


# “They Got Filters”: Indigenous Social Media, the Settler Gaze, and a Politics of Hope

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Social Media + Society  
April-June 2020: 1–11  
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305120925261  
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## Abstract

Social media technologies have had ambivalent political implications for Indigenous peoples and communities. On one hand, they constitute new horizons toward which settler colonial forces of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and elimination can extend and strengthen their power. On the other hand, social media have also offered opportunities to resist and reject the violence of colonization and its ideological counterparts of domination and racial superiority, and work toward imagining and realizing alternative futures. In this article, we draw on insights from settler colonial studies and affect theory to chart the politics of “affect” through the stories of Indigenous Australian social media users. We first argue that the online practices of Indigenous social media users are often mediated by an awareness of the ‘settler gaze’—that is, a latent audience of non-Indigenous others observing in bad faith. We then outline two responses to this presence described by participants: policing the online behaviors of friends and family, and circulating hopeful, inspiring, and positive content. If “policing” is about delimiting the things of which online bodies are capable, then an affective politics of hope is about expanding a body’s capacity to act and imagining other possible futures for Indigenous people.

## Keywords

Indigenous studies, affect theory, settler colonial studies, social media

Social media technologies complexly intersect with and affect Indigenous subjectivities. Facebook and Twitter, on one hand, have become home to more or less organized hate groups, facilitating what Matamoros-Fernández (2017) has called “platformed racism” (p. 930). Research has found Indigenous people disproportionately bear the brunt of practices of trolling, cyberbullying, and other forms of digital violence (Campbell et al., 2010). The effects of these forces are far from immaterial, but can lead to both real trauma at the level of the individual, and the ongoing marginalization at the level of whole social groups (Carlson et al., 2017). In these ways, social media offers another platform through which the settler colonial “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006) can be enacted.

But social media have also offered opportunities to powerfully resist, refute, and reject this logic and work toward imagining and realizing different futures for Indigenous peoples. From the online Zapatista movement in Mexico against government subjugation (Wolfson, 2012), to the Canadian #IdleNoMore activism for Indigenous sovereignty (Grundberg & Lindgren, 2015), to the #SOSBlakAustralia protests against the forced closures of remote Aboriginal communities (Carlson & Frazer, 2016), Indigenous peoples globally have leveraged social media technologies to their own ends—challenging

dominant discourses, organizing feet-on-the-streets activism, and producing anti-colonial collectives.

Researchers have also been interested in how social media is implicated in Indigenous peoples’ more “everyday” political expressions, performances, or representations of the self (Lumby, 2010; Petray, 2011). Moving beyond earlier debates around the “authenticity” of online expression, more recent work has sought to understand the political *work* of social media performances. Petray (2011) argues, for instance, that “self-writing,” where Indigenous Australians overtly perform their identities online, constitutes an everyday form of “micro-activism” through which pejorative stereotypes may be challenged. This work has demonstrated social media—as “an arena for political struggle” (Harris & Carlson, 2016, p. 460)—provides Indigenous peoples promising though uncertain political possibilities in refuting the forces of settler colonialism.

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Over the last decade, social scientists turned to ideas of “affect” to better understand the processes through which political subjectivities and collectives are produced and maintained. Most often understood through Baruch Spinoza’s dictum of “the capacity to affect and be affected,” this work has looked at what affects *do* in the formation of subjectivities, rather than what they *are* (Ahmed, 2013). A focus on affect has helped scholars parse the complex forces that provisionally cohere to produce particular political arrangements—that is, how forces “beyond” both the material and discursive move, stabilize, and transform subjects.

Increasingly, media and communications studies scholars have put to work these ideas to analyze the messy, complex, and often unstable forms of political sociality now facilitated through social media. Most commonly, this work has sought to understand how affect is implicated in the production of digital “publics” (Hipfl, 2018; Papacharissi, 2016). Analyses have included how the affective force of “anger” can rally a people around issues of social justice (Blevins et al., 2019); how anti-fascist activism can be reframed and intensified through notions of “love” (Persson, 2017); and how “eudaimonic” (i.e., meaningful, joyful, and inspiring) memes can be used to “circulate joy” among Facebook publics (Rieger & Klimmt, 2019).

In this article, we chart the everyday politics of affect through the stories of Indigenous Australian social media users.<sup>1</sup> We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 41 participants across five Australian communities, in which we discussed what kinds of content they posted online, what they thought constituted “proper” and “appropriate” online behavior, and what factors figured into their views on what comprised “good” online behavior. Rather than questioning the “authenticity” of these performances of the self, we instead asked the following: What *work* do they do? Which online actions and expressions do they make possible, and which others do they foreclose? And which broader relations of power might be working to guide, shape and preclude these online expressions?

Through our analysis, we argue that the online practices of Indigenous social media users are often mediated by an awareness of the “settler gaze”—that is, the knowledge of a potential audience of anti-Indigenous others observing in bad faith. The people we spoke to described two main responses to this latent presence. On one hand, some articulated a responsibility to moderate and “police” the online expressions of their family, friends, and kin, particularly when they were concerned these expressions might be used against them in some way. On the other hand, a smaller group of participants described actively sharing content that produced an altogether different image of Indigenous futures—one that exceeded the dominant settler colonial narrative of Indigenous “decline”—in what we broadly describe as an affective politics of hope. In both cases, however, we suggest the affective expressions of these Indigenous social media users can be understood as already enabled and delimited through existing Indigenous-settler power relations and regimes of surveillance.

## Social Media and Affective Politics

Political scholars across disciplines have found difficulty articulating the political relations, connections, and arrangements that now emerge on social media (Castells, 2015). In an age of “fake news” (Albright, 2017), dispersed and seemingly “unorganised” White supremacist networks (Nagle, 2017), and the frantic workings of “cancel culture,” more traditional forms of political analyses appear increasingly inadequate to describe the more decentralized and “rhizomatic” forms of political action that social media makes possible.

Perhaps most influentially, political scholars Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe these online political arrangements as “connective action.” They define connective action as a more “personalised,” less centrally organized, and more provisional political formation. The *personalisation of the political*, Bennett (2012) argues elsewhere, “is perhaps the defining change in the political culture of our era” (p. 37). Rather than being elicited, organized, and held together through hierarchical models of political “membership,” online political movements “are developing relationships to publics as *affiliates* [. . .] offering them personal options in ways to engage and express themselves” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 760, emphasis added).

Increasingly, there has been a turn to ideas of affect to understand these more dynamic and “affiliative” publics of digitally mediated action (Hipfl, 2018). While theories of “affect” have diverse provenance (Pile, 2010), much of the recent work in media studies has drawn on broadly Spinozan conceptualizations of affect as *the ability to affect and be affected*. That is, focusing less on the clearly felt or easily articulable dimensions of everyday experience, this work pays attention to what bodies can and cannot do, say, and sense. Affect does not set analysis only on questions of identity, representation, or complete, unified, and static forms. Instead, it emphasizes connections, in-betweenness, provisional unity, circulation, and emergence. It asks how bodies are connected to other bodies and what capacities these connections might produce or preclude. It is an approach that, as scholars are increasingly recognizing, appears particularly well-suited for the messy, contingent, and diffuse political formations that often transpire on social media.

Papacharissi (2016), for instance, elaborates the idea of “affective publics” to understand online movements that exceed more traditional political solidarities. Affect is, they explain, “the drive or sense of movement experienced *before* we have cognitively identified a reaction and labeled it as a particular emotion” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 316, emphasis added). For Papacharissi, because it is pre-cognitive or non-representable, affect leaves open possibilities for alternative political arrangements. “Its in-the-making, not-yet-fully-formed nature is what invites many to associate affect with potentiality,” they write (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 316). Papacharissi (2016) argues that it is through the affective registers of Twitter hashtags, for

instance, that undifferentiated “crowds” are rendered into more clearly defined “publics,” which “come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment” (p. 308). This leads to a much more open, complex understanding of the political affordances of online connections. Rather than focusing on the readily identifiable structures and meanings of political arrangements, the notion of affective publics sees politics as potentiality: what is and what is not politically possible on social media.

A growing body of literature has tracked empirically the emergence, formation, and dissolution of these affective publics on social media. Knudsen and Stage (2012), for instance, argue from their case study on climate activism that “affect plays a prominent role as a way of creating inner relations among the activists and as a way of connecting to the outer world” (p. 154). Blevins et al. (2019), more recently, explore the affective registers of tweets around Black rights movements in the United States and, in particular, how they produce counter narratives to those circulated by legacy media. “By telling their own stories, on their own terms,” they write,

[T]hese “affective publics” disrupted the power typically held by mainstream news outlets and in the process changed the conversation from one that focuses on basic story elements [. . .] to one in which the meaning of the event is more internalized. (Blevins, 2019, p. 14)

More than just the discursive content of tweets, the affective registers of hashtags used in Twitter dialogue around police brutality worked to internalize and intensify an audience that supported Black rights. Persson (2017), on the contrary, explores the “excessive” aspect of affect and emotion in online political activity. Focusing on the affective politics of Twitter use during an anti-fascist protest, they argue that in understanding online expressions, we must understand to which *publics* they are connected, and which they produce. Persson (2017) writes, “To *feel* in public is a way for people to discharge their own individual emotions in front of others, but it also becomes a way of being part of a public based partly on shared emotions” (p. 9, their emphasis). This work shows that through the circulation of affect that publics are *produced*, rather than just gathered or contained.

### Social Media, Indigenous Activism, and the Project of Decolonization

This recent turn toward affect provides new and exciting avenues for understanding the political relations, movements, and arrangements that social media makes possible. Rather than relying on more traditional conceptualizations of collective politics as ideology or group membership, affect points toward the more diffuse, affiliative, and indeterminate registers of digital politics. While scholars have applied this thinking to the political potentialities opened up for marginalized groups, such as Black populations in the United States,

little work on affect has explored the political engagements of Indigenous social media users. This is a significant oversight, as a growing body of research shows that not only are Indigenous groups situated differently within regimes of power—most significantly, *colonial* power—they also use and experience social media differently than other populations (Hutchings & Rodger, 2018; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Relations between Indigenous and settler colonizer populations are reproduced and reimagined through the connections made possible through social media (Carlson & Frazer, 2020; Frazer & Carlson, 2017).

In settler colonial Australia, Indigenous people constitute a distinct social, cultural, and economic group. By many metrics, Australian Indigenous peoples are subject to the worst social, economic, and educational outcomes in the country. Paralleling the experience of Indigenous populations elsewhere, two centuries of concerted effort at elimination, dispossession, and disenfranchisement by colonial forces have wrought great violence against Indigenous Australians. Scholarship on Indigenous-settler relations in Australia documents the ongoing workings of colonial logics, which work to ignore, contain, and erase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, subjectivities, and claims to Country (Maddison & Nakata, 2020). Indigenous Australians, however, remain in existence—socially, culturally, and spiritually strong—owing to centuries of successful anti-colonial resistance, political organization, and cultural resurgence. Because of this broader politics, there are different stakes for Indigenous people in being online: both in terms of the possibilities it brings about and the risks it carries.

A growing body of work documents the myriad benefits social media offers Indigenous populations, such as in finding friends and family lost through past policies of forced removal (Carlson, 2013); participating in significant cultural practices, including language regeneration and Sorry Business (i.e., practices of mourning; Marshall & Notley, 2014); sustaining networks of trust, help, and care (Hefler et al., 2018); and, most importantly for this article, engaging in political processes of self-expression and self-representation (Petray, 2011).

Moving beyond earlier concerns around the “authenticity” of online identities, more recent work has conceptualized social media as “a vibrant stage of *constructing* authenticities” (Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 74, emphasis added). Social media has been understood as a platform through which multiple expressions of the self can be made (van Dijck, 2013; Zhao et al., 2008).

This is particularly significant for marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples. Since colonization, racist stereotypes of Indigenous people have worked to sustain and legitimize the settler colonial state. The founding national myth of *terra nullius* (i.e., empty land), for instance, posited Australia as a land without people, free for British forces to appropriate without negotiation, treaty, or compensation. Deleterious colonial policies across the last two centuries have been

based on racist representations of Indigenous people as, variously, lazy, alcoholics, neglectful parents, and criminals (Augoustinos et al., 1999). Moreover, scholars have documented the ways in which mainstream media and government discourse, even that which is “sympathetic,” is implicated reproducing what is called a “deficit discourse”—a discursive formation that Fforde et al. (2013) describe as “a narrative of negativity, deficiency and disempowerment” (p. 162). This narrative constitutes a way of identifying and defining Indigenous people by that which they supposedly lack. Significantly, researchers have consistently found this discursive formation in fact *perpetuates* that which it claims to only describe (Fforde et al., 2013).

One of the ongoing critical questions, then, has been who has the power to represent Indigenous peoples and communities in Australia. “Mainstream media in Australia and elsewhere has presented limited opportunities for Indigenous input,” Desmarchelier et al. (2018) argue, “and have instead focused on reporting from the perspective of the colonizers” (p. 150).

In this context, new media, including social media, has often been understood as providing opportunities to tell other stories, to produce other cultural identities, and to paint other futures (Brown & Nicholas, 2012; Carlson & Dreher, 2018; Frazer & Carlson, 2017; Titifanue et al., 2018). Desmarchelier et al. (2018) write that “where Australian Indigenous people have access to and/or control over forms of broadcast media, there is a noticeable dilution of mainstream/Whitestream narratives of Indigeneity” (p. 151). Looking at Indigenous-controlled digital media, they argue that “Indigenous empowerment is strongly evident in the positive portrayals of identity and culture” (Desmarchelier et al., 2018, p. 161). In this same vein, Hutchings and Rodger (2018) argue that “social media platforms like Twitter are important tools that can be utilised by Indigenous peoples to make explicit and powerful challenges to Settler ideas of what defines contemporary Aboriginality” (p. 86).

As this work has demonstrated, there is a complex politics of “being Indigenous” on social media (Petray, 2011). To express one’s Indigeneity online is to defy the colonial project of elimination (Wolfe, 2006), at both corporeal and discursive registers. For Indigenous social media users, to have control of how oneself and one’s social group are represented is to challenge forces that define them in terms of what they lack, and to make possible other futures.

But scholars have warned against the tendency in social research to amplify the apparent benefits of new media while downplaying its dangers (Bennett, 2012). Digital technologies have ambivalent consequences for Indigenous peoples (Brown & Nicholas, 2012). As work across the disciplines of sociology, media studies, and cultural studies has shown, social media can also work to extend and intensify the colonial “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006). Online, Indigenous Australians are subject to racism, trolling, cyberbullying, doxing, gossip, and lateral violence (Matamoros-Fernández,

2017). Moreover, while they might facilitate the continuation and performance of culture, they also open possibilities of its appropriation (Brown & Nicholas, 2012). While social media has opened new doors for Indigenous people in political participation, to express themselves, to take power over their own representation, others have argued that it has also produced new ways of silencing dissent. Dreher et al. (2016), for instance, argue we must pay attention not only to the politics of giving “voice” but also the politics of “listening.” This, they suggest, turns attention from the question of who gets to *speak* to one of who is *heard*.

Ultimately, this work shows clearly that Indigenous people’s use of social media does not exist in some politically neutral space, somehow free from the broader forces that constitute contemporary Australian settler colonialism. Rather, we must also pay attention to how Indigenous people’s online engagements exist in relation to broader colonial relations, which might work to delimit, silence, and police what is possible for Indigenous people online.

## The Project: An Affective Politics

This article emerges from a national research project funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Indigenous grant (ID: IN160100049) exploring the giving and receiving of help between and among Indigenous social media users.<sup>2</sup> The aim of the research is to better understand the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on social media as it relates to accessing and sustaining networks of trust and support. This project was inspired by a desire to understand how, in a context of ongoing settler colonial marginalization and widespread distrust of settler institutions, Indigenous social media users might be producing other networks of help, trust, and care through the less “formal” connections facilitated by social media.

Over the last 2 years, we have been talking to Indigenous social media users across various parts of Australia, conducting semi-structured interviews that focus on their online practices, and engaging with Indigenous service providers to see how social media figures into their organizational practices. We have conducted face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 41 Indigenous participants from communities across New South Wales (Wollongong and Dubbo), Queensland (Cairns), and the Northern Territory (Darwin). Participants were selected on the basis that they were over the age of 18 years, identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and were active social media users. Participants came from a wide variety of ages (18–60 years of age) and backgrounds: political activists, university students, stay-at-home parents, community workers, and Elders. To ensure anonymity, participant names have been omitted from this article.

The collected data were qualitatively analyzed using an Indigenous research methodological framework. Indigenous frameworks encourage researchers to center and elevate



Indigenous perspectives, voices, and experiences (Rigney, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). We were particularly guided by Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata's (2007) notion of the "Cultural Interface"—a concept he developed to denote the site of symbolic and material struggle that continues to envelop colonized peoples. For Nakata, the Cultural Interface is a space of interaction, negotiation, and resistance, whereby the everyday expressions of Indigenous people can be understood as both productive and constraining. For this article, it encouraged us to see social media as always already mediated by existing Indigenous-settler relations. However, and importantly, the Cultural Interface is also a space of possibility, in which these mediated relations can always be challenged and dismantled.

To explore the ambivalent political possibilities of social media for Indigenous people, we draw on these insights from settler colonialism studies and recent developments in theories of affect to frame an affective politics of Indigenous social media users. Hipfl (2018) explains that "affect is not individual, it is always *relational*" (p. 7, emphasis added). Affect is what binds us together, what moves us, and what makes us capable of feeling and acting upon the world. Affect circulates between, across, and through collectives—sticking to some bodies, gliding off others, both reifying and transforming subjectivities in the process. Following the research outlined above, we are interested in Indigenous social media users' capacity to affect and be affected online.

A significant, though often overlooked, element is the role of audience in producing affective publics. Most research on Indigenous peoples' use of social media has focused on the productive engagements of users between one another, in collectives, and communities, and, in the process, it generally assumes a homogeneous, neutral audience. In this article, and following the work of Litt and Hargittai (2016), we are interested in the differential affects of Indigenous social media users, depending on *who* they presuppose their audience to be. We ask, how does the awareness of an audience shape what users share and who they become on social media? Thus, we are interested in understanding social media not only as a platform through which people might connect with one another, but a stage on which users' online interactions might be observed by others. A focus on audience, we suggest, broadens the scope of analysis. While we talked to individual users and asked them about their personal experiences, beliefs, and practices, a consideration of the role of audience encourages an understanding of how the affective capacity of individual users is always enabled and delimited by broader collectives—imagined or otherwise.

Our analysis moves through three sections. In the first section, we discuss the role of what we call the "settler gaze" in mediating Indigenous peoples' social media practices. We argue that, in the context of the settler state, Indigenous users' interactions can be reasonably positioned as "potentially surveilled." In short, we demonstrate that many Indigenous social media users are often aware of the possibility of

nefarious onlookers, people who are ready to co-opt sensitive and esoteric knowledge or use everyday internal conflict against Indigenous peoples. The following sections focus on two distinct responses to this nascent awareness.

On one hand, people we interviewed very often talked about their self-identified responsibility in ensuring that family, friends, and kin did not engage in behavior online that might present a risk to their families and communities, including sharing cultural information or engaging in "drama" (boyd, 2014). Users described "keeping an eye" on younger family members, privately messaging friends to mitigate online drama, and self-policing their own online practices.

On the other hand, a smaller group of participants described an entirely different response to the settler gaze: circulating what we describe as an affective politics of hope. Several participants explained that not only did they avoid engaging in conflict, drama, and other forms of "negative" online behaviors that might be used against the broader community, they actively sought to produce positive, hopeful, and "eudaimonic" content. This "hopeful" mode of online activity, we suggest, worked to imagine other possible futures for Indigenous peoples that exceed the settler narrative of Indigenous lack and decline.

## The "Settler Gaze" on Social Media

In interviews, we asked all participants if they ever witnessed or participated in any "drama" on social media, including arguing with others, "dorrying" (i.e., gossiping), flaming, harassment, and so on. Mirroring experiences of social media users globally (Marwick & boyd, 2014), all participants explained that drama was part and parcel of being online. However, there was also a strong sense that social media was not a neutral or private space in which drama, conflict, and arguments might take place. Rather, there was an understanding that an Indigenous person's online behaviors could have broader cultural, social, and political ramifications.

On one level, many participants articulated a clear sense of responsibility to culture. They explained there were certain community or social standards to which one must adhere online. Some of these standards specifically regarded cultural protocol, such as engaging in particular aspects of Sorry Business (practices around death, dying, and loss) online. As one participant explained,

I know it's a public space and they can do that. But there are some things where, well, I feel that are just not appropriate to put there. There might be cultural content there that you don't post. You know, like the passing of a dead person, and you might say their name or they might disclose some information that is not really cultural protocol. (Female, 30)

Many Indigenous groups in Australia maintain strict practices around dying, death, and loss, and breaching these protocols (such as speaking a deceased person's name, talking

about their death, sharing their image) is often considered taboo. Social media is implicated in a “translation” of these cultural practices—a process which can lead to social conflict among Indigenous peoples and communities, and non-Indigenous appropriation of cultural knowledge (Brown & Nicholas, 2012; Carlson & Frazer, 2015).

On another level, there was a sense that there were potentially damaging consequences for seemingly unacceptable or inappropriate behavior online—what Marwick and boyd (2014) describe broadly as “drama”: “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media” (p. 1191). Drama is a ubiquitous feature of online sociality. But for Indigenous people, drama is often *externally* problematized and pathologized in ways not experienced by other, non-Indigenous social groups. Rather, there is a danger that what is said online by individual Indigenous users might be posited as a reflection of their family, community, or the social group of “Indigenous” more broadly.

Recognition of this danger was evident in some of the participants’ interviews. As one explained, “You shouldn’t be fighting on Facebook, because other people will know your business then. You should be seeing them face-to-face. Not putting it out there for everybody else to see” (Female, 35). Another explained that

That’s all you see on social media, young kids fighting around. *Just makes us look bad*, especially when you get them Indigenous people on there, fighting around, and then word gets back, and it just keeps going on round social media. *Once the news get hold of it, it’ll just eat ‘em alive*. So that’s the worst thing that could ever happen. (Female, 45, emphasis added)

There is always an “imagined audience” (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) to our online engagements, but we cannot always be certain of exactly who comprises this audience, how our engagements will be perceived, and how they will ultimately be used by others. For these social media users, the stakes are understood as being different for Indigenous people. Unlike dominant and mainstream social groups, an individual Indigenous person’s “bad” behavior is more likely to be held to reflect negatively on the community more generally. This is a major social policing mechanism through which majoritarian social groups—in this case, settler colonizers—maintain a hegemonic power position. It mirrors what Mayer-Schönberger (2011) calls the “digital panopticon” (see also Lumby, 2010). “The panopticon,” they write, “shapes present behavior: I act as if I am watched even if I am not” (Mayer-Schönberger, 2011, p. 11). Because of this, online interactions—even between two Indigenous users—are mediated by broader, racial relations of settler power. There is a non-Indigenous presence, imagined or otherwise, that works to shape and mold online behavior. There is always the possibility that a nefarious observer is in the audience, ready to wield personal online interactions against Indigenous people as a social group.

## Policing Community on Social Media

If this “settler gaze” is always a latent presence on social media—if there is always a danger that individual online activities can be used against the Indigenous community as a whole—then what affective consequences are there for what Indigenous social media users can and cannot do online?

In seeking to fulfill cultural, social, and familial responsibility, participants described a range of care, maintenance, and risk-adverse strategies that aimed to preclude the possibility that their communities might be negatively affected. In this and the following section, we describe two of the most common responses to the “settler gaze,” what we broadly categorize as “policing” and “hopefulness.”

Many participants described engaging in what could be broadly categorized as “self-policing” practices. “I find myself doing this policing thing,” one participant explained,

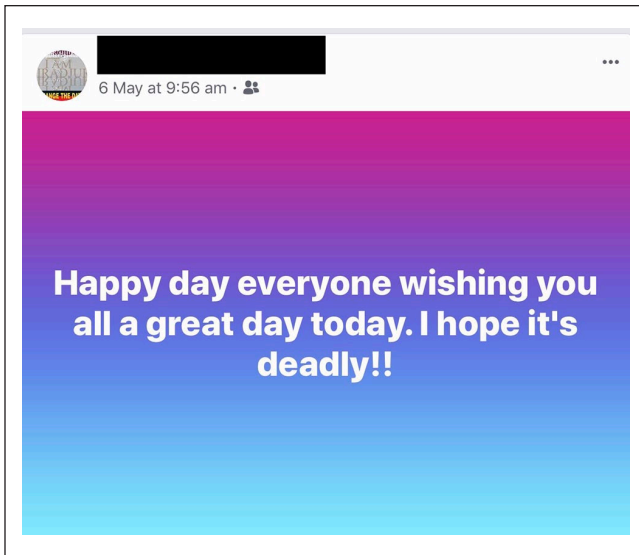
I’ve grown up a certain way that I just . . . I just won’t do it. If I want to talk to somebody about something, I’ll tell ‘em face to face. Do it professionally. But, again, that’s probably because of my age group. We were taught to communicate, you know. I’d hate to have my mother, my family respectively, have my mother find out some information. If I was a bit of a gossip on there, she would probably have a heart attack. I don’t want to put her health at risk. (Male, 30)

Others described actively policing the online interactions of others. One young participant explained that she “check[s] for the last post from my nieces or something. So I can stay on top. Because I don’t want to get a phone call from their mum, ‘Can you sort these girls out?’” (Female, 18). Another said that when she sees people engaging in drama online,

I would come in and say, “Hey!” You know? Especially if it’s a close family member of mine, it might be my niece, or, you know I’m the aunty, so I find that I have this responsibility, this, “Hey, you don’t wanna be talking like this on Facebook.” You know? “It looks bad. Take down that content, it’s inappropriate, you’re offending people here, and you gotta show some respect.” (Female, 30)

Another told a story in which she herself was disciplined by her family. She was having “a blow with [her] sister,” which started offline, “and then I took it online,” she explained. “Terrible. She’s my younger sister,” she said. “So, I was irresponsible and I posted something, and then people were saying, ‘Sister, you know, don’t’. And all this, and all this. And, ‘Come on, sis’.” She explained she took down the posts, “and that was a learning thing for me, you know. That I can’t be too reactive” (Female, 40). One participant, who described themselves as a bit of a jokester online, explained that these more cautious social media users “got filters” (Female, 65).

For Indigenous people, being “safe” online can necessitate alertness to the dangers of the settler gaze. As Carlson



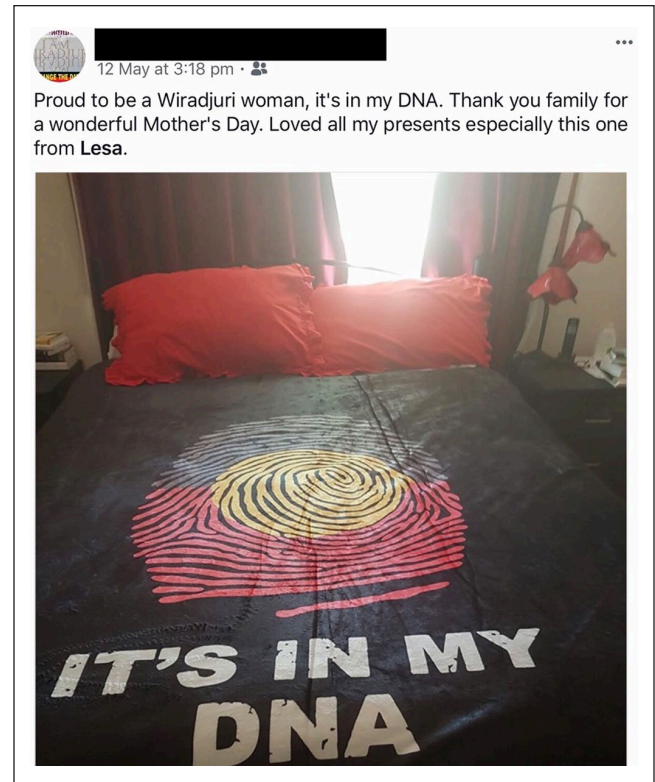
**Figure 1.** Eudaimonic post on being “deadly” (with permission).

(2019) found in Indigenous Australians’ use of dating apps, “there is a strong sense of danger felt by Indigenous users of these apps that can manifest in strict self-surveillance and vigilant performativity” (p. 14). If a user “steps a foot wrong,” there are potential penalties for the entire social group. In this case, there was a belief that, online, you are a representative not only of yourself, but your family and community. This policing—or “vigilant performativity”—was often about ensuring family and kin were engaging in “respectable” practices online, not drawing negative attention to the family, community, or entire social group. “Image maintenance,” here, is not just about projecting some idealized version of one’s identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Instead, it takes a more political and more collective hue: it is not just about preserving one’s own subjectivity and status, but about preserving one’s community.

While Papacharissi (2016) and others have explored the possibilities and potentialities of affect, we also need to be mindful of how affect can be externally delimited—we need to analyze those broader affective forces which work to circumscribe a body’s capacity to affect. The collective Indigenous body, it seems, is always already delimited through existing Indigenous–settler power relations and regimes of surveillance.

### Diagramming Hope on Social Media

A smaller group of participants described another kind of response to the settler gaze, circulating what we describe here as an affective politics of hope. Generally articulating themselves as, in some sense, community representatives or otherwise respected figures within their communities, these participants described how they worked to present highly



**Figure 2.** Eudaimonic content on having pride (with permission).

selective versions of themselves on Facebook, only sharing and engaging in what Rieger and Klimmt (2019) call “eudaimonic” (i.e., meaningful, joyful, and inspiring) content. They described their active efforts to avoid political debates, contentious topics, and drama, and instead share vocational, educational, and cultural opportunities; to offer words and images of encouragement, spiritual guidance, and faith to friends, family, and kin; and to engage in overt expressions of joy, care, and hope.

One participant explained that she aimed to share a positive message every morning, often accompanied by an image, often encouraging her friends and family to “stay deadly” (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup> She said she wants people “to wake up and see something positive on Facebook before they get down to see the meanness of the world” (Female, 60). Another described shaping her whole online presence around positivity, explaining that she runs Facebook “as a positive tool” (Female, 40). “It’s generally to encourage people,” she said. “I would say probably that’s 80% of how I utilise Facebook.” She described sharing inspiring quotes, positive stories about “Indigenous excellence,” and offering direct personal support to friends and family. When she can see someone “is giving up hope,” she explained, “I’ll private mail them and, typically to like my close relative, and give them encouragement, like publicly on their post, and then private mail them, and then we talk a little bit more personally, you know?”



Another participant explained that he liked to share anything new he has done or learnt:

I try and be positive on Facebook. So if I hear something or have participated in something and I feel like it—ya know, I'm very community minded and I feel like it should be shared—I'll put up a post about that on Facebook. (Male, 30)

He also explained that he tended to only respond with praise and encouragement to friends and family going through challenging times, such as his niece:

She's been overweight her whole life, she's had a baby, she's going on this journey where she's trying to lose weight so she can spend more time and be active with her child. So every now and then she puts up a post to say what she's done, what type of exercise and stuff, so the other day she put up a post and I said to her: "You don't know how many people you're inspiring by doing this journey for yourself." Like, "You're not doing this alone." And then she messaged me saying: "Thank you, I didn't even think of it that way."

The politics of "hope" has attracted the attention of a range of radical thinkers, including Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986), critical educator Paulo Freire & Freire (2004), and critical feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2013). Far from constituting a form of naïve or politically impotent optimism, these scholars have instead conceptualized hope as constituting new horizons of the possible. To hope is to keep the future open to difference, to what Bloch describes as the *not-yet become* (see Anderson, 2006).

Understanding hope as *affect*, then, it is not only a private emotional state, but rather a performative and productive expression that takes place in front of an audience and works to reconfigure the affects of publics. On one hand, the above participants were careful to reject everyday forms of online negativity and interpersonal conflict; to ignore the provocations and attacks of hostile others; and to not publicly participate in the (justified) anger against broader forces of marginalization. Ultimately, they worked toward cutting short online circulations of anger, "meanness," and despair that are so often entangled in Indigenous publics. In contrast, their myriad self-representations and emotional expressions centered on circulating what might be broadly construed as "positive" Indigenous affect.

Although these participants largely resisted describing their online practices as "political," in the context of contemporary Australian settler colonialism, we argue they are nonetheless performing a "prefigurative" and affective politics of hope (Springer, 2016). Amid the ongoing marginalization of their communities, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and "deficit discourses," these users diagram other possible futures. Rather than only seeking to produce favorable or egotistical representations of a "positive self," these users are working to chart a not-yet *collective* future.

"One of the strategies that indigenous peoples have employed effectively to bind people together politically," Māori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (2012) explains, "asks that people imagine a future, that they rise above present-day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision" (p. 255). Hope, in this sense, is not useless or fanciful daydreaming. Instead, to hope is to challenge the dominant colonial narratives of Indigenous lack and deficit, and to remain open to a future that might be otherwise. Focusing on the politics of Indigenous hope allows us to see how settler colonial power is already being challenged online.

### Closing: The Limits of Hope

Social media certainly provides new possibilities for Indigenous self-expression, connection, and transformation. But we must be careful not to overstate its benefits and downplay its dangers. As we have argued in this article, there are always forces working to delimit what can and cannot be said and done online, forces which work to delimit Indigenous affect. For many Indigenous social media users, the presence—imagined or otherwise—of the settler gaze can be understood as a digital panopticon. Thinking through questions of "audience" allows us to see how online engagements are always mediated through broader power relations. The imagined audience, as Litt and Hargittai (2016) write, "serves as a guide for what is appropriate and relevant to share when an actual audience is unknown or not physically present" (p. 1). While some audiences might cohere into a new affective public that challenges existing structures and forces of marginalization (Papacharissi, 2016), other audiences surveil and demand obedience to settler hegemony. More specifically, in this article, we have argued that audiences police online drama differentially. The social media users we spoke to described an awareness of these differential consequences—which arise through broader colonial relations of settler hegemony and Indigenous oppression—and worked to augment and police their online engagements accordingly. This was not just about preserving one's individual status, but about preserving one's community. In this way, the settler gaze does not itself have to discipline; it instead coerces Indigenous people to discipline themselves.

But the participants in this project also described another response to the settler gaze, by engaging in what we have been calling an affective politics of hope. While these users did not frame their online engagements as necessarily "political," settler colonial studies encourages an orientation to social phenomena which foreground the political registers of Indigenous and settler encounters. Thinking in this way, we suggest these users were engaging in a form of "implicit" or prefigurative politics of hope (Askins, 2015; Springer, 2016). We argue that through a range of discursive, symbolic, and emotional practices, these users were implicated in the creation of spaces of hope through diagramming affects. If "policing" is about



*delimiting* the things of which online bodies are capable, then an affective politics of hope is about *expanding* a body's capacity to act. It encourages the possibility of being able to do, say, and sense other things, and imagine that other futures are possible. Through practices of policing and self-policing, the participants sought to protect their families and communities from potential outside harm. And through circulating positivity and encouragement, others sought to animate their families and communities toward more expansive futures, beyond the settler narrative of Indigenous deficit and decline.

There is, however, a difficult tension at play in these more "hopeful" practices. On one hand, they seek to animate individuals and communities toward more "positive," healthier, and happier lives. But hope also risks shifting the blame and responsibility of social, economic, and political disadvantage onto Indigenous peoples themselves, rather than more critically diagnosing the problem as originating in the violence of colonialism. Indeed, it seems participants who only expressed positivity and hope online were themselves engaging in a form of self-policing in response to the settler gaze. Hope might be what is needed in the context of contemporary settler colonialism, but we must also maintain what Gramsci (1971) famously referred to as "pessimism of the intellect."

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper was supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council, Discovery Indigenous. Project ID IN130100036.

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### Notes

1. The original inhabitants of Australia comprise hundreds of distinct nations, cultures, and language groups. The term "Indigenous" is commonly used to encompass both the Aboriginal peoples of mainland Australia including Tasmania and the peoples of the Torres Strait Islands. In this article, we will generally use the term "Indigenous," as participants comprise Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders, and people with blended ancestry.
2. The research has ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Macquarie University (REF: 520170667). The research design is underpinned by the principles outlined in guidelines specific to Indigenous research ethics, particularly spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, and responsibility (see, for example, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2012).
3. "Deadly" is common Indigenous slang for "good," "excellent," or high praise.

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