

The London School of Economics and Political Science

# **Realness, Wrongness, Justice**

Exploring Criminalization as a Mediated Politics of  
Vulnerability

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# Declaration

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# Abstract

This thesis makes an empirically grounded attempt to rethink the problem of ‘criminalization’—what it is, how it works, and the kinds of political work it performs—from the perspective of media culture. Informed by an abolitionist ethic, it explores the role played by news media in building, maintaining, and potentially transforming, the justificatory basis for different forms of security practice. More specifically, it investigates how journalistic representations of crime events work to negotiate, in and through public culture, the imaginative conditions of possibility for policing, incarceration, punitive deportation, and other strategies of so-called ‘crime control’. Its major theoretical contributions are a radically expanded understanding of what it means to culturally ‘criminalize’, as well as the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a new critical heuristic for understanding the relationship between ways of communicating (in)security, on the one hand, and way of acting upon it, on the other. Together, these two contributions open new horizons (both scholarly and practical) for the cultural resistance of criminalization as an endemic, yet ultimately arbitrary, logic of contemporary social and political life.

Empirically, these contributions unfold through a close analysis of one specific case of mediated criminalization: the construction of ‘African gang crime’ in and through the Australian press. Since beginning to arrive in Australia in significant numbers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, members of Australia’s Black African diaspora have been subject to persistent negative media attention, with news narratives focussing on perceived issues of juvenile delinquency and gang activity. The analysis approaches news media representations of ‘African gang crime’ events (both print and televisual) as sites of vulnerability politics, where different and sometimes conflictual accounts of social vulnerability struggle for public recognition. Deploying an ‘analytics of mediation’ (Chouliaraki, 2010) which combines granular multi-modal text analysis with the critical analysis of discourse (CDA), the thesis explicates how criminalization operates as a mediated politics of vulnerability across three key dimensions: first, through the negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition, or its constructed sense of “realness”; second, through the negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition, or its constructed sense of “wrongness”; and finally, through the positioning of vulnerability as a practical epistemology of justification, or as a justificatory basis for different kinds of social practice.

As the practices we have historically called criminal justice experience a moment of radical normative instability, this thesis argues that the mediation of criminality will have a critical role to play in determining its longer political legacy. To the wealth of political economy critiques of policing and prisons, the thesis accentuates ‘imaginability’ as an important critical horizon for our efforts to transform the practices through which we pursue safety and justice, and practices of mediated representation as crucial to how this horizon might be remade. Amid heated debates about the status of ‘the victim’ in contemporary political life, it also deploys a critique of mediated (in)security to consider the wider historical significance of a particular, premediated formation of white victimhood that expresses itself in a subjunctive mood: a victim*could*, wherein it is the very possibility of injury (rather than the fact or the likelihood) that subverts the promises of whiteness in contemporary Australian life to position its subjects as ‘wronged’.

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# Introduction: Mediated Criminalization in Our Conjunction

## A Crisis of Imagination

In the last decade, but especially since the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Black and Indigenous activists and scholars the world over have dragged our public conversations about policing and prisons into much more urgent, fundamental territory. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has placed the issue of police violence on the national agenda of almost every Western democracy, and a previously hegemonic imaginary of policing as public safety—at least, in the mainstream media landscape—has been fundamentally destabilized. Writers and actors from celebratory cop shows have engaged in public reflection and donated large sums of money to bail funds in the United States (see Kemp, 2020); legislatures have introduced and, in some cases, passed bills aimed at bridling the powers of law enforcement; and there is greater public pressure than ever to deliver real consequences for police officers who harm or kill civilians (see Eder et al., 2021). At the same time, however, we are witnessing a perhaps inevitable cultural backlash: #BlueLivesMatter is on the rise; a ‘moderate’ stance on the question of crime control—often, articulated as a call for reinvestment and reform—has become a distinguishing hallmark of political centrism (see Chaggari, 2021; Oladipo, 2022); and moral outrage over waning public deference towards law enforcement agents has become a centrepiece of the right-wing ‘culture wars’ in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere (see for example Lind, 2017).

In the city of my birth—Melbourne, Australia—the rhetoric of #BlackLivesMatter has been taken up with force but also with a notably different inflection. There it has been spearheaded by Indigenous activists, scholars, and community leaders, who explicitly locate the violences of ‘law enforcement’ and incarceration within the much longer and much larger context of colonial occupation and genocide on the Australian continent. Aboriginal deaths in custody and spiralling rates of detention and incarceration for Indigenous adults and children have been at the forefront of the #BlackLivesMatter protest discourse across Australia<sup>1</sup>. In Melbourne, however, the global

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<sup>1</sup> See The Guardian (2020) for indicative coverage of the 2020 protests in Australia, and Watego (2020), Corbould (2020), and Hazel (2018) for reflections on the points of historical congruence and solidarity between the US- and Australia-based movements for Bla(c)k life and liberation.

consciousness-raising around anti-Black racism, brutality, and impunity in policing precipitated by Floyd's murder in Minneapolis carried a second point of recent historical resonance: the fervent criminalization of African migrants and refugees—especially, those from Sudanese or South Sudanese backgrounds—by Australian politicians and the press. This criminalization has taken two conjoined forms: first, decades of vitriolic anti-refugee sentiment and rhetoric in mainstream Australian politics; and second, a persistent narrative in local crime reporting about so-called 'African gang crime' in Melbourne's suburbs.

When I commenced work on this thesis in September 2017, I could never have imagined that the state of our public discourse—both in Australia and elsewhere—about the normative place of criminal justice institutions in our society would have advanced so far as it has by the time of my writing this introduction. I would have struggled to believe that by June 2020 the hashtag #DefundThePolice would be trending on Twitter; that major publications like *The Nation*<sup>2</sup>, *The Guardian*<sup>3</sup>, *The New Yorker*<sup>4</sup> and *The New York Times Magazine*<sup>5</sup> would be publishing think-pieces on police and prison abolition and feature interviews with activist scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore or Mariame Kaba. In some ways, these developments seem to have (welcomely) disrupted what was then a core premise for this study: the stubborn unimaginability for many citizens (especially, white citizens) of a world that does not anchor its efforts towards harm reduction and emancipatory safety in the failing promises of a so-called 'criminal justice' system.

However, the longer political legacies of this overdue moment of normative disruption around 'crime' and its management remain suspended in the ether. The conjuncture we find ourselves in is one marked not only by 'emerging' conversations<sup>6</sup> about possible alternatives to police and prisons, but also the steady fortification and consolidation of the structures of racial capitalism, colonial exploitation, and neoliberal governance that cultivated the system we have now (see Davis, 2003; Wilson Gilmore & Gilmore, 2016; Kelley, 2016; Vitale, 2017). Meanwhile, the shock, guilt, shame, and animus for change that characterized much public discourse during the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings of 2020 have been steadily redirected towards more familiar, far less disruptive proposals for reform like body-worn cameras, implicit bias training, and other 'progressive policing' measures—measures which usually fail to make practices of law enforcement

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Do we need the police?' *The Nation* 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2021 (Goldstein & Perez, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> See 'The answer to police violence is not reform, it's defunding. Here's why.' *The Guardian* 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020 (Vitale, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> See 'The Emerging Movement for Police and Prison Abolition' *The New Yorker* 7<sup>th</sup> May (Taylor, 2021)

<sup>5</sup> See 'Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore might change your mind' *The New York Times Magazine* 17<sup>th</sup> April 2019 (Kushner, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> While the public mainstreaming of abolitionist critiques of police and prisons is an 'emerging' phenomenon in the era of #BlackLivesMatter, such critiques are part of a long-established radical tradition in Black and Indigenous anti-racist, Marxist, feminist, and decolonial thought. This longer history will be discussed in Chapter 2.

any safer or less discriminatory for policed communities, and which always entail a reinvestment (both financial and cultural) in the false promises of criminal justice (see Murakawa, 2020). While the legitimacy of certain police, in certain contexts, engaging in certain practices, have become heated topics of public discourse and debate, *criminalization itself* remains largely undisturbed as the dominant paradigm through which we (mis)perceive, (mis)diagnose, and attempt to remedy the problem of harm in contemporary social life.

There is a very real risk, in other words, that this clamorous moment of cultural destabilization around ‘crime control’ practices and their place in a society geared towards equality and social justice will ultimately *re-enshrine* their deeper sense of indispensability—both in public policy and in our shared imaginary of what it means and wants to live in a ‘safe’ and ‘just’ society. It is for these reasons that imagination—especially, the very *imaginability* of a decriminalized future—recurs as a leitmotif in the proliferating radical critiques of criminalization, policing, and the prison-industrial complex (see, for example, Davis, 2003, 2005; Kilroy, 2018; Murakawa, Camp & Heatherton, 2016). What might the urgent task of cultivating imaginability of this kind need and want from the symbolic work of crime journalism? This is the question that animates this project.

## **On the Politics of ‘Criminalizing’ Representations**

My aim in this thesis is to provide a novel account of criminalization—what it is, how it works, and the kinds of symbolic work it requires—from the perspective of media culture. It starts from the premise that cultivating the imaginability of worlds otherwise is both an important horizon for efforts to transform the violences of policing and incarceration *and* a primary normative function of journalistic storytelling. Criminalization is understood here as a cultural (rather than merely legal) achievement entailing a closure of social meaning around the question of harm. The forthcoming analysis enquires into criminalization’s most basic symbolic mechanics, and so offers an account of its deepest points of cultural stabilization. Consequently, it also undertakes to imagine what the collective project of radically transforming our practical approaches to the questions of harm, safety, and justice—a project I call *decriminalization*—might want and need from the representational practices of news media.

Much has already been written about how media representations, especially those of news media, help to a) negotiate the social construction of ‘criminal’ subjects and identities; and b) perpetuate and/or potentially disrupt the symbolic power of crime control institutions, such as the police, the courts, and the prison system. Such accounts have approached the question of ‘how news media criminalize’ in a multitude of ways: by considering how criminality is constructed around people and communities (e.g. Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Windle, 2008; Majavu, 2020); how

criminality is attached to certain practices like migration or drug use (e.g. Taylor, 2008); how criminality informs the moral pedagogy of the news (e.g. Cohen, 1972); how crime reporting cultivates fear as a political resource (e.g. Hall et al., 2013; King, 2015); how journalism negotiates the public visibility and image of crime control agents and institutions (e.g. Bock, 2021; Mawby, 2003); how the professionalization of police public relations reconfigures the normative transparency function of the press (Goldsmith, 2010; Mawby, 2001); and how citizen journalism is renegotiating the terms of public visibility for both police officers and those targeted by police actions (e.g. Richardson, 2020); to name just a few major paradigms.

The account of mediated criminalization that I develop here is not intended to critique ‘flaws’ in these established traditions nor to challenge the centrality of these various foci to the perpetuation of criminalization in the current moment—especially as concerns the historically symbiotic and conceptually intractable relationship between criminalization and racialization. Criminalization is a heterogeneous process with many moving parts—and the social and economic functioning of race is central to most if not all of them. Here, however, my aim is to tackle the question of criminalization in much more fundamental terms: as an arbitrary yet endemic *justificatory logic* which provides reflexive support to a wide variety of practices of modern violence and their attendant institutions. Instead of focussing on the construction of criminality *per se*, my analysis explores the kinds of ‘background’ symbolic work upon which criminalization as our dominant (but, once again, inessential) dispositional response to the challenges of harm, violence, and insecurity relies. My concern, in other words, is not with how criminalization is occurring in one instance or another, but rather more fundamentally, *what criminalization needs* in order to resist radical critique and normative destabilization—and so, to imaginatively occlude other ways other ways of being and doing in a conjuncture marked by enduring structural injustices and entrenching inequalities.

I pursue these questions through a granular examination of texts emerging from (indeed, constituting) just one case of mediated criminalization: the construction of so-called ‘African gang crime’ in the city of Melbourne, in and through the Australian press. Since beginning to settle in Australia in the late 1990s, members of the Black African<sup>7</sup> diaspora—especially, Black African

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<sup>7</sup> The Australian press frequently lexicalises members of the African diaspora in Melbourne as simply ‘African’, ‘Sudanese’ or ‘African refugees’ (Majavu, 2020; Windle, 2008). These catch-all terms obscure the diversity of communities, identities and migration experiences within the diaspora while disguising that racialization (rather than country or continent of origin) is what has primarily informed their grouping together in media coverage. Following Majavu (2020), I use ‘Black African’ across this thesis to describe a broad community of people marked as Other in Australian public culture through both racializing discourses that construct them as ‘Black’ and xenophobic discourses which position them as being ‘of Africa’. As the terms ‘Black’ and ‘Blak’ are also used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, I employ the term ‘Black African’ to also distinguish the dynamics of criminalization discussed in this thesis from those experienced by Indigenous communities, which have overlapping yet distinct conditions of possibility in the Australian settler colony.

boys and men—have been routinely connected to the problems of crime and public disorder by Australian politicians and journalists, despite accounting for less than 1% of all crime in the state of Victoria (see Grivas, 2018). Given the obvious significance of both racist and xenophobic Othering, on the one hand, and unabashed political opportunism, on the other, in the perpetuation of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative (see Chapter 2) my decision to eschew the ‘construction of criminality’ approach in my deconstruction of this case might seem counterintuitive. However, I resist an intuitive analytical path—which might frame the case as either the construction of a racialized criminal ‘Other’ or the construction of a politically useful climate of fear—for several important reasons.

One reason is that these approaches have already been widely applied to both this case and others with fruitful results—and so these two dimensions of the case and of criminalization more broadly are already well understood (see Weber et al., 2021; Keel et al., 2021; Majavu, 2020; Windle, 2008; Nolan et al., 2016). The more important reason, however, is that explaining and/or elucidating this specific case is not my analytical aim here. Rather, the analysis positions ‘African gang crime’ as just one iteration of the logic of criminalization which, though fundamentally reliant on racist Othering, cannot be reduced to Othering alone (Cacho, 2012). The narrative I try to weave here is theoretical, rather than empirical: it aims to develop insights not primarily about this specific case, but about the workings of the much larger symbolic project of which it forms just part. However, while racialized Othering is not my principal focus, the analysis keeps race firmly in view as a key ordering principle in the symbolic achievement of criminalization. In other words, as I try to determine the kinds of symbolic achievement criminalization needs for its pragmatic and moral coherence, I maintain an indispensable awareness of how those achievements are themselves often contingent in race as an entrenched framework of social sense-making in the Australian settler colony and in many other contexts.

In this way, my inquiry into and ultimate attempt to theorize ‘how media criminalize’ here is intended to supplement, rather than substitute, existing critical approaches. Such approaches tend to frame the problem of criminalization-by-new media as one of cultivating misperception and misrecognition: around people and communities subjected to criminalization, to be sure, but also around the crime control institutions who police and imprison them. There is no question as to the importance of this work. However, my own approach enquires instead into the problem of criminalization-by-news media as one of iterative *misdirection*: of revealing violence with one hand to conceal it with another. As I discuss in Chapter 2, so-called criminal justice is beleaguered by core and indelible contradictions of normative promise, intended purpose, and true political

function. The management of these meaningful contradictions and the justificatory pressures they entail is essential for the reflexive reproduction of crime control practices, and so the primary symbolic task of ‘criminalizing’ media representations. This is the kind of symbolic misdirection that helps crime control practices to endure through even their most abject violences, obvious discriminations, and spectacularly visible failures—and so, precisely the kind of (mediated) symbolic work I seek to explicate here.

## **News Media Representations of Crime: Analytical Approach**

As this thesis aims to offer a novel theoretical account of how the symbolic conditions of possibility for criminalization are negotiated through news media representations, it requires a novel theoretical approach. Fusing insights from critical security studies, the critical analysis of media discourse, sociology, and feminist theory, I develop and offer the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a new framework for interrogating and interpreting the relationship between ways of representing crime and criminality, on the one hand, and ways of acting upon it, on the other. Rather than focussing exclusively on the representational construction of criminal acts and agents, this framework directs analytical attention towards how such representations simultaneously *contextualize* these acts and agents within a background imaginary of everyday political life. Though officially limitless (in the sense that there is nothing we *can’t* imagine, in absolute terms), I propose that such an imaginary is profoundly structured through the historicity of representational practices in ways that delimit both its preoccupations (the security ‘realities’ both present and future we invest in imagining) and its limits (where it pushes up against its boundary with the ‘unimaginable’). As a theoretical framework, it complements (rather than contradicts) dominant constructivist paradigms by a) capturing a broader range of symbolic conditions that must be met for the legitimate reproduction of crime control practices; and b) offering a more precise political ontology of the relationship between ways of representing crime and criminality, on the one hand, and ways of acting upon it, on the other.

At stake in the mediated security imaginary, I propose, is its attendant *politics of vulnerability*. This is a symbolic politics, conditioned in and through discursive and representational practices, which negotiates vulnerability as a particular kind of political and moral problem and in doing so selectively positions vulnerability as a justificatory basis for action. The analytical framework that I develop here proposes that (de)criminalization is reflexively contingent within three different forms of calculative symbolic construction: first, the negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition, or as ‘real’ openness to harm; second, the negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition, or as ‘wrong’ openness to harm; and third, the positioning of vulnerability as a practical

epistemology of justification, or as a justificatory basis for different kinds of security practice. The first two domains of contingency (realness and wrongness) inform the third: through the calculative negotiation of ‘real’ vulnerability, the *necessity* and/or *efficacy* of specific security practices is established, while through the negotiation of ‘wrong’ vulnerability the *rightness* and/or *justness* of those same practices is established. However, the symbolic positioning of certain forms and registers of vulnerability as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ does not automatically activate specific ways of acting upon them. Interrogating the third domain—practical justification—therefore requires deconstructing how some practices (and not others) are positioned in representation by this politics of vulnerability, vis-à-vis the ‘problem’ of crime, in ways that make them seem pragmatically essential and morally self-apparent. These three strands of symbolic negotiation—realness, wrongness, and practical justification—structure my empirical inquiry into how criminalization works through journalistic reporting on crime.

Taking the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as my theoretical framework and this proposed analytics of (mediated) vulnerability politics as my critical heuristic, the forthcoming analysis enquires into the following overarching research question:

RQ1: How does criminalization work through news media representations of crime? Which kinds of symbolic work does it require, and what kinds of justificatory work can it perform?

I pursue this question across my empirical chapters through a close, multi-modal discourse analysis of news media texts emerging from just one specific case of mediated criminalization: the construction of so-called ‘African gang crime’ in and through the Australian press. As discussed in the opening of this chapter, the Black African diaspora has been subject to persistent symbolic articulation with the problems of crime, disorder, and social conflict since beginning to settle in Australia in the late 1990s—and a fervent association with the problem of ‘gang crime’ since the ‘Mooramba Riot’ of early 2016<sup>8</sup>. The analysis examines Australian news representations of these ‘gang crime’ events during this latter ‘second wave’ of criminalizing coverage, across three journalistic sub-genres—print news, current affairs television, and nightly news reports. A detailed elaboration of the specificities of this case, its historical context, and how I position it analytically vis-à-vis the larger question of mediated criminalization is offered in the next chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> The so-called ‘Mooramba Riot’ was a hypermediated incident of public disorder at Melbourne’s annual Mooramba Festival which germinated the ‘second wave’ of criminalizing coverage around Melbourne’s Sudanese and South Sudanese communities from March 2016 onwards. The event and its significance will be discussed in closer detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5.

## Structure of the Thesis

This thesis unfolds in eight chapters. The next chapter, **Chapter 2**, contextualizes the study in three important ways. First, it situates the construction of so-called ‘African gang crime’ within the longer history of what I call Australia’s crime-migration-media nexus. This historicization is intended to provide the reader with important contextual information for the interpretation and analysis of texts emerging from this case, and to illuminate its paradigmatic character vis-à-vis a much longer and more iterative logic of criminalization in the Australian settler colony. From here, I sketch the contours of three distinct (yet sometimes overlapping) interpretative frameworks which currently dominate research on ‘construction of criminality’ through the news: the *folk devil* approach, which focusses on the symbolic construction of ‘the criminal’ as a category of subject; the *moral mythology* approach, which (broadly) focusses on the symbolic construction of ‘the criminal’ as a category of practice, as well as on the symbolic power of crime control institutions; and the *omnipresent unease* approach, which focusses primarily on how representations of crime stoke public fearfulness and perceptions of danger, disorder, and risk.

While each of these frameworks, for different reasons, might seem like an intuitive fit for my chosen case, this brief literature review ultimately concludes that none offers the conceptual vocabulary and/or analytical tools to explore criminalization in the terms that interest me here and that our current conjuncture demands: that is, as a social logic that is fundamentally (rather than incidentally) in conflict with the ideals of a more just and equitable society; and, too, as fundamentally contingent within practices of mediated communication and representation. Drawing on abolitionist writing on the socio-economic functioning of policing and prisons, I advocate for an *abolitionist ethic* for critical research into media representations of crime. This ethic entails a critical disposition towards the question of how media criminalize that is a) attuned to the historical arbitrariness of criminalization *itself* as a way of making sense of the challenges of order, safety, and justice; and b) grounded in empirical awareness of the fundamental contradictions of promise, purpose, and actual social function that underpin modern crime control, especially as they exacerbate existing social inequalities and structures of domination.

**Chapter 3** develops the theoretical framework and conceptual vocabulary for this study, in two halves. The first half departs from the ‘construction of criminality’ approach and theorizes the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a supplementary theoretical framework. This framework comes together in three concentric moves. The first argues that criminalization ought to be understood as a form of *security*, as the term has been understood and critiqued within the tradition of critical security studies. The second move, enveloping the first, introduces the concept of a ‘security imaginary’ as the context within which the logic of security is symbolically negotiated.

The third and final move makes a case as to why the security imaginary needs to be understood and interrogated as a *mediated* imaginary, specifically. The first half of Chapter 3 concludes by summarizing this new theoretical perspective on the question of ‘how media criminalize’ and briefly outlining what it can offer researchers in terms of epistemic gain, especially when compared with (or, when complementing) the ‘construction of criminality’ approach that currently dominates research on this topic.

The second half of Chapter 3 translates each of the core elements of my theoretical framework—mediation, the imaginary, and security—into more concrete conceptual objects that can guide empirical research. Mediation (or, mediated discourse) is substituted for the concept of journalism, which I propose ought to be understood as a speech genre conditioned by two institutionalized logics that sit in productive tension with one another: first, the logic of realism, and second, the logic of narrativity. From this foundation, I reconceptualize ‘the imaginary’ using Wagner Pacifici’s theory of the event—in particular, her concepts of ‘rupture’ and ‘ground’ (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). Journalistic accounts of crime events, I propose, can be conceptualized as symbolic ‘event forms’ which re-make the banal ground of everyday political life through both their form—that is, as representations—and their flow—that is, as mediated texts (ibid). Finally, to conceptualize what is at stake in this remaking of imaginative ‘ground’, I look to insights from feminist scholarship to reconceptualize security (and so, criminalization) as a symbolic politics of vulnerability. Within this politics are three important domains of contingency, each of which helps constitute the symbolic conditions of possibility for criminalization and its attendant practices. These are the question of vulnerability as a political condition, or of who is truly vulnerable to harm; the question of vulnerability as a moral condition, or of whose vulnerability to harm is morally acceptable or intolerable; and the question of what is to be done about ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerabilities, or vulnerability as an epistemology of normative social practice. This proposed, three-pronged analytics of mediated vulnerability politics forms the critical scaffolding for my analysis.

**Chapter 4** lays out my methodological rationale and approach. It begins by establishing the epistemological foundations for this study, discussing the place of discourse analytic methodologies within the critical project, the validity principles and standards of rigour that apply to research of this kind, and how I envision a critical analysis of news media texts contributing to an emancipatory critique of criminalization. This discussion segues into a reflection on the importance of researcher reflexivity in critical discourse analysis, which I propose ought to take three forms: self-reflexivity; analytical transparency; and epistemological accountability. From here, I detail the processes and procedures that guided my data collection, explaining precisely how I

arrived at the catalogue of texts analysed with this study, the coherence of this collection approach with the epistemological foundations of my method, and the implications of my data collection procedure for the epistemic boundaries of my research findings. Finally, I conclude by developing a bespoke adaptation of the ‘analytics of mediation’ (Chouliaraki, 2006a, 2006b) to guide my textual analysis. Here I make a case for the coherence of this analytical approach with my theoretical framework, whilst also elucidating its core components and the precise sub-questions that guided my analytical procedure.

The first empirical chapter, **Chapter 5**<sup>9</sup>, considers the question of how news media representations of crime events negotiate the ‘realness’ of openness to harm, using news photographs as a paradigmatic example of journalism’s broader claim to *perceptual realism*. My analytical interest in this chapter is how photographic representations of ‘African gang crime’ events are implicated in the construction of event spacetime, and so in locating such events within a background imaginary of everyday (in)security in terms of their scale and historical significance. Using the concept of a ‘vantage point’ as an analytical tool, the chapter develops a typology of five distinct yet interdependent ‘ways of looking’ at crime events—the anticipatory, the embodied, the forensic, the vigilant, and the pre-emptive—each of which carries its own imaginative demands and implications. I conclude the chapter by introducing the concept of *kaleidoscopic visibility*, which I argue is critical to understanding how mediated crime events resist discrete and/or bounded interpretations of their historical significance, and so how the pragmatic justification of crime control practices is negotiated through visual journalism.

Next, in **Chapter 6**<sup>10</sup>, I consider the question of how journalistic representations of crime events negotiate the ‘wrongness’ of openness to harm—or, in other words, how they work to differentiate vulnerabilities in terms of their moral status. This time focussing on news media representations’ claims to *categorical* and *ideological realism*, I look at how different first-person testimonies of vulnerability and suffering are ordered in current affairs television accounts of ‘African gang crime’ events, and ultimately hierarchised in terms of their relationship to the question of (in)justice. The analysis in this chapter uncovers and explicates four specific strategies of textual composition and presentation by which Black African testimonies of vulnerability are ‘heard’ in the official sense yet ultimately deprioritized in the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a moral concern. I term these strategies appropriation, marginalization, subjugation, and calculation. The chapter synthesizes this analysis to theorize what I call white *victimhood*: a structure of moral justification, supporting criminalization, wherein it is the very possibility of harm (rather

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, the analysis in Chapter 5 is under review for publication in *Visual Communication*.

<sup>10</sup> The analysis in Chapter 6 has been published as a peer-reviewed journal article in *Journalism* titled ‘Nobody feels safe: vulnerability, fear, and the micro-politics of ordinary voice in crime news television’ (Higgins, 2021).

than the fact or even the likelihood) that is deployed in representation to position fearful white subjects as morally ‘wronged’.

Finally, in **Chapter 7**, I build on insights developed across the first two empirical chapters to consider how ‘realness’ and ‘wrongness’ work to negotiate vulnerability as a practical epistemology of justification, or as a justificatory basis for different forms of security action. Using my proposed analytics of mediated vulnerability politics as a guide, the analysis in this chapter deconstructs three forms of intervening practice—policing and incarceration, citizen vigilantism, and punitive deportation—to uncover how their sense of necessity and/or efficacy (pragmatic justification) and rightness and/or justness (moral justification) is negotiated in representation vis-à-vis ‘African gang crime’. For each, I uncover a set of justificatory strategies and tropes which sustain criminalization in one of two ways: either, by imaginatively engineering justification; or, by imaginatively *evading* justification, and thereby shielding crime control practices from the full ideological force of their own failures and contradictions.

The closing chapter, **Chapter 8**, is a hybrid discussion/conclusions chapter. It distils and then elaborates the empirical findings before offering some concluding thoughts about their implications, both for future studies of mediated criminalization and for the larger project of decriminalization. As an ambition of this thesis is to develop a set of conceptual and analytical tools for future applications of an ‘abolitionist ethic’ in critical media research, I conclude the thesis by suggesting some of these important avenues for future scholarship.

## **Contributions to Knowledge and Scholarship**

This thesis advances our understanding of how criminalization works through, and so is conditioned by, the representational practices of journalism in several important ways. It also develops a set of new conceptual tools, theoretical frameworks, and analytical heuristics that may be fruitfully applied to future studies of how media help negotiate the symbolic conditions of possibility for practices of crime control, and for security practices more broadly. These contributions to knowledge, scholarship, and the pursuit of decriminalization are elaborated in detail in Chapter 8, where I discuss my findings and their broader implications. At this stage, however, I propose that they be loosely grouped and summarized as follows:

### *Mediated Criminalization: A New Interdisciplinary Approach*

This study is, to the best of my knowledge, the first comprehensive attempt to articulate the core insights from critical security studies (CSS) scholarship, on the one hand, and critical theories of mediation, on the other, for the study of modern criminalization. While poststructuralist and social

constructivist critiques of security and criminality emanating from CSS and critical IR have long engaged with the significance of media practices, technologies, and institutions, they have overwhelmingly neglected to consider ‘mediation’ as an important context for contemporary social and political life. However, I demonstrate here how the mediated character of the social needs to be understood as both ontologically essential to contemporary (in)security (including criminalization) and epistemologically essential to knowing how (in)security and criminality are negotiated through cultural practices. In the first instance, mediated communication is fundamental to both the perception and experience of the social world—especially of social spacetime and intersubjectivity as two important domains of contingency for (in)security. In the second instance, it forms an important material and institutional context for practices of public representation, and so a key condition for the social functioning of security discourses.

By making these theoretical links and demonstrating their critical utility, the present study lays paths for much-needed interdisciplinary engagement between critical scholars in the fields of media studies, criminology, and CSS/critical IR (as well as sociology, cultural studies, and feminist theory, which were also key theoretical interlocutors in the development and execution of this study). Such interdisciplinarity is needed if those of us concerned with the steady creep of calculative security logics in contemporary social life are to tighten our intellectual grasp of the cultural building blocks most essential to something we call (in)security: especially, our (symbolically cultivated) imagined sense of history and futurity, of proximity and distance, of self and Other, of eventfulness, immediacy, agency, calculative morality, and (in)justice.

### *The Abolitionist Ethic: A New Critical Disposition in Media Studies*

The critical narrative of this thesis has its feet in insights from radical (predominantly Black and Indigenous) scholarship about the ways in which criminalization finds itself fundamentally and irretrievably in conflict with the goals of transformative justice and emancipatory safety. In Chapter 2, I describe this critical disposition as an ‘abolitionist ethic’ and discuss its hitherto marginality in research on crime journalism and the politics of media representations of crime and its management. Scholarship within this latter sub-field has tended to critique ‘criminalization’ in incidental rather than fundamental terms, and so with a primarily ‘reformist’ critical sensibility. Within the scholarly and activist movement for police and prison abolition, however, criminalization is scrutinized in much more fundamental terms: as irreparably bound up in (indeed, buttressing) modern systems of oppression and exploitation, and so *always* in conflict with the ideals of social transformation and radical care. Through this lens of this ethic, the resilience of criminalization itself becomes the object of critique. However, radical and abolitionist scholarship

has tended to position criminalization as a structural dynamic with primarily material and economic drivers, relegating the symbolic work of media representation to a place of marginal political significance. The present study adopts an abolitionist disposition towards the question of criminalization while re-centring the symbolic work of media as one of its key domains of contingency. In this way, it demonstrates how and to what ends we might reconcile these two important scholarly traditions, establishing the foundations of a new and much-needed critical trajectory for crime journalism research.

#### *New Tools: The Mediated Security Imaginary and the Analytics of Vulnerability Politics*

Both the study design and the analytical findings develop a suite of new theoretical, conceptual, and analytical resources that can help guide future research into how criminalization works through news reporting, and more broadly how (in)security is symbolically negotiated through practices of mediated communication. My first major contribution of this kind is to theorize the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a novel and radically expanded theoretical perspective on the relationship between ways of representing crime and insecurity, on the one hand, and ways of acting upon it, on the other. A second major contribution is my reconceptualization of criminalization as a mode of vulnerability politics, including the development of my proposed ‘analytics of vulnerability politics’ and its subsequent operationalization as a framework for the analysis of media texts. In terms of epistemic gain, these contributions illuminate a much wider set of symbolic conditions that must be met for criminalization (and so, the reflexive justification of crime control practices) through representation, beyond the construction of ‘criminal’ subjects and crime control agents (essential though they are). In this way, they are analytical resources that can help move critical studies of crime journalism beyond incidental critiques of criminalization and towards a more fundamental deconstruction (and disruption) of criminalization as an endemic social logic in which media practices are deeply implicated. As I argue in Chapter 8, both these contributions have the potential for much wider application, in addition to several new conceptual resources developed through the empirical chapters—especially, ‘victimcould’, ‘cruel benevolence’, and ‘kaleidoscopic visibility’.

#### *Towards Decriminalization: Directives for Media Scholars and Practitioners*

In attempting to distil the precise forms of symbolic achievement upon which a criminalizing politics of vulnerability relies, the empirical analysis also helps illuminate some of the precise forms of symbolic undoing that might help constitute its inverse: *decriminalization*. In this way, it offers

important suggestions both for a ‘decriminalized’ journalism and for the communication strategies of organizations and collectives working for decriminalization in their communities. It also provides critical media and journalism scholars with a heuristic for evaluative critique.

While symbolic decriminalization is often intuitively thought of as a kind of disarticulation—particularly, of certain people and practice from the category of crime—the findings instead suggest that decriminalization will require a more fundamental re-evaluation of how and why crime is made eventful through the news and how journalism might, through alternative representational practices, cultivate greater justificatory pressure around the institutions and practices tasked with ‘managing’ it. While the thesis narrative does not capture the labour of crime reporting and its material, economic, institutional, cultural, and embodied conditions, the findings point to some important forms of symbolic work that a ‘decriminalized’ mode of journalistic storytelling around crime and its management will inevitably need to perform. These include finding ways to historicize fear and suffering in representations of crime, opening space for the affective and moral recognition of ‘criminal’ actors, and resisting representational tropes that fortify crime control practices with a sense of pragmatic and moral self-evidence. In identifying these and other potential ‘decriminalizing’ strategies, the study illuminates some of the forms of symbolic—and so, imaginative—reconfiguration that the much larger project of radically transforming our approaches to harm, justice, and safety might need from the world-building representational work of news storytelling.

### *Justificatory Strategies and ‘African Gang Crime’*

Finally, though it is not the primary objective of this study to explain how and why politicians and the press cultivated and constructed the ‘African gang crime’ narrative in Melbourne, it nonetheless offers some modest empirical insights about this case. The analysis here is both methodologically and narratively novel: it is, to my knowledge, one of the first to explore the case of ‘African gang crime’ using a granular multi-modal discourse analysis of its attendant texts (rather than thematic analysis, quantitative content analysis, or interviews)<sup>11</sup>, and one of only a very small handful of studies to explicate the broader political implications of the mediated criminalization of Black African youth beyond those pertaining to a) Australia’s racist and racializing politics of belonging; or b) the ‘politics of fear’ in Australian electioneering. By taking a less intuitive approach to the case, the present study (especially, the analysis in Chapter 7) develops a compelling account of

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<sup>11</sup> The only other studies using critical discourse analysis to explore the construction of ‘African gang crime’ are, to the best of my knowledge, Windle (2018) and Majavu (2020). Both studies focus on how racializing discourses have been used in Australian public culture to construct Black African migrants as dangerous and socially problematic Others.

the precise representational strategies by which news media accounts of ‘African gang crime’ subtly helped maintain the sense of pragmatic necessity and moral legitimacy required for the reflexive justification of crime control interventions against African communities in Melbourne. The distillation of these strategies—many of which may seem banal and innocuous at first glance—helps illuminate how both the ‘African gang crime’ narrative and criminalization more broadly can subvert and evade radical symbolic disruption, even when widely disputed in public discourse and/or incoherent in seemingly obvious ways.

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I finished writing this thesis sitting at my kitchen table in Berlin on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022, six days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Putin’s has been called a ‘war of information’ it is also manifestly a war of bombs and bullets, the representations of which matter very little to those whose lives they are already claiming. Insecurity is so very much more than symbolic, and criminalization is, equally, so very much more than representation. People live whole lives behind prison walls and die running from the police that would take them there. Families and futures are decimated by our spirited attachment to righteous punishment. In the name of order, revolutions are held at bay. Crime and harm are not synonyms. Sometimes, however, they are siblings, converging most convincingly in communities already burdened by poverty, social exclusion, and systemic exploitation and violence. This thesis does not reframe criminalization as a symbolic politics of vulnerability to suggest that vulnerability is ‘meaning only’. Rather, it does so to insist that it is only when vulnerability meets meaning that the practices we call security—from crime control to war waging—take flight and take hold. Ultimately, mine is an inquiry into the symbolic terms of that meeting. Its horizon is the imaginability of a decriminalized future—and so, of “a world less violent than this one” (Watego, 2021).

## CHAPTER 2

# Constructing Criminality: ‘African Gang Crime’ in Context

### Introduction

This thesis aims to elucidate the base symbolic mechanics of criminalization, broadly defined (at this point) as the symbolic project that informs and sustains practices of crime control. Empirically, however, I intend to pursue this larger question through a grounded and granular examination of texts emerging from just one case of mediated criminalization: the construction of so-called ‘African gang crime’ in and through the Australian press. As discussed in the Introduction, the purpose of this chapter is to contextualize that investigation in three important ways: by introducing this case and situating it within the longer history of the White Australian<sup>12</sup> project and its attendant crime-migration-media nexus; by considering the established scholarly literature on the question of ‘how media criminalize’; and by clarifying the critical and epistemic limits of the dominant approaches to this question, in order to illuminate the contours of a hitherto missing critical trajectory. By undertaking the contextualizing work, I hope to illuminate not only the unique specificities of the ‘African gang crime’ case (which will provide important historical context for the analytical interpretation of its texts) but also to clarify how it might be understood as a paradigmatic example of mediated criminalization more broadly, at the very least within the Australian context.

The chapter unfolds in three sections. The first lays out a brief history of the Black African diaspora in Australia and the steady vilification of its members, especially those of Sudanese or South Sudanese heritage, by Australian politicians and the press, before locating this case within a much longer tradition of using crime and the fear thereof to animate cultural racism and buttress exclusionary border regimes in the Australian settler colony. From here, I consider the existing

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<sup>12</sup> ‘White Australia’ is an often-used shorthand for the Australian settler colonial project, designed to explicitly foreground whiteness and white supremacy as the foundations of the nation’s political and cultural coherence despite the superficial embraces of multiculturalism and racial pluralism across its history (see Hage, 2000; Majavu, 2018). The name itself comes from the ‘White Australia Policy’, a catch-all term for a set of 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration laws and policies that were explicitly designed to exclude anyone not of white European descent from immigration to Australia. For a brief overview of the main tenets and mechanisms of the White Australia Policy, see Jones (2017).

repertoire of answers to the question of how media criminalize, unpacking the various iterations of a dominant critical paradigm that I term the ‘construction of criminality’ approach. Inspired by cultural studies, cultural criminology, and critical international relations (IR), the ‘construction of criminality’ approach broadly conceives of criminalization as either a) practices of (mediated) representation that reproduce racialized Othering; b) practices of (mediated) representation which bolster the symbolic power of crime control agents and institutions; or c) practices of (mediated) representation which foster feelings of fear, unease, and/or (in)security in order to cultivate support for coercive and/or punitive forms of state power. This paradigm—especially, the first and third iterations listed above—is the dominant lens through which the ‘African gang crime’ case has been examined and critiqued in existing research literature. By briefly reviewing this literature, I intend not only to epistemically situate my own investigation of this case but to also demonstrate some of the critical limitations of this dominant approach as concerns both the politics of criminalization and the politics of mediated representation.

This opens the door for my own approach to mediated criminalization, which I elaborate in close detail across Chapters 3 and 4. The final section of this chapter, however, looks to abolitionist critiques of policing and prisons to help lay the groundwork for my own attempt to rethink precisely *what* cultural criminalization is and *how* it functions in and through (mediated) representation. Drawing principally on political economy and historical materialism, these more fundamental critiques of the politics of so-called ‘criminal justice’ tend to emphasize the material and economic imperatives of crime control practices within the architectures of modern racial capitalism—and so, the question of representation is generally held as somewhat peripheral or ancillary to the question of economic power. However, I argue that this literature scaffolds an ‘abolitionist ethic’ that can orientate the study of criminalization-by-media towards a horizon of much deeper and more fundamental forms of symbolic undoing — to the *unmaking* of criminalization, as an important cultural auxiliary to the institutional project of abolition.

## **‘African Gang Crime’ in Context**

### *a) The Black African diaspora in Australia*

Prior to the late-1990s, the Black African diaspora in Australia was very small. Most members arrived in the late-1990s and early-2000s through Australia’s Special Humanitarian Program, which at that time was prioritizing resettlement applications from people fleeing violence and instability in and around the Horn of Africa region—in particular, the civil war in the Darfur region of Sudan.

By the signing of the (largely ineffectual) Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, the conflict in Darfur had already claimed more than two million lives and displaced more than four million people (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a total of 42,489 people resettled in Australia under the African Humanitarian Program between June 1997 and June 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Over half of these identified Sudan as their country of birth, with Sudanese arrivals outnumbering the next most significant countries of origin—Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sierra Leone—by almost ten-to-one (ibid.). Of the 19,049 Sudanese people living in Australia for the 2006 Census, 89.1% had arrived in the country less than ten years earlier, the overwhelming majority on humanitarian visas (ibid.). As a result, the Black African diaspora is frequently lexicalised in both media and academic discourses as simply “Sudanese” and almost invariably as “refugees” (Majavu, 2020; Windle, 2008), despite being incredibly diverse in terms of countries of origin, religions, and languages, and meaningfully diverse in terms of migration experience (Han & Budarick, 2018).

#### *b) The (mediated) criminalization of Black African youth*

Since beginning to arrive in Australia in significant numbers, people of Black African ancestry, and the Sudanese community in particular, have been subject to persistent negative media attention, with news narratives often focussing on perceived issues of ‘gang crime’ and juvenile delinquency (Baak, 2019; Budarick, 2018; Burford-Rice et al., 2020; Due, 2008; Gaffey, 2019; Han & Budarick, 2018; Majavu, 2020; Nolan et al., 2011, 2016; Nunn, 2010; Simons, 2018; Wahlquist, 2018; Weber et al., 2021; Windle, 2008). While the lexical collapse of the entire diaspora under catch-all terms like “African” and “Sudanese” has certainly erased the diversity of the diaspora as represented by Australian media, it has also performed more pernicious racializing work. Specifically, it has historically deployed race as the dominant lens through which diverse Black African subjects are cohered and made intelligible as a singular Other in Australian public culture. These descriptors obscure racialization even as they perform it, tacitly denying the preoccupation with Blackness as “visible difference” underlying the construction of “Africans” as a problematic group in contemporary Australian society (Majavu, 2020; Nolan et al., 2016; Windle, 2008).

Previous studies of the media discourses framing Black African subjects and communities in Australia have confirmed the presence of a variety of racializing tropes, including over-attentiveness to and emphasis of physical characteristics like height and skin colour in reporting (Windle, 2008), neo-racist forms of ‘culture talk’ which represent African cultures (and thus people)

as inherently violent (Nolan et al., 2016; Windle, 2008), accusations of parental incompetence, assimilationist discourses which frame ‘integration’ into Australian culture as normatively desirable yet uniquely difficult for Black Africans (Nolan et al., 2016), and segregationist discourses which construct Black Africans as hostile invaders of ‘white’ suburban spaces (Windle, 2008). Media coverage has also explicitly adopted gendered anti-Black tropes from the United States through references to ‘LA-style gangs’ and ‘rap culture’ and ‘fatherless’ families (Windle, 2008, p. 599). These tropes and stereotypes have worked historically in the US context to culturally synonymise Blackness (particularly, Black masculinity) with criminality and social dysfunction in order to legitimize the over-policing of Black communities and mass incarceration of Black men (Davis, 1998; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

In the dying months of the 2007 election campaign that would ultimately end then Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s 11-year term in office, news stories about so-called “African gangs” first began to circulate. The Howard government was as notable for its hard-line attitude towards immigration (especially, humanitarian immigration) as it was for its preferential approach to media engagement, which afforded disproportionate access to government ministers, including Howard himself, to the conservative press (Turner, 2009b). Consequently, the most politically inflamed news stories involving asylum-seekers and refugees during this period often coincided with election challenges that Howard and his Coalition colleagues were expected to lose—including the 2001 Tampa crisis and “children overboard” affair (discussed later in this chapter) which immediately preceded Howard’s eleventh-hour victory in the that year’s federal ballot. In 2007, as Howard once again trailed in the polls, stories about ‘gangs’ of young people from refugee backgrounds committing crimes in Melbourne began to ripple through news outlets. The precipitating event for this first wave of coverage was the murder of Liep Gony, a Sudanese teenager who was set upon and beaten to death by two young white men in an unprovoked, racially-motivated attack (Nolan et al., 2011). Early reporting and political commentary misattributed Gony’s murder to ‘gang activity’ within the Sudanese community, germinating a media narrative that would continue to articulate the Black African diaspora with the problem of violent crime, regardless of whether as perpetrators or victims (Windle, 2008).

The “African gang crime” narrative lingered in the background of local reporting in Melbourne for most of the next decade but resurged to spectacular prominence in March 2016 following what was eventually termed the ‘Moomba Riot’. Moomba Festival is a free, family-friendly cultural event held every year over a weekend in March along the Yarra River in Melbourne’s central business district. The so-called Moomba Riot was a highly mediated (and so, highly visible) incident of public disorder on the Saturday night of the 2016 festival, reportedly

sparked by a confrontation between two groups of young men, including men of Black African and Pacific Islander backgrounds. Spectacular images from the incident made front-page news the following day, and conservative politicians and media commentators quickly labelled it a “riot” though it did not meet the conventional definition of one (Blaustein & Benier, 2018). Eventually, media reporting allocated responsibility for the incident—and, for an alleged but unsubstantiated ‘surge’ in crime across Melbourne—to a gang called Apex, which was routinely described as comprising mostly young men of South Sudanese heritage (Benier et al., 2018). Stories about climbing crime rates and incidents involving Apex and other ‘gangs’ became mainstays of the right-wing press, with Australia’s most-read newspaper, the *Herald Sun*, running 173 pieces about Apex alone in the 12 months following Moomba 2016, 37 of which were opinion pieces or editorials and 28 of which ran on the front page (Watkins, 2017; Wilson, 2018; see also Keel et al., 2021). In 2018, as conservative Liberal Party candidate Matthew Guy sought to unseat the more progressive Victorian State Premier Daniel Andrews, the narrative once again exploded, informing the basis of Guy’s ‘law and order’ election platform.

Members of the Black African diaspora have reported feeling stigmatized, vilified, culturally excluded, and subjected to racial prejudice and discrimination as a result of their symbolic articulation with ‘criminality’ in and through the Australian press (see Burford-Rice et al., 2020; Han & Budarick, 2018; Henriques-Gomez, 2018; Wahlquist, 2018; Weber et al., 2021). However, criminalization has also manifested in more institutional and material forms. Black African men are disproportionately involved with law enforcement and subject to prejudicial treatment within the criminal justice system. Shepherd et al. (2018) cite findings from several studies suggesting that Black African men in the state of Victoria are more likely to be racially profiled and/or arbitrarily stopped by police (see Hopkins, 2021), more likely to report negative interactions and/or discriminatory treatment by police (Flemington & Kensington Legal Centre, 2011), and more likely to be processed by police (Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2014) than Australian-born youth. Sudanese-born people are significantly overrepresented in the state’s youth justice cohort (Armytage & Ogloff, 2017), while among adults they have the highest imprisonment rate of any country of birth-based group in the country (Shepherd et al., 2018, p. 284).

Following the ‘first wave’ of criminalizing coverage in 2007, the Australian government slashed its humanitarian intake quota for people fleeing violence in African war zones, citing concerns about “integration” (Haggis & Schech, 2010). In 2014, the *Charter Act* expanded the exclusionary provisions of Australia’s *Migration Act* so that a person suspected or accused of criminal activity—but neither charged nor convicted—could have their Australian visa revoked on the grounds of poor character (Hoang & Reich, 2017). During the post-2016 ‘second wave’ of

criminalizing coverage, it was clarified that the provisions of the *Charter Act* would cover suspected or alleged (but, again, not proven) membership of a ‘gang’ as grounds for deportation (Majavu, 2020).

c) *White Australia’s crime-migration-media nexus*

In his book *White Nation*, Ghassan Hage argues that nativist fantasies of white supremacy are inherent to the very idea of an ‘Australian’ identity, enduring through superficial embraces of multiculturalism and conditioning Australia’s relationship to itself and the outside world (Hage, 2000). “Whiteness [is] itself a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of European expansion,” he writes, “...not an essence that one has or does not have, even if some Whites think of it and experience it this way” (ibid., p. 20). In many ways, the history of the Australian settler colonial project is intelligible as a history of this ‘fantasy position’ and the anxious defence thereof—specifically, through symbolic and legislative strategies of “crimmigration” which have fortified the White Australian project historically by a) positioning criminality as justification for territorial and civic exclusion, and; b) harnessing migration laws and policies as instruments of ‘crime control’ (Stumpf, 2006). The criminalization of Black African youth is an iteration of a much longer lineage of symbolic and institutional entanglement between crime, migration, nativism, and race in Australia, and so it is important to briefly locate it within that historical context.

Anxieties about crime and migration have been tightly entwined in Australia for as long as any country with that name has existed. As is widely known, the settler society known as Australia was founded in 1788 as a penal colony; the vast majority of its earliest arrivals came to the continent either as ‘criminals’ or as military agents of the criminal justice system (Burke, 2008, p. 18). It is generally agreed among Australian historiographers that the invasion and settlement of the Australian continent were motivated as much by geo-strategic, economic, and imperialist desires as the need to establish a “dumping ground for convicts” (Moore, 1991, p. 108). However, these material motivations notwithstanding, the fear of crime—as a threat to person, to property, and to sovereignty—was baked into the foundations of the Australian project at its inception. When plans for a penal colony in the region were established and convict transportation resumed in late-18<sup>th</sup> century England, they responded (at least in part) to a growing anxiety about street crime amongst the middle and upper-classes of urban centres like London (Lemmings, 2009, pp. 1–4). Media played an instrumental role in this origin story. As the production and circulation of printed material exploded in early modern England, so too did both public interest in the issue of crime and the sense of openness to public scrutiny felt by English public officials tasked with managing

it (ibid.). Expansions of criminal law, punishment and policing during this period—including the founding of the Botany Bay penal colony—emerged from these changing cultural conditions, constituting one of the earliest examples of the mediated “moral panic” that Stanley Cohen would later theorize in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain (Cohen, 1972; Lemmings, 2009).

Australia was “invented”, to borrow Anthony Burke’s phrasing, in accordance with the same logic and desires that inform the construction of prisons: to get rid of crime by getting rid of people (Burke, 2008, p. 14; Davis, 1998). As a political project explicitly animated by whiteness, however, the burden of Australia’s ‘logic of expulsion’ falls disproportionately on people of colour—especially, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, whose very survival subverts the fantasies of white nativism at the heart of the Australian project. Presently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are one of the most incarcerated groups of people on the planet, accounting for 27% of Australia’s prison population despite comprising just 2% of the general adult population at the last census (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017). The rate of incarceration for Indigenous women is more than twenty times that for non-Indigenous women, and almost twice as high as the incarceration rate for Indigenous men (ibid.). Of the more than 800 children under the age of seventeen detained in Australia in June 2021, no fewer than 50% were Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). While the stark overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in both police and prison custody was a key finding of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody as early as 1991, the burden of the criminal justice system on Indigenous communities continues to increase, both in terms of overall incarceration rates and in terms of the gap in incarceration rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Between 2006 and 2016, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates increased by 41% (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017) and by 2020, 4.18% of all Indigenous men were in prison<sup>13</sup> (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Working within and through this logic of expulsion, however, is another: the logic of *insulation*, which desires to seal off Australian society from the threats of criminality and disorder by “de-territorializing” the people associated with them (Perera, 2009). In the long view of Australian history, the push-and-pull of these two desires—to expel and to insulate—has played out as a deep anxiety about the authenticity and integrity of White Australia’s relationship to the territory it occupies, an island continent. More specifically, the logic of insularity fixates on the (de-)territorializing capacities of Australia’s maritime border, and so on those who cross it—migrants—as an ever-renewing source of suspicion and unease. A militarized coastline and

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<sup>13</sup> This compares with around 0.3% of all non-Indigenous men in Australia (ALRC, 2017) and 2.27% of African American men in the United States (Pew Research, 2020).

successive waves of racist immigration policies (see Footnote 1) have sedimented the logic of insularity in Australian immigration practices and law (Burke, 2008). Culturally, it manifests as deep xenophobia (Burke, 2008) and what Han & Budarick (2018) term a “new kids on the block syndrome”, whereby each new generation of migrants to settle in Australia becomes subject to intense and institutionalized forms of cultural Othering—usually, harnessing the fear of crime to articulate broader anxieties about national identity, social cohesion, and race.

The criminalization of Black African boys and men in Melbourne is only intelligible as part of this longer history of moments of “intense racialization” whereby racial difference has been harnessed to fortify the bonds between migration (especially, asylum-seeking) and criminality in the Australian cultural imagination and in Australian law (Windle, 2008). Media, and especially news media, have been instrumental for this symbolic work. The political backdrop for the Black African diaspora’s resettlement in Australia in the early-2000s was the Howard government’s fervid and cynical politicization of asylum-seeking and a subsequent upswell of anti-refugee and anti-immigration discourses and sentiments in Australian public culture. Both were abetted by a string of spectacularly mediated events involving asylum-seekers, refugees, and migrant communities. Three stand out.

In August 2001, the *MV Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter carrying 443 mostly Afghan refugees rescued from a distressed shipping vessel, was refused entry into Australian waters. The so-called ‘Tampa crisis’ became a major media event, eventually exploited by the Howard government to frame asylum-seeking by boat as an unacceptable threat to territorial sovereignty (Gale, 2004). Later that year, following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, the Howard government’s criminalizing rhetoric was stepped-up to frame asylum-seekers—especially, Muslims—as encroaching figures of potential violence. When a wooden-hulled boat carrying 223 Iraqi refugees sank off the coast of Christmas Island<sup>14</sup> in October, senior government officials (including Howard) claimed that those onboard had thrown their own children into the sea to coerce a rescue by the Australian Navy—a claim widely reproduced by the Australian press. The function of the mediated ‘children overboard’ scandal was to intensify

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<sup>14</sup> Christmas Island is an Australian external territory located more than 1,500km north-west of the country’s mainland, in the Indian Ocean south of the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra. As part of the Howard government’s so-called ‘Pacific Solution’, the island was excised from Australia’s migration zone so that asylum-seekers and refugees landing there or detained there could not apply for refugee status in Australia. The island has also hosted one of Australia’s offshore detention facilities, described by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre as “a high security military camp where control is based on fear and punishment and [where] the extensive internal use of extrajudicial punishment by force and isolation is evident” (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2016). The facility was closed in 2018 but subsequently re-opened by the Morrison government in August 2020. There are currently approximately 226 people detained on the island (Refugee Council of Australia, 2021).

racializing discourses in Australian public culture that associated (predominantly Muslim) refugees with savagery, cruelty, and immorality—connecting the threat of a porous border with the threat of violence, moral dereliction, and social conflict in an otherwise ‘peaceful’ and ‘moral’ Australian society. It also capitalized on post-9/11 fears about Islamic terrorism to reframe asylum-seeking as a national security issue, rather than a humanitarian one (Burke, 2008). However, the growing public anxiety about border sovereignty was, and continues to be, at its core a cultural anxiety about (racialized) difference:

“Given the lack of concern in the Australian community about the thousands of Europeans who overstay their visas every year, it was right to assume that the perceived threat of boat people really lay in their *difference* – Muslim, Coloured, Oriental – in their status as an unassimilable excess that the pure being of the Australian subject could not abide.” (Burke, 2008, pp. 212–213; emphasis in original)

In December 2005, these compounding anxieties and intolerances—regarding racial and religious pluralism, the character of Australian national identity, border security, and the threat of crime—combusted in the form of the Cronulla Riots. Incited by public radio shock jocks and a media-orchestrated frenzy of outrage following an attack on two lifesavers by a group of men of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ on Cronulla Beach in outer Sydney, more than 5,000 people descended on Cronulla on December 11 to ‘reclaim’ the beach for the ‘locals’ (Poynting, 2006). For four days, groups of white men combed the streets of Cronulla, setting upon and beating anyone they encountered who looked possibly Middle Eastern. It became a spectacular media event, engulfing front pages across the country and dominating news and current affairs reporting. While the violence was widely condemned, the problem it ostensibly responded to—the burden of ‘ethnic crime’ in Sydney’s suburbs and the harassment of ‘Aussie women’ by migrant men—was not widely refuted by politicians nor by the press. Prime Minister Howard himself denied that racism played a role in the riots. Instead, he and his government officials framed the riots as a manifestation of “ordinary criminality and the understandable exasperation of the locals, fuelled by alcohol.” (Poynting, 2006, p. 90).

As Black African migrants began settling in Australia in earnest across the early 2000s, they were arriving at the centre of an inflamed cultural compression point centuries in the making. As (often) refugees, as (always) intensely racialized Others, and as (many of them) Muslims, the diaspora sits at a fraught intersection of overlapping anxieties about immigration and about racial and cultural pluralism that have plagued the White Australian project since its inception. The

crime-migration-media nexus, as I have elaborated it above, might thus be understood as an engrained structure of Othering that supports (both in culture and in law) an exclusionary vision of Australianness by connecting the problem of crime to the question of migration through the prism of racialized difference. As the brief history above makes clear, the media (especially, news media) have been and remain important coagulants of this nexus and the racialized politics of (un)belonging it fortifies.

## **Criminalization, Representation, and Mediation**

### *a) Social constructivism and the construction of criminality*

At this point, I would like to momentarily depart from the case of ‘African gang crime’ in Melbourne to lay out the foundations of my approach to the question of criminalization. The starting point for the social constructivist understanding of criminalization that I adopt in this thesis is the recognition of ‘crime’ as a cultural category, and so criminalization as a cultural achievement. Legal and criminological discourses use the word ‘crime’ to denote any practice proscribed under criminal law, and ‘criminalization’ to describe the process by which different practices are brought under this proscriptive apparatus of the State. Within such a framework, the meaning of ‘crime’ in any given historical juncture is defined and (relatively) unambiguous, and practices can be arbitrated as ‘criminal’ or ‘non-criminal’ through interpretative reference to the law as written and practiced. By contrast, a social constructivist understanding of criminalization divests from the question of whether a given subject or practice is ‘really’ criminal, instead understanding ‘the criminal’ as itself an arbitrary and historically-contingent category, the meaning of which is negotiated through symbolic practices—including, but certainly not limited to, those in the sphere of law. Here, the arbitration of ‘real’ criminality loses its critical significance, and the *construction of criminality* instead becomes the object of critical research.

Criminalization is reframed as a cultural process by which certain people, groups, identities, and experiences are symbolically joined up with the issue of crime through patterns of representation and acts of discursive articulation, across distinct yet interconnected spheres of social practice. As a descriptor, ‘the criminal’ is understood as a floating signifier (Laclau, 2005) attached to different people and practices, at different points in history, and stabilized by different forms of power. Crucially, a cultural critique of criminality attunes to power by recognizing that ‘the criminal’ signifier is never evenly attached to every person or practice who meets the legal

definition of criminality in any given historical context, nor ever only to those who meet that definition. As Manning (2001) writes:

“Crime is a context-based idea, not a thing; it is a representation, a word, a symbol, standing for many things, including vague fears, symbolic villains, threats and assailants, the unknown, generalized anxieties and hopes.” (Manning, 2001, p. 335)

Framed in this way, the media are significant to criminalization primarily because of their representational capacities: that is, as locales (institutional, technological, textual etc.) for the symbolic negotiation and circulation of particular versions of crimes, criminals, and their contexts. As the next sections detail, this is the dominant way in which scholars have framed the relationship between crime and media more broadly and through which the significance of media in the construction of ‘African gang crime’ has been overwhelmingly understood and critiqued. However, there exist subtle differences in approach and emphasis within the ‘construction of criminality’ theoretical paradigm, which are important to understand in order to grasp some of the paradigm’s critical limitations vis-à-vis the question of cultural criminalization.

*b) Dominant frameworks: folk devils, moral mythology, and omnipresent unease*

Three broad frameworks dominate existing research and critiques of criminalization as the (mediated) construction of criminality. The first focuses on the cultural construction of ‘the criminal’ as a *category of subject*, as a type of agent. Specifically, it frames criminalization as a process of Othering, whereby practices of representation give form to ‘the criminal’ as a deviant Other who can in turn serve the “masterly self-definition” of other social identities, naturalized thereby as ‘non-criminal’ (Pickering, 2001). As certain subjects, experiences, and social collectivities are symbolically articulated with the category of ‘crime’ through iterative acts of representation, they too become Other to the social whole. Media are significant within this framework because of their representational capacities—specifically, as the context (technological, institutional, material etc.) within which, and through which, representations of ‘criminal’ subjects are (re)produced and circulated.

The bulk of scholarship using this first framework draws its conceptual and epistemological scaffolding from Stanley Cohen’s (1972) theorization of the mediated ‘moral panic’ and its associated figure of the ‘folk devil’. Moral panics, Cohen argues, are concentrated flurries of news media attention directed at a “condition, episode, person or group of persons... defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1972, p. 1). While they can leave long

cultural legacies, and while the most effective tap into deep-seated, pre-established cultural anxieties, moral panics as defined by Cohen are volatile and fleeting: “a splutter of rage which burns itself out” (ibid., xxxvii). Given this transitory nature, the political function of moral panics is to regularly refresh in media culture representations of (criminally) deviant ‘folk devils’ as “visible reminders of that which we should not be” (ibid., p.2).

Drawing inspiration from the Gramscian concept of hegemony, Stuart Hall et al. (2013 [1978]) later deployed Cohen’s vocabulary within a Marxist critique of state violence in *Policing the Crisis*. A landmark text in the cultural critique of criminalization, it tracks the mediated construction of the Black “mugger” in 1970s Britain during a historical conjuncture characterized by economic decline, crumbling social welfare provisions, a crisis of (white) British identity, and an exhaustion of consent-based governance. *Policing the Crisis* argues that moral panics are ultimately ‘elite’ interventions into the construction of public opinion that work to engineer consent for coercive state management of those social groups who pattern across moral panics as folk devils: young people, racialized subjects, migrants, and the working class (Hall et al., 2013 [1978]; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Media, and especially news media, are understood to be significant not only as circulators of criminalizing representations and discourses, but also as cultural institutions which privilege political elites, such as politicians and police officials, as the “primary definers” of crime and criminality (Hall et al., 2013[1978]).

This first framework—which (broadly) understands mediated criminalization as the construction and reproduction of *criminalized subjects* through media, and so in the self/Other definitional work of representation—has inspired a broad body of scholarship investigating the role of news media representations in criminalizing marginalized social groups, including asylum seekers and refugees (see Vezovnik, 2017), Muslims (see Umamaheswar, 2015; Wigger, 2019), protesters (see Leopold & Bell, 2017; Pérez-Arredondo & Cárdenas-Neira, 2018), and drug users (see Taylor, 2008). There is also a considerable and growing body of literature examining the role news and entertainment media representations have played in legitimizing the overpolicing and mass incarceration of Black people in the United States through the iterative symbolic articulation of Blackness with criminality (see Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; King, 2015; see also Davis, 1998).

A second, and closely related, framework within the ‘construction of criminality’ approach to criminalization is one that focuses on the cultural construction of ‘the criminal’ as a *category of practice*. This approach conceptualizes representations of crime and its management as forms of “moral mythology” invested in the delineation and reproduction of normative ideas about *good* and *bad*, *right* and *wrong*, *just* and *unjust* (Loader, 1997). Crime news stories are positioned as important sources of information about “the normative contours of a society” and “the

boundaries beyond which one should not venture” (Cohen, 1972, p. 41; citing Erikson, 1966). Moreover, representations can ‘criminalize’ insofar as they can reproduce the symbolic power of criminal justice institutions—most of all, the police, but also prisons and courts—as arbiters of order and justice through the (mediated) public spectacle of punishment (see Bock, 2021; Loader, 1997). The diverse and proliferating literature on mediated ‘copaganda’—the ways that police institutions capitalize on different forms of media visibility to bolster their own symbolic power and misrepresent their true social and political functions to the public—would also fall within this second framework (see for example Mawby, 2003; Shantz, 2016; Wood & McGovern, 2021)

Conceived in this way, we might say that crime news stories have a similar cultural function to myth or folklore: their meanings emerge through the consistent relational structuring of narrative elements across different iterations of what is essentially the same story (e.g. the criminal Other, harming the innocent civilian(s), brought to justice by the heroic police officer) rather than the in construction of any one of these elements alone within a given iteration (Levi-Strauss, 1955). Structural *repetition* across crime news stories is therefore key to understanding how such stories work to uphold the fantasy of police-enforced safety and social order as one of “the myths we live by” in contemporary Western societies (Samuel & Thompson, 1980; cited in Loader, 1997, p. 3).

This second framework has several critical strengths. First, it offers an explicit account of the relationship between (mediated) representations, on the one hand, and the legitimacy of specific crime control practices, on the other. By zooming out from the construction of ‘criminals’ to the broader narrative composition of stories *about* them, this framework centres the news media as an important symbolic resource for the public imagination of *crime management*, and so for the specific institutions tasked with managing crime. As Manning (2001) argues, mediated visibility constructs the stage upon which the dramaturgical work of policing as a *performance* of control—always exceeding the actual capacities of the police institution—can play out for public consumption. These performances, however, can only be staged through fragile negotiations of the (sometimes competing) interests of police officers and crime journalists, with police “dependent on the media” for the reproduction of their public legitimacy yet simultaneously “fearful of their sting” (ibid., p. 333; see also Bock, 2021). The ‘moral mythology’ approach to criminalization also offers important insights about how mediated criminalization ought to be studied by gesturing to some of the critically important features of mediated representations beyond the constructed figure of ‘the criminal’: specifically, to the significance of *narrativity* as that which places constructed categories of subject in imaginative relationships with one another

through representation; and to *intertextuality* as the historical context of the representational work of media. The ‘story’ that media representations construct about the kind of problem crime is, and the kinds of intervention it implores, manifest historically *across* representations, and so each act of representation relies on the long history of others for its symbolic coherence and criminalizing potential.

Finally, a third framework can be identified that focuses on the (mediated) construction of criminality as a *social condition*. Here, the specificities of ‘crime’ as a particular kind of threat are less significant than their overall net contribution of a generalized and omnipresent sense of danger and instability that permeates many contemporary societies. Media representations of crime are culturally and politically significant inasmuch as they reflexively construct *society itself* as a space of always-imminent threat. This is a popular approach within critical International Relations scholarship, which tends to situate localized media and political discourses about crime and criminality within larger political projects at the level of the state which increasingly seek to use fear and unease as political resources. Critiques of this emergent ‘politics of unease’ position the construction of criminality as a micro-project within a broader push towards securitization, especially the securitization of migrants and those associated with the threat of terrorism (see for examples Bigo, 2002; Ericson, 2007; Huysmans & Buonfino, 2008; Isin, 2004; Krahmann, 2011).

A key critical advantage of this approach is that it connects up domestic security practices with larger security assemblages and broader processes of securitization, resisting a domestic/national security divide that is increasingly irrelevant in globally networked societies (Bigo, 2016; McCulloch & Pickering, 2009). By centring social ‘unease’ as the most important implication of criminalizing representations, it also highlights how domestic and national security practices have shared cultural conditions of possibility. However, in deferring to a more holistic ‘bird’s eye’ view of criminalization, this approach sometimes loses sight of the micro-political implications of criminalization – that is, of criminalization as its own kind of problem, with consequences for safety, equality, and justice beyond and sometimes outside those that register at the level of the state. It also takes for granted that the primary cultural function of ‘criminalizing’ representations is to a) generate feelings of fear and anxiety; and/or b) to reinforce, in a relatively uncomplicated way, in-group/out-group forms of social identification. This is a deterministic and somewhat outdated understanding of the politics of (media) representation which betrays critical IR’s hitherto limited engagement with the work of media scholars (see Higgins, 2015). It leaves limited space to appreciate how representations of crime may still be significant to criminalization even if and when we reject the idea that media can cleanly ‘create’ certain forms of identification and/or affective response.

c) *‘African gang crime’ as the construction of criminality*

Existing studies of the mediated criminalization of Black African youth in Australia have overwhelmingly conceptualized criminalization as the cultural construction of criminality. Most draw on the first framework discussed above—which conceptualizes criminalization as the construction of criminal *subjects* through symbolic articulation, and representation as a practice of self/Other definition—to situate the ‘African gang crime’ narrative within a larger mediated ‘politics of belonging’ (see Due, 2008; Nolan et al., 2011, 2016; Nunn, 2010). Viewed through this lens, media representations of ‘African gang crime’ are *criminalizing* inasmuch as they work to ‘Other’ Black African migrants and refugees within Australian society by symbolically connecting them to the problem of crime, which is in turn positioned as fundamentally un-Australian.

Nolan et al. (2016), for example, argue that news media representations of ‘African gang crime’ animate a politics of belonging by deploying criminality to construct the Black African diaspora as fundamentally incompatible with “values” and “a way of life” that are positioned as uniquely and specifically Australian. Similarly, Windle (2008) argues that Australian newspaper representations of Black African boys and men regularly activate racialized Otherness as an explanatory variable for criminal violence and/or social conflict. His analysis highlights how racialization works both through the repetitive discursive foregrounding of the physicality of the Black male body (including reference to height, skin colour, physical presence) and through Orientalist forms of “culture talk” (Mamdani, 2002) which frame Africa as a space of primitivism, violence, and endemic disorder. In both instances, racialized Othering ultimately serves the construction of an ‘Australianness’ that must be reconciled with, and thus fundamentally excludes, the Black African diaspora—an Australianness that is explicitly naturalized as ‘peaceful’ and ‘civilized’ and implicitly coded as ‘not Black’. Echoing Hall et al.’s political operationalization of Cohen’s core concepts, Windle traces the prevalence of these racializing discourses in the press back to the disproportionate access of ‘elite’ sources, like politicians and police officials, to Australian journalists (Windle, 2008).

Sociological studies with Black African participants in Australia have similarly framed the mediated criminalization of Black African youth in terms of its consequences for feelings and experiences of belonging (see Baak, 2019; Burford-Rice et al., 2020; Han & Budarick, 2018; Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020). Baak (2019), for example, examines the experiences of Black African teenagers in the Australian education system. Many of the bullying discourses identified in Baak’s study—including taunts that Black African children should “go home” to (South) Sudan—echo the discourses of (un)belonging characteristic of right-wing political and tabloid media

conversations about immigration and citizenship. In another study by Han & Budarick (2018), interviewees reported that criminalizing and otherwise negative representations of Black African people in the press felt like a “media endorsement” of everyday racism. Participants linked such representations to the targeting of Black African teenagers by police officers in public spaces (“Because the media is saying Africans always commit a crime”, p. 217) and to the possibility of being targeted by racist and xenophobic violence (“The media should be careful because these words can kill people. Especially in treating those who are newcomers to Australia”, *ibid.*).

The first major book-length study of the case (Weber et al., 2021) draws on many of the same theoretical and conceptual resources discussed above, but places additional emphasis on the role of political opportunism in agitating the ‘African gang crime’ narrative in the run up to the 2018 Victorian State Premiership election. Drawing inspiration from Hall et al.’s *Policing the Crisis*, the authors conceptualize the case as a form of moral panic to accentuate its implications for a racialized politics of belonging in contemporary Australian society, especially as those implications have registered in the everyday lives of Black African people. In terms of the role played by news media in the criminalization of Black African youth, this study relies on a longitudinal quantitative content analysis of ‘African gang crime’ coverage across publications in the aftermath of Moomba 2016 and in the run-up to the 2018 Premiership election (see Keel et al., 2021). The qualitative dimension of the authors’ text analysis follows the precedent set by other analyses of this case: that is, focussing on the routine articulation of Blackness and criminality as a strategy of racist Othering and as an auxiliary to (anti-)immigration and national identity discourses. Thus, while Weber et al. offer an illuminating birds-eye view of the broad patterns and trends in reporting that gave rise to the construction of ‘African gang crime’, their qualitative critique of the social and political implications of the narrative largely echoes that of previous studies.

Overall, then, the existing literature on the mediated criminalization of Black African youth in Australia has tended to focus critical attention primarily onto the self/Other definitional work of such representations—specifically, how they feed negative community attitudes towards the Black African diaspora and feelings of exclusion and cultural subjugation amongst its members. While considerably less prominent, the two other major frameworks for understanding mediated criminalization—the ‘moral mythology’ approach and the ‘omnipresent unease’ approach—often overlap with these critiques. Nolan et al. (2016), for example, situate the ‘African gang crime’ narrative within a broader renegotiation of the normative contours of the Australian nation state, shifting away from discourses of multiculturalism and towards a “new integrationsim” (Poynting & Mason, 2008) that positions cultural (and racial) difference as a threat to social cohesion and ‘harmony’. Moreover, analyses foregrounding the role of elections in the different ‘waves’ of

‘African gang crime’ coverage—such as that of Weber et al.—engage a critique of the politics of unease, highlighting how mediated criminalization helped construct a generalized (and yet pointedly racialized) sense of insecurity and disorder in Australian society upon which ‘law and order’ election platforms could be built and executed.

On the whole, however, it can be said that mediated criminalization—both as it relates to the Black African diaspora in Australia specifically, and more broadly as an object of critical social research—has been conceptualized, investigated, and critiqued as the symbolic articulation of certain subjects, practices, social groups, social spaces, subcultures, and so on, with the category of ‘crime’. It follows from this understanding that mediated *decriminalization* could be conceptualized as a process of symbolic recuperation, whereby those same subjects, practices, social groups, social spaces, sub-cultures etc. are symbolically *detached* from the category of crime through iterative acts of mediated representation that forge alternative symbolic attachments. But is this really all that cultural decriminalization means and requires? In the next section, I lay out some of the important critical limitations of the ‘construction of criminality’ understanding of mediated criminalization and the version of cultural decriminalization that it implies. These limitations fall into two broad shortfalls: a partial and unsatisfying account of the politics of mediation, and a partial and unsatisfying account of the politics of criminalization.

*a) Critical limits: the politics of mediation and the politics of criminalization*

One significant limitation of the “moral panic” as a framework for understanding contemporary cultural criminalization is its reductive understanding of the politics of mediation—or, more specifically, how power works through, and is negotiated by, practices of mediated communication, including journalism. As highlighted by McRobbie & Thornton (1995), the concept of a “moral panic” as theorized by Cohen and later operationalized within a Marxist critique by Hall et. al. assumes a degree of ideological uniformity and representational consistency within and across mediated discourses which jars with contemporary media realities. Writing in the mid-1990s, these authors pointed to an increasingly participatory and dialogical media landscape and questioned whether it was still coherent (indeed, ever coherent) to propose that the role of journalism in the reproduction of hegemonic or “common sense” ideas about crime and deviance was simply that of a vector, carrying the ideologies of political elites and other agents of social control (such as the police) out to the public with minimal symbolic interference. “The hard and fast divide between media professionals and media ‘punters’ seems to have broken down,” they wrote (1995, p. 571). If this was true “to some extent” in 1995 (*ibid.*), it is certainly

an understatement in the present-day context of digital journalism, which necessarily occurs in an active, participatory dialogue with the public.

A drawback of the “moral panic” understanding of mediated criminalization, then, is that it underplays the openness and antagonism of contemporary (mediated) culture, and so struggles to offer a satisfying account of the relationship between the symbolic work of journalism, on the one hand, and the cultural legitimation of coercive and violent state practices, on the other. This limitation is pertinent in the case of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative, which has engendered serious political implications for both members of the Black African diaspora and for the securitization of immigration and multiculturalism more broadly in contemporary Australia *despite* being widely contested by progressive media and politicians, and by no means hegemonic in the Australian media landscape (Nolan et. al, 2016).

This gestures to a second key limitation of the ‘moral panic’ approach—and the broader ‘construction of criminality’ approach of which it forms part—which lies in its conceptualization of the political significance of media representations. By focussing analytical attention onto the objects of criminalization (people, places, practices etc.), the ‘construction of criminality’ approach emphasizes mediated processes of amplification, exaggeration, and distortion. The core political problematic that animates the ‘construction of criminality’ approach to criminalization, then, is the *wrongful* association of particular groups, identities, and experiences with the issue of crime through acts of representation. As such, a critique of criminalization that relies on the symbolic deconstruction of ‘the criminal’ in media representation can often find itself tangled up in, and ultimately stalled at, the arbitration of which groups, identities, or practices are associated with crime arbitrarily (for example, Black African men) and which are associated legitimately (for example, serial killers, or rapists). As Watney (1987) writes:

“Moral panic theory is always obliged in the final instance to refer and contrast ‘representation’ to the arbitration of ‘the real’ and is hence unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within representational systems. Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of *permanent* struggle of the meaning of signs” (Watney, 1987, p. 41; cited in McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p.564 )

This critique takes aim on two fronts. First, it argues that representations of crime need to be situated within, and analysed as part of, historical struggles over meaning that can never be simply resolved in favour of ‘reality’. Second, and relatedly, it highlights how an approach to criminalization which focuses on the *illegitimacy* of mediated representations vis-à-vis ‘reality’ leaves the possibility of *legitimate* criminalization undisturbed, and thus the coherence of

‘criminality’ as a way of making sense of challenges to safety and social order more or less intact. While it is certainly important to highlight that the association of Black African youth with widespread violent crime by the Australian press has no demonstrable basis in crime victimization data (Grivas, 2018), a critique focussed on this disconnect between representation and ‘reality’ cannot easily extend to a deeper critique of ‘criminality’ and the practices it animates (including policing, incarceration, and punitive deportation) as historical technologies of racialized order and social and economic inequality. In the case of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative, a critique focussed on arbitrating the (un)reality of this narrative disguises the arbitrariness of ‘criminality’ *itself* as a way of perceiving, diagnosing, and acting upon challenges to safety and justice—and so also of the *iterative* character of all criminalizing discourses, no matter their subjects.

The two other frameworks for understanding mediated criminalization—either conceptualizing criminalization as the construction of moral myths, or as the construction of omnipresent unease—mitigate some of these limitations but come with their own. In the ‘moral mythology’ approach, the critique of criminalization shifts somewhat away from the constructed figure of ‘the criminal’ and towards the symbolic power of the institutions tasked with managing the ‘problem’ of crime—in particular, police, prisons, and the courts. While incisive in its deconstruction of how storytelling helps sustain the reflexive societal impulse to export problems labelled as ‘criminal’ to the “police solution” (Vitale, 2017), the broader political implications of criminalization—including the impact of mediated criminalization on the lives of the criminalized—are often absent from such critiques. We might say, then, that this approach is analytically inattentive to the cultural work performed by stories about crime and its management *beyond* the simple renewal of the “myths” of policing-as-order and punishment-as-justice (Manning, 2001). Similarly, while the ‘omnipresent unease’ framework engages a critique of the broader political and cultural significance of criminalizing representations vis-à-vis the legitimacy of certain state practices and policies, it lacks micro-political attentiveness. Conceptualizing criminalization and its political consequences in terms of the (re)production of *generalized* insecurity neglects the question of *which* forms of risk and danger come to be articulated as ‘criminal’ threats (and which do not), and *who* gets caught up in criminalization and its attendant practices (and who does not). In other words, the social politics of criminalization as a specific form of securitization fall somewhat out of view, in favour of a broader critique of governance-by-fear as a threat to democratic ideals.

## Rethinking Criminalization to Rethink ‘Criminalizing’ Representations

We live in a police state, in which the police have become the judge, juror and executioner. They’ve become the social worker. They’ve become the mental health clinician. They’ve become anything and everything that has to do with the everyday life of mostly Black and Brown poor people. They’ve become the through line. They’ve become the expectation. Instead of the mass movement saying, “No, we don’t want them,” the mass movement is saying “How do we reform them? How do we hold a couple of them accountable?” The conversation should be: “Why are they even here?”

**Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the #BlackLivesMatter movement**

(Cullors & Heatherton, 2016, p. 36)

The question of how media criminalize evidently sits at the intersection of a vast multitude of scholarly projects and lines of enquiry, including those of cultural studies, critical criminology, sociology, police studies, critical IR, security studies, as well as media and journalism studies. The construction of criminality approach to this question—which broadly understands criminalization as a cultural rather than simply legal achievement—forms the basis of my own. However, in elaborating its various iterations in this chapter, my intention has been to demonstrate that this research agenda has not so far developed the theoretical and conceptual vocabulary needed to deconstruct and dismantle criminalization as a logic of social practice that is *fundamentally* (rather than incidentally) in conflict with the aims of social justice and emancipatory safety. Returning to the case of ‘African gang crime’, we can say that existing scholarship provides a rich catalogue of resources for critically analysis of the case in its specificities (especially, the symbolic construction of ‘African gang criminals’ and of Victoria Police) but not the larger historical phenomenon of which it forms just part: criminalization as a base logic of modern social organization and social order, and the ‘crime-migration-media’ nexus as a resilient and fundamentally iterative mechanism of its practical realization in the Australian context.

Of course, this is not to say that such critiques do not exist, nor that such a vocabulary has not already been richly developed outside studies of criminalizing *media*, specifically. Abolitionist writers, scholars, and activists—those who hold the wholesale dismantling of crime control institutions and technologies as a normative political horizon—have long insisted that criminalization be understood as fundamentally antagonistic to the pursuit of social justice. Drawing substantively on historical materialism and political economy critiques of crime control

institutions, authors within this tradition propose that racist exclusion, domination, and violence, far from being “glitches” of criminal justice practices, are rather inevitable and ultimately irreducible *features* of how these practices operate and the kinds of social and economic order they are designed to fortify (see Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003, 2005; Murakawa, Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Murakawa, 2020; Vitale, 2017; Wilson Gilmore, 2007, 2021). Such critiques firmly reject the still decidedly common-sense notion that the intended (if not actual) function of the criminal justice system is to promote public ‘safety’ and evenly enforce laws that we are to in turn presume have been devised with the interests of all citizens held evenly in mind. Rather, critics within this tradition understand criminal justice to be, by design, a complex yet purposeful mechanism for the maintenance of existing political arrangements—and so, inevitably, an institutionalized curb to possibilities for meaningful political transformation<sup>15</sup>. In the context of modern racial capitalism (see Bhandar, 2018; Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Robinson, 2000), this maintenance function inevitably involves the forceful re-entrenchment of race as a key economic and civic organizing principle, as well as the management (on the streets) and ‘tidying away’ (in prisons) of those whom are most abjectly failed by existing economic arrangements. In this way, the criminal justice system disguises capitalism’s racialized and racializing global “crisis of care” by managing it in ways that help sustain (rather than disrupt) the practices and systems that give rise to it—in other words, ensuring that it is never truly apparent *as* a crisis and thus as a potential ideological challenge to the legitimacy of neoliberal economic order (Wilson Gilmore & Gilmore, 2016, pp. 173–174). Poverty, addiction, educational inequalities, homelessness, survival sex work, unemployment, disability, and mental health struggles are reinscribed (both culturally and legally) as ‘crime’, and thus re-cast as individual (rather than systemic) failures demanding punitive responses. As Vitale (2017) elaborates:

“It is understandable that people have come to look to the police to provide them with their safety and security. After decades of neoliberal austerity, local governments have no will or ability to pursue the kinds of ameliorative social policies that might address crime

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<sup>15</sup> One of the earliest critiques of this kind can be found in Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction*, wherein he describes how early US criminal justice systems (including early police forces) helped sustain the persecution and exploitation of Black people in the post-civil war South following the official abolition of slavery in 1865. He wrote: “In no part of the modern world has there been so open and conscious a traffic in crime for deliberate social degradation and private profit as in the South since slavery. The Negro is not anti-social. He is no natural criminal. Crime of the vicious type, outside endeavour to reach freedom or in revenge for cruelty, was rare in the slave south. Since 1876 Negroes have been arrested on the slightest provocation and given long sentences or fines that they were compelled to work for as if they were slaves or indentured servants again.” (Du Bois, 1956, p. 698; cited by Mendieta, 2005). For an extended discussion of Du Bois’ critiques of Black criminalization and how they might extend into a fundamental critique of crime control-as-safety, see Werth (2022).

and disorder without the use of armed police; as Simon points out, the government has basically abandoned poor neighbourhoods to market forces, backed up by a repressive criminal justice system. That system stays in power by creating a culture of fear that it claims to be uniquely suited to address.” (Vitale, 2017, p. 53; discussing Simon, 2007)

This thesis is not a work of criminology, nor political economy, nor public policy, nor law. It enquires not into systems of economic order nor legislative practices, but rather into news texts as instruments of mediated worldmaking. My reason for drawing brief attention to abolitionist scholarship at the end of this chapter is to illuminate the contours of a particular critical disposition towards the question of ‘crime’ and its management which has so far been overwhelmingly lacking from critiques of ‘criminalizing’ media representations, and entirely absent from research into the phenomenon of ‘African gang crime’. This disposition, which I will term the *abolitionist ethic*, takes the arbitrariness of *criminalization itself* as an analytical starting point, and the violence of so-called criminal justice for marginalized groups (especially, the racialized poor) as an empirical given. This is an ethic that firmly rejects the sense of inevitability often attached to policing and prisons in public and scholarly discourse, instead insisting that such institutions must be held to (and so, allowed to potentially buckle under) the same standards of justification as any other alternative. It insists, in other words, that the question posed by #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Patrisse Cullors about the police at the opening of this section—*Why are they even here?*—is one that demands a serious answer. As an ethic for critical scholarship, it orientates the researcher towards much deeper questions about the politics of criminalization, both in terms of what it requires and in terms of the kind of work it performs in the world. It implores one to resist the ‘reformist’ impulse to critique only some practices, processes, or cases of criminalization—the ‘more violent’, ‘more discriminatory’, or ‘more arbitrary’—and to instead investigate how, why, and crucially *for whom* ‘criminality’ is maintained as our dominant framework for (mis)perceiving, (mis)diagnosing, and attempting to remedy modern forms of harm. Naomi Murakawa (2016) illustrates the distinction between a ‘reformist’ and an ‘abolitionist’ critical ethic as follows:

“The terminology we use [police brutality and racial profiling] betrays the notion that policing is at its core acceptable, that it only becomes a problem when things go awry. But let’s be clear: there is no such thing as racial profiling. To say that police are profiling suggests the possibility that there could ever be colour-blind policing. [...] ‘Police brutality’ is also a hollow term, in

the sense that all police interactions, by definition, occur under the threat of brutality. [...] What we need to challenge is routine policing, not the “exceptional abuses” of policing.” (Murakawa, Camp & Heatherton, 2016, pp. 232–233)

Herein lie what I believe to be some as-yet-unanswered question for scholars of media. What would it mean to investigate ‘criminalizing’ practices of media representation using an abolitionist (rather than reformist) critical sensibility? What sorts of theoretical and analytical tools would it require? These are the questions that animate and orientate the narrative I aim to develop across this thesis. As Lisa Maria Cacho writes, “the term “criminalization” has been used to refer to being stereotyped as criminal as well as to being criminalized, but it’s important to maintain a distinction between the two” (Cacho, 2012, p. 4). I follow Cacho in insisting on this distinction, whilst simultaneously insisting that we do not yet have a sufficient analytical grasp on the relationship between these two dimensions of criminalization—the ideational and the practical—and the significance of media representations therein. Criminalization is, at its core, about being legitimately excluded from the protective function of the state and whilst being legitimately exposed to practices of state violence—a condition of civic subjectification that Cacho describes as “social death” (ibid.). Through the prism of an abolitionist ethic, the normative question of how media might *decriminalize* becomes less about shrinking or arbitrating the category of ‘the criminal’ (i.e. the disruption of stereotyping) and more fundamentally about investigating the very conditions of possibility for ‘criminality’ as the hitherto dominant frame through which we perceive, diagnose, and act upon, threats to social order and justice, with a view to their unmaking (i.e. the disruption of social death). This is the political horizon towards which my own critique of mediated criminalization is orientated, and to which I will return at the end of this thesis.

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## Theorizing the Mediated Security Imaginary

### Beyond the ‘Construction of Criminality’

The preceding chapter advocated for a more holistic and fundamental approach to the question of mediated criminalization as social construction, capable of capturing both its micro-political work—in the construction of subjects and identities, including the ‘criminal’ and the ‘non-criminal’—and its macro-political implications—specifically, how it constitutes an important condition of possibility for *practices* of crime control and the structures of domination they fortify. Such an approach is required, I propose, to investigate and theorize the enduring significance of representational practices—especially, news media representations—for the reproduction (and so, potential disruption) of criminalization as an endemic yet ultimately arbitrary logic of social life. In this chapter, I offer a theoretical and conceptual framework for investigating (mediated) criminalization in these terms, in two moves.

The first move develops a framework for interpreting the political ontological character of the relationship between representations of criminality and ways of acting upon criminality, to clarify how this project understands symbolic and material forms of criminalization to be politically linked. This framework—which I term the ‘mediated security imaginary’—draws on and integrates several different theoretical traditions. The first is critical security studies, a sub-field within critical International Relations (IR) scholarship that advocates for a (broadly speaking) poststructuralist understanding of the category ‘security’. I deploy this scholarship to reconceptualize crime control as a form of security practice, and so criminalization as an enactment of what I call the *logic of security*. The utility of this reframing is that it, first, distils the precise forms of discursive work criminalization requires, and second, consequently helps symbolically connect crime control to other security practices, and so to ‘security’ as a much larger political project.

From here, I propose the concept of a ‘mediated imaginary’ as the means of this symbolic connection: first, by positioning the ‘social imaginary’ as that which links ways of knowing about and ways of acting upon the social world; and second, by making an argument as to why the social imaginary must be conceptualized and investigated as *mediated*, specifically. In the first instance, I look to philosopher Charles Taylor’s concept of the social imaginary and its later

reconceptualization by Jolene Pretorius for cultural critiques of security praxis as the ‘security imaginary’. On the question of mediation, I turn back to the field of media and communications to address one of the major critical shortfalls of the ‘social imaginary’ framework—that it lacks a clear and cogent account of communication power. To introduce ‘mediation’ as an important theoretical concept for the study of security imaginaries, I draw primarily on Chouliaraki & Fairclough’s (1999) work on mediated discourse, as well as on the concepts of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and premediation (Grusin, 2004).

The first move of this chapter, then, is to introduce and advocate for the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a framework for theorizing criminalization from a critical cultural perspective—that is, with an analytical eye towards its symbolic negotiation, but a critical attentiveness to its material implications. The second move is to then operationalize this theorization for empirical work, and specifically for investigating the criminalization of Black African youth in and through the Australian press as a specific case. The second half of this chapter develops a conceptual framework for the coming empirical analysis by re-framing each core element of the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as something that can be identified and analysed within media texts. This framework proposes that mediated criminalization should be conceptualized and investigated as a symbolic *politics of vulnerability*, operating in this case through journalistic representations of ‘African gang crime’ events. With this conceptual framework in place, the chapter concludes by laying out the overarching research question for this project, as well as the sub-questions that will help guide the analytical process.

#### *a) Criminalization as security logic*

The concept of ‘security’ has been a popular object of (critical constructivist) interrogation since the mid-1990s, when in the aftermath of the Cold War scholars in international relations and related fields began to question the taken-for-grantedness of the term’s historical associations with militarism, state sovereignty, and the exercise of organized armed warfare. Rooted in the rationalist and realist political philosophies of thinkers like Hobbes and Locke, traditional or ‘neorealist’ security studies has positioned itself historically as a field of scholarship invested in the protection and preservation of nation states, their citizens, and their resources, against the ever-present threat of foreign incursion and war (Walt, 1991). Security, here, is framed as a ‘how to’ question: how do we build it, by what means should we maintain it, and through which strategies should we insure it for future generations? Almost automatically, the nation state was widely understood as the

‘referent object’ of both security praxis and security scholarship (Buzan et al., 1998), and military action its default *modus operandi*.

However, in the 1990s—following the breakup of the USSR, and amid the steady intensification of global inequalities and mass-casualty intra-state conflict<sup>16</sup>—this hitherto dominant understanding of what security means and wants started to lose its real-world purchase for many researchers and theorists. For some, security remained a ‘how to’ question, but with different ends and means in mind, such as healthcare, housing, and sustainable access to food and water (see Beebe & Kaldor, 2010; Chandler & Hynek, 2011). Others, however, started to re-think the very idea of ‘security’ in much more fundamental terms. The normative concern became not what security needed for its realization, but rather, what the *language* of security could justify. The most prolific framework to emerge from this period was *securitization*. Coined by thinkers at the Copenhagen School, securitization draws on J.L. Austin’s theory of the ‘speech act’ (Austin, 1975) to describe a performative process whereby influential state actors deploy the language of security to lift certain issues out of the terrain of everyday politics and into the terrain of ‘the emergency’ to mandate urgent and exceptional forms of intervention that circumvent or supersede normal democratic deliberation (Buzan et al., 1998).

I want to resist simply reframing criminalization as a form of securitization, so defined, for several important reasons. First, the normative dimension of the theory—which understands securitization to be a ‘problem’ insofar as it threatens the integrity of democratic processes—misconstrues the political stakes of criminalization and the political contexts in which it occurs. The emphasis placed on political exceptionalism offers limited inroads to interrogating criminalization as one of the many forms of violent intervention that comprise the *unexceptional* political backdrop of modern liberal democratic societies (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020, p. 7; Neal, 2006, p. 33). Second, the theory has a narrow interpretation of the significance of communication in the construction of ‘legitimate’ security threats. Securitization is imagined in procedural terms—in meeting speech conditions, following rules, and moving through steps. The “success” of securitizing speech acts is consequently reduced to the agency (and authority) of the securitizing actor—the role of their ‘audience’ is simply to accept or reject the securitizing move, not to dialectically co-construct it (see Balzacq, 2005). Culture is, by consequence, minimized as a domain of contingency for security practices, obscuring a closer critique of *why* only some ‘threats’ come to be legitimately identified, enunciated, recognized, and acted upon through the prism of ‘security’ while others do not.

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<sup>16</sup> These conflicts often aligned geographically with regions most affected by creeping global inequality, former sites of proxy warfare during the Cold War, and former colonies—and so, emerged as a direct consequence of the major Western military and economic incursions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Instead, I propose that criminalization be thought of as a form of ‘security’ as the term is understood by another, adjacent body of scholarship that emerged around the same time—the loosely grouped field of critical security studies (Krause & Williams, 1997). Authors within this tradition deploy a broadly poststructuralist understanding of the generative relationship between language, knowledge, and power, inspired by writers like Michele Foucault and Judith Butler, to approach ‘security’ not as a concrete set of practices, but rather, as a *logic* of practice, mobile and malleable, not simply ‘deployed’ through the speech acts of political elites but rather negotiated and made intelligible (and thus actionable) through iterative historical patterns of discourse. As Campbell (1998) observes, modern social life contains “a veritable cornucopia of danger” (p.2). It is impossible to know ‘objectively’ all that threatens us in any given moment, and so the making and marking of security threats can occur “only through an interpretation of their various dimensions of dangerousness” (ibid.). As such, what gets articulated and acted upon as ‘insecurity’ or ‘threat’ is always more than objective, and thus always arbitrary to a greater or lesser extent. The critical agenda of this strand of research is to understand how certain claims to and about (in)security are granted historical stability and salience, by whom, for whom, and with what consequences for the way we can think about, speak about, and act upon threats to human life and flourishing (Krause & Williams, 1997). Or, as Burke (2008) phrases it:

“It is to explore security’s *conditions of possibility*: how it is possible to *think* security in any particular time and place, and how security in turn makes it possible to think and act within a given political and cultural community... [B]efore existing techniques of security can be superseded or rethought, their stubborn cultural power must first be understood.” (Burke, 2008, p.12-13).

The normative concern in critical security studies is with the justificatory power that the *idea* of security (in its various historical iterations) can harness and deploy, especially in the legitimate reproduction of violence. As a concept whose “basic principle of reality is irony” (ibid, p.8), ‘security’ practices usually create exactly that which they purport to address: that is, *insecurity*, often displaced rather than defeated. A key symbolic condition of possibility for all forms of practice enacted in the name of ‘security’ is the discursive management of this core contradiction, so that security practices—be they policing and incarceration, border militarisation, or warfare—can retain meaningful coherence as something we call either ‘safety’ or ‘justice’. Walker (1997) frames the lens of critical security studies this way:

“What are the conditions under which it is now possible to think, speak, and make authoritative claims about what is referred to in the language of modern politics as ‘security’? This is the crucial question that must be addressed, given the widely shared sense that we hardly know what we’re talking about when this term rolls so easily off the tongue to circulate among the practices of modern violence.” (Walker, 1997, p. 61).

In terms of epistemology, then, a critique of criminalization through the lens of critical security studies directs analytical attention towards the ideational work of discourse, which provides knowledge and violence with their means of legitimate convergence (Booth, 1997, p. 71). At this point, however, an important caveat must be made. Criminalization is, of course, not *reducible* to discourse or ‘discourse only’, nor is the concept of ‘threat’. Much of that which we find threatening has a basis in material realities and conditions that are unamenable to discursive transformation (e.g., the vulnerability of the body) or so historically sedimented as to be treated empirically as ‘real’ (e.g., structural inequalities). However, nothing can be constituted *as* (in)security *outside* of discourse, and it is *in being constituted as such* that the materiality of threat becomes meaningful and so can inform social practice. This is the difference between the claim that security threats are completely arbitrary (that is, divorced from material conditions) and the ontology of threat I am borrowing from critical security studies, which is that security threats are always *somewhat* arbitrary (that is, always constituted by *more than* those material conditions). An important implication of this argument is that security threats (and so, criminality) can never be politically neutral. Their constitution and recognition are contingent within power relations, and they are always embedded in and conditioned by normative ideas about justice.

To summarize, when I employ the term ‘security’ in this project I am referring not to a bounded set of practices or institutions but rather to a *logic* of practice that is culturally constituted. The logic of security, I have argued, is both relational and calculative, intersubjective and context-dependent, and so grounded not only in the cultural reproduction of subjects but also the construction of social contexts. Practices we call ‘security’ inevitably create that which they purport to remedy, and so practices conditioned by the logic of security are implicated primarily in the redistribution (rather than amelioration) of different forms of openness to harm. Security discourses are thus inherently *justificatory* discourses, articulating claims not only about who or what is in need of security intervention, but also on what grounds. Criminalization, reframed as security discourse, is therefore a dialectical structure of communication and interpretation grounded in more than just the representation of ‘criminal’ actors, groups of identities, or crime control agents and institutions. Rather, it constitutes (and so, relies upon) a much broader field of meaning that

informs the legitimacy of crime control practices through calculations of (in)security that are both relational (and thus, *intersubjective*) and also historical (and thus, coherent only in the context of broader perceptions and experiences of social time and space).

*b) Security logic as 'imaginary'*

There is little consistency in the way 'the imaginary' has been adopted by scholars, neither as a colloquialism nor as a defined concept. Here, I am employing the term to conceptualize the relationship between discourse and security practice, and specifically the role the former plays in shaping and potentially delimiting the conditions of possibility for the latter. Employing this slippery term, I have in mind Charles Taylor's (2002) understanding of the social imaginary as "that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (p. 106). Common, here, certainly does not mean common amongst all people, implying a singular and fixed 'social imaginary', but rather *common enough* that modern social practices can maintain coherence<sup>17</sup>. Taylor places the symbolic and material moments of practice in a cyclical dialectic, arguing that social meaning is a prerequisite condition for social practice *as well as* something that practices generate in and through their discursive moment. He writes:

"What I'm trying to get at with this term [the social imaginary] is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." (Taylor, 2002, p. 106)

There are a few key points to be drawn out from this elaboration, which will help illuminate how 'the imaginary' can theoretically inform an empirical critique of criminalization. First, Taylor conceptualizes the social subject as (potential) social actor in relational terms. It is not simply a sense of the self or of the Other that informs practices, he argues, but rather a sense of "how they fit together" and "how things go on between them" (*ibid.*). Applying this perspective to the question of criminalization, one can posit that the legitimacy of crime control practices is based in

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<sup>17</sup> This perspective harmonizes with a social constructivist theory of discourse power, which positions discourse as the 'meaning-making moment' of social practice, upon which practices are differentially dependent for their reproduction through justification (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). I discuss this perspective in greater detail when laying out the epistemological foundations of this project in the following chapter.

a patterned sense of “how things go on” between those constructed as criminal Others and those naturalized as ‘non-criminal’ security subjects, emergent historically through iterative representations of crime and its management. There is also a duality to Taylor’s conceptualization of the imaginary that is important to draw out. The legitimacy of practice, he argues, depends not only on the perceptual moment of representation, but also its normative moment—not just a common sense of how social relations ‘go’, but also how they *should go* and thus should be acted upon through practice. As Taylor explains:

“This understanding is both factual and “normative”; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice.” (ibid.)

The legitimate reproduction of practice is thus unavoidably caught up in culturally constructed ideas about justice, while the reflexive construction of ‘legitimacy’ invariably involves the construction of its limits—the ‘missteps’ that would tilt the practice off its normative foundations. However, the question of criminalization (as a form of social construction) and crime control (as the category of practice it justifies) makes it clear that power has an important role to play in determining *whose* social imaginaries dictate the legitimacy of practice, and *to whom* missteps must appear in order for practices to be destabilized. For example, the extent of police aggression and violence towards Black communities in the United States has, for many spectators, qualified as an invalidating misstep significant enough to spark calls for defunding or abolishing police institutions. For others, however, the normative legitimacy of the practice endures through these spectacular failures because the social imaginary informing crime control can accommodate them; police brutality is perceived as a glitch—a sign of the practice going wrong—rather than a feature, a sign of the practice *being* wrong.

A ‘security imaginary’, then, should not be interpreted as a singular field of meaning shared by all people. Nor would it be sufficiently accountable to the material contexts of policing and incarceration to suggest that these practices reproduce themselves through a constructed sense of legitimacy (or, consent) alone. Clearly, the reproductive power of the social imaginary vis-à-vis practices of crime control cannot be disentangled from other forms of power and thus other forces contributing to the reproduction of crime control—including the material and economic imperatives foregrounded by leading abolitionist thinkers and discussed in the preceding chapter (see Alexander, 2010; Wilson Gilmore, 2007). However, describing security (and so, criminalization) as a phenomenon of the security imaginary asserts that the reproduction of crime control practices is *at least partly* dependent on how people imagine these practices and the social

world in which they operate, and thus *more than simply* a coercive extension of economic power. The very presence of criminalizing discourses in public culture is evidence of this—without the need for consent, there would be no imperative to justify crime control through the construction of ‘legitimate’ targets. Crime control is, like all forms of practice, reflexive, and thus contingent within discourse without being reducible to discourse alone (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The security imaginary is our “wider grasp of [the] whole predicament” of social life (Taylor, 2002, p. 107) and the status of (in)security, as a specific predicament, within it; a discursively constructed backdrop against which specific practices become possible by becoming meaningful, by ‘making sense’.

A version of this heuristic has already been proposed by Pretorius (2008) as a way of conceptualizing the role of culture in global processes of military isomorphism. Against a rationalist model of military diffusion, which positions transformations in military strategy as calculated responses to changes in a nation’s security environment, Pretorius advocates for a constructivist understanding of military strategy as “adopted (consciously or unconsciously) and adapted (consciously or unconsciously) to fit a country’s particular environment *as this environment is constituted by society*” (Pretorius, 2008, p. 102; emphasis in original). Just as Taylor proposes that social imaginaries are constituted in “images, stories and legends” (2002, p. 106), so Pretorius points to discursive practices and their artifacts—“[j]ournals, speeches, studies, proposals, conversations, reports, news broadcasts and accounts of all kinds” (2008, p. 100)—as that which enables the co-conditioning dialectic between imaginations of the security environment and practical responses to it (p. 102). In adopting the term ‘environment’, Pretorius conceptualizes the security imaginary in spatial terms, arguing that the imaginary emerges not only from the articulation (Hall, 1997a) and interpellation (Althusser, 1971) of subject positions, but also the relational configurations subjects are placed in, through acts of representation, at particular (constructed) junctures of time and space. She writes:

“The notion of a security imaginary is not simply an extension of the concept ‘social imaginary’ so as to apply it to the study of security, but instead refers to that part of the social imaginary as ‘a map of social space’ that is specific to society’s common understandings and expectations about security and makes practices related to security possible... The security imaginary takes cognisance of the cultural raw material that needs to be present for various associations (or meanings or ‘signifieds’) that the word ‘security’ might denote at different times for a society.” (Pretorius, 2008, p. 112)

The security imaginary, as proposed by Pretorius, is thus a constructed sense of social spacetime, and the relational subject positions constructed within it, which makes practices we call ‘security’ possible by (re)producing the web of symbolic associations necessary to make them meaningful. It follows then, that changes in the security imaginary imply changes in the conditions of possibility for security practices, without determining them autonomously or entirely. This is a considerably different understanding of how (in)security is ‘made’ through language than that offered by the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School; while the latter understands security claims as annunciated through the speech acts of political elites, the security imaginary approach instead conceptualizes such claims as symbolically *negotiated* through and between banal representations of social life which condition the socio-political imaginations of both security actors and ordinary citizens. Returning again to the question of criminalization, the security imaginary is that culturally constructed background understanding of the temporal-spatial and intersubjective dimensions of social life against which practices of crime control can appear coherent, both practically (that is, vis-à-vis a constructed sense of ‘how things are’) and morally (that is, vis-à-vis a constructed sense of ‘how things should be’).

c) *The ‘security imaginary’ as mediated*

An important critical shortfall of the ‘security imaginary’ as conceptualized by Pretorius—inherited from its antecedent, Taylor’s ‘social imaginary’—is that it lacks a clear theoretical account of communication and, by extension, communication power. We can rephrase this critique to say that, as an account of the ontological relationship between security discourses and practices, the ‘security imaginary’ is insufficiently attentive to the *conditions of discourse practice*, and so how those conditions may be consequential for how (in)security can be imagined, spoken about, and acted upon. To address this limitation, I propose that the ‘security imaginary’ must be conceptualized and interrogated for its specifically *mediated* character—and so, that criminalization must ultimately be understood as a phenomenon of mediation.

Mediation, like security, is a difficult concept to pin down or crystalize in a singular definition. By invoking this concept, my aim is to draw attention to the materiality of discursive practices—especially, of criminalizing news representations, as my particular focus in this study. To theorize the relationship between discourse and social practice, I propose that discursive ‘texts’ need to be appreciated for both their symbolic constructivist potential vis-à-vis social spacetime (that is, as representations) but also for how they reconfigure *experiences of* social spacetime in their materiality as texts (that is, as technologies). Along these lines, ‘mediation’ refers broadly to the process by which discourses become texts, and thus encompasses both the material forms of texts

themselves and the broader material conditions under which discursive practices can occur (which include, but are not limited to, the materiality of textual forms). As Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) write:

“The category of ‘text’ arises with mediated interaction. We understand a text to be a contribution to communicative interaction which is designed for travel, so to speak—which is designed in one context with the view to its uptake in others. So, the category of ‘text’ is linked to the category of mediation.” (p. 45-46)

Conceptualized as such, mediation is a basic condition of possibility for the “social functioning of discourse” (ibid., p.42) in modern societies—or in other words, for the reflexivity of modern social practices through their discursive moment. The above definition of mediated ‘text’ includes any and all forms of discourse that involve a technical medium of some kind (e.g., pen and paper, a smartphone, a camera). Textual materiality matters to the social functioning of discourse because it enables and constrains different forms of communicative interaction and symbolic articulation, which in turn condition differing experiences of social spacetime and thus different possibilities for social practice. In particular, mediation is socially significant in that it enables the “time-space distantiation” of the social, or the reconfiguration of the temporal-spatial contexts of social experience and thus the conditions of possibility for social practices and the exercise of social power (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 43).

This line of argument has echoes of Silverstone’s (1994) concept of double articulation, which proposes that all media are socially significant in both their symbolic contents (that is, as representations *of* social life) and in their materiality as objects that move through and become situated within specific social settings (that is, as technologies that help *(re)construct* the spatial, temporal, and intersubjective dimensions of social experience). It also gels with a generative understanding of mediation as social construction, resisting an ontological dualism between the subject and the world (with media as that which ‘goes between’) to instead position mediations as constitutive of the social. Grusin (2015) elaborates:

“Mediation should not be understood as standing between pre-formed subjects, objects, actants, or entities but as the process, action or event that generates or provides the conditions of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world.” (Grusin, 2015, p. 129)

In his theory of ‘radical mediation’, Grusin takes this argument one step further, positing that “everything [is] a form of mediation” (ibid., p. 145) including interactions occurring in nature that are only distantly conditioned by human practices and relatively unamenable to transformation through discourse. He argues that “flowers, trees, rivers, and lakes” are “mediations themselves no different from texts, photos, sounds, videos, or transaction data that circulate on our media devices and provide data for corporate, technical, and governmental surveillance” (ibid.). However, I resist that extra step in this project for several reasons. First, this atomisation of mediation as simply ‘everything’, or as the “the ontological character of the world, as what the world is made of” (ibid., p. 142) somewhat strips the term of its epistemic utility by depriving it of specificity. More importantly for this project, however, it loses sight of the importance of the symbolic in the mediation of social life; in resisting ‘representationalism’ (Barad, 2007; cited in Grusin, 2015, p. 129), it significantly downplays the ontological and political significance of representation. Texts and photographs *are* different from flowers and lakes, and the difference matters. Thus, while carrying forward Grusin’s assertion that mediation is “affective and experiential” as well as merely semiotic (2015, p. 132), my own use of the term resists overdetermining the symbolic work of mediation with its material moment. I do this also to keep a firm focus on precisely *why* mediation is significant for the construction of security imaginaries through practices of discourse, and thus which ‘moments’ of mediation are most analytically significant in this project.

When I speak of the security imaginary as ‘mediated’, there are two aspects of the materiality of communication that I have in mind. First, the materiality of texts themselves has implications for constructed imaginations of social spacetime, and thus for the security imaginary and security subjectivities. Different mediums carry different possibilities for both the representation of *and* the experience of social spacetime. The materiality of a print photograph, for example, allows for communicative interaction at a temporal distance of years or decades (in its durability) and across large spatial distances (in its mobility). That a photographic representation can perform symbolic work in temporal-spatial contexts other than the very moment of its capture emerges from the materiality of its form as text—including the semiotic modalities enabled or constrained by that form. A photograph cannot spell out the historical context of a scene in the way that a written account can, for example, though it may have communicative affordances that are more difficult to access through the written word—for example, affective immediacy or aesthetic realism. The materiality of texts is thus significant to the symbolic potential of discourse (and thus practice) in two ways: first, in the possibilities it opens for time-space distantiation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), and second, in the possibilities it opens for the construction of

meaning within, across, and between different semiotic modalities (e.g., visual images and written text).

Second, the broad assemblage of practices, institutions, technologies, and texts we call ‘the media’ are also significant in the (re)construction of security imaginaries through discourse. Later in this chapter, I will elaborate on how I am conceptualizing the specific practice of journalism and how I understand the institutionalized logics of journalism to be analytically significant in this project. However, to theorize how and why the ‘security imaginary’ needs to be approached as *mediated* imaginary specifically, we can look to the concepts of ‘remediation’ (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and ‘premediation’ (Grusin, 2004). Remediation, as conceptualized by Bolter & Grusin, is a form of temporal-spatial remixing conditioned by two contradictory symbolic logics: the logic of *immediacy*, which seeks to obscure textual mediums so that mediated social spacetime can be by experienced as if ‘unmediated’, and the logic of *hypermediacy*, which capitalizes on the (mobile) materiality of textual mediums in order to ‘remediate’ old texts and textual forms into new contexts and combinations so as to give rise to a construction of social spacetime in which mediation is foregrounded and explicit. Again, ‘mediation’ here is about both the perception and experience of the social, as Grusin elaborates using the example of the 9/11 attacks in New York:

“As we have seen, the intensity of the double logic of remediation expressed during 9/11—the immediacy of the bombing, burning, and collapse of the Twin Towers coupled with the hypermediacy of its mediation on screens across the world—made 9/11 in some sense the paradigmatic global remediation event [...] The double logic of these remediations worked simultaneously to erase the televisual medium in our act of witnessing the horror and to multiply mediation through split screens, scrolling headlines, the importation of radio feeds, cellphones, videophones, and so forth.” (Grusin, 2004, p. 21)

The promise of ‘security’ is fundamentally future-orientated, and so the logic of security is firmly committed to the idea that epistemic resources available in the present can be combined and scrutinized in ways that not only vision specific futures but provide information about which forms of practice in the present can stop undesired futures from coming into being. Security imaginaries are thus mediated imaginaries, I propose, because security knowledge and action rely on a mode of being in and perceiving social spacetime that the doubled logic of media—the masterful omniscience of hypermediacy, and the affective force of immediacy—is uniquely suited to facilitate. It is not a coincidence, I argue, that in Grusin’s writing on ‘premediation’, terrorist threats (in the empirical case study of 9/11) and violent crime (in the textual case study of the Hollywood film *Minority Report*) serve as his illustrative examples (Grusin, 2004, p. 36). Mediations of security

threats, and the imaginaries they help build and sustain, *are* premeditations: remixed constructions of social life and the social world, built from existing textual representations, in which imaginations of the *future* social worlds are symbolically evoked and deployed (De Goede, 2008, p. 159). Grusin elaborates on premediation as follows:

“[T]he concept of premediation insists on the reality of the premediated future [...] But I also do not want to be misunderstood as saying that premediation predetermines the form of the real. Rather by trying to premeditate as many of the possible worlds, or possible paths, as the future *could be imagined to take*, premediation works something like the logic of designing a video game; it is not necessarily about getting the future right as much as it is about trying to imagine or map out as many possible futures *as could possibly be imagined* [...] The emerging conventions of premediation [...] require that the future be premediated in ways that are almost indistinguishable from the way the future will be mediated when it happens.” (Grusin, 2004, p. 28-29; emphasis added)

The formally limitless *yet historically limited* conditions of imaginative possibility that Grusin references here are what I am calling the security imaginary. Officially, there is no security future that cannot be imagined. However, we do not imagine or premeditate every possible future. Rather, imaginations of (in)security are conditioned within the historicity of discourse—in past remediations—both in terms of their limits (the boundary with the ‘unimaginable’) and in terms of their preoccupations (those potentialities we invest in imagining and premediating). While the security imaginary is a symbolic field, the forms of symbolic associations required for something called ‘security’ to be coherently imaginable, utterable, and actionable, are contingent within the materiality of discursive practices. This includes the materiality of texts themselves (which conditions both the communicative potential of different semiotic modalities, and the mobility and durability of different semiotic resources), the material means of circulation and recombination of texts (that is, media technologies and institutions), and in the materiality of semiotic systems (the materiality of language, and the intertextuality of discourse).

#### *d) The mediated security imaginary*

To theorize and investigate how criminalization works through media representations, I have proposed moving beyond the ‘construction of criminality’ approach (explored and critiqued in the previous chapter) and offered the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a supplementary framework. The mediated security imaginary, as I have theorized it, is that background sense of social life—including both its temporal-spatial and intersubjective dimensions—against which practices and

discourses of something we call ‘security’ can maintain meaningful coherence. It is both perceptually and normatively constituted—that is, capturing a constructed sense of both “how things are” in the social world and “how they ought to be”. This project positions such an imaginary as an important space of symbolic struggle and contingency for the legitimate reproduction of security practices, including practices of crime control. Before operationalizing this approach for empirical work, however, it is worth briefly reflecting on what the ‘mediated security imaginary’ can offer a critique of criminalizing representations in terms of epistemic gain, particularly in comparison to the dominant ‘construction of criminality’ approach.

First, reframing criminalization as a form of security throws into sharp relief the *relational* and *calculative* logics upon which criminalization relies. As I argued in the previous chapter, crime control, now conceptualized as a form of security praxis, creates and maintains forms of openness to harm for criminalized populations *as a means of* building the security of society ‘in general’, from which criminalized actors are symbolically, institutionally, and physically separated through criminalization (see Cacho, 2012). Criminalization can thus be understood as an interpretative structure rooted not only in the construction of ‘the criminal’, but also in the construction of the ‘non-criminal’ security subject to whom crime is positioned as threatening in specific historical contexts, and the relationship between the two. The danger of ‘crime’ is “not a thing that can exist independently of the subject to whom it may become a threat” (Campbell, 1998, p. 1) but rather relies on that subject and its sense of moral worth for its very coherence. A critique of criminalization, then, cannot simply deconstruct the figure of ‘the criminal’, but must untangle how that figure is placed in calculative relationships with other types of subjects within particular (constructed) social contexts. This is a more integrated heuristic of criminalization-as-social construction that, in turn, offers a more incisive account of how criminalizing representations can animate crime control practices—or, in other words, of the ontological character of the relationship between the symbolic and material moments of criminalization as a heterogeneous social dynamic.

Second, this framework resists approaching policing, incarceration, and other practices of crime control as operating somehow independently of other forms of security practice or according to an autonomous internal logic. In turn, this helps place the ‘African gang crime’ narrative in a more explicit relationship with Australia’s crime-migration-media nexus, as just one of its many historical iterations. If we take ‘security’ as a mobile and malleable logic constituted historically across and between different spheres of activity, then it follows that all practices which operate *as* security are to some extent co-implicated in meaning and thus reflexively co-conditioning. Bigo (2016), for example, likens security practice to a ‘Mobius strip’ on which

international and ‘internal’ security, militarism and policing, warfare and crime control, appear as two separate terrains but are actually a single topological continuum of security institutions and actors. Stumpf (2006) coins the term “crimmigration” to describe the institutional mechanisms through which domestic law enforcement is increasingly harnessed as a strategy of US ‘national security’ and border control, while McCulloch & Pickering’s (2009) explore how the pre-emptive logic of post-9/11 international security praxis is bleeding into the domestic business of crime management in the form of ‘pre-crime’ policing techniques. Framing mediated criminalization in these terms helps place domestic strategies of crime management, like policing and incarceration, in clearer symbolic *and* material relationships to a larger assemblage of security practices, professionals and institutions, including those involved in the work of ‘national security’. In other words, though crime is the referent problem to which criminalizing representations are indexed, criminalization can justify more than just ‘crime control’ practices, and those practices in turn rely symbolically on ‘more than’ just the cultural construction of criminality for their legitimate reproduction.

Finally, by framing the ‘security imaginary’ as a *mediated* imaginary specifically, the framework draws attention to how both the perception *and* experience of the social are significant for how (in)security can be imagined, envisioned, spoken about, and acted upon, and so how both the symbolic and material moments of media texts are implicated in criminalization as a dynamic of social construction. Mediation becomes a core theoretical concept for a critique of criminalization not to dismiss the political and ontological significance of representation, but to foreground how the materiality of representations conditions the kinds of symbolic work they can perform. In particular, two aspects of this materiality have been identified as analytically significant: first, the materiality of textual mediums, which conditions their durability, mobility, and the potentialities for multi-modal discourse; and second, the materiality of media technologies, through which symbolic resources from different historical contexts can be remixed and recombined to give rise to temporally and spatially distantiated experiences of the social world, social life, subjecthood, and (in)security.

The mediated security imaginary is, in summary, the combined symbolic conditions of possibility for the imagination of (in)security realities (for example, criminality) and (in)security futures, and thus for the coherence of security claims (for example, criminalization) and the practices they inform (for example, crime control). These conditions are negotiated through the historicity of discourse, and so are contingent in mediation as an important context of contemporary discursive practice.

## Mediated Imaginaries of ‘African Gang Crime’: A Conceptual Framework

This project is specifically interested in how criminalization works through news media, a question I intend to explore through a grounded examination of representations of ‘African gang crime’ in the Australian press as a specific case. The remainder of this chapter makes a proposal about how the ‘mediated security imaginary’, as a framework for understanding the relationship between representations of and way of acting upon the ‘threat’ of crime, should be operationalized for empirical research. Each of these theoretical foundations—security logic, the imaginary, and mediation—is reconceptualized in more concrete terms, as something that can be readily identified and analysed within news media representations of ‘African gang crime’. My intention in the following sections is to make clear how I am defining and approaching each of these core concepts, and how I see them fitting together to inform my research questions.

First, for mediation, I employ the concept of journalism. I position journalism as a practice of mediated representation conditioned by two key symbolic logics—realism and narrativity—and giving rise to ‘news discourse’ as a specific genre of speech. Then, to operationalise ‘the imaginary’, I draw on the Wagner-Pacifici’s (2017) ontology of the event to position crime *events* as the referents of crime news storytelling and the portals through which the temporal, spatial and intersubjective dimensions of security imaginaries are made and remade. Finally, to operationalise ‘security’, I employ the concept of vulnerability. Mediated crime events, I argue, are sites of vulnerability politics, where security claims emerge through the symbolic calculation of vulnerabilities between different subjects in different historical contexts. These calculations relate to both vulnerability as a political condition (that is, who is truly vulnerable, to whom, and under what conditions) and to vulnerability as a moral problem (that is, which forms of vulnerability are morally (in)tolerable, for whom, and why). It is through these calculations, I argue, that criminalization operates as a mediated politics of vulnerability—which, in turn, negotiates the symbolic coherence (and so, justification) of different forms of security practice, including practices of crime control.

### *a) Journalism: representation, realism, and narrativity in news discourse*

Empirically, this project is interested in the criminalizing potential of news media discourses, and so in texts emerging from the mediated interactions taking place within and through the practice of journalism. To conceptualize the specific type of mediated representation I am interested in, I approach journalism as a specific sphere of discursive practice giving rise to ‘news discourse’ as a *speech genre* conditioned by both the material conditions of the practice of journalism *and* the

historical linguistic features of journalistic texts. Bakhtin (1986) elaborates the concept of a speech genre as follows:

“Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects – thematic content, style, and compositional structure – are inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These are what we may call *speech genres*.” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60; emphasis in original)

From this broad definition, I propose that news discourse be conceptualized as one of these ‘relatively stable’ types of utterance, deriving its relative stability both through a historical dialectic with other utterances of this type (intertextuality) and from the broader “conditions and goals” of journalism as the specific sphere of language use from which such utterances emerge as texts. Following Chouliaraki & Fairclough’s (1999) writing on the relationship between language and social life, I understand journalism to be a complex and ontologically heterogeneous social practice conditioned by multiple ‘moments’ and their attendant logics, of which discourse is just one—the reflexive, meaning-making moment in which the practice represents itself to itself, and thus iteratively delimits its own coherence (p. 25-29). As such, it is not practical (indeed, possible) to give a comprehensive overview of all the various forces conditioning the practice of journalism in contemporary Australia and the texts emerging from it. However, to frame an investigation of how criminalization operates in and through such texts and the discourses they contain, there are two specific and interrelated conditions and/or goals (to use Bakhtin’s terminology) informing the meaning-making work of journalistic practice—which I will call ‘logics’—that need to be clearly in view: the logic of realism, and the logic of narrativity.

Both these logics relate to journalism as a practice of representation. When I use the term ‘representation’, I have in mind Stuart Hall’s (1997a) conceptualisation of representation as symbolic articulation: the ‘bringing together’ of symbolic elements within and across iterations of discourse to form associative relationships that are never given or fixed but rather demand ‘constant renewal’ through cultural practices in order to be sustained (Hall, 1985, pp. 113–114;

cited in Clarke, 2015, p. 277). Hall positions the power of representation as operating through concealment and obfuscation of the arbitrariness of symbolic articulations—in the constructed sense that two symbolic elements (for example, crime and violence) *do* go together in ways that are given and fixed, rather than constructed and thus subject to transformation. As already discussed in this chapter, an important material condition of the representational work of contemporary media (and journalism specifically) is its multi-modality, or the capacity for semiotic resources from different communicative modalities (e.g., linguistic text, visual imagery, aural resources) and different historical contexts to be drawn together into singular acts of representation.

When I propose that journalism is a practice of (multi-modal) representation conditioned by a ‘logic of realism’, I refer to the reflexive historical positioning of news discourse as invested in the objective representation of social reality: of communicating the social world ‘as it is’ (Schudson, 1978). While the meaning, possibility, and value of objectivity have been widely discussed and disputed within journalism scholarship (see Wright, 2011), it nonetheless remains the case that the *claim* to objective representation of social reality is at the heart of what distinguishes news discourse from other practices of symbolic representation, like literature or visual art. Several authors have proposed that objectivity is a performance which journalists enact through the way they conduct themselves as workers and storytellers (Boudana, 2011; Tuchman, 1972). However, I propose that this ‘objectivity’ imperative must also be managed symbolically within and through news texts themselves—so that, for example, a news text is easily distinguishable from a work of fiction, or a news photograph from a staged work of art. Realism is thus the aesthetic foundation of news storytelling. It conditions not only which stories can feature in journalism but also how they can be told, making it essential to the reflexive reproduction of the practice of newsmaking.

Related to, and often beleaguering, the imperative of realism in news discourse is what I call journalism’s logic of narrativity. There is some debate about the place or status of narrative in journalistic texts. For example, van Krieken & Sanders (2019, p.4) propose that narrative journalism be understood as a “distinctive subgenre” of the larger practice, distinguishable from non-narrative forms in terms of compositional structure, style, and the use of specific storytelling techniques and conventions. However, when I propose that journalism is a narrative practice, I refer to an underlying conditioning imperative rather than to specific linguistic features—that is, to news ‘reporting’ as a practice of telling (realist) stories about the social world, no matter the structure or style of the report in question. This approach understands storytelling as an “intrinsic quality of news” (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2015, p. 161; see also Roeh, 1989; Bird & Dardenne, 1988) that can nonetheless be realized through a diversity of means in terms of the

structure and style of reportage. It also draws inspiration from authors like Zelizer (2010), whose work on news photographs demonstrates how even isolated images possess complex narrative capacities which awaken and take form through the imaginative invitations that images extend to viewing subjects.

Narrativity is a logic of journalistic discourse practice that sits in productive tension with the logic of realism. Emerging from this tension are specific conditions for journalistic storytelling that must be managed symbolically in and through news discourse. The tension I am referring to can be conceptualized in terms of what Labov (2002) describes as the ‘reportability’ and ‘credibility’ imperatives of storytelling practices. On the one hand, real-world happenings must sit somewhat outside the mundane backdrop of everyday social life in order to be worth ‘reporting’ on through storytelling. This is the reportability imperative. On the other hand, however, happenings reported on through storytelling must be *coherent with* that backdrop in order to make sense for the reader/listener—in other words, they must have a sense of external fidelity that ‘rings true’ with the reader/listener’s understanding of social life and the social world (Fisher, 1989; in Kunelius & Renvall, 2010, p. 517). This is the imperative of credibility. Labov (2002) elaborates this tension as follows:

To the extent that an event is reportable, it is also uncommon, rare, and unlikely. The more unlikely it is, the less credible. This inverse relationship between reportability and credibility creates a major problem for narrative construction. For unless a narrative is one of the special genre of “tall tales”, rejection as falsehood is equivalent to total failure for the narrator with a consequent loss of social standing. The problem of establishing credibility for the most reportable event is equivalent to answering the question, “How did this [extraordinary thing] come about?” (Labov, 2002, p. 10-11).

Journalistic storytelling, conditioned as it is by the logic of realism, bears this contradictorily inverse relationship between credibility and reportability acutely. For an event or real-world phenomenon to coherently feature in news discourse, it must be both outside the everyday and coherently part of it: spectacular, but also banal enough to be made sense of. A ‘news values’ approach to this tension might propose that it conditions *which* stories are selected for journalistic mediation—that ‘unusualness’ but also ‘relevance’ are characteristics of real-world events that inform which we count as ‘news’ in the first place (see Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). However, I propose that these are symbolic pressures that come to bear on the *communication* of events through the news, and thus on news discourse. The sense of being ‘apart from the everyday’ or ‘of the everyday’ are achieved

in the act of narrative reconstruction—they can be dialled up or dialled down in the way an event is presented to support its coherence as a ‘news story’. Journalism, then, is engaged in the symbolic construction of both events *and* their contexts and conditions of emergence. One cannot coherently feature in news discourse without the other. This is why, as I argue in the following section, news stories about crime offer helpful entry points to investigating the construction of mediated security imaginaries.

*b) Crime events: the co-construction of rupture and ground*

As a framework for the study of criminalization, the mediated security imaginary understands criminalization as being both relational (that is, intersubjective) and context-dependent (that is, based in more than the construction of subjects alone). The concept of ‘the imaginary’ has been adopted to conceptualize that background understanding of social life that informs the coherence of criminalizing discourses and the practices they help sustain. Now, I will propose that *crime events* should be understood as the empirical referent of crime stories, and so the ‘building blocks’ through which imaginaries of crime, as a specific security predicament, are constructed and sustained through mediation.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017) offers an ontology of the event as emergent in the ‘form’ and ‘flow’ of symbolic texts (defined in the broadest possible sense, so as to include any artifact, action or institution with a symbolic dimension). She writes that events “live in and through forms” (p.11) and that the interactive flow of these forms through the circuits of culture—particularly, the moments of symbolic ‘handoff’ between them—are what “keep events alive” (ibid.). Wagner-Pacifici’s theorisation of events as symbolic ‘form’ and ‘flow’ offers a helpful rubric for my own analysis of mediated spectacles of crime and the security imaginaries they build and sustain for several key reasons. Most important among these is that her conceptualization can essentially be read as an account of the event as mediated discourse. While she insists that close interrogation of forms (for example, through textual analysis) is essential to understanding the trajectory of events and their historical implications, her ontology also recognises that events live and die by their mobility—more specifically, through the productive moments of symbolic encounter that the mobility of texts facilitates. The “restlessness” and “unsettledness” that Wagner-Pacifici ascribes to events speak directly to the contingency of mediation and a dialectical understanding of discursive construction (Bakhtin, 1981; Fairclough, 1992), including the multi-modal construction of crime events through journalism. Thus, while mediated criminal events are (as discourse is) formally open (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), the meaning of these events and their movement through

the circuits of culture are conditioned by the historicity of the ‘crime news’ genre as well as the material and institutional conditions of journalistic storytelling (Bakhtin, 1986; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Though Wagner-Pacifi does not explicitly centre mediation as a productive force vis-à-vis the event nor limit her consideration of ‘forms’ to linguistic texts and images, she foregrounds both when discussing representation as a core component of the political semiosis of events. “No event lives for more than an instant without copies, and no event escapes representational transformation,” she observes (p. 26), adding that in acts of representation (which manifest as text) we find answers to open questions both about *what* is happening in a given event (that is, the negotiation of the meaning of events) and *to whom* it is happening (or, the negotiation of identities caught up in events) (p. 25-28). Representation, as a key element in the semiosis of events, is the process by which eventful ruptures take on social meaning, and thus resonate in the social imagination beyond their moment of emergence.

In addition to representation, Wagner-Pacifi’s theory considers the ‘demonstrative’ work of event forms<sup>18</sup>. The work of demonstratives within and across event forms is to establish relationships of proximity, distance, and scale between events and those experiencing them unfold. These relational constructs can be spatial—for example, establishing whether an event is happening ‘here’ or ‘there’, ‘close’ or ‘far away’—but also temporal—‘now’ or ‘then’, ‘finished’ or ‘ongoing’—and intersubjective—is this event happening to an ‘us’, or to a ‘them’, or simply to ‘me’? If the work of the representational feature of political semiosis is to provide possible answers to the question “what is this?” (Wagner-Pacifi, 2017, p. 26), then the demonstrative feature answers another set of questions: “*where* is this?” and “*where am I* in relation to it?”. Demonstratives are thus about *orientating* viewing subjects within and towards the spacetime of mediated events, and establishing the parameters of an event’s temporal, spatial, and thus political, significance. Their productive work vis-à-vis the symbolic life of the event is in the construction of perspectives, vantage points, ways of looking—and thus, inescapably, the making of relational subject positions that condition how mediated events are experienced and how their constructed sense of social significance is perceived.

As elaborated in my discussion of the ‘mediated (in)security imaginary’, one of my aims in this thesis is to investigate, and eventually theorize, the relationship between mediated forms of crime

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<sup>18</sup> The third element of Wagner-Pacifi’s theory of political event semiosis, which I do not emphasize within this framework, is the ‘performative’. Like the ‘securitization’ theories of the Copenhagen School, Wagner-Pacifi’s understanding of performative event forms draws on J.L. Austin’s theory of the “speech act”. See Chapter 4, Footnote 6 for a more detailed explanation of why the performative moment of event semiosis is not central to the analysis here.

events and the imaginaries of (in)security they construct and sustain. If we understand crime news texts as symbolic forms of crime events, the question then becomes: how do such texts speak to and of the ‘background’ terrain of social and political life? To answer this question, Wagner-Pacifici employs the concepts of ‘rupture’ and ‘ground’. Eventful ruptures and the everyday ground from which they ‘take off’, she proposes, are dialectically co-constituted in semiosis. This is because events cannot exist without context—indeed, the ontological status of a moment of rupture is reliant upon and indexed to ‘ground’ as its inverse. It is not that ground (or, the security imaginary) simply precedes rupture (or, the crime event), but that ground must be (re)made *in and through* the communication of eventfulness. Events are thus symbolically active in reconfiguring social reality, both as it is perceptually constructed (through the representational work of event forms) and experientially constructed (through the demonstrative work of event forms).

As established in my conceptualization of journalism, the tension between reportability and credibility is acutely felt in news reporting as a practice of “making sense” of events through mediated storytelling. For the spectacle of crime to coherently feature within the narrativity of journalism, crime events must speak to and of their own conditions of emergence—that is, they must articulate claims about the pre-existing terrain of social and political life from which the crime event has sprung. Moreover, as what we might call ‘minor’ events (usually spectacular only through, and in connection with, other iterative repetitions) ‘African gang crime’ ruptures carry symbolic potential vis-à-vis the imaginative ‘ground’ of everyday social life only as they are intertextually constituted *across* various representations within the genre of crime journalism, rather than through any single event alone. Moving forward with an analysis of the mediation of crime events through the news, my critical interest will be less in the representation of any specific moment of eventful rupture, and more in how various, iterative moments of rupture are together implicated in the mediated (re)making of ground—or, in my terminology, how mediated representations of crime symbolically negotiate particular imaginaries of (in)security.

### *c) Vulnerability politics and justification*

So far, I have operationalized ‘mediation’ and ‘the imaginary’ as news media representations of crime events, proposing that such representations build and sustain security imaginaries through the (re)construction of social context—or ‘ground’—upon which events—or ‘ruptures’—rely for their communicative coherence. Drawing on Wagner-Pacifici’s theory of the event, I understand the social constructivist work of mediated crime events vis-à-vis security imaginaries as operating in both the symbolic and material moments of news media texts. The former is implicated in the

representation of social spacetime and the latter in how the social spacetime of events is experienced by those watching them unfold, and both are significant for how security threats (such as crime) can be imagined and acted upon. To return finally to the question of criminalization, I would like to operationalize ‘security’ by proposing that mediated crime events—including their symbolic forms as crime news texts—be understood and analytically approached as sites of vulnerability politics.

Ann Murphy writes that vulnerability is “above all a figure concerned with potentialities” (2012, p. 98), an ambivalent state of openness to possible but as-yet-unarrived futures—including, but not limited to, the possibility of violent victimization. Many feminist scholars have worked to detach the concept of vulnerability from its semiotic associations with weakness, incapacity, and lack, arguing that there is ethical and political potential in centring vulnerability as a shared ontological condition which is ‘constitutive’ of subjects and enabling of social life<sup>19</sup>. However, some feminist writers have cautioned that this focus on universality has come at the expense of attentiveness to the political differentiation of vulnerability in contexts of inequality, as well as the ambivalent political work that claims to vulnerability can perform in public culture. These authors are concerned with what Munro & Scoular (2012) term the “politics of vulnerability”, including the micro-political work of claims to vulnerability articulated through public discourse. Cole (2016) for example, warns that “the project of resignifying ‘vulnerability’ by emphasising its universality and amplifying its generative capacities... might dilute perceptions of inequality and muddle important discussions among specific vulnerabilities, as well as differences between those who are injurable and those who are already injured” (p. 60). Similarly, Munro & Scoular (2012) argue that a narrow focus on embodied vulnerability and its generative possibilities occludes closer examination of vulnerability as a historical construction with both subjective and objective dimensions, ‘generative’ not only in the constitution of subjects but also the (re)production of power relations:

“[Vulnerability] is not some pre-existing ontological category, but a profoundly political label and strategy for legitimation, the meaning, parameters and import of which fluctuate across time, space, structure and context.” (Munro & Scoular, 2012, p. 201-202)

Embedded within the above conceptualization (and across the broader literature on the politics of vulnerability) are two key observations that lead to two important points of critical concern. First,

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<sup>19</sup> See Gilson (2011, 2014) for an example of this normative embrace of vulnerability in feminist theory, and Cole (2016) and Gibbs (2018) for critical overviews of feminist writings in this tradition.

there is the observation that the political and ethical potential of ‘vulnerability’ is reliant upon processes of recognition, and thus upon practices of communication that are both affective and discursive (Gibbs, 2018). The meanings and affects attached to vulnerability serve as the legitimating basis for acting upon it, and so inevitably the question of vulnerability becomes tangled up in the work of language. It cannot be cleanly indexed to the materiality of the body alone<sup>20</sup>. Vulnerability is historical and context-dependent (Gibbs, 2018), subject to “multiple meanings” (Munro & Scoular, 2012, p.189), enduringly mutable (Chouliaraki, 2020), and thus “particularly malleable to a diverse set of political and social discourses and intentions” (Gibbs, 2018, p. 25). However, despite its deep historicity and semiotic instability, vulnerability is often asserted through the ostensibly ahistorical and “universal” language of pain (Chouliaraki, 2020, p. 9), allowing claims to and about vulnerability to garner recognition and legitimate ameliorative intervention while evading critical scrutiny. This makes claims to and about vulnerability handy thoroughfares for regressive political projects to secure access moral justification through language (Munro & Scoular, 2012).

Claims to vulnerability—an “ontologically shared but politically differentiated” way of being in the world (Gibbs, 2018, pp. 10–11; see also Butler, 2009)—carry different meanings for different subjects in different times and places. The forms of political work that such claims can perform in and through public culture are therefore deeply ambivalent, making it a “vexed” and “risky” referent for progressive political projects (Murphy, 2012; Butler et al., 2016, p. 2; cited by Gibbs, 2018). The second key observation flowing from this basic premise is thus that ‘vulnerability’ is not singular, but rather can be both claimed *and* experienced across different registers and different dimensions of political subjecthood. One can be, for example, psychologically vulnerable (perhaps due to past trauma) but not economically so (perhaps due to intergenerational wealth or other structural advantages). While economic vulnerability may condition and/or intensify psychological vulnerability (and vice versa), one does not automatically nor proportionally beget the other. Similarly, one can *feel* vulnerable, or perceive oneself as vulnerable, without that perception having a clear and demonstrable basis in the material conditions of one’s life and/or one’s position within relational structures of power—and equally, one can *be* vulnerable without perceiving oneself as such or making claims to vulnerability (Munro & Scoular, 2012, p. 202). Vulnerability politics, Cole (2016) argues, is thus fundamentally engaged with the problem of political and moral

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<sup>20</sup> Butler (2004, 2009) frames this distinction as one between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity’. While Butler’s emphasis is on the distinction between inherent (shared) and arbitrary (differentiated) forms of corporeal fragility and openness to death and injury, my emphasis here is on the ideational rather than biopolitical dimension of vulnerability—that is, vulnerability as a constructed social condition, as a claim about relative power and moral worth. For these reasons, I elected not to extend the language of precariousness/precarity through this thesis, instead retaining ‘vulnerability’ as a simple descriptor for openness to harm.

differentiation amongst *vulnerabilities* in the plural—including how such differentiations are worked through, ordered, and (potentially) stabilized in discourse:

“As a malleable and ambiguous condition (to follow the recent redefinition of the concept), vulnerability requires translation for politics, in order to “name the wrong.” To claim a wrong is to enact an ethics, but in a political form and language. Vulnerability has to be reframed as a claim about injustice. Because of its determinedly prospective temporality, vulnerability lacks urgency and makes no immediate demand.” (Cole, 2016, p. 273; citing Rancière, 1999)

The ‘prospective temporality’ of vulnerability makes it a helpful conceptual proxy for insecurity—a general state of openness to harm which does not require injury in order to be coherently claimed. Even when reframed by this narrow definition, however, not all forms of ‘vulnerability’ have the same relationship to questions of inequality and injustice. As Cole argues, the ‘multivalence’ of vulnerability can blur such distinctions and blunt the concept’s precision and thus efficacy for emancipatory politics. The cultural legitimization of crime control practices (that is, criminalization) relies on the calculation of vulnerabilities through discourse—on the cultural making and marking of some forms of vulnerability as ‘wrong’, and others as tolerable within or even conducive to the pursuit of security.

The mediation of crime events, I propose, performs just this kind of political work. Spectacular crime stories inform and condition banal social imaginaries of vulnerability across two key dimensions. First, such stories advance ontological claims about *who* is truly vulnerable in society, to whom and to what, and under what conditions. This first dimension emerges from journalism as a form of mediated storytelling with an explicit claim to realism (journalism as realist representation). Second, stories about crime events advance political claims about the moral status of different vulnerabilities, constructing them as acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong, injustice or mere misfortune. This second dimension emerges from journalism as a practice of political world making, implicated in the construction of social spacetime and the (re)production of political and moral subjects (journalism as social construction). Given my earlier argument that security claims are fundamentally relational and historical (that is, contextually dependent), I propose that vulnerability be understood as a kind of ‘ordering principle’ within such claims, governing the relationships between different subject positions that such claims both represent and constitute. At stake in and through such claims are their *justificatory* potential: the forms of practice that become political and morally justifiable through the construction of some vulnerabilities as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’, while hiding, excusing, or even commissioning, others.

This approach to mediated crime events as sites of vulnerability politics—struggles over what it means to be vulnerable, whose vulnerability matters, and *what vulnerability wants* from social practice—gels with my earlier conceptualization of security logic as relational and calculative. It also informs my understanding of criminalization as the simultaneous denial *and* creation of vulnerability as openness to harm. As detailed in the previous chapter, this understanding is informed by Lisa Marie Cacho’s (2012) writing on criminalization as an iterative process of ‘social death’ whereby subjects (usually, racialized subjects) are increasingly subjected to the coercive mechanisms of the state tasked with ‘protecting’ citizens but excluded from that very protective mandate: to be “subjected to regulation, containment, surveillance, and punishment, but deemed unworthy of protection” (Kelley, 2016, p. 28). As a mode of vulnerability politics, then, criminalization doesn’t merely prioritize some vulnerabilities (and vulnerable subjects) over others—it negotiates the justification of practices which *intensify* and/or *create* vulnerability to harm, including but certainly not limited to policing and incarceration.

From these foundations, a productive analytics of criminalization emerges. Conceptualized as a (mediated) politics of vulnerability, criminalization is contingent within two forms of intersubjective social construction. First, there is the construction of vulnerability as a *political condition*. Here, mediated representations of crime authenticate the ontological “realness” of different kinds of openness to harm, articulating claims about who is truly vulnerable, to whom, and under what conditions. Second, there is the construction of vulnerability as a *moral condition*, wherein ‘real’ forms of vulnerability are differentiated in terms of their relationship to the question of justice. To culturally animate security practices, vulnerabilities must be constructed as both “real” and as “wrong”, as both *needing* and as *worthy of* ameliorative intervention. Inversely, the criminalization of certain subjects or groups relies on the ontological obfuscation and moral devaluation of their own openness to harm—on casting criminalized subjects ‘outside’ the project of security.

These, I propose, are the forms of ‘background’ symbolic calculation that negotiate the third dimension of criminalization as a mediated politics of vulnerability: that is, the dimension that positions vulnerability as a *practical epistemology of justification*, or, as a justificatory basis for action. First, the mediation of vulnerability as a political condition (that is, its “realness”) discursively negotiates different ways of acting upon vulnerability in terms of their *necessity* and/or *efficacy*. Second, the mediation of vulnerability as a moral condition (that is, its “wrongness”) discursively negotiates different ways of acting upon vulnerability in terms of their *rightness* and/or *justness*. This is how a symbolic politics of vulnerability, in and through the mediated security imaginary, operates as a justificatory framework for social practice.

## Exploring Criminalization as a Mediated Politics of Vulnerability

The guiding objective of this project is to offer a more nuanced cultural account of how media criminalize. As outlined in the previous chapter, this project builds on existing theories of news representations as sites for the ‘construction of criminality’ around particular groups, identities, and experiences, by reframing criminalization as an intersubjective and context-dependent cultural process that depends on far more than just the symbolic construction of criminalized subjects, and whose primary political implication is the practical and moral legitimization of violence. The guiding research question for this project is therefore:

RQ1: How does criminalization work through news media representations of crime? Which kinds of symbolic work does it require, and what kinds of justificatory work can it perform?

In this chapter, I have developed a theoretical and conceptual framework for tackling this question, which positions criminalization as a phenomenon of the ‘mediated security imaginary’: the constructed background sense of social life and power (in both its temporal-spatial and intersubjective dimensions) which symbolically informs the pragmatic legitimacy (or, necessity/efficacy) and moral legitimacy (or, rightness/justness) of crime control practices. I have argued that this imaginary is contingent in media texts, both as symbolic representations *of* social time, space, and subjects, but also as material technologies which reconfigure the *experience* of social life, and thus how the social can be imagined, spoken about, and acted upon. This project therefore positions the mediated security imaginary, and thus media culture, as an important space of struggle vis-à-vis the reproduction of security practices. A key critical premise for this study is that changes in the symbolic resources from which such imaginaries are built (i.e., changes in discourse) imply changes in the conditions of possibility for practice, without determining those conditions entirely.

In the second half of this chapter, I have operationalized the ‘mediated security imaginary’ approach by developing a framework of concrete conceptual objects that can be found in, and thus inform the analysis of, empirical materials. This conceptual framework proposes that the mediated security imaginary informing and sustaining the criminalization of Black African youth in contemporary Australia can be investigated through analysis of news media representations of crime events involving Black African subjects. Mediated ‘African gang crime’ events, which live in the ‘form’ of symbolic texts and their ‘flow’ through cultural practices, have been conceptualized as sites of vulnerability politics, where different and sometimes competing accounts of

vulnerability struggle for recognition in the construction of security ‘realities’. Criminalization, I argue, operates through the differential construction of vulnerabilities as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’, and thus needing and worthy of ameliorative intervention. The vulnerability politics of mediated crime events, therefore, is enacted across and between two different forms of constructed claim: first, claims about vulnerability as a political condition (*who* really is vulnerable in society, *to whom*, and *under what conditions*); and second, claims about vulnerability as a moral problem (*for whom* is vulnerability a moral problem, for whom is it morally permissible, and *on what basis*). Mediated crime events are thus politically active (and active in the construction of security subjects) through the placing of different forms of vulnerability and different vulnerable subjects in differential relationships to the questions of reality and justice—and in so doing, negotiating the pragmatic and moral justification of different forms of action. They provide interpretive frameworks that distinguish tolerable and intolerable forms of openness to harm, misfortune from injustice, those ‘inside’ and those ‘outside’ the logic of security that symbolically informs practices of crime control.

To answer RQ1, I will pursue the following three analytical questions. These questions will be explored through a close analysis of news media representations of ‘African gang crime’ events, as specific sites within a specific case of mediated criminalization:

AQ1: How are ‘African gang crime’ events, their social contexts, and their broader social significance, represented in Australian news media texts? What kind of security imaginary do these representations evoke?

AQ2: Which forms of vulnerability are authenticated as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ in such representations, how, and for whom? What kind of vulnerability politics is enacted within and between such representations as a result?

AQ3: How do news media representations of ‘African gang crime’ events negotiate the pragmatic and moral justification of different forms of security practice, in and through this mediated politics of vulnerability?

AQ1 and AQ2 are intrinsically linked, as I have proposed that it is through representation of crime events that a symbolic politics of vulnerability is enacted, and it is through this politics of vulnerability that the question of (in)security is granted imaginative coherence. The distinction made between the two here is for the purpose of analytical clarity. AQ3 broadens the analytical lens to consider the *implications* of this mediated security imaginary and its attendant politics of

vulnerability for the legitimate (re)production of different social practices. Providing a satisfying answer to AQ3 will require building on the insights developed in response to AQ1 and AQ2 by considering the positioning of different forms of action (and different actors) within the mediated security imaginary as necessary and/or effective (pragmatic justification) and right and/or just (moral justification). In the next chapter, I elaborate the epistemological commitments implied by the theoretical and conceptual scaffolding I have assembled here to develop a concrete proposal for how to tackle these questions through a close, grounded analysis of news texts.

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## CHAPTER 4

# Methodology: Investigating Mediated Criminalization

### Epistemological Foundations

Before proceeding to the methodological design of this study, it is worth briefly revisiting and clarifying the epistemological foundations of my approach to mediated criminalization, established in the previous chapter through my theorization of the mediated security imaginary and of criminalization as a symbolic politics of vulnerability.

#### *a) Criminality and (in)security as discursively constructed*

Criminalization has first been conceptualized as a matter of social construction (through the discussion in Chapter 2) and then more specifically as a phenomenon of the mediated security imaginary and its attendant politics of vulnerability (in Chapter 3). This framework adopts a broadly poststructuralist understanding of the category ‘security’ as something constituted in and negotiated through practices of language. Neither criminality nor (in)security, as I have conceptualized them, has a self-evident meaning nor a ‘truth’ that exists outside or prior to the truth effects brought about through the historicity of discourse (Foucault, 1980; Foucault & Rabinow, 1986). Criminality is, I have proposed, a discursively constituted logic of the social that makes certain practices (including practices of crime control) possible by making them meaningful.

It is important to clarify that this position does not deny nor disregard the material conditions of threat and injury—the material mechanics of a gun will respond in the same way no matter the historical context in which the trigger is pulled, as will a human body when penetrated by a bullet. However, as Wendt argues, “a gun in the hand of a friend is a different thing to one in the hands of an enemy, and enmity is a social, not material, relation” (1999, p. 50). A poststructuralist perspective on (in)security does not posit that vulnerability and openness to harm are ‘meaning only’ but rather that they invariably *require* meaning in order to be articulated and acted upon *as* insecurity—that is, to serve as the justificatory basis for security interventions, such as those belonging to the group of practices called ‘crime control’. To return to the language used in the previous chapter, no form of vulnerability can be constituted as either ‘real’ or ‘wrong’ without the forms of meaningful imaginative engagement that communication makes possible.

Criminalization, as a resilient practical manifestation of the logic of security, is thus radically contingent in the symbolic work of discourse.

The previous chapter also described the mediated security imaginary—conceptualized as the cumulative symbolic conditions of possibility for security practices—as both officially limitless *and* historically limited. The ‘limitlessness’ of this imaginary speaks to the formal openness of semiotic systems and so the fundamental instability of social meaning, which I derive from Wittgenstein’s concept of social life as a “language game” (Wittgenstein, 1958; also Baert & Rubio, 2008, pp. 67–68). Rather than understanding social inquiry as a matter of capturing and communicating objective ‘external’ realities, Wittgenstein proposed that language itself is the means by which the social comes into existence, and so needs to be its primary site of investigation. The notion of social life as not just language but a language *game* refers to the importance of historical context in the semiotic construction of the social; meaning is emergent in the historical *relationships between* signs or utterances, rather than self-evident within them (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 674). An important implication here is that meaning emerges through semiotic interaction, and so is always fundamentally unstable and amenable to change. The social, by extension, always resists fixity to a greater or lesser extent, even when elements of it appear as structural or permanent (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

The ‘limitedness’ of this imaginary, however, speaks to the heterogeneity of power. Social constructivism is a broad church—not all approaches privilege discourse as the means of social construction, and fewer still conceptualize the significance of discourse in the constitution of social life and power relations in ways that could be described as ‘poststructuralist’ (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). My own approach to the relationship between language and the social most closely resembles Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, which views the meaning making work of discourse as radically open and unstable—and so, all practices of discourse as forms of political struggle, and all texts sites of what Wodak calls ‘micro-politics’ (Wodak, 2015). However, there are two important ways in which this theory of discourse falls short in its explanatory power vis-à-vis the question of criminalization as I have framed it—both emerging from its ontology of power. First, in placing so much emphasis on the radical openness and contingency of social life, the theory struggles to account for how and why some meanings, knowledges, and practices endure over others across historical contexts—that is, why we find ourselves in a social world that appears as profoundly structured, even while formally unstable. Second, the theory views the social as being entirely constituted by discourse, and so provides weak tools for analysing and theorizing the significance of mediation—and more specifically, journalism—in delimiting conditions of possibility for security knowledge, imagination, and action (see Chouliaraki, 2002, p. 95).

Consequently, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory offers limited epistemological foundations for investigating a) the *resilience* of criminalization (despite its radical instability); and b) the significance of *journalism* as a specific practice of discourse (rather than simply discourse 'in general'). Without elaboration, it also leaves discourse analytic methodologies without clear replies to two of the most significant critiques levelled against poststructuralism in the social sciences: that of discursive idealism (reducing the world to 'discourse only'), and that of radical epistemic and moral relativism (rendering both science and critique impossible, as all forms of knowledge are equally arbitrary and no account of the social, nor way of social life, can be evaluated as better or worse than any other). For these reasons, I am adopting what Jørgensen and Phillips call a "multiperspectival" approach (2002, p. 4), combining Laclau and Mouffe's core premises about the radical openness of meaning and the ubiquity of power struggle in language with a more nuanced account of the relationship between discourse, on the one hand, and the conditions of possibility for security practices, on the other.

*b) Discourse and practice: accounting for meaningful closure and practical resilience*

So far, I have proposed that the conditions of possibility for discourse are, to a significant extent, the conditions of possibility for social life—that in making things utterable and imaginable, we make them meaningful and thus actionable. Changes in the conditions of possibility for discourse imply changes in our social horizons, and so these conditions become important objects of critical investigation for research committed to projects of social transformation. If the social is by definition open and unstable, then 'power' refers to the means by which closure, fixity, and exclusion are achieved in a field of meaning-making that is formally infinite—that is, in which the possibilities for the transformation of meaning through the 'iterability of discourse' are officially limitless yet appear as limited in practice (Chouliaraki, 2008a, p. 688; Howarth, 2000, pp. 35–48). My theoretical framing of both 'mediation' and 'criminalization' has implicitly rejected the idea—central to the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe—that these conditions of possibility for discourse, and thus social life, are themselves delimited only in the historicity of discourse itself.

Resisting discursive idealism requires recognizing that criminalization is a heterogeneous dynamic of the social—it articulates and is articulated by a wide variety of different practices across a range of different institutional contexts (in journalism, but also in law, in state policy, in popular culture, in urban design and architecture, and in the market, to name only a few examples), which are all themselves complexly heterogeneous. My understanding of criminalization concurs with Laclau & Mouffe's insistence that all social practices (and so, certainly crime control practices) are

radically contingent within discourse. However, I also follow Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) in asserting that not all practices are *evenly* contingent in discourse, and none are contingent *only* in discourse. Security practices, including practices of crime control, are inescapably meaning-bound and so could not operate without the reflexivity of their discursive moment. This makes meaning-making practices of representation important sites of critical investigation and intervention. However, while the discursive moment of practice is grounded in the semiotic logic of language, other moments and logics carry implications for the conditions of possibility for practice—including for discourse, itself a form of practice. Material logics, for example, play a significant role in conditioning communicative and thus discursive possibilities—this is part of why mediation is an important concept for the discursive construction of criminality. Similarly, practices have sources of resilience beyond their discursive self-representations, other moments that can be ‘internalized’ by the reflexive moment of discourse if needed (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, pp. 28–29; Harvey, 1996). Policing, for example, is stabilized by its coercive dimension when legitimacy falters or consent fails, as has been made all too apparent in the incidents of police brutality recorded throughout the #BlackLivesMatter protests of 2020, to again name just one example.

While Chouliaraki and Fairclough’s framework concurs that changes in the conditions of possibility for discourse are changes in the conditions of possibility for social life, they clarify that: a) they do not *determine* the social in a causal way; and b) that they are themselves conditioned by logics other than (though never outside) the semiotic. This is the difference between insisting that criminalization is reproduced *only* in and through discourse and arguing that criminalization cannot occur *outside* of discourse—a distinction which goes some of the way to accounting for both the flexibility (meaningful openness) *and* resilience (practical closure) of criminalization across different historical contexts. It also brings into focus how the reproduction of criminality has also relied historically on various forms of domination—there are and have always been groups of people to whom crime control practices appear significantly or entirely illegitimate, and yet the logic of criminalization has endured. Struggles over meaning are struggles over power, but other logics, including material logics, have a hand to play in who prevails in those struggles—that is, whose imaginaries of the social come to matter for social practice and especially for the practices of the state.

In light of this, what can the analysis of discourse contribute to an emancipatory critique of criminalization, and to the critical project in the social sciences more broadly? How can an investigation of criminalization as negotiated through meaning-making contribute to the critique of criminalization as more than meaning alone, and to the potential transformation of the social?

These are the questions I turn to in the following section, which will frame my methodological design.

*c) Critical discourse analysis: the form and function of critique*

The remainder of this chapter lays out a proposal as to how, and why, mediated criminalization ought to be scrutinized through a critical analysis of discourse. Broadly, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a method of investigating how power works and is worked through in language practice. By conceptualizing the social as meaning-bound and meaning as inherently unstable, CDA interrogates how some meanings and not others come to appear as natural or self-evident: where the arbitrariness of current social arrangements conceals itself, and how. By pursuing the arbitrariness of the social, discourse analysis is also attuned to the “silences” of discourse, the possibilities for meaning and for social life that are elided through formally limitless yet actually limited practices of meaning-making (Gill, 1996; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 185–186).

As a critical method, it also attempts to develop an account of the political projects served through discursive closure or the provisional ‘limitedness’ of meaning, often by spotlighting the selective interests lurking behind values, identities, or logics of practice that are constructed as ‘universally’ beneficial or self-evidently good. CDA contributes to the critical project in the social sciences not only by drawing attention to these elisions but also by offering empirically-engaged explanations of *how* discourse constructs, conceals and maintains them; the precise mechanisms through which certain possibilities for the social—for example, the rejection of criminalization—are kept at arms distance from meaningful coherence and cultural legitimacy, and so practical realization.

A key charge levelled against discourse analytic methodologies in the critical social sciences is that of radical moral relativism. With the possibility of universal truths or ideology-free meanings firmly rejected, what should guide projects of social transformation? Or, reformulated to pertain more specifically to my own area of concern: if the systemic criminalization of Black African youth in Australia is no more or less arbitrary, no more or less an effect of power, than any other form of meaningful closure, then what is the basis for calling it objectionable, for using CDA to try to imagine how it might be otherwise? My own position here is that one does not need to defer to universal moral truths, or to ontological realism, in order to accept as ‘real’ the harms that are reproduced through practical realizations of the logic of criminalization. The purpose of CDA is not to arbitrate whether particular social arrangements are good or bad, but to unmask the meaningful contradictions constituting discourses of *universal* good in order to reveal politics where it hides. In this way, CDA redescribes the social with the aim of opening up possibilities for

“ordinary critique” (Boltanski, 2011) by bringing into the foreground what usually needs to stay hidden for the smooth reproduction of existing social arrangements.

This is not to say, however, that the practice of CDA resists moments of subjective judgement—only that it does not index that judgement to universal and/or objective claims about the true and the good. CDA is problem-orientated: my own study, in identifying the mediated criminalization of Black African youth in Australia as a ‘problem’, has engaged in both cognitive judgements (about the degree to which criminalization is a misrepresentation) and needs-based judgement (about the degree to which criminalization is bad for people) (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 33). In the first instance, my judgement has been arrived at not by reference to some ‘true’ account of social life against which the construction of criminality can be judged, but rather based on the degree of *political* arbitrariness of this construct—the narrowness of political interests it serves, and the extent to which it must conceal its narrowness in order maintain legitimacy. In the second instance, my judgement is grounded not in universal moral claims about good and bad, but rather in the provisional acceptance of the world as perceived, experienced and described by those for whom criminalization is a lived reality (Chouliaraki, 2002).

CDA engages critique through the analysis of texts: instances of language use that acquire material form through the involvement of a mediating technology of some kind, such as a printing press or a camera (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, pp. 46–36). As should be clear by this point in the chapter, the aim is not to uncover the ‘true’ meaning of a text, as none exists (Gill, 1996, p. 147). Rather, CDA engages the researcher in the interpretative work of *reading* the text through the prism of a specific theoretical framework (which locates the text in social practice) and re-describing its properties in light of specific concerns, framed as research questions (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 67). The work of interpretation and redescription resists procedural fixity—while multiple frameworks for the critical analysis of discourse are available, there is no singular method, nor a concrete set of steps through which one can claim to have done CDA ‘correctly’ (Gill, 1996). Instead, the rigour of critical discourse analysis is grounded in internal relationships of coherence between the researcher’s founding ontological and epistemological commitments, theoretical scaffolding, choice of research materials, and analytical approach, which ultimately come together in the form of narrative.

A founding commitment of the method is that texts and the discourses they contain are officially ambivalent and open to multiple interpretations. It follows that the interpretation offered by the researcher is inevitably one among possible others, no matter how rigorously developed. This inherent epistemic relativism, however, does not mean that analyses produced through CDA cannot be evaluated as contributions to knowledge. Rather, the ‘external’ validity of the

researcher's interpretative work is evaluated in terms of epistemic gain—whether the account offered by the researcher represents “a more adequate understanding of the social in the service of emancipation” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 34; citing Calhoun, 1995). While the researcher can make a case for epistemic gain, it can ultimately only be evaluated over time through dialogical negotiation in the public sphere: through the critical engagement of interlocutors in the collaborative project of critical research and theory, certainly, but more importantly, of those whose emancipation is at stake in the critical project (ibid). This is why self-reflexivity, analytical transparency, and epistemological accountability are essential components of any discourse analysis.

### **Self-Reflexivity, Transparency, and Accountability**

As a hermeneutic methodology, critical discourse analysis does not call on the researcher to flee her own subjectivity nor to extract herself from the social field she studies—to attempt to produce knowledge as if from nowhere. Indeed, it firmly rejects the very possibility of such moves. The proposal that the researcher can somehow secure privileged access to ‘truth’ and communicate it in ways disarticulated from power—a move Donna Haraway calls “the god trick” (1988, p. 581)—flies in the face of the anti-positivist commitments at the core of social constructivism. All practices of discourse are moves to/from power (Foucault, 1980; Foucault & Rabinow, 1986), and research *is* a practice of discourse; the world as accessed, analysed and communicated through research is a socially constructed world nonetheless. However, this rejection of the possibility of objectivity does not mean that knowledge generated through hermeneutic methods is exempt from critical evaluation, nor that no insight or narrative can be ‘truer’ to the world than any other. To cultivate the possibility of critical evaluation of the research findings and to resist radical relativism, the work of interpretation must be suffused with three overlapping forms of reflexivity: a) self-reflexivity regarding the standpoint of the researcher; b) analytical transparency in the development of narrative; and c) epistemological accountability to the limitations of one's methodological design, especially in the presentation of findings.

#### *a) Self-reflexivity in the insider/outsider account*

Rather than stepping back from subjectivity in order to pursue procedural replicability (as in positivist methodologies), hermeneutic methods step forward, drawing the researcher as a social creature into plain sight as an important element of the social context within which the work of interpretation has taken place. Indeed, as Gill (1996) argues, that the researcher can be located

within the same social, cultural, and political contexts as the texts she analyses and practices she critiques is part of what makes the work of discourse analysis possible in the first place—without it:

“...we would be unable to see the alternative versions of events or phenomena that the discourse we are analysing had been designed to counter; we would fail to notice the (sometimes systematic) absence of particular kinds of account from the texts we are studying; and we would not be able to recognize the significance of silences.” (p. 147)

In this sense, the transparent subjectivity of the researcher’s account is an important source of its credibility (see also Durham, 1998; Harding, 1991, 1993). However, lived familiarity with and political embeddedness within the social field being investigated are always partial and never neutral, no matter how closely the researcher and the researched may seem to overlap. Just as shared social, political, and cultural context between the researcher and the researched can sensitize analysis towards discursive silences and alternative possibilities for social arrangements and practices, an equally inevitable *lack* of shared context can be de-sensitizing. Self-reflexivity is thus about ensuring that both the researcher and the reader are maximally attuned to the ways in which the narrative being developed through the interpretative work of analysis is both an insider *and* outsider account of the phenomenon it describes. In this way, self-reflexivity is a guiding commitment rather than an achievement, a way of conducting research rather than a distinct moment in the research process.

Self-reflexivity can and should be cultivated, I propose, in two core ways. First, the researcher must stay attuned throughout all stages of the research process to the ways in which she is producing knowledge from both inside *and* outside the object of her critique and its various social, political, and cultural contexts. This requires engaging in iterative cycles of critique and self-critique throughout the research process—developing a healthy habit of second guessing one’s own conclusions and cultivating a productively sceptical orientation towards one’s own account of the social and its potential oversights and limitations. It also requires embracing ambivalence and resisting the urge to neaten one’s narrative—holding space for that which fails to fit rather than ‘tidying’ it out of sight. I will return to this point later in the chapter when I outline my analytical process.

Second, the researcher has a responsibility to ensure that the reader, as a key interlocutor in the process of knowledge production, is also maximally equipped to evaluate the researcher’s analysis in light of the standpoint from which it has been produced (Harding, 1993). This requires

being explicit about the ways in which the researcher's narrative is both an 'insider' and 'outsider' account of the social phenomenon in question, signposting where shared context ends and purposefully inviting readers to draw on their own experiences and standpoints, which may differ from the researcher's in important ways, to engage critically with the researcher's account. Thus, while many authors have rightly critiqued 'confessional' or 'cathartic' approaches to self-reflexive research practice—whereby the researcher simply lists up front to all the forms of power and privilege she enjoys within the social field she studies and how that may be consequential for the account of the social she offers (see Pillow, 2003)—some sort of opening discussion to that effect, which brings me as the interpretive medium and context for this study clearly into the light, is essential.

My own positionality as a researcher engaged in the investigation and critique of mediated criminalization in contemporary Australia is far more significantly outside than inside. Australia is the country of my birth and the country I called home for the majority of my life. Though it has been almost ten years since I lived and worked on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri people, I retain Australian citizenship and remain an active participant in, and beneficiary of, the violent settler-colonial project that has decimated and devastated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities since the British invasion of the Australian continent in 1788—in no small part through the evolving mechanisms of so-called 'criminal justice' in the colony. I grew up a white child of white migrant parents, both of whom enjoyed the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship. My first language, English, was the same language most of my peers spoke at home with their parents, the same language my teachers spoke at school, the same language I encountered when I turned on the television or opened a newspaper. My experience of Australian society has, in almost every important respect, been that of a sanctioned 'insider' to Australian culture. By consequence, however, I grew up an 'outsider' to the many violent exclusions which constitute Australian identity, culture, and nationhood, including those I explore and critique in this thesis. It was not until much later in life—and not without the profound intellectual and creative labours of those whom the Australian project works daily to marginalize, exclude, or eradicate—that my own cultural context even became visible to me, let alone critically intelligible.

Criminalization, too, has never been part of my daily lived reality. Criminality (legally defined) is often imagined as something that emerges only through the actions of criminalized actors—people 'step outside' the law, and in doing so, become criminal. However, it is in fact the law that moves—stepping *into* contexts of social existence in order to render it impossible for those who live their lives within them to live lawfully (Cacho, 2012). This has been the case, for example, for Black African youth who are suspected of 'gang membership' (and potentially

deported as a result) simply for moving through public space in groups. Also, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose daily lives in the Australian settler-colony are subject to the ironic (yet, mutually reinforcing) pairing of both intense and often hostile micro-regulation by the state, on the one hand, and profound state indifference and neglect, on the other. Poverty, lack of safe and affordable housing, sex work, drug use, dependency, and addiction, domestic violence and abuse, and migration status (among many, many others) are all contexts which can make living within the law in contemporary Australia impossibly difficult, but none of these have been the contexts of my own movement through Australian society. Similarly, while criminality (culturally defined) often works to ensure that “an individual resembles his crime before he has committed it” (Foucault, 1975 n.p.), whiteness, femininity, and relative economic privilege have allowed me to move through the world with minimal symbolic ties to the category of crime, and so overwhelmingly immune of the pre-emptive impulses of criminal justice institutions.

These profound forms of ‘outsideness’ make me deeply unsuitable to offer anything like an account of what criminalization ‘is’ in its totality or how it is experienced in daily life—but that is not what I am attempting to do in this thesis. What I am attempting is to develop an account of some of the different forms of symbolic work that criminalization requires, especially as concerns the world-making work of journalism. I do not position this as an exhaustive or totalizing account—this would entirely contradict the epistemological foundations of my method. Rather, I see the narrative I will develop through the forthcoming analysis as a small but important contribution to a collaborative project of knowledge building; not a final account of mediated criminalization, but one among many others both present and future that will inevitably, through negotiation with interlocutors across time, be found to be both useful *and* limited. While I will make a case for the critical utility of my account at the end of the thesis, I will also endeavour to highlight its limitations and I invite readers to do the same. In this way, limitations may also hopefully make epistemic contributions of their own in the long view of the collaborative, dialogical project of critical theory.

#### *b) Analytical transparency and epistemological accountability*

The critical analysis of discourse needs to incorporate two other forms of reflexive critique (in addition to self-reflexivity) in order to make an ethically and epistemologically sound contribution to knowledge: analytical transparency, and epistemological accountability. Analytical transparency is essential for the scrutiny of internal relationships of coherence between the researcher’s theoretical framing, epistemological foundations, methodological design, research questions, findings, and analytical narrative, and so is an essential prerequisite for the evaluation of validity

and rigour. It also helps ensure that the reader, as a key interpretative interlocutor in the process of knowledge building, is maximally equipped to understand how, and by what analytical procedures, the researcher's account of the social has been developed—and so, for cultivating opportunities for critique of its potential limitations and/or incoherencies.

In this project, I am pursuing analytical transparency in two ways. The first is by laying out in this chapter (in as much detail as possible) exactly *how* I have conducted my textual analysis: my guiding analytical questions, the textual features I have been most attentive to, and how I understand those questions/features to be speaking to (and providing insights about) my research questions. These details are laid out below in the section on Data Analysis. Second, I pursue analytical transparency by extending this analytical vocabulary into my empirical chapters (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), endeavouring at all points of the analysis to make clear *how* and *why* a particular conclusion has been arrived at. Crucially, this also requires sometimes placing my own reading of the text in dialogue with other possible alternatives, signposting symbolic ambiguities and interpretive uncertainties rather than tidying them away.

While analytical transparency illuminates (for both the researcher and the reader) the relationships of coherence between the research design and analytical findings for this study, epistemological accountability illuminates the boundaries of the account of the social that this study can offer. While I have rigorously argued that a critical discourse analysis of this kind can, and will, make an important contribution to understanding how criminalization is culturally reproduced, epistemological accountability means remaining attentive—in my presentation of empirical findings, and in the development of my analytical narrative—to all the dimensions of the social that my method is unable to capture and so my critique is unable to account for. It is for the purpose of epistemological accountability that an extensive discussion of this study's epistemological foundations has been included at the beginning of this chapter. It is also why I will endeavour, in the concluding discussion of this thesis (Chapter 8), to frame the significance of my own analysis in terms of what it can contribute to the larger (and heterogeneous) project of academic and activist disruption of criminalization: in other words, drawing different epistemologies of criminalization into productive, critical dialogue with the one I develop and deploy here.

## **Data Collection and Preparation**

This section provides details about how texts were selected for inclusion in this study and then prepared for analysis. First, it offers a brief overview and guide to Appendix 1, which details the parameters and procedures that were used to conduct a broad, initial search for texts that were

relevant to my research questions as formulated: Australian news media representations of so-called ‘African gang crime’ events in Melbourne. Then, it briefly explains my rationale for including multiple sub-genres of journalistic text within this study and how I conducted and then synthesized analysis across these genres. Finally, it offers an account of how the large body of ‘eligible’ texts identified through my initial search (Appendix 1) was ultimately refined down to a smaller catalogue of texts for close analysis (Appendix 2). As this account makes clear, the texts analysed in this study should not be conceptualized as a ‘sample’ that speaks to or professes to represent some larger body of texts—but rather, as purposeful *sites* of investigation that have been chosen based on their ‘fit’ with the research questions and their salience as examples of mediated criminalization, as it has been theorized within this project.

*a) Timeframe, search terms, and databases (guide to Appendix 1)*

My contextual discussion (Chapter 2) has already outlined the historical context of so-called ‘African gang crime’ reporting and discussed how and why I am approaching this specific case as an example of mediated criminalization—unique and novel in many of its features, but also an iteration of a much longer historical entanglement of criminality, racism, (anti-)immigration, and journalistic representations in Australian culture. The present study has been empirically limited to what is therein described as the “second wave” of criminalizing coverage of Black African youth in Melbourne, commencing with the events at Moomba Festival in March 2016 and ongoing at the time of writing, though with considerably less coverage from 2019 onwards (Keel et al., 2021). While Appendix 1 elaborates the rationale behind this methodological choice, it distills to three key factors: first, that the term “gang” became much more prominent in the lexicon of coverage following Moomba 2016; second, to ensure that my analysis will be maximally relevant to mediated criminalization as it currently operates in the Australian press and upon the Black African community in Melbourne; and third, to ensure the most productive dialogue possible between my own research findings and evolving conversations about the criminalization of Black communities globally, which have gained considerable traction in both academic and public critiques since the founding and expansion of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013-2016 and its global explosion following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020.

Appendix 1 also outlines and explains the different search terms that were used to find appropriate texts for analysis within this study, and how these search terms were refined through the process of data collection. Searches for print material were conducted primarily through two different databases: LexisNexis and PressReader. Searches for audio-visual material were conducted first using the online archives of major news and current affairs programs from

different television channels, and then using the search functions on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and IMDB to source episodes/segments unavailable through these archives. Audio-visual texts were only considered for inclusion in the study if a full version of the episode or segment could be located, downloaded, and transcribed, and its broadcast date could be verified.

*b) Selecting sub-genres: newspaper texts, current affairs television, and nightly news*

Rather than limiting this study to analysis of one specific sub-genre of journalistic representation (e.g., current affair television), an early decision was made to adopt an inclusive approach to genre which could dialogize analysis between three main types of multi-modal journalistic text: newspaper reports (both print and digital), current affairs television episodes, and nightly news segments. As discussed in Appendix 1, nightly news segments were considerably more difficult to source than current affairs television episodes, because they were less searchable and less likely to be available in the online public archive of their broadcaster. For this reason, they feature less prominently in the catalogue of analysed audio-visual texts than current affairs episodes.

The rationale for my analysis of and critique of mediated criminalization around these three sub-genres of journalistic text boils down to three key points: one empirical, one epistemological, and one methodological. The empirical rationale is that, as detailed earlier in this thesis (see Chapter 2), previous studies of the mediation of so-called ‘African gang crime’ have emphasized that the narrative of Black African criminality has been constructed across a variety of journalistic formats and genres, including print news reports, letters to the editor, talkback radio, and televisual news. The epistemological rationale is that one of the key distinctions between different sub-genres of journalistic text is the epistemological basis of their claim to representational realism. Current affairs texts, for example, develop ‘personalization’ narratives which represent politics in the abstract through a close-up of the personal and the particular, and so are epistemologically grounded in lifeworld testimony and claims to authenticity embedded in “ordinary voice” (see Chouliaraki, 2010; Higgins, 2021; Kunelius & Renvall, 2010; Turner, 2005). Print news accounts, on the other hand, rely more heavily on perceptual realism or a constructed sense of facticity, and so epistemologically on claims to (and the performance of) objectivity (see Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Tuchman, 1972, 1980). Given that my research questions (RQ1 and AQ1, 2, and 3) are concerned with how a mediated politics of vulnerability serves as the epistemological basis for the symbolic justification of different practices of crime control in and through news storytelling (see Chapter 3), then the richest possible answer to these questions will require inclusive consideration of these different textual epistemologies, and a dialogical analysis of their implications for the mediated construction of security imaginaries and so for mediated criminalization.

Finally, the methodological rationale pertains to why the final list of analyzed sub-genres did *not* include texts other than print news, current affairs, and nightly news: specifically, talkback radio, opinion pieces, and letters to the editors, all of which have been previously critiqued for perpetuating the criminalization of Black African youth in Melbourne (see Nolan et al., 2011, 2016; Weber et al., 2021). While discourses and texts contained within these more ‘opinion-based’ journalistic sub-genres can undoubtedly perform criminalizing work, they have been excluded from my own study simply because they do not (or rarely) function as representations of crime *events* specifically, and so are not methodologically coherent with the specific operationalization of the ‘mediated security imaginary’ that I deploy here.

*c) Cultivating analytical richness (guide to Appendix 2)*

Once a broad initial catalogue of televisual and print media texts had been collected according to the criteria discussed above and in Appendix 1, I began as Gill (1996) suggests with a process of deep immersion—reading and viewing each text, re-reading and re-viewing, and making preliminary analytical observations. For televisual texts, I watched and re-watched each episode while making detailed notes; I downloaded written transcripts if they were available, or prepared them myself if not, and began to annotate. I froze, captured, and printed isolated visual frames within each episode that struck me as being (potentially) analytically significant and began annotating and cataloguing these. For print texts, I downloaded articles using PressReader and printed them out in their original presentation format and size, before organizing them in A2-sized presentation folders so that I could view, annotate, and analyse them in a format as close as possible to how they might have originally appeared in a newspaper. For several months, I allowed myself to be swallowed up by the material; I began the process of reading and viewing these texts through the prism of my theoretical framework and within the frame of my research questions, producing several hundred pages of fragmented and diffuse preliminary analysis notes.

This lengthy and relatively unstructured process of “getting to know” the material is a necessary prerequisite to analysis proper, Gill argues, because it helps resist a prescriptive and/or reductive approach to the data based only on what the researcher has determined *a priori* (through the literature review and theoretical scaffolding) will be analytically significant in developing insights vis-à-vis the research questions (ibid., p. 143-144). Immersion instead facilitates an inductive orientation towards text and an iterative approach to methodological design: it creates space in the analysis for that which fails to fit, for observations that are unexpected, anomalous, contradictory, or dissonant—which can’t be clearly made sense of using the existing analytical framework, and so may gesture towards adjustments to the analytical framework that can help

support greater complexity and nuance in analytical findings. In discourse analysis, the object of investigation is not ‘meaning’ as a coherent or singular feature of texts but *struggles over meaning* as waged within and through texts. For this reason, an ‘inclusive’ approach to both the selection of texts and the analysis of them—one which embraces meaningful ambivalence, rather than obscuring it—is essential (Gill, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Immersion was thus the first step before iterative cycles of data collection, data analysis, and methodological tweaking, commencing with my first round of data collection and immersion in April 2019 and lasting until the completion of the first drafts of my analytical chapters in June 2021. The objective of this iterative approach was not to work towards a ‘perfected’ analytical framework, nor to mitigate the unavoidable arbitrariness of data selection by fashioning a somehow exhaustive or representative textual ‘corpus’ (see Bauer & Aarts, 2000; Barthes, 1967). Rather, I moved iteratively between data collection and data analysis as a strategy for pursuing analytical richness. My starting point was informed by my conceptual framework and research questions, but nonetheless subjective to a significant extent: following the period of immersion, I commenced analysis with those texts that seemed to offer the richest analytical material vis-à-vis the research questions as formulated and theorized. A two-paragraph newspaper clipping about a robbery, for example, often seemed less ‘rich’ as a site of mediated event construction and/or vulnerability politics than a two-page feature article incorporating photographs, headlines, captions, graphics, as well as a variety of different kinds of written material (e.g., event narration, analysis, vox pops, interviews etc.). This is not to say that the two-paragraph clipping was insignificant, however, only that it offered a less fruitful starting point for the iterative process of analysis.

Beginning with the ‘richest’ texts in each of my sub-genres of interest (print news, current affairs television, and nightly news), I began analysis proper using the framework I develop below in the section on Data Analysis. From here, I wrote up preliminary analyses and findings, and then returned to the data, looking for texts that might complexify, challenge, or redirect the evolving observations and arguments. I then returned to analysis again, developing new insights and elaborating or adding nuance to those developed in the first round. In some cases, the significance or coherence of findings I began developing in the first round of analysis appeared limited once I carried them forward as sensitizing ideas for the analysis of further texts. In other cases, findings became more convincing through the analysis of new texts, either by reinforcing patterns or functions of discourse identified in the first round or by complexifying the analysis in ways that added necessary nuance. This steady process of developing the richest possible analysis by moving back and forth between text selection, interpretation, and analytical writing reached a natural stopping point when I arrived at a place of relative saturation—that is, when looking at texts

stopped providing anything substantially ‘new’ or novel for the account being developed and refined through my analysis (Bauer & Aarts, 2000). Of course, this is not ‘saturation’ in any empirical sense, but rather, in a narrative sense; ultimately, the decision about when to stop analysing new texts or re-analysing old ones—to decide that a sufficiently rich and inclusive analysis has emerged—is a question of informed judgement, rather than verification. In June 2021, when I had rich, nuanced, and empirically convincing accounts to offer in response to all three of my analytical questions, and when turning to new texts no longer illuminated new paths forward, I judged that it was time to stop. The final catalogue of texts which were subjected to close, multi-modal analysis and ultimately included in this study can be found in Appendix 2.

## **Data Analysis**

Before proceeding to outline my approach to data analysis, it is worth briefly revisiting the research and analytical questions developed in the previous chapter. The overarching research question for this project is:

RQ1: How does criminalization work through news media representations of crime? Which kinds of symbolic work does it require, and what kinds of justificatory work can it perform?

To attempt to answer this question, I proposed three more specific analytical sub-questions to help guide the process of data analysis. These are not separate lines of inquiry, but rather, interconnected elements of the overall account I hope to build in response to RQ1—and so, they will need to be explored together across the forthcoming analysis, rather than separately. However, as explained at the end of the preceding chapter, answering AQ3 will require building on and synthesizing insights gained from AQ1 and AQ2, and so will need to be addressed last:

AQ1: How are ‘African gang crime’ events, their social contexts, and their broader social significance, represented in Australian news media texts? What kind of security imaginary do these representations evoke?

AQ2: Which forms of vulnerability are authenticated as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ in such representations, how, and for whom? What kind of vulnerability politics is enacted within and between such representations as a result?

AQ3: How do news media representations of ‘African gang crime’ events negotiate the pragmatic and moral justification of different forms of security practice, in and through this mediated politics of vulnerability?

I arrived at these questions after setting out two key proposals about how the cultural work of criminalization broadly—and the criminalization of Black African youth in Melbourne specifically—should be investigated in news media texts. The first of these proposals was that journalistic representations of crime should be conceptualized and approached as symbolic forms of *crime events*. News texts give life to crime events, I argued, both as symbolic representations of social relations in particular historical junctures (that is, as representations of social subjects and spacetime) and as material entities which in their durability, iterability, and mobility can reconfigure *experiences* of the social, including its temporal and spatial dimensions. Drawing on Wagner-Pacifi’s (2017) theory of the event, I proposed that conceptualizing crime news texts as event forms, rather than simply as representations of criminal actors, would open space for a broader exploration of the kinds of relational, calculative, and contextualizing cultural work that criminalization requires. This will help the present study go beyond the dominant focus within existing studies of criminalization-by-media on the construction of ‘the criminal’, or criminalization as Othering. Though (usually, racialized) Othering is absolutely fundamental to how criminalization operates, my argument is that the legitimacy of crime control practices, conceptualized as enactments of a logic of security, depends culturally on more than this alone—to return to Taylor’s phrasing, not just on the constructed sense of who people are (identities) but also on how we imagine things “going on between them” in specific historical contexts. My framework positions criminalization as contingent within a broader (mediated) imaginary of social time, space, and political relations, within which the threat of crime can be positioned as both *real* and *wrong*, and so pragmatically and morally deserving of coercive intervention.

Wagner-Pacifi’s (2017) theorization of the relationship between ‘ground’ and ‘rupture’ in event semiosis, I have argued, offers a helpful interpretive heuristic for this relationship between mediated crime events and the imaginaries they enliven. My conceptual framework foregrounds two elements of her ‘political semiosis of the event’ as being particularly important within the mediated construction of security imaginaries: demonstration and representation<sup>21</sup>. Demonstration

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<sup>21</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, Wagner-Pacifi argues that events live in the form and flow of symbolic texts (broadly defined). Symbolic event forms, she argues, give life to events across three distinct yet conjoined features of semiotic construction: the performative, the demonstrative, and the representational. The ‘performative’ feature refers to speech acts (Austin, 1975): statements which when “made at a certain time and place, by a certain authorized speaker, in a certain procedural order, and with a certain attitude do literally change the world of social identities, destinies and relations” (Wagner-Pacifi, 2017, p. 20). In relation to the semiosis of Black African youth crime

refers to how mediated event forms (texts) position and orientate their viewers towards moments of eventful rupture. The demonstrative feature of semiosis works to establish relationships of temporal, spatial, and thus social, significance between events and those watching them unfold through the news: designating “the near and the far, the now and the then, the sooner and the later, the us and the them, and the inside and the outside” (Wagner-Pacifi, 2017, p. 25; citing Abbott, 2007). Representation, on the other hand, refers to the iterative practices of (re)mediation through which events are sedimented and circulated as textual copies (ibid, p. 25-26). It is important to clarify here that demonstration and representation co-exist within singular textual forms, rather than describing different kinds of texts: within any given textual form of an event, the representational feature provides possible answers to the question “What is this?” (ibid. p. 26) while the demonstrative feature provides answers to an associated set of questions: “Where/when is this?” “Where/when *am I* in relation to it?”, “Am I inside or outside this event? A distant spectator or an involved participant?”. Representations demonstrate just as demonstrations represent—the distinction between these two features of event semiosis is for the purposes of analytical precision only.

My second proposal was that media representations of crime events ought to be analytically approached as sites of micro-political struggle over the question of *vulnerability*. Building on the premise that most forms of security praxis inevitably create that which they purport to address (namely, openness to harm), I argued that the legitimacy of security practices in general (and crime control specifically) is contingent within a politics of vulnerability enacted across three dimensions. The first dimension pertains to the constructed *realness* of vulnerability, manifest in claims about *who* is truly vulnerable, to *whom*, and *under what conditions*. This is the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition: through such claims, the necessity and/or efficacy of different forms of security practice is negotiated. The second dimension pertains to the constructed *wrongness* of vulnerability, manifest in claims about *for whom* vulnerability is a moral problem, for whom it is morally acceptable, and on what basis. This is the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition: through these claims, the rightness and/or justness of different forms of security practice is negotiated. Together, these two dimensions of meaningful struggle inform a third:

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events, a performative speech act could be the very naming of an incident as ‘crime’ by an authorized official, which has material effects in that it procedurally mobilizes institutions of criminal justice and/or border regimes. This is the version of securitization popularized by the Copenhagen School, which I have critiqued for being too narrow in its view of culture and sometimes reductive in its understanding of how power works in and through communication. Performative speech acts certainly have a role to play in the mediated construction of crime events, and I will note and analyse them when they are observed in my data. However, my study looks to go beyond and elaborate this dominant understanding of securitization, and so I will primarily focus on the other two features of Wagner-Pacifi’s deconstructive framework: demonstration and representation.

vulnerability as a practical epistemology of justification, or as a justificatory basis for social practice and action. This ‘three-dimensional’ or ‘three-pronged’ approach is my proposed analytics of (mediated) vulnerability politics, which will frame my analysis going forward.

*a) Chouliaraki’s analytics of mediation*

To operationalize the two proposals above for empirical work, I draw on Chouliaraki’s (2006a, 2006b) proposed analytics of mediation. Broadly, this method offers a framework for exploring how different kinds of semiotic resources come together in multi-modal media formats<sup>22</sup> to enact different kinds of news realism. As argued in the previous chapter, the practice of journalism advances implicit and explicit claims to the ‘objective’ representation of external social realities, to capturing and mediating the world simply as it is. This is an important part of what distinguishes journalistic texts as a discursive genre from, say, literature or advertising. However, a social constructivist perspective on journalism reframes its bid to factuality as an accomplishment of ‘artificiality’ achieved in the semiotic construction of news texts (Chouliaraki, 2006a, p. 82; citing Derrida, 2001, p. 41). The analytics of mediation investigates how this claim to realism is articulated within journalistic texts across three dimensions: perceptual realism (the constructed sense of *facticity* of a given representation); categorical realism (the constructed *emotionality* of a given representation); and ideological realism (the constructed *normativity* of a given representation, or how a representation appeals to ideas about how the world should be).

In line with my own proposed analytics of vulnerability politics, these three forms of realism can be reframed as the registers through which news representations of crime and criminality engage, and are engaged by, a social politics of vulnerability. Crime news texts are, as all forms of discourse, inherently ambivalent. My objective in applying the analytics of mediation to such texts, however, is to explore “how each of these types of realism resolves the reality of [vulnerability] precisely by articulating media and meaning, aesthetic quality and universal moral values” (ibid.). Reformulated as dimensions of a mediated politics of vulnerability, we can redescribe these three forms of realism as follows:

*Perceptual Realism*

The constructed ‘facticity’ of openness to harm, and so of vulnerability as a political condition. The perceptual realism of vulnerability articulates calculative claims about who

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<sup>22</sup> Chouliaraki develops the analytics of mediation specifically for the analysis of televisual texts. However, my reformulation proposes that it can be extended to any text that integrates both visual and verbal/linguistic resources, including multi-modal print media

is truly vulnerable in society, to whom, and under what conditions. Through this register of the politics of vulnerability, the *necessity* and *efficacy* of specific security interventions are struggled over—so, for example, the perceptual ‘realness’ of openness to harm through crime victimization (as negotiated within the mediated construction of crime events) in turn conditions the practical justification of policing as means for acting upon a form of vulnerability that is constructed as factually ‘real’.

### *Categorical Realism*

The constructed ‘emotionality’ of openness to harm, or how the reader/viewer is invited to feel for and feel with the vulnerable subject(s) as represented. This is reality as it is *felt*—a sense of the real indexed to human emotion rather than to an ‘external’ set of facts. Categorical realism contributes to a mediated politics of vulnerability through the affective register of representation. The cultural legitimacy of action upon vulnerability is negotiated through the forging of (or the failure to forge) bonds of feeling between those represented as vulnerable and those engaging with them through the news.

### *Ideological Realism*

The constructed ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of openness to harm, and so of vulnerability as a moral condition. The ideological realism of vulnerability articulates calculative claims about whose vulnerability is morally problematic, whose is morally acceptable, and on what grounds. Through these claims, ideological realism contributes to a mediated politics of vulnerability by negotiating the *rightness* or *justness* (or, moral justification) of specific forms of intervention—which, in the case of crime control, almost invariably involve creating (morally acceptable) vulnerabilities as a means of addressing other (morally intolerable) vulnerabilities.

Methodologically, the analytics of mediation integrates multi-modal textual analysis with the critical analysis of discourse. The former involves a close interrogation of “difference within the semiotic” (Chouliaraki, 2006b), or how various semiotic resources are articulated within multi-modal texts to negotiate the three forms of realism outlined above. The latter involves an analysis of “difference outside the semiotic” (ibid.), or how the text as a singular act of representation is implicated more broadly in the *making* of the social world through the historicity of discourse. Here, the analytical concern is with *which* forms of vulnerability are mediated as both real and wrong, and with what implications for security imaginaries and thus possibilities for security

action—in other words, for the *politics* of mediated vulnerability, as explored through the critical analysis of discourse. It is through CDA that an investigation of perceptual, categorical, and ideological realism as constructed in news texts connects up with a critique of the power relations operating beyond (but not separate from) those texts—that is, of criminalization as a constructed logic of the social. This is how I envision an analysis of criminality and (in)security *as* mediated meaning contributing to a critique of criminalization and securitization as *more than* meaning alone—the objective I stated at the beginning of this chapter.

As method, the analytics of mediation resists a prescriptive or procedural approach to text analysis. Rather, it provides a sensitizing framework: a rubric of specific semiotic features and discursive dimensions of multi-modal news texts which can help the researcher connect textual analysis with social critique through the prism of ‘mediation’ as a world-making force. Inspired by Wagner-Pacifici, my conceptual framework has proposed approaching the world-making work of representation in terms of the symbolic co-constitution of eventful rupture (mediated crime event) and everyday ground (mediated security imaginary). Wagner-Pacifici’s rendering of this framework does not explicitly centre mediation as a productive force vis-à-vis the event nor an important context for the representational and demonstrative capacities of news texts. However, as I will illustrate, Chouliaraki’s heuristic captures—and offers grounded guidelines for the analysis of—the two core points of contingency that Wagner-Pacifici proposes condition the relationship between eventful rupture and banal imaginative ground: the constructed and ‘restless’ spacetime of events; and how identities come to be implicated by, and (re)made through, the constructed inside/outside of events.

Thus, while Wagner-Pacifici provides an ontological framework for approaching news texts as event forms, Chouliaraki’s analytics provides more detailed guidance for how such forms can be analysed as sites of mediated political struggle. Broadly, it calls for an analytical strategy attentive to the following<sup>23</sup>:

#### *Mode of presentation*

This can be loosely described as the genre-based conventions of a given news report, as well as the specific presentational choices made within the report itself. Live footage,

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<sup>23</sup> Chouliaraki develops the analytics of mediation specifically for the analysis of representations of suffering on television, and a critique of the ethical potential of the mediated spectatorship of suffering. What follows is a bespoke adaptation of her framework for my own purposes – that is, for the analysis of news media representations of crime events across both televisual and multi-modal print media, and a critique of the political implications of a mediated politics of vulnerability. Not all the elements of Chouliaraki’s analytics are included here, and some have been given greater or lesser emphasis depending on their coherence with my theoretical approach, conceptual framework, and pertinence to research questions as formulated.

studio-based report, or panel interview are all distinct modes of presentation for televisual news; in print news, a front-page story, an opinion piece, and a feature will all differ in their modes of presentation (for example, in how many images they use, and what kind). Different modes of presentation support different forms of narrative realism: a panel interview may involve a close interrogation of how we should feel about a given form of vulnerability (ideological realism), while live footage may make a stronger claim to facticity (perceptual realism). Broadly, we can ask: who is (re)presenting the event, from where, and in what format?

### *Visual-verbal correspondence*

Broadly, the analytics of mediation understands the ‘verbal’ as the *classificatory* moment of event representation, while the ‘visual’ is the *authenticating* moment (Chouliaraki, 2006b, p. 162-163). Analysis of visual-verbal correspondence draws attention towards how these two modalities come together and interact in the construction of meaning through multi-modal representation: specifically, to give rise of three different forms of meaningful co-construction:

- Indexical correspondence: A ‘direct’ relationship of correspondence, where the image ‘authenticates’ the verbal by presenting exactly the action or object described. For example: *Police have cordoned off a park in Werribee* + an image of a park cordoned off with police tape.
- Iconic correspondence: A more abstract relationship of correspondence based on ‘family’ resemblance, designed to communicate a sense of meaningful equivalence or similarity between two things that are officially different. The image is used to testify to a “generic condition”, such as fear or intolerance, rather than a concrete set of facts. For example: *Police have cordoned off a park in Werribee* + an image of graffiti on a playground slide, iconically signifying ‘disorder’ or ‘neglect’.
- Symbolic correspondence: More abstract still, a relationship of correspondence that works through “discursive associations based on common knowledge or value” (Chouliaraki, 2006a, p. 80). Symbolic meanings make the strongest claims to ideological realism. For example: *Police have cordoned off a park in Werribee* + an image of children playing happily in the park, making a direct claim about *who* has lost out from

the park being closed and articulating a judgement about the closure by juxtaposing the children's happy faces with the news that the park has been closed by police, as well as the innocence of childhood with the 'deviance' of crime.

Television is a time-based medium; in the analysis of television, visual-verbal 'correspondence' is temporally defined, inviting analysis of the *co-appearance* of verbal and visual semiotic resources (either in simultaneity or close temporal proximity) in the narrative progression of the news report. In print media, however, visual-verbal correspondence becomes image-word correspondence, and draws attention to both a) how written narratives are elaborated or meaningfully transformed in the visual modality of the text; and b) how the interpretation of still news images might be inflected by the written text they appear alongside, particularly headlines and captions, but also the body text of the report (see Machin & Mayr, 2012).

### *Aesthetic Quality*

Loosely, aesthetic quality describes how the two elements discussed above—mode of presentation, and visual-verbal correspondence—come together to connect a specific news representation of crime with other genres of discourse and regimes of meaning (Chouliaraki, 2006b, pp. 164–165). A print news report on crime may, for example, draw on the aesthetics of militarism (through the use of aerial maps, territorial framings, military discourses) to connect reporting on crime to the genre of war reporting or war cinema. Or it may foreground suffering and victimhood to frame the threat of crime through the genre of the humanitarian appeal. For the purposes of the current study, I interpret 'aesthetic quality' as the sum effect of difference within the semiotic and propose that it should be analysed in terms of intertextuality—how specific compositional choices in the multi-modal construction of crime event forms help establish interdiscursive relationships between the practice of crime event storytelling through the news and other forms of social practice and their associated regimes of meaning (see Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 49; Fairclough, 1992).

### *Spacetime*

As emphasized in both my rationale for adopting the concept of a "security imaginary" and in my operationalization of Wagner-Pacifici's theory of event, the question of

mediated spacetime is indispensable to a critical analysis of crime news texts as sites of vulnerability politics, and so to a critique of mediated criminalization. Mediated spacetime has two key dimensions: first, the social time and space of the crime event as represented in crime report-as-text; and second, the social time and space of the crime event as *experientially facilitated* through crime report-as-mediating technology. Both are fundamental to a mediated politics of vulnerability, as they a) articulate claims about the historical and geo-social scale and significance of crime events; and b) inform relationships of temporal and spatial proximity/distance, and thus involvement/detachment, between crime events and those experiencing them unfold through the news.

To guide an analysis of the mediated spacetime of crime events, I propose the following list of sensitizing questions—some of which have been drawn directly from Chouliaraki's framework (see 2006b, p. 167-169) and others tailored based on my own specific theoretical framework (especially, Wagner-Pacifici's concept of 'demonstration') and research questions:

- Is the space of the crime event replaceable or unique? Generic, iconic, or specific? (ibid.)
- Is space internally differentiated (within the scene of action) or does it appear homogeneous? (ibid.)
- Are distinctions made between spaces of safety and danger? Do these spaces interact with one another or are they strictly separated? (ibid.)
- Is the event spatially and/or temporally bounded (e.g., fixed in 'the past' or in a specific geographic location) or as spatially and/or temporally expansive (e.g., moving across contexts, or resonating across time)?
- Where is the viewer placed within the scene of action? What can be seen, and where can it be seen from? What kind of spatial vantage point is created, and what kinds of subjectivity are evoked through that vantage point?
- How close or far (in time and space) is the captured frame from the moment of eventful rupture to which it testifies? What kinds of imaginative demands (Frosh, 2006) is the image extending to its viewer?
- How is eventful rupture contextualized in social time and space through narrative? How, and in what ways, is the reader invited to perceive the event as practically and/or morally significant to their own lifeworld?
- Is the event taking place in the present or the past? (ibid.)

- Is the event (or eventful phenomenon) finished or ongoing? Are we looking back on it, or experiencing it as it happens?
- Where is the viewer placed *in time* vis-à-vis the scene of action? Is she waiting for the event to occur, looking back with the benefit of hindsight, or caught up in it as it unfolds?
- How is the future evoked by the event? Is the future presented as determined or unknown, controllable or uncontrollable? What kinds of contingency are foregrounded?

Together, these elements of mediated spacetime form the ‘chronotope’ of the crime event and the vulnerability realities articulated therein: that “regime of multiple spaces (danger and safety) and temporalities (present, past or future) through which the event ‘moves’ back and forth and, in so doing, presents the spectator not with one single reality of [vulnerability] but with multiple realities relevant to [vulnerability]” (Chouliaraki, 2006b, p. 168). The sensitizing questions outlined above roughly translate into two dynamics which negotiate the ambivalent spacetime of crime events: first, a dynamic between *concreteness* and *multiplicity* (simple, singular context vs. complex, multiple contexts), and second, between *specificity* and *mobility* (spatial-temporal fixity and boundedness vs. spatial-temporal expansion, movement, unboundedness) (ibid, p. 169).

There are multiple semiotic choices within news text composition that contribute towards, and so can be interrogated as part of an analysis of, the chronotope of crime events. In the visual modality we can look to elements such as camera position and angle in photographic images (the framing of event spaces, the construction of vantage points, and the forms of interactivity encouraged from the viewer), the use of graphical specifications (for example, maps), intertextuality and juxtapositions (for example, through composite images which recombine different historical contexts) (Chouliaraki, 2006b, pp. 167–168; Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, pp. 145–153). In the written/verbal modality, we can examine linguistic references (for example, explicit markers of space and time, adverbs of space and time) as well as grammatical features such as verb tense (see Chouliaraki, 2006b, pp. 167–168). This is not an exhaustive list nor are these “tick boxes” for the forthcoming analysis—only a theoretically-informed starting point from which to start developing an analysis of how the spacetime of crime events is semiotized through multi-modal news coverage.

## *Agency*

As with spacetime, the question of agency is doubly articulated in multi-modal news reports of crime events as both representational texts and mediating technologies (Silverstone, 1994). First, there is agency as negotiated within the constructed spacetime of the event itself: who acts and who is acted upon, who intervenes and who watches, who takes and from whom are things taken, who has power over whom and what kind? Then, there is agency as negotiated through the act of mediation: whether a given event ‘form’ opens specific possibilities for action to the reader/viewer, whether it represents the issue of crime as within or beyond the possibility of intervention. The analysis of agency is central to a critique of crime news as a mediated politics of vulnerability because it directly addresses the question of power—who has power to act, upon whom, in what ways? Which forms of action are imaginable, legitimized, and/or performed within the narrative unfolding of crime events? How does the security imaginary as built and sustained through the mediation of crime events lend legitimacy to specific forms of action while denying it to others? In this way, it also speaks directly to my own concern (derived from Wagner-Pacifici) with how subjectivities and identities come to be caught up in, and (re)made through, the mediated co-construction of eventful crime ‘rupture’ and banal imaginative security ‘ground’.

Once again, it is helpful to start out with a set of sensitizing analytical questions. As before, some of these have been adapted directly from the suggestions offered by Chouliaraki (see 2006b, p. 170-71), while others are my own formulation:

- Who is acting within the event as represented, and who is being acted upon?
- Are there distinct ‘active’ and ‘passive’ positionalities created within the text for different subjects? If so, how are they constructed, and who is occupying them?
- Who speaks, and who is spoken about? Who gets to address the reader/viewer directly?
- Who is afforded a ‘complex interiority’ beyond the role they perform in the text narrative, and who is confined to their role only? Who is given depth through the presence of their emotions, experiences, personal history, personality, and/or private life in the text, and who is rendered only in flat and/or superficial ways?
- Which kinds of action or intervention are being performed within the text, and by which agents?

- Which roles are evoked by the text (e.g., benefactor, beneficiary, threat, victim) and who occupies them? Who is the reader/viewer invited to identify with?
- What is the overall “dramaturgical composition” (ibid.) of agents within the spacetime of the crime event? Which emotional, imaginative, and/or practical forms of response does the text invite?

A variety of semiotic choices within the composition of crime news text will contribute to the construction and construal of agency—both for the account of power offered by the text and the forms of power it fortifies or disrupts through the act of mediation. For still images, we can look at compositional choices like camera angle and *mise-en-scène* to ask *who* is within the scene of action, *which* actions they are performing or receiving, and *how* the viewer is invited to engage with them. For televisual media, we can look to editing choices (like the sequencing of visual frames in the unfolding of a given action, or the construction of a montage) to unpack how particular forms of (in)action are being constructed both within the text and through the imaginative engagement of the viewer, as well as features of visual transitivity (see Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Motta-Roth & Nascimento, 2009). In the verbal/written modality, we can look broadly at processes of objectification and subjectification operating through the transitive work of grammar (Halliday, 1985; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), including the use of imperatives that address the viewer directly and implore specific forms of action and engagement. Once again, there may be other semiotic choices that appear relevant through the process of analysis; the choices mentioned here are intended as an analytical starting point only.

## The Way Forward

My empirical analysis is structured in three chapters. The first two (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6) investigate the first two of my analytical sub-questions (AQ1 and AQ2). However, these two sub-questions are fundamentally connected and cannot be separated for analytical purposes. Accordingly, I have divided Chapters 5 and 6 not according to question but according to the specific dimension of mediated vulnerability politics they investigate. Chapter 5 focusses on how representations of ‘African gang crime’ negotiate the vulnerability as a political condition, or as ‘real’ openness to harm. Here, the analysis is focussed on news images as a just one particular type of textual event form that I propose is paradigmatic of the broader claim to perceptual realism that all news texts articulate. In Chapter 6, I move on to consider how mediated representations of

‘African gang crime’ negotiate vulnerability as a moral condition, or as ‘wrong’ openness to harm. While the analysis becomes more significantly multi-modal in this chapter, I again look at just one specific type of textual event ‘form’ that distils and exemplifies the struggles over categorical and ideological realism that all mediated events articulate: first-person testimonies of vulnerability on television. Chapter 7 investigates my third analytical sub-question (AQ3). Building on the analytical insights gained through the first two empirical chapters, here I explore how a mediated politics of vulnerability helps position specific practices as pragmatically and morally (un)justified—that is, as (un)necessary, (in)effective, right (or wrong), and/or (un)just. Through these three lines of inquiry, I weave a narrative in response to my overarching research question: about how media criminalize, and how we should understand the political significance of mediated criminalization (RQ1). This is the question that anchors my concluding discussion in Chapter 8.

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## CHAPTER 5

# Mediating ‘Realness’: Event Spacetime and the Question of Power

### The Tip of the Iceberg

It is not clear whether the 2016 ‘Moomba Riot’ was an event worthy of its name. The ‘facts’ of the event are in short supply, overwhelmingly ambiguous or disputed. At the centre of the rupture was, according to many reports, a hostile confrontation between two groups of young boys and men, possibly premeditated, on the night of 12<sup>th</sup> March 2016 in Melbourne’s Federation Square. Other reports—including, eventually, that of Victoria Police—refute this ‘confrontation’ narrative, instead framing the events as a deliberate attempt by a group of young boys and men “of African, Islander, and Caucasian appearance” to provoke Victoria Police and terrorize members of the public (Nierhoff, 2016). Accounts of the number of people involved in the confrontation range from less than 10 to more than 100<sup>24</sup>. Police intervened by deploying capsicum spray and wielding batons against the young boys and men. Several people were eventually taken to hospital with injuries. Those involved retreated from Federation Square down Melbourne’s busiest shopping strip, Swanston Street, where the disorder continued. Four people were arrested on the night, but by 11<sup>th</sup> April, twenty-four charges had been laid by police for offences including affray, riotous behaviour, and theft. Of those charged, twenty were children, some as young as fourteen years old (Zielinski & Booker, 2016). Despite not meeting the generally accepted criminological criteria for a ‘riot’<sup>25</sup>, the event was swiftly labelled one by public commentators, and was (at the time) the most significant incident of public disorder in the state of Victoria since the 2006 G20 protests (Blaustein & Benier, 2018).

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<sup>24</sup> A statement from the South Sudanese Community Association reported that only “six to ten” young people were actually involved with the Apex gang placed at the centre of the ‘riot’, with all others involved simply Moomba attendees who became caught up in the event (Richards, 2016). An ABC News report said witnesses to the event reported ‘more than a hundred’ people involved (Nierhoff, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> These criteria generally include the public meeting of multiple people, to use or threaten illegal violence and disorder, for a common purpose, and causing injury and/or damage to property. In Victoria, the offence of Violent Disorder is defined as “when six or more persons present together and ‘use or threaten unlawful violence with a common goal or intention and the conduct of them, taken together, causes injury to another person or damage to property”” (Azad, 2017)

The ‘facts’ of Moomba 2016, though not without importance, are somewhat peripheral however to the question of its cultural legacy. In that respect, one indisputable fact is more salient than any other: that the so-called ‘Moomba Riot’ was a *media* event. To serve as ground zero for the construction of ‘African gang crime’, the Moomba Riot had to ‘live’ beyond the moment of its rupture: the evening of 12<sup>th</sup> March 2016 at the intersection of Swanston and Flinders Streets. That was, and remains, only possible by virtue of (re)mediated representations—headlines, press conferences, eyewitness testimonies, police statements, but most potently, images. The precise scale, severity, and context of the ‘riot’ remain officially contested, but the visual spectacle of its rupture has served as the basis of its constructed eventfulness. Press coverage in the immediate aftermath of the event was strongly overdetermined by visual accounts, with spectacular images overwhelming front pages and feature spreads (see Figures 1 & 2 below). Images taken on the night of the so-called riot are also persistently remediated in the construction of other ‘African gang crime’ events to articulate the former as historical context for any and all instances of ‘crime’ or ‘public disorder’ involving Black African youth. The question of what ‘really’ happened at Moomba 2016 (and what this moment of rupture can say about ‘realities’ of vulnerability in contemporary Australian life) has been overwhelmingly answered through mediated visual testimony—especially, through the historical and aesthetic claims to perceptual realism embedded in photography as a communicative medium, and photojournalism as a specific practice of discursive construction (Sontag, 2008 [1977]).

Taking the rupture of the ‘Moomba Riot’ as its starting point, this chapter explores the role of mediated spacetime and agency in the imaginative life of ‘African gang crime’ events, and so in mediated criminalization. More specifically, it investigates how vulnerability as a political condition—that is, the “realness” of different forms of openness to harm—is negotiated within and through the mediated construction of crime’s eventfulness. My conceptual framework has proposed that, in order to coherently feature within the genre of news storytelling, crime events must be mediated in ways that testify to their own social, political, and historical contexts of emergence—that is, in ways that articulate claims about the pre-existing terrain of social and political life from which the crime event has sprung. This is how, I have proposed, the ‘rupture’ of mediated crime events (re)makes the ‘ground’ of everyday (in)security imaginaries. By conceptualizing the ‘Moomba Riot’ and other ‘African gang crime’ events as phenomena of mediated spacetime, I intend to explore how criminalization is contingent in the meaningful *scaling* and *stretching* of crime events and the power dynamics they distil beyond their moments of rupture, so that they can be brought to larger political meaning and inform the pragmatic coherence of security practices.

a) *News images as realist representation: vantage points and imaginative demands*

This chapter adopts the still news image (both print and digital) as a ‘realist’ storytelling device and an active site of political world-making. This is not to say, of course, that news images are the only types of symbolic event form engaged in the construction of perceptual realism, nor that they do so in isolation. Rather, I have narrowed analytical focus to news images in this chapter because they are paradigmatic of the specific register of mediated vulnerability politics that I am attempting to explore and theorize: the negotiated “realness” of vulnerability, or vulnerability as an evidencable positionality within social power relations, and so a political condition. As a communicative medium, photography has been elevated historically as a mode of ‘factual’ representation, as a means of presenting the world and its happenings simply as they are found by the photographer. This is certainly not to say that a photograph cannot distort or curate reality, but rather that perceptual realism—the *claim* to facticity, to objectivity, to truth—constitutes the aesthetic base of photography as a representational medium and news photography as a specific genre of (visual) discourse. There is, in other words, a “presumption of veracity” (p. 6) asserted through photography that makes news images an ideal site for exploring how the ‘reality’ of ‘African gang crime’ events—especially, the forms of relational (in)vulnerability they capture and articulate—is negotiated through journalistic mediation, as Sontag (2008 [1977]) elaborates:

“Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it... [The] camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always the presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph—any photograph—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects.” (p. 5-6)

While crime events are temporally and spatially “restless” in their mediation (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010), the news image of crime is by definition still—a singular capture in time and space that speaks to and of a world in which no such stillness ever actually exists. For an image to ‘speak’ about the world it must necessarily speak of more than what it formally shows; imagination is, consequently, the normative proposition of all photographs. Barbie Zelizer has called this the “subjunctive voice of the visual”—the unique power of images to testify to (that is, make claims about) precisely that which they leave out, to suspend representation between the “as is” of the

image and the “as if” invitation all images extend to their viewers (Zelizer, 2010). And so, within the invariable stillness of still-capture news images there is inevitable activity: specifically, an active negotiation of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the political imaginary represented within the image and brought into being by the act of photographic mediation, which must be *watched* rather than merely ‘viewed’ (Azoulay, 2008). Returning briefly to Wagner-Pacifici’s (2017) arguments above about the openness of events, we can say that still news images of ‘African gang crime’ are ‘open’ in so much as that the historical, spatial, and intersubjective dimensions of the events to which they testify are contingent within the imaginative elaborations demanded of the viewer. Making meaning of crime through still news images requires an active collaboration between the image and the person who views it, without which images could not coherently feature within the narrativity of journalism.

Though officially limitless, the meaningful ‘openness’ of the crime event as represented through visual journalism—and so, its resonance within the mediated security imaginary and its attendant politics of vulnerability, through imaginative engagement—is nonetheless conditioned in important ways. As explained in my theoretical framework (Chapter 3) and my adapted analytics of mediation (see Chapter 4), multi-modality, intertextuality, and the material and institutional contexts of mediation contour the imaginative potential of news images of crime in ways that condition their meaning. Most significantly, the correspondence of images and written language within the multi-modality of journalistic texts, and the semiotic interaction (and thus interdependency) of all images within the crime news genre, are both important considerations when reading news images as sites of imaginative production (Chouliaraki, 2006b). Following my earlier discussion of the logic of narrativity that symbolically governs the practice of news journalism, the forthcoming analysis will also be attuned to the curatorial intent behind news images. It is beyond the interpretive limits of my methodology to try to read into why an editor may have chosen one specific image over others. However, it can be assumed that the images analyzed within this chapter were chosen by news editors specifically for their narrative potential (as storytelling devices) and for their coherence within the regimes of representation that constitute crime news as a particular genre of visual discourse (their intertextuality).

This chapter approaches eventfulness as a phenomenon of mediated spacetime, contingent not only in the representational moment of symbolic event forms (e.g., the symbolic construction of social spacetime through news images as representational texts) but also in their material circulation (e.g., the *experiential* reconfiguration of social spacetime through news images as mediating technologies). In the first instance, news images of crime events function as forms of historical testimony, locating the event in social time and place and articulating discursive claims

about its scale and significance. In the second, the spacetime productiveness of the news image operates through the negotiation of proximity and distance between the criminal event and the viewing subject through the act of photographic capture and mediated circulation (Chouliaraki, 2006b; Silverstone, 2006). The analysis will thus need to pay attention to the role of imagination, interpolated through the visibility of journalism, in delineating both the temporal and spatial location of criminal events *and* the temporal-spatial character of the relationship between represented events and the subject that views them.

Integrating these two concentric dimensions of mediated spacetime, I propose, is the concept of a *vantage point*. Conceptually, a vantage point helpfully incorporates both the objects of vision (i.e., *what* one is looking at/*what* falls within the scope of vision) and also the location from which vision occurs (i.e., *where* one is looking from/*how* the scope of vision is structured and organized by the positionality of the viewing subject). Different vantage points extend different demands to the viewer in the imaginative reconstruction of events through visual spectatorship (Frosh, 2006), and so imply different ways of seeing, knowing, and experiencing the event in question. Returning briefly to Wagner-Pacifici's political semiosis of the event (see Chapter 3) we can conceptualize vantage points as emerging from, and conditioning, the 'demonstrative' capacities of news images as symbolic event forms. The work of demonstratives within and across symbolic forms is to establish relationships of proximity, distance, and scale between events and those experiencing them unfold—in other words, to *orientate* viewing subjects within and towards the spacetime of mediated events, and in doing so, to negotiate the parameters of an event's historical, spatial, and so political significance in the imagination of the viewer.

#### *b) Vulnerability as a political condition*

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is worth briefly revisiting the animating concerns of this study and how they have been operationalized as empirical questions. The primary concern in this chapter is with the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a *political* condition, as perceptually real openness to harm in the context of everyday political life. This is a core element of both AQ1 and AQ2, which conceptualize criminalization as a phenomenon of the mediated security imaginary and its attendant politics of vulnerability across two key modes of relational and calculative social construction: the construction of "realness" and the construction of "wrongness". It is additionally consequential to AQ3, as it helps reflexively constitute the *pragmatic* justification of security practices (that is, their constructed sense of *necessity* and/or *efficacy*), though this will be explored in closer detail in Chapter 7. Criminalization, I have proposed, is grounded culturally in the differentiation of different forms and registers of vulnerability vis-à-vis the question of social

reality, on the one hand, and the question of social justice, on the other. Only through such differentiations can criminalization (and so, practices of crime control) retain meaningful coherence as something we call either ‘safety’, ‘security’, or ‘justice’.

The question of social reality and the question of justice are obviously co-implicated, as are power and morality. By focussing in on the constructed “realness” of vulnerability in this chapter my intention is not to imply a false divide within these two dimensions of a mediated politics of vulnerability, but rather to zoom in analytically on the question of perceptual realism (see Chapter 4). Understanding vulnerability as politically differentiated demands approaching constructed claims about the *facticity* of different forms of openness to harm as, inevitably, claims about the ‘real’ character of everyday political life: about *who* is truly vulnerable, *to whom*, and *under what conditions*. My objective in this chapter is to understand how the ruptures of ‘African gang crime’ events are mediated so as to articulate these types of claims—and so, to transpose ‘African gang crime’ onto the ‘ground’ of the security imaginary not in the form of discrete events at particular junctures of time and space, but rather as a singular phenomenon, ‘real’ in the forms of vulnerability it captures, and so also the forms of (relational, calculative) political subjectivity it constructs and implicates.

## Watching the Moomba Riot(s)

This chapter starts at the beginning: the so-called ‘Moomba Riot’ of March 2016. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter 2; Chapter 4; and Appendix 1) this event precipitated the re-entry of ‘gang crime’ into the lexicon of criminalizing and stigmatizing discourses attached to Melbourne’s Black African diaspora through news media and the rhetoric of politicians. More specifically, it was through the mediated construction of the ‘Moomba Riot’ and its afterlives that the two main features of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative started to be drawn together and symbolically articulated in public discourse: first, the constructed sense of racialized and xenophobic Otherness that had characterized media representations of the Black African diaspora since at least the mid-2000s; but second, and newly, claims about creeping rates of violent crime and public disorder in the city of Melbourne (see Benier et al., 2018, 2020).

Figure 1 displays the front-page image and headline of the *Herald Sun* newspaper on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016, the Monday after the ‘Moomba Riot’:



Figure 1: Herald Sun (14/03/2016)

Titled “Out of Control”, the photograph captures a group of young men<sup>26</sup> on the precipice of a violent brawl. The violence to which the image testifies, however, is formally ‘elsewhere’—a few seconds beyond the vantage point opened through the image. The narrative coherence of this image thus relies on the call to imagination it extends to the viewer. Compositional and aesthetic visual elements work in concert to manifest this invitation. First, a wide expanse of negative space at the centre of the photograph focusses the viewer’s attention onto the only figures who occupy it—two young men moving towards one another. Blurring around the limbs of the figures in the

<sup>26</sup> The image caption refers to these two individuals as ‘men’, though they both appear to be very young, and the article text describes some of the Moomba rioters as being “as young as 14”. This ambiguity around age allows for the responsabilization of the rioters as adults *and* the social horror of violence among children to sit side-by-side in the narrative of the article.

central foreground of the frame communicates a sense of movement-in-progress. Meanwhile, the trajectory of this movement is implied through the orientation of their bodies towards one another, as jutting limbs compel the about-to-be fighters forward from either side. This sense of direction, and thus anticipation, is reinforced by the fact that almost every other body captured within the frame is orientated towards this unfolding scene—the faces of distant onlookers gaze inward to the centre of the frame, while the bodies of those immediately proximate to the about-to-be fighters physically encircle them. The coming confrontation between these two young men forms a physical and meaningful centre of gravity; the bodies of onlookers angled and blurred, as if they were being pulled inwards—towards one another—to an imminent and violent encounter at the centre of the photograph.

As a visual account of violence, the testimonial force of the image relies on that which it invites the reader to imagine rather than what it explicitly shows. Placed back in the context of its original multi-modal presentation, we can observe a suite of other demonstrative features working in concert to clarify just *who* is “Out of Control” in this photograph, *where*, and *in what way*. First, the composition of the image creates two binary groups of subjects within the frame: those involved in unfolding confrontation in the central foreground of the image, and the distant onlookers whose faces crowd the upper margin of the scene. Structuring these binary subject positions—and informing the narrative significance of each—are two aesthetic juxtapositions. First, there is a clear juxtaposition of *movement* and *stillness*—a flurry of action concentrated in the central foreground of the frame set against a backdrop of static, unmoving watchfulness in the form of distant onlookers. Evoked here is a visual micro-politics of agency that divides those present within the frame into ‘active’ and ‘passive’ positionalities: the ‘doers’ (in the foreground) and the ‘done to’ (in the background). Further exaggerating this division is the juxtaposition of *spaciousness* and *crowdedness* in this image which, in concert with the established contrast between movement and stillness, constitutes a visual micro-politics of space. Negative space, concentrated in the central foreground of the image where the ‘scene of action’ takes place, swallows up around half of the frame. Meanwhile, the distant, static onlookers are visually ‘crowded out’ to the upper extremity of the scene. The bodies of about-to-be fighters are depicted head-to-toe, forming a horizontal belt that cuts across the centre of the photograph and isolates the spectators in the background (who appear only as pinprick faces in the distance) from the open space in the foreground. Again, a clear binary of agency is established: between those who take up space, and those from whom space is taken.

The image headline, itself dominating almost half of the frame and most of the photograph’s negative space, is thus revealed as an ironic *double entendre*. Those who are accused

of being ‘Out of Control’—the about-to-be fighters—are in fact *in control* of the depicted scene, of the space of action and of the visual terrain of the image, while those not fighting—that is, the ostensibly ‘in control’ or ‘under control’ subjects—are (literally) marginalized and (meaningfully) disempowered. Interestingly, the positionality of the viewer implied by the vantage point of the photograph is ambivalently placed between these two co-constitutive positions: that of a proximate spectator, inactive and yet somehow complacent (or complicit) in the depicted scene. The aesthetic and semiotic contrasts which characterize Figure 1 perform micro-political work, calculating the depicted subjects into two binary, co-constitutive subject positionalities—the ‘doers’ and the ‘done to’, the ‘takers’ and the ‘taken from’, the ‘threatening’ and the ‘threatened by’. And as is the case more generally across account of so-called ‘African gang crime’, these subject positions are racialized: racial difference is both visually and linguistically foregrounded in the construction of the ‘rioters’, while the onlookers are naturalized as white (that is, as that which the racialized rioters are *different from*). The specific vantage point of Figure 1, however, articulates these micro-political claims through an *anticipatory* way of looking, placing the viewer immediately before an eventful rupture to invite an imagination of a coming moment of violent contact that remains officially absent from the image itself.



Figure 2: Herald Sun (14/03/2016, p. 5)



Figure 3: Herald Sun (14/03/2016, p. 7)



Figure 4: Daily Mail Online (13/03/2018)

Turn the page, or open another paper, however, and the vantage point shifts. Sometimes, the viewer is placed *within* the moment of rupture, as in Figure 2<sup>27</sup>. Low resolution and poor denotative clarity make it difficult to decipher exactly what is happening or to whom—instead, the vantage point of this image places the viewer at the spatial and temporal epicentre of an unfolding violent scene in order to extend an impressionistic invitation to imagine its affective quality: chaotic, overwhelming, accelerating, volatile. In other images, the moment of rupture has long since passed. The vantage point of Figure 3 places the viewer more than a full day after the ‘riot’, with police officers standing in iconographically for a moment of ‘criminal violence’ that is, in the captured moment, spatially proximate yet temporally distant. In Figure 4, the vantage point of the photograph is once again ‘immediate’ to the time and space of rupture. However, the context of

<sup>27</sup> Several images analysed in this Chapter have visible watermarks, which I was unable to remove for images accessed via PressReader. For a detailed explanation of some of the data collection challenges faced in the execution of this project and the ‘fixes’ ultimately employed, see Appendix 1.

its (re)mediation is years into the future—as part of a report on disorder at Moomba 2018 in the *Daily Mail*, two years later. Compositional hypermediacy articulates a narrative claim, inviting the viewer to connect Moomba 2018 to Moomba 2016 as important historical context—to appreciate the two events as moments within a singular, ongoing phenomenon. Aesthetic immediacy, however, recycles the affective force of Moomba 2016 (as it was mediated then) for the imaginative reconstruction of Moomba 2018 (as it is mediated in the ‘present’). The spacetime of the so-called ‘Moomba Riot’ (its constructed sense of ‘where’ and ‘when’, proximity and distance) is fluctuating and undefined, shifting backwards and forwards through time, expanding and contracting through social space, via the different modes of imaginative (re)construction that these distinct yet symbolically interconnected ‘ways of looking’ at the event invite.

### **Typology: Ways of Looking at Crime Events**

Crime photojournalism is aesthetically characterized by significant degrees of visual fragmentation (Straw, 2015). The ephemeral and unanticipatable nature of most crime events (including those marked by news discourses as ‘African gang crime’) means they usually resist iconic forms of visual representation, wherein a single (usually professional, usually premeditated) image from a single juncture of time and space comes to represent the event as a whole. Instead, visual accounts of crime events are often multiple and aesthetically diverse, derived from a range of sources and often presented together in a ‘tableau’ style within single reports. This “fragmented visibility” (ibid., p. 140) is intensified by the dispersed ‘minor’ eventfulness—and so, profound intertextuality—of mediated ‘African gang crime’ events. Such events are, I have argued, brought to social meaning through their constructed sense of connection to one another rather than within their own individual constitution—and so, *across* symbolic forms, across eventful ruptures. The visibility of ‘African gang crime’ is fragmented not only within single reports, but within the larger visual ecology of the phenomenon as constituted historically through iterative acts of representation.

The remainder of this chapter uses the concept of a ‘vantage point’ to examine this fragmented visibility in terms of its imaginative implications, especially in the representational negotiation of agency and the mediated construction of event spacetime. Zooming out from Moomba 2016 and to the visual construction of ‘African gang crime’ as a whole—that is, as the historical sum of its mediated ruptures—the ‘ways of looking’ at such events opened through visual journalism can be typified as five distinct yet symbolically interconnected vantage points. Each of these—the Immediate Before, the During, the Immediate After, the Distant After/Distant Before, and the Extreme Distance—constructs the spacetime of the crime event in a different way, and so engages perceptual realism in a slightly different mode. Here, I present

these different vantage points in the form of a typology, arguing that each invites (demands, even) different forms of imaginative engagement from the viewer, and so constitutes a different ‘way of looking’ at crime. I term these ways of looking the *anticipatory*, the *embodied*, the *forensic*, the *vigilant*, and the *pre-emptive*.

Examining these different ways of looking first independently of one another helps explicate how each, through its attendant imaginative invitations, constructs the political and spatio-temporal character of the event—its implied scale, historical significance, and power dynamics—in different ways. By engaging the question of an event’s ‘reality’ each in a different imaginative mode, these image type also represents a different relationship of symbolic co-constitution between mediated eventful ‘rupture’ and the ‘ground’ of the security imaginary—especially, its political dimension, wherein the question of vulnerability is negotiated as a question of relative power. However, these different vantage points do not exist in semiotic isolation. They are mutually available and co-conditioning, sometimes within single news reports, but certainly within the broader, intertextual visual ecology of Australian crime journalism. Moreover, the political ‘reality’ of so-called ‘African gang crime’—its constructed sense of significance within and for everyday power relations—is not contingent in the construction of any one event alone, but rather *across* and *between* events that are narratively articulated as part of the ‘whole’ of this phenomenon. For these reasons, the analysis will in the final instance consider what these varied vantage points do *together*, as mutually available ways of looking within the mediation of ‘African gang crime’.

#### *a) Immediate Before: Anticipatory Looking*

The ‘Immediate Before’ vantage point communicates the criminal act by representing the moment immediately preceding it: a punch about to land, a window about to shatter, a fight about to break out. This vantage point has already been discussed through a close analysis of Figure 1, so I will only briefly restate its key properties here. Immediate Before images, like Figure 1, are laden with expectation. The significance of the captured moment derives from what the viewer must imagine taking place beyond the frame—the swung fist connecting with the waiting face, or two bodies launched towards each other finally making contact. The sense of trajectory communicated by these images of ‘action in progress’ asserts a sense of certainty about the moment of violent contact to come, even while that moment remains formally absent from the frame (and, indeed, may never come at all). The ‘reality’ of that moment, however—both in terms of its perceptual character and its affective force—is left to the work of imagination. The image speaks to precisely that which it leaves out, from a distance of mere (milli)seconds. This is why I describe the ‘way of

looking' invited by the Immediate Before vantage point as *anticipatory*. The viewer is called to look towards what cannot be seen, not by adjusting their gaze but by imaginatively constructing the next moment in a trajectory of action frozen by photography.

Images of this type are relatively uncommon, as crime photojournalism is most often a reactive practice, speaking backwards to a past event rather than forward to an event to come (see Straw, 2015). However, amid the proliferation of citizen-produced imagery and the growing remediation of such images within the context of professional news storytelling, it is worth reflecting on the narrative potential and imaginative implications of an Immediate Before vantage point and an anticipatory mode of looking, especially as concerns the negotiation of perceptual realism in mediated crime event (re)construction. Specifically, the Immediate Before image capitalizes narratively on the capacities of social imagination exceeding those of visual representation. By placing the moment of violent contact in the narrative 'future' of the image—and, sometimes, by placing an Immediate Before image alongside scenes of aftermath—the photograph implores the viewer to imagine that which goes between, to visualize the 'peak' of dramatic action to which the Immediate Before image serves as an incline. An Immediate Before vantage point, then, has the capacity to imaginatively scale the meaningful intensity and affective force of eventful ruptures to their upper limits, and to testify to that which may have been, in 'reality', absent. A soon-to-be moment of violence can be implied without evidence of its arrival, and the forms of agency and vulnerability caught up in the 'anticipatory' moment can be imaginatively carried through to a moment of injury or harm—potentially misrepresenting their true resilience within and implications for the (political) conditions of possibility for social practice.

#### *b) During: Embodied Looking*

In the 'During' image—typified earlier by Figure 2 and Figure 4—the moment of eventful rupture is caught 'in the act'. The most spatially and temporally immediate vantage point available in the visualization of crime events, the During image is most usually a photographic representation of the event whose semiotic elements conspire to *immerse* the viewer within the captured moment by placing them at the centre of a fraught space of action and disorder. Often blurred, grainy and out-of-focus, During images derive their claim to authenticity—and so, their sense of perceptual realism—from the intertextual aesthetic regimes of clandestine witnessing and citizen journalism (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2008b). These are examples of what artist and scholar Hito Steyerl calls the 'poor image': technically deficient, hard to decipher, and bearing the aesthetic scars of multiple remediations across various technological and representational mediums. The poor image, Steyerl writes, is one that "tends towards abstraction – it is a visual idea in its very

becoming” (Steyerl, 2009, n.p.) The aesthetic hallmarks of such images—pixelation, blurring, low-resolution, inadequate lighting, distortion, and compositional haphazardness—imbue them with a sense of amateurism that contrasts sharply with the usual technical professionalism and narrative intentionality of press photographs.

As an event form that lays implicit claim to realist representation, the communicative register of the During news image is primarily affective. Such images communicate not the precise details of what happened, where, or with whom, but rather an impressionistic, aesthetic account of *how* the captured moment might have registered physically and emotionally for “the eye that is the camera” (Mroué & Martin, 2012). Specifically, this vantage point emphasizes the embodied presence of the (citizen) photographer within the scene of action and summons the viewer into this positionality. As Andén-Papadopoulos (2013, p.356) writes, the “representational inadequacy” of such images also “encodes immediacy [and] the collapse of time-space limits with the scene of violence, allowing us to make ourselves imaginatively present at the event”. The imaginative demand of the During image is thus a demand for affective immersion: to *feel* the depicted scene as if physically present within it.

As such, the ‘way of looking’ invited by the vantage point of the During image can be described as imaginatively *embodied*, placing the viewer *within* the immediate spacetime of rupture in order to elicit ‘sensitized’ modes of knowledge construction about criminal events and the forms of vulnerability they capture and implicate (Harari, 2009). Reframed in the language of the analytics of mediation, we can describe this as a symbolic collapse of perceptual and categorical realism: the ‘factual’ reality of the event is its reality as *felt*. Figure 2 and Figure 3 above are illustrative of how this imaginative invitation manifests through the visual. Compositionally, the point-of-view implied by the eye/camera of the photographer is immersed within the field of action, with bodies crowding the image at various degrees of depth to imply an ‘extension’ of the scene beyond the perimeter of the captured frame. Pixelation and low resolution communicate that these images were captured by ‘lay’ photographers rather than professionals, while blurring and visual ‘fuzz’ gesture to the possibility of remediation (i.e., that these images are still captures from videos, likely first recorded using an amateur device like a mobile phone). In both images, the aesthetics of hypermobility (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 345) evoke a sense of embodied presence (even participation) in the scene of action, calling the viewer into the ‘first person’ immediacy of the captured moment. Hypermobility here refers not only to the chaotic and multi-directional movement of bodies and objects within the captured frame (as in the leftward-bound ‘rioter’ and rightward-thrown chair captured in Figure 2) but also the presumed movement of the

human eye/hand/camera behind the image<sup>28</sup> (as in Figure 3, where the severe tilt of the frame implies that the image has been captured by a ‘handheld’ device while running).

The subject of these photographs is not the agent(s) captured within the frame, but rather the imagined figure of the human eye/hand/camera-subject that manifests aesthetically within the frame as a “haunting absence” (Mroué & Martin, 2012, p. 24). Within the multi-modality of crime news storytelling, During images invoke the vulnerability of the body in order to imaginatively summon their viewer to the centre of a chaotic field of visual transitivity. The vantage point of such images implores imaginative identification with a particular (embodied) political positionality: that of the subjugated, the overwhelmed, the disempowered, the exposed. Thus, the embodied ‘way of looking’ that such images invite engage the question of reality not through the articulation of claims about magnitude (across space or time) but rather in the visual manifestation of *intensity*. The representational force of these images of rupture vis-à-vis the security imaginary—and the political status of ‘African gang crime’ within it—is thus dually derived: first, from the claims to authenticity embedded in the visual genre of clandestine testimony, and second, from the claims to authority embedded in the figure of the what Harari (2009) calls the ‘flesh witness’: she who knows the ‘truth’ of the event not through a familiarity with verified facts, but through the affective immediacy of lived experience.

### c) *Immediate After: Forensic Looking*

The ‘Immediate After’ image is most usually a photographic account of damage, either to a body (in the form of bodily injury) or to an object (in the form of damaged property). As with the Immediate Before vantage point, the spatial and temporal location of the Immediate After vantage point vis-a-vis the rupture of the crime event is asymmetrical: spatially immediate, and yet temporally ‘afterwards’. The imaginative invitation extended by such images is thus to move *backwards* through time, using evidentiary objects to ‘read off’ an imagined prior sequence of activity. The ‘way of looking’ at crime offered and interpellated by the vantage point of the Immediate After image might thus be called *forensic*. Bodies and objects are presented as artifacts of eventful rupture, with the viewer invited to imaginatively reconstruct the causes and conditions to which these “visible residues of crime” testify (Straw, 2015, p. 139).

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<sup>28</sup> From Rabih Mroué’s *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012): “It is as if the camera and the eye have become united in the same body, I mean the camera has become an integral part of the body. Its lens and its memory have replaced the retina of the eye and the brain. In other words, their cameras are not cameras, but eyes implanted in their hands – an optical prosthesis.” (p. 30)



Figure 5: Sydney Daily Telegraph (06/01/2018)



Figure 6: Daily Mail Online (20/11/2018)



Figure 7: Herald Sun (16/08/2019)

Typified by Figures 5, 6 and 7 (above), the Immediate After vantage point engages perceptual realism by drawing on a visual discourse of evidence from the sphere of procedural criminal justice—in particular, the genre of crime scene photography (Straw, 2015, p. 139). Material damage is positioned to elicit deductive modes of imagination and ‘reconstructive’ forms of knowledge about the event to which the image is narratively indexed as aftermath. Here, the damaged object stands in representationally for its own violent conditions of emergence, calling the imagination of the viewer backwards through time to actions and agents absent from the frame.

This invitation to ‘forensic looking’ and reconstructive ways of knowing manifests through a few consistent semiotic features. First, it relies on the visual capture of *informational detail*, usually implying a sharp focus and long depth of field. For zoomed-out images (like Figures 5 and 6), fine-grained visual detail emphasizes the *quantity* of damage. Damaged objects clutter and overwhelm the frame, calling the eye in multiple directions at once rather than offering a single focal point. For zoomed-in images, the precision and clarity of visual detail scales the event by emphasizing the *quality* of damage—a gaping, jagged hole in a shop window (as in Figure 7), or blood oozing from a fresh wound. In both instances, sharp denotative detail is essential to the

representational work of the image as an event form, scaling both the physical magnitude and the affective intensity of the prior moment of rupture to which the image testifies.

Second, and relatedly, the Immediate After image—in its semiotic reliance on stillness and clarity—tends to be absent of action-in-progress. The presence of active agents within the captured frame would be both visually distracting (in terms of the aesthetics of movement) and meaningfully confusing (making it less clear which sequence of action—past or present—the image is testifying to). An important exception to this is the figure of ‘the onlooker’. In Figure 5, the police officers are not interacting with the captured scene, but rather *observing* or *surveying* the damage from a distance. In this way, the ‘onlooker’ serves its own demonstrative function by *performing* within the space of appearance the same forensic ‘way of looking’ that these images invite from the viewer.

The Immediate After vantage point engages the question of event reality by inviting a reconstructive mode of imaginative engagement, calling on the viewer to ‘fill in’ the historical context to which the image is positioned as testimony, and which accompanying linguistic text (including image captions, but also the report narrative) may elaborate. The image does this by articulating the narrativity of journalistic discourse with a discourse of evidence from the sphere of procedural criminal justice, offering artifacts as material testimony of sequences of criminal action that are spatially immediate yet temporally prior to the captured frame. Viewers of the Immediate After image are thus invited to ‘read off’ the causes and conditions of criminality from material traces criminalized actors leave behind, inviting a forensic mode of visual engagement with the materiality of social space. Moreover, as representations of aftermath, the temporality of the event is meaningfully stretched so that the since-passed moment of eventful rupture ripples into the present, both representationally within the terrain of the image and experientially through the act of mediation.

#### *d) Distant After/Distant Before: Vigilant Looking*

Distant After photographs are portraits of social space, the vantage point of which emphasizes *spatial proximity* to a moment of criminal rupture whilst also harnessing *temporal distance* to perform contextualizing work. However, the degree of temporal distance that characterizes this vantage point is so significant as to render such images representationally abstract—they are not, denotatively speaking, ‘of’ crime events at all. These portraits of social space are ‘elsewhere’ in time whilst remaining ‘precisely there’ in space, relying on other semiotic elements—especially, captions and headlines, but also other images—to clarify their location vis-à-vis the rupture of crime. Temporal abstraction supports representational ambiguity: not clearly marked as either

‘before’ or ‘after’ a criminal moment, these images function symbolically as both. The Distant After vantage point is thus also a Distant *Before* vantage point, as nothing in the visual modality distinguishes these two image types from one another.



DAVID GERAGHTY  
**Rocchina Pignataro, with daughter Alesia, outside her home in Taylors Hill, where gangs rampaged this week**

*Figure 8: The Australian (10/08/2018)*

The ambivalent temporality of the Distant After/Distant Before image is fundamental to the ‘way of looking’ at the crime event it invites—and so, also, the forms of perceptual realism it engages and the kinds of political claims it is able to articulate. In Figure 8, the subjects of the image—a mother and a young child—are photographed from the middle distance so that the frame also captures details of their environmental surroundings: a large house, a sweeping driveway, a manicured front garden, and a peaceful suburban street receding into the distance. This is both a portrait of a mother and daughter and of the social space they occupy, at the interface of the public and private domains. A caption formally classifies this as a Distant After image: the woman stands in immediate spatial proximity to a site of criminal rupture, but at considerable temporal distance. However, the mood of the image is expectant. The woman’s gaze is cast out into the distance as if in watchful anticipation of something approaching her home, while the abundance of negative space in the central foreground of the image places her ‘out in the open’, emphasizing a physical vulnerability that the presence of the child on her hip subsequently reinforces. The image distils the ambivalent temporality of the Distant After/Distant Before and its imaginative significance: the literal after is the meaningful before, with openness to *future* harm (rather than present injury) the primary ‘trace’ of the criminal rupture.



Figure 9: The Australian (10/08/2018)

As symbolic event forms, Distant After/Distant Before images collapse time into space to invite contrasting imaginations of the social environment: as accentuated by the headline accompanying Figure 8, which reads “*Dream suburb turns to worst nightmare.*” Placed back into the context of its original presentation (Figure 9), we can see how captions, headlines and images come together to position the banal, perhaps even idealized, imaginary of suburban social space in Figure 8 as *both the before and after* setting of the “nightmare” of criminal disorder. The visual collapse of time into space supports a cyclical imagination of criminality: articulated through the narrativity of journalistic representation, crime manifests as a cycle in which the ‘after’ is always simultaneously the ‘before’, and in which everyday social spaces are representationally recast as locations of past and future crime events. The way of looking invited by the Distant After/Distant Before image might therefore be called *vigilant*—a watchful orientation towards spaces and the bodies inhabiting them that scans for dormant or emergent criminal potential in the everyday (see Amoores, 2007).



Figure 10: Sydney Daily Telegraph (06/01/2018)

As Louise Amoore writes, this “vigilant visuality” is characteristic of a post-9/11 security imaginary in which the local and the everyday are imaginatively reconfigured through practices of mediated communication (including journalism) as the “homefront” of larger geopolitical power struggles (Amoore, 2007). Vigilant watchfulness is grounded in an attentiveness to contrast—between “self and other, homeland and strangeland, safe and unsafe, ordinary and suspicious” (p. 217)—and committed to the predictive power of the present, and thus a pre-emptive logic of action. As a result, vigilance often “plays out as profiling” (p. 216): bodies, as well as spaces, become ‘sites’ to be scanned for signs of emergent threat. In Figure 10, the spatial proximity of criminal past-futures is evoked not through contrasting representations of material space, but through the multi-modal symbolic articulation of the banal body and the spectacle of criminal violence. A vigilant way of looking—ever searching for the emergent criminal potential of the seemingly noncriminal—is thus sharply attuned to gendered and racialized difference and to the body not just as a container of agency, but also a site of action that can imaginatively call together events with distinct temporalities into a compressed, cyclical vision of crime. The materiality of social space is replaced with the materiality of the body as the after/before ‘trace’ of criminal events, in this case re-signifying the Black body as criminality-in-becoming (see Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

#### e) *Extreme Distance: Pre-emptive Looking*

The Extreme Distance image is usually a multi-modal graphic of some kind—a map, a timeline, a graph, a collage—incorporating text, digital illustration, and sometimes photography into a single visual frame. As symbolic event forms, these images do not testify to any single event at any

particular juncture of space and time. Rather, the Extreme Distance vantage point congeals events together visually to mediate them as *phenomena*, connected in time and space and co-implicated in meaning. These images testify not to an eventful rupture that has ‘happened’ (as in the witness photograph that typifies the genre of photojournalism), but rather to something *happening*—active, ongoing, in-process. The Extreme Distance vantage point collates events from across the chronology of lived time so that they can appear and amass side-by-side in visual simultaneity. Spatial contexts, meanwhile, are cut and pasted together within the frame, giving the crime phenomenon a sense of trajectory, direction, and scale.



Figure 11: The Australian (14/08/2018)

In Figure 11, a map of greater Melbourne serves as a visual backdrop. This map is absent of ‘social geographic’ markers like roads, schools, hospitals, parks, or places of worship or trade. Instead, the map highlights only borders—in this case, between local council constituencies—as the definitional feature of social space, rendering the city of Melbourne in territorial terms. Figure 12 below, too, employs a map as its background—this time, a satellite photograph that similarly obscures the social texture of the space it represents. Small, red circles mark locations of past crime events. The indexicality of these marks is clarified by accompanying captions which give superficial details about the date, location and type of crime represented by each red circle. In real time, the nine events represented in Figure 5 have taken place over the course of almost eight months. However, the Extreme Distance image articulates these events within a single frame so that they can appear—and crucially, massify—in visual simultaneity. In Figure 12, the represented

events have all taken place on the same night, but with different people involved each time<sup>29</sup>. A yellow line connects the events, implying a trajectory of action by a singular agentive force, while a black arrowhead gestures to the possibility of continuation. In both images, each red circle is numbered; tracing them with the eye in sequential order draws the gaze back and forth across the map, reinforcing a narrative claim that criminality is spreading across or ‘taking over’ the spatial terrain of the image. Moreover, the red circle signifier does not discriminate between different types of crime it marks, establishing a sense of symbolic equivalence between, say, a trashed Airbnb property and a fatal stabbing (Wallace, 2009). This reading of these images is reinforced in the linguistic modality of each text, where headlines and captions deploy floating signifiers like “violence” and “mayhem” to meaningfully co-implicate these different moments of eventful rupture as a singular phenomenon.



Figure 12: Weekend Australian (06/01/2018)

The Extreme Distance vantage point takes up discrete crime events and mediates them as parts of an as-yet-incomplete whole; it offers a way of looking at crime that facilitates the identification (and imaginative continuation) of patterns. We can describe the way of looking it invites as *pre-emptive*: a sense of ‘seeing-as-foreseeing’ that invokes the pre-emptive logic of national security within the domestic business of crime control (McCulloch & Pickering, 2009; Wallace, 2009; Virilio, 1994). Crime events are ‘scaled up’ in terms of their historical stakes and political implications through a symbolic dynamic of expansion and contraction—the former ‘stretching’

<sup>29</sup> The accompanying caption states that police “believe all the incidents are linked” but does not elaborate on the basis of this belief, stating only that “all offenders are perceived as being of African appearance.”

crime events across space in order to communicate scale, the latter ‘condensing’ such events in time so that they can appear *en masse* within a single visual frame. The sense of *event accumulation* constructed through the Extreme Distance vantage point constitutes a register of visual transitivity, animating an imagination of the crime phenomenon as something active, accelerating, and on-the-move. It also co-implicates the meaning of these events, so that the socio-political significance of each derives as much from its place within the sequence as from its own specificities. And so, when viewed from an Extreme Distance, mediated crime events resist discrete and/or limited imaginations of their spatial and historical significance. Past and future crime events are called together “as matter to shadow” in the imaginative visualization of unriveted crime futures (McCulloch and Pickering, 2009: 641).

## **Conclusion: ‘African Gang Crime’ Through the Kaleidoscope**

This chapter has shifted the analytical lens from the question of how criminality is stereotyped (dominant amongst ‘construction of criminality’ approaches to mediated criminalization) to the question of how criminality is *socially contextualized*—specifically, by exploring the various forms of imaginative elaboration invited by news images in the mediated (re)construction of ‘African gang crime’ events. However, the varied ways of looking at crime uncovered through this analysis do not exist in semiotic isolation. The imaginative potential of each is conditioned by its relationships with others, both symbolic (within the genre of crime journalism) and material (within the multi-modality of news stories, wherein such varied vantage points often appear side-by-side). And so, in the last instance, they must be read dialogically, as interconnected moments of a larger strategy of visualization through which ‘African gang crime’ events are brought to political meaning through the intertextuality of news storytelling (Bakhtin, 1981; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Within the ‘construction of criminality’ approach to news media representations of crime (discussed in Chapter 2), the greatest critical significance is ascribed to that which stays relatively *fixed* across iterative representations of criminality: usually, the people and practices that are resiliently positioned within, and so constructed by, media discourses as ‘criminal’. This approach conceptualizes mediated criminalization as symbolic articulation (Hall, 1997b): the steady and repetitive association of certain subjectivities (especially, racialized subjects) with the category of ‘crime’ through discourse until this symbolic association calcifies into a pernicious stereotype, lending cultural legitimacy to selective practices of state surveillance, exclusion, and control (see Davis, 1998). Through the lens of this approach, the perceptual ‘reality’ of vulnerability as a political condition is generally viewed as being negotiated by the mediated construction of relative

power and agency—in representational accounts of *who* wields power, of *what kind*, *over whom*, and *under what conditions*.

Viewed from this perspective, images of ‘African gang crime’ engage in the construction of criminality through an iterative micro-politics of agency that reproduces the two co-constitutive subject positions explicated in my close analysis of Figure 1: the active and the passive, the doers and the done to, the threatening and the threatened by, the takers and the taken from. The analysis in this chapter finds that these categories remain relatively fixed across different representations of ‘African gang crime’ events, so that ‘the criminal’ is imbued with an expansive and coercive sense of agency while the ‘non-criminal’ is routinely represented as disempowered and vulnerable. Moreover, these categories remain rigidly racialized across such representations; just as Blackness is routinely articulated with criminality, so too is it routinely articulated with relative coercive power. The result is that, within and across visual accounts of ‘African gang crime’, a discourse of white vulnerability is engaged whereby the ‘facticity’ of both Black vulnerability *and* white power in contemporary Australian society is symbolically obscured—indeed, reversed.

However, a ‘criminalizing’ mediated politics of vulnerability is not simply one which reproduces iterative, stereotypical representations of powerful ‘criminals’ and their disempowered ‘victims’. Rather, my analytical framework has proposed that criminalization can only occur through the symbolic transposition of ‘spectacular’ crime events (and the politics of agency they articulate) onto banal, background imaginaries of everyday power dynamics. This, I have proposed, is contingent within the mediated reconfiguration of social spacetime, through which crime events can ‘live’ beyond (and so, take on social significance outside) their moments of rupture. The analysis in this chapter has highlighted how and why a critique of ‘criminalizing’ visual representations must also be attentive to what *does not* stay fixed across news media representations of crime. In the typology developed here, this is the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of crime, both as represented in news images as testimonial texts *and* as experientially constructed through the hypermediacy of visual journalism.

Returning finally to the question of vulnerability as a political condition—as ‘real’ openness to harm in everyday social life—this chapter has highlighted how perceptual realism is engaged not only *within* particular event forms, but also *between* them. Another way of phrasing this might be to say that perceptual reality of ‘African gang crime’ is negotiated across two different orders of mediated construction: the representational, and the experiential. Within individual event forms (texts), the reality of vulnerability to harm is first negotiated representationally through the narrative account of agency and relative power developed within the text: an account of who acts, upon whom, and what empowers them to do so. In the mediation of ‘African gang

crime', the figure of 'the criminal' is regularly and repetitively represented (or, imaginatively invoked) as an agentive and self-responsible figure with disproportionate coercive power vis-à-vis 'non-criminal' members of society. This sense of disproportionate coercive power—and so, broader social vulnerability to 'African gang crime'—is reinforced imaginatively in different ways through each of the different vantage points explicated in the analysis. Sometimes, as in the *During Image*, the perceptual 'reality' of criminal power is asserted affectively, through a visual evocation of embodied presence and felt intensity. Other times, as in the *Extreme Distance*, this claim takes a more evident narrative form, with maps and iconographic markers used to advance claims to dynamism, trajectory, interconnectedness, and historical scale. In both instances, a politics of vulnerability is engaged representationally by allocating different capacities for action, coercion, and control to different actors *and* narratively through the intertextual constitution of 'African gang crime' as an eventful phenomenon that is spreading through social space and gathering strength across time.

Crucially, however, an analysis of the expansive and unstable spacetime of the 'African gang crime' event highlights how these representational claims about relative coercive power of the 'African gang criminal' are reinforced through mediation. The *experience* of 'African gang crime' as it is imaginatively facilitated through journalism is constituted not through any one event or representation, but rather *between* them, through the dynamic of their semiotic consistencies and differences. What I have illustrated in this chapter is how the 'demonstrative' dimension of the semiosis of 'African gang crime'—the proposed answers that event forms offer to the questions "Where/when is this?" and "Where/when am I in relation to it?"—is radically open and unstable. This carries significant implications for the mediated spacetime of its constituent events, and so for how such events (and the power dynamics they capture) can be imaginatively located within everyday social time and space. The forms of perceptual realism explicated here support an expansive and officially limitless imaginary of everyday insecurity, wherein there is no degree of temporal or spatial distance at which the 'African gang crime' event reaches the limit of its own social context. Such events, as imaginatively reconstructed through the visibility of journalism, are never memorialized as meaningfully 'past' or 'elsewhere', never as a bounded moment in history that is now 'over'. Rather, the experience of 'African gang crime' is imaginatively all things at once: close enough to feel, far enough away to analyse; over there, but also unfinished, on-the move, on its way, as-yet-incomplete; 'now' enough to foster a sense of urgency, yet 'then' enough to allow for analysis and contemplation. Thus, while representation reproduces a particular micro-politics of agency as that which makes these events 'alike' and meaningfully co-implicated, mediated spacetime imbues that politics with a broader imaginative sense of historicity and social scale—in

other words, narratively transposing it onto the banal ground of uneventful, everyday political life to which the eventfulness of ‘African gang crime’ is imaginatively indexed.

To conceptualize how the fluctuating, unstable chronotope of the ‘African gang crime’ event sits in productive symbolic tension with the rigid (and racialized) politics of agency articulated in and through each account of rupture, I propose that we can use the metaphor of a kaleidoscope. A kaleidoscope is a narrow tube, usually constructed from plastic or cardboard, containing two or more mirrors set facing towards one-another at varying angles. An object viewed through a kaleidoscope is thus viewed as if from multiple positions at once; innumerable perspectives are captured through the viewfinder as if part of a singular vantage point. The multiplicity of available perspectives is temporal as well as spatial—as the kaleidoscope rotates, the angled reflections within the tube shift and the perspectives available to the viewer proliferate anew. Kaleidoscopic visions are ultimately *patterned* visions that emerge through an imaginative interplay between singularity/fixity and infinity/movement: the moment of criminal rupture set against the restlessness of the mediated event, the stillness of the photograph against the inevitable motion of social life. In the visual mediation of ‘African gang crime’, singularity/fixity is achieved through the repetitive mediated construction of ‘white vulnerability’ to ‘Black violence’, while movement/infinity operates through the ‘anarchic contextualization’<sup>30</sup> work of a vast and unstable mediated social spacetime. The result—in this case and likely for other ‘kaleidoscopically visualized’ crime phenomena—is an expansive, patterned imaginary of criminality in which the ‘who’ and ‘what’ dimensions of crime are imbued with a sense of symbolic stability and certainty, while the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of past and future crime events (both as represented in texts and as experienced through mediation) remain radically unstable, uncertain, and officially limitless.

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This chapter has been deliberately narrow in its analytical focus, looking only at the question of perceptual realism and only at images as one specific type of symbolic event form. This has not been to disarticulate the question of ‘reality’ from questions of emotionality/feeling and ideology/meaning, nor to imply that images perform autonomous representational and/or narrative work within news texts as fundamentally intertextual and often multi-modal event forms. Focussing on images has helped illuminate the specific forms of ‘realist’ construction and imaginative elaboration necessary for cultural criminalization, precisely because of the

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<sup>30</sup> I am indebted to Mary Angela Bock for this helpful turn of phrase, after hearing her describe the context of visual journalism as such during a book talk with Sandra Ristovska hosted online by CU Boulder on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

paradigmatic claim to ‘innocent’ representation embedded in the medium of photography and the genre of photojournalism. While the achievement of perceptual realism or “realness” has been explored here specifically in terms of visual event (re)construction, it is not by definition ‘visual only’ and the insights developed here will carry forward into the remainder of this thesis as rubrics of multi-modal (rather than predominantly visual) discourse analysis. The decision to open with an exploration of perceptual realism in the mediated construction of ‘African gang crime’ is in deference to how reality precedes morality in the reflexive justification of practices. We do not act upon forms of vulnerability we do not perceive as ‘real’, but of those we *do* perceive as such, we act only on some. In the next chapter, I turn to this second dimension of differentiation: to vulnerability as a *moral* condition, symbolically negotiated by placing different forms of ‘real’ vulnerability in uneven relationships to the question of justice. I also broaden my analytical lens, moving beyond the still image to consider more semiotically heterogeneous textual forms and so more complex modes of representational (re)construction.

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## CHAPTER 6

# Mediating ‘Wrongness’: Ordinary Testimony and the Question of Justice

“The Victorian public is really outraged by some of the goings on [...] the reality is people are scared to go out to restaurants of a night-time because they’re followed home by these gangs, home invasion and cars are stolen.”

Australian Home Affairs minister Peter Dutton speaking on 2GB (3<sup>rd</sup> January 2018)

### Fear and Outrage

The news image (especially, the photograph) may indeed be a communicative form that is broadly paradigmatic of the claim to perceptually ‘realistic’ representation that all journalistic texts advance, but it is not the only one. Another similarly paradigmatic form is the statistic. Across news media accounts of so-called ‘African gang crime’, one statistic is frequently repeated: that Sudanese and South Sudanese people account for (only) 1% of all unique criminal offenders in the state of Victoria (see Grivas, 2018). I put the word ‘only’ in parentheses here to draw attention to the diverging meanings of this statistic—itsself questionable, as it relies on data from Victoria Police—within popular discourses about so-called ‘African gang’ criminality. Indeed, statistics can be as contingent as images. For some, 1% was *only* 1%, and so evidence that the scale and severity of the problem of criminal activity amongst members of the Black African diaspora in Melbourne had been grossly exaggerated. Others, however, contrasted this ‘1%’ with another statistic: 0.14%, or the percentage of the total population that Sudanese and South Sudanese people accounted for in the state of Victoria at the last census. For proponents of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative, 1% became *1%!* This, they claimed, was ironclad evidence of a disproportionate involvement in crime amongst Sudanese and South Sudanese Victorians, and so of a ‘real’ crime problem that was specifically Black African and problematic in being so.

What kind of moral imaginary can position a 1% contribution to offending as an intolerably ‘wrong’ amount of threat, especially vis-à-vis the 73.5% of unique offenders who were born in Australia or New Zealand (ibid.)? This is a question fundamental to understanding how criminalization works through media representations and discourses, and to which the quote from

Home Affairs minister Peter Dutton provides some early hints. In a widely mocked<sup>31</sup> interview on radio station 2GB, Dutton claimed that Victorians were now so scared of being victimized by ‘African gangs’ that they were reluctant to go out for dinner if it meant being outside the home after dark. Crucially, Dutton’s comment attached a sense of “outrage” not to the widespread experience of injury, but to the widespread experience of fear. But how can the fear of something that is, by the admission of its own proponents, spectacularly unlikely, simultaneously be positioned as ‘too much’ fear, as ‘outrageous’? The intensity of the ‘wrongness’ of Black African criminality was clearly based in something more than the extent of its ‘realness’. Dutton used fear to evoke a sense of omnipresent danger that a discourse of overrepresentation—implied by the ‘1%’ figure—then directly contradicts. So, what were ‘Victorians’ (as constructed by Dutton) really outraged by?

*a) Naming the wrong: vulnerability as a moral condition*

The preceding chapter considered how, and to what ends, the mediation of ‘African gang crime’ events can negotiate vulnerability as a political condition—as a positionality within everyday power relations marked by relative openness to harm. My analytical focus there was the question of perceptual realism; specifically, how photographic imagery (as a particular type of event form that articulates both aesthetic and historical claims to ‘realist’ representation) works to establish the *facticity* of ‘African gang crime’ as a meaningful threat to everyday security and order. Cultural criminalization is understood within this project as a (mediated) politics of vulnerability; the preceding chapter explored the calculative question of *social power* within that politics, through which claims about *who* is truly vulnerable, *to whom*, and *under what conditions* are imaginatively advanced to negotiate the *pragmatic* basis (the necessity and/or efficacy) for various forms of security action.

This chapter changes gear to consider the second core dimension of the mediated politics of vulnerability as I have theorized it: the question of vulnerability as a *moral* condition. As discussed at the end of the preceding chapter, the question of mediated ‘reality’ only gets us so far to understanding criminalization as a phenomenon of media culture. While we do not, of course, tend to act upon forms of threat that we do not perceive as ‘real’, we equally do not act consistently nor similarly upon *all* forms of threat that meet this basic criterion. Most people, for example,

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<sup>31</sup> Dutton’s comments were widely ridiculed by left-leaning commentators and publications as a cynical political ploy. The backlash ultimately inspired a retaliatory social media campaign called #MelbourneBitesBack, in which people used this hashtag to post photographs of themselves eating out at Melbourne restaurants and cafes on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram (see SBS News, 2018)

would recognize imprisonment as a perceptually ‘real’ form of social disempowerment and bodily openness to potential injury; not all people, however, find the forms of real vulnerability implicated through the act of imprisonment to be morally objectionable. Vulnerability politics inevitably requires a ‘naming of the wrong’ to reflexively inform (or disrupt) social practice (Cole, 2016; citing Rancière, 1999, pp. 21–43). It is *moral differentiation*, then, that connects the question of ‘real’ vulnerability to the question of justice—and only through such differentiation that the moral basis for security practices (the *rightness* and/or *justness* of different ways of acting on vulnerability) can be reflexively established through acts of mediated representation.

Another way to conceptualize the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition—or, the uneven sense of ‘wrongness’ attached to different forms and registers of vulnerability through discourse—is by using the concept of victimhood. Victimhood—especially, white victimhood—has in recent years become a heated object of cultural critique (see Banet-Weiser, 2021; Chouliaraki, 2020; Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2020; Cole, 2007, 2016; King, 2015; Phipps, 2021). Of greatest concern within this burgeoning literature is the “mutability” of victimhood as a newly dominant paradigm of political claim-making, which harnesses the “universal language of pain” to “accrue moral value” to those who engage in public suffering—often, by circumventing the question of power (Chouliaraki, 2020). In so doing, victimhood can muddy the water on the question of *why* people suffer to instead inspire a politics grounded in the alleviation of hurt, rather than the pursuit of social justice. Victimhood, in other words, collapses categorical and ideological forms of realism (see Chapter 4) to negotiate the ‘wrongness’ of vulnerability not through reference to questions of inequality and domination (see Cole, 2016), but rather, through calculative symbolic encounters between different accounts (or, representations) of suffering.

The forthcoming analysis explores how the various forms of perceptually ‘real’ vulnerability caught up in the construction of ‘African gang crime’ events—including, crucially, the vulnerabilities exacerbated by practices of crime control—are representationally differentiated in terms of their moral status. Which forms of openness to harm are articulated within the mediated construction of crime events as forms of injustice, and which as mere misfortunes? Which subjects and registers of vulnerability are positioned as morally intolerable, which as morally permissible, and on what basis? And, crucially, how (and in what ways) does mediated representation generally (and journalistic representation more specifically) constitute a key condition of symbolic possibility for such forms of moral differentiation, essential as they are for the reproduction of criminalization as a logic of social practice?

b) *Demotic news narratives and testimonial encounters*

To explore these questions, I shift empirical focus in this chapter towards *first-person testimony* as an important component of the symbolic (re)construction of ‘African crime events’ through mediated representation—and especially, on television. While photographs were positioned in the previous chapter as paradigmatic of the journalistic claim to perceptual realism, testimony engages realism in a different mode. Writing about the reconstruction of events in the courtroom (rather than in the news), Gilmore (2017) asserts that we look to testimony for something “both more and less” than facts can provide (p. 15). Testimony is ‘less’ than fact, in this sense, because it is explicitly subjective—an account of the social world rendered through the prism of an individual experience. It is *more* than fact, however, because it engages (and so cultivates) the question of *authenticity* in event (re)construction in a way that simple facts (numbers, dates etc.) cannot. A testimonial account of an event, in other words, foregrounds the subjectivity of the speaker precisely to negotiate the categorical realism of mediated event forms—their constructed ‘trueness’ to everyday social life and power as it is *sensed* and *felt*, rather than ‘factually’ verified.

Based on the discussion in the preceding section, it should be clear how and why first-person testimony offers an ideal empirical focus for investigating the negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition through the news, which I have reconceptualized as the mediated construction of victimhood. Journalistic texts which narratively foreground first-person testimony in their (re)construction of crime events draw on a specific epistemology of news storytelling that has been variously described (by its critics) as “demotic” (Turner, 2001, 2009a) and (in more celebratory and/or ambivalent accounts) as “ordinary voice” (Chouliaraki, 2010)<sup>32</sup>. While political elites and institutional experts have been centred historically as ‘primary definers’ in the production of news narratives about crime and its management (see Hall et al., 2013), ordinary voice reconfigures the concept of expertise so that individual lifeworld experiences—claims to have seen things, lived things, felt things ‘first hand’—are positioned as authoritative forms of evidence about crime ‘realities’. In this way, ordinary voice has the potential to ‘open up’ and democratize crime news as a mediated space of appearance (Arendt, 1958; Silverstone, 2006) in which moral sensibilities are forged and political collectivities negotiated through contentious discursive encounters between different testimonies of social vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2006a; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Moreover, as an epistemology grounded primarily in the authenticity of emotion

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<sup>32</sup> This academic debate is primarily concerned with the implications of “ordinary voice” for journalism as a means of realizing democratic ideals. As this question is somewhat outside the scope of my research questions, I do not elaborate on that debate here. However, for a detailed account of how the analytical findings in this chapter intervene into that debate, see Higgins (2021).

rather than the authority of ‘evidence’, ordinary voice engages categorical realism to ‘make meaning’ of crime events by inviting the audience to *feel* and *experience* certain stories as morally important (Kunelius & Renvall, 2010). As Chouliaraki (2010) elaborates:

“The valorization of ordinary witnessing introduces into the news a different epistemology of authenticity that relativizes the empiricism of facts in television news, by placing it side by side with the *empiricism of emotion*... It is not the verification and analysis of sources but the immediacy of experience that counts as news – and it is this experience that now endows journalism with a new moralizing force.” (p. 5, emphasis added)

The remainder of this chapter approaches crime news narratives on television as sites of testimonial encounter, where different and sometimes competing first-person accounts of vulnerability—what Cottle (2013) describes as “injunctions to care”—struggle for moral recognition. This is especially so within current affairs as a specific sub-genre of televisual reporting, which multiple authors have identified as particularly demotic in the Australian context (see Bonner & McKay, 2007; Turner, 2005, 2009a). In terms of investigating how vulnerabilities are morally differentiated in and through journalistic representation, my analytical interest will be in a) how different testimonial accounts of lived vulnerability are imbued with different kinds (and degrees) of categorical realism; and, by extension, b) how different testimonial accounts of lived vulnerability are placed in ideological tension, and so in competitive relationships vis-à-vis the question of social justice. Returning to the analytics of mediation (see Chapter 4), the analysis will examine both the multi-modal presentation of individual testimonies on television (the mediated construction of categorical realism) *and* the placement of different testimonies within the overall narrative composition of televisual news texts (the mediated construction of ideological realism). The animating concerns here, in terms of the question of mediated criminalization, are: to what extent are the lived vulnerabilities of criminalized subjects (including those implicated by crime control practices) imbued with emotional and moral force through the mediation of first-person testimony? What *kind* of moral problem is ‘African gang crime’ made out to be through demotic storytelling, and for whom? Which forms of victimhood are discursively reproduced through such testimonial encounters on television?

### **Moral Calculus: Dulling the Symbolic Force of Black Testimony**

My theoretical framework positioned criminalization as a form of security practice to draw attention to its calculative logic. Security, I proposed, ought to be conceptualized in terms of a

‘morally calculative’ social politics of vulnerability, wherein some (morally acceptable) forms of openness to harm are reproduced, through security practice, in order to mitigate or ameliorate other (morally intolerable) forms (Burke, 2008, p. 5; see also Chapter 3). The moral coherence of criminalization as a *logic of social practice*—or, the constructed rightness and/or justness of the practices criminalization animates—is contingent not only in the moral differentiation of vulnerabilities, but also in the *concealment* of that differentiation in the mediated construction of ideological coherence. Ordinary voice, as a ‘democratizing’ epistemology of journalistic storytelling, has the hypothetical capacity to disrupt this sense of coherence (and so, criminalization) by introducing the testimonies of the criminalized into the mediated reconstruction of ‘African gang crime’ events on television. But how does this opportunity for disruption play out in practice, and how might criminalization reproduce itself nonetheless?

Amongst the televisual texts analysed for this study (see Appendix B), those within the nightly news sub-genre—which tended to be shorter and more narratively superficial—rarely included the testimonies of Black African subjects in the (re)construction of ‘African gang crime’ events. These texts obscured the significance of race as a key ‘ordering principle’ in the moral differentiation of openness to harm by focussing exclusively on the figure of the (predominantly white) crime victim, achieving a sense of ideological coherence through simple exclusion. Current affairs texts, however, regularly included the voices of Black African subjects, and so had to engage in more complex and explicit forms of testimonial hierarchisation to provide a coherent account of the moral significance of ‘African gang crime’ events. Analyses of these texts were, by consequence, much more revealing in terms of how the ‘wrongness’ of different forms of openness to harm is negotiated in and through the mediated (re)construction of crime events. Close multi-modal analysis of such texts illuminated four discrete yet interconnected strategies of textual composition and presentation through which the categorical and/or ideological force of Black African testimony can be symbolically blunted, and so through which a criminalizing moral politics of vulnerability can reproduce itself despite the discursive interventions of the criminalized. I have termed these strategies *appropriation*, *marginalization*, *subjugation*, and *calculation*.

#### *a) Appropriation*

‘Appropriation’ describes a compositional strategy wherein the authenticating force of ordinary voice is co-opted by speakers with limited lived experience of crime or criminalization, and then articulated with and internalized by other sources of discursive authority, such as professional status. Across testimonial accounts of ‘African gang crime’ events on television, appropriation can be observed operating through two key mechanisms; first, through *testimonial saturation*, and second,

through *narrator adoption*. I will discuss each of these in turn, using an illustrative textual example for each.

In an episode of current affairs talk show *Q+A* titled ‘Polling, Policing, and Reporting’ (ABC, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018), lawyer and human rights advocate Nyadol Nyuon sits as one of five invited discussants. Accompanying her are Labor Shadow Minister for Justice Clare O’Neil, Liberal Minister for Citizen and Multicultural Affairs Alan Tudge, Victorian Police Commander Stuart Bateson, and *Herald Sun* crime reporter Andrew Rule. O’Neil, Bateson, Tudge, Rule, and episode host Virginia Trioli, are all white. Nyuon is the only person of colour participating in the panel, and one of only two women. Around 11 minutes into the episode, an audience member—a white man, aged in his fifties or sixties—asks the panel what can be done to fix “the related discipline and respect” problems amongst young people in Australia. “In my youth,” he says, “we had respect for police and did as we were told.” At around 46 minutes, another audience member—a young Black woman—asks a question about media double standards for African Australian youth. Why, she asks, are they “Australian” when they succeed and achieve, yet “African refugees” when they do “something negative”?

These two questions top-and-tail an extended discussion about the contested reality of so-called ‘African gang crime’ in the city of Melbourne, which dominates this particular episode of *Q+A*. Throughout this discussion, Tudge and Rule are the most insistent about the ‘reality’ of African gangs as a serious threat to public safety. O’Neil and Nyuon serve as detractors, directing blame for the narrative towards conservative politicians and the press (who Tudge and Rule represent, respectively). Bateson is more ambivalent. While insisting that there is a ‘real’ problem with youth criminality in the city, he resists Tudge and Rule’s account that a) the problem of ‘youth crime’ is a racialized one, disproportionately involving Black African young boys and men; and b) the police have lost control over the problem, precisely because they refuse to acknowledge its racialized character and refuse to act in a sufficiently coercive manner.



Figure 1: Trioli: “There are a series of truths sitting in this room tonight”. Nyadol Nyuon (second from right) appears on Q+A alongside (L-R) Stuart Bateson, Clare O’Neil, host Virginia Trioli, Alan Tudge, and Andrew Rule (ABC, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018)

Nyuon is herself a Black African woman, born in a refugee camp in Ethiopia after her family fled the Second Sudanese Civil War. In 2005—in the final stint of John Howard’s tenure as Prime Minister, and two years before the murder of Liep Gony—an 18-year-old Nyuon arrived and settled Australia with her family. In the context of this televised discussion about the ‘reality’ of Black African criminality, Nyuon is obviously positioned differently than her co-discussants: she is simultaneously an expert on (as a lawyer and human rights advocate) *and* a subject of (as a Black African refugee) the ‘African gang crime’ narrative. At several points during the discussion, Nyuon harnesses this different positioning in order to use testimony—and the experiential authenticity embedded in ordinary voice as a mode of claim-making—to offer alternative and disruptive accounts of the forms of vulnerability caught up in and around the ‘African gang crime’ narrative. She tells her co-discussants, the studio audience, and the viewing public:

**Nyadol Nyuon:** ...we've questioned whether we can be safe going to shopping centres. We've been made to feel like criminals, honestly. I give advice to my young brothers, who are very tall six-foot boys, because I'm afraid that the three of them walking together constitute a gang. I tell them to behave nicely. I tell them to dress nicely. I tell them to minimize their presence in public, because I'm afraid that, unfortunately, things can get really bad...

The categorical realism of Nyuon’s claim to vulnerability (that is, its appeal to human feeling) is grounded in the authenticity of lived experience and the ‘empiricism of emotion’ (Chouliarakis, 2010, p. 310). This is emphasized, for example, by the repetitive, sequential use of first-person pronouns and present-tense verbs (“I give”, “We question” “I tell them”) as well as testimonial expositions of internal emotional experiences (“I’m afraid”). Nyuon uses first-person testimony to

assert Black vulnerability to harm as a moral matter, as not only perceptually ‘real’ but also something that should figure within the moral politics of criminalization. The ‘evocative force’ (Kunelius & Renvall, 2010) of this intervention, however, is diluted by a strategy of textual composition I term *testimonial saturation*, wherein the testimonial interventions of those with the greatest lived proximity to ‘African gang crime’ events (and police responses to them) are drowned out by the testimonial interventions of institutional elites. Nyuon’s fellow panellists also draw on lifeworld accounts of social reality to authenticate their own claims about ‘African gang crime’, and the singularity of Nyuon’s standpoint within the context of the panel is subsequently obscured:

**Andrew Rule:** ...there were car-jackings, there were home invasions, there were serious things that did, for a while, 18 months ago, a year ago, become the subject of conversation everywhere I went. And everybody knew somebody who had had a brush with it, including me.

**Stuart Bateson:** I mean, when I started, 30 years ago, I think it was a little bit easier for front-line police and I look at our people today [...] they’re starting every working day by putting on a bulletproof vest. And it might be the day that they need it.

**Clare O’Neil:** I mean, the idea that people are afraid to go out to dinner. I actually drove down Thomas Street, Dandenong, before I arrived here [...] You will see hundreds of people on the street out there, they’re having a wonderful time and they’re not too afraid to go out.

Here, Rule and Bateson draw on first-person accounts of vulnerability *as lived* in order to assert the reality of violent crime as a real threat to public safety in Melbourne. O’Neil, on the other hand, draws on lived experience to articulate a counter-claim, about the *unreality* of the omnipresent danger that Rule asserts “everyone” has experienced. Consistent across these accounts, however, is their empirical foundation: an individual and subjective experience of the social environment, deployed to make claims about the ‘true’ character of social vulnerability within that environment. Saturation of this kind flattens the category of ‘lived experience’ as that which could and perhaps should set criminalized subjects epistemologically apart in the mediated reconstruction of crime events (Kunelius & Renvall, 2010). The ‘first-person account’ becomes not an extension of the practice of ‘bearing witness’ but, rather, a matter of aesthetic—a rhetorical device that deploys emotional and experiential forms of evidence to advance claims about vulnerability ‘as lived’,

available to *all* speakers, no matter their political positionality. In this way, testimonial saturation obscures disparities of power and experience between speakers by creating, through a shared style of claim-making, an illusion of equality and pluralism whilst simultaneously fortifying the authority of elite voices by articulating them with the authenticity of lived experience.

A second key mechanism of appropriation, observable across mediated (re)constructions of ‘African gang crime’ events, is *narrator adoption*. While testimonial saturation flattens experiential and political difference, narrator adoption *constructs* difference by using the authoritative voice of the journalist-narrator to imbue some lifeworld testimonies (but not others) with a sense of narrative authority. In other words, narrator adoption tactfully collapses categorical and perceptual realism, so that some accounts of lived vulnerability (but not others) are positioned as factually authoritative in the mediated (re)construction of crime events.

An episode of current affairs program *Sunday Night* entitled ‘African Gangs’ (Channel 7, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2018) provides an illustrative example. The episode is built around the testimony of a woman named Elaine. A white woman in her fifties or sixties, Elaine worked as a receptionist at a jewellery store in the upmarket Melbourne suburb of Toorak before an attempted robbery at the store left her traumatized and unable to work. The *Sunday Night* investigation into Black African youth crime reconstructs the ‘reality’ of this event through the prism of Elaine’s experience of it, empirically foregrounding her emotional state both during and after the robbery. However, Elaine’s feelings and experiences are not always articulated in Elaine’s own voice, as can be seen in the following illustrative fragments:

**Reporter:** ... she just loved working here...

**Reporter:** ... in just seconds, the job that had brought Elaine so much satisfaction became a place of fear and dread...

These fragments are presented on-screen as a voiceover narration, detached from the face and body of the journalist-narrator who articulates them. Here, we can observe the journalist-narrator *taking on* Elaine’s testimonial voice as his own. By speaking *as* Elaine, from her perspective, the reporter on *Sunday Night* blurs the intersubjective boundary between the two speakers through symbolic articulation: his own voice becomes infused with the affective authenticity of lived experience, while Elaine’s testimony of her own vulnerability takes on the authority of the journalistic voice and its implicit claim to perceptual objectivity. In this way, narrator adoption ‘appropriates’ the moral force of testimony by selectively authorizing some accounts of crime

events over others, and so presenting lifeworld testimonies are *differentially* subjective. It is striking that, across the texts analysed for this study, Black African testimonies of vulnerability were rarely presented in the journalistic voice, and so rarely positioned as ‘definitional’ evidence within the (re)construction of crime events. Narrator adoption can thus support ‘criminalizing’ representations by subtly constructing a hierarchy of authenticity between different subjects’ attempts to establish the reality of their vulnerability through testimony, thwarting opportunities for moral agonism and ideological dissonance.

### *b) Marginalization*

‘Marginalization’ is a strategy by which the voices of criminalized subjects can be officially ‘called into’ the mediation of ‘African gang crime’ as an eventful phenomenon and yet still ‘locked out’ from meaningful symbolic participation in the negotiation of its (moral) meaning. As discussed, the claim to authenticity that ordinary voice advances is grounded in the experiential and emotional proximity of speakers to news issues and events (Chouliaraki, 2010). ‘Proximity’, however, can be interpreted in a variety of ways by news editors. Commonly, it can mean spatial proximity as an eyewitness to events covered in the news (Zelizer, 2007). However, it can also be proximity that is intersubjectively rendered: proximity through identity, through historical experience, through emotional investment, or, as the analysis here finds, through racialization. Some ordinary voices are thus discursively authorized as “flesh witnesses” (Harari, 2009) to newsworthy events, while others can speak only as “symbol people” (Tuchman, 1980) who represent a category of person deemed relevant, by editors, to the story being told. Such speakers are ‘heard’ in the official sense, but struggle to access the authenticating force of ordinary voice through lifeworld testimony because they have no lived connection to the specific events being reconstructed.

The simplest form of marginalization works through the differential presentation of testimonies on screen. Consider, for example, the side-by-side images in Figures 2 and 3, both from the *Four Corners* episode ‘Crime and Panic’ (ABC, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018). The first shows a young white woman named Leah, recounting her experience of an attempted ‘home invasion’ robbery by a group of young Black African men while she and her boyfriend slept. A tight, sharp camera shot hovers on Leah’s face as she cries, her face contorting with the painful and potentially traumatic memory of that night. Even when Leah stops speaking, the camera lingers, capturing her closed eyes and deep, laboured breaths as their own form of evidence. The overall visual composition here emphasizes Leah’s emotional distress, inviting empathy and perhaps activating what Ruby Hamad has described as a historical impulse to “soothe white women’s emotional distress” (Hamad, 2019, p. 109; see also Accapadi, 2007; Srinivasan, 2021). Leah’s suffering, and

the forms of vulnerability to which it is narratively indexed, are constructed as morally wrong because they are rendered through the ostensibly universal language and aesthetics of pain (Chouliaraki, 2020, p. 9).



*Figure 2 (L) and Figure 3 (R): Leah recounts her experience of a ‘home invasion’ robbery, while Pronto recounts his experiences of everyday racism.*

In contrast, Figure 3 shows a young Black African man named Pronto offering his own testimonial account: this time, of his experiences of everyday prejudice, which he believes are the result of racial criminalization. He tells the interviewing journalist:

**Pronto:** I’m Black, I’m six-five, and I’m dark skinned, really dark skinned. You know what I mean? I’m really dark skinned. So, to other people who are not like me, I’m a threat. So, it’s hard for me to walk these streets sometimes, because when I try to walk these streets sometimes I’m seen as a threat. You know what I mean? I actually walk outside, go to a shop, try to buy something, and they look at me as a thief. Even though I have my money and my coins in my pocket. They still look at me as a Black thief.

The first thing to be said about Pronto’s testimony here is that, even with its minimal emotional exposition (“It’s hard for me... sometimes”), it is nonetheless an outlier within the sample of televisual accounts of ‘African gang crime’ analysed for this study. Most often, Black African voices are simply absent, and when present they are rarely afforded space to speak about the personal tolls of criminalization in emotional terms, as Pronto does. However, even when taken as an anomaly, there are clear and observable narrative and aesthetic disparities between Pronto’s testimony and the trope of the “victim testimony”, of which Leah’s is an indicative example. The visual presentation of his testimony does not emphasize emotional distress—his face remains calm, his tone measured and even. His testimony, in fact, allocates more time to describing the feelings and experience of people ‘not like him’—their sense of fear and suspicion when they encounter him in public space—rather than his own feelings about being racially stereotyped. And while Leah’s interview is recorded in her home and during the day, Pronto’s interview is recorded in a

shadowy music studio, following a clip of him recording a rap with a group of friends who are all also Black African men. This extends another pattern representation across the analysed texts: exclusively depicting Black African boys and men either at night (when in public) or in spaces that are socially coded as Black (when in private), and almost exclusively with each other. The result of these various differences is a *categorical* differentiation of Leah and Pronto's respective accounts of their own vulnerability, and so an uneven invitation to empathy and indignation. In other words, if victimhood is a (primarily) affective structure of communication that operates through the language of pain (Chouliaraki, 2021), then Leah and Pronto are not equally intelligible as victims. Pronto is heard, and perhaps the 'unfairness' of his experience is discernible—but he is not constructed as one who suffers, and so the form of vulnerability he describes is not presented as a matter of urgent moral concern. His vulnerability is an addendum to Leah's suffering, not the core of the moral problem at hand<sup>33</sup>.

A more complex form of marginalization occurs at the level of the overall narrative composition of the crime report as a televisual event form. In addition to crime victim Elaine, the *Sunday Night* episode 'African Gangs' incorporates the voice of a Sudanese music producer named Torit. Torit is a young Black African man with no lifeworld relationship with Elaine nor connection to the attempted robbery at her workplace. The underlying logic of Torit's inclusion in the episode is directly indexed to Elaine's testimony: specifically, her racialization of the men who tried to rob her store and her subsequent identification of anti-Black prejudice as a 'wound' inflicted on her through the robbery:

**Elaine:** Well I'm too nervy... too nervy. I mean, you know, I can't go to a shopping center because if I ran into a... a coloured person I'd be having a panic attack or ten [...] It's just... it's not easy, even going for a walk.

Throughout the episode, Torit uses first-person testimony to advance his own claims to vulnerability, including testifying to his experiences of war and of the criminal justice system. As in the case of Pronto's testimony, the emotionality of these testimonial interventions is limited. However, Torit's claims are also articulated under intense symbolic pressure, as his primary role in the overall narrative structure of the text (which focusses on Elaine's experience of the robbery and its subsequent effects on her quality of life) is that of a prop: a conjured embodiment of a fear that synonymizes criminal threat with the physicality of the Black male body (Smiley & Fakunle,

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<sup>33</sup> This reading is also supported by the differential placement of the two testimonies within the chronological composition of the text. Leah's testimony appears in the first five minutes, framing the narrative to come. Pronto, by contrast, speaks around half-way through the 45-minute episode.

2016). Torit here is less a ‘symbol person’ (Tuchman, 1980) than he is a proxy (Mulvin, 2021), called into the narrative not to represent a particular community or point-of-view (less still to represent himself) but rather a *specific person*—Elaine’s ‘attacker’<sup>34</sup>—to whom he is linked editorially (that is, proxified) only on the basis of racialized ‘sameness’.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 4: Torit and Elaine are brought together at the end of ‘African Gangs’. Torit removes his hat to greet Elaine, who appears reluctant to move closer towards him. (Channel 7, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2018)

This point is most clearly illustrated in the visual composition of the episode’s final scene (Figure 4), when Elaine and Torit are brought together in a staged ‘reconciliatory’ encounter. Though Torit and Elaine both offer testimonies of vulnerability throughout the episode, in this final scene they are clearly cast in opposing roles—Elaine, the threatened, and Torit, the threatening. Tight, close-up shots of Elaine’s face emphasize her emotional distress upon meeting Torit, inviting sympathy and imbuing her fearfulness (an emotional register of vulnerability) with a sense of categorical realism. Meanwhile, low-angle and wide-angle shots emphasize Torit’s height and physicality throughout the scene, as well as the visual contrast between his body and Elaine’s. This preoccupation with visual difference, and the symbolic synonymization of height with physical invulnerability, are common racializing tropes in Australian media representations of Black African men (Windle, 2008). Despite Torit’s testimonial interventions earlier in the episode, the sense of ideological realism fortified through this final scene is one that reinforces, rather than complicates or subverts, the dominant metanarrative of white vulnerability to Black violence (King, 2015). This

<sup>34</sup> I use the term ‘attacker’ here because this is how the man who robbed Elaine’s store is described in the episode, though it should be noted that Elaine was not physically assaulted at any point during the robbery.

<sup>35</sup> See Mulvin (2021) for an extended account of the politics of proxification and the forms of cultural work that go into, and emerge from, deciding which characteristics determine which people and objects are able to stand in (materially and representationally) for others.

is somewhat a *fait accompli*, given that the logic underpinning Torit's presence in the narrative at all is Elaine's synonymization of 'fear of crime' and 'fear of Blackness' in her own testimony.

As the underlying epistemology of this text, ordinary voice opens space for Torit to make testimonial claims to vulnerability, but limits the narrative realism of those claims precisely because the testimony he offers *does not and cannot pertain to the event being discussed*. He has no lifeworld connection to Elaine nor to the robbery, and so cannot discursively participate in the construction of meaning around this event through first-person testimony. As a consequence, Torit speaks about his experiences from a position of profound narrative marginality, neutralizing the possibility of his testimony disrupting or complicating the ideological realism of Elaine's self-perceived vulnerability to Black African violence, which she positions as a direct consequence of the robbery (and so ahistorical beyond this single piece of context). Through such narrative marginalization, criminalized subjects like Torit can thus be locked out of negotiating the political and moral significance of crime events, even as they are called into their mediated (re)construction on television.

### c) *Subjugation*

Testimonies can be incriminating as well as authenticating. While criminalized subjects may be granted space to testify within the mediated (re)construction of crime events on television, the presentation and placement of their testimonies within the text can redirect their symbolic potential—often, towards authenticating the felt vulnerability of *others* to criminal threat. This strategy, which I call 'subjugation', operates primarily through uneven forms of visual-verbal correspondence in the presentation of testimonies on screen.. As a technique of multi-vocal textual composition, subjugation reveals how the categorical and ideological realism of a testimony—and so, its moral potential and constructed relationship to justice—is contingent within its multi-modal presentation. Subjugation is thus an important mechanism by which televisual accounts of crime events bid for and secure ideological closure around the 'problem' of crime, despite the officially inclusive multi-vocality that demotic newsmaking cultivates.

The clearest way to demonstrate this point is to analyse testimonies in pairs, contrasting their visual authentication. Returning to *Sunday Night*, we can look at the following paired excerpts from Elaine and Torit:

**Elaine:** And he's pushed the gun here into my throat, and he's said if you don't move I'll kill you dead, so I thought oh I gotta act calm, and I stood up, walked towards the safe, and he had the gun then in my back...

**Elaine:** It's ruined my life. I don't have a life anymore. From being a very active woman, going to work, playing golf, going out and enjoying myself... I don't do any of that anymore.

**Torrit:** It's seeing bodies everywhere, you know, when you're young? Blood soaked, drenched clay, on the ground... people, animals too, you know, everything dying.

**Torrit:** When I came here, I thought I could just fight at school like back then... but nah, it was different. It was very new for us, there was like, culture shock, you know?

Elaine's account of her own vulnerability, both during and after the robbery, is authenticated visually using primarily indexical forms of visual-verbal correspondence. As she recounts her experience of the event, her words correspond visually on-screen with two different sets of footage: first, CCTV footage of the event itself; and second, a staged dramatic reenactment of the event, in which Elaine (played by an actor) is the central protagonist. As can be seen in Figures 5 and 6, these two sets of footage are styled to resemble one another (e.g. through matching clothing) and are not clearly distinguished by either editing (e.g. playing one after the other) or linguistic markers (e.g. labelling one as 'CCTV' and the other as a dramatic reenactment).



*Figures 5 & 6: CCTV footage of the robbery at Elaine's workplace (L); and a staged dramatic reenactment that is styled to match the CCTV footage (R)*

As Elaine's narrative moves forward, so too does the on-screen sequence of action; the CCTV reel and dramatic reenactment progress in tandem, interspersed with one another. These indexical forms of visual-verbal correspondence represent a strategic collapse of perceptual and categorical forms of realism, rendering the 'facts' of the event through the prism of Elaine's affective

experience and framing the question of the event's moral meaning in terms of its emotional resonance. Aesthetically, the text invites an affective identification with Elaine by evoking similar forms of emotional response to those she describes: as she recounts her fear, fearful music plays; as she describes her pain, tight close-ups bring that pain into focus as it moves across her face. Supplementary footage is also used strategically to authenticate as 'real' Elaine's perception of the outside world as a space of danger. As the narrator describes Elaine as a woman "broken" by a sense of fear (grounded in a factually 'real' vulnerability to criminal violence) a mid-distance shot (Figure 7) depicts Elaine peering nervously out the front door of her house while the camera hovers predatorially behind a nearby rosebush, watching her.



Figure 7: Elaine peers out her front door on *Sunday Night* (Channel 7, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2018)

Torit's claims to vulnerability are, by contrast, rarely authenticated in this manner. Instead, two key sets of footage are used to elaborate his testimony in the visual modality of the text. The first, seen in Figure 8, is (presumably) taken from the war in Sudan. Rather than indexically elaborating Torit's testimony through images of death or suffering, however, this footage foregrounds violence by focussing on generic images of death and destruction and the figure of the child soldier—young Black African boys and men with rifles slung across their backs. The second set of footage (Figure 9) is a music video which shows Torit rapping from inside a prison cell. The visual-verbal relationship between these images and Torit's testimony is not indexical, but iconic: the images serve not as evidence (either perceptual or affective) of Torit's specific experiences of vulnerability, but rather as icons of 'violence' and 'disorder' that symbolically articulate Torit's testimony with the categories of 'war' and 'crime' (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 163). The result of these iconic elaborations is that Torit's testimony, rather than authenticating his own vulnerability, instead authenticates *Elaine's* testimonial association of Blackness and danger by naturalizing that association in and through the multi-modal presentation of Torit's own testimony.



Figures 8 & 9: Generic images of war, guns, explosions, and anonymous death dominate the visual presentation of Torit's migration story (L); Torit, a music producer, is shown rapping inside an old-fashioned prison cell (R).

*Four Corners'* episode 'Crime and Panic' provides a more ambivalent example in the paired testimonies of Leah (who, like Elaine, typifies 'the victim'<sup>36</sup> in the reconstruction of 'African gang crime' events) and Martha, the mother of murdered South Sudanese teenager Liep Gony (see Chapter 2). Both Leah and Martha offer first-person testimonial accounts of different crime events, using the language of fear and suffering to authenticate the claims to vulnerability embedded within their accounts:

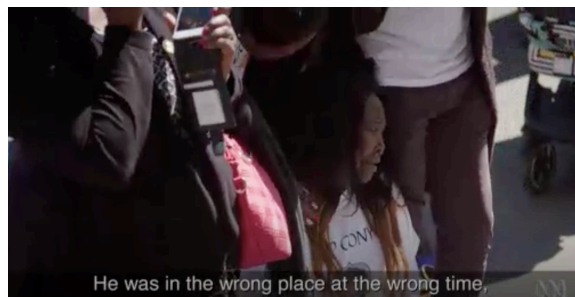
**Leah:** I just remember... just yelling at us... just screaming to give us money and... and Gavin got out of the bed and, um, physically pushed... we had two of them in the room, and he got up and physically pushed them out [...] I don't know how they can say that the crime rate is falling, because everyone I know doesn't – nobody feels safe.

**Martha:** They killed Liep because he was Black. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, he was the first Black person they found. I arrived and saw him getting lifted into the back of the ambulance. And we all rushed to hold him. His brother was trying to hold his legs and I was trying to hold him, but the paramedics pushed us back.

As with Elaine in *Sunday Night*, CCTV footage is used to authenticate Leah's claim to vulnerability through a symbolic collapse of perceptual and categorical realism. Martha's testimony, however, is elaborated iconically with footage of a community memorial and protest for Liep. In sharp

<sup>36</sup> While 'victims' appear in many guises across the analysed texts, it is obviously noteworthy that both Leah and Elaine, who serve as the central victims in *Four Corners* and *Sunday Night* respectively, are white women. The white woman as ideal crime victim is a well-established trope in both fictional and non-fictional crime media (see Sommers, 2016; Slakoff, 2018, 2020; Rosner, 2021). The trope articulates discourses of white innocence and discourses of feminine virtue and fragility to position white women as 'ideal' victims of (especially, racialized) crime – as those who it is easiest to feel for (and feel with) as 'truly' innocent, and so 'most' wronged. In turn, the trope agitates white patriarchal values around the protection/ownership of white women and their bodies in order to sexualize and criminalize (especially) Black men. For recent accounts of the longer history and politics of the 'white-woman-as-victim' trope, see Hamad (2019) and Phipps (2021).

contrast to the typical presentation of Black African testimony within televisual ‘African gang crime’ event forms, the footage accompanying Martha’s testimony is emotionally charged: we see Martha’s pain up-close as she recounts her final moments with her son, and friends and family weeping at his memorial, holding one another, their faces contorted in obvious anguish and distress (Figure 9 & 10). There is, if only momentarily, an evenness in the forms of categorical realism used to authenticate Black and white claims to vulnerability<sup>37</sup> through the language and aesthetics of suffering.



Figures 9 & 10: Martha cries as she recalls finding her dying son after he had been attacked (L), and people cry and comfort one another at a memorial for Liep (R).

But to what end, we should then ask, for *ideological* realism—for the relationship these two testimonies are placed in vis-à-vis the question of justice? While Leah’s testimony frames the episode, Martha’s appears at the end and serves narratively as an ‘afterword’; it speaks to and perhaps complicates the main text narrative (and its moral message) but nonetheless sits notably separate from it, additional rather than fundamental. As Windle (2008) has argued, the original misattribution of Liep’s death to ‘gang activity’ within Melbourne’s Black African communities distills a discourse in which Black African boys and men are associated with the ‘problem’ of rampant violent crime and disorder regardless of whether as perpetrators or victims. In this way, Martha’s suffering (and Liep’s death), though imbued with affective force, are ultimately narratively subjugated to authenticating *Leah’s* claim about the omnipresence of violent potential in Melbourne’s suburbs—that “nobody feels safe”. Her testimony is, in other words, narratively

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note here how substantively different the types of vulnerability being testified to by each of Leah and Martha are, and to clarify that even an ‘equitable’ symbolic presentation of their respective suffering would be ideologically forceful in this case. Leah was left afraid and potentially traumatized after a break in at her home, in which nothing was ultimately stolen, and no one was left with any physical injuries, lasting or otherwise. Martha’s son Liep, on the other hand, is dead – his life ended by a deliberate act of racist violence. Placing their testimonies side by side, as the episode of *Four Corners* does, implies a sense of equivalence that allows the viewer to misperceive the deeply disparate contexts of their respective suffering, and so the uneven conditions of vulnerability in which they live their lives.

repurposed to reinforce the ideological realism of an omnipresent and indiscriminate vulnerability to violence that is causally attributed to Black Africans as “problem group” (ibid.) in contemporary Australian life, inherently and disproportionately bound up in the ostensibly new ‘problem’ of violent crime.<sup>38</sup>

#### *d) Calculation*

Drawing on and articulating the three strategies discussed above, ‘calculation’ describes a strategy of ideological realism that orders different first-person accounts of lived vulnerability within crime news texts so that they appear in disparate relationships to the question of justice—that is, the question of vulnerability as a moral problem. Through calculation, intolerable forms of vulnerability are distinguished from the merely regrettable, and injustice is distinguished from mere misfortune. More specifically, calculation erects relationships of ideological tension between vulnerabilities in the plural in order not only to perform, but also to obscure, the symbolic work of moral differentiation. It subsequently functions as an important mechanism of mediated criminalization by creating a narrative space in which the vulnerability claims of criminalized subjects can be ‘heard’ and authenticated as perceptually and categorically ‘real’, yet simultaneously morally deprioritised in the overall *politics* of vulnerability that the text enacts (Cole, 2016; see also Chapters 3 and 4)

In televisual accounts of ‘African gang crime’, calculation can be found operating through a regime of representation that a) routinely obscures the uneven material conditions of different registers of vulnerability and vulnerable subjects; and b) invokes a zero-sum imaginary of safety, in which the possibility of *mutual* safety is symbolically obscured. These two elements are, of course, mutually reinforcing: the latter performs the work of moral differentiation at the level of text narrative, the former naturalizes through representation the ideological basis for that calculation, thus granting it cover from ordinary critique (Boltanski, 2011). Dependent as it is in both asserting *and* hiding itself, calculation works most effectively through the deployment of metaphor. In televisual forms of ‘African gang crime’ events, two forms of metaphorization stand out: the metaphorization of fear as *death*, and the metaphorization of fear as *incarceration*. As close textual analysis reveals, both these forms of metaphorization draw the testimonies of vulnerability articulated by (predominantly white) crime victims into competitive tension with those articulated by Black African subjects, ultimately fortifying the moral importance of the former at the expense of the latter.

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<sup>38</sup> This reading of the text is reinforced by the visual presence of police officers at Liep’s memorial, who are depicted watching over the mourners, as if in protection.

First, metaphors of death, destruction, breakage and discontinuity are deployed both linguistically and visually in the presentation of white testimony in order to position fear of crime as existentially threatening—that is, as a disruptive, even violent, challenge to the very continuation of human life, or at least life worth living. In this way, the ‘fearful’ crime victim—which I have proposed is representationally typified in the figures of Leah (*Four Corners*) and Elaine (*Sunday Night*)—is imbued with a sense of profound and morally intolerable loss: a ‘loss of life’ that stands in metaphorically for a loss of fearlessness, or *invulnerability* in an emotional register:

**Elaine:** I don’t have a life anymore. From being a very active woman, going to work, playing golf, going out and enjoying myself... I don’t do any of that anymore.

**Elaine:** Well I feel as though I am dead... just a shell of a person.

**Leah:** Every time I see a Black person down the street or just anywhere, it’s like a trigger. Before all of this happened, I wasn’t scared of Black people or people of color or whatever [...] but I can’t help but associate that night with them, and that’s what’s really unfair.

In these testimonies, the fear of encountering Black bodies in public space is framed as an injury, sustained through lifeworld experiences of crime victimization. For Elaine, this fear is an injury akin to death: she asserts that she *is* simply “dead”, that she “[doesn’t] have a life anymore”. On the other hand, Leah—who is also describing her anxiety about encountering Black African people in public space—places fearfulness at the core of what constitutes her as a ‘wronged’ subject (“that’s what’s *really* unfair”) and so at the foundation of her status as a victim. What both these testimonial excerpts (and their multi-modal presentation on-screen) emphasize, however, is the sense of *newness* that must be attached to fear in order to objectivize (and so, dehistoricize) it as a form of injury. We can see this, for example, in Elaine’s repeated use of the qualifier *anymore*, as well as in Leah’s assertion that “Before all this happened, I wasn’t scared”. The metaphorization of fear as (fatal) injury operates as a strategy of calculation by putting imaginative pressure on possibilities for restoration and renewal for fearful subjects, thus attaching a sense of moral intolerability to white subjects’ *self-perceived* vulnerability to future Black African crime, which is articulated in the language of fear. The possibility that such fear may have historical roots beyond the crime event in question—for example, in the longer history of anti-Black racism in Australian culture (Majavu, 2020)—is simultaneously elided.

Meanwhile, the metaphorization of fear as *incarcerating* works to imaginatively construct the vulnerability of ‘victimized’ white subjects and ‘criminalized’ Black African subjects in zero-sum

terms—specifically, by symbolically invoking the very same practices of protection/punishment associated with the criminal justice system to construct white victimhood. The spectre of the prison is invoked—again, both linguistically and visually—in order to leverage the moral status of the former (security *for*) to justify the use of coercive intervention against the latter (security *against*), fostering a sense of ideological closure around the moral ‘rightness’ of crime control practices despite the agonistic forms of vulnerability implicated therein. We have already seen an example of visual carceralism in this chapter in Figure 7: as Elaine peers out the front door of her home, we get the sense that she is trapped inside, unable to roam freely in public space for fear of whom she may encounter. The metaphor is more explicitly articulated, however, in the following testimonial excerpts:

**Unidentified Caller:** As a victim, what happens to us? They get rehabilitated, they get sent back out into the community. I’m living with a life sentence every day.

**Elaine:** I don’t have any life. These four walls is where I live.

The first of these testimonies is played on *Four Corners* as accompanying audio for a visual frame of a Melbourne public park, juxtaposing the caller’s metaphor of imprisonment with the openness of the park to invoke a zero-sum politics of space and movement. The unidentified caller employs a carceral metaphor (“I’m serving a life sentence”) to relativize the normative value of restorative, less-coercive justice practices (“they get rehabilitated, they get sent back out into the community”) against the demand for justice for “victims”, with the former positioned as coming at the direct expense of the latter. The ‘life sentence’ becomes an imaginatively immovable object—it must be served by someone, and so the question of justice simply becomes: *by whom?* Similarly, Elaine’s assertion of her own ‘imprisonment’ within her home (“These four walls is where I live”) draws on carceral symbolism to assert Elaine’s self-perceived vulnerability to harm as a form of injustice. More specifically, the metaphor invokes a zero-sum politics of movement that—in tandem with the naturalization of Elaine’s fear of Blackness as a form of injury—simultaneously calculates her ‘imprisonment’ within her home *directly against* the freedom of Black African subjects to move through public space undisturbed by the coercive and punitive institutions of the state. Elaine’s victimhood is, in other words, not calculated against the liberty of her attackers specifically but rather against the liberty of Black African subjects *in general*, establishing an ideological tension between a racially pluralistic Australia and Elaine’s *existential* need for a social environment that excludes Black bodies. With Elaine’s fear objectivized as a form of injury (for which the Black

African men who robbed her store are positioned as directly and exclusively responsible), this ideological tension is ultimately resolved in Elaine's favour.

### **Conclusion: Fearfulness, Woundedness, and 'Victimcould'**

Returning to the question of vulnerability as a moral condition, what can now be said about how the "wrongness" of different forms of openness to harm is negotiated in and through representations of 'African gang crime' events? This chapter has explored how televisual representations place first-person testimonial accounts of different forms of openness to harm in uneven symbolic relationships to the question of justice, routinely imbuing testimonies of white vulnerability—especially, white fear—with a moral intolerability that is just as routinely denied the testimonies of Black African subjects. More specifically, the analysis has explicated some of the specific strategies of categorical and ideological realism that work to negotiate the mutable "wrongness" of different testimonial accounts of vulnerability, both within the presentation of individual testimonies on-screen and across their calculative ordering within the overall narrative composition of televisual event forms. These analytical findings echo and affirm many of the critiques of "white victimhood" discussed in the opening of this chapter, as the wrongness of the various forms of vulnerability caught up in 'African gang crime' events is undeniably arbitrated by race. This is a mode of "moral calculus" (Burke, 2008, p.5) that can only retain (or, feign) moral coherence through the prism of political whiteness (HoSang, 2010; Phipps, 2020).

However, the analysis has also uncovered a symbolic politics of vulnerability that is subtly different from, and critically supplementary to, the paradigm of white victimhood that these authors critique. While white victimhood asserts itself primarily through claims to "woundedness" (Phipps, 2020, pp. 67–69), accounts of so-called 'African gang crime' deploy the language of suffering primarily in service of the categorical realism of *white fearfulness*, in turn positioned as 'wrong' through its metaphorization as injury. It is, in other words, the self-perceived *openness to injury* (rather than injury itself) that is imbued with moral intolerability through the aesthetics of pain, and so which positions white 'crime victims' as wronged subjects within these texts. The sense of loss upon which the articulation of white victimhood relies is indexed to an imagined future—but the thing 'lost' therein is not safety itself but the *sense of certain safety* (and so, historical control) that empowers the white subject to move into that future with ease and confidence. This is a victimhood that expresses itself in a subjunctive mood: a *victimcould*, where it is the very possibility of harm (rather than the fact, or even the likelihood) that positions its subjects as 'wronged'.

An important caveat is necessary at this point. My description Elaine and Leah as exemplary figures of ‘victimcould’ should not be interpreted as an attempt to minimize their personal suffering, nor to arbitrate whether their trauma should ‘count’ as injury. Can fearfulness be a legitimate political grievance? Can it testify to conditions of precarity and/or domination, and undermine the pursuit of a more just, peaceful, and equitable society? Surely, it can. And of course, to traumatize someone is to harm them. My intention here is not to diminish nor dismiss fear and/or trauma, but to call into question a discourse that collapses them together in order to divorce fearfulness from the question of historicity—that is, of *where fear comes from*. In the cases of Elaine and Leah, the distinction between fear (a social condition) and trauma (a psychological affliction) is strategically muddled in order to position fear *as* trauma, as an injury sustained through (and so, causally attributable to) lifeworld encounters with crime events and their actors. However, their fear is also racialized—it is Blackness specifically that they find frightening and (potentially) threatening. By positioning fearfulness as woundedness, victimcould obscures the historical conditions that give rise to the particularities of fear—in this case, the longer history of political whiteness and anti-Black racism in Australian culture. In this way, victimcould connects fear (of Blackness) not only with moral ‘wrongness’ but with historical innocence: fear becomes a wound, unjustly inflicted, for which Black African subjects are allocated exclusive moral responsibility.

‘Victimcould’ is not, therefore, so much a simple incitement to the fear of crime as it is an attempt to imbue fearfulness with a specific and narrow social meaning—one that obscures the role of politicians, the press, and the long history of institutionalized racism in its cultivation. However, victimcould is fragile and requires significant symbolic work for its maintenance. Appropriation, marginalization, subjugation, and calculation are textual strategies that help cohere the communicative structure of victimcould and grant it resilience the mediation of crime. There are inevitably others. What unifies these strategies, however, is not their form but their function: to limit opportunities for ideological dissonance around the ‘wrongness’ of white fear by eroding space for the kinds of testimonial encounter that might disrupt it (King, 2015, p. 92). The four strategies explicated in this chapter do this in a variety of ways: by muddling the political distinctions between different forms and registers of vulnerability; by metaphorizing white fear in order to symbolically inflate its moral stakes and place it in ideological tension with Black African freedoms; by limiting the categorical realism of Black African testimonies in order to blunt their affective force; by repurposing accounts of Black African suffering so that they authenticate white fearfulness; by keeping Black African subjects on the narrative margins of (re)constructed crime events; and by obscuring the forms of vulnerability and harm inflicted through criminalization in order to position crime control practices as ‘universally’ good and just, to list just some. Crucially,

testimonial news storytelling provides cover to these exclusionary strategies by masking them with conditions of ‘official’ inclusion: granting Black African subjects space to speak whilst simultaneously ensuring they are not heard, performing moral calculation in the ‘immediacy’ of representation whilst obscuring it through the ‘hypermediacy’ of institutionalized journalistic practices (Bolter & Grusin, 1999 see also Chapter 3).

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The previous chapter focussed on the ‘realness’ of crime, and how mediated representations of ‘African gang crime’ negotiate the reality of crime events (and the phenomenon they constitute) in ways that limit opportunities for historically discrete and/or desecuritized interpretations of their political significance. This chapter, however, has called into question the extent to which criminalization really hinges on the question of reality. The analysis has explicated a mediated imaginary of ‘African gang crime’ that we might describe as morally overdetermined: that is, in which reality as felt (categorical realism) supersedes reality as verified (perceptual realism) in the constructed moral ‘meaning’ of crime events, and so in which the ‘wrongness’ of white vulnerability to crime meaningfully overdetermines the question of its ‘realness’. Mediated criminalization—the reflexive pragmatic and moral justification of crime control practices, through acts of mediated representation—appears to be at least as significantly supported (if not more so) through the representational negotiation of a normative imaginary of *who should and should not be vulnerable* as through an imaginary of who is or is not.

However, having now explored the questions of ‘realness’ and ‘wrongness’ respectively, our picture of how criminalization works through news media remains partial and disjointed. A particular form of openness to harm being constructed as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ may lay the symbolic foundations for the pragmatic and moral justification of specific practices, but such practices are not automatically implied or predetermined. The many people who agree that our current climate crisis is both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’, for example, have profoundly different ideas about *how we should act* in response to this threat. And so, in the final instance, the ‘mediated security imaginary’ approach to criminalization requires investigating how a mediated politics of vulnerability helps position specific *practices* of crime control as necessary and/or effective (pragmatic justification), right and/or just (moral justification), vis-à-vis the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ problem of (in this case) ‘African gang crime’. How is it that some ways of acting on crime come to seem essential and inevitable, and others profoundly unimaginable? This is the third dimension

of my proposed analytics of mediated vulnerability politics, to which I turn in the next chapter: vulnerability as a practical epistemology of justification, or as a justificatory basis for action.

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## CHAPTER 7

# Mediating Justification: Policing, Vigilantism, Punitive Deportation, and the Question of Practice

### What Is to Be Done?

The analysis so far has explored how the journalism of crime events negotiates criminalization, in and through a mediated politics of vulnerability, across two key dimensions. In Chapter 5, the analysis focussed on how the “realness” of vulnerability to criminal threat is established through the intertextual construction of crime event spacetime, and especially through the varied imaginative invitations of photographic accounts. My concern here was with the negotiation of vulnerability as a *political* condition: vulnerability as a “real” openness to harm. Broadly, this chapter concluded that the “kaleidoscopic” visualization of crime events mediates so-called ‘African gang crime’ events as both historically significant and contextually expansive, limiting opportunities for discrete and/or desecuritized interpretations of their social and political significance. In Chapter 6, I shifted analytical focus towards the negotiation of vulnerability as a *moral* condition—that is, to the discursively constructed “wrongness” of different forms of vulnerability. This second empirical chapter explored how different testimonies of vulnerability are ordered and hierarchized within crime news storytelling so that they sit in uneven relationships to the question of (in)justice. Through this analysis, Chapter 6 developed a critique of some of the symbolic strategies by which (white) fear of crime is positioned as existentially threatening and morally intolerable, while vulnerabilities associated with migration, racial minoritization, and criminalization (among others) are simultaneously obscured, minimized, and calculatedly justified through a ‘zero-sum’ politics of vulnerability and (in)security.

These two strands—realness and wrongness—are the axes upon which vulnerability to harm—a formally universal condition—is differentiated in terms of social meaning. But why does the *meaning* of vulnerability matter, from the perspective of critical research? This is the question I want to return to in this final empirical chapter. My critical rationale for exploring criminalization in symbolic terms (see Chapters 2 and 3) has been grounded in an epistemological commitment to the significance of *representation* in the reflexive reproduction of contemporary social practices (see Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). What we do, I have argued, is irretrievably bound up in *why*

we do it, and “why” is a question that resolve in language. A mediated politics of vulnerability matters, in the final instance, because it helps engender certain conditions of possibility for social practice: opening up new imaginative prospects for being in and acting upon the social world, or, closing them down. And so, this chapter considers the third critical dimension of criminalization as a mediated politics of vulnerability: that is, vulnerability as a *practical epistemology of justification*, or as a justificatory basis for certain types of action. This is the dimension that connects the question of vulnerability to the legitimacy of different ways of acting upon it, and so helps manifest criminalization in deeply material ways: in bricks, bars, and borders, in police vans and jail cells, in poverty and punishment. How does a mediated politics of vulnerability negotiate a justificatory basis for different ways of *acting upon* openness to harm, for security-as-praxis? This is the question, derived from RQ1 and AQ3 (see Chapter 3), that frames this final empirical chapter.

The analysis in this chapter is essentially engaged in the task of symbolic deconstruction. It works backwards from a preliminary observation of *which* forms of practice are regularly invoked within the mediation of crime events to then examine *how* representation works to position these practices as both pragmatically and morally justified, in and through the symbolic politics of vulnerability that frames them. Returning briefly to my conceptual framework (see Chapter 3), I argued that the legitimate reproduction crime control practices is contingent in two key forms of justification: first, **pragmatic justification**, which relates to the *necessity* and/or *efficacy* of a given practice; and second, **moral justification**, which relates to the *rightness* and/or *justness* of a given practice. The first dimension of justification, I have proposed, is contingent in the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition, as “real” openness to harm. The second emerges from the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition, and so as “wrong” openness to harm. These forms of justification are fragile symbolic achievements, which in turn rely on the representational positioning of ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerabilities as their validating epistemological basis. The forthcoming analysis explicates some of the symbolic strategies through which these two key forms of justification are achieved—in turn, shedding light on how the construction of ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerability functions as a mechanism of epistemological validity for crime control practices within the security imaginary that mediated crime events help (re)produce.

Across the representations of ‘African gang crime’ events examined for this study, three forms of practical intervention regularly recur: policing and incarceration; citizen vigilantism; and punitive deportation and/or border control. Each of these forms of intervention is summoned into the mediated life of the crime event in the form of a specific narrative trope—the police officer; the (usually white, usually male) citizen vigilante; and the imagined figure of the Australian

national border. The analysis considers each of these tropes (and their attendant crime control practices) in turn, examining a) how their justificatory basis is established through the symbolic negotiation of ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerabilities; and b) the version of (in)security imaginatively invoked by each, and the social politics of vulnerability implied therein. This analysis is necessarily attuned to both the consistencies/continuities between these justificatory strategies as well as the points of tension and contradiction between them: the resiliencies of the mediated (in)security imaginary as it relates to ‘African gang crime’, but also its points of meaningful dissonance and so normative instability. My analytical aim is to better understand how a “background” mediated politics of vulnerability (as explicated in Chapters 5 and 6) works to resolve the reality of vulnerability in favour of certain “foregrounded” practices whilst simultaneously occluding the imaginability of other ways of making sense of and responding to the problems of precarity, injury, conflict, and harm in contemporary social life.

### **Policing: Heavy Hands, Light Touches**

The symbolic association between the category of ‘crime’ and the figure of the police officer is so historically sedimented that minimal justificatory work is required to position the latter as a potential ‘solution’ to the former. In a game of Pictionary, we might comfortably wager that someone trying to visually represent the word ‘crime’ would be just as likely to draw a police officer, a police car, or some other icon of policing (for example, handcuffs or a jail cell) as they would a criminal agent or act. The figure of the uniformed police officer, the cop car, even just a flickering red-and-blue light cast onto an otherwise banal scene, is sufficient to symbolically conjure criminality to where it may otherwise be absent. It is unsurprising, then, that within news stories about so-called ‘African gang crime’ events, the police are everywhere: stably positioned as key commentators (both as witnesses to events and as ‘expert’ analysts), lingering in the background of ‘morning after’ scenes as visual icons of since-passed criminal activities, and the centrepiece of most rhetorical appeals to action and/or intervention against the “real and wrong” problem of gang crime in Melbourne’s suburbs.

Almost every single textual form of an ‘African gang crime’ event examined for this study featured some iteration of the police officer trope. Close multi-modal analysis of the complete collection of texts listed in Appendix 2 uncovered three key strategies of justification that help position policing and incarceration—the practical interventions to which the police officer trope is indexed—as both pragmatically necessary/effective and morally right/just vis-à-vis the ‘problem’ of ‘African gang crime’ and the forms of social vulnerability it articulates. These are: a) forced perspective and ‘de facto’ proportionality; b) the ‘watching, waiting’ police officer; and c) a

discourse of anti-political correctness that invokes politically regressive forms of nostalgia. These strategies respectively fortify the symbolic justification of policing, in and through a representational politics of vulnerability, by a) symbolically reconfiguring the question of police “necessity”; b) eliding the question of police “efficacy”; and c) reframing police failure as a moral failure by positioning it within a historical narrative of decline. Rather than simply describing these justificatory strategies in general terms, I will explicate their workings and their significance for imaginative (in)security through granular, multi-modal analyses of specific acts of representation.

*a) Forced perspective and de facto proportionality*

“Melbourne Beach Violence” is a two-and-a-half-minute news clip from *The Today Show* (Channel 9, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2018) which reports on two crime events, and subsequent arrests, on Melbourne’s Chelsea beach the previous day. The first, earlier in the afternoon, is a physical brawl between “Turkish and Lebanese youth” allegedly sparked by an argument over the use of jet skis. The second, later that evening, is an imprecisely described incident involving youth “reported to be of African appearance”, which according to the report narrative saw “bags ransacked” (a loaded descriptor for petty theft) and a bottle thrown at the head of one bystander. These are, essentially, different crime events, distinct in terms of the groups of people reportedly involved but connected by spatial proximity to one another on Chelsea Beach and temporal proximity on the same day. Only one of these two events—the first, involving “Turkish and Lebanese” youth—is represented through a first-person account: a shaky, hand-held video of the brawl, presumably recorded with a mobile phone. However, it is the second event involving “youth reported to be of African appearance” that is positioned as *the* event at the centre of the report, with the other simply a prelude. In lieu of a primary account, the report relies linguistically on a second-hand recounting of the event by the presenting journalist and on “morning after” testimonies from local residents—all of whom are white—which contextualize the event within a broader pattern of youth conflict and disruption on the beach. Visually, the report relies on a few repeated motifs: the handheld footage of the earlier brawl; banal scenes of beachgoers relaxing on the beach as police officers comb through the crowds; and footage of a man being wrestled to the ground by a group of police officers, presumably during an arrest. The only people clearly “of African appearance” (a veiled way of emphasizing Blackness while sidestepping a direct narrative confrontation race) who appear at any time on-screen are two young women walking together, smiling, across the crowded beach, backdropped (perhaps unknowingly) by six uniformed police officers (see Figure 1, below).



Figure 1: Two young women walk across Chelsea beach, flanked by uniformed police officers (The Today Show, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2018)

Like the Distant After/Distant Before image type discussed in Chapter 4, Figure 1 articulates an ambiguous temporality vis-à-vis the criminal rupture at the centre of the narrative. The accompanying caption reports that “police will ramp up patrols over the coming weekend”, and so it is not made explicit whether the police patrol captured by this image is in anticipation of or reaction to the criminality in question. This narrative ambiguity, however, offers a vivid illustration of how the metonymic visual relationship between the figure of ‘the police officer’ and the category of ‘crime’ can allow the practice of policing to serve as its own justification. Just as the category of crime imaginatively justifies the presence of police officers, the visual spectacle of policing evokes and summons the category of crime into scenes otherwise disconnected from criminal rupture. A historically sedimented symbolic association, in other words, helps symbolically construct policed spaces as *de facto* sites of criminal potential, and so policing *itself* is positioned as a surface trace of insecurity and disorder, as its own self-referential mandate for action. The two walking women, and the beach, are joined up with the problem of criminal disorder through the iconographic significance of the dark blue police uniform, which stands out visually by jarring uncomfortably with the exposed flesh and summery attire of the surrounding beachgoers.

This metonymic reflex supports the pragmatic justification of policing by symbolically insulating the question of *necessity* from disruptive critique. On the pragmatic axis of justification, necessity is ultimately a question of proportionality and fit: whether an intervening practice ‘matches’ a given condition of vulnerability in a way that seems roughly symmetrical, and so pragmatically justifiable. In “Melbourne Beach Violence”, however, the question of proportionality is profoundly reconfigured. With the multiplied figure of the police officer standing in metonymically for the crime rupture at the centre of the report (and the problem of

vulnerability it purportedly evidences), the question of necessity lacks an external epistemological referent (i.e., a representation of criminal agency) and proportionality becomes a forgone conclusion. Consequently, opportunities for an ordinary critique of *disproportionate* police intervention are elided. In serving as its own necessitating referent, the scale of policing on the beach is positioned as evidence of the scale of the problem to be addressed. This sense of de facto proportionality is reinforced linguistically by the reporting journalist, who articulates a direct causal relationship between crime and policing when he remarks that “...*police will be **swarming** at Melbourne’s most popular beaches **as a result** of this.*”

De facto proportionality also performs justificatory work vis-à-vis the question of necessity when police officers are represented acting upon criminalized people. In one brief clip, repeated twice in this two-minute report, a lone man is seen being pinned to the ground and handcuffed by a large group of police officers (Figure 2). The spectacle of the arrest opens a (potential) opportunity for the symbolic disruption of pragmatic justification. The man is clearly outnumbered: he is alone, his bare skin exposed to the hard concrete, while the seven or eight armed officers, clad head-to-toe in dark blue, work collectively to force his body onto the pavement. The image captures profoundly asymmetrical conditions of agency and embodied vulnerability between the man and the arresting officers, and so articulates a potentially delegitimizing claim about disproportional and so perhaps unnecessary use of force. However, the metonymy of the police officer trope, reinforced linguistically in the narration that accompanies the presentation of this scene, redirects this symbolic potential. As the clip reappears twice on-screen, the journalist-narrator elaborates:

**First appearance:** “A group of teenagers believed to be of African appearance ransacked bags on the beach... they then attacked five people, including a man who was just sitting on the sand...”

**Second appearance:** “... they [police officers] will also be conducting random weapons searches among beachgoers, locals are calling for more CCTV in the problem areas...”



Figure 2: A man is wrestled to the ground by a group of uniformed police officers (The Today Show, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2018)

In terms of visual-verbal correspondence, the image works symbolically rather than indexically: it visually elaborates a linguistic account of *criminal* violence rather than evidencing the specific arrest it captures, which is not explained or even mentioned during the report narration. The arrested man—a proxy prototype for the ‘criminal’ agents at the centre of the narrative—thus finds himself in a position where the violent force used against him is positioned as corroborating evidence of his own violence and forcefulness, where eight police officers become the measure of *his* threateningness rather than the measure of the threat against him. This justificatory effect is reinforced in the second instance of the scene’s presentation through a reference to “random weapons searches”. No weapons are reported to have been used in either the ‘brawl’ nor the ‘ransacking’ events covered by the report, and yet the possibility of weaponry—invoked right at the very moment the arresting officers wrestle the man to the ground—intensifies the sense of threat attached to the event and so to the spectacle of arrest. A practice that could seem disproportionate becomes seemingly proportionate—and so, pragmatically justifiable—by comparing it to something else entirely: the spectre of hypothetical future violence. This sense of forced perspective closes down opportunities for the critique of ‘heavy handed’ police practices in the present against the premediated futures they are supposed to be holding at bay.

*b) Watching, waiting: on lines, thinness, and the promise of protection*

The second core element of reflexive pragmatic justification, in addition to the question of necessity, is the question of *efficacy*. Here, policing finds itself on perpetually unstable ground. This is so for (at least) two key reasons. First, policing (as an enactment of the logic of security) inevitably creates the very thing it is reflexively positioned as addressing: different kinds of

openness to harm. Second, and relatedly, contemporary policing is beleaguered by a core contradiction of pragmatic purpose. As a primarily reactive practice, it is generally unsuited to addressing the most important drivers for violence and injustice and so is poorly equipped to ‘prevent’ social harm in any meaningful sense (see Vitale, 2017). However, crime prevention and ‘safety’ are the justificatory imperatives behind many calls for police expansionism; it is primarily through a *discourse of protection*—articulating claims to order and community welfare rather than simply (retroactive) justice and punishment—that the reflexive justification of contemporary policing tends to be reproduced (see Manning, 1997).

In “Melbourne Beach Violence” a white woman stands on Chelsea beach, giving a citizen vox pop interview to the reporting journalist. She tells him: “*It’s not good enough... I think there has to be **more police** presence and people have **to be protected**.*” However, the woman does not engage the question of efficacy by elaborating on *what* police should be doing or *how* their actions might function protectively. Here and elsewhere, it is the *moral importance* of protection that is positioned as the justificatory basis for police intervention in ‘African gang crime’, over and above a *pragmatic* account of how such protection might be ‘effectively’ realized. The moral importance of protective police power, in other words, overdetermines the question of the actual forms (and limits) of police agency. Euphemistic verbs like “*cracking down*”, being “*all over it*”, or simply “*acting*”, are routinely used to describe the practice of policing, but the specific forms of (actual or hypothetical) practice implicated by these idioms are rarely spelled out—and so, rarely laid bare for critical scrutiny. In the vox-pop quote above, a normative moral condemnation frames the call for police intervention (“*it’s not good enough*”) while a pragmatic mandate—one which equates ‘more police’ with ‘more protection’—is implied but not explained. Indeed, the actual mechanics of ‘protective policing’ are observable only as a key silence across the discourse of protection (Gill, 1996), with moral justification (i.e. ‘vulnerability is unacceptable’) eclipsing pragmatic justification (i.e. ‘vulnerability is reducible by these specific means’) at every turn.

Efficacy, then, is an unanswered question that representations of policing-as-protection must resolve, distract from, or symbolically reconfigure in order for a sense of pragmatic justification to be maintained. In representations of ‘African gang crime’ events, the efficacy of police protection is imaginatively elided through the figure of what I call the “watching, waiting” police officer. Images of police officers show them standing about, watching, waiting for something to happen, or else reacting to an event long after its moment of rupture. Inanimate icons of the police institution serve as visual backdrops for scenes of unfolding violence—in Figure 3, young people brawl in the street while an unmanned police car sits inertly behind them. Accompanying headlines and captions describe the police as “caught off guard” and “mocked”, emphasizing the agency of

African youth who “rampage” and “riot” while police officers simply “watch”. The dominant rendering of police agency, in other words, emphasizes inertia, intransitivity, and incapacity. These forms of visual and linguistic intransitivity contrast sharply with the iconic images of militarized policing often associated with protest photojournalism, which visually foreground the physical invulnerability and disproportionate power of police and military agents vis-à-vis the citizen in order to communicate efficacy (see Edrington & Gallagher, 2019; Hubbert, 2014).



*Figure 3: Police cars backdrop a scene of unfolding violence (Herald Sun, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016)*

To understand how the “watching, waiting” police officer trope elides the question of efficacy in the pragmatic justification of policing, we can situate it within the context of an imaginative paradigm of protective policing often referred to as the “thin blue line”. This popular metaphor positions the police institution as an essential and (always temporarily) effectual defence against (otherwise inevitable) societal decline, continually invested in “the invention of the human through a civilizing and exterminating war against beasts” (Wall, 2020). Vulnerability to violence is therein framed as a basic, inalienable condition of human existence—common amongst all people, and yet variable in as much as different groups of subjects are positioned at different degrees of proximity or distance from the ideal of ‘civilized’ life. This imaginary engages essentialist discourses of human nature, positioning “violent crime” as an inevitable condition of the social if not for the thin coercive shield that policing ostensibly provides.

Tracing the “thin blue line” through media representations of ‘African gang crime’ reveals its decidedly racist inflections and logics, with Blackness (through its routine symbolic articulation with criminality) positioned as a ‘decivilizing’ force against which police officers are tasked with protecting society ‘at large’, which is in turn routinely represented through the figure of the white

citizen and so naturalized as ‘not Black’. Animalistic metaphors, for example, frequently describe African youth as “*predators*”, “*prowling*” or “*stalking*” the Melbourne streets and “*waiting to pounce*”, deploying the same racializing discourses of ‘civilization’ which have historically framed colonial projects to position Black African youth as being more primitive—and so, more ‘of’ (violent) nature—than their white Australian-born counterparts (see Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020; Mills, 1997). Such an imaginary positions policing-as-solution vis-à-vis a version of crime-as-problem in which ‘crime’ is the surface trace of a society in decline, and in which Blackness is specifically represented as a disruptive, even *corruptive*, force in the fragile balance of social harmony.

In terms of pragmatic justification, the “thin blue line” imaginary of policing-as-protection insulates the question of efficacy in a similar way to the logic of ‘victimcould’ discussed in the previous chapter: that is, by deferring its arbitration to an as-yet-unarrived, and officially imaginary, future. This is the anarchic and violent future that the “watching” police officer is “waiting” for. However, rather than clarifying the actual form of the “blue line” itself—that is, the kinds of practice that constitute the barrier that policing is supposed to maintain between a fragile present and a morally intolerable future—the ‘watching, waiting’ police officer trope instead represents an iterative symbolic preoccupation with its “thinness”. As Tyler Wall (2020) writes:

“[The “thin blue line”] marks less the back-and-forth patrolling between norm and expectation than it marks the police as always in constant crisis, under threat, inevitably insecure if ultimately triumphant. The implication is that the “thinness” of the line marks not a temporary crisis, a momentary emergency, or a state of exception. Rather, the *normal* condition of the line is one of continuous insecurity and instability, and it is this *ordinary emergency* that provides the alibi for everything police do, have done in the past, and will do in the future.” (Wall, 2020, p. 324; citing Wall, 2016; emphasis in original).

Put differently, the ‘watching, waiting’ police officer trope evokes an imaginary of “continuous insecurity and instability” (ibid.) by functioning not as a representation of the “thin blue line” working, but rather, *failing*. This “thin” imaginary of police protection is one which symbolically recasts the manifest failures of policing as proof of its continued necessity and moral legitimacy. In terms of the efficacy dimension of pragmatic justification, the trope shields the concept of ‘protective policing’ from critique by imaginatively marginalizing the question of action: the moral stakes of ‘protection’ symbolically overdetermine the *pragmatic* question of its actual form. A temporally and spatially expansive construction of ‘African gang crime’ (as discussed in Chapter 4) supports this kind of (in)security imaginary, in which the spectacle of public violence is expanding

and engulfing everyday spaces and realities—an intolerable future screaming into the present as the fragile dam of police protection gives way. Rather than opening opportunities for critique of ‘the line’, then, the impulse becomes to fortify it—to make it stronger, tougher, less permeable, more able to resist the sheer force of violent criminality that builds constantly at the margins of ‘civilized’ life, always ‘almost here’. A trope that *could* support an ordinary critique of the practical legitimacy of policing-as-protection (specifically, its efficacy) instead fortifies its access to *moral* justification by obscuring its coercive moment and casting police officers as inert frontline victims of an encroaching, powerful tide of social chaos.

c) *Anti-political correctness and regressive nostalgia*

A third key strategy that helps position policing as a pragmatically and morally justified response to ‘African gang crimes’ is a *discourse of anti-political correctness*, which in turn evokes an imaginary of (in)security grounded in regressive forms of social nostalgia. While representations of ‘successful’ policing-as-protection are largely absent from the accounts of ‘African gang crime’ events analysed for this study, the continued *possibility* of police protection is routinely invoked. Police failure is routinely cast as (culturally) circumstantial, rather than (practically) definitional. More specifically, a discourse of *anti-political correctness* is routinely deployed to cast police failure as a surface trace of a ‘society gone soft’ and police themselves as victims of a muzzling social idealism. We can observe this discourse in the following quote, which is offered to a reporter by a retired police official as part of an episode of *A Current Affair* titled “Law and Order Anger” (20<sup>th</sup> September 2018):

“We seem to have **a new form** of policing where we don’t actually arrest anyone when they’re committing offences, we **try and scramble** around and find them **afterwards**. **Obviously**, it’s not working.”

The interviewee’s characterization of current (ostensibly, failing) policing methods as “*new*” sets up a clear imaginative contrast between the present—in which police are unable or unwilling to “*actually arrest anyone when they’re committing offence*”—and the past, when the interviewee implies that catching criminalized actors *in* the act (rather than “*afterwards*”) would have been more likely. Further, the use of the verbs “*try*” and “*scramble*” to represent police agency reinforces the trope of the ‘watching, waiting’ police officer, discussed above, as a symbol of police disempowerment and incapacity. Finally, there is an evaluation at the end of the narrative, which declares that this “new” approach (namely, ‘trying’ and ‘scrambling’) is “*obviously... not working*”. The use of the word “*obviously*” communicates to the viewer that the evaluation—“*it’s not working*”—is so self-evident

that it does not require substantiation within the narrative itself. The cumulative effect of this short narrative construction is to imply that the protective and punitive agency of the police institution has *declined*—and by extension, that intensifications of police capacity (particularly, their capacity to act pre-emptively) would be simply *restorations* to previous standards, rather than expansions. This yearning for restoration to a more empowered past is a form of regressive nostalgia which positions crime—and policing’s failure to prevent it—as an inessential product of history, of cultural circumstance.

Specifically, it is *political correctness* that is repeatedly positioned as the cultural circumstance ‘thinning’ the protective capacities of the police institutions and blunting their efficacy as a protective and/or preventative institution. The above quote from the retired police commissioner captures the first key element of this discourse: the idea that police institutions have been ‘declawed’ by a societal recoiling from the use of physical force. Here, policing is positioned as a failed practice, but not for its own (lack of) merits. Rather, violent crime persists because police officers are discouraged from reproducing the definitional feature of their practice: the legitimate use of violent force. The second key element of this discourse homes in on the question of race: specifically, by implying that cultural anti-racism weaponizes Blackness to *shield* criminality from police intervention and, in so doing, victimizes the ‘everyday’ citizen, who is naturalized as ‘not Black’. This second element of the justificatory discourse performs a “victim-perpetrator flip” (Wodak, 2015) by implying that Black African youth possess *exceptional* invulnerability to the police institution in a culture newly sensitized—*oversensitized*, the discourse posits—to anti-Black racism. We can see this second element of the discourse deployed in the following two excerpts, one from politician Alan Tudge in “Polling, Policing and Reporting” (Q+A, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2018) and the other an exchange between the reporting journalist and a police official in “Law and Order Anger”:

**Tudge:** “...I think the media’s very careful about it and in fact leans over backwards, as do senior police, to be very diplomatic and not to use descriptors. Sometimes it **becomes ridiculous**, so that it’s clear that an **accurate** description would be to say, ‘a 6-foot-4-inches guy of **whatever colour**’, or whatever it might be, would be **an accurate way to describe an offender**, and in fact the media tends **to duck and to dodge it** and just say an offender, a male.”

**Reporter 1 [as voiceover narration]:** “To the shock of locals, no one was arrested that night...”

**Reporter 2 [to Police Official]:** “Now, you’re saying there’s no such thing as a ‘no-arrest policy’...”

**Police Official:** “Absolutely. We’ve seen 700 arrests since March.”

In the first excerpt, a preoccupation with “accuracy” speaks to the question of perceptual reality, implying that a politically correct media and senior police management are ‘dodging’ and ‘ducking’ the reality of a crime problem that is *specifically* Black. In the second excerpt, the apparent contradiction between a rumoured “*no arrest policy*” for Black African youth and the figure of “700 arrests” places the latter in the context of the former to suggest that 700 arrests [of Black African youth] is potentially only a small portion of the number that would have been made if not for police leniency. In both instances, a discourse of anti-political correctness positions vulnerability to crime as a consequence of a police institution either unable or unwilling to confront the ‘reality’ of white vulnerability to Black violence (King, 2015). The result is a symbolically fortified sense of pragmatic justification around the practice of policing and an eroded discursive space upon which to coherently articulate counterclaims about the *needlessness* or *inefficacy* of police intervention, as the foundations for such counterclaims—the easy disputability of widespread ‘Black African violence’ and easy demonstrability of police failure—are pre-emptively recast as political (mis)representations, rather than simple empirical facts.

\*

The three justificatory strategies discussed above explicitly position policing as a failing practice vis-à-vis the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ problem of ‘African gang crime’—but crucially, not on its own lack of merits. Rather, these strategies evoke—and are, in turn, supported by—an imaginary in which violence crime persists precisely because police officers are discouraged from harnessing violence and physical coercion as the key features that definitionally separate ‘policing’ from other public services. Police are thus constructed as having both “heavy hands” (a legitimate capacity for coercive force and a justificatory basis to use it) *and* “light touches” (a failure to be sufficiently forceful in the context of a ‘society gone soft’). I propose that opportunities for ordinary critique of policing are closed down through the discursive management of this key contradiction: in which the ‘explosion’ of violent crime events can simultaneously serve as evidence of *both* the failure of policing to prevent violence *and* the need to culturally re-invest in policing as a violence-prevention practice. The failures of coercive and punitive crime control interventions are repurposed as

evidence of their indispensability, in a cyclical justificatory reflex that limits the imaginability of alternatives.

## **Vigilantism: Vulnerable Menaces and Menacing Vulnerabilities**

The vacuum of action that the figure of the ‘watching, waiting’ police officer creates, the figure of the citizen vigilante fills. Across news reports about ‘African gang crime’, the vigilante recurs as a narrative trope: almost always white and male, he is a citizen who has been moved (or “forced”) to “take matters into his own hands” in the absence of meaningful protective action on the part of police and the state. The figure of the vigilante is animated by an ambivalent politics of vulnerability in which he is positioned as both a victim of intolerable vulnerability *to* violence and a potential agent *of* violence—simultaneously both a security subject and a security threat. Far from contradictory, this ambivalent positioning helps reproduce the same imaginary basis for the pragmatic justification which informs policing (discussed above), whilst making stronger overtures to moral justification by narratively invoking, and then symbolically appropriating, the spectre of Black injury and/or death.

### *a) Calculated ambivalence: the vigilante as security threat/ subject*

An episode of *A Current Affair* entitled “Guns for Hire” (29<sup>th</sup> January 2019) introduces us to a man named Frank, who lives in a house with his girlfriend, Jayde, adjacent to Chelsea Beach in Melbourne’s south-east. White, tattooed, and in his forties or fifties, Frank is positioned as an ‘average’ lower-middle-class citizen, not particularly wealthy or from an affluent suburb. However, the report tells that following a “*dramatic confrontation*” with a group of African youth outside his house (also covered by the earlier *Nine News* report “Beach Brawl” and the *Seven News* report “Boiling Over”, both circa 7<sup>th</sup> December 2018) Frank has hired two guards, armed with handguns, to patrol the perimeter of his property at significant personal expense—\$1,000 AUD per day, per guard. The crime event at the centre of the report—the “*dramatic confrontation*”—is mediated using CCTV footage, which shows Frank and Jayde arguing in the laneway behind their home with a group of four or five teenagers, several of whom are Black. At one point, Jade threatens the teenagers with a baseball bat. Later, the narrator tells the audience that the teenagers threw furniture and glass bottles over the wall of Frank’s house while he and Jayde ate dinner in their backyard. According to the reporting in “Beach Brawl”, the confrontation was precipitated by some of the teenagers—who use the alleyway behind Frank’s house as a thoroughfare to Chelsea Beach—sitting on Frank’s parked car.

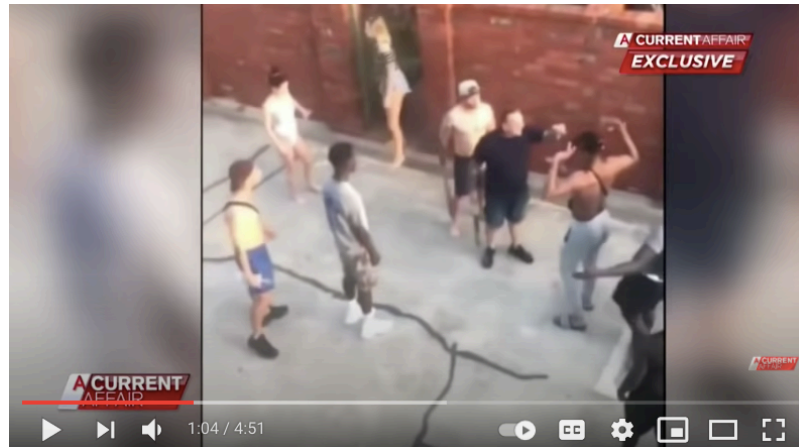


Figure 4: CCTV footage of the confrontation between Frank and the teenagers (A Current Affair, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2019)

In terms of pragmatic justification, the figure of the vigilante harnesses, and so deploys, a similarly anarchic (in)security imaginary to that of the ‘protective’ police officer—one in which violent social decline and disarray are inevitable, even essential conditions of contemporary Australian life if not for those willing to resist social idealism and confront an (intolerably) violent reality with a (righteously) violent response. However, the vigilante occupies an ambivalent position within this imaginary as both a security *subject* (the ‘for whom’ of security practice) and a security *threat* (the ‘against whom’ of security practice). In this way, the citizen vigilante trope is a striking example of what Wodak (2015) calls “calculated ambivalence”, positioning vigilante violence as both morally intolerable (in its net contribution to ‘violence’ as a generalized social condition) *and* morally righteous (as a response to the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerability of white citizens to Black African violence). While the pragmatic justification of the vigilante’s actions depends on the (constructed) perceptual realism of the social context to which he responds (i.e., ‘African gang crime’), moral justification is delicately balanced on the *normative* ambivalence of vigilante violence. This in turn relies on justificatory strategies that arbitrate and ultimately differentiate the figure of the (white) vigilante from the figure of the (Black African) criminal. Without such symbolic maintenance, the ambivalent status of the vigilante as security threat/subject would struggle to maintain coherence, and the moral justification of vigilantism would falter.

One key strategy that helps cohere and maintain the ambivalent figure of the citizen vigilante (by distinguishing him from ‘the criminal’) works through the differential construction of *complex historicity*. Across news accounts of ‘African gang crime’ events, the figure of the citizen vigilante is always given space to speak, to elaborate on his fears, his anger, and his motivations. His actions—including those involving physical violence—are always located within the context of both his own lived experience (through testimony) and of the crime event(s) to which he responds (through multi-modal event construction and narration). In “Beach Violence” and

“Guns for Hire” it is physical vulnerability and personal disempowerment that are positioned as the *moral* basis for Frank’s decision to take up arms against the youths outside his house. As Frank testifies to these conditions, and multi-modal presentation of testimony on screen imbues them with perceptual and categorical realism: we see images of broken bottles and toppled furniture; an image of a small bruise on Jayde’s elbow; CCTV footage of a verbal confrontation scored with tense, dramatic music, suggesting escalating tension. While it might be said that Frank’s decision to hire armed guards to patrol his home has *introduced* the possibility of lethal violence to his neighbourhood, Jayde asserts that the stakes of the conflict were already existential when she says: “they’re telling us they’re going to kill us... you know, really, really vulgar things.” This self-perceived sense of existential danger is later reinforced by the reporting journalist (who repeats that the pair “*feared for their lives*”) and the hired armed guard (who tells the journalist that people in the neighbourhood are “*scared to death*”). These forms of complex historicity support the moral justification of Frank’s actions by a) enforcing the perceptual realism of his sense of vulnerability to violence; and b) differentiating his actions, in terms of ideological realism, from those of Black African youth in terms of their status as (respectively) ‘defence’ and ‘aggression’, ‘reaction’ and ‘instigation’.



Figure 5: Front Page and Page 6, Herald Sun (29/01/2019)

A more explicit example of this strategy can be seen in Figure 5 (above): a *Herald Sun* report about a group of teenage vigilantes—again, all male and white—targeting Black African youth at a local

bus stop. The report is accompanied (in the top-right of the two-page spread) by an interview with one of the vigilantes and his father. In the form of a 14-year-old boy named Xavier, the white vigilante is given a name, a face, a family, a story, desires, losses, fears—all of which are denied to the young African boys and men being targeted by Xavier and his friends. The by-line describes “vigilantes menacing youths”, seemingly subjecting the vigilante to moral condemnation by clearly positioning him as a security threat. However, moral ambivalence is subsequently reasserted by allocating a significant portion of the article narrative to elaborating two specific dimensions of the (constructed) historical context of this ‘menacing’ event: first, a robbery at the same bus station the previous day during which “up to 20” people including two young men “of African appearance” stole a phone and a necklace from Xavier; and second, the “ongoing concern” over a “string of violent crimes” involving African youth, which has led to racialized “friction in the community.” Both these elements of constructed context ultimately foreground the actions of Black African youth as the original, precipitating force behind the “alarming escalation” of violence that the reported event is positioned narratively as being representative of.

By contrast, the actions of the Black African teenagers involved in this (and other) crime events are placed in a vacuum of meaning and motivation. We usually do not know, and are not invited to care, who they are, what they want, or how they feel. Jayde tells the camera that the teenagers “*come in numbers and are just so angry*”; the adverb “just” strips this anger of possible connections to past events or circumstances, and the viewer is not invited to wonder *why* these teenagers might have been angry, or why they might have congregated around Frank’s house in particular. Their (reported) anger is presented as causeless, meaningless, even mindless. The adverb performs similar grammatical yet opposite narrative work when used by Frank to describe himself as “*just an ordinary bloke*”; questions about Frank’s own background and/or motivations for taking up arms against Black African teenagers are eschewed, and the vigilante is moved into a purely reactive positionality. In this way, selective and uneven historicization operates as a strategy of moral de-responsibilization, insisting that vigilante violence should be morally interpreted only within the context of the (alleged) criminality of Black African youth—and not, for example, within the longer history of racism and anti-immigration sentiments in Australian society and culture. By denying complex historicity to the “anger” of Black African youth, the report also deploys pernicious racist tropes, positioning race as that which distinguishes ‘civilized’ from ‘uncivilized’ violences. Frank’s aggression is presented as a reasoned (if perhaps excessive) response to historical circumstances and so grounded in rational thought. Yet the reported aggression of Black African youth is presented as ‘anger only’ without meaning or reason—and so, childlike, even animalistic, not simply unjustified but firmly outside the very possibility of justification.

The justification of vigilantism is also supported through the uneven and differential construction of the ‘white citizen vigilante’ and the ‘Black African criminal’ in terms of their capacities for coercive agency. This differentiation implicates both pragmatic and moral justification by constructing the figure of the vigilante as a man ‘fighting against the odds’. He is capable of wielding violent power, but considerably less so than the figure of the criminal; socially disempowered (and so, *needing* self-protection) but also unjustly victimized (and so, *deserving* self-protection). Sometimes, this sense of uneven coercive agency is communicated simply through the massification of Black African youth. In “Beach Brawl”, Frank tells the journalist reporting the story that “*twenty or thirty blokes*” were involved in the incident outside his home, while Jayde later reports that it was “*fifty or sixty*”. Other times, the ‘disempowered’ vigilante trope is communicated through a visual politics of space, not unlike the form of this politics discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In Figure 6 (below), Frank’s account of his own disempowerment and political aggrievement is symbolically reinforced using fortress-like imagery, which imaginatively positions Frank’s home as a fragile place of safety and Frank himself as a man under siege by an outside world that is menacing, inhospitable, and encroaching.



Figure 6: Franks looks out over the wall of his home (A Current Affair, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2019)

Again, the sense of the disempowerment and reactivity that characterizes the citizen vigilante trope and fortifies its sense of moral ambivalence is supported by uneven forms of linguistic transitivity—such as active/passive verb forms—which routinely position vigilante actions as a reflex-like response to criminal behaviour, and so a consequence of criminal (rather than vigilante) agency. Vigilantes are described as being “pushed to breaking point”, “at their wits’ end”, “fed up”, “shaken” and “forced to take matters into their own hands”. In Figure 5, the figure of the *child* vigilante meditates on the question of innocence to explicitly engage a discourse of responsibility. The main photograph in Figure 5 visually emphasizes the physical vulnerability of the Black African teenagers, who appear surrounded. However, the headline “Robbery shakes teens” moves

the encircling vigilantes to a passive positionality, acted *upon* rather than acting out. It also provides motivating context for the frightening scene depicted in the photograph: the teens have been “shaken” into action by an incident of criminal violence *against* them, and so the captured scene is positioned as fundamentally *reactive*. There is moral absolution in Xavier’s constructed sense of political subjugation, which is granted perceptual realism through the extensive details of the crime against him offered in the report, and categorical and ideological realism through Xavier’s own first-person account of his trauma (“I feel shaken... I feel scared”), as well as that of his father (“he’s turned to jelly”). The vigilante is articulated as a figure made violent against his will by those against whom he now threatens violence.

Finally, the figure of the citizen vigilante is symbolically separated from the figure of ‘the criminal’ through an implicit discourse of service and sacrifice animated by political whiteness (HoSang, 2010; Phipps, 2020) and victimhood (see Chapter 6). In a similar way to the “thin blue line” imaginary of policing, the vigilante is positioned as acting in response not only to his own vulnerability but also to those around him: “his” community, which always excludes the figure of the Black African ‘gang member’. The following excerpt, from a report about a citizen vigilante named Guilio titled “Apex Vigilante” (Channel 9, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2017), provides an illustrative example. Here, the journalist presenting the segment weaves a second-person, present-tense narrative to extend an explicit imaginative invitation to the viewer; he summons the viewer into the position of a vulnerable subject in order to imbue Guilio’s perception of his own community as “unsafe” and “unprotected” with a sense of categorical realism:

“It’s the kind of coordinated gang attack that will **make you feel sick** to your stomach. **Imagine** you’re walking down this laneway. It’s broad daylight, and you’re in a nice area. There’s no need to be concerned, right? Wrong. **Suddenly, you’re attacked. Lightning fast. Not by one person, not by two people, but a gang of thugs.** It’s **you against them**, and **you don’t stand a chance**. Before you know it, you’ve **lost** your wallet, you’ve **lost** your keys, and you’ve **lost** your phone, and you’ve been beaten up, and they’re gone. It’s terrifying. The **reality** is now, though, it **doesn’t matter** if the sun’s out, it **doesn’t matter** what suburb you’re in. This could literally happen **anywhere**, at **any time**. And it needs to stop.”

This monologue is delivered in the present tense as the presenting journalist walks down the laneway in question. It invites the viewer to put themselves into the position of a man that Guilio says he saw being robbed outside his home—the precipitating event behind Guilio’s decision to

surveill, chase down with his car, and eventually seize and detain a young Black African man in his neighbourhood after a subsequent robbery. The proliferating use of the second-person pronoun ‘you’ here (“*Imagine you’re walking...*” “*You’re alone...*” “*You don’t stand a chance...*”) performs two imaginative tasks simultaneously. First, it imbues Giulio’s actions with a sense of tacit moral approval by evoking the very sense of fear and generalized insecurity that is narratively positioned as the precipitating ‘cause’ of Giulio’s actions: that is, by granting categorical realism to the claim that such an attack could “*literally happen anywhere, at any time*”. Second and more obviously, however, it explicitly invites the viewer to *identify with* the ‘victim’ at the centre of the narrative, to imagine that this victim *could* be them. In this way, the vigilante is positioned as acting in response to communalized vulnerability rather than individual victimization—with whiteness implicitly positioned as that which gives ‘the community’ (and so, the claim to vulnerability) symbolic coherence through differentiation from the racialized ‘criminal’ actor.

This section has explicated three linguistic strategies that help support the moral ambivalence of the citizen vigilante trope: symbolic deresponsibilization, symbolic disempowerment, and a discourse of service and sacrifice. These strategies morally differentiate the figure of the vigilante from the figure of the ‘criminal’ by constructing vigilantism as a *response* to conditions of intolerable vulnerability, rather than simply an *exacerbator* of those conditions for Black African youth. Together, they help constitute a regime of representation in which the citizen of vigilante is not intolerant, but pushed to the breaking point of his tolerance; not a criminal, but a law-abiding citizen who has been forced by circumstance to the edges of the law; not powerful, but painfully disempowered, abandoned by the state and forced to ‘go it alone’ against the growing threat of criminality. In this way, the citizen vigilante is tacitly decriminalized through discourses which selectively historicize in order to morally and politically discriminate harm from harm, violence from violence, crime from crime. As I discuss in the following section, while the narrative framing of citizen vigilantism regularly sidesteps a direct confrontation with the question of race, the moral ambivalence of the trope has considerable implications vis-à-vis the symbolic reproduction of racist justificatory logics.

#### *b) Cruel benevolence: appropriating Black vulnerability*

While the citizen vigilante evades criminalization through his positioning as disempowered, protective, and limited in his responsibility for his actions, he is simultaneously subject to many of the same strategies that help construct ‘African gang members’ as figures of threat and danger. While the citizen vigilante is rarely shown enacting violence, his *capacity* for violence is routinely emphasised—just as we are invited to feel for the vigilante, we are also invited to fear him. In

“Guns for Hire”, the journalist reporting the story emphasizes how, in hiring armed guards, Frank has created (or, at the very least, exacerbated) a life-threatening climate of danger in his neighbourhood, telling the viewers: “*Forget baseball bats. These weapons can kill instantly.*” The reference to baseball bats is significant here, as many other reports—including the newspaper article in Figure 5—foreground the baseball bat as an icon of vigilantism: a symbol of amateur, under-resourced efforts of citizen self-defence. By contrasting the gun with the bat, the narration gestures to an *escalation* of the violent potential attached to the figure of the vigilante, and more generally within the community. In Figure 7, we see this effect intensified in the visual modality of the text through repetitive close-up images of the guard’s handgun in its holster. While police officers carry firearms in Australia, citizen ownership of handguns is rare<sup>39</sup>. Here, the handgun becomes itself one of the protagonists of the story—out of place in the Melbourne suburbs, inanimate yet filled with lethal potential. The journalist warns the viewer that the guard patrolling Frank’s home “*will shoot if he needs to*”, but does not specify what might constitute that such a need:

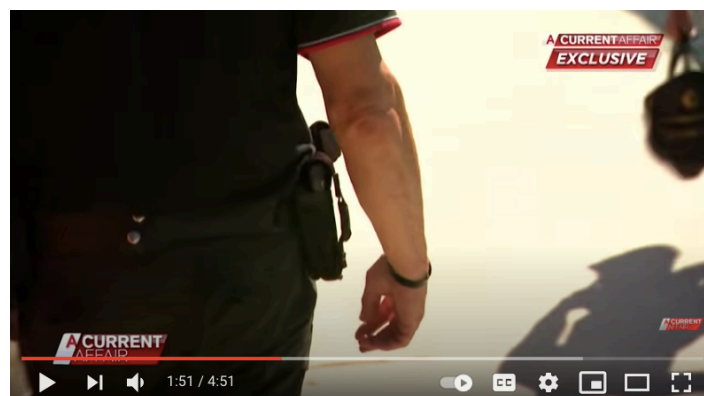


Figure 7: A gun in the holster of one of the armed guards patrolling Frank’s house (A Current Affair, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2018)

In this way, the citizen vigilante trope animates an imagination of *intensifying* insecurity within the community—a vision of violence begetting violence, disorder begetting disorder, with an escalating pattern extending into an uncertain future. In other words, the vigilante trope evokes an imaginary of *generalized* insecurity and social decline, not unlike the imaginary that informs the “thin blue line” vision of policing-as-protection. This imaginary—and its political and moral stakes—are made explicit in the report “Apex Vigilante” (see above). In reference to Guilio’s ‘citizen’s arrest’ of a young Black African teenager, a crime journalist interviewed for the report argues:

<sup>39</sup> In 2020, approximately 3.41% of Australians had a valid gun license (The University of Sydney, 2020). By contrast, more than 30% of adults in the United States personally own a gun and more than 40% live in a household with a gun (Gallup, 2020).

“We’re going to see **more and more** people **tempted** to **take the law into their own hands**. This is an example of that. **This** guy’s a brave guy, he’s **a good guy**. He’s done what he perceived to be **the right thing**. But **of course**, it **could** end in tears.”

This brief cautionary comment captures and distils the key features of the figure of the citizen vigilante as a narrative trope, as well as the (in)security imaginary this trope speaks to and reproduces. There is the promise of escalation and intensification in the repetitive descriptor “*more and more*”; there is the redistribution of agency and subject/object reversal in the description of the vigilante as “*tempted*”; there is a sense of inevitability in the use of the phrase “*of course*”; there is a deferral of moral condemnation away from Guilio and towards an imagined *future* vigilante through the use of the qualifier “*this*”, which positions Guilio as an exception in order to position vigilantism as individually righteous and heroic yet collectively dangerous and threatening. The euphemistic phrase “*end in tears*” gestures to the stakes of vigilantism as a source of insecurity but leaves these stakes ambiguous. *Whose* potential tears are we invited to fear or lament? For what kind of injury or openness to injury does the word “tears” stand in metaphorically? Similar silences can be observed in the phrase “*take matters into their own hands*”. What kind of “matter” is being acted upon? Whose hands, if not those of the vigilante, is this matter *supposed* to be in? As I proposed at the beginning of this section, the figure of the citizen vigilante ultimately accentuates the void of coercive intervention that the intransient figure of the “watching, waiting” police officer leaves behind; its ultimate function is to fortify the pragmatic and moral mandate for such “official” responses to criminality by premediating the intolerable future that they ostensibly hold at bay. The vigilante acts, in this narrative, because the state fails to; even as a figure of threat, the trope’s ultimate function is to reinforce the (imaginative) basis for the surveillance, policing, and punishment of Black African youth.

Lauren Berlant coined the phrase “cruel optimism” to describe the kind of relation in which an object of one’s desire actively subverts or scuppers the needs, values and motivations which fuelled that desire in the first place (Berlant, 2011). Following Berlant’s interpretation and application of the concept of cruelty, we can conceptualize the kind of justificatory logic that the figure of the citizen vigilante animates as one of *cruel benevolence*: a relation within a symbolic politics of vulnerability in which one type of vulnerability—in this case, Black African vulnerability to racist vigilante violence—is appropriated as the justificatory basis for practices which will ultimately exacerbate or entrench the vulnerability of those same of subjects. In the case of the citizen vigilante trope, perceptually ‘real’ Black vulnerability to racist violence is positioned (in terms of pragmatic justification) as a basis for protective state interventions—not against the

vigilante, but against the ‘African gang criminal’ and by extension the Black African community. In terms of moral justification, the mandate of intervention is grounded not in the constructed ‘wrongness’ of the fear and suffering of Black African subjects, but rather in the wrongness of a generalized climate of insecurity in Melbourne’s suburbs, in which white people are positioned as the primary victims. The *subject* of protection here, then, is not the Black African subject, but the white citizen—sometimes, even the vigilante himself, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from an interview with Frank in “Guns for Hire”:

“But, ah, but **those guards are there more for their protection**, more than mine, because you know... if I do something stupid, **what happens to me?**” [Journalist: You go to jail]  
“That’s right, and I don’t want that.”

This passing comment from Frank distills the logic of cruel benevolence. In the first instance, Frank casts Black African youth into a position of vulnerability and himself as a threatening force. “*Those guards are more for their protection, more than mine,*” he says, seemingly eschewing his own vulnerability. However, the possibility of “*something stupid*” happening is, in the final instance, positioned as a threat to Frank: “...*what happens to me?*” he asks. The question of what happens to the people he might (it is implied) attack is seemingly inconsequential; vigilantism is, in the final instance, a moral problem only insofar as it exacerbates the vulnerability of the white citizen—in this case, to the punitive mechanisms of the criminal justice system. Frank’s excess is recast as restraint, and Black African vulnerability to racist violence is appropriated to the task of fortifying the pragmatic necessity and moral legitimacy of state intervention against ‘African gang crime’. Ultimately, it is Frank we are invited to feel for and feel with. Moreover, it is telling (as I discuss later in this chapter) that it is specifically the threat of arrest and incarceration—a threat from which, it is implied, the ‘African gang member’ is comparatively immune—that is invoked to fortify Frank’s articulation of his own ‘victimhood’.

Cruel benevolence is cruel, then, in at least two key senses. First, because it takes up the vulnerability of Black African subjects as an object of moral concern, only to then construct the categorical and ideological realism of this vulnerability through the suffering of the white citizen. The spectacle of racist violence against Black African refugees is positioned as something to fear, but not on the basis of moral concern for the lives of Black African subjects. Instead, racist vigilantism is morally problematic because it is “ugly” and “not a good look” (as in Figure 5) or because it degenerates/decivilizes the white citizen in ways that make him (‘wrongly’) vulnerable to the punitive mechanisms of the state (as in the case of Frank). Moral justification, in other words, remains anchored in white vulnerability, with Black African suffering positioned as objectionable

only on the basis of a) its potential to ‘incriminate’ individual white citizens; or b) its ‘net contribution’ to a generalized climate social disorder and disharmony in Melbourne’s suburbs. Black African vulnerability to white violence is not afforded categorical nor ideological realism on its own terms but is instead appropriated as a mere surface trace of a (white) Australian society in decline.

Cruel benevolence is cruel in a second sense, then, because helps symbolically fortify the justificatory basis (both pragmatic and moral) for the same state practices (such as policing and incarceration) that would intensify the vulnerabilities and limit the freedoms of Australia’s Black African diaspora in the name of benevolent protection. The ‘wrongness’ of vigilante violence is routinely constructed in ways that forcefully recentre state crime control as the ‘right’ way to do things (e.g., Figure 5). Meanwhile, the ‘realness’ of vigilante violence (especially, future violence) is positioned reactively vis-à-vis the ‘real’ threat of ‘African gang crime’, so that intervention against the latter is positioned as ‘necessary’ and ‘effective’ action on the former. The result is that the various crime control practices invoked throughout reporting—harsher sentences, zero-tolerance policies, pre-emptive policing—are imaginatively recast as forms of benevolent restraint. Even, as care.

\*

In conclusion, we can say that the white citizen vigilante trope supports the symbolic justification of crime control practices not only by reproducing a criminalizing symbolic politics of vulnerability around Black African subjects, but also by symbolically repurposing the two representations with the greatest capacity to disrupt its coherence: first, representations of Black African vulnerability and suffering; and second, representations of white racism against the Black African community. In the first instance, the pain, suffering, and insecurity of Black African subjects is acknowledged as both ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ only to be repurposed within a justificatory structure that ultimately endorses the very crime control practices that would target—and thus, intensify the vulnerability of—these same subjects. This is the discourse of cruel benevolence I have explicated above.

In the second instance, the figure of the citizen vigilante explicitly foregrounds political whiteness whilst simultaneously insulating it from moral critique. Unlike post-racial discourses, which deny the enduring political significance of race in contemporary social life, the figure of the citizen vigilante foregrounds racial difference but positions it as historically novel, animating an imaginary of Australian society that might be described as ‘pre-racial’. In this imaginary, the settlement of African refugees is narrated as the arrival of Blackness, and the arrival of Blackness

as an arrival of race. As discussed in more detail in the following section, the invocation of this imaginary is made particularly explicit when other settler colonial societies—specifically, the United States and South Africa—are routinely referenced in the construction of ‘African gang crime’ events as contrastive examples: as contexts that Australia is positioned as being fundamentally unlike, and yet *becoming more like* through the “new” developments of both ‘Black criminality’ and white racist violence. Vigilante violence and ‘African gang crime’ are thus positioned as two parts of one whole: the breakdown of order and social harmony attached to the arrival of ‘race’, for which African migrants are ultimately allocated exclusive responsibility. While the violence of the citizen vigilante is animated by political whiteness, this revisionist ‘pre-racial’ historical narrative offers the vigilante moral cover by positioning him as racialized—that is, *made white*—only by the arrival of Blackness.

### **Deportation: Insular Fantasies and the Zero-Sum Security**

The history of Australia can, in many ways, can be interpreted as a history of fears and fantasies of insularity (Burke, 2008; Perera, 2009). In news media accounts of so-called ‘African gang crime’ these fears and fantasies assert themselves in the trope of Australia’s national border, which lends justificatory support to practices of deportation and territorial exclusion. As discussed above, the police officer and citizen vigilante tropes appear and operate within the mediated life of crime events in indexical forms—that is, in the form of *actual* police officers and vigilantes, premediating the security futures they imaginatively evoke. By contrast, deportation is invoked through symbolic references to Australia’s national border and the multitude of promises and anxieties it contains—the border as its own sort of “thin line”. Of course, the ‘line’ of Australia’s national border is not thin at all. Australia is an island, its maritime border wide and deep and historically treacherous, its coastline intensely militarized, and its immigration policies amongst the harshest and most exclusionary in the world, especially as they relate to humanitarian migration. The “thinness” of the border, then, is imaginatively constituted—it relates not to its physical form but to its symbolic significance as that which bounds the imaginative coherence of the Australian project. In this way, appeals to the exclusionary capacities of the border—its capacity to keep out what ‘should be’ out—frequently operate also as attempts to reassert a version of ‘Australianness’ grounded in white nativism and the imaginative erasure of the country’s status as a settler-colony.

Across print and televisual coverage, appeals to the protective, punitive, and preventative capacities of the border manifest in calls to “send [African refugees] back where they came from”, to “kick them out”, or simply to “deport them”. Across these appeals, it is clear that the border serves a tripled imaginative function vis-à-vis the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ problem of gang crime in

Australian society: first, a *protective* function, moving “crime” (in the form of bodies) beyond the territorial limits of Australian society; second, a *punitive* function, addressing the injustice of vulnerability to crime through the punishment of those same criminalized bodies through physical exclusion from the Australian project; and third, a *preventative* function, pre-empting criminality by keeping criminalized bodies ‘out’ but, also, evoking the spectre of the border to deter to those still (precariously) within its boundaries—specifically, those without citizenship rights.

However, the legitimacy of punitive deportation is by no means hegemonic across the mediated construction of ‘African gang crime’, and explicit calls for deportation are more or less exclusive properties of right-wing press and commentary (see Chapter 2). However, across coverage of ‘African gang crime’ events, it is possible to observe a mediated politics of vulnerability operating in ways that lend deportation-as-security more subtle, pernicious forms of meaningful coherence. In particular, two justificatory strategies stand out: first, a zero-sum politics of safety, which positions vulnerability as mobile yet ultimately irreducible; and second, a multivalent discourse of *white invulnerability*, which collapses ‘social harm’ and ‘social change’ in order to symbolically attach the moral intolerability of the former to latter.

*a) Zero-sum security and the politics of space*

This strategy symbolically fortifies the pragmatic necessity and moral legitimacy of deportation by constructing a ‘zero-sum’ competitive tension between Black African refugees’ need for safety and security and the equivalent needs of Australian citizens. Within this imaginary, vulnerability to harm is an irreducible quantity that can only be *moved* from place to place or person to person, but never meaningfully transformed. Such an imaginary is evoked through repetitive, often mimetic representational contrasts between the vulnerabilities of Black African subjects and those of other (usually, white) Australians. The episode “Inside Apex”, which features interviews with alleged members of the so-called Apex gang, provides an illustrative example:

**Reporter:** “Why did you leave your home country?”

**Interviewee 1:** “There was war... like, a lot of war, you know. Killing, kids getting killed, getting choked, getting stabbed, getting... ah, what’s it called... kidnapped.”

**Reporter, to Interviewee 2:** “What country did you come from?”

**Interviewee 2:** “I come from South Sudan”

**Reporter:** “And was it similar to [Interviewee 1’s] experience? There was war there?”

**Interviewee 2:** “Yeah, there was war there. That’s the reason we’re all here.”

This account of the violence to which the two interviewees were exposed (and so, vulnerable) in South Sudan immediately segues into an account of their “*run-ins with the law*” in Australia, including a story in which Interviewee 1 reports that he once struck a police officer. As with Torit in Chapter 5, the war in South Sudan is appropriated to the task of elaborating and authenticating white vulnerability to Black African aggression; it is positioned as part of that which makes the young Black African refugees *threatening*, rather than *threatened*. Evoked here is an imaginary of asylum-seeking in which the violence, disorder and dispossession associated with war are *sticky* attributes which cling to the body as it travels from place to place. Within such an imaginary, asylum-seekers do not *flee* war, but rather, bring war with them, lodged within their bones and flesh. Openness to harm takes on an irreducible quality—it can be shifted from place to place, or transferred between those more or less ‘deserving’ of it, but it cannot be meaningfully reduced or transformed. We can see this zero-sum imaginary evoked again in “Guns for Hire” when the reporting journalist constructs the following narrative:

**Reporter:** “Until recently, the violence had been localized here along the St Kilda foreshore, but since a bolstered police presence and an increase in the number of security cameras in the area, that problem is now creeping along the coast, down towards suburbs like Chelsea where there are fewer cameras.

Within this narrative, there is a lingering awareness of the futility of policing as a means of transforming vulnerability or building meaningful safety (i.e., the inefficacy of protective policing). Policing interventions (in the form of ‘numbers’ and ‘cameras’) are not ‘solving’ the problem of vulnerability to crime, but simply *moving* it, shunting it from wealthier suburbs (St Kilda) to less-wealthy ones (Chelsea) as if it were a solid, irreducible mass. While this account might seem to clash with the “thin blue line” imaginary of policing-as-protection, it harmonizes with the sense of permanent, essential vulnerability at the heart of the preoccupation with “thinness” which animates cultural (and financial) reinvestment in policing by constructing it as an always-almost-failure. Moreover, an imaginary of violence as *embodied* and vulnerability to it as *irreducible* gives rise to a politics of spatial exclusion—specifically, one in which the physical expulsion of criminalized bodies appears as the only meaningful way of acting upon the vulnerabilities associated with crime. While the vulnerabilities associated with fleeing war and seeking asylum are constructed as perceptually “real”, the intake of asylum-seekers and refugees is positioned as an act of self-harm, alleviating the vulnerabilities of those fleeing war by assuming them oneself. In other words, the safety secured by asylum-seekers through their inclusion in Australian society is constructed as

coming at the expense of the safety *of* (white) Australia—the burden of openness to harm not alleviated, but simply transferred.

Other forms of this same justificatory strategy can be seen in the tropes of the “fleeing family” (Figure 8) and the “incarcerated citizen” (Figure 9, see also Chapter 6), which representationally mimic Black African experiences of displacement and imprisonment respectively. The “fleeing family” trope, distilled in Figure 8, replicates a dominant narrative of asylum-seeking—a family displaced by insecurity, leaving friends and family behind to relocate to a place of relative safety—but repositions asylum-seekers and refugees (implied through the descriptor “*teenagers of African appearance*”) as now *fled from*, rather than *fleeing*. There is an implied transference of vulnerability here: African youth, in fleeing to Australia, are causing ‘Australians’ to flee in turn. Meanwhile, the “incarcerated citizen” trope—which I explored preliminarily through the figure of Elaine in Chapter 6, and which is rendered once again in Figure 9 below—invokes the exclusionary capacities of the national border by placing the Black African migrant and the (white) citizen in a zero-sum contest for public space. This trope manifests linguistically through metaphors of forced confinement (e.g., “I’m trapped” or “I’m a prisoner”) and visually through images of white citizens peering anxiously over, around, or through the borders that bound ostensibly fragile space of private safety: usually, walls, front doors, fences, and windows.

## Crime fatigue drives family to pack it in

SAMANTHA HUTCHINSON

Danielle Beaton has had enough. The mother of three from Hoppers Crossing in Melbourne's west and her family are midway through packing up their house ahead of a move to the Gold Coast later this month.

They've endured an attempted home invasion, a ramacking and three car burglaries in the last year and now they're taking drastic action and moving north.

"We're just tired," Mrs Beaton said.

"Our car has been bugged three times this year and I can't even turn my back on my kids while they're playing on their bikes in the street."

"We've got family (in Victoria) but we're not prepared to go through it any more."

The problems started in early 2017 when a gang of teenagers of African appearance would pluck themselves in the front garden and make a racket.

"It was just intimidating stuff and then you call the police but they're always gone by the time they get there," she said.

The family was at home one evening in March and saw the front door knobs rattling and heard teenagers on the property.

Those kids ran away when the family's two dogs started growling.

About two months later, the family went through the real deal, however, when they arrived home from Kmart one evening to find the whole house had been ramacked.

"The kids' rooms had been trashed, drawers taken out of chests and dumped everywhere and stuff smashed for no reason. And just the weirdest stuff was taken," Mrs Beaton said.

"There was a pack of smokes on the kitchen bench on top of an iPad."



Danielle Beaton with husband Eric and daughters Tanisha and Aaliya at home in Truganina in Melbourne's west

—has been broken into three times, often as part of a wave in which the thugs target every car in the street looking for garage remote controls.

By November, the family had decided they'd had enough.

Mrs Beaton is a property manager and her husband is a road worker.

They made the decision to leave Melbourne in November

and lined up new jobs before Christmas.

"I sounds stupid, but when you've got a 15-year-old daughter and you know a gang is lurking her from the park and threatening her as she walks home, what are you meant to do?" she said.

"We're just sick of feeling unsafe."

"The got kids who should be able to catch a bus to the local plaza to meet their friends. That's just not happening here."

Figure 8: An example of the “fleeing family” trope, which appears as part of a larger report on Victoria’s ‘law and order’ problem (*The Weekend Australian*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2018)



Figure 9: An image of Frank peering over the wall of his Chelsea home (A Current Affair, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2019)

**Frank:** “I’m just a normal bloke who minds his own business, and I don’t need any [shit] to be honest, I don’t need to be told to sit inside my own house **as a prisoner**. It’s not right. It’s **not right**.”

These tropes perform justificatory work by evoking an imaginary in which (white) Australian citizens have lost their security unjustly *to* the Black African diaspora—in other words, in which Black African security comes necessarily at the *expense of* white security. In the case of the fleeing family, the Australian citizen flees because the Black African refugee, now settled in Australia, no longer has to. In the case of the incarcerated citizen, the white victim loses access to public life and public space *because* of the access that Black African migrant retains; the white victim is confined to the metaphorical prison of their home precisely because the Black African ‘criminal’ evades imprisonment. This kind of zero-sum imaginary of security ultimately feeds fantasies of absolute spatial and social exclusion, be it through the “de-territorializing” capacities of the prison or the national border (see Perera, 2002).

*b) Boundary work: Vulnerability to harm/vulnerability to change*

Permeating both print and televisual coverage of so-called ‘African gang crime’ is a lingering preoccupation with the edges of things—with borders, boundaries, margins, frontiers, lines that stop one thing from bleeding into another. Sometimes, these lines are spatial. Beaches, which recur as a visual motif, emphasize the boundary between land and sea, the outer limits of the landmass that gives ‘Australia’ recognizable form and shape. Suburbs are rendered in territorial terms, with news reporting tracing the movement of ‘gang crime’ across lines distinguishing place from place. Homes are imagined as fragile fortresses, their walls and fences precarious shields against the encroaching outside world, always about to give way. Other times, these are lines in time—between

hypothetical, intolerable futures and a present in flux. Either way, ‘security’ is often articulated as a project of keeping things in their place. Vulnerability politics, in turn, is routed through the question of maintenance. Will these lines hold? Will the edges of things stay where they are? Or, will they move—and in moving, change the form of the things they define?

This symbolic preoccupation with boundaries—what I call representational “boundary work”—has implications for the moral justification of security practice. By imaginatively investing ‘security’ in the idea of social maintenance, it collapses together different forms and registers of vulnerability in its broadest definition: that is, openness to *change*, rather than simply openness to harm. We can see this strategy at work in the routine discursive articulation of the ‘African gang crime’ event as phenomenon ‘out-of-place’, morally problematic not only because of what it is (crime) but also because of where it occurs (Australia). An episode of the panel show *Q+A* titled “Polling, Policing and Reporting” (discussed briefly in Chapter 6) provides an illustrative example of this discourse. At one point, lawyer and community advocate Nyadol Nyuon challenges the perceptual reality of an emerging ‘African gang crime’ problem by pointing out that rates of crime victimization in the state of Victoria have not increased but rather have held steady year-on-year. In response, politician Alan Tudge states:

**Tudge:** “But there’s different types of crime here as well. I mean, **we are not used to** the car-jacking, **we’re not used to** the home invasion, **we’re not used to**... elderly women waking up with someone with a baseball bat in their bedroom.”

Within this exchange, Nyuon and Tudge are struggling over the “realness” and “wrongness” of vulnerability to ‘African gang crime’ in Melbourne. When Nyuon attempts to subvert the perceptual reality of this vulnerability by turning to the (perceptual) question of *quantity*, Tudge redirects the negotiation to the (categorical and ideological) question of *quality*. However, the basis for the moral intolerability of the kinds of crimes he mentions—car-jackings, home invasions—is rooted in the *unfamiliarity* and *unexpectedness* within the Australian context (*we’re not used to*... *we’re not used to*...). These, he asserts, are crimes out-of-place; they are morally intolerable not because of their essential qualities but because of the sense that they belong ‘elsewhere’. This discourse is echoed in the tweet banner which runs across the bottom of the screen throughout the episode, which at one point displays the following tweet:

**Tweet 1:** “We need white farmers from South Africa in Melbourne to protect us!”

During a subsequent discussion about heavy-handed police tactics and racial profiling, another tweet rejects allegations of racist policing by distinguishing Australia and the United States:

**Tweet 2:** “We don’t live in the USA! Aussie cops are brilliant.”

Elsewhere, in an episode of *A Current Affair* titled “Law and Order Anger”, a local resident giving a vox-pop interview remarks on the out-of-placeness of a street brawl she witnessed near her home, in the suburb of Collingwood:

**Interviewee:** “It’s [like] something from a movie... you don’t expect to see that two-hundred metres from your house.”

Through such comparisons, the phenomenon ‘African gang crime’ is positioned as morally problematic in so much as it violates socio-spatial expectations. More specifically, there is an anxiety about Australia *becoming like* places it is not. Intuitively, we might expect comparisons between Australia and refugees’ countries of origin to dominate, given the xenophobic discourse of belonging that regularly characterises media representations of Black African migrants in Australia (see Chapter 2). Instead, however, it is *other settler colonies*—in particular, South Africa and the United States—which are most frequently naturalized as the contexts where the phenomenon of ‘African gang crime’ belongs—where it might be ‘in place’ rather than out of it. Gang crime is repositioned as threatening insofar as it makes Australia *like* that which it should be *unlike*. However, this discourse of (dis)similarity hinges on the question of race, both explicitly (as in the reference to “*white farmers*” in South Africa) and implicitly through references to racist policing in the United States (“*We don’t live in the USA!*”) and Hollywood cinema (“*like something from a movie*”). So, while such comparisons articulate a historical discourse of exceptionalism as it relates to the Australian colonial project, it is the naturalized relationship between Blackness and (interracial) violence that is pushed into the foreground as that which ostensibly distinguishes the ‘there’ of South Africa and the United States from the ‘here’ of Australia.

Once again, there is a calculated ambivalence here—the problem of vulnerability is simultaneously indexed to both the threat of *harm* and the threat of *social change*. This discursive ambivalence functions as a strategy of justification because it synonymises susceptibility to change and susceptibility to harm, (re)producing an imaginary in which *political continuity* appears as the defining feature of ‘security’ and so a guiding logic of security practice. Within such an imaginary, the debatable ‘realness’ of the ‘African gang crime’ threat is of weakened epistemic significance in

the overall justification of crime control practices, as ‘wrongness’ is attached not to the threat of injury but rather (as in the articulation of ‘victimcould’ in Chapter 6) the very condition of injurability that being open to change and/or transformation necessarily implies.

However, “boundary work” is not evenly preoccupied with all forms of potential transformation: it explicitly centres Blackness as that which marks the ‘here’ of Australia as increasingly like (and so, poorly insulated from) ‘elsewhere’. Race, then, is once again at the foundation of vulnerability as an epistemology of justification vis-à-vis practices of state violence—that is, the ultimate ordering principle by which the moral differentiation of vulnerabilities is symbolically executed in representation. Border-based security practices (including deportation, but also immigration control) derive moral coherence not from the constructed ‘wrongness’ of crime itself but rather from an imaginary that positions white victimcould—that is, hypothetical (rather than actual) white vulnerability to Black violence—as an inevitable, yet intolerable, consequence of racial pluralism. This is an imaginary that tacitly synonymizes ‘security’ with a version of racial order in which white people are fundamentally invulnerable to the very possibility of Black violence: a normative security imaginary characterized by the absolute dominion of white Australians as a political class. Moral justification, in other words, is detached from the arbitration of vulnerability as a ‘real’ political condition and grounded instead in a future disruption of invulnerable whiteness that the spectacle of ‘African gang crime’ supposedly prefigures, and which only absolute (white) territorial control can avert.

## **Conclusion: Revisiting Criminalization as Mediated Politics of Vulnerability**

This chapter has explored the third dimension of criminalization as a mediated symbolic politics of vulnerability: that is, vulnerability as a *practical epistemology of justification*, or as a justificatory basis for different forms of practice. Criminalization is grounded not only in the negotiated ‘realness’ (Chapter 5) and ‘wrongness’ (Chapter 6) of different forms of openness to harm, but also in the symbolic justification of different ways of acting upon ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerability. This chapter has examined how representations of ‘African gang crime’ events serve also as representations of different kinds of security practice, which in turn must be ideally positioned as necessary and/or effective (pragmatic justification) and right and/or just (moral justification) ways of acting on ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerability to be coherently reproduced in representation *as* security. To understand how the problem of vulnerability is representationally connected to the question of normative practice, the analysis has examined the justificatory strategies that help position three dominantly

represented ways of acting upon the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ problem of ‘African gang crime’: policing and incarceration; citizen vigilantism; and deportation and/or border control.

In light of this analysis, what can now be said about how a ‘criminalizing’ symbolic politics of vulnerability (explicated in Chapters 5 and 6) supports the reflexive justification of crime control practices (AQ3) and thus how criminalization as a *logic of practice* works through news representation (RQ1)? The theoretical starting point for the analysis in this thesis was a proposed analytics of criminalization, which suggested that criminalization be understood as a symbolic achievement contingent in a mediated politics of vulnerability comprising two key spheres of contingency: the constructed ‘realness’ of vulnerability (or, the calculative negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition); and the constructed ‘wrongness’ of vulnerability (or, the calculative negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition). Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 explored these two dimensions respectively, developing a catalogue of symbolic criteria (explicated in greater detail in Chapter 8) that can be thought of as the symbolic groundwork for a ‘criminalizing’ security imaginary. The analysis here has frequently reinforced these proposed criteria for ‘criminalizing’ representations, especially in terms of the moral deprioritization of Black African openness to harm and the constructed moral intolerability of white fearfulness.

However, looking specifically at strategies of justification, the analysis in this chapter adds an important caveat: that the (relative) realness and (relative) wrongness of vulnerability are *ideal*, rather than essential, justificatory criteria for criminalization. While the legitimate reproduction of security practices *should* in theory be contingent in their constructed sense of (pragmatic) necessity and/or efficacy and (moral) rightness and/or justness, the strategies explicated in this chapter just as frequently *evade* these criteria as they meet them. Protective policing, for example, does not secure access to pragmatic justification simply through its representation as ‘necessary’ and ‘effective’—but rather, through representational strategies that help the practice evade accountability to these criteria by *symbolically reconfiguring* the very questions of ‘necessity’ and ‘efficacy’. ‘De facto proportionality’, for example, is not a *representation of* police necessity so much as it is a strategy that allows representations of policing to sustain imaginations of necessity *without that necessity being explicitly represented*. Similarly, the discourse of ‘cruel benevolence’ articulated in and through representations of vigilantism foregrounds (rather than hides) the spectre of Black African vulnerability and suffering, but symbolically repurposes it to fortify (rather than disrupt) the moral coherence of crime control practices. As a practical epistemology of justification, criminalization can clearly operate as much through the obfuscation of practical or moral *incoherence* of crime control practices as through their constructed veneer of coherence. This chapter has

explicated a catalogue of representational strategies (and their specific semiotic mechanics) by which this justificatory obfuscation can take place.

What is the epistemic and critical utility of understanding criminalization as a (mediated) symbolic politics of vulnerability—as I have proposed we should—if pragmatic and moral justification are *normative* rather than essential criteria for the reflexive reproduction of crime control through representation? I propose that analyzing representations of crime control through this prism of this normative framework is valuable because it helps advance our understanding precisely *how* crime control practices, despite their practical failures and moral contradictions, nonetheless evade the kinds of ordinary critique that might fundamentally disrupt their legitimate reproduction (Boltanski, 2011). The analysis of justificatory strategies and struggles conducted in this chapter helps illuminate the ‘weak spots’ of justification: the places where the pragmatic and moral coherence of crime control practices are most fragile, and thus most susceptible to potential disruption through alternative representational practices and discourses. If ‘criminalization’ is the symbolic making of justification either through or around a mediated politics of vulnerability, then *decriminalization* is a project of imaginative *unmaking* requiring both the disruption of justification *and* the exposition of its already-existing failures. While the question of what it means to ‘decriminalize’ has been kept in the margins of my analysis thus far, tracing the fault lines of justification and the strategies by which they are symbolically managed in representation—as I have done in this chapter—provides hints about the precise forms of imaginative undoing that decriminalization might require, and the precise forms of representational work that might be able to serve as its means.

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## CHAPTER 8

# Towards Decriminalization: The Question of Imaginability

On 24<sup>th</sup> November 2018, after almost a year of furious campaigning, Victorians went to the polls to elect their next State Premier. Ultimately, the Liberal National Party's (LNP) attempt to unseat Labor Party incumbent Daniel Andrews with conservative challenger Matthew Guy proved unsuccessful. The Andrews government secured a second four-year term with an expanded parliamentary majority, while Guy and the Coalition suffered a net loss of 11 seats. And, almost overnight, so-called 'African gangs' began to fade from the headlines (Weber et al., 2021). In a recent quantitative analysis of reportage on 'African gangs' across nine newspapers, Keel et al. (2021, pp. 45–50) confirm the two 'waves' of criminalizing coverage identified in Chapter 2, including a substantial second wave beginning with Moomba 2016, climaxing across 2018, and then commencing a swift and steady decline in the month following the election. The authors position these results as evidence of the clear role played by cynical political opportunism in the manufacturing of a law and order crisis around Black African migrant communities and to reinforce their characterization of 'African gang crime' as fierce yet fleeting (mediated) moral panic (see also Koumouris & Blaustein, 2021). Media narratives, too, have pointed to Andrews' election victory and the sudden end of 'African gang crime' reports that followed as confirmation of the ultimate failure of the Coalition's racist and xenophobic politics of fear—as least as far as electoral politics is concerned (see Vedelago & Millar, 2021).

However, creeping alongside the rise and fall of the 'African gang crime' narrative has been a sustained intensification of crime control as a 'first line' means for addressing challenges to safety and order in (some) Victorian communities. In a political moment characterized by profound fragmentation and polarization, an expansionist, "tough-on-crime" attitude towards policing and prisons has endured as one of the few points of clear consensus between Labor and the Coalition in the state of Victoria. Funding for Victoria Police has more than tripled since the mid-1990s and the state's prison population more than doubled in the decade to 2019 (Millar & Vedelago, 2021). Victoria Police has also undergone a steady process of militarization with the rollout of new weaponry designed to help manage "public disorder", including semi-automatic capsicum rifles, blunt-force projectiles, and stinger grenades (Silvester, 2018). The incarceration rate of Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people is intensifying, and deaths in custody continue to devastate Indigenous families and communities (Evershed et al., 2020). While the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked protests across Australia, calls for downscaling or abolishing prisons and police institutions remain profoundly marginal in state and national politics alike. Indeed, several commentators have suggested that the degree of cultural investment in these institutions is now so strong in Victoria that both major parties have found themselves locked in a “law-and-order arms race” from which there appears to be no politically viable option for retreat (Millar & Vedelago, 2021; see also Weber et al., 2021).

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Australia in March 2020, Victoria’s response was policing-led. Australia swiftly closed its national border and hinged its public health strategy on the kind of absolute geographical and social isolation that only a militarized island continent can afford. In July, nine apartment towers in North Melbourne and Flemington—largely inhabited by migrant families—were forcibly locked down without warning after several residents tested positive for the virus. Police guarded the doors while residents begged to be released, to collect children from neighbours’ houses or to access food and medical care (Weedon, 2020). Cramped conditions meant an increased risk of infection within the close confines of the sealed towers (ibid.). In nearby affluent suburbs, the lives of (overwhelmingly white) residents remained relatively undisturbed. Subsequent investigations into the move found that while a lockdown was clearly justified on public health grounds, its no-warning implementation was a violation of residents’ basic human rights. State ombudsman Deborah Glass ultimately concluded that the Victorian government’s unprecedented actions were spurred by the assumption that the towers were “a hotbed of criminality and noncompliance” and that residents “could not be trusted” not to try and evade the lockdown if they were given sufficient warning, as other Melbournians were when lockdowns eventually became more widespread (Simons, 2021).

I foreground these examples to make a simple and relatively uncontroversial point. The ‘African gang crime’ narrative may never have been hegemonic in Australian public culture, politics, nor the press (Nolan et al., 2011, 2016; Weber et al., 2021). But the calculative and racist logic of criminalization upon which the narrative relied was, and remains, a hegemonic way of making sense of vulnerabilities in contemporary Australian life.

Previous studies of the ‘African gang crime’ phenomenon in the Australian press have approached the question of criminalization in one of two ways: as a) the symbolic articulation of Black African identity and subjecthood with the category of ‘crime’, as a means of racialized Othering and the symbolic (and physical) exclusion of Black African subjects from the Australian national community; and/or as b) the manufacture of a disingenuous moral panic around law,

order, and migration for opportunistic political gain. When such studies have engaged media analysis, they have relied methodologically primarily on audience interviews (e.g., Benier, Wickes & Moran, 2020), interviews with journalists (e.g., Koumouris & Blaustein, 2021), or on thematic and/or quantitative analysis of news media texts designed to map broad patterns in coverage across publications or across time (e.g., Keel et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study is theoretically (in its conceptualization of criminalization), methodologically (in its application of a fine-toothed, multi-modal critical discourse analysis), and narratively (in its adoption of an abolitionist ethic), novel. As flagged in Chapter 1, this novelty may at first strike the reader as counterintuitive, given the clearly essential role played by both strategic political rhetoric and racist/xenophobic cultural Othering in the construction and perpetuation of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative. My primary aim in this project, however, has not been to help explain or contextualize this case. Rather, I have tried to complement these important lines of critique—and the ‘construction of criminality’ approach more broadly—by examining and elucidating the deeper symbolic dependencies of the larger and more historically complex social logic of which each instance of constructed criminality (including the construction of ‘African gang crime’) forms just one constitutive moment. This is the logic of criminalization, and the role of news media representations therein. The concluding discussion in this final chapter takes stock of what can now be said, in light of the analysis, about how media criminalize, and makes a final case for why these insights might matter from the point of view of emancipatory research.

## **Realness, Wrongness, Justice: Summary of Findings**

### *a) Research questions and analytical approach*

My overarching aim for this thesis has been to use close analyses of news media representations of crime to develop a more nuanced understanding of the precise forms of symbolic work that criminalization requires from representation. More specifically, I have taken up the case of so-called ‘African gang crime’ in Melbourne as a unique but in many respects paradigmatic example of mediated criminalization, at least in the Australian context (see Chapter 2). Previous studies of this case have overwhelmingly focussed on the political and institutional “push factors” surrounding the emergence of the ‘African gang crime’ moral panic within its specific historical conjuncture: especially, political opportunism and a racist ‘politics of belonging’ that has calcified through decades of intense politicization around asylum-seekers and refugees in Australia (see Chapter 2). While this conjunctural critique and the ‘construction of criminality’ approach more

broadly are both of significant scholarly value, my analytical focus here has been at once more holistic and more granular. Rather than evaluating how and why criminalization ‘occurred’ in this one case, my interest has been more fundamental: in understanding *what criminalization needs* for its political and moral coherence. In the service of that interest, a guiding research question for this study was articulated as follows:

RQ1: How does criminalization work through news media representations of crime? Which kinds of symbolic work does it require, and what kinds of justificatory work can it perform?

In this question, criminalization is understood in cultural terms: as a specific justificatory dynamic that animates practices of crime control by building and maintaining their symbolic conditions of possibility. To conceptualize those conditions of possibility, my theoretical framework redescribed criminalization as a (mediated) politics of vulnerability, which symbolically negotiates—in and through representation—realities of vulnerability across three key dimensions. The first dimension relates to the negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition, or as factually ‘real’ openness to harm. The justificatory significance of this first dimension relates to the *pragmatic justification* of crime control practices: that is, their sense of necessity and/or efficacy vis-à-vis the ‘real’ problem of vulnerability. The second dimension relates to the negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition, or as ‘wrong’ openness to harm. The justificatory significance of this second dimension relates to the *moral justification* of crime control practices: their sense of rightness and/or justness vis-à-vis the problem of ‘wrong’, or morally intolerable, vulnerabilities. The third dimension of my proposed analytic relates to the representational positioning of vulnerability as a *practical epistemology of justification*, or as a justificatory basis for action. In this third dimension, a mediated politics of vulnerability is joined up with the question of practice through representations of specific ways of acting on or responding to the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ problem of crime.

The context for these negotiations, I have proposed, is what I term the mediated security imaginary: that ‘background’ sense of the social world and social relations (in both their perceptual and normative dimensions) against which crime control practices can appear politically and morally coherent. To conceptualize the necessary relationship between the mediated spectacle of crime and this banal background imagination of social life and social power upon which criminalization relies, I have operationalized Wagner-Pacifici’s concepts of ‘ground’ and ‘rupture’ within journalism as a specific practice of storytelling, and news representations of crime as a specific type of textual ‘event form’. This operationalization proposes that such texts are not only mediated

constructions of crime events but also of those events' contexts and conditions of emergence—and so, they inevitably articulate implicit claims about power and justice in the 'ground' of everyday social life from which the spectacle of crime springs. Crime events need this 'background' imaginary (and its attendant politics of vulnerability) in order to be brought to social, political, and moral meaning—to 'make sense'. Moreover, journalistic representations of crime events (re)make the ground of the security imaginary across two distinct yet interrelated orders of mediated social construction: first, the perceptual, which relates to news media texts as representations of social spacetime and social life; and second, the experiential, which relates to news media texts as technologies which, in their mobility and durability, reconfigure the experience of social spacetime and social life. From these theoretical elaborations, RQ1 was subsequently divided—for analytical, rather than procedural, purposes—into three elucidating sub-questions:

AQ1: How are 'African gang crime' events, their social contexts, and their broader social significance, represented in Australian news media texts? What kind of security imaginary do these representations evoke?

AQ2: Which forms of vulnerability are authenticated as both 'real' and 'wrong' in such representations, how, and for whom? What kind of vulnerability politics is enacted within and between such representations as a result?

AQ3: How do news media representations of 'African gang crime' events negotiate the pragmatic and moral justification of different forms of security practice, in and through this mediated politics of vulnerability?

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 were jointly dedicated to developing insights for AQ1 and AQ2, while Chapter 7 built on these insights to more directly address AQ3. Drawing on a repurposed version of Chouliaraki's analytics of mediation (see Chapter 4), Chapter 5 focussed on the question of perceptual realism and the negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition, using news images as a paradigmatic textual form. Chapter 6 broadened the analytical lens to consider the categorical and ideological realism of first-person testimonies on television, in order to explore the question of how the "wrongness" of vulnerability (or, vulnerability as a moral condition) is negotiated through representation. Finally, Chapter 7 used my analytics of mediated criminalization—developed in Chapters 3 and 4 and deployed in Chapters 5 and 6—to deconstruct three dominantly represented forms of practical response to 'African gang crime': policing and incarceration;

vigilantism; and deportation and border control. My aim in this final empirical chapter was to uncover how the pragmatic and moral justification of these practices is representationally negotiated by either meeting or evading the symbolic criteria of a criminalizing politics of vulnerability. How, I asked, are these practices positioned as necessary, as effective, as right, as just? What kind of background security imaginary and politics of vulnerability is required to support that positioning? And when these criteria cannot be met, how might the justification of such practices sustain itself through representation nonetheless? In the following sections, I briefly revisit the key insights from these empirical chapters and elaborate on their theoretical and critical significance.

*b) Kaleidoscopic visuality and the question of power*

Chapter 5 explored the repertoire of visualization strategies at work in the mediated construction of ‘African gang crime’ events to elucidate how the ‘reality’ of the phenomenon—especially vis-à-vis the contextual questions of social spacetime and relative social agency—is negotiated through representation. The analytical focus of this chapter was on the question of perceptual realism, and so how the “realness” of the different forms of vulnerability caught up in crime events is negotiated through representation. Criminalization is, in the first instance, grounded in the political differentiation of vulnerabilities: in the placing of different forms and registers of vulnerability in uneven relationships to the question of relative social power. Understanding criminalization in these terms requires approaching representations of crime events as sites of articulation for claims about the perceptually ‘real’ character of the everyday political terrain from which crime events emerge: that is, claims about *who* is truly vulnerable in society, *to whom*, and *under what conditions*. Chapter 5 looked to news photographs as a specific type of event form, paradigmatic of the broader claim to ‘factual’ representation that symbolically conditions all journalistic representations of crime. Through a close analysis of such images, my hope in this chapter was to better understand how the ruptures of ‘African gang crime’ events are mediated so as to articulate these kinds of political claims—and so, to transpose spectacles of crime onto the ‘ground’ of the security imaginary not as discrete events bounded at specific junctures of time and space, but rather as a singular, historically ‘real’ phenomenon. In this way, I proposed, photographs of ‘African gang crime’ events are able to articulate broader claims about the ‘true’ character of everyday political life, particularly in terms of the historical significance of such events and the differential allocations of agency and vulnerability they distil in representation.

My analytical focus in this chapter was on the dialectic between event spacetime and event agency, as negotiated both within single event forms (photographic representations) but also between them, in the broader visual ecology of crime reporting. Using the concept of a spatiotemporal ‘vantage point’ to articulate both the perceptual and experiential dimensions of these two questions—that is, social spacetime and agency as represented in text, and social spacetime and agency as constructed through mediation—the analysis developed a typology of five specific ‘ways of looking’ at crime events that photographic representations can open for their viewers: the *anticipatory*; the *embodied*; the *forensic*; the *vigilant*; and the *pre-emptive*. Each of these ways of looking is an imaginative invitation, semiotically articulated, that calls on the viewer to actively participate in the reconstruction of criminal rupture. While each was found to have its own ‘criminalizing’ potential, I argued that these ways of looking must ultimately be analysed and critiqued for their mutual availability within and across the mediated construction of ‘African gang crime’—as components of a much larger, intertextually-constituted way of mediated looking that I have termed *kaleidoscopic visuality*.

What, then, does ‘African gang crime’ look like through the kaleidoscope of visual journalism? The characteristic feature of a kaleidoscopically visualized crime phenomenon, as I have theorized it, is a representational dialectic between singularity/fixity and infinity/movement. More specifically, tightly iterative constructions of the forms of agentive subjectivity caught up in and between crime events, which in turn cultivate a relatively stable sense of certainty around the *who* and *what* dimensions of the crime phenomenon; coupled with an expansive and radically unstable construction of event spacetime, which in turn helps maintain a perpetual sense of uncertainty around the *where* and *when* of the crime phenomenon. In the case of ‘African gang crime’, kaleidoscopic visuality evokes an imaginary in which the question of *agency* is narrowly construed through a repetitive narrative trope of white vulnerability to Black violence (King, 2015) while event *spacetime* is constructed in such a way as to imbue ‘African gang crime’ with a sense of spatial expansiveness and profound historical significance. In simpler terms, this is an imaginary in which crime events could occur ‘anywhere’ and at ‘anytime’, yet in which the (racialized) power relations that characterize crime appear as relatively constant and predictable.

Building on Straw’s (2015) observations about the fragmented aesthetic of visual crime reporting, the concept of kaleidoscopic visuality zooms out from individual texts, reports, and events to instead consider the broader visual ecology of crime journalism, keeping in analytical focus both repetition—the usual focus within analyses of mediated criminalization-as-mediated stereotyping—and variation, as both, I argued in Chapter 5, play an important role in how journalistic reconstructions of crime events advance claims about relative social power. In this

way, kaleidoscopic visuality also connects the question of a ‘fragmented aesthetic’ to the politics of representation by highlighting how it is *spatio-temporal fragmentation* specifically that conditions how ‘African gang crime’ events can be imaginatively engaged with, and so imaginatively scaled in terms of historical scope and socio-political meaning.

Returning to the question of how criminalization works through news media representations of crime (RQ1), we can say that a ‘criminalizing’ politics of vulnerability is one that relationally constructs as ‘real’ a version of social power relations in which actors represented as ‘criminal’ are disproportionately powerful not only in the context of specific events (in ‘rupture’) but in society more broadly (in ‘ground’). Criminalization, then, is contingent not only within the representation of power dynamics at play within a given event, but in the meaningful stretching of those power dynamics *beyond* the event—in positioning the event as a testimony of a larger political reality. Kaleidoscopic visuality is, I have proposed, an important means of this symbolic transposition. Through the kaleidoscope, ‘African gang crime’ events testify to their own political conditions of possibility and so are brought to larger historical meaning, both symbolically (in the ‘immediacy’ of representation) and experientially (though the hypermediacy of journalism). The spatial-temporal locations of eventful ruptures (both past and future) are rarely bounded or discrete: rather, they are mediated as reverberating, expansive, and crucially, ever-uncertain. Indeed, it is in the connection of the past-as-represented to the future-as-imagined that the expansive mediated spacetime of ‘African gang crime’ performs criminalizing work. Criminal agency is constructed as relative social power—not only as it operates between individual actors within individual events, but as a historical force, as an engine for social transformation.

From the basis of these observations, we can draw the following two conclusions about what constitutes a ‘criminalizing’ representation, in terms of perceptual realism and the negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition characterized by relative openness to harm. We can say that a criminalizing (regime of) news representation is one which:

- Through the **mediated construction of agency**, offers a selective or partial account of the forms of vulnerability caught up in eventful crime ruptures, so that ‘criminal’ actors are positioned as disproportionately powerful/invulnerable vis-à-vis ordinary citizens and intervening agents (such as police).
- Through the **mediated construction of event spacetime**, contextualizes crime events in such a way as to position (both symbolically and experientially) the selective account of social vulnerability captured within event forms (representations) as being *indicative of*, rather than *anomalous to*, the broader everyday workings of power.

In the specific case of photographic news images as just one type of event form, I have termed these conjoined forms of mediated construction kaleidoscopic visuality. However, they are by no means ‘visual-only’, as perceptual realism can be pursued through a diversity of representational strategies and myriad semiotic modalities. My argument is simply that when the two forms of mediated construction are realized together, they form an essential epistemological basis for negotiating the ‘pragmatic’ justification of crime control practices within the mediated security imaginary: that is, the necessity and/or efficacy of different ways of acting upon the ‘real’ problem of crime. Without them, the pragmatic coherence of crime control practices finds itself under reflexive symbolic pressure. This is because criminalization, as a culturally constituted *logic* of practice, is contingent within the symbolic negotiation (and ultimately, differentiation) of vulnerability as a political condition—as a factually ‘real’ positionality within social power relations. In the case of ‘African gang crime’, this demands a fundamental misrecognition of Black vulnerability and of the character of the relationship between race and power in contemporary Australian life. It relies, in other words, on the imaginative misperception of the ‘African gang crime’ event as an *exercise of dominance*, and so of relative social empowerment.

The account of ‘African gang crime’ as kaleidoscopically visualized through journalism developed in Chapter 5 helps expand our understanding of how criminalization works through news representations in at least two ways. First, it complements existing critiques of criminalization as subject-construction (dominant among ‘construction of criminality’ approaches) by highlighting how mediated representation helps position criminal agency (both symbolically and experientially) as *representative of*, rather than *anomalous to*, everyday power relations. In the visual ecology of ‘African gang crime’ reporting, the ‘criminal’ is representationally construed as a figure of disproportionate coercive power within the unfolding of individual ‘gang crime’ events. Hypermediacy, however, imaginatively spreads this claim beyond the boundaries of the event and into the terrain of ‘uneventful’ everyday life. What cuts through the analyses in Chapter 5 is a specific vision of the political conditions of possibility for gang crime—and so, of vulnerability to criminal harm as a location within everyday power relations. This vision casts Black African boys and men as agents of relative power and violent potential vis-à-vis other citizens, who are in turn cast into a position of ‘real’ vulnerability to injury. Obscured here, of course, is the question of *Black vulnerability* to harm in everyday Australian life and of *whiteness* as a political category (see HoSang, 2010; Phipps, 2020). In other words, a key discursive silence is maintained around vulnerability as a political condition emerging from, and so contingent within, a racist political order. Criminalization is, I propose, supported by an imaginative reconfiguration of the relationship between race and coercive power in contemporary Australian society. Blackness is articulated not only with criminal

deviance and ‘Otherness’, but also with relative social dominance, with an invulnerable *closure* to harm, and so with the implicit necessity of ‘equally’ forceful forms of security intervention. If a ‘decriminalized’ mode of imaginative engagement with the crime event might be to perceive and experience it as (temporally, spatially, politically) discrete and bounded—as an exception to, rather than testimony of, the everyday workings of power—then the concept of kaleidoscopic visibility helps illuminate how and why crime events often resist such an interpretation.

Second, the analysis highlights how the experiential dimension of mediated eventfulness carries implications for the mediated security imaginary—specifically, by cultivating a liminal imaginative space between the certain and uncertain, the known and the unknown, within which criminalization can thrive. The reflexive legitimacy of security interventions, many have observed, flourishes when knowledge and control meet their outer limits (Amoore, 2009; Bigo, 2002; De Goede, 2008; Ericson, 2007). Through the kaleidoscope of visual journalism, the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of ‘African gang crime’ events remain relatively stable and rigidly racialized. There is, in other words, a “fantasy of manageability” (De Goede, 2008, p. 168) maintained around vulnerability as a ‘real’ openness to threat in everyday life, in which the form and figure of that threat appear to be clearly defined and easily recognisable. The ‘where’ and ‘when’ of that threat, however, are mediated as limitless, fluctuating, and (in the case of possible future crime events) ever-uncertain—as officially unknowable. Representations of ‘African gang crime’—as essentially premediations of future eventful ruptures—thus inflect the fantasy of manageability with a hypervigilance towards the unknown, inviting a criminalizing mode of imaginative engagement with social spacetime in which preemptive and anticipatory forms of intervention can appear as politically justified—that is, justified by the ‘true’ character of criminal agency and omnipresence of criminal potential.

### *c) Victimhood and the question of justice*

In the reflexive justification of crime control practices through representation, the question of reality precedes the question of morality; we do not act upon forms of vulnerability that we do not perceive as real, but of those we do perceive as such, we act only on some. Chapter 6 shifted the analytical lens towards the question of vulnerability as a *moral* condition, or as “wrong” openness to harm. Through a close, multi-modal analysis of how first-person testimonies of vulnerability are configured within the mediated reconstruction of ‘African gang crime’ events on television, the analysis uncovered four specific strategies of textual composition and presentation which imbue testimonies of vulnerability with uneven forms of categorical and ideological realism,

placing them in uneven relationships to the question of justice. I termed these strategies *appropriation*, *marginalization*, *subjugation*, and *calculation*. Each allows the voices of criminalized subjects to be officially heard within the reconstruction of crime events on television, yet meaningfully deprioritized in the overall moral politics of vulnerability enacted within and through televisual event forms. They are, in other words, strategies of moral differentiation that help place different vulnerabilities, and different vulnerable subjects, in uneven relationships to the question of justice, and so the question of normative (protective) practice.

While these strategies, as I have formulated them, relate specifically to the multi-modal presentation of first-person testimonies in televisual event forms, they are once again not an exhaustive list nor are they ‘televisual’ or ‘testimonial’ only. Rather, I argued in Chapter 6 that what unites these four strategies is not their specific form, but their broader discursive function: to fortify the moral coherence of crime control by systematically excluding criminalized subjects from participating in the construction of moral meaning around crime events, even under conditions of official inclusion. Returning to RQ1, we can synthesize the findings from Chapter 6 to draw the following initial conclusions about what constitutes a ‘criminalizing’ representation, in terms of categorical and ideological realism and the negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition. These, I propose, are important symbolic conditions of possibility for the reproduction of crime control, cultivated through representation and transposed onto normative background imaginaries of everyday vulnerability. A criminalizing (regime of) news representation is one which:

- Constrains opportunities for **the affective and moral recognition of the vulnerability of criminalized subjects** by limiting the categorical realism of their claims to suffering (or excluding them altogether). These claims include both the forms and registers of vulnerability that historically condition the construction of criminality *and* the forms and registers of vulnerability that are implied *through* criminalization. This, in turn, reinforces the construction of ‘the victim’ and ‘the criminal’ as discrete categories that never overlap.
- **Obscures the moral calculus of criminalization** by systematically closing opportunities for agonistic symbolic encounters between ‘victims’ and the criminalized—and so, for potential ideological dissonance in the mediated reconstruction of crime events and their subjects.
- Establishes a **zero-sum politics of safety and liberty between ‘victims’ and the criminalized**, by positioning disempowerment, suffering, incarceration, and exclusion as irreducible quantities that need to be borne by either the criminalized or by non-criminal

‘innocents’. A moral imaginary is reproduced in which the ‘victim’ suffers *because* ‘the criminal’ does not, and ‘the criminal’ suffers so that the victim doesn’t have to. The *reducibility* of these quantities is thus imaginatively obscured.

At the end of Chapter 6, I proposed that in the case of so-called ‘African gang crime’ and its mediation through the Australian press, the four strategies identified—appropriation, marginalization, subjugation, and calculation—work to cohere and maintain a specific structure of moral justification that I term ‘victimcould’. Drawing on recent critiques of the formation and political operation of ‘white victimhood’ in contemporary public life, I defined ‘victimcould’ as a subjunctive claim to woundedness and loss that epistemologically grounds the “wrongness” of vulnerability not in past or present injury, but in the very possibility of openness to harm. In the texts analysed for this study, victimcould was asserted through two key mechanisms: first, by deploying the language and aesthetics of suffering primarily in the service of *white fearfulness*; and second, by routinely constructing fearfulness as a form of morally intolerable injury to white Australian subjects. By positioning white fearfulness in this way, victimcould obscures the historical circumstances that give rise to the particularities of fear—which in the case of ‘African gang crime’ certainly include the long vilification of asylum-seekers and refugees by Australian press and political elites, as well as the deep history of anti-Black racism in Australian culture. Victimcould is not, therefore, so much an attempt to ‘incite’ white fear as it is a justificatory structure that works by imbuing that fear with a specific and narrow social meaning: one grounded in a felt sense of moral intolerability and largely divorced from questions of power and historical context.

What is the political significance of a subjunctive victimhood that expresses itself in these terms, especially vis-à-vis the reproduction of a criminalizing moral politics of vulnerability? Chapter 6 opened with a quote from Australian Home Affairs minister Peter Dutton, who reported in a radio interview that Melbourne residents were “outraged” and “scared to go out to restaurants of a night-time” because of the threat from so-called African gangs. To illustrate the broader cultural and political resonance of victimcould, however, I’d like to set my sights further afield—geographically, though not historically. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2018, former US President Donald Trump gave an interview to White House reporters in support of then Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh, who was subsequently confirmed to the Supreme Court, stood publicly accused of sexual assault by a former classmate, Christine Blasey Ford. “This is a very scary time for young men in America, where you can be guilty of something you may not be guilty of...” Trump told reporters. “My whole life I’ve heard you’re innocent until proven guilty, now

you're guilty until proven innocent... You could be somebody who was perfect your entire life and somebody could accuse you of something" (CNN, 2018). Trump's reference to his own life here was not 'innocent' in any sense. Accused of sexual assault by no fewer than 15 women himself, he sought to fortify the historical standards for his own innocence as much as for his Supreme Court pick.

This now notorious comment by Trump has been used as a touchstone example for many of the critiques of contemporary victimhood that framed my analysis in Chapter 6 (for example Banet-Weiser, 2021; Chouliaraki, 2020; Phipps, 2020). In many respects, the constructed claims to 'wrong' vulnerability explicated through that analysis—especially, those framing the figure of the white 'crime victim'—appear similarly paradigmatic. We can observe, for example, a mode of victimhood that is explicitly animated by "political whiteness" (Phipps, 2020; discussing HoSang, 2010), or white political supremacy as the imaginative anchor of 'normal' and 'right' political order. In the metaphorization of fear as death and/or incarceration, we can hear intertextual echoes of the "ruined lives" discourses that are increasingly reframing losses of entitlement as forms of injury in order to disarticulate the question of victimhood from the question of relative social power (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Phipps, 2020). And there is, unmistakably, a discourse that 'works with fear' as its primary symbolic resource (Wodak, 2015), anchoring the sense of (implicitly) gendered and (explicitly) racialized aggrievement expressed by 'victim' figures through the ostensibly apolitical language and aesthetics of suffering (King, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2020).

However, the structure of victimcould is subtly different from, and critically supplementary to, the paradigm of white victimhood these authors elucidate and critique. It is revealing but often overlooked, I propose, that Trump described the #MeToo movement as a 'scary' time for men in America, rather than a dangerous one. And that Dutton, to assert the wrongness of so-called 'African gang crime' in Melbourne's suburbs, referenced residents' lack of confidence ('people are scared') rather than lack of safety ('people are in danger'). By attaching suffering (and so, the moral value of the sufferer) to fear rather than injury, victimcould locates the 'wound' of white victimhood in the possibility of harm rather than in harm itself. Just as vulnerability does not require injury to be coherently claimed, fear of injury does not require a basis in political conditions or experiential realities either past ('have you been injured?') or future ('are you likely to be?')—what Chouliaraki calls the 'conditions of the self' (2020, p. 8). When Trump lamented on the White House lawn that a man *could* be perfect, and yet still *could* face allegations of sexual assault or misconduct, the hypotheticality of victimcould excused him from the arbitration of both a) whether or not such a thing was actually likely, empirically speaking; and b) whether or not Kavanaugh, or indeed Trump, bore any actual resemblance to this hypothetical "perfect" man.

The wrongness was in the couldness—as it was when Dutton asserted that Melbournians were afraid to eat dinner in restaurants, or when *The Australian* newspaper labelled Victoria the ‘State of Fear’.

As with vulnerability (Cole, 2016; Gibbs, 2018) and victimhood (Chouliaraki, 2020; Chouliaraki & Banet-Weiser, 2020), the problem with *victimcould* is in its mutability and multivalence. When the “wrongness” of white vulnerability is attached symbolically to the condition of fearfulness, the moral status of the ‘crime victim’ is unhooked from the question of past and present crime realities and instead attached to (imagined) crime futures. Victimhood becomes anticipatory and hypothetical. The ‘wrongness’ of white vulnerability to crime is symbolically indexed to its very possibility—which, crucially, is definitionally true for *all* white subjects, regardless of whether they have actually experienced, are likely to experience, or will ever experience crime victimization. It is, in other words, the prospective temporality of *victimcould* that allows for collective moral identification through whiteness—for white subjects who have not been harmed to identify politically and morally with those who have, taking up their sense of woundedness as their own.

Daniel HoSang describes ‘political whiteness’ as a conceptual category encompassing the “norms, “settled expectation”, and “investments” [that] shape the interpretation of political interests, the boundaries of political communities, and the sources of power for many political actors who understand themselves as white” (HoSang, 2010, p. 20; citing Harris, 1993). The explication of white *victimcould* in Chapter 6 reveals two things about political whiteness (at least, in Australia) concurrently: first, that it is the foundation of the normative ‘security subject’ to whom the rightness of crime control is indexed<sup>40</sup>, and so from whom criminalization derives its moral legitimacy in the Australian context; and second, that *invulnerability*—closure to the very possibility of harm—needs to be understood as one of the “settled expectations” of whiteness in contemporary Australian life, and so key to the social construction of race. The sense of “aggrievement” attached to the white crime victim and articulated through the structure white *victimcould* is (as in most ‘victim’ discourses) grounded in a sense of loss (see Banet-Weiser, 2021; King, 2015). The thing ‘lost’, however, is the sense of being outside the very possibility of subjugation and injury. This is not to suggest that all (or any) white people have ever felt truly immune to harm—hypervigilance to threat and a preoccupation with control are important coagulants of political whiteness (see Phipps, 2020, pp. 68–69; discussing Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Rather, it is to insist that this “loss” needs to be approached as a loss of racialized entitlement,

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<sup>40</sup> Campbell (1998) writes that “Danger is not an objective condition. It [sic] is not a thing that can exist independently of those to whom it may become a threat.” (p.1).

which in turn takes white political supremacy as its normative referent (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Phipps, 2020, pp. 76–81). By working through the structure of victimcould, the sense of white aggrievement that informs the criminalization of Black African migrants in Australia is able to resist scrutiny so long as the *possibility* of injury remains. The ‘wrongness’ of white vulnerability, in other words, overdetermines the question of its ‘realness’.

In light of this critique, and in contribution to RQ1, I propose we can add the following forms of ‘criminalizing’ mediated construction to those developed earlier in this section. Based on the analysis in Chapter 6, I propose that a criminalizing (regime of) news representation is one which:

- **Flattens the question of vulnerability’s ‘wrongness’ by rendering it through the language and aesthetics of suffering.** This erodes imaginative and discursive space for the political differentiation of different kinds of openness to harm<sup>41</sup>, and so for ordinary critique of the *historical conditions* of white fearfulness and how they might be consequential for its relationship to the question of justice (and so, normative practice).
- **Reinscribes invulnerability as one of the ‘settled’ normative expectations of whiteness** by perpetuating ‘victimcould’ and positioning fear of crime as existentially threatening and morally intolerable—as a moral basis for security action in its own right.

#### *d) Justification and the question of practice*

Having explored the mediated construction of ‘realness’ in Chapter 5 and ‘wrongness’ in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 sought to elucidate how these constructs might be consequential for the reflexive justification of practices—that is, of certain ways of acting on or responding to the ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerabilities caught up in crime events. While the first two chapters used close textual analysis to explicate vulnerability politics as symbolic struggle, Chapter 7 deconstructed specific practices represented within textual crime event forms to illuminate how a symbolic politics of vulnerability functions as a *practical epistemology of justification*, or as a justificatory basis for action.

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<sup>41</sup> I am indebted for this phrasing to Mike King (2015), who describes the cultural consequences of ‘white aggrievement’ as follows: “As this postmodern dialectic of mythical scapegoats and the demand for racial justice for white America progresses, a new white supremacy is being constructed that not only opposes efforts at racial justice, but fundamentally erodes the political and discursive space upon which actual, materialist claims about racial inequality can even be coherently expressed.” (King, 2015, p. 92). This ‘fundamental erosion’ is, in my terminology, a narrowing of the security imaginary.

My rationale for this line of enquiry was twofold. First, my epistemological approach (detailed in Chapters 3 and 4) is committed to the idea that all forms of social practice (including crime control practices) are at least partly contingent in the reflexivity of their discursive moment, and so in their discursive construction through and across acts of representation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). What we do, in other words, is substantively conditioned by *why we do it*, and ‘why’ is a question we resolve in practices of language. Second, while I have positioned ‘real’ and ‘wrong’ vulnerabilities as the epistemological basis for the justification of crime control, the justificatory relationship between a mediated politics of vulnerability and specific ways of acting on vulnerability is not automatic nor pre-determined. There can be, for example, broad consensus that the forms of vulnerability associated with poverty are both real and wrong, and yet people can still have profoundly divergent ideas about what the practical responses to poverty ought to be. Criminalization is in the final instance about the justification of some practices *rather than* others—usually, those which involve coercive and punitive management of the harms associated with capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, rather than those which might constitute meaningful care or contribute to social transformation. Understanding how criminalization works through a mediated politics of vulnerability, then, requires in the final instance considering how practices of crime control are positioned in representation vis-à-vis vulnerability as the epistemological basis for their justification. This is the positioning work that the analysis in Chapter 7 sought to deconstruct for three prevalent forms of practical response to ‘African gang crime’: policing and incarceration; citizen vigilantism; and punitive deportation and border control.

Guided by AQ3, the analysis in Chapter 7 understood justification to be implicated in and by a mediated politics of vulnerability in two important ways. First, the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition or as ‘real’ openness to harm (Chapter 5) is consequential for *pragmatic justification*, which relates to the constructed necessity and/or efficacy of a given practice. Second, the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition or as ‘wrong’ openness to harm (Chapter 6) is consequential for the *moral justification*, which relates to the constructed rightness and/or justness of a given practice. This framework proposes that in representations of ‘African gang crime’ and its management, necessity, efficacy, rightness, and justness are questions that demand answers in order for specific practical responses to be reflexively reproduced as ‘justified’. A symbolic politics of vulnerability provides the epistemological basis for the answers that representations of policing, vigilantism, and deportation/border control must seek to provide for these questions in order to maintain pragmatic and moral coherence.

The analysis in Chapter 7 highlighted a variety of specific justificatory strategies that work within and through representations of ‘African gang crime’ events to position each of policing and

incarceration, citizen vigilantism, and deportation and border control as pragmatically and morally justifiable responses to ‘crime’. Rather than rehashing each of these strategies here, however, I want to instead focus on two key insights that unfolded across the explication of these strategies. Both were briefly touched on at the end of Chapter 7, without being elaborated in full.

The first is that, through the deconstruction of policing, vigilantism, and punitive deportation, we can see many of the same criminalizing constructs elucidated across Chapters 5 and 6 (and summarized in the two sections above) at work in justification—and so, glimpse how these different practical responses to ‘African gang crime’ are reflexively conditioned by shared justificatory logics: the logics of criminalization. Both citizen vigilantism and punitive deportation, for example, derive some of their sense of moral justification from a zero-sum imaginary of vulnerability to violence, in which such vulnerability is reflexively positioned as an irreducible quantity that must be borne by either Black African ‘migrants’ or (white) Australian ‘citizens’. Similarly, both policing and citizen vigilantism derive some of their sense of pragmatic justification from an imaginary in which Black African vulnerabilities (for example, those associated with asylum-seeking) are symbolically appropriated to the task of authenticating the perceptual realism of *white* vulnerability to harm in the context of Black African migration. Overwhelmingly, though, the thing most common across the strategies of justification examined in Chapter 7 is a consistent overdetermination of the pragmatic dimension of justification with the moral, in the same vein as the structure of victimhood explicated in Chapter 6. The question of the necessity and/or efficacy of such practices, in other words, is consistently subjugated to the question of their rightness and/or justness, with the achievement of ideological coherence around practices of crime control more firmly grounded in categorical, rather than perceptual, forms of representational realism vis-à-vis the ‘problem’ of vulnerability to which such practices ostensibly respond.

Together, these observations help demonstrate the critical utility of the ‘mediated security imaginary’ as a framework for understanding and interrogating how criminalization works through representational media. While the forms of practice deconstructed in Chapter 7 are disparate in form and take place in different institutional contexts, their cultural justification is cultivated in and through a *shared* imaginary of what vulnerability means and wants in contemporary Australian society. They are, in other words, meaningfully co-implicated, not only in terms of their macro-political function but in terms of their symbolic conditions of possibility. Any attempt to dismantle the normative foundations of crime control practices will therefore inevitably need to go beyond the question of institutional symbolic power to instead understand (and then, disrupt) the basic cultural mechanics of criminalization as the justificatory framework all such practices have in common and so mutually require. When we consider that another clear ‘red line’ through the

analysis in Chapter 7 is that very nearly all the justificatory strategies discussed therein deploy racial difference as their basic organizing principle, we can also begin to appreciate how the ‘mediated security imaginary’ approach might be a compatible and productive supplement to the ‘construction of criminality’ approach that currently dominates research into mediated criminalization. Both of these points have implications for *decriminalization* as a normative political horizon—an argument I will return to later in this chapter.

A second, and related, insight from Chapter 7 is one that complicates, rather than simply confirms, my early redescription of criminalization as a mediated politics of vulnerability. As discussed at the end of Chapter 7, the analyses of the justificatory strategies framing policing and incarceration, citizen vigilantism, and punitive deportation/border control, make abundantly clear that necessity, efficacy, rightness, and justness are in fact *normative*, rather than *actual*, criteria for the achievement of justification through representation. By this, I mean that the symbolic strategies used to position these practices as pragmatically and morally justifiable responses to so-called ‘African gang crime’ events just as often *evade* these criteria as they meet them. In the case of policing, for example, ‘de facto proportionality’ and ‘forced perspective’ are not so much representations of police necessity so much as strategies for *reconfiguring the very question of necessity* so that pragmatic justification might evade it. Moral overdetermination, as discussed above, is also a strategy of evasion; to use the example of policing once again, in the discourse of protection explicated in Chapter 7 the asserted ‘rightness’ of protection (“*People should be protected*”) helps representations of policing elide closer scrutiny of the *pragmatic* question of protection—that is, the question of whether policing is in fact, or ever can be, a substantively ‘protective’ practice.

What is the utility of my proposed analytics of mediated vulnerability politics vis-à-vis the question of criminalization, then, if the justification of crime control practices can find ways to symbolically sustain itself even when the criteria of necessity, efficacy, rightness, and justness are not, or cannot be, all ‘met’ in the act of representation? As with all normative frameworks, its ultimate value is in providing a rubric for critique. When we go looking for representations of police efficacy in news reports about ‘African gang crime’, for example, we routinely find them to be lacking. Similarly, in the case of deportation and border control, narrative tropes like the ‘fleeing family’ and the ‘incarcerated citizen’ harness the moral wrongness of these conditions (displacement and incarceration) to contradictorily assert the moral *justness* of these same conditions for Black African migrants: a moral paradox that only makes sense through the prism of political whiteness. This and other strategies explicated in Chapter 7 are justificatory workarounds for these gaping representational silences and obvious incongruities—but they are fragile symbolic achievements, and consequently highly susceptible to symbolic disruption. My

proposed analytics of mediated vulnerability politics is therefore helpful not only for understanding how criminalization as a specific justificatory regime is cohered through the negotiation of vulnerabilities in and across acts of representation, but also for illuminating the symbolic *fault lines* of justification, and so crime control's most profound points of normative instability. This, again, has implications for the horizon of *decriminalization*, which I turn to in the following section.

## Mediating Imaginability: Implications for Theory and Practice

This thesis has sought to extend our understanding of how criminalization works through (news) media in several ways. While some of these contributions have already been elucidated above, below I offer a brief overview of what I believe are the most important implications, stemming from my analysis, for future work on mediated (de)criminalization, both as a scholarly sub-field and as a critical project in which scholars are just one group of interlocutors among many others.

### *a) The mediated security imaginary: a new critical heuristic*

The first major theoretical contribution of the thesis has been to develop, and then demonstrate, the 'mediated security imaginary' as a new analytical heuristic for critical research. Rather than substituting the 'construction of criminality' approach explored and critiqued in Chapter 2, the mediated security imaginary approach expands it by providing a framework for critical inquiry into a far wider set of symbolic circumstances. In this way, it offers a radically expanded understanding of what it means to 'criminalize' in and through representation—one capable of informing much more fundamental (rather than incidental) critiques of criminalization as a resilient, but ultimately arbitrary, logic of contemporary social and political life.

As the analysis has hopefully made clear, the mediated security imaginary is not so much a thing to be described as it is *itself* a way of describing that draws analytical attention somewhat away from securitizing or criminalizing speech acts and instead towards the 'background' symbolic conditions required for the legitimate reproduction of organized practices of violence—to the symbolic maintenance of a version of the social world within which crime control practices can 'make sense' as something we call security. This approach invites the question: how are we required to perceive, imagine, and morally relate to the problem of vulnerability in everyday life in order for a given practice, or set of practices, to seem pragmatically and morally sensical? To guide critical intervention, it then asks: how are these imaginative 'prerequisites' primed in and through acts of

mediated representation, especially of events in which questions of (relative) vulnerability come into play?

Not only does the mediated security imaginary offer a novel theoretical elaboration of the relationship between different ways of representing crime and different possibilities for acting upon it, its explication across this thesis has also helped distil a concrete framework for future research in the form of my proposed ‘three-dimensional’ analytics of mediated vulnerability politics (see Chapters 3 and 4). The construction of ‘realness’ (vulnerability as a political condition), ‘wrongness’ (vulnerability as a moral condition), and ‘justice’ (vulnerability as a practical epistemology of justification) are dimensions of the symbolic achievement of criminalization through representation. However, they are also constitutive of the ‘logic of security’ more broadly, and so may be taken up as a guiding heuristic for other critiques of mediated justification as it relates to different organized practices of (state) violence, exclusion, and domination. In this way, the thesis has developed a rich set of conceptual and analytical tools for future studies of both mediated criminalization specifically and mediated (in)security more generally—tools which help illuminate crime control’s deepest points of cultural stabilization, and the forms of symbolic work required for their maintenance or disruption.

*b) Mediation as a core concept for critical criminology and critical security studies*

Second, and relatedly, the analysis across this thesis offers an account of why (and how) mediation needs to be understood as a basic condition of possibility for ‘security’ as a social logic, and so criminalization as one of its manifestations. While firmly eschewing media determinism—or the idea that criminalization is ‘media only’—the analysis makes clear that the mediated encounter with the crime event is multiply significant to cultivating a ‘criminalizing’ imagination of whether such events have something important to say about the banal ‘ground’ of everyday political life from which they emerge. In Chapter 5, for example, the question of (constructed) social spacetime was positioned as absolutely fundamental to the construction of vulnerability as a political condition, or as ‘real’ openness to harm. The mediated ‘remixing’ of crime event spacetime was, in turn, emphasized as critical to the achievement of a fluctuating and expansive sense of political and historical significance around individual incidents of crime. Only *across* the intertextual mediation of crime events, rather than within them, is it possible to understand why such events resist discrete social contextualization and/or desecuritized interpretations—and so, too, to understand how they criminalize. Similarly, Chapter 6 uncovered some of the kinds of symbolic work required to build and maintain hierarchies of moral (in)tolerability between different forms and registers of

vulnerability and suffering, finding that it was the simultaneous achievement *and* obfuscation of this symbolic work that imbued such hierarchies with ideological resilience. In this way, the analysis foregrounded a dialectic between immediacy (i.e., emotionally evocative representations of suffering) and hypermediacy (i.e., the disparate multi-modal presentation and overall ordering of such representations within event forms as curated media texts) as critical to the achievement of ideological closure around the wrongness of ‘white victimhood’ even under official conditions of inclusive visibility and multivocality.

Cutting through these observations and others across the thesis is therefore an implicit argument about why ‘mediation’ needs to be taken up as a core concept in critical security studies and critical criminology. Both these research traditions have firm roots in discourse analytic theories and methods, on the one hand, and an established empirical interest in ‘the media’ as cultural institutions, on the other. However, the question of mediation as an important *context* for contemporary (crime and insecurity) discourses has been largely overlooked by both, with the notable exception of research which approaches ‘mediation’ as a process of institutionalization. In that regard, there are already rich bodies of work considering how perceptions of crime, justice and (in)security may be conditioned by and through the institutional conditions and logics of specific spheres of media production, such as the press (for example Bock, 2021; Koumouris & Blaustein, 2021) and entertainment media (for example Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Colbran, 2014; Turnbull, 2010). However, my own analysis implores that we also consider ‘mediation’ in much more fundamental terms—as a force that structures and reconfigures both perceptions and experiences of the social world (for example, through the distancing of social space and time, or through the representational dialectic of immediacy and hypermediacy), and so one deeply consequential to how we may imagine (in)security in ways that include, but are certainly not limited to, the question of institutionalized communicative practice. Many of the imaginative elements that the analysis has positioned as critical to the symbolic coherence of criminalization—our imagined sense of history and futurity, of proximity and distance, of eventfulness, immediacy, and agency—are significantly contingent upon the mediated encounter with our own social context. They are, in other words, modes of engagement with the social world that practices of mediated communication are uniquely suited to facilitate.

While this thesis has centred mediation as an important analytical concept for studies of criminalization, (in)security, and (in)justice, it has only skimmed the surface of what mediation entails in the present moment for our perceptions and experiences of the social. Social media, datafication, and algorithmic communication, for example, have all been left outside my critique of mediation criminalization, but are undeniably fundamental to how the temporal, spatial, and

intersubjective dimensions of social life are presently experienced and ‘made experienceable’ in contemporary societies – and so, to how imaginaries of insecurity are evoked, negotiated, and maintained in the current moment. For this reason, I certainly do not position this thesis as a totalizing account of how mediation ought to figure as a theoretical and conceptual tool in constructivist criminological and security research. Rather, the analysis supports a more general argument about the need for deeper engagement between these fields of research and the field of media and communications. The latter’s insistence on placing discourses (including practices of representation) within their material, institutional and technological contexts can help guide future critiques of security and crime control practices by drawing critical attention towards how changes not only in discourse but in the *conditions of possibility for discourse* (i.e., changes in media) can in turn imply changes in possibility for how we come to imagine, envision, and practice something called ‘security’ in the contemporary social life.

c) *‘Victimcould’ and the contemporary politics of the victim*

In developing the concept of ‘victimcould’, my analysis also makes an important intervention into the proliferating critical literature on the contemporary uses of victimhood in societies marked by systemic racism, gender inequality, and profound economic injustice. This literature has positioned the contemporary popular embrace of (usually white, often male) victimhood as a reactive force vis-à-vis the (steady, if modest; normative, if not actual) destabilization of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation that justice movements have secured since the turn of the century. Many authors have foregrounded claims to woundedness (for example Banet-Weiser, 2021; Chouliaraki, 2020; Phipps, 2021), arguing that (often highly mediated) spectacles of suffering and discourses of injury and loss can work to distract from the question of *where* suffering comes from, of *what* is lost, and so of the relationship between suffering, injury, power, and (in)justice. By exploring the justificatory uses of the figure of the white crime victim and explicating the communicative structure of ‘victimcould’, my own analysis complicates and augments these critiques by drawing attention to the importance of *imagined futurity* in a contemporary politics of victimhood. While most critiques have focussed on how powerful actors advance claims to past or present injury to position themselves as ‘victims’, *victimcould* puts a name to a specific type of claim to woundedness that indexes itself to an imagined, as-yet-unarrived future, which the exceptional and hypermediated spectacle of crime purportedly prefigures. This is an anticipatory mode of victimhood that divorces itself from empirical accountability to present political realities, including those of systemic racism, patriarchy, and white political and economic supremacy.

The concept of ‘victimcould’ can enrich emerging critiques of the (mediated) politics of victimhood in at least three important ways. First, it complicates the idea that victimhood necessarily requires epistemic footing in a claim to injury, or to having been harmed. While crime victims are certainly injured subjects, my analysis found that the ‘wrongness’ of their victimization is often articulated subjunctively through the language of fear. In this way, white victimcould can *evade* the question of woundedness to instead ground wrongness (and so, the moral status of the victim) in the possibility of *future* injury—which, crucially, need not be demonstrated or empirically substantiated in the present realities of the white subject.

Second, and relatedly, the concept of victimcould offers a heuristic for understanding how a mediated politics of victimhood may feed into and shape the social construction of whiteness in the present historical moment, at the very least in Australia. My critique has proposed that it is precisely the subjunctivity of ‘victimcould’ (rather than simple victimhood) that invites and authorizes uninjured white spectators to identify morally and politically with ‘injured’ crime victims—to feel ‘wronged’ without having yet been harmed. This is because the ‘wrongness’ of white victimcould is attached to the *couldness* of white injury, which discursive representations of white fearfulness evocatively premeditate. In this way, the concept of victimcould foregrounds *invulnerability* as one of ‘settled expectations’ of the political whiteness that our contemporary politics of victimhood works to symbolically restore and fortify. The inherent futurity in the very concept of ‘security’ makes representations of security threats (including but not limited to crime) ideal sites for the articulation ‘victimcould’ discourses. However, the concept can easily extend for critique of any claim to victimhood which mobilizes the language and affects of fearfulness-as-suffering in order to establish a sense of moral intolerability around one’s *openness* to harm rather than actuality or even likelihood of one’s injury—in turn, to maintain a sense of moral legitimacy around anticipatory and pre-emptive forms of practical intervention geared towards the maintenance of existing political arrangements, and so the scuppering of political transformation. Several areas of potential application come to mind, which I will return to in my concluding discussion of possible directions for future research.

Finally, my explication of the communicative structure of ‘victimcould’ offers a new slant on not only on the contemporary uses of victimism but also the contemporary uses of fearfulness. In this way, it makes a critical intervention into writing on the *politics of fear* in the current historical conjuncture. Many scholars have richly demonstrated how fear can serve as a primary resource for regressive political projects, such as those opposing immigration, race and gender justice, redistributive economics, and key civil rights and liberties for marginalized groups (Wodak, 2015; see also Burke, 2008; Simon, 2007; Gale, 2004). The overwhelming majority of this research,

however, treats ‘fear’ primarily as an emotional and/or affective resource: as something which is *evoked, invited, or cultivated* by the discourses of such projects, especially towards marginalized Others. However, in the case of ‘African gang crime’, the construction of white ‘victimcould’ works not so much to incite fear (fear as emotion) as to imbue fear with a specific and necessarily narrowed sense of historical and political significance (fear as meaning). In criminalization, the question of whether or not people feel afraid eclipses the question of where fear comes from, and so what fear actually *means* in social terms and what it needs (or, does *not* need) from ‘just’ social practice. Consequently, the concept of victimcould calls on critics of fearfulness and its political uses to maintain analytical awareness of fear not only as an emotion or affect but as a discursive construct: as a thing with (always unsettled, and so always ambivalent and transformable) meaning. It cannot be taken for granted that the primary political function of a discourse of fear (intended or actual) is to simply evoke the condition it normatively constructs, nor that those who subscribe to political projects grounded in a politics of fear are necessarily afraid.

In the mediation of ‘African gang crime’, I found that a discourse of fear worked primarily not to implore fearfulness (*you should be afraid*) but to support the structure of victimcould—and so the moral intolerability of white vulnerability—by giving fear a specific significance (*your fear is wrong and should be alleviated*). We might therefore conclude that the critique and ultimate undoing of the kind of politics of fear that supports regressive political agendas may consequently require finding ways to intervene into and transform the *social meaning* of fear as much to minimize its societal prevalence. This may mean cultivating a sense of moral acceptability around those forms of fearfulness that emerge from the destabilization of domination. It may also mean finding ways to symbolically parse different types of fearfulness—for example, the Black African fear of police brutality, on the one hand, from the white fear of crime, on the other—in ways that resist symbolic collapse and draw attention to their disparate historical contexts and uneven demands for moral attention. In any case, it must be held firmly in mind that a discourse of fear can perform a much broader repertoire of symbolic functions than the simple evocation of fearfulness, and indeed can have profound political significance *without* the (re)production of actual fear. The question of whether or not people are afraid of crime may be less significant to criminalization than the question of what people think their fear of crime means and wants.

#### *d) Decriminalization and abolition: directives for media scholars and practitioners*

This thesis has focussed on the question of how news media criminalize, and so has kept the question of what ought to be done about criminalization necessarily at the margins of its narrative.

However, in adopting an abolitionist ethic to guide critique, the analysis has been firmly orientated towards the horizon of *decriminalization*, to which I will now turn more explicitly. Of course, the question of how media do, can, or might decriminalize has not been my analytical focus here. However, in expanding and then crystalizing some of the key forms of symbolic achievement that constitute a ‘criminalizing’ (regime of) news representation (see Summary of Findings), the analysis provides hints as to what decriminalization—and by extension, the project of abolition—might need from journalism and from media. These hints can help guide future scholarly critiques of both mainstream and alternative practices of reporting on crime and justice (such as citizen witnessing on social media, or grassroots journalism). They also offer important directives for the media and communication strategies of people working for decriminalization in their communities.

Abolition is the collective material project of unmaking crime control practices, their attendant institutions, and the social and economic structures that have fostered their expansion. It requires cultivating ways of ‘doing’ safety and justice that are fundamentally committed to the transformability of harm, and so which reject both the practical inevitability and moral retrievability of policing and prisons. Decriminalization, as I have framed it, is the symbolic auxiliary to that project. It requires the *cultural* unmaking of criminalization as the justificatory structure that supports the reproduction of crime control practices and institutions. Abolitionist writing does not often place media at the centre of the question of (de)criminalization, as criminalization is understood within that tradition to have primarily economic drivers and imperatives. However, this is not to say that there has not been a considerable preoccupation within such writing with the idea that abolition must also be a project of thought—of changing minds as well as material conditions. Frequently, this preoccupation manifests in abolitionist writing through the motif of imagination: specifically, the question of how to nurture the *imaginability* of a decriminalized world (see, for examples, Davis, 2005, 2003; Murakawa, Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Kilroy, 2018; Kaba, 2021).

Abolitionist writers—most of them grounded in Black Marxist, Black feminist, and/or Indigenous intellectual traditions—have tended to approach the problem of ‘imaginability’ prefiguratively: that is, as something to be cultivated through the *doing* of abolitionist work. Their argument is that in fostering the kinds of institutions, collective practices, and networks of care that might *replace* policing and prisons, we enhance our capacity to recognize their inherent harms and so to imagine a ‘safe’ and ‘just’ world without them (Kaba, 2021). My own approach to the question of imaginability—which understands it to be contingent within a mediated politics of vulnerability—certainly does not contradict this vision. However, it does gesture to the possibility of media, and specifically practices of news media representation, having a much more important

role to play in cultivating the imaginability of abolition (and so, decriminalization) than is usually afforded in current scholarship. Of course, my research findings are by no means a prescription of how to ‘do’ decriminalizing journalism. Rather, they sketch some of the specific types of symbolic work that a decriminalizing (regime of) news representation of crime would essentially need to challenge, undo, or remake in order to reconfigure the politics of vulnerability that informs criminalization. In this way, they help shed light on what a decriminalizing—or, at the very least, less criminalizing—mode of journalistic storytelling about crime and its management would need to look like.

As regards the contingency of (de)criminalization within the negotiation of vulnerability as a political condition (that is, as ‘real’ openness to harm) we can ask: what kinds of alternative representational practices could help *break* the ‘kaleidoscopic’ mode of reportage explicated in Chapter 5? Having distilled the two precise forms of representational construction necessary for its function (see p. 179) we can illuminate two possible pathways to its potential unmaking, and so to how crime events might be mediated through journalism in less criminalizing ways. Based on these two findings, I propose that a decriminalizing (regime of) news representation of crime might be one that:

- Resists narrow, repetitive, and often profoundly racialized accounts of the forms of vulnerability caught up in the events we call ‘crime’. This requires ***broadening and complexifying*** how news representations account for the question of relative agency between different actors caught up in crime events—especially, in ways that support the perceptual realism of the forms openness to harm that being marked as ‘criminal’ necessarily implies and from which the practices we call ‘criminality’ often emerge.
- Constrains and/or stabilizes the constructed spacetime of mediated crime events by **communicating and drawing attention to the *limits* of crime event significance** vis-à-vis ordinary or ‘uneventful’ distributions of power and capacities for harm and coercion in everyday life, especially as these are racialized, gendered, and classed.

Given the intensity of journalism’s historical and deeply institutionalized preoccupation with crime and the profound hypermediacy of much crime event reportage, these forms of ‘decriminalizing’ symbolic work may demand some deeper reflection on the extent of crime’s newsworthiness and so the normative basis for (at least some) crime reporting. Most fundamentally, however, it will require finding ways to cultivate representational practices which support (rather than obscure or undermine) the perceptual realism of the vulnerability of criminalized subjects—indeed, of

‘criminality’ as often an *expression of* vulnerability and criminalization as often an entrenchment of structured social harm.

In terms of the contingency of (de)criminalization within the symbolic negotiation of vulnerability as a moral condition (that is, as ‘wrong’ openness to harm) the analysis and findings highlight several important symbolic tasks. Decriminalizing our imaginations of security futures will require, in the first instance, a confrontation with the criminalizing politics of vulnerability—the kind which makes its arbitrariness explicit and reveals race as its most basic ordering principle. Inevitably, this implies a confrontation with how and why we come to view some forms of openness to violence and injury as morally intolerable and others as permissible within, even conducive to, a ‘safe’ and ‘just’ society. Having distilled five of the precise forms of symbolic work that a criminalizing *moral* politics of vulnerability requires (see p. 182 and p. 185-186), I can suggest that a decriminalizing (regime of) crime news representation needs to be one which:

- Fosters opportunities for the **affective and moral recognition** of the vulnerabilities of criminalized subjects by representing their stories (and the claims to vulnerability embedded therein) with the kind of categorical and ideological realism usually reserved for the suffering of crime victims. Decriminalizing representations must also resist treating ‘criminals’ and their ‘victims’ as discrete categories, as it is members of criminalized populations who are also most likely to be the victims of criminalized harms.
- Reveals and even foregrounds the moral calculus inherent to criminalization by opening opportunities in representation for **agonistic symbolic encounters** between victims of crime and those made more vulnerable by our efforts to ‘control’ or ‘manage’ criminality—and so, for ideological dissonance around practices like policing and incarceration.
- Resists a zero-sum politics of safety and liberty between ‘victims’ and the criminalized by refusing to represent disempowerment, suffering, incarceration, and social exclusion as irreducible quantities that need to be borne by someone more or less ‘deserving’ of them. Decriminalizing representations must, in other words, tell stories about crime in ways committed to the **reducibility of suffering and domination**, and so to the ultimately inessential character of state practices of caging, punishment, injury, and civic exclusion.
- Cultivates imaginative and discursive space for the **differentiation of different forms and registers of vulnerability**, especially in terms of their historical conditions of possibility and their implications for (in)equality and (in)justice.

- Subverts a naturalized normative relationship between whiteness and invulnerability, and so **challenges the justificatory significance of white ‘victimhood’**. This should, in turn, foster opportunities for an ordinary critique of ‘fearfulness’ as a self-evident basis for security action.

The discussion in Chapter 7 outlined some of the justificatory discourses and representational strategies by which news accounts of policing, citizen vigilantism, and punitive deportation evade the very forms of justificatory pressure that the journalism of criminal justice ought to be enforcing. Decriminalizing representation, then, will principally require resisting these tropes. However, the insights above about what a decriminalized security imaginary might need from practices of representation also help reveal the critical limits of some of the representational practices that we might intuitively think of as ‘decriminalizing’. One strategy that I frequently observed when collecting texts for this study, for example, was that of symbolic recuperation: representational efforts to form more ‘positive’ and/or humanizing symbolic attachments around the Black African migrant through stories celebrating achievements in education, community activism, or professional life. While not without value, this approach eschews the question of crime’s social meaning altogether and instead construes criminalization only as a mode of Othering. As such, it offers no meaningful challenge to the logic of criminalization itself—only to its broad and indiscriminate application to *all* Black African youth. It also walks dangerously close to the kind of subjective proxification I critiqued in Chapter 5, and so naturalizes the exclusion of ‘criminal’ actors themselves from the mediated reconstruction of crime through the news.

The findings also add important caveats to the proliferating literature on “copwatching” and citizen witnessing of police, in terms of their capacity to meaningfully ‘decriminalize’ through representation. The focus within these practices (and the scholarly literature about them) is on visibilizing spectacles of violence and abuses of power, as a means of fostering accountability for individual police officers and agencies, on the one hand, and of complicating and/or disrupting the dominant narratives of, and cultural myths about, the police institution, on the other (see, for example, Bock, 2016, 2018; Richardson, 2017). Given what I have argued here about the need for news media representations to visibilize (with categorical and ideological force) the forms of vulnerability and suffering wrought by the practices we call ‘crime control’, these types of representational work have obvious merit and importance. They can also produce and circulate important forms of visual evidence, and so can ‘decriminalize’ in the most literal of senses.

However, the political stakes of these practices vis-à-vis the horizon of cultural decriminalization are tempered by my own assertion that criminalization is stabilized by our

*background* imaginaries of *everyday* vulnerability in both its political and moral dimensions—and so, ultimately contingent in iterative and banal accounts of crime control functioning ‘as it should’. A decriminalizing journalism cannot be exclusively focussed on exceptional abuses of power or on the most visually arresting forms of violence—that is, policing ‘going wrong’. Rather, it is our imaginaries of routine policing—policing ‘going right’—that are in most urgent need of symbolic disruption. An important task, going forward, is to cultivate the kinds of representational practices—both within news media and beyond it—that open unexceptional, everyday crime control practices to ordinary critical scrutiny. We need, in other words, a profoundly reconfigured symbolic politics of vulnerability that can challenge the very coherence of ‘criminality’ as the dominant frame through which we perceive, diagnose, and act upon, threats to social order and justice—principally, by surfacing in representation its already-existing pragmatic failures and normative contradictions.

## Directions for Future Scholarship

This thesis has attempted to think through the problem of cultural criminalization and the significance of news media representations therein in a new way, and to develop a set of theoretical and conceptual tools for those seeking to critique mediated criminalization in fundamental, rather than incidental, terms. This concluding discussion has sought to make a clear case for the critical utility of the specific story I have told here about the criminalizing potential of crime journalism. However, this is not to say that this story—and the empirical project that gave rise to it—are not without limitations. I have tried to acknowledge and address most of these limitations in the discussion of my methodological design (Chapter 4), specifically by being as explicit as possible about the epistemological foundations of my approach to the question of ‘how media criminalize’ and so the limited empirical scope of both my analysis and its findings. However, other limitations constitute important future directions for research and critique. I conclude the thesis by briefly discussing these here, alongside some other lines of future inquiry that, though not necessarily emerging from ‘limitations’ of the present study per se, nonetheless may warrant future scholarly attention.

First, and most obviously, in focussing on the question of *how* media criminalize my analysis has been detached from the question of scale, or of *how much*. This is a purposeful limitation, as the question of ‘how much’ would have implied an entirely different study—indeed, a study that more closely resembles much of the existing scholarship on the question of how news media help construct ‘criminality’, and the criminality of Black African youth in Australia in particular (see Keel et al., 2021). However, having deeply explored the question of ‘how’ in this thesis in order to

explicate a range of specific justificatory strategies that support criminalization in and through news representations of crime and its management—for example, those detailed in Chapter 7—a productive route for future research would be to explore the extent to which these strategies dominate reporting on crime across different publications and mediums. Such research might involve a comparative approach to case selection (i.e., looking at how justificatory strategies mutate for different types of ‘crime’ or different groups of criminalized people). It may also consider to what extent (and crucially, by what means) counter-discourses of crime and its management—such as those of activists, or of different types of news publications—are fostering ideological dissonance around criminalization in specific cases or complicating justification by symbolically undermining the kind of mediated politics of vulnerability that I have argued here works to imbue crime control practices with their pragmatic and moral self-appearance. By distilling some of the precise semiotic features of these justificatory strategies, my findings may help guide the design of larger scale, more empirically complex, and perhaps more quantitative studies in the future, and enrich such studies with essential qualitative depth.

A second limitation is that my narrative has been crafted from a close analysis of journalistic *texts* only, and so has necessarily elided the day-to-day work of the journalists who ‘do’ crime reporting, as well as the conditions of their work. The institutional, economic, technological, historical, and/or embodied dimensions of contemporary journalistic practice that might be giving rise to the specific types of criminalizing symbolic construction that I have critiqued here are therefore firmly outside the scope of my methodological approach. Similarly, while the analysis has illuminated the contours of what a less criminalizing mode of crime news storytelling might look like in terms of representation, it does not equip me to evaluate the practicability of producing such alternative representations within contemporary news organizations. The question of *why* news media criminalize, in other words, is also marginal in my narrative. Answering that question will require research within such organizations and with the people who produce journalistic representations of crime, using ethnographic methodologies (such as participant observation and/or interviews) to explore which changes in the conditions of journalistic work might be required for journalism to place more substantive pressure on the justificatory regimes of crime control practices. While some recent studies have productively adopted this alternative methodological approach to explore crime reporting in terms of its consequences for the reproduction of crime narratives or ideological force of criminal justice institutions (see, for example, Bock, 2021; Koumouris & Blaustein, 2021), this thesis—and especially, its theorization of the mediated security imaginary and its attendant politics of vulnerability—offers tools for

future ethnographic research aiming to critique crime reporting practices and their criminalizing potential in much more essential terms.

A third important direction for future scholarship is to broaden, both theoretically and empirically, how the concept of ‘mediation’ is understood and deployed in critiques of crime and security. While I have centred mediation here, my treatment of it as an analytical category has been narrow: I have looked only at mainstream journalism, only at three types of journalistic text (print news, nightly news television, and current affairs television), and have only conceptualized the significance of mediation vis-à-vis the social functioning of discourse in terms of textual materiality and its implications for time-space distancing, intertextuality, and multi-modal representational practices. Future research may take the concept of a ‘mediated security imaginary’ and explore its potential applications in other spheres of mediated interaction and world-making: especially, social media, which is undoubtedly significant to how ‘background’ imaginaries of vulnerability (in both its political and moral dimensions) are being negotiated in the present moment. Such applications will likely add nuance and texture to the starting theorization I have offered. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my intention here has been to emphasize and then demonstrate the centrality of mediation and the ‘mediated’ character of contemporary discourses to many of the most critical elements in the symbolic constitution of something we call (in)security: especially, social spacetime, intersubjective morality, and our officially limitless yet always actually limited capacities to imagine worlds otherwise.

Indeed, several of the key concepts and theoretical tools developed in this thesis are suited to and warrant much wider application than this one case study or even criminalization as just one iteration of the ‘logic of security’ I have reframed and critiqued here. The ‘mediated security imaginary’, for example, may be used as a heuristic to guide critical research into of a variety of different security practices—such as counter-terrorism measures, immigration detention, military strategy, or even seemingly banal personal and/or home security practices—in terms of how they are stabilized in their discursive moment in and through a variety of representational practices—specifically, the fundamentally calculative claims about the ‘realness’ and ‘wrongness’ of different forms of vulnerability on which they rely for their pragmatic and moral coherence, and so which must be resolved in representation in order for the practice to perpetuate.

Similarly, the concept of ‘victimcould’ captures a specific justificatory dynamic that is certainly not limited to the criminalization of Black African youth in Australia. Rather, it offers a productive conceptual tool for analysing the discourses and justificatory strategies of any contemporary political project that uses highly emotive assertions of the ‘wrongness’ of a particular type of vulnerability or threat in order to obfuscate critique of the question of its ‘realness’—often,

through the subjunctive language of fear. One possible example has already been mentioned in this chapter: the anxious and angry backlashes against the #MeToo movement in the United States and elsewhere, wherein powerful actors (usually, wealthy white men) have sought to cultivate moral hysteria around men's vulnerability to false accusations of (and punishment for) rape and sexual misconduct, to distract in turn from the question of whether such a gendered vulnerability actually exists in the current moment or is ever likely to under patriarchy. Another application might be in the much-needed analysis and critique of rising so-called "gender critical" movements in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, which have similarly grounded their calls for protective intervention against improving rights and freedoms for transgender people in highly emotive claims about the 'wrongness' of women's vulnerability to male violence—distracting, in turn, from the fact that there is no historical evidence to suggest that advances in transgender rights have intensified, or will intensify, that vulnerability in any meaningful way (see Phipps, 2021). Regardless of the specific case, there is clearly important work to be done on the politics of hypothetical and/or subjunctive claims to victimhood in the present moment, and the critical significance of media practices—especially, those which premeditate imagined futures—therein.

The most important contribution I have endeavoured to make in this thesis, however, is a case for how and why media representations matter to the very imaginability of alternatives to policing, prisons, and other forms of so-called crime control—and so, where critical media practices and scholarship need to contribute to cultivating the conditions of possibility for a decriminalized future. Though limited in its empirical scope and modest in its epistemic contributions, this project serves as a compelling illustration how we might theorize, investigate, and critique mediated criminalization in ways that maintain awareness of its fundamental (rather than simply incidental) contradictions with the goals of safety, justice, and care. I have termed this an abolitionist ethic, as it is the same ethical commitment that guides those working for decriminalization and abolition in their communities. One does not need to (already) subscribe to police or prison abolition, however, to appreciate the unimaginability of a world without these institutions as its own sort of critical problem. Unimaginability is an effect of discursive closure, and so of power, that helps ensure that crime control practices are rarely held fully accountable to the ideological force of their own failures and contradictions. It limits our capacity to develop ways of acting on harms that address their root causes, entrenching systems of punishment and exclusion that exacerbate prevailing structural inequalities. For these reasons, it is also a matter of urgent concern for critical media scholars. Whatever visions we hold for a safer and more just world, we can surely agree that journalistic representation must be essentially engaged in cultivating the imaginability of "worlds less violent than this one" (Watego, 2021)—especially by revealing

that violence where it hides. My hope is that this thesis has developed some productive theoretical insights, conceptual tools, and analytical heuristics for future scholarship within this much-needed critical trajectory in our field.

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## APPENDIX 1

This Appendix offers some supplementary details about the data collection procedures for this study, as outlined and rationalized in Chapter 4. The study sought to engage a close, multi-modal analysis of news media texts across three genres: ‘print’ news, nightly news reports, and current affairs television. Adopting a systematic approach to text collection was challenging for several reasons. However, it was ultimately decided that a more customized approach to data collection was coherent with both my research aims and with the epistemological foundations of my method, and so this was ultimately pursued.

### *Data Collection Challenges*

For the ‘televisual’ genres (nightly news and current affairs), I was informed by the LSE Library early in the study that no comprehensive database of Australian broadcast television was available in the United Kingdom. I consequently reached out to several television researchers at Australian universities to inquire into their data collection procedures and was informed of the Informit TVNews database at RMIT University, which includes both current affairs television episodes and nightly news broadcasts. I subsequently made enquiries with Informit TVNews about negotiating access. However, I was unfortunately informed by Thompson Henry Limited (the UK publishing representative for RMIT) that the database was not available to researchers outside Australia.

For the print news articles, collection was somewhat easier as several databases available in the United Kingdom (including LexisNexis and PressReader) offered back-catalogues of articles from major Australian news publications. However, as PressReader is a commercial platform, it offered limited capabilities for systematic searching using key terms. LexisNexis, on the other hand, had excellent search capabilities but returned articles only as reproduced text—and so, removed from their original presentation format and without accompanying images. The results returned by LexisNexis searches were therefore not suitable on their own for multi-modal analysis.

### *Customized Data Collection*

After consulting with my thesis supervisors, it was decided that a more bespoke approach to data collection would be appropriate for the study, as my main analytical objective was to explicate in granular detail the symbolic mechanisms at work *within* texts rather than to map broad patterns of coverage across the construction of ‘African gang crime’ within a specific timeframe, which would have required building a more ‘representative’ and generalizable corpus (see epistemological discussion in Chapter 4). It was at this stage in the data collection process that the more iterative strategy of moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis throughout the study—as detailed in Chapter 4—was decided upon. However, the starting point for this process was to collect as many texts coherent with my research questions and methodological approach as possible, to begin the lengthy familiarization and immersion process that is a prerequisite to building analytical richness (see Gill, 1996).

For ‘print’ articles, it was decided that both online and paper-based reports would be appropriate for the study and coherent with my analytical method. However, as previous analyses of and commentary on the ‘African gang crime’ case have emphasized the prominence and importance of ‘front page reporting’ (see Watkins, 2017; Wilson, 2018), a conscious effort was made to include as many paper-based print reports in the initial collection of texts as possible. To ensure I could collect and analyse these paper-based texts in their original presentation format, I used a combined search method: first, using the search capabilities of the LexisNexis database to locate relevant texts using designated search terms (see discussion below); and then using PressReader to locate copies of these texts in their original presentation format. These texts were saved as PDF files, but those ultimately subjected to close analysis (see Appendix 2) were subsequently printed out in A2 and filed, so as to facilitate analysis in a format as close as possible to their original presentation as a newspaper. For digital print articles, I followed leads from the LexisNexis search as well as using the online search capabilities of major local news outlets like *The Age*, the *Herald Sun*, *The Australian*, *The Guardian Australia*, *Daily Mail Online*, and *ABC News Online*. When digital print articles contained embedded videos, these were also analyzed using the same approach as for televisual texts.

For televisual texts, several avenues for initial collection were pursued. First, I used key search terms (see below) to comb the online archives (when available) of major current affairs television programmes on free-to-air channels in Australia, including *A Current Affair*, *Sunday Night*, *Four Corners*, *Q&A*, *60 Minutes*, *The Project*, and *The Today Show*. These terms were also used to search the Twitter and Facebook pages of these programmes, in order to locate and download any episode segments that may have been shared on social media after the relevant broadcast. However, these were only analyzed if the segment was shared in full and without abridgement. This second, social media-based search strategy was also used to comb for broadcast fragments shared online by major free-to-air news shows, including *Nine News*, *Seven News*, *ABC News*, and *10 News First*. As a final data collection strategy, I entered the relevant search terms into the IMDB pages of these various news and current affairs programmes to try and identify relevant episode titles. When these could be identified, I would subsequently search for a clip of the relevant episode on YouTube. Once again, these texts were only included if they could be located online in full and if their broadcast date could be confirmed.

### *Search Parameters*

The ‘wide net’ search for relevant print and televisual texts described above was conducted across Australian news media outlets in accordance with two key search parameters that helped ‘define’ the case in the data. The first of these parameters was an open-ended timeframe, starting on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016 and extending until the last rounds of data collection were concluded in June 2021. The second parameter was defined by a set of key search terms, which were used across the platforms discussed above to search for texts that were topically relevant to the case study as defined. Each of these parameters is elaborated in detail below.

### *Timeframe*

As discussed in Chapter 2, Melbourne's Black African diaspora has been subject to persistent negative media attention since beginning to arrive in Australia in significant numbers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with coverage predominantly focussing on issues of criminality as juvenile delinquency, as well as broader challenges related to cultural integration/assimilation. Early studies of this case of mediated criminalization identify 2007—the final year of conservative John Howard's 13-year tenure as Australia's Prime Minister, and the year of the murder of Liep Gony—as the first landslide moment of press vilification towards young Black African people in Melbourne, especially those of (or, perceived to be of) Sudanese or South Sudanese descent (see for example, Nolan et al., 2011; Windle, 2008). For the present study, however, I decided to limit analytical attention to what is generally characterized as the 'second wave' of this criminalizing coverage: a period of time commencing in March 2016 and lasting until the present day, but with a considerable drop-off in coverage following the 2018 State Premiership election (Keel et al., 2021).

The precipitating event for this second wave of criminalizing media coverage was the so-called Moomba Riot, an intensely mediated incident of public disorder at the 2016 Moomba Festival. Moomba is Australia's largest free-of-charge, "family-friendly" community festival, held in the heart of the Melbourne central business district across a long weekend in March each year. Often framed as a celebration of Melbourne's multiculturalism (see Melbourne Magazine, 2018), press coverage of Moomba 2016 was engulfed with stories and images of the so-called "riot", most foregrounding (both visually and narratively) the involvement of Black and Pacific Islander youth (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 5). Soon after, the word "gang" exploded in the lexicon of news coverage (Blaustein & Benier, 2018), with several outlets claiming that the confrontation at Moomba was orchestrated by an organized criminal group called Apex whose membership was primarily comprised of refugee youth from South Sudan (for example Davey, 2016; Margan, 2017; see also Benier et al., 2018).

After Moomba 2016, the topic of 'African gang crime' remained a persistent feature of local journalism in Melbourne, sometimes extending into the national media. As discussed in Chapter 2, several authors have already investigated this second wave of mediated criminalization, primarily in terms of its implications for Australia's racialized and racializing politics of national belonging. However, while racializing discourses of (un)belonging, integration, and criminality have remained constant in media discourses about Australia's Black African communities, such discourses have evolved in the contemporary context, with the alleged threat of "gangs" and "gang crime" taking on new prominence in Melbourne-based coverage. For example, law and order became a major election issue in the 2018 State Premiership contest between progressive incumbent Daniel Andrews and conservative challenger Matthew Guy, with conservative commentators using the thinly veiled signifier "youth crime" to accuse Andrews of being soft on law enforcement and public safety (see Alison, 2018; Wahlquist, 2016; see also Weber et al., 2021).

And so, while the earlier iterations of this criminalizing narrative (i.e., from coverage during the 2007-2008 period) are analytically relevant to the present study as historical context, the decision was ultimately made to limit data analysis to more contemporary texts and discourses. This was to

help ensure that the narrative I developed would be maximally relevant to mediated criminalization as it contemporarily operates in the Australian press and upon the Black African community in Melbourne. Additionally, it was to help ensure the most productive dialogue possible between my own research findings and the evolving scholarly and public conversations about the criminalization of Black communities globally and its political implications, which have gained considerable critical momentum since the founding and expansion of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and especially since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020.

In light of these considerations, a temporal parameter was established for the data searches for this study, commencing 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016 (the morning after of the so-called ‘Moomba Riot’) and extending until 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021, when the iterative process of data collection and analysis for this project concluded.

### *Key Search Terms*

The established literature on the mediated criminalization of Black African subjects and communities in Australia, reviewed in Chapter 2, makes clear that both the subjects of the ‘African gang crime’ narrative *and* the problem(s) identified and defined by this narrative are inconsistently lexicalized across the Australian press. As discussed in the Introduction, an early decision was made to employ the descriptor ‘Black African’ across this thesis to give rough form to a *discursively constructed* category of subject in contemporary Australian society that has been criminalized on the basis of *both* race (that is, in the construction of such subjects as Black) and perceived country or continent of origin (that is, in the positioning of such subjects as being ‘of Africa’). However, this categorization is rarely used in media discourses, and so seeking out and selecting relevant texts for analysis required alternative search terms.

A list of relevant search terms was developed through a two-stage process. First, the review of the extant literature on this subject revealed several prevalent descriptors for both the kinds of crime events of interest in this study and the community/subjects criminalized through mediated representations of these events. This initial list of key terms included: *African gangs; gang crime; youth crime; African; Sudanese; African Australian; Sudanese Australian*. Using this initial list of search terms, a first round of exploratory data collection was conducted across the genres of interest and databases outlined above. The purpose of this first round was to explore, through a superficial review of media discourses, whether there were other relevant search terms that could help identify suitable texts for analysis. This review identified six further search terms for locating relevant texts through database searches: *riot; home invasion; thug; Apex; Menace to Society; and Laa Chol*. Apex and Menace to Society are the names of two alleged gangs that have received considerable attention in media coverage of and debates about crime involving Black African youth. Laa Chol is the name of a 19-year-old Kenyan-born woman who was fatally stabbed at a house party on 21 July 2018 after it was crashed by alleged members of Menace to Society.

These thirteen search terms—the seven identified from the literature review, and the additional six identified through a first round of exploratory analysis—were used to cast a wide net for possible texts of interest across print media, current affairs television, and nightly news (using the collection procedures detailed above). Prior to being considered for inclusion in this study, texts

needed to be assessed for relevance to the case, coherence with the research questions as formulated, and coherence with my theoretical framework. The search term ‘African’, for example, returned many news items that were not at all related to youth gang crime. Many articles covered the broad topic of so-called ‘African gang crime’ and its management, but without functioning as mediated representations of gang crime *events* specifically—for example, letters to the editor about racial profiling by police, or opinion pieces about media coverage of the issue. Only texts that met the following three criteria were ultimately considered for analysis: a) covering the issue of crime and/or its management; b) involving (perceived) members of the Black African diaspora in Melbourne; and c) representing, or containing representations of, crime events.

## APPENDIX 2

Below is the final catalogue of texts that ultimately underwent a close multi-modal analysis for this study, through and following the iterative process of data collection and analysis described in Chapter 4 and detailed in Appendix 1, and using the analytical methods outlined in Chapter 4. For print texts, I have included the relevant headline; publication; article type (i.e. cover story, feature, or article); page number(s) and images; and publication date. For televisual texts, I have included the episode title; program and broadcaster; format (i.e. full episode or segment); length; and broadcast date.

Headline	Publication	Type	Page(s) and Images	Date
“Out of Control”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story + Feature	4 pages (1, 4, 5 & 7), 7 images	14/03/2016
“End Bail Bonanza”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story + Feature	2 pages (1 & 4) 3 images	03/05/2016
“Moomba Festival: Police Arrest 53 and Use Pepper Spray to Control Brawls”	<i>The Guardian (Online)</i>	Article	n.p. 1 image 2 videos	11/03/2017
“Apex Killed My Son”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story	2 pages (1 & 6) 2 images	27/02/2017
“Gang Tackle on Premier”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story + Feature	3 pages (1, 6 & 7) 9 images	02/01/2018
“African Gangs in Melbourne Are a Problem, Police Admit as Victorian Government Defends Strategy”	<i>ABC News Online</i>	Article	n.p. 2 images 1 video	02/01/2018

“Explainer: Does Melbourne Have a Street Gang Problem?”	<i>The Age (Online)</i>	Article	n.p. 7 images	02/01/2018
“Peter Dutton says Victorians scared to go out because of ‘African gang violence’”	<i>The Guardian</i>	Cover Story + Feature	3 pages (1, 6 & 7) 4 images	04/01/2018
“African Gang’s Reign of Fear”	<i>The Weekend Australian</i>	Cover Story + Feature	2 pages (1 & 4) 2 images	06/01/2018
“Streets of Menace”	<i>The Weekend Australian Inquirer</i>	Cover Story + Feature	2 pages 6 images	06/01/2018
“Streets of Fear”	<i>The Daily Telegraph (Sydney)</i>	Feature	1 page (60) 4 images	06/01/2018
“‘Fear is Real’: Radio Star in Crusade on Violence”	<i>The Australian</i>	Article	1 page (6) 1 image	08/03/2018
“Fear and Fact May Differ – But We Still Deserve Action on Crime Wave.”	<i>The Australian</i>	Article	1 page (12) 0 images	08/03/2018
“African gang violence ruins Melbourne Moomba festival for the third year”	<i>Daily Mail (Online)</i>	Feature	n.p., 7 images	13/03/2018
“Police Vow to ‘Take Back the Streets’”	<i>The Age (Online)</i>	Article	n.p. 4 images 1 video	04/09/2018
“Dream suburb turns to worst nightmare”	<i>The Australian</i>	Feature	1 page (2) 6 images	10/08/2018

“Stop your preaching, mayors told”	<i>The Australian</i>	Feature	1 page (3) 4 images	14/08/2018
“Melbourne’s African Gang Crime Hot Spots Are Revealed – So Is Your Suburb Safe?”	<i>Daily Mail (Online)</i>	Article	n.p. 6 images	20/11/2018
“Teen Mayhem: Police hunt African and islander youths after riot”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story + Feature	3 pages (1, 6 & 7) 9 images.	03/09/2018
“Bat Gang Hit Squad”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story	2 pages (1 & 6) 6 images	29/01/2019
“Robbery shakes teens”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Article	1 page (6) 1 image	29/01/2019
“Under siege: Police warn lives will be lost as violent new youth gangs run riot”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Cover Story	2 pages (1 & 6) 2 images	16/08/2019
“Young thugs film fights”	<i>Herald Sun</i>	Feature	1 page (6) 0 images	16/08/2019

<b>Episode Title</b>	<b>Broadcaster and Program</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Episode/Segment Length</b>	<b>Air Date</b>
“Enough is enough!”	<i>Nine Network</i> (A Current Affair)	Segment	5:16	20/07/2016
“Inside Apex”	<i>Nine Network</i> (A Current Affair)	Segment	12:40	28/04/2017

“Polling, Policing and Reporting”	<i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</i> (Q&A)	Segment	52:34	09/04/2018
“African Gangs”	<i>Seven Network</i> (Sunday Night)	Full Episode	20:01	08/07/2018
“Something we should talk about: Melbourne crime”	<i>Network 10</i> (The Project)	Segment	8:00	19/07/2018
“Law and Order Anger”	<i>Nine Network</i> (A Current Affair)	Segment	4:45	20/09/2018
“Crime and Panic”	<i>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</i> (Four Corners)	Full Episode	46:08	05/11/2018
“Beach Brawl”	<i>Nine Network</i> (Nine News)	Segment	2:03	07/12/2018
“Boiling Over”	<i>Seven Network</i> (Seven News)	Segment	2:13	07/12/2018
“Melbourne Beach Violence”	<i>Nine Network</i> (The Today Show)	Segment	2:02	28/12/2018
“Guns for Hire”	<i>Nine Network</i> (A Current Affair)	Segment	4:51	02/02/2019
“Gang Busters”	<i>Nine Network</i> (A Current Affair)	Segment	4:58	24/10/2019

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