicators ‘scale up’ and ‘scale down’ asylum-seekers’ experiences and subjectivities to exclude Central American asylum-seekers deemed undesirable or unworthy. Relatedly, Varsanyi (2011) documents city officials and activists’ efforts to ‘scale down’ US federal immigration law to the local-city scale within the context of broader pro-immigration ‘neoliberalizing policies formulated at the national and supranational scales’ (296). This work exposes how shifting scalar performances of border enforcement intersect with other scalar logics and anti-immigration politics, and how the rescaling of immigration enforcement to ‘the local’ often intersects with racialized discourse of belonging and illegality (Hiemstra, 2010).

States efforts to ‘jump scale’ and extra-territorially govern potential migrants abroad exhibit similar qualities. Collaborative works between Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz have been particularly apt at exploring how scale, securitization, and border externalization become intertwined,

specifically through states' embrace of 'regional approaches' to irregular migration (Loyd & Mountz, 2014; Mountz & Loyd, 2013). These scholars have documented how such regionalisms are performed at 'finer scales', places like islands, detention centres and migrants' bodies as performative sites of containment. Noting such works, Cobarrubias (2020) has recently called for greater empirical and theoretical consideration for how scale and border externalization intersect.

I agree with this call but would broaden it. Migration management is not circumscribed to performances of exclusion, but instead also incorporates the governance of those selected for inclusion. Moral geographies of forced migration management in particular operate through relationalities between the two. Consider how actors frame 'worthy refugees' against 'irregular migrants' or the state's 'legitimate' refugee resettlement programme as being put at risk by 'illegals'. How logics of scale shape ideas about deservedness and how this crystalizes into performative policies of exclusion and inclusion exist in relation to one another.

The resulting scale effects have dramatic consequences for the forcibly displaced, shaping their experiences in displacement based on who they are, where they are and how they got there. How scale is performed to such effect cannot be determined solely from an actor's rhetoric, however – scale effects cannot be assumed to perfectly correspond to the scalar imaginaries actors adopt. A 'regional approach' to asylum-seeking irregular migration, for example, may not be experienced by 'the region' as a whole but instead through specific sites like a new detention centre, the body of a detainee, the city hosting resettled refugees and the more circumscribed spaces of their everyday lives. The above mentioned literature has taught us that we must be sceptical of politics of scale shaping states' moral geographies of forced migration management and curious about the reasons for and consequences of the scalar stances adopted.

## Scale and Australia's moral geography of forced migration management

The sections below analyse Australia's moral geography of forced migration management from 1976 through 1999. This timeframe was chosen as Australia began forming an official refugee resettlement programme in 1976, while 1999 marked the end of an era in which comparatively few asylum-seekers arrived to Australia by boat, arrivals increasing from 372 in 1999 to 2,939 in 2000. The response to this increase culminated in the Pacific Solution and have been well-documented. My analysis is derived from a dataset of primary source documents produced by the Department of Immigration,<sup>1</sup> Parliament of Australia, Australian Government offices and independent studies commissioned by the Parliament or Executive. I used a purposeful sampling strategy to select reports based on their relationship to asylum-seeker, refugee, and border security policy. The dataset comprised 54 primary source documents. Data were coded using a combination of descriptive and analytic coding, classifying data into themes and then analysing connections within and across themes.

### *The region*

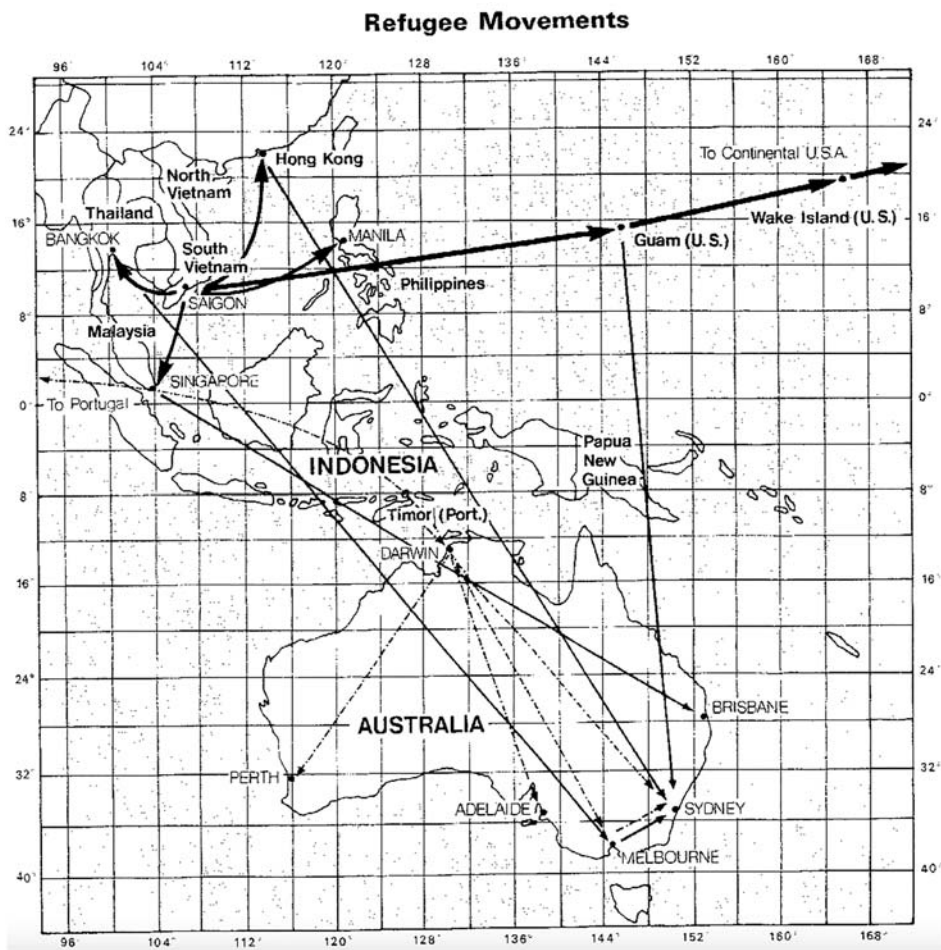
Australia played a significant role in forging and facilitating the two multilateral agreements, the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) (1979–1989) and Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-Chinese Refugees (CPA) (1989–1996), managing the 3 million asylum-seekers who fled Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from 1975 through the mid-1990s. The ODP and CPA were agreements where countries of first asylum, primarily ASEAN states, agreed to encamp asylum-seekers provided resettlement countries like the US, Australia, and others agreed to provide resettlement.

The logics which shaped Australia's role in managing this exodus can be traced to a 1976 Parliamentary report, *Australia and the Refugee Problem*. This was the Australian Government's first report dedicated to refugee and asylum-seeker policy.

Politics of scale, specifically 'the region', are foundational to the report. While there were other refugee crises at the time, the report focused on Southeast Asia, regionally scaling Australia's 'refugee problem'. Prior to the report's main text there is a map (Figure 1). There is not a key or legend but the bolder lines seem to depict asylum seeking routes of larger size, the thinner and dashed lines secondary movements.

It is interesting that given Australia's history of social anxiety about Asian migrants the first piece of information the authors chose to convey was Southeast Asian asylum-seekers' ability to reach Australia.

Indeed, even prior to the report's release the Government resettled 111 Vietnamese asylum-seekers arriving by boat (Neumann, 2015, pp. 251–252). Correspondingly, throughout the report a qualified responsibility to resettle Southeast Asian asylum-seekers was endorsed due to their



**Figure 1.** Map from *Australia and the Refugee Problem*. Source: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia (1976, p. 4).

‘regional’ origin. The authors lament that Australia did not evacuate more refugees as Northern Vietnamese troops took Saigon, expressing regret that ‘countries with inherited responsibilities in South East Asia, including Australia, declined to contribute more’ (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1976, p. 28). This statement asserts that due to geographic proximity Australia had an ‘inherited responsibility’ to aid those displaced within ‘the region’.

This scalar stance is further explained in a 1981 Department of Immigration report, *Refugees and Australia: A Perspective* (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1981a),

The Indo-Chinese refugee situation has presented Australia with an unusual combination of difficult issues which, taken together, represent a forceful challenge to the Australian community’s traditional attitude to people in need. Australia is accepting for resettlement as refugees a large number of people who come from very different racial and cultural groups and who, in the not too distant past, would not have been acceptable as settlers under any circumstances. In determining a response to the Indo-Chinese refugee situation, regional proximity of the problem must be considered. Australia is physically closer to this refugee emergency than to any previous large exodus of refugees ... Not only does Australia have an obligation as a responsible member of the international community but also, as a good neighbour, it should be willing to meet its share of regional obligations (6).

In associating geographic proximity with ‘responsibility’ and ‘obligation’ the regional scale is imagined as a unique space compelling governmental action. People displaced within a nation-state’s region are understood as being owed governmental care beyond that of non-regional asylum-seekers. Scalar obligation is described in the quote above as overriding previous concerns about supposed racial or cultural characteristics, shifting ideas about who is ‘in need’ and who is obligated to meet said need. Thus, who counts as a crisis and who is responsible for responding is tied to proximity, specifically whether such a crisis is ‘regional’.

While the Australian Government constructed ‘the region’ as a unique space of responsibility, ‘the region’ was also ascribed with risk. *Australia and the Refugee Problem* (1976) endorsed what the authors term the ‘Camp System’ as a regional geopolitical order for managing asylum-seekers (27–36). In the report, the Camp System described the refugee processing architecture the US established to resettle Vietnamese refugees; holding and processing refugees on islands then relocating them to the US in waves. Scaled to ‘the region’, this territorial division of labour idealizes a schema where there are essentially four types of states serving unique functions: (1) source countries; (2) countries of first asylum; (3) transit countries; and, (4) resettlement countries. This spatial architecture became manifest in the ODP and CPA agreements referenced above.

While the Government of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser embraced a regional responsibility to aid and resettlement, this position was contingent upon the Camp System’s fortification of Australia from large numbers of boat arrivals. Thus, ‘the region’ was imagined as a specific moral geography of forced migration management, one of particular responsibilities but also risks necessitating extra-territorial regulation. A series of 1979 policy memorandums articulate this contingent commitment. One such memorandum states,

Australia’s current efforts in refugee resettlement are focused on the Indochinese refugees. This Australian emphasis is logical because of the facts of geography and important political associations. We have an obligation to assist not only the refugees themselves but also our neighbours and friends in the region ... (Commonwealth of Australia, 1979, pp. 200–201).

Again, ‘the region’ emerges from proximity (‘facts of geography’) and is assigned certain obligations, yet also risks. The Cabinet concluded that if boat arrivals increased and Australia became a de facto country of first asylum it would be necessary to establish refugee camps on Australian territory,

If Australia had no alternative but to accept the status of a country of first asylum we should without compunction and as a matter of principle seek international assistance in resettling refugees ... effort should be made as a matter of principle that Australia should not be expected to grant automatic resettlement to refugees arriving on Australian territory (Commonwealth of Australia, 1979, p. 187).

While ‘the region’ was imagined as engendering a unique moral responsibility this was deemed less important than the responsibility to protect Australian territory from unauthorized asylum-seekers. Per the quote, if asylum-seeker mobilities made Australia into a country of first asylum this would negate resettlement responsibilities. Australia’s moral geography of forced migration management is evident, ‘regional’ asylum-seekers were owed certain obligations based on their relative location yet that obligation was contingent upon how and where they moved. Responsibility was to be performed through resettlement, embodied in resettled refugees, while risk was performed through border externalizations and reterritorializations – the creation of camps and encamped bodies.

Indeed, the Australian Government performed the Camp System through border externalizations creating sites of confinement across Southeast Asia. As early as March 1978 the Government was engaging with Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore to encourage encampment and convince all Southeast Asian countries to ‘hold Vietnamese boats in transit’ (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1981b, p. 6) This approach ultimately became embraced in the ODP and CPA. In July 1978, Australia requested UNHCR facilitate multilateral meetings to discuss asylum processing, three meetings occurring by 1979 (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1979, p. 13). In May 1979, Australia participated in a meeting with regional governments to ‘discuss Special Processing Centres in Southeast Asia’, Australia agreeing to provide \$250,000 USD to help fund a new camp on Galang Island, Indonesia (DIEA, 1981b, p. 8). Once established, the Galang Island camp complemented Malaysia’s Bidong Island camp as two of the region’s largest refugee camps.

A 1979 Australian Cabinet memorandum described Australian policy as encouraging ASEAN countries to grant temporary asylum (i.e. to become countries of first asylum), encouraging international support, developing resettlement functions and maintaining Australia’s position as a country of resettlement (Commonwealth of Australia, 1979, p. 179). This is an outline for the Camp System, a scheme supposedly fulfilling regional responsibilities of care while ensuring ‘the national’ was protected. Regional risk and responsibility was performed through isolated sites of confinement, remote camps on select countries, docile refugee bodies produced through waiting. Resettlement was not truly regional or open to the breadth of the region’s refugees, nor did the Camp System territorialize evenly across the region. Rather, limited and liminal spaces of authorized mobilities, waiting, and reterritorialization were engendered.

The Government further performed ‘the region’ through developing new governmental functions facilitating refugee selection and resettlement. Between 1945 and 1976, Australia resettled nearly 300,000 refugees or ‘quasi-refugees’ (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1976, p. 8). Overwhelmingly, these were white Europeans displaced by World War Two and/or fleeing communist states and were provided visas through the normal immigration programme. This corresponded to Australia’s broader racialized immigrant recruitment strategy under the White Australia Policy, but also was influenced by the US and Canada’s refugee resettlement programmes (Jupp, 2007, pp. 176–177). The emergence of regional responsibility marked a major departure from past practice, each year from 1977–1991 Southeast Asians comprising the largest share of refugees resettled, around 140,000 being resettled by 1999 (see Hugo, 2002 for a complete breakdown of Australia’s resettlement programme during this time).



This new project began in earnest with deployments of immigration agents to Southeast Asian camps in 1976 (DIEA, 1976, p. 8). In 1977, a new immigration office was established in Bangkok to process refugee applications from across the region (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1977, p. 15). Institutionally, regional responsibility was also performed through the Department of Immigration developing a number of new humanitarian and refugee visas, the Department being reorganized several times from 1976–1999 to better design and administer these resettlement programmes. As such, regional responsibility was territorialized through the establishment of new places of asylum and care within and beyond Australian territory, embodied by immigration agents in the field and through resettled refugees.

### *Global responsibility*

This transformation quickly became controversial, a new politics of scale emphasizing Australia's 'global' responsibility to refugees swiftly emerging to challenge 'the region' as carrying unique obligations. During this time Australia's refugee resettlement programme became more geographically diverse, yet Southeast Asians continued to be resettled in comparatively high numbers. By the early 1980s the Department of Immigration began indicating that the refugee programme's regional focus was under pressure from the media and segments of the public (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1983, p. 1; Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1984, p. 1). The Department responded to this pressure through publically securitizing asylum-seekers as a growing threat. In 1982, for example, for the first time the Department featured in its annual report a story about the deportation of 'bogus refugees', portraying Australia as increasingly susceptible to irregular arrivals (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1982, pp. 63–64).

That same year a new policy of individual refugee status determinations was initiated, evaluating asylum applications on a case-by-case basis regardless of their source country (DIEA, 1983, p. 27). This ended the prior policy of automatically granting 'Indo-Chinese' asylum-seekers refugee status (Robinson, 1998, p. 153). The new policy enabled 'people of any nationality outside their country' to apply for asylum in Australia (DIEA, 1983, p. 27). While the Department stated that priority would be given to applicants from source countries which Australia had a longstanding interest, like Southeast Asia, this was certainly a step away from privileging 'the region'.

The following year the Department began an initiative to 'diversify' resettlement away from Southeast Asia (DIEA, 1983, p. 1). This was justified through stressing the need to 'reflect the global dimensions of refugee problems' (DIEA, 1983, p. 27). By 1984 rhetoric concerning the need to diversify resettlement intensified. Throughout the Department's 1984 annual report are references to refugee policy being altered in response to the country's sense there was too much Asian immigration. The Department listed their top policy changes as emphasizing the entry of relatives of Australian residents, restricting economic migrants, and 'diversifying the refugee program to respond without discrimination to refugee situations around the world' (DIEA, 1984, p. 113). The Department's use of the phrase, 'to respond without discrimination', directly challenges notions of regional responsibility, proclaiming regional responsibility to be discriminatory to non-regional refugees. In stark contrast to the regional imaginary in *Australia and the Refugee Problem*, the Department increasingly described refugee issues (or 'problems') to be global rather than regional and thereby rescaling Australia's responsibility from 'the regional' to 'the global'.

Unfortunately, there is little textual evidence for what 'the global' purportedly engendered or why. One can speculate that in replacing 'the regional' with 'the global' a more cosmopolitan

sense of obligation is being embraced, the argument that humanitarian commitments should not be arbitrarily bound and instead are owed to all of humanity, for example. Within the context of individual status assessments being adopted in 1982, perhaps an embrace of a moral cosmopolitan philosophy centring ethical obligations on the individual rather than groups or places was being adopted. In this sense, politics of scale stressing ‘the global’ over ‘the regional’ is rescaling responsibilities to humanity qua the individual, ‘the global’ and ‘the individual’ being relationally interconnected scales of moral obligation.

Under this logic, ‘the global’ can only be performed through assessing obligation on a case-by-case, individual, basis rather than through the prism of place or group boundaries. Yet we can also think about how embrace of ‘the global’ came during a time of social anxiety about the racial character of Australia, the Government responding to public pressure asserting that Australia was becoming ‘too Asian’. Viewed in this light, scalar and racial politics intersect – ‘the global’ taking on the character of not being ‘the regional’ qua Southeast Asian. The above mentioned facts about the media and segments of the public turning against continued commitment to regional responsibility make this a more likely influence than a nascent moral cosmopolitanism.

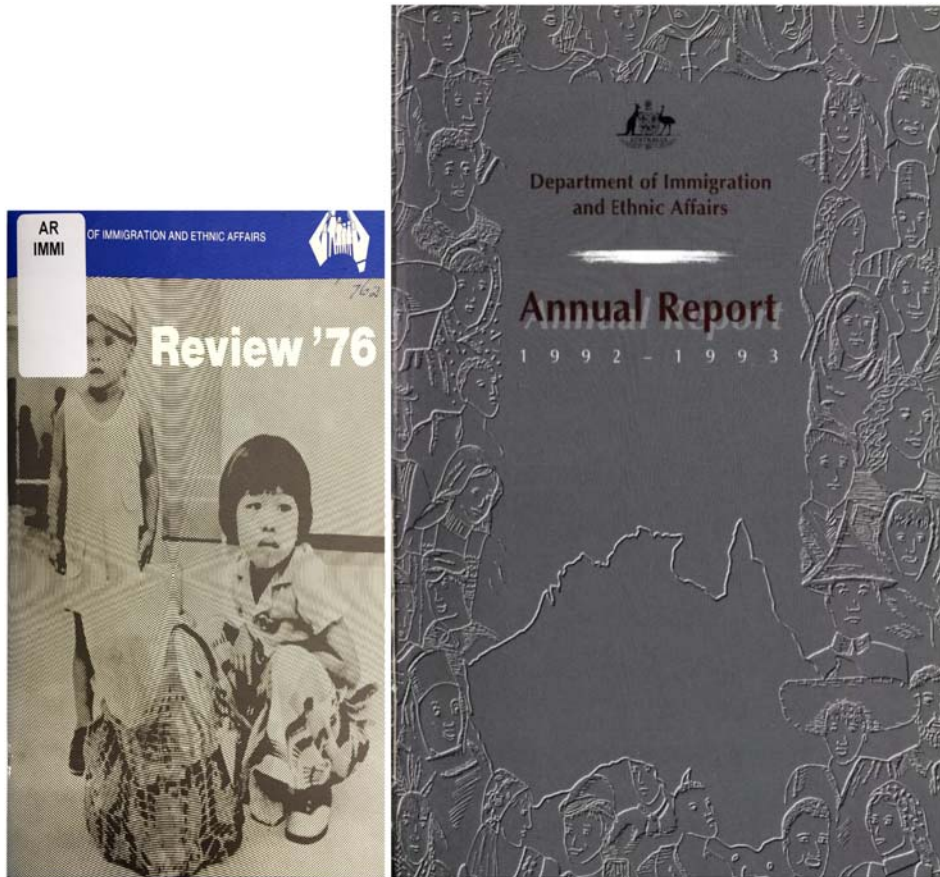
What can be verified is that Australia began geographically diversifying refugee resettlement. During the 1983–1984 fiscal year, Australia resettled 838 refugees from Central and South America, up from 50 across 1982–1983, and dramatically increased the resettlement of refugees from the Middle East to 982 (DIEA, 1984, pp. 36–37). Similar to the Australian Government’s performance of ‘the region’, global responsibility was further performed and embodied through the opening of new immigration offices (in Mexico City, for example) and the deployment of more immigration agents to the Middle East (DIEA, 1984, p. 2). 1983–1984 also marked the first time Australia accepted an ‘appreciable’ number of refugees from Africa, resettling 106 refugees primarily from Ethiopia (DIEA, 1984, p. 2).

Per the Department of Immigration, the geographic expansion of the refugee programme reflected the Department’s ‘recognition of the global nature of the refugee problem’ (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1985, p. 67), that ‘as far as resettlement is concerned, Australia operates global Refugee and Special Humanitarian Programs which seek to respond to the needs of refugees ... in most [of the world’s] major refugee situations’ (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIEA], 1986, p. 63). In 1986, the Department described reductions in Southeast Asian resettlement in the following way,

Over the years Australia has been gradually adjusting the composition of its refugee intake according to changing needs and international developments. The program has therefore diversified from an original concentration on Indo-Chinese and Eastern European refugees, to accommodate people from Central and South America, the Middle East, and Africa (DIEA, 1986, p. 64).

Across the 1980s ‘the global’ was performed in selective and geographically uneven ways, however. Each year Southeast Asians consistently represented over half of those resettled, while the geographic diversification of the resettlement programme corresponded to subjective determinations of which displacement events qualified as ‘major’ and which refugees were considered ‘right’ for Australia.

In 1987, the Australian Parliament commissioned a study to examine immigration. The FitzGerald Report (1988), as it became known, argued resettlement should further pivot from Southeast Asia (84). Jupp (2007) describes the FitzGerald Report as the most important influence on the Department of Immigration for a decade (45), and indeed across the 1990s the geographic scope of resettlement diversified (Hugo, 2002). This rescaling was institutionally embodied and



**Figure 2.** Department of Immigration annual report covers. Source: DIEA (1976) (left); DIEA (1993) (right).

performed through resettlement but also materialized in social artifacts. For example, from 1976 through 1997 Department of Immigration annual reports almost always featured cover images of refugees and immigrants. Through the 1980s the people featured were from Europe or Vietnam. Yet starting in the 1990s this changed, with those featured coming from an increasingly diverse set of countries.

This is made most clear through comparing the 1976 cover (the first ever) to the 1993 cover (Figure 2). Representative of the era, the 1976 cover depicts two Vietnamese refugees (left side of Figure 2). The 1993 cover (right side of Figure 2, enlarged for clarity), however, emphasizes the new ‘global’ nature of Australia’s immigration programmes through sketches of people from across the world converging on Australia. The intent of the 1993 cover is clear – that immigrants to Australia come from across the globe – and indeed by the mid-1990s refugees resettled from Yugoslavia and the Middle East far outnumbered those from Southeast Asia.

### **Global risk**

The emergence and performance of global responsibility was mirrored by a restructuring of the purported risk posed by asylum-seeking irregular migration. The Australian Government began

stressing that asylum-seeking had become a global rather than just regional threat and that asylum-seekers from anywhere in the world now endangered Australia's position as a self-declared resettlement country. The growth of the world's refugee population and a resumption of asylum-seeker boat arrivals to Australia served as catalysts (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, p. 31). In 1988, the ODP broke down as asylum-seeker flight in Southeast Asia dramatically increased. Boat arrivals to Australia from November 1989 onward is described by Jupp (2007) as causing a 'panic' (43). Despite only eight boats carrying 382 asylum-seekers arriving between November 1989 and May 1991, the Department referred to a new 'wave' of boat arrivals (Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs [DILGEA], 1991, pp. 58–67). These new boat people were primarily asylum-seekers from Cambodia fleeing that country's ongoing violence and ethnic Viet refugees who had already been resettled in China but subsequently decided to travel to Australia in search of permanent refuge. The aforementioned CPA (1989–1996) reproduced the Camp System and Australia's commitment to resettling Southeast Asian refugees yet a merging of asylum-seeker and border security policy accelerated. Loughnan (2019) documents how the CPA helped solidify a distinction between 'genuine refugees' and asylum-seekers in Australian refugee policy and law, while normalizing migrant detention.

Indeed, across the 1990s around 300 asylum-seekers, primarily from 'the region', were arriving by boat each year, interestingly leading to an escalating scalar politics about the 'global' threat of irregular migration. A 1990 Parliament report, for example, stressed the need to strengthen border security as 'control of illegals has taken on a new urgency' (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1990, p. 12). The Department of Immigration stated that 'it is a cause for some concern that asylum-seekers are choosing to pass through other countries en route without seeking protection in order to reach Australia as a preferred destination' (DILGEA, 1991; pp. 56–57). The Department's 1991 annual report listed the 'availability of relatively cheap and fast means of international travel' and the 'expansion of western images of wealth and opportunities to every corner of the globe' as two of the four key world developments affecting migration policy (DILGEA, 1991, p. 25). The supposed threat of globally mobile asylum-seekers was also a theme in the influential 1991 *Refugee Review* (National Population Council, 1991). Across the report are references to 'jet-age asylum-seekers' who could easily reach Australia, and arguments that Australia needed to protect against self-selecting asylum-seekers from the world over.

This scalar discourse was performed through increasingly harsh refugee status determination, detention, asylum, and deportation policies. A month after the 1991 *Refugee Review* report was released the Department of Immigration adopted the policy of mandatory detention for all asylum-seekers arriving by boat. Mandatory detention was codified into law by the Migration Amendment Act of 1992, 'the global' risk of asylum-seeker mobilities being performed through the production of domestic detention centres and detainees; specific sites, subjectivities, and lived experiences. Asylum-seeker arrivals, regional or otherwise, were generally detained while they awaited the results of their refugee status determinations. Those determined not to be 'genuine refugees' and/or eligible for asylum in Australia were deported back to their country of nationality or to transit countries. Bridging visas also were introduced, placing temporal limits on the length of asylum for certain refugees and restricting their access to social welfare services (Hugo, 2002, p. 34).

As asylum-seeking became securitized as a 'global' risk, not only detention and deportation but deterrence and border externalization emerged as purported solutions. A bipartisan 1992 report, *Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian System*, argued that self-selecting asylum-seeker arrivals threatened to crowd out Australia's refugee and immigration programmes (45). The report (1992) was at pains to stress that 'states have sovereignty over their borders', concluding that as 'Western

countries are now countries of first and last asylum ... deterrence appears a sensible control option' (9–10). The report (1992) asserted that as asylum-seekers were refusing to be encamped, resettlement countries were forced to 'discourage and obstruct' asylum-seeking (9–10). The report (1992) concluded the Government was 'forced' into hardline positions by asylum-seekers,

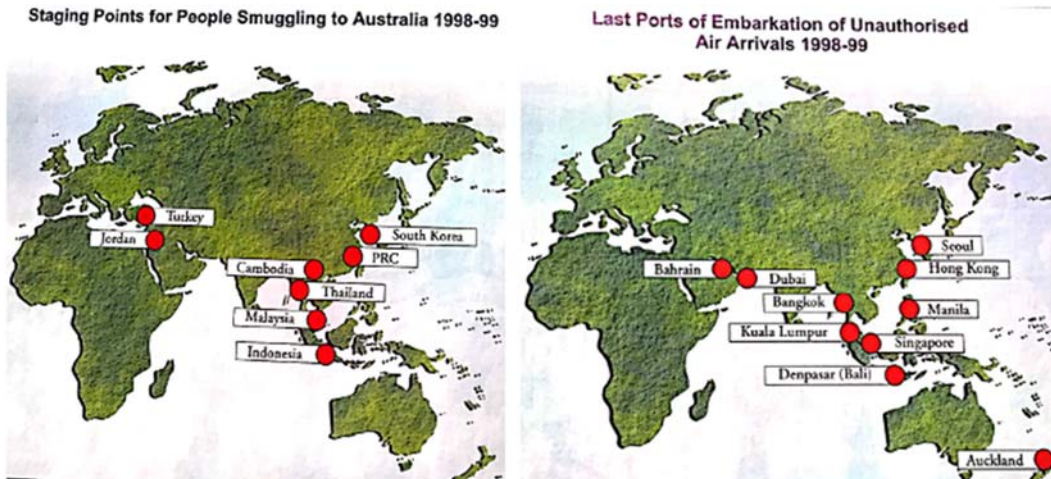
The Committee accepts the need to move away from the old system in which on-shore refugees [spontaneous asylum-seeker arrivals] were automatically given permanent residence. This change was forced upon the Government by the unprecedented rise in on-shore claims and the continuing unpredictability of on-shore refugee numbers (83).

Thus, perceptions that not merely 'the regional' but now 'the global' threatened Australian territory led to increasing calls to develop and deploy systems of asylum-seeker deterrence; the Camp System required rescaling from 'the regional' to 'the global'. As the Cabinet memorandums referenced above hypothesized, the Government responded to asylum-seeking mobilities through transforming how Australian territory functioned as a site of forced migration management.

The report (1992) advised respatializing Australian territory through making asylum-seekers ineligible for automatic resettlement if they had access to a 'safe third country', could 'alleviate perceived risk by relocation to a region of safety within the country of origin', or were 'seeking residence in Australia principally to secure better social, economic or educational opportunities' (102). Following these recommendations, Safe Third Country legislation was enacted in 1994 which enabled the deportation of refugees determined to have effective protection elsewhere. This changed Australia's moral geography of forced migration management in two important ways. First, Australian territory as a site of forced migration management changed in that thereafter only asylum-seekers who moved in these newly approved ways were eligible for resettlement. Second, other countries became legally designated as sites 'safe' for asylum-seekers, sites asylum-seekers were supposedly unjustified in fleeing from and could be legally deported back to.

An Australian National Audit Office (1998) review of asylum-seeker policy furthered the case for border externalizations. The audit (1998) identified multilateral and bilateral arrangements like naval cooperation, intelligence sharing, and anti-people smuggling operations as desirable measures to deter asylum-seeking (57). The Government under Prime Minister John Howard and Minister for Immigration Philip Ruddock agreed, expanding the targeting of asylum-seekers in source and transit countries with such measures (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs [DIMA], 1999). As I have shown elsewhere (Watkins, 2017b), starting in the late 1990s the Government adopted a policy of targeting *potential* asylum-seekers wherever they may be with border externalizations – from border security initiatives and information campaigns to humanitarian aid. These performances place-made sites of containment across maritime spaces, Southeast, East, and South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (DIMA, 1999).

The geography of Australia's border externalizations in the late 1990s was far from global, however. Instead, people and places were targeted based on determinations of their *potential* to travel to Australia or produce asylum-seekers, often informed by past air and boat arrivals. As the maps in Figure 3 show, while the asylum-seeking risk was globally scaled the border externalizations performing this discourse were more narrowly targeted. In the Immigration report from which the maps in Figure 3 derived, *Protecting the Border* (1999), these sites were described as 'staging points' and 'last ports' as the asylum-seekers using them came from many countries (DIMA, 1999, pp. 21–24). For example, Jordan and Turkey were seen as 'staging points' for asylum-seekers from across the Middle East, whereas South Korea and Seoul served as a 'staging point' and 'last port' for Iranians and Algerians, while Indonesia



**Figure 3.** Maps representing the ‘global’ asylum-seeking risk. Source: DIMA (1999, pp. 22–23).

and Malaysia housed ‘last ports’ for asylum-seekers from the Middle East, Iran, and Afghanistan (DIMA, 1999, p. 22). Border externalizations were deployed to target such ‘staging points’ and ‘last ports’, but also other source and transit countries, as well (DIMA, 1999, pp. 16–20). Thus, just as externalizations administered under the logic of regional responsibility/risk manifested through targeted performances at ‘finer scales’ than ‘the region’, so too did the globalization of the Camp System; externalizations geographically diversifying and shifting in accordance to the perceived locations and characteristics of *potential* asylum-seekers.

## Conclusion

The geographic expression of a state’s commitment to refugees and asylum-seekers can be found in its moral geography of forced migration management – which refugees it provides aid to, when, where, and why. The geographic expression of a state’s securitization of refugees and asylum-seekers also can be found in its moral geography of forced migration management – which refugees and asylum-seekers it discredits and targets for immobilization, when, where, and why. As this article has shown, logics and politics of scale influence states’ perception and performance of refugee responsibility and risk. Yet the performativity of scalar politics are not absolute; for example, the case above demonstrated incongruencies between the Australian Government’s scalar stances and actual performances of scale. Nor are the politics of scale permanent. Power changes hands, actors change their minds, and external events have impact. What appears to be a constant is that actors ascribe meaning to proximity and distance, as well as specific peoples, places, and mobilities. How this becomes relationally connected to notions of responsibility, risk, and other discursive fields impactfully shapes which forcibly displaced peoples are targeted for immobilization and which receive international protection.

## Note

1. Over the years, the Australian Government department in charge of immigration and refugee policy has had numerous name changes. Currently, the department is called the Department of Home

Affairs. In the text, for the sake of clarity I will consistently use ‘Department of Immigration’ when referring to the department.

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