CRUEL BENEVOLENCE

Vulnerable menaces, menacing vulnerabilities and the white male vigilante trope

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In 2007, a Sudanese Australian teenager named Liep Gony was murdered on a suburban Melbourne sidewalk. Two young white men, both unknown to Gony, beat him to death in broad daylight. In a 2018 episode of the Australian current affairs television program *Four Corners*, Liep's mother, Martha, cries as she recounts her final moments with her son:

> 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.
>
> *(Four Corners, 2018)*

Liep's murder—an unambiguous instance of racist vigilante violence—was initially mis- reported by Australian journalists as an incident of gang-related violence *within* Melbourne's Black African diasporic communities (Windle, 2008). Though corrected in later coverage, this early misrepresentation was nonetheless critical in precipitating a recurrent narrative in local crime reporting known as the "African gang crime" narrative (Majavu, 2020; Weber et al, 2021). Since 2007, this narrative has symbolically articulated Melbourne's Black African[1] communities with the problems of criminal violence, public disorder and social conflict regardless of whether as victims or perpetrators, with news media the primary site of this articulation (Windle, 2008; Majavu, 2020). Angry white men killed Liep Gony in a flurry of racist hatred—and yet, the murder become the foundation stone of a persistent discourse of *Black African criminality*.

This incident was the first iteration of the story I trace in this chapter—a story about how the threat of white vigilantism has been weaponised, through media storytelling, to justify the criminalisation of Black African communities in Australia. While white male vigilantes are rarely subject to the same regimes of representation that give symbolic form to "criminalised" people and populations, they nonetheless recur in stories about crime and social conflict. As the alleged criminality of racialised subjects remains firmly in the fore- ground of the "African gang narrative," the white male vigilante haunts the background. What is the political utility of this haunting?

News stories about crime and social violence are "sites of vulnerability politics", where different and oftentimes competing claims to different kinds of openness to harm—most basically, the harms of crime and the harms of the criminal legal system—confront one another in representation and "struggle for public recognition" (Higgins, 2022, p. 2114). Here, I inquire into the kinds of work that the figure of the white male vigilante performs within that politics. More precisely, I

situate the vigilante trope within a broader cultural rise of "white male victimhood," which increasingly positions moves towards social justice and equality as intolerable forms of injury for white male subjects (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Chouliaraki, 2021; Sengul, 2022).

Most scholarship on the cultural significance of the vigilante within media storytelling accentuates his hypermasculine invulnerability and strength, conceptualising the trope as a site for critiques of the "weak" state and for the staging of alternative patriarchal fantasies. However, tracing the operations of the vigilante trope in crime reporting makes it undeniably clear that *vulnerability* is in fact central to its symbolic function. Ambivalently positioned between threat and threatened, the white male vigilante animates a politics of vulnerability that I describe as one of *cruel benevolence*—in which the vulnerability of racialised subjects like Liep and Martha to vigilante violence is authenticated as real and wrong, but for the ultimate purpose of morally animating practices of *state* violence against those same subjects.

Macho men, media, and the emasculated state

The vigilante is a long-established narrative trope within media representations of violence and social conflict, both fictional and journalistic. Almost always white and male, he is a citizen who has been moved (or "forced") to "take matters into his own hands" in the face of the (self-perceived) dispossession, disempowerment and/or insecurity of his community. More specifically, vigilantism is understood as an "alternative means of controlling crime and providing safety where the state does not" (Gross, 2016, p. 239), and so too as both an *indicator of* and a *response to* a weakened state monopoly on the use of violence (Bjørgo and Mares, 2019). However, as Liep Gony's murder makes all too clear, white male vigilantism also has roots in histories of lynching and racial punishment, the motivations for which are usually to inspire fear and forcefully re-assert white patriarchal power rather than to supplement a perceived lack of public safety (Senechal de la Roche, 1996).

As a figure that circulates in media culture, the vigilante can be best understood as a site of expression for the fantasy lives of white masculinity, including fantasies of control, strength, heroism and valour (see Thobani, 2010; Frame, 2021; Sotirin, 2021). Historically, the primary arenas for the staging of these fantasies have been comic books and action films in which the emasculation of the state—signified through rampant criminal activity, ineffectual policing, state corruption, a porous border and intersecting anxieties about the moral degradation of (predominantly white) women and children—is countered with hypermasculine performances of protection and/or retribution by individual aggrieved men (Frame, 2021, p.169).

Buttressing these performances, often, are dramatised representations of the vulnerability of (predominantly, white) women to criminal violence (Frame, 2021, p.171). These representations valourise vigilante violence while constructing a gendered backdrop of weakness and incapacity against which the hypermasculine strength of the vigilante can stand out. In this way, the vigilante trope connects with the long history of "white women's tears" lending justificatory support to white men's (fictional and factual) violence, especially against racialised communities (Phipps, 2020; Hamad, 2019), as well as the "alt- right lore" that it is "white, militarised, authoritarian masculinity" that must hold the line between order and chaos in modern societies (Frame, 2021, p.171; also Johnson, 2017; Wall, 2020).

However, the white male vigilante is more than a caricature of masculine strength—the trope signifies vulnerability and woundedness as much as its inverse. Vigilantes inhabit liminal spaces between safety and violence, "frontier zones" where the imagined protective and/or ordering capacities of the state have petered out into anarchy (Abrahams, 1998). These spaces serve as staging sites of "masculine valor" but also as "[terrains that reveal] the hollowness of their masculinity as men come face to face with the utter vulnerability of their bodies to injury and death" (Thobani, 2010, p. 56). The white, militarised, authoritarian masculinity that the vigilante signifies is thus, at its core, a masculinity in crisis (Solomon-Godeau, 1995, cited in Thobani, 2010, p.57) and this sense of crisis extends to the masculinist state that the trope both admonishes and reasserts (Brown, 1995). As icons of state failure, vigilantes accentuate the flimsiness and futility of law, border regimes and the strongman state, even as they simultaneously reinforce white supremacist patriarchy as an ideal of social organisation (Palmer, this volume).

Vigilantes, therefore, exist in a deeply ambivalent normative relationship to state power (Bjørgo and Mares, 2019). As self-ordained agents of safety and justice, they are defined by the extrajudicial character of their actions—they are vigilantes precisely because they are *not* police officers, who are in turn often constructed as corrupt and/or ineffectual. However, as *cultural* figures, white male vigilantes propagate an imagination of how everyday security is built and maintained that is remarkably similar to the one that has historically bolstered the popular legitimacy of policing: that of the *thin blue line*. This is an imaginary which positions policing (and, I propose, vigilantism) as an always-almost-failure in a social world characterised by a permanent, relentless and irreducible tilt towards violence (Wall, 2020). Historically, it has valourised police officers by placing them, imaginatively, on the frontlines of a permanent, everyday war against social decline. It is unsurprising, then, that the vigilante resonates culturally with the backlash masculinities that characterise many contemporary populist and far-right movements— movements which, in turn, often champion police officers even while denigrating other branches of liberal state power (Thobani, 2010, p.56–58; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bratich, 2022; Sengul, 2022).

This ambivalent positioning becomes even more pointed in non-fiction journalistic media, wherein the vigilante usually appears in the context of reporting on social conflict and crime. Stories about incel violence, white nationalist terrorism and citizen efforts at law enforcement all help comprise the milieu of contemporary mediated vigilantism. While the law offers an easy symbolic division between citizen vigilantes and police officers, my analysis below tracks a more complicated symbolic achievement: separating the figure of the white male vigilante from the figure of "the criminal". Here, the vigilante trope is not simply a fantasy representation of masculine invulnerability, nor a celebratory representation of patriarchal protection. Rather, it is the vigilante's constructed sense of moral ambivalence—his weak-strength, victim-villainy, right-wrongness—that underpins the trope's symbolic function: to re-enshrine the necessity of prerogative state power (in the form of crime control) and so to reassert the moral legitimacy of the "protective" patriarchal state (Brown, 1995).

Three "ordinary blokes," two weeping women

To unpick the work of the white male vigilante trope vis-à-vis the cultural legitimacy of state violence, I consider three examples of white men who appeared as vigilantes in Australian news

reporting on so-called "African gang crime" and its social consequences. All three are from 2017–2019—a period that saw the narrative revived with force in local crime journalism as conservative politician Matthew Guy sought to propagate concerns about "law and order" to unseat Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews in the 2018 state election (Weber et al., 2021). First, a television news report about a self-described "ordinary bloke" named Frank, who after a verbal confrontation with a group of teenagers (including some young Black African men) outside his home decided to hire two armed guards—at a cost of $1,000 per day—to "secure" his property (*A Current Affair*, 2019). Second, another television report is about a man named Giulio, who undertook a "citizen's arrest" of a young Black African man in his neighbourhood after witnessing an incident of theft (9News, 2017). And third, a newspaper feature about a teenager named Xavier, who together with his friends took up baseball bats and confronted a group of Black African teenagers at a local train station the day after his phone was stolen by an unrelated group of Black African teens (Rose and Rooney, 2019).

Presented alongside Frank's story is that of a teenage girl named Alika. Crying, Alika testifies to her fear of being victimised by racist vigilante violence because she is Black. Like Martha above, she is allocated space within the "African gang crime" narrative to make her vulnerability emotionally intelligible to news audiences; her inclusion introduces moral ambivalence around the vigilante by clearly positioning him as a (potential) victimiser. However, as I pro- posed above, it is precisely this ambivalence that animates the vigilante within the cultural justification of state violence. Here, in contrast to the political uses of "white women's tears" (Hamad, 2019; Phipps, 2020), Black womens' tears play a crucial role in the logic of cruel benevolence. Within vigilante narratives, they are harnessed to morally condemn the vigilante, but only *as a means of* morally legitimising the coercive powers of the state. This is an allegorical good cop/bad cop in which racialised communities, despite their publicly mediated suffering, nonetheless find themselves at the constructed root of violence—and so, still, the ultimate targets of "protective" practices of state surveillance, punishment and control.

Vulnerable menaces

The white male vigilante trope is framed 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. In the first instance, maintaining this ambivalent positioning relies on representational work that thickens the moral distinction between vigilantism and criminal violence—principally, by finding ways to accentuate the white male vigilante as *himself* a vulnerable figure. As Sotirin (2021, p. 5) argues, the vigilante is a figure of "victim justice," and so a constructed sense of victimhood is fundamental to making vigilantism ethically intelligible. In Australian news narratives, three symbolic strategies regularly recur to help fortify the vigilante/criminal boundary: *deresponsibilisation*, *disempowerment* and a *discourse of service and sacrifice*.

Deresponsibilisation

First, the white male vigilante is *deresponsibilised* for his violence through representational strategies that move him into a *reactive* positionality vis-à-vis the actions of criminalised subjects. 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". Supporting this positionality in Australian crime reporting is a persistently uneven allocation of *historicity* between vigilantes and Black African youth. The vigilante's actions, in other words, are always placed in context and the vigilante himself is routinely granted space to speak about his fear, motivations and anger—that is, to engage in justificatory discourse.

The current affairs episode about Frank provides a pointed example of this strategy. Frank insists that it was an unacceptable threat of Black African violence that "forced" him to take up arms against members of his community. As Frank testifies to these conditions, we see images of broken bottles and toppled furniture, a small bruise on his girlfriend Jayde's elbow and 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 the prior stakes of the conflict when she says: "they're telling us they're going to kill us ... you know, really, really vulgar things". This sense of existential danger is later reinforced by the reporter (who repeats that the pair "feared for their lives") and the hired armed guard (who states that people in the neighbourhood are "scared to death").

By contrast, the actions of Black African teenagers are placed in a vacuum of meaning and motivation. We are not told, nor are we invited to care, who they are, what they want, or how they feel. Jayde claims 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 and even mindless. In this way, selective and uneven historicisation operates as a strategy of deresponsibilisation, 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 subtly positions whiteness as that which distinguishes between defence and aggression and so between "good" and bad" expressions of masculine power.

Disempowerment

Working in concert with deresponsibilisation is *disempowerment,* which routinely positions the vigilante as "battling against the odds". Xavier, as a child vigilante, offers a pointed example of this strategy. Though the images accompanying Xavier's story show him and his friends physically encircling a group of Black African teenagers with bats in hand, the headline reads "Robbery shakes teens", moving Xavier and his friends into a passive, victimised positionality. Moreover, a significant portion of the article is dedicated to describing Xavier's own (motivating) experience of subjugation: a robbery at the same bus station the previous day during which "up to 20" people including two young men "of African appearance" stole his phone and his necklace. The ambiguity around numbers here is crucial: "twenty" is far more than the five white male youths visible in the accompanying photograph, positioning Xavier's stand as an act of resistance from below, rather than dominance from above. This massification of Black African youth is also observable in Frank's story—the teenagers who confronted him outside his home are first described as

numbering “twenty or thirty”, then later as “fifty or sixty”, though no more than five are visible in the accompanying CCTV footage.

Accompanying the report on Xavier’s vigilantism, on the same page, is another: a humanising, emotionally intimate interview with Xavier and his father. This report gives Xavier a name, face, family, desires, losses, fears—all of which are denied to the young Black African boys and men targeted by Xavier and his friends. Accompanying the report is another image: a portrait of Xavier sitting with his father and brother standing protectively over him. This image accentuates Xavier’s status as a *child*—intrinsically vulnerable and acting from a place of *disempowerment*. There is moral absolution here in Xavier’s constructed sense of political subjugation, which is subsequently authenticated through the extensive details of the crime against him offered in the report. Xavier attests to his own trauma: “I feel shaken ... I feel scared”. His father corroborates his son’s disempowerment: “he’s turned to jelly”.

Discourses of service and sacrifice

Finally, the figure of the white male 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). 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 young Black African boys and men. The story of Giulio and his “citizen’s arrest” provides an illustrative example. Here, the reporter weaves a second-person, present-tense narrative to extend an explicit imaginative invitation to the viewer and to imbue Giulio’s perception of his own community as “unsafe” and “unprotected” with a sense of emotional authenticity:

> **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.**
>
> *(9News, 2017)*

This monologue is delivered in the present tense as the reporter walks down the laneway in question. The proliferating use of the second-person pronoun “you” (“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 (white) *vulnerability* that is narratively positioned as the precipitating “cause” of Giulio’s actions. Second and more obviously, it explicitly invites the viewer to *identify with* the “victim”, to imagine that this victim could be them. In this way, the vigilante is positioned as acting in response to communalised vulnerability rather than individual victimisation—with whiteness implicitly

positioned as that which gives "the community" (and so, the claim to vulnerability) symbolic coherence through differentiation from the racialised "criminal" actor.

The net achievement of these three strategies is to morally distinguish the vigilante from the "criminal" by constructing vigilantism as *responding to* conditions of intolerable vulnerability rather than simply *creating* or *exacerbating* those conditions for Black African subjects. Together, they help constitute a regime of representation in which the white male vigilante is not intolerant, but pushed to the breaking point of his tolerance; not a criminal, but an otherwise 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 criminal violence. In this way, the white male vigilante is tacitly decriminalised.

Menacing vulnerabilities

While the white male vigilante evades criminalisation through his positioning as dis- empowered, protective and with limited responsibility for his actions, he nonetheless remains subject to many of the same representational strategies that routinely construct "criminals" as figures of threat. While he is rarely shown enacting violence, his *capacity* for violence is routinely emphasised—and so, just as we are invited to feel for the vigilante, we are also invited to fear him.

Regarding Frank's decision to hire armed guards to patrol his property, the report emphasises how Frank's actions have created (or, at the very least, exacerbated) a climate of danger in his neighbourhood: "Forget baseball bats. These weapons can kill". The reference to baseball bats is significant, as many reports (as in Xavier's story above) foreground the baseball bat as an icon of vigilantism: a symbol of amateur, under-resourced efforts of citizen self-defence. While police officers carry firearms in Australia, citizen ownership of handguns is rare. Here, the handgun becomes one of the protagonists of the story—out of place in the Melbourne suburbs, inanimate yet filled with lethal potential. The journalist warns that the guard patrolling Frank's home "will shoot if he needs to," but does not specify what might constitute such a need.

In this way, the vulnerability of the white male vigilante becomes, itself, menacing. The trope animates an imagination of *intensifying* insecurity within the community: a vision of violence begetting violence, with an escalating pattern extending into an uncertain future. And, perhaps counterintuitively, it is the suffering of Black African women and girls that is routinely called upon within such stories to imbue this menacing quality with a sense of emotional authenticity and moral urgency. Martha weeps as she recalls her son's murder and we are invited to feel for her—but her pain, we must remember, is only granted this public visibility in the context of a current affairs investigation into "African gang crime" (*Four Corners*, 2018). Similarly, when Alika cries, it is in the context of a story about Frank being "forced" to threaten members of the Black African community with lethal violence in order to "protect" his home. She tells the reporter:

> I feel scared to leave the house especially during at nighttime because people are going to start taking, like, things into their own hands ... If it gets worse, I'm scared that ... anybody in the Sudanese community might eventually get killed just for looking the way they are.
>
> *(A Current Affair, 2019)*

The ambiguity of Alika's use of the word "it" is of critical narrative significance: "it" may be white men's propensity for violent retribution, or "it" may be the alleged phenomenon of "African gang crime" which the report has positioned as the *cause* of Frank's actions. Either way, Alika's testimony conjures an imaginary of everyday insecurity that is strikingly like that of the thin blue line: one in which violence is intrinsic to masculinity, with spectacles of women's distress marking the boundary between its "good" and "bad" manifestations. As one crime journalist interviewed as part of the report about Giulio's "citizen's arrest" warns:

> 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 the key operations of the white male vigilante as a narrative trope. 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 Giulio and towards an imagined *future* vigilante through the use of the qualifier "this", which positions Giulio 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? What kind of injury or openness to injury does the word "tears" stand for 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?

Cruel benevolence

Lauren Berlant (2011) coined the phrase "cruel optimism" to capture 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. Following Berlant's interpretation and application of the concept of cruelty, we can conceptualise the kind of justificatory logic that the white male vigilante trope activates as one of *cruel benevolence*: a relation within a symbolic politics of vulnerability in which one type of vulnerability—in this case, Black African women and girls' vulnerability to racist vigilante violence—is appropriated as the justificatory basis for practices which will ultimately exacerbate or entrench the vulnerability of those same subjects.

In the case of the white male vigilante trope, racialised vulnerabilities are authenticated only so that they may be repurposed to justify "protective" state interventions. This reflects, in Berlant's terms, an optimistic attachment to the benevolence of law enforcement and the peacebuilding capacities of the strongman state. The *subjects* of this state protection, however, are not Black African communities but, ultimately, white citizens—sometimes, even vigilantes themselves. Frank's testimony provides a pointed example:

> 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 distils 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. 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 a moral problem only insomuch as it exacerbates the vulnerability of the white citizen, in this case to the punitive mechanisms of the criminal legal system. Frank's excess is recast as restraint and a zero-sum vision of public safety is enforced: Frank is not a "real" criminal, but he will nonetheless act and be treated as one if the "real" criminals—Black African boys and men—are not sought, stopped and punished.

Cruel benevolence is cruel, then, in at least two key senses. First, because it takes up the vulnerability of racialised subjects as an object of moral concern, only to then refract this concern through the suffering of white citizens. The spectacle of racist violence is positioned as something to fear, but not on the basis of concern for the lives of Black African subjects. Instead, the trope positions racist vigilantism (and Black African suffering) as morally problematic primarily because of a) its potential to incriminate, in the most literal sense, individual white boys and men; or b) its net contribution to a generalised climate of social disorder and disharmony in Melbourne's suburbs, in which white people are positioned as the primary victims.

It is cruel in a second sense because it symbolically fortifies the moral case for the same state practices 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 policing and the criminal legal system as the "right" way to do things. Precariously teetering between hero and menace, the white male vigilante trope reproduces the mythology that it is white patriarchal power that must ultimately hold the line between a precariously "civilised" present and an intolerably violent future but capitalises on moral ambivalence to reassert the state as the correct site for its exercise. Because vigilante violence is positioned as a reaction to the "real" threat of African gang violence, coercive state intervention against the latter is positioned as essential and effective action on the former. The result is that the various crime control practices invoked through reporting—harsher sentences, zero-tolerance policies, pre-emptive policing—are imaginatively recast as forms of benevolent restraint. Even, as care.

Conclusion

Cruel benevolence is the logic—upholding the public morality of state violence—that insists that you must, for your own good, be harmed. Writing about the rise of vigilante masculinities in post-9/11 North America, Thobani (2010) describes how "saving Muslim women" became a fig leaf for the racism and sexism inherent to the so-called War on Terror (also Abu-Lughod, 2015). "White American masculinity", she writes, "redefined itself in the changed global order: the vigilante form was fed by fantasies of Islam as violent, and hence *requiring* a greater violence to be vanished" (Thobani, 2010, p. 65). In much the same way, Australian news media extend compassion and concern to Black African women and girls not to take seriously the intersecting dangers of white supremacy and patriarchy in contemporary Australia, but to position them as victims of police failure—and so, to co-opt their suffering for the moral justification of more, tougher, "better" policing.

In news storytelling, cruel benevolence is reproduced by staging spectacles of racialised suffering vis-à-vis morally ambivalent accounts of white men's violence, in order to symbolically reposition policing, incarceration and punitive deportation as practices with protective, even anti-racist, potential. Of course, visibilising white men's violence through the news is an urgent and important task. Stories about white vigilantism and the threats it poses to racialised populations should and must be told. However, when such stories are framed by an optimistic attachment to white patriarchal protection, it is equally important to remain "vigilant" to the often-unintuitive forms of political work they can perform. News stories about white male vigilantes must a) responsibilise them for their violence; b) locate them narratively within the context of historical white supremacy; and c) resist their discourses of service and sacrifice to instead position them explicitly as agents of their own political self-interest.

Note

1 Following Majavu (2020), the descriptor "Black African" here refers not to a specific community nor to an articulation national identity, citizenship, belonging, and/or ancestry (as in the descriptor Sudanese Australian or African Australian) but rather to a specific kind of racialization that constructs its subjects as both Black and of African descent (see also Higgins, 2022, p. 2128).

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