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McElhone, Megan (2019) Portrayals of Middle Eastern background communities as criminal in Australian popular media. In: Akrivos, D. and Antoniou, A.K. (eds.) *Crime, Deviance and Popular Culture: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Palgrave Studies in Crime, Media and Culture. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 289-314. ISBN 9783030049119.

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# Portrayals of Middle Eastern Background Communities as Criminal in Australian Popular Media

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## **Abstract**

Despite often being overlooked, the popular media plays an important role in staging, describing and interpreting race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class and criminality for the public. This chapter presents a qualitative content analysis of three Australian popular media texts that frame Middle Eastern background communities in Australia as being crime-prone. The texts analysed are: *The Combination* (2009); *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* (2010); and *Down Under* (2016). This chapter argues that these texts represent Middle Eastern background communities as having proclivities for gang membership, firearms-related violence, and disregard for police and the rule of law. As such, this chapter complements and extends the body of literature that has considered the racialised framing of Middle Eastern background communities as crime-prone in Australian news reporting since the 1990s.

## **Keywords**

Arab Other – Middle Eastern background communities – Popular media – Sydney – Australia

## **Introduction**

This chapter analyses how the purported criminality of Middle Eastern background communities has been constructed and represented in Australian popular media over the last decade. Previous research has documented the ways that people ‘of Middle Eastern background’ have been framed as crime-prone in Australian news reporting, in tandem with public statements made by politicians and senior police officers (Collins, et al., 2000; Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 2001). As described in the relevant literature, such reporting has homogenised Middle Eastern background communities, and alleged that members of those communities are markedly engaged in crime due to experiences of war in the Middle East, or because of pathological or cultural proclivities for criminality (Collins, et al., 2000; Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 2001; Noble and Poynting, 2003; Manning, 2004; Poynting, et al., 2004). Thus, in Australian news reporting about Middle Eastern background communities, links between race, ethnicity, crime and violence have been naturalised and essentialised.

Though scholars have previously analysed representations of Middle Eastern background communities in Australian news reporting, their representations in Australian popular media have received far less attention (Krayem, 2014, 2017a). This chapter takes the view that the popular media plays an important role in staging, describing and interpreting race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class and criminality for the public (Hall, 1982 cited in McLaughlin, 2005, p. 164; Gray, 2004; Krayem, 2014, 2017a). Accordingly, this chapter aims to extend to the body of literature pertaining to media portrayals of Middle Eastern background communities as crime-prone by analysing portrayals of Middle Eastern background communities in Australian popular media. Three texts will be examined. These are: the 2009 Australian drama film *The Combination*; the 2010 thirteen-part crime drama series *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*; and the 2016 black comedy film *Down Under*.

This chapter argues that the above texts portray Middle Eastern background communities as being markedly involved in ‘gang crimes’ and firearms-related crimes, and as having a disregard for police and the rule of law. As such, these texts reflect and reproduce the framing of Middle Eastern background communities as crime-prone in Australian news reporting. This is despite attempts to challenge and extend narratives about the alleged criminality of Middle Eastern background communities that are discernible in two of the three texts analysed.

### **A Note on Terminology**

It is important to note that despite the repeated use of the label ‘Middle Eastern’ throughout this chapter, the term is contested. In Australia, the term ‘Middle Eastern’ is often used interchangeably with others including Lebanese, Arab and Muslim. As such, it should be viewed as an imprecise catch-all label, which obscures the many different races, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultures of those individuals and groups that it is supposed to identify, as well as inter-racial and inter-ethnic differences (Poynting et al., 2004, p. 33).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) identifies six Middle Eastern ‘primary source countries of birth’ in Australia, which are Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Israel and Syria. However, many other people ‘of Middle Eastern background’ have migrated to Australia from other places in the Middle East, such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Moreover, many people ‘of Middle Eastern background’ were born in Australia. Most of them live in Sydney, the capital of the state of New South Wales (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

It should also be noted that the term 'Middle Eastern' is productive, in that its use brings into being ideas about the behaviours and alleged pathologies of 'Middle Eastern' people. Many of these ideas are negative and may be used in an essentialist manner, as will be discussed further in the following section of this chapter. As such, in keeping with Bowling and Phillips' advice that scholars should 'reject raciological and criminological essentialism while retaining race and ethnic categories in order to illuminate the racialised patterns of everyday human experience' (2002, p. xvii), the term 'Middle Eastern' is retained in this chapter.

### **'Antipodean Orientalism'**

In their 2000 book *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime*, Collins et al., take as their starting point two events that occurred in 1998 in south-western Sydney: the murder of 14-year-old Edward Lee, who was killed on his way to a friend's birthday party, and the shooting of a nearby police station. According to Collins et al. (2000, pp. 2-10, 30-54), a moral panic was initiated in the aftermath of these events, wherein the news media, politicians and senior police officers made unsubstantiated public accusations that 'Lebanese gangs' were responsible for both crimes and thus defined so-called 'Lebanese gangs' as a threat to community safety. The authors describe the specific role of the news media in racialising crime, criminalising race and sustaining the moral panic in the following terms (2000, p. 226):

In constructing particular 'ways of seeing' youth, ethnicity and crime, media representations 'explained' these incidents by pathologising ethnic criminality, and hence blamed the culture of these young men for... a complex social phenomenon. In the cycle of panic that ensued, these criminal incidents were presented as 'foreign', as emanating from outside, rather than inside Australia.

Collins et al. (2000, pp. 2-3, 50-54) also found that while young Middle Eastern background men were at the centre of this moral panic, responsibility and complicity for 'gang crime' was extended to Middle Eastern background communities more broadly, as other members of those communities were urged to reign in the crime problems purportedly pervading their communities. Moreover, these racialised, media-fuelled moral panics encouraged political and police responses that emphasised the apparent need to be 'tough on crime', whilst occluding any reference to socio-economic factors that are generally more likely to bear on criminal behaviour than racial, ethnic or cultural factors are (Collins, et al. 2000).

Manning also considered representations of Arab and Muslim people in Australian news reporting in his 2004 monograph *Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism: Reporting Arabic and Muslim People in Sydney Newspapers*. Specifically, Manning surveyed over 12,000 articles

in Sydney's two major newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald (and its Sunday edition the Sun-Herald) and the Daily Telegraph (and its Sunday edition the Sunday Telegraph), between late 2000 and late 2002 (2004, pp. 1-5). Manning used qualitative data analysis software to determine thematic correlations in the reporting and also conducted a literary analysis of some of the articles that he collected (2004, p. 3). Manning's research showed that most reporting on Arabs and Muslims considered foreign events, and especially the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States (2004, p. 9, 44). Some of Manning's key findings included (2004, p. 45):

The close textual reading, sometimes assisted by the statistical analysis, elicits some clear patterns of portrayal. Arabs and Muslims (and the terms appear coterminous in the articles) and Palestinians in particular, as seen as violent to the point of terrorism. Israel, the US and Australia – 'us' – are seen as under attack from such people and they are seen as both an external and internal threat. 'Their' violence is portrayed as without reason, humanity, or compassion for its victims. Arab young men, in particular, are seen as especially threatening, wanting 'our' Caucasian women and not policed sufficiently by their own communities.

Manning also drew on the intellectual legacy of Edward Said's influential (and controversial) book *Orientalism*, which was first published in 1978. In *Orientalism*, Said examined how, over several centuries, Western written, visual, and oral texts generated knowledge about the East (the 'Orient'), by positioning the West (the 'Occident') over and above the Orient. More explicitly, the knowledge produced about the Orient in Western texts was binarised and self-affirmative, and framed Oriental people as a primitive, exotic, lustful, indolent and, at times, violent and dangerous, non-European 'Other'. However, the derogation of the Orient was not simply an issue of misrepresentation or over-generalisation, but also of power and domination, as the knowledge produced about the Orient served as a justification for the colonisation and control of the Orient by Western powers (Said, 2003). When applying Said's work in *Orientalism* to the Australian context, Manning (2004, p. 45) determined that Australia, itself a colonised nation, 'picked up the imperial inheritance with full force... [as evidenced by] a portrait of an Australian orientalism... [that] has been successfully transplanted and developed on Antipodean shores'.

In their work *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other* (2004), Poynting et al. (2004, pp. 34-35) also drew insights from Said's work in *Orientalism*, especially with respect to processes of 'Othering'. As was the case in their previous collective work (Collins, et al., 2000), Poynting et al. (2004) also made use of the analytic tools provided by moral panic theory and racialisation theory. The authors presented an analysis of Australian media coverage and political discourse about people of Middle Eastern background, and key domestic and

international events such as the Bali Bombings and the so-called ‘Tampa Crisis’ in the five-year period from 1998 to 2003 (Poynting, et al., 2004, pp. 2-3). Indeed, the book’s title is appropriated from a headline that appeared on the front page of one of Sydney’s major newspapers a short while after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, which exclaimed: “TERROR AUSTRALIS: Bin Laden groups in our suburbs” (Poynting, et al., 2004, p. 29). The key arguments presented in Poynting et al.’s work are comparable to Manning’s, as the authors contended that a range of disparate fears about Arabs, Muslims, criminals, terrorists and refugees had become pathologised and entangled in a threatening entity that they called the ‘Arab Other’. As explained by Poynting et al. (2004, p. 50):

This Other functions not only as an object of hostility, therefore, but also as a form of ideological explanation for a range of social problems, understood as moral problems originating in the cultural pathology of the folk devil and providing a simple narrative of us and them, good and evil, victim and wrongdoer.

This section does not purport to present an exhaustive review of the literature pertaining to media portrayals of Middle Eastern background communities in Australia (see, for example, Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 2001; Noble and Poynting, 2003; Poynting and Mason, 2006; Tufail and Poynting, 2013). However, the works referred to above each make strong arguments that news reporting has contributed to Arab and Muslim communities in Australia, and especially those in Sydney’s south western suburbs, becoming a potent symbol that embodies fears about irrational, pathological violence, gangs, refugees and terrorism.

At the same time, depictions of people of Middle Eastern background in Australian popular media have been almost entirely overlooked. A possible explanation for this is that ‘there is hardly a surplus Arab and Muslim Australians represented in fictional texts, [although] Australian productions are beginning to be more inclusive’ (Krayem, 2017a, p. 4). One scholar who has considered depictions of people of Middle Eastern background in Australian popular media is Krayem (2014; 2017a), whose work examines depictions of Arab men in Australian crime drama films and television series. Krayem’s work poses questions about expressions of masculinity, belonging and acceptance, Whiteness, assimilation and multiculturalism in Australia (Krayem, 2014; 2017a). Considerations about deviance and criminality are also incidental to Krayem’s analyses, as she determines that two of the three case studies in her major works, which were films written by a Lebanese-Australian and a Turkish-Australian man, respectively, both ‘reinforce the existing discourse of Middle Eastern men as thugs and criminals’ (2014, p. xiii), despite attempting to elaborate on the social, political and economic marginalisation of Arab and Muslim-Australian men (2014, pp. 111-140; 2017a, pp. 152-191).

While it is ‘virtually impossible to prove effects of media coverage on what the public thinks and does about race’ (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 164), this chapter takes the view that the popular media is a site that, despite often being overlooked, plays an important role in staging, describing and interpreting race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class and criminality for the public (cf. Hall, 1982 cited in McLaughlin, 2005, p. 164; Gray, 2004; Krayem, 2017a). Accordingly, the following section of this chapter aims to probe how the purported criminality of Middle Eastern background communities has been constructed and represented in Australian popular media in the last decade by presenting a qualitative content analysis of three texts which portray members of Middle Eastern background communities as being criminal. As stated above, three texts were analysed: the 2009 Australian drama film *The Combination*; the 2010 13-part crime drama series *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*; and the 2016 black comedy film *Down Under*.

## **The Case Studies**

### **Analysing Representations of Crime in Popular Culture**

As explained by Kort-Butler (2016), content analysis is particularly suited to studies concerned with representations of crime and deviance:

Content analysis requires systematically watching or reading with an analytical and critical eye, going beyond what is presented and looking for deeper meanings and messages to which media consumers are exposed. This exposure contributes to the social construction of crime and deviance, that is, to people’s beliefs about what is deviant, who is criminal, and how to control crime.

Though some researchers employ deductive, quantitative analytic techniques and count the frequency of specific themes in the data that they are analysing (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 53), this chapter took a qualitative approach to content analysis. The rationale for taking a qualitative approach stemmed from Kort-Butler’s (2016) above assertion of the need to ‘[go] beyond what is presented and [look] for deeper meanings’ when analysing representations of crime and deviance, and the recognition that the meaning of the content in audio-visual texts like films and television productions is not always literal, manifest and quantifiable (cf. Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 86). As explained by Drisko and Maschi (2015, p. 84), ‘[t]he reductionism inherent in quantification may not adequately capture certain kinds of meanings’.

The approach to coding taken in this chapter was inductive. Coding proceeded as follows: first, the author took detailed notes whilst viewing each of the texts; next, the author read through the notes several times to become familiar with them; and finally, the data was categorised into codes. While this is described as an inductive approach because the author aimed to identify

emergent themes in the data, the coding process was also influenced by the author's prior knowledge of the literature pertaining to Australian news reporting about Middle Eastern background communities, as described in the previous section of this chapter. Indeed, the key themes identified in the texts analysed generally aligned with themes previously discerned in analyses of Australian news reporting. These themes were: 'gang' affiliation; involvement in firearms-related offences; recourse to violence more generally; and disregard for police and the rule of law.

### **The Combination (2009)**

*The Combination* is a 2009 drama film based on writer and producer George Basha's experiences of growing up in working-class, suburban western Sydney. Basha, who is Lebanese-Australian, also stars in the film as John Morkos. In interviews prior to the film's release, Basha explained that he intended for *The Combination* to be didactic, in that he hoped to provide a cautionary message to young men in Sydney's west (Krayem 2014, pp. 9, 122-125; Schembri, 2009, p. 21; see also Dunn, Maddox and Irvine, 2009, p. 18). As explained by Basha (quoted in Shembri, 2009, p. 21):

The film is about choices... I've got to get these kids thinking that if they're going to handle guns and they're gonna do drugs there are consequences to pay, not only for you, but for your family, your friends.

On its opening weekend in February 2009, *The Combination* was screened in a handful of theatres, primarily in Sydney's western suburbs (Krayem, 2014, pp. 124-125; Groves, 2009). By September 2009, the film had grossed what Don Groves deemed to be 'a modest \$728,000 nationwide' (Groves, 2009).

*The Combination* is centred on John Morkos and his younger brother Charlie (Firass Dirani). The Morkos brothers are second-generation Lebanese Christians and live with their widowed mother, Mary Morkos (Doris Younane), in Sydney's west. In the opening scene of the film John is released from gaol and arrives home to find that, in his absence, Charlie has become close friends with a handful of other young men of Lebanese background who are influencing him to make poor and dangerous decisions. Charlie's friends are prone to acting violently and are continually involved in retaliatory fights with young 'Aussie' men who taunt them for being Lebanese. Charlie's friend Zeus (Ali Haidar) introduces him to Ibo (Michael Denkha), who is also Lebanese, and is the head of an organised drug supply business. After meeting Ibo, Charlie begins to use and deal drugs. Ibo also provides Charlie with a gun, and later forces Charlie and Zeus to commit an armed robbery of a local independent grocery store.



John believes that he has a responsibility to act as a role model for his younger brother and he has no desire to go back to gaol. He accepts a low-paying job as a cleaner at a local boxing gym and begins a relationship with a young Anglo-Australian woman who, incredulously, is named Sydney (Clare Bowen). He also watches over Charlie and his friends, and continually warns Charlie that his friends are bad influences. However, for the most part, Charlie resists John's attempts to steer him away from his group of friends. Charlie believes that John is a hypocrite and is frustrated that they both lack legitimate avenues of social mobility, which indicates part of his rationale in choosing to deal drugs for Ibo. The following exchange between Charlie and John is illustrative of Charlie's frustration:

Charlie: What happened to you? I mean, look at you, bro. You were always the one after easy money, and now you've got a job.

John: I'm happy. I don't need to watch my back.

Charlie: That's just it. I'm not you. I don't wanna work at a gym for a lousy few hundred dollars shovelling shit.

Basha's didactic message shines through with respect to the depiction of the consequences of Charlie's drug dealing. John attempts to prevent Charlie from drug dealings for Ibo by flushing the drugs that he is supposed to sell down the toilet. Having no drugs to sell, Charlie is unable to produce Ibo's profits by the agreed date. Ibo drives down the Morkos' street and fires a number of rounds, which penetrate their home. John realises the need to produce the money for Ibo and strikes a deal with his boss at the boxing gym, who gives John the cash that he needs. Though John pays the money to Ibo, Ibo still shoots and kills Charlie as he is walking home from school.

The representation of a so-called 'ethnic youth gang' or 'Lebanese gang' in *The Combination* has already been the subject of scholarship. In her studies of portrayals of Arab males in popular culture, Krayem (2014; 2017a) provides a thorough analysis of Charlie's friendship group. Krayem situates her analysis in the context of ongoing concerns about 'ethnic youth gangs' in Sydney's western and south-western suburbs (as mentioned in the previous section), and she also draws on literature which has considered the social alienation of young second-generation Arabic-speaking men in Australia. Krayem emphasises that Charlie and his friends have been ostracised for being 'un-Australian' and that they lack opportunities for social mobility and personal resources. Accordingly, Krayem (2014, p. 193) argues that 'due to the ongoing discrimination [they face, Charlie and his friends] regain a sense of self-respect or dignity by engaging in an exaggerated performance of masculinity'.

As such, *The Combination* contributes to discussions about ‘Lebanese gangs’ by revealing the social, political and economic factors that can influence the ways that young men behave, express and understand themselves, and form friendship groups (Krayem, 2014, pp. 187-195; 2017a, p. 73, 95-98). These factors contribute nuance to representations of ‘Lebanese gangs’ that is not normally apparent in the ongoing, racialised news reporting about ‘Lebanese’ gangs, with reporters tending to label fluid social groups of ethnic minority young people as ‘gangs’ and overstate the extent to which ‘gang’ members are involved in criminal activities (Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 1999; Collins, et al., 2000; White, 2007; White, 2008). However, while Krayem (2014, pp. 14, 111; see also Krayem, 2017a, pp. 152-191) maintains that there is value in Arab-Australians challenging and extending the ways that they are represented in Australian popular culture, she voices her concern that *The Combination* ultimately ‘reinforce[s] caricatured portraits of white Australia and Australian Arabs’.

Krayem’s concerns about caricatures of Arab-Australians in *The Combination* are compounded by the film’s broader representation of Lebanese-Australians as being pathologically and culturally violent, retaliatory, and accepting of firearms-related crimes. In addition to depictions of Charlie and his friends behaving violently in *The Combination*, John and Ibo do too. Thus, every male of Lebanese background in the film is engaged in violence. As mentioned above, towards the close of the film Ibo shoots the Morkos’ house in a so-called ‘drive by shooting’, and then shoots and kills Charlie for failing to provide him with his money; a violent, retributive act that seems senseless given that he has received his money from John. John then pursues Ibo after Charlie’s death and severely beats him. Though John opts not to use Charlie’s gun when he confronts Ibo, thus providing a partial challenge to allegations that men of Middle Eastern background commonly commit firearms-related crimes (Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 2001, p. 76), the fact remains that John sought retribution by enacting violence upon Ibo, rather than allowing the police to apprehend him (Krayem, 2014, p. 127; 2017a, p. 83). As such, *The Combination* provides another iteration of the ongoing framing of Lebanese Australian men as inherently violent and retaliatory, as has been evident in news reporting since the 1990s. However, as depicted in *The Combination*, this violence is not simply sanctioned by Lebanese-background men but is made to seem pathologically or culturally Lebanese. Indeed, the only female Lebanese character central to the film’s storyline, John and Charlie’s mother Mary, extends a blessing to John as he leaves the family home in pursuit of Ibo. Mary’s encouragement of John’s pursuit of violent retribution is juxtaposed against Sydney’s attempts to intervene and prevent him from leaving

the family home. Throughout the film, John and Sydney struggle to reconcile their cultural differences, while their parents challenge their suitability for one another. In one notable monologue, Sydney's father warns her about Lebanese people:

I mean, they're different mate. I remember when this whole area was full of Australians. You didn't have little Lebanon and the whole thing going on. Not that that worries me... But the place wasn't full of guns... People being stabbed... And you can't tell me you feel safer, Syd. That's not being racist. That's just the way it is. I mean, you don't see Australians travel in gangs looking to beat up or rape people, do ya? I mean, it's all about fitting in. I mean if we go to another country to live, we've gotta live like whoever they are.

In this monologue, disparate crimes including rapes, firearms-related crimes and knife crimes are racialised, and responsibility and complicity for those crimes is attributed to an apparently homogenous Lebanese migrant community, irrespective of 'the diversity of religions, politics, settlement histories, ages, class backgrounds, labour market positions' that differentiate people of Lebanese background in Australia (see Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 2001; Noble and Poynting, 2003). Moreover, the alleged behaviours of people of Lebanese background are marked as being categorically 'un-Australian' (Krayem, 2014, pp. 210-211; 2017a, pp. 177-178). However, rather than challenging the sweeping generalisations and the essentialism evident in Sydney's father's monologue, *The Combination* portrays Ibo, John, Mary, Charlie and Charlie's friends as being prone to, and accepting of, violence and firearms-related crimes. In addition to differing from Anglo-Australians in their inclination towards violence, implicit in John's and Mary's recourse to retribution for Charlie's murder is a fundamental disregard for policing and the rule of law. While scholars have noted that some Lebanese Australians do possess a disregard for police in Australia, they have stressed that this is not simply a corollary of their supposed tendency towards violence, or purely indicative of a cultural aversion to policing (Collins, et al., 2000; White, 2007). Rather, scholars have found that antagonisms between the police and Lebanese communities in New South Wales are, at least in part, a result of aggressive, 'gloves-off' street policing in south west Sydney since Lebanese communities first became embroiled in waves of moral panics about 'Lebanese gangs' in the late 1990s (Collins, et al., 2000; Dixon and Maher, 1999; White, 2007). However, portrayals of police are almost entirely absent from *The Combination*, which means that the role of policing practice in producing distrust for police within Lebanese communities in Sydney is overlooked, leaving space for viewers to draw a straight line between Lebanese culture and disregard for the police and the rule of law.

## **Underbelly: The Golden Mile (2010)**

The highly-anticipated 13-part miniseries *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* made its premiere on April 11, 2010, on a major commercial free-to-air television station, in the prime-time Sunday night timeslot. *The Golden Mile* was the third series of the popular *Underbelly* crime drama franchise. The first episode of *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*, entitled 'Into the Mystic', attracted more than 2.2 million viewers (Vickery, 2010, p. 3). *The Golden Mile* is loosely based on events in Sydney between 1988 and 1999. Much of the series is based in Kings Cross, Sydney, and indeed, the series' title reflects this, as 'The Golden Mile' is the colloquial name for Darlinghurst Road in Kings Cross. As 'Into the Mystic' opens, the show's narrator sets the tone for the series by explaining that Kings Cross, which is known for its busy nightlife, nightclubs, bars, strip clubs and brothels, is a 'neverland' of fantasy and vice.

The first seven episodes of the series, which cover the period from 1988 to 1994, depict the 'denizens' of Kings Cross struggling to keep control and order in the district. Several Lebanese characters are introduced as being involved in a protection racket that extorts (or 'stands over') the owners of Kings Cross' clubs, but, in exchange, protects the clubs from (other) thieving criminals. Some of the characters are caricatured and dramatised portrayals of real people, including John Ibrahim (again played by Firass Dirani), who moved to Australia from Lebanon as a small child. Ibrahim is a boisterous teenager when the series begins and becomes involved in the protection racket through his friend from the western suburbs, the fictional Harry 'Hammer' Hammoud (Salvatore Coco). Ibrahim later becomes a nightclub owner and a legitimate, level-headed businessman, while Hammer develops a drug addiction and is sent to gaol, only to return to Kings Cross with affiliations to outlaw motorcycle gangs.

Real-life brothers and Lebanese immigrants Bill and Louis Bayeh are also part of the protection racket. Bill Bayeh (Hazem Shammas) is, for the most part, portrayed as a level-headed businessman like Ibrahim, though his business interests are less legitimate; Bill is involved in managing the protection racket, as well as cocaine and heroin trafficking, and he also runs illegal gambling dens. Though he is generally depicted as being reserved and well-mannered, Bill has a tendency towards impulsivity, as evidenced through his gambling addiction. Meanwhile, Louis Bayeh (Steve Bastoni) is portrayed as unintelligent and, unlike his brother, Louis' impulsivity manifests through rash acts of violence.

As the series progresses, a handful of other Lebanese characters are introduced, who each come to threaten the 'order' that the others had maintained through their protection racket. Most of

these characters are drug users and dealers, including Benny Kassab (Michael Vice), Norm Korbage (Ronny Mouawad), Ali Ghazzawie (Jason Ghama), and Shaka (Matuse). Louis Bayeh and Hammer's tendencies towards violence are outdone only by those of Danny 'DK' Karam (Dan Mor). Karam is in and out of gaol, abuses steroids and other drugs, and is persistently depicted in fights with other people, including police officers, while he froths at the mouth and non-diegetic, animalistic sound effects underscore his viciousness. While some of these characters are Lebanese immigrants, others were born to Lebanese immigrant parents in Sydney's western suburbs. Nevertheless, these characters all know one another. Some characters show an interest in where each other's families hail from in Lebanon, and others are sporadically subjected to similar racial taunts, like being called 'dirty Lebs'. Thus, throughout the series viewers are consistently reminded that each of the characters described above is unified in being Lebanese, despite some being Christians and others being Muslims. Moreover, while there is some nuance in the way that they are characterised, the Lebanese characters in *The Golden Mile* are all deviant, criminal, and, for the most part, dangerous. Thus, together, they reflect and reconstitute what Hage calls the 'spectrum' of Arab Otherness (Hage, 2004, p. vii). However, it is noteworthy that Lebanese women are excluded from the narrative told in *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*.

In the first nine episodes of *The Golden Mile*, the Kings Cross police detectives are also characterised as being deviant, dangerous and deeply corrupt. Indeed, rather than comprising a behavioural binary, the actions of the Kings Cross detectives are comparable to, but arguably worse than those of the Lebanese characters that are depicted. The Kings Cross detectives, who are almost exclusively male, rape a female colleague and sexually harass another, are involved in violence and cover-ups, and accept bribes to refrain from investigating crimes. They drink beer ironically labelled 'Valiant Ale' while they are on shift, and they close ranks to protect one another. However, while the Kings Cross detectives are all Anglo-Australians, their deviant and criminal actions are represented as being a function of police occupational culture, while their race or ethnicity is almost entirely unacknowledged, in contrast to the Lebanese denizens of Kings Cross. This incongruity resonates with Collins et al.'s (2000, p. 9) remark that 'it seems that only non-Anglo-Celts are seen as "ethnic" in relation to criminal matters'.

In episodes ten ('Hurt on Duty') and eleven ('Beauty and the Beast'), the 1994-1997 Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service is played out. In *The Golden Mile*, The Wood Royal Commission purges the Kings Cross area, and the police organisation more broadly of its corrupt officers. Several criminals are also successfully prosecuted. As such, in

episode twelve ('The Good Lieutenant'), the series' narrator identifies the Royal Commission as a key turning point in the series, explaining that:

1998 and Kings Cross was changing thanks to the Wood Royal Commission. There was a major power vacuum in that most lucrative of Golden Miles; a vacuum that dangerous opportunists like Danny 'DK' Karam rushed in to fill. And a new generation of wannabe dealers flooded in right behind him. Gangs of delinquents from the suburbs roamed the streets unchecked, fighting pitch battles, carving out their turf, causing mayhem.

Though Karam was introduced earlier in the series, he assumes a more prominent role in episodes ten through thirteen. He is involved in an ongoing conflict with the police in Kings Cross and recruits a gang from Sydney's western suburbs, who, but for one exception, are young men of Lebanese background. 'DK's Boys', as they become known, act beyond Karam's orders and carry out brazen acts of violence, including shooting in the direction of police officers. It should be noted that DK's Boys, as depicted in *The Golden Mile*, are also caricatures of real people. Indeed, the real-life DK's Boys were engaged in many acts of serious, violent and organised crime in Sydney in the 1990s, which directly contributed to the moral panics about 'Lebanese gangs' in the 1990s (Collins, et al. 2010, pp. 4, 8, 53). However, where *The Combination* sheds light on the social, political and economic influences on young men's behaviours and self-expressions, *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* falls short, as it makes little attempt to develop the characters of DK's Boys.

In *The Golden Mile*, 'DK's Boys' are shown intently listening to Karam's stories about his time in the Christian Militia in Lebanon and they enthusiastically ask him questions about firearms; implying that the war in Lebanon is a direct, foreign influence on DK's Boys' firearms-related violence in Sydney. As noted by Poynting et al. (2004) and Noble and Poynting (2003), reporters and journalists often make use of metaphors of war in reporting about crimes committed by members of ethnic minority communities. Poynting et al. (2004, pp. 54-55) explain that such metaphors have often been evident in news reporting on 'Lebanese gangs' in Sydney, with the effect that:

Metaphors of war have a decidedly moral and political character, serving to legitimate state action... Complex economic and political causes [influencing criminal behaviour] are displaced by reference to cultural difference... [which] enhance the violence of the threat posed, and... extend it to a general, pervasive threat, akin to a warring enemy.

Indeed, where *The Combination* is virtually silent on policing, *The Golden Mile* valorises police efforts to apprehend DK's Boys and 'restore order' to Kings Cross. While the detectives of Kings Cross had consumed 'Valiant Ale' before the Wood Royal Commission, in the era after the Royal Commission the police are portrayed as being the embodiment of valiant. The portrayal of police practice in episodes ten to thirteen of *The Golden Mile* is quite consistent

with scholarly accounts of police practice in New South Wales in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Scholars who have critically analysed the Police Service's post-Royal Commission reform agenda have emphasised that, institutionally, the Service became animated by an enthusiasm for 'crime fighting' and crime reduction, which, as depicted in *The Golden Mile*, included proactive and intensive street policing (Dixon, 1999; Fleming and Lewis, 2002). However, perhaps because of its focus on Kings Cross, *The Golden Mile* does not accurately depict the scope of police intervention, and the broad targeting of Middle Eastern background communities in Sydney's south west through intensive street policing operations, which was spurred on by concerns about 'ethnic gangs' like DK's Boys (Collins, et al., 2000; Dixon and Maher, 1999; White, 2007). Thus, similar to *The Combination*, *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* fails to account for the criminalisation of entire communities because of the grotesque actions of a few, and, as a result, also fails to provide adequate context for the animosity between the police and Lebanese-background communities in Sydney (Collins, et al., 2000; White, 2007).

### **Down Under (2016)**

*Down Under* is a black comedy film written and directed by Abe Forsythe, which premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2016 and was released in cinemas in August 2016. *Down Under* is set in the immediate aftermath of the Cronulla Riots in December 2005. The Cronulla Riots have also been a key site for scholars studying issues of race and ethnicity, social cohesion and social change, cultural difference, and multiculturalism and nationalism in Australia.

On December 4, 2005, a scuffle took place between two young Caucasian surf lifesavers and a group of young men of Middle Eastern background at Cronulla Beach in Sydney's south. The following day, a New South Wales Police Force media release incorrectly reported that the surf lifesavers at Cronulla Beach in Sydney's south had been attacked, without provocation, by a large group of young men of Middle Eastern background (Strike Force Neil, 2006, p. 29; Poynting, 2006). As examined in the substantial body of literature on the Cronulla Riots, issues of racial tension, 'ethnic gangs' and related subject matters became topics of fevered discussion for politicians and talk-back-radio hosts after the scuffle on the beach and the police media release (Strike Force Neil, 2006; Poynting, 2006; Noble, 2009). People of Middle Eastern background (and especially men) were accused of continuously affronting Cronulla's residents and acting disrespectfully towards Anglo-Australian women, even prior to the fight on December 4, 2005 (Strike Force Neil, 2006; Poynting, 2006; Noble,

2009). Then, on December 11, 2005, around 5,000 Anglo-Australians mobilised in response to the calls urging them to reclaim their beach and gathered at Cronulla. Many members of the mob were intoxicated and enacted violence on any person in Cronulla 'of Middle Eastern appearance', though Many of the mob's victims were later found to have no Middle Eastern heritage (Strike Force Neil, 2006). The mob also showed contempt for emergency services workers and attacked both police and paramedics present at the scene (Strike Force Neil, 2006). The following evening, small numbers of men of Middle Eastern background retaliated to the events at Cronulla in so-called 'reprisal attacks' in beach-side suburbs in Sydney's south and south-east (Strike Force Neil, 2006; Poynting, 2006; Noble, 2009).

The involvement of young men of Middle Eastern background in the reprisal attacks led to the establishment of a specialist 'Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad'. The rationale for this decision was explained by the team that carried out the Police Force's investigation into the Cronulla Riots, which was code-named Strike Force Neil, and whose report is referred to as the Hazzard Report. Strike Force Neil presented a critical and racialised reflection on the attacks and property damage enacted by young men of Middle Eastern background in the 'reprisal attacks', stating that (2006, p. 56):

There is evidence of a significant level of violent criminality being committed by a small element of the Middle Eastern community. These criminals have shown that they have the means to form a large group of people with Middle Eastern background who have little or no criminal records to engage in activity that is referred to as the 'reprisal' attacks. This criminal element has no respect for authority and engages in intimidation of police and members of the community.

However, as it was acknowledged in the Hazzard Report that most of the individuals involved in the 'reprisal attacks' were people 'who [had] little or no criminal records', it seems incongruent to cite the reprisal attacks as part of the rationale for establishing a specialist organised crime squad. It also seems incongruent that the Police Commissioner did not establish a similar crime squad to contain the crimes of those Anglo-Australians who instigated the large-scale violence which began on December 11, 2005.

*Down Under* sets out to expose and challenge some of these incongruencies by using satire as a device to highlight similarities between the Anglo-Australian and Lebanese-background men that it depicts. *Down Under* focuses on two groups of men who mobilise in the immediate aftermath of the Cronulla Riots. One is a group of Anglo-Australian men, who set out to proactively 'patrol' the Shire for any sign of 'wogs' amidst the reprisal attacks. The group is comprised of Jason (Damon Herriman) who is passionate about his cause, Ditch (Justin Rosniak) who is obsessed with the revered Australian outlaw bushranger Ned Kelly,



their friend Shane (Alexander England) who does not want to participate in the ‘patrol’, and Shane’s cousin Evan (Christopher Bunton), who has Down syndrome, and winds up on the ‘patrol’ because he is visiting Shane, so that Shane can teach him how to drive. Meanwhile, a second group of Lebanese-background men heads towards the Shire from Sydney’s south western suburbs. Nick (Rahel Romahn) is Jason’s counterpart in the second group of men, as he is the only person in the second car who is genuinely interested in staging a reprisal attack. He is reluctantly accompanied by Hassim (Lincoln Younes), who does not condone Nick’s quest for violence but agrees to head to the Shire out of concern for his missing brother. Hassim’s uncle Ibrahim (Michael Denkha), who is a devout Muslim visiting from Lebanon, and D-Mac (Fayssal Bazzi), a friend of Nick and Hassim’s, both join the others. As with the other texts analysed, women are excluded from the narrative in *Down Under*, save for a handful of appearances by Jason’s pregnant Anglo-Australian partner Stacey (Harriet Dyer).

In a monologue at the beginning of the film, Nick explains to Hassim why he wants to stage a reprisal attack, stating: ‘[t]hey’re treating us like second class citizens, cuz. I’m sick of them feeling like they’ve got more of a right to be here than us, and I’m not the only one’. In this way, *Down Under* attempts to provide context and a voice for those who became involved in the reprisal attacks that is often oversimplified or unacknowledged in news reporting and official reports like the Hazzard Report.

Nick’s claim that he has been made to feel like a second-class citizen is reinforced by Ditch telling the Australian men on his patrol that ‘if Ned [Kelly] were around today he wouldn’t stand for all these Lebo cocks bringing their grease here from other countries’, only to be reminded by Evan that Ned Kelly was the son of an Irish convict who was transported to Australia. Ned Kelly was also the leader of a gang of bushrangers and a convicted police murderer. As explained by Poynting (2000, p. 67), Ned Kelly has assumed the role of an icon in contemporary Australia after having been “adopted and rehabilitated as ‘Anglo-Celtic’, [but he] may have led the original “ethnic gang””. Thus, there is an irony in Ditch venerating Ned Kelly, given the persistent allegations that Lebanese communities have imported criminal behaviour to Australia, characterised by gangs, guns, violence and disregard for policing and the rule of law. Moreover, in embarking on a vigilante patrol of their own, Ditch and his carload of friends are complicit in endorsing violence and demonstrating the same disregard for policing and the rule of law that Lebanese communities in Australia have previously been accused of demonstrating in news reporting (Collins, et al., 2000; Dixon and Maher, 1999). However, while duly attempting to highlight the hypocrisies in Anglo-

Australians bemoaning migrants for importing cultural traits that are deviant and criminal, the strength of *Down Under*'s premise is undermined by its failure to acknowledge the devastation wrought upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the British colonisation of Australia, apart from one scene where the carload of Anglo-Australians listen to the protest song 'Treaty' by the band Yothu Yindi (some members of Yothu Yindi are Yolngu people).

*Down Under* also satirically challenges the specific idea that firearms-related crimes are peculiar to Middle Eastern background communities in a scene that, like *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*, draws on the imagery of war. As the Anglo-Australian men are preparing to leave for their 'patrol', Shane's father is aghast to hear that Jason and Ditch only packed sandwiches, biscuits and a baseball bat. Shane's father asks Shane to assist him as he produces a rusted metal chest. From the chest, he removes a longarm rifle that Shane's grandfather dismantled and smuggled back into Australia after fighting at Gallipoli in one of Australia's most venerated war campaigns. Shane's father goes on to explain that the gun was brought back to Australia only to 'spill the blood of someone who didn't uphold our values'. Thus, in *Down Under* it is the Anglo-Australians who bring firearms-related crimes into Australia, whilst ironically bemoaning Middle Eastern background communities for their apparent disregard for 'Australian values'. However, the value of this challenge to the dominant discourse about Lebanese communities is severely undermined when the carload of Lebanese-background men also obtains a firearm and each side ends up maiming one another. Indeed, Krayem's assertion (2017b, p. 19) in her short review of *Down Under* holds true:

In telling the story of a particular moment in Australian history, *Down Under* has aimed for the right thing by attempting to include the perspective of the Other. But, ultimately, it lacks punch, finesse and understanding.

### **Comparing the Texts**

In all three texts characters of Middle Eastern background engage in firearms-related crimes and other violent acts. In *The Combination*, every major male character of Middle Eastern background participates in acts of violence and firearms-related crimes. Moreover, the single major Middle Eastern background female character is shown to endorse violence and firearms-related crimes, extending a blessing to her son as he leaves their family home in possession of a firearm, seeking revenge for the murder of his brother. In *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*, the major characters of Middle Eastern background are all men. Though there is

some nuance in the respective characterisations of these characters, they are all involved in violence of one form or another: those who are not shown discharging firearms are invariably involved in extortion, street brawls and other physical altercations. Moreover, direct links are drawn between war in Lebanon and the violence and firearms-related crimes committed by some of the characters depicted in *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* in Sydney: implying that those behaviours were imported to Australia from Lebanon. Meanwhile, in *Down Under*, the major characters of Middle Eastern background are also all men, who set out to stage violent reprisal attacks in the aftermath of the Cronulla Riots. Though one of the men is opposed to his friends' violent quest, the film nevertheless concludes with the Middle Eastern background men maiming a second carload of Anglo-Australian men. That the violent acts depicted in each of these three texts are generally carried out by groups of young men serves to reinforce the crude images of violent 'ethnic gangs' and 'Lebanese gangs' that have been evident in Australian news reporting since the 1990s (Poynting, Noble and Tabar, 1999; Collins, et al., 2000; White, 2007; White, 2008).

A further theme evident across the texts is a disregard for police and the rule of law. This theme is most obvious in *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*, which focuses as much on the Kings Cross police detectives as it does on the Lebanese-background denizens of the Cross. Disregard or distrust for the police amongst the Lebanese-background characters in *The Golden Mile* is most apparent in the latter episodes of the series, when a change in police organisation's operational priorities takes place in the aftermath of the Wood Royal Commission. The shifts in police practices that follow the Royal Commission see the police target intensive street policing practices at some of the Lebanese-background characters, thus generating animosity between the police and the characters who are aggressively policed. However, this depiction of police practice does not capture the extent to which aggressive street policing was targeted at Middle Eastern background communities in New South Wales in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which occurred because responsibility and complicity for the crimes of a few young men of Middle Eastern background was extended to entire community groups. *The Golden Mile* also fails to capture the widespread hostilities that these targeted policing practices created between the police and Middle Eastern background communities (Collins, et al., 2000; Dixon and Maher, 1999; White, 2007).

Disregard for police and the rule of law is also portrayed more subtly in *The Combination* and *Down Under*. Indeed, the police are almost invisible in both films because men of Middle Eastern background seek recourse to retributive, vigilante violence rather than seeking out the

police to assist them. While the characters' recourse to vigilante violence in both films arguably indicate a lack of trust in the police, omissions of the police from these texts mean that like *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*, *The Combination* and *Down Under* both fail to account for the role of policing practice in producing distrust for police within Lebanese communities in New South Wales. Instead, the texts give the impression that there is a naturalised link between race and retributive violence, despite the writers of both films attempting to extend and challenge narratives about the criminality of Middle Eastern background communities (Krayem, 2014, pp. 9, 122-125; 2017b, p. 16).

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented a qualitative content analysis of Australian popular media texts that portray Middle Eastern background communities as being deviant and criminal. The three texts analysed were: *The Combination* (2009); *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* (2010); and *Down Under* (2016). The key themes discerned from the representations of Middle Eastern background communities in these texts included gang membership, firearms-related crimes and other acts of violence, and disregard for police and the rule of law. The representations of Middle Eastern background communities in the texts analysed align with scholars' observations about 'antipodean orientalism' and the framing of Middle Eastern background communities in Australian news reporting since the 1990s. However, attempts to challenge and extend narratives about the alleged criminality of Middle Eastern background communities are also discernible in *The Combination* and *Down Under*. Nevertheless, these texts still framed Middle Eastern background community members as being crime-prone.

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## List of Key Index Terms

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Collins, Jock

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Crime drama

Cronulla Riots

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