AUTHOR BIO

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Friend Requests from the Force: Affective Mimicry, Intimate Imitations and a Softened Police Apparatus

Zsuzsanna Dominika Ihar

ABSTRACT

What happens when we are spoken to *softly,* with a sense of playfulness, by the symbolic apparatus of the carceral state? Invoking the concept of "affective mimicry," this paper examines the digital means by which law enforcement agencies attempt to realise a sense of trust, intimacy, and emotional entanglement with the cyber-public. With a focus on the social media presence of the Australian Police, it will be argued that a strategic synthesis of memes, humorous language, and innocuous imagery with incarcerations, mugshots, and criminal descriptors *abstracts* the very materiality of law enforcement; its role, its potential misuse of power, and, by extension, state-sanctioned violence. Furthermore, the paper will suggest that the techno-affective cues embedded within these digital posts are vital in actively fostering intimate, off-screen solidarities between civilian users and the police force – solidarities which are oriented towards the visible, and always accessible, criminal other (with haptic contact evoked through virtual commentary and reactions). It will be posited that these interactions exist as potential avenues for exculpation, with digital posts momentarily capturing an affect and subsequently utilising it to bolster state governance. In this case, it happens to be the appropriation of a pre-existing, emotive lexicon, one commonly circulated in the context of community and friendship. The paper will also draw upon Louis Althusser's analysis of the Ideological State Apparatus by conceptualising digital affect as possessing an *interpellative* function, much like classical forms of subjectification by the state, whereby the police are imagined as one of the primary social actors transforming individuals into subjects. However, Althusser's point will be complicated through a recognition of social media's emphasis on the general public as arbiters and decision-makers, an emphasis facilitated by the structural hyper-connectivity of digital communication, as well as the symbolic ideological terrain within which popular social media platforms have emerged. Indeed, the developmental system within which digital interactions between the state and its subjects occur ultimately obfuscates police subjectification and complicity for harm enacted. Considering all of this, the question remains: do we respond to friend requests sent by the force? If so, do we *accept* or *reject*?

KEYWORDS

Affect, intimacy, state apparatus, governance, social media, memes, police

> *"But that police are emboldened by legal authority to enact force…*
> *makes the police, to put it in colloquial idiom, "not your friend."*
> – Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, "Not Your Friend: Dissensus
> and the Police" (20)

> *"Certain assemblages of power require the production of a face. Others*
> *do not."*
> – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (172)

> *"The assertion is that subjects are now addressed as 'affective beings' and*
> *manipulated through new governmentalities that bypass consciousness."*
> – Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect* (26)

Introduction

NOTE: All Figures referred to in this paper are available in the Appendix at the end of this document, after the Works Cited.

A range of sensorial cues blend into an unrecognisable stream of information and image, as the mouse scrolls down the page. A viral post advising drivers to "slow down" via an appropriated version of U.S. rap group Migos's song, *Bad and Boujee*, shifts into images of cute dogs/doggos, then again into police-themed versions of the Howbow Dah girl (Figs. 1 and 2 – SEE NOTE), the Persian Cat meme, and the Roll Safe guy (Butler, "There's a Reason" 1). Circulating amidst the array of lighthearted and familiar imagery are explicit and violent racial epithets (left in comment sections), warnings of surveillance and police tracking, CCTV footage screen-grabs of youths labelled as Aboriginal, Middle Eastern or African in appearance, urgings for civilian vigilantism, as well as calls for community togetherness against disruptive Others. Despite the disciplinary undertones, the NSW Police's social media presence alone has increased by 100, 000 followers over the last year (Hunt 1), with a combined presence of over 930,000 followers across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Butler, "There's a Reason" 1).

This unprecedented amassing of a digital community reflects the burgeoning utility of "affective governance" (Ahuja x) to a digitised order of globalisation; an order whose "means and effects," entangled with the swift movement of imagery and ideology across the "smoothed" spaces of social media, can often feel "all too post-human" (Shukin 11; White 118). Manifesting novel affective assemblages, essentially clusters of state interest intermingled with humanised sentiments and familiar markers of popular culture, this mode of governance crosscuts social media, forging new spaces for state apparatuses to occupy (Williams et al. 462), as well as enact power through. From the Australian Police to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (@DIBPAustralia), an assortment of governmental and corporate actors have mobilised digital means to not only rebrand law enforcement (Beshears 490), but to simultaneously cultivate a new language of community (Thornhill 70), humour, and mundane violence – a language capable of neutralising the violent materialisation of these regimes in real life.

This paper examines the way in which law enforcement affirms itself through affective means, fostering hotspots of generative relations built upon the circulation of image and the disavowal of select populations. The first section

of the article will hone in on the "affective turn" of state governance; a turn from the biopolitical "power of enclosures" to a diffuse, speculative, and deterritorialized "power over capacities – that is, affects, or the power to act" in what may anticipate the coming "societies of control" (Deleuze, in White 122). With a critical emphasis on the "translation" of state discipline into the realm of the digital ("going digital"), I suggest that policing in the information age is increasingly contingent on the hybridisation of both ideological and repressive forms of governance, whereby the management of highly mobile, interconnected, and proliferating populations (Foucault, in Rabinow 244) necessitates a more diffuse form of coercion via tactics of digital interpolation, subjectification, and the "softened" recruitment of civilians for the enforcement of a bounded polis (Reeves and Packer 375-6). Inspired by Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the apparatus will be seen to mobilise *affective mimicry;* mimicking the language of togetherness, benevolence, and philia (adhesive love instead of sticky hate), fostering a counter-public based on "same" affect, as well as naturalising the strategic concession, or withholding, of state rights (Ahmed 123). This idea of communal closeness will be contrasted in the second section, examining how racial matter is digitally rendered by state institutions and online social actors, wilfully binding and suffocating Othered communities. Through a New Materialist perspective, matter will be understood as an intangible "substance" which gives shape and form to the word, thus expressing the inextricability of "our ideas about the world" to "the world itself" (Barad 90). Expanding upon Mel Y. Chen's idea of animacy or the "quality of agency, awareness, mobility and liveliness" (2) within matter, the presence of racialised mugshots, digital blackface (Jackson 3), ethnic slurs, as well as abuse on these sites will be discursively analysed, conceptualising the aforementioned examples as forms of "digital callousing," whereby otherwise sharp enactments of violence are subsumed by the mundane, becoming a source of blunt trauma. Social media will be seen to introduce a conceptual "order of things" (Chen 12), rendering Othered bodies devitalised – insensate, conditionally visible, and ultimately bereft of any "likeable" vitality (Bennett 35). Finally, a capacity for resistance will be recognised, highlighting civilian interventions through meme-edits (Shifman, 120), digital call-outs and "unaffected affect" (in the vein of skepticism).

Laughing at, Laughing with, and the Mimicking of Feeling

Western conceptualisations of police power tend to evoke images of neighbourhood patrols, batons and tasers, suspect bodies cuffed then held down, stern warnings directed at bystanders, and "the right to remain silent" given to alleged culprits (Reeves and Packer 374). For Althusser, the police exist merely as a component within this sort of Repressive State Apparatus, markedly differentiated from the more elaborate, and in his view embedded, "ideology in general" (173) – distinguished for its ability to exist in omni-historicity (174), surfacing as an imaginary relation, or construct, which is capable of successfully withholding any endowment to material existence (184). Responding to a slogan in the weekly *Action* ("get rid of the cop in your head!"), Althusser (178) goes as far as to express explicit disdain for the centring of repression, in the form of the police, as the key element in

capitalist class exploitation – at the cost of ignoring the biopolitics of bourgeois ideology (179). In doing so, he effectively partitions the police into an external realm of governance, curtailing a more nuanced analysis of policing by focusing, simply, on the physical acts of law enforcement – that is, the visible "jobs" performed in order to fulfil the role of the officer, including surveillance, the *charging* of individuals *accused* of wrongdoing, the punishments handed down after an alleged crime, and the finality of sentencing and incarceration (180). Such a dismissal of law enforcement's presence in the intimate subjectification of individuals, with claims that "individuals do not have their own personal cop behind them or in their heads" (179-180), can be argued to no longer adequately reflect the relationalities between states and subjects in the digital era (Williams et al. 476). Indeed, through social media, the slogan can be appropriately re-written as "get rid of the cop in your friend list," reflecting not only the blurring of the very realms of governance (Mawby 240), but also the feel of it, thus complicating Althusser's decisive separation. Furthermore, this failure to attend to the ideological functions of repressive state apparatuses has prefigured a contemporary rebuttal of "police critiques." Perhaps best exemplified by the "Blue Lives Matter" movement of 2014 (Craven), such a rebuttal pivots its argument toward the alleged impunity of the actors involved in policing. Deconstructing this logic, what is essentially implied is that the physical acts of policing are done by innocent individuals simply caught up in the external conditions of their employment. This particular appeal relies on a fictive removability of person from structure, ignoring and denying the ongoing integration of individual habits/personal beliefs and disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault 8).

Despite the error in his ascription, the ontological features of the police on social media can be said to increasingly reflect Althusser's primary theses concerning "ideology in general" (175-176) – namely, that ideologies appear as dehistoricised discursive constructs born out of a homogeneous, featureless ground; that is, constructs effacing the very material processes and power asymmetries which both condition and give rise to them. Indeed, revisiting Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus in the information age, we come to see the sanitisation of online spaces occupied by the police (Crump 24-25; Schneider 130) – via strategic deleting, controlled authorship, and the visual clustering of popular opinion (away from the unpredictability and uncontrollability of opinion sites and news feeds) – as indicative of an emergent mode of state control via affective governmentality (Ruddell and Jones 65), one necessitating the contemporary uptake of ideology by sectors of the state which had previously acted only through overt coercion (Reeves and Packer 360). In the digital realm, law enforcement apparatuses can successfully interpellate individuals as subjects, without the need for traditional notions of force or violence (Elmer and Opel 23; Reeves and Packer 376). Within the parameters of Facebook and Twitter, the Australian Police is able to rid itself of the undesirable histories which repressive apparatuses end up collecting and being associated with. There is no mention on these police pages of Ms Dhu, who died due to "a catastrophic deterioration in her health" (Perpitch) whilst in police custody; Clifton Wayne Penny, who was stomped on the head and tasered until he "pissed himself" (Borrello); nor Jamie Jackson, who was "thrown around like

a rag doll" (Rourke) by New South Wales Police during Sydney's 2013 Mardi Gras Parade. Instead, the digital environment effectively grants law enforcement impunity, allowing the police to exist purely in ideology, as a curated assemblage of community support and positive engagement (Russell 6). This is aptly encapsulated by posts publicly shared on the NSW Police Force Facebook page, seen in Figs. 3 and 4, where we are introduced to two affect-charged renditions of policing, oriented towards positive interaction, on the level of the individual subject: that of the progressive, LGBTQI+ ally cop, and that of the neighbourly officer, entangled with the intimacies of home and community (mobilising the inclusive pronoun of "we").

Reflecting Anderson's assertion that "apparatuses produce specific versions of what affect, emotion, and other modalities, are and do" (33), these examples can be thought of as specific textual reproductions aimed at reworking popular understandings of community policing by associating law enforcement with stirring "liberal values"; namely, "equality, diversity and peace" (Russell 6). Indeed, the intimacies of everyday life become an object-target in these cases; here, affective modes of governmentality exploit the interconnectivities, commonings, and diffuse relationalities of a globalising and digitising world in order to facilitate the expansion of "applicable targets of [societal] control" (Kappeler and Kraska 306), as well as a simultaneous proliferation in the *means* by which these targets are interpolated as state subjects (McCulloch 45; Sentas 32). These means, which comprise the mobilisation of a highly affective, communal, digital lexicon of memes, comments, "likes," emojis, and Facebook "reacts," dovetails with the contemporary resurgence of public narratives concerning reconciliation, re-gained trustworthiness, and, indeed, *hopefulness,* in select institutions (Vitale; Bonnett 19); a hopefulness spurred by precarity, social unrest, and the mobilisation of compromised rights, wealth, as well as property, within mainstream political rhetoric (Ahmed 44). Indeed, this alignment of the police with dehistoricised values of "progress, modernity, and adaptability" (Ferguson 163) may prove instrumental in neutralising the material inequalities and historical contingencies central to the reproduction of state hegemony, allowing former antagonisms to retreat into departicularised moral expectations and standards (Tyler).

Thus, the wielding of digital affect in these posts ultimately does recuperative work, complicating the figure of the officer through strategic humanisation (as "one of us": a marginalised member of the community, an ally, a friend) as well as the production of emotions "in common" (Ahmed 11), as opposed to those in isolation. This allows state power to expand via the "constituent mechanism of making common" (Bratich 69), hijacking the very ontologies which one would expect to find in grassroots resistance movements (based on multiform subjective production and pluralistic methods) and community activism (Negri 37). In accumulating signifiers of communal connectivity, and public engagement, there is a strategic movement *away* from the image of the police as a "sad despotic body" (Bratich 70) whose mediatized apparatuses are geared towards "capture, control, and elimination … blocking another body from acting" (70), and *towards* the encouragement of collective sentiment: the fostering of a common lexicon. In forging these moments of identification and familiarity, the police successfully occlude the

very nature of policing, effacing law enforcement's instrumentality to the defence of capital, property, the State, and white supremacy (Bonds and Inwood 716), thus turning a blind-eye to the increasingly aggressive and paramilitary styles invoked to keep order (McCulloch 14). The police system is effectively stripped of its materialisation by focusing on innocuous singular components, including a myopic representation of "harmless" officers, stripped from the contexts where they would otherwise transform into tangible state actors (Cunningham and Reid). This erases the institutional, systematised reality of policing by individuating the officers who not only "like to have a laugh" (Hunt 1), but evoke positive reactions from the general populace (as evident in Figs. 5, 6 and 7), thereby strengthening the "myth that police and the public share a single set of coherent and consistent norms and values" (Smith 280).

Considering the seamless enjoinment between the civilian sphere and the state (occurring on these digital platforms), there is a need to closely examine the particular visual triggers responsible. Superficially, these mainly consist of "dog memes," often with a smiling officer beside the animal, as well as posts depicting police participation in recreational/social activities – frequently patriotic and nationally recognisable "pub games" (Figs. 8 and 9). These "unproblematic" images are accompanied by jokes functioning on the level of aesthetic descriptors (Bratich 65), without any contestable socio-political commentary and recruiting what Virno refers to as "diagram of innovative action" (73). In these instances, code and variation are combined (129), resulting in a deviation from the police as "unhumorous" and "serious," trickling down to unsettle other internalised notions about the police, for example their brutality, opposition to select communities, enforcement of anti-civilian laws, as well as corruption. Such spectatorship results in civilian users feeling "inactive delight," described by Virno as a type of "sympathy that borders almost on enthusiasm" (83-84). This reconfiguration of previously negative, or "suspicious," matter (as evident by the lack of public engagement in previous, non-digital police campaigns), can be seen to reflect Sara Ahmed's reading of the particular tactics employed by hate groups to amass popular following (133). There is a similar conversion of feeling occurring (15), where the police apparatus becomes not only an object of feeling (cultivating a visually and emotionally enjoyable digital space), but a feeling subject (13); capable of being befriended and interacted with. In this manner, the digital platform becomes a communal site of "feeling good," promising potential followers (those who click "like") a sense of affinity in being on the side of the police and the rest of the "general" public, as well as proximal to sources of legitimacy and structural support (51). This relationship assures an intimate positionality, of not only being "in on the joke" but also inside an *ideal* collective. Indeed, it can be said that the police actively "accrue value" and reproduce themselves through the spread of images; images in alignment with how the very nationstate imagines itself – wholesome, innocent, and pure (Leonard 102). Ultimately, this insular allegiance exculpates both state apparatus, as well as the wider public, from having to critically interrogate and confront the injurious materialities which underlie the contemporary carceral system as we know it (Vitale; Hinton 20; Biondo 45; Gottschalk).

There is a sense that these content-productions, as well as content-consumption, based collaborations between the state and civilians mark not only a particular expansion of governance, but also an elaboration (Reeves and Packer 360). The headiness of affect which surrounds these images and posts (as shown by the receptiveness and engagement of users who may identify as anti-state/anti-police) perfectly aligns with the shift from a disciplinary system to a society of control. As stated by Deleuze, "Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway [e.g. internet, social media]," however, those forged paths have the ability to instead multiply the means of control, allowing people to "travel infinitely and freely without being confined, while being perfectly controlled" (Lapoujade 322). In this way, the proliferation of technology has not only resulted in a greater access to information, increased mobility, and an affectively rich terrain of engagement (Picazo-Vela et al. 693-4), but also increased means of controlling a population (Foucault 106-8). This is rendered evident by the dual function of social media within the very police force, as a site of "cop on the beat" community conversations, in addition to crime detection/prevention (known as "soft surveillance") (Lyon 201). Ray Sparvell, in his 2017 article on the use of social media by the Western Australian police force, described this as a form of cyber snitching, where monitoring squads co-exist with post generators, to not only source information, but encourage disclosures. Indeed, this reflects a more complex development of government interventions that also function as producers of greater intimacy (Picazo-Vela et al. 694) and so allow fantasies of control to be uneasily reconciled with an era of digital hyperconnection and hypermobility (Reeves and Packer 360). Subsequently, the necessity of containing risk to maintain empire, of "defending the [nation] in a world of expanding contact," ends up requiring "ever more desperate, intimate, and proximate interventions that seek to postpone a state's overextension and demise" (Ahuja vii). This type of intimate intervention can be located in Figure 10, where the aesthetic cuteness of a black Labrador is actively utilised for the layering and burrowing of incentives, as well as seemingly unobtrusive, public "advice." The materiality of the media engagement is already geared towards mobilisation, encouraging civilians to shift towards becoming impassioned vigilantes, rather than simply passive consumers (Picazo-Vela et al. 694; Zavattaro et al.). The narrative of this transformation is facilitated through the process of following the online command of "zoom in on the nose," all the way through to the real world action of dobbing in a dealer (Fig. 11). With social media users becoming recruited for the purpose of supervision and suspicion in this manner, traditional juridicial forms, reliant on watchwords and strict punitive measures (Packer and Reeves), are replaced with a "free-floating" system (Deleuze 4) – where control functions like modulation are continuously changing from one context to the other, like a "sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point" (Deleuze 5). Indeed, the "technologization" of police communication and power has meant the creation of "ever-wider circuits" (Foucault 48), allowing the circulation of ideas, bodies, capital, and most importantly *feelings* (Anderson 15), reassuring the public with what appears to be a sense of benevolence, duty, and closeness.

Hate Speech in a 140 Characters, Violence in a Click

The "management of affective relations" (Ahuja x) by the police force reflects an entrenched lineage of intimate governance exercised through extrajudicial brutality, the projection of criminality, and a sense of "duty" conveniently aligning with state aims (Biondo 25; Seigel 157). Properly contextualising law enforcement's novel role in the digital sphere – as community members and benevolent "jokesters" – entails looking at the historical friendship between the Australian police force and settler "frontier" communities. Within this context, a sense of friendship and respect was actively fostered through Indigenocide as well as military-style policing of Aboriginal people (Evans and Thorpe 23). Whilst for settler society, the police embodied the harmless caricature of the village constable (Cunneen 49), acting as a valued member of the local community, for Indigenous Australians they were members of a colonial police force: "superimposed on aggressively expanding communities" (Foley 161), taking (never ceded) sovereign land via state-sanctioned land grabs, occupational licenses, and pastoral leases (via the Crown Lands Unauthorized Occupation Act 1839 (NSW)). Police massacres had "a smell of official sanction" (Cunneen 54), with "no legal justification for the pursuit and killings that took place" (Kercher 15) existing outside of the spheres of self-defence and martial law declaration. Indeed, extrajudicial, police-led murders often numbered in the hundreds, and occurred due to settler discomfort. One such case was the Waterloo Creek Massacre, where 200-300 Indigenous Kamilaroi were killed by mounted police (Cunneen 54). Between 1860 and 1897, in Queensland alone, inquiries into the deaths of Aboriginal people produced more than fifty cases in which police were strongly implicated or found formally responsible (Finnane and Richards 95). Despite the last recorded massacre occurring in 1928 – resulting in the death of 60-70 Walpiri people by a police party in Coniston in the Northern Territory (Markus Governing Savages 163) – a system-wide "politics of insecurity" (Ross 2) seamlessly succeeded previous forms of police violence. Entailing "a governing through crime" (as stated by Criminology expert Chris Cunneen), Indigenous Australians were exposed to new forms of judicial injury and police violence, aimed at protecting settler interests in the form of "zero-tolerance policing, longer sentences, more restrictive bail and parole policies" (Ross 3). This contextual lineage ultimately culminates in the contemporary state of policing relations in which Indigenous people make up 27% (2,300 for every 100,000) of the prison population (AAP); laws have actively enabled the extension of police power to detain people (Anthony 2) without filling out necessary paperwork (known as paperless arrests); and cases of abuse/death in custody regularly surface across the nation (Wahlquist 4).

Taking this history into account, the digital matter found on police-run social media begins to forge similar, systematic patterns of racial injury and selective protection. It becomes clear that the lighthearted, humorous and positive social media posts are catering to those within a privileged and shielded community that is historically responsive to, and amicable with, state apparatuses. In stark contrast, Indigenous individuals are excluded from being a target audience by the very materiality of these digital spaces, a materiality which is explicitly anti-black and capable of positing racialised

bodies as flattened objects of criminality, suspicion and threat (Oboler 10-11). One such example of this kind of animated, as well as animating, language can be found in Figure 12, where a young Indigenous toddler is actively memefied by the police. His body is not only attached to the physical object of a breathalyser but also the caption "found behind the wheel supporting Looma Eagles at the local footy – lucky he blew zeroes!" – intended to be a comedic quip. In doing this, the police not only co-opt the toddler's subjecthood and bodily integrity, as well as privacy (Johnson 2), for the sake of transmitting an affectively-charged message about drink-driving (it is worth noting that no permission was asked from the toddler's parents for the photo, nor was the toddler's face censored), but they also "blindly" conjure up a racist, historical generalisation associating Indigeneity with alcoholism and substance abuse (Oboler 13). Echoing Mel Y. Chen's statement that "words more than signify; they affect and effect" (54), these sorts of representative hijackings are indicative of an entrenched and salient techno-infrastructural modus operandi. The same social media sites act as a central feature of anti-Indigenous policing interventions, including the Suspect Target Management Plan (STMP), which is a NSW police policy allowing the force to draw upon multiple "risk assessment" tools (including online posts) in order to predict criminal behaviour and place individuals on a blacklist (Morelli). Considering the fact that 55% of people currently on the list are Indigenous, it becomes evident that seemingly inconsequential digital posts are indicative of, and entangled with, firmly established forms of structural injury, as well as interventionist policing (McGowan).

Subsequently, the tight interweaving of Blackness (as an epidermalised, visible state of being) and the affect of suspicion, with colonialist racial caricatures (Stephen 2) by the police, facilitates the emergence of particular kind of mob mentality, as seen in Figures 13-17. In these instances hate speech becomes a coagulating factor, gluing various commentators together through visceral and bodily affect (Ahmed 43). It animates those who organise themselves around the signifier of "White," or the imagined settler nationstate (Ahmed 47; Leonard 2012). In these instances, the racist spectacle is both verbal and gestural (Weaver 549), rendering the Indigenous body legible only as a "flattened object, an ideological and financial commodity, and a source of derision, surveillance, discipline, and punishment" (Leonard 102; Neal) – a digital materiality legitimised and bolstered by the fact that the comments are left uncensored and undeleted by the police force. Through circulating in the same space as seemingly innocent memes, these comments are able to deliver blunt trauma extrajudicially without warranting legal curtailment on the basis of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*. Indeed, what this results in is a callousing of "Othered" bodies (Chen 32) through the accumulation of hateful text that digitally scrapes against and bruises racialised individuals (Chen 53), whilst also adhering to the mugshot and literally accumulating as data on the social media feed. In this way, affectively injurious terminologies that solidify hierarchies based around "White" humanness are vitalised and given power (Ahmed 131), whilst Indigenous bodies are rendered devitalised (Chen 33-34) through not only a linguistic association with animality (with one commenter comparing an Indigenous suspect to a "mutt"), but also through strategically wielded historical trauma and stereotyping (Gilmore 28). These forms of racial

mattering are evident in comments like "needs chains on feet" and "he knows nuffin about a stolen generator," which reanimate both the colonial period where Indigenous individuals were subjected to slavery and indentured labour, as well as White narratives around legitimate settler property versus Indigenous criminality and valuelessness (Bond 4). Alongside these racialisations, the affective attachment of the mugshots to base animality (Chen 44, 50) can also be understood as a digital extension to Indigenous dispossession, with the state apparatus of the police not only facilitating but *encouraging* commenters on these pages as they actively strip Indigenous subjects of sources of cultural pride and heritage. This is evident in sarcastic and vicious comments like "he went walk about" and "mighty powerful dreamtime. Hey bro, got a dollar." Perhaps the most distressing example of racial mattering, which threatens to spill into vitalised, state-sanctioned hate, can be found in Figure 18, where a young Aboriginal man's mugshot is left to occupy the same pixelated space as the comment "Can we run him over?". Through the sting of the question, the felt memory of Elijah Doughty's tragic death (killed at the age of fourteen due to suffering multiple fatal injuries at the hands of a white farmer, for allegedly stealing a motorbike) is brought to the foreground (Menagh and Tomlin), brushing against the very skinscape of any Indigenous users behind the computer screen. The comment remains firmly attached to the post, relentlessly animating the trauma of the recent death and making it evident that subjects occupy "unequal planetary conjunctions of life and death" (Ahuja x).

Through entangling Shifman's definition of internet memes as "cultural information that passes along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon" (18) with what can be thought of as embodied racial humour (Weaver 549), the social exchanges occurring in cyberspace take on a more sinister tone. The sort of linguistic weaponry present not only establishes set hierarchies by which subjects can be judged citizen/non-citizen, criminal/noncriminal, or even human/non-human (Chen 8), but also assigns particular levels of animacy (ie. the very possibilities of acting/enacting). Racialised bodies are reduced to a singular image, or mugshot, on these pages, deprived of any interactive capacity (Yoon 93) and organised according to a pre-determined set of labels (including criminal/suspect, female/male, adult/non-adult). In contrast, the general public, comprised mostly of White individuals, are granted full autonomy to insult, dehumanise, and persecute. Their words are capable of cultivating the "third-person consciousness" (Chen 33) of being an objectified subject. Indeed, the cacophony of threats made by public users on the NSW Police's Facebook page (Fig. 19-25), including "cut their hands off," "should have just injected him with a little special something" (alongside an emoji of a sharp blood-filled needle) and "a plastic bag over the head tends to discourage spitting" – all materialise and bring into action the commonly deployed metaphor of words "cutting like knives." Indeed the very textuality of these phrases organises and configures affect to be consequential rather than simply *propositional* (Chen 2), calling forth the possibility of real-world community vigilantism, and assault, in order to "unmake the world of the other through pain" (Ahmed 58).

Beside Indigenous populations, the common "other" on these social media pages include African and Middle Eastern men (Markus Migrants from Africa; Dunn et al. 465), posited as both dole bludgers ("they should cut his DSP") and thieving immigrants. Through examining Figures 26-32, a potent rhetoric of imagined authority emerges; involving citizens making state-oriented recommendations around the topic of deportation (one post even advising the police to "deport these f*cks"), in addition to fear mongering around falsified refugee statuses and the decline of Western authority (with comments such as "Import the 3rd world. Become the 3rd world," as well as "Check the Centrelink Offices – he will be a poor refugee struggling to find his way in a new country!"). Without appropriate and proactive policing, Blackness and Otherness are imagined by these commenters as forms of reverse-colonialism, transforming the imagined, authentic White nation (of Australia) into a non-White space (Ahmed 42; Hage), thus tarnishing the fantasy of absolute lawfulness and financial prosperity associated with the country (Figs. 33-39). Despite the overtness of dehumanisation and discrimination (Chen 45) present in these posts, the very medium of the feed allows hatefulness to morph into comedy as one rapidly clicks from post to post causing a cognitive blending of affects akin to a sort of racial colourblindness (Bonilla-Silva 3; Yoon 94). The layering of the digital space and the speed of transmission effectively facilitates the naturalisation of racism, rendering it just another background element via nullifying responses and strategies of "intention-denial" (van Dijk 92), with commenters often replying "I did not mean that" or "you got me wrong" (92). It is worth noting that there is a permissible Blackness presented alongside the explicit abjection of black bodies in the form of "Digital Blackface" (Jackson) generated by the police (Figure 40 & 41). This is evident in memes used by the police within their responses and comedic posts, which often co-opt black "reaction" gifs (capable of emitting exaggerated emotions) to appeal to a youth demographic – a sort of minstrel animatedness completely controlled by White content producers (Jackson). Through this particular conceptual organisation, Black individuals on these pages are reduced to "abject subjects" exposed to a "fraught collision between humanity and zeroness" (Chen 40; Leonard 102). Racialised subjects are thus granted conditional, digital animation through what essentially functions as clickbait and hyper-disposable humour — whilst simultaneously being manoeuvred as matter which ultimately doesn't *matter*.

With this in mind, it can be said that the more we dehumanise select individuals/members of the public, the more we humanise state structures, as well as state actors. Movements such as Blue Lives Matter in America, a direct response to Black Lives Matter (Thornhill 7; Coates), signal a governance rooted in strategic empathy and humanisation, which manages to thrive exactly by hijacking the lexicon of the communities it brutalises and violates (Cunningham and Reid; Thornhill 69). Statements by the public affairs branch of the police, like "We're using humour to show people we're part of the community, we're human. Cops like to have a laugh," as well as "We're getting great feedback that younger people are seeing a different side of policing, they feel a bit more connected with police" (Hunt; Butler, "There's a Reason"), reveal the capacity of ventriloquising oppression; reaping the benefits of public empathy evoked by relationality and mimicry.

As stated by Cunningham and Reid, the circulation and defence of "Blue Life" on social media confuses "a job for a social existence, an occupational hazard for an ontological crisis", and in doing so, the police transform into marginalised subjects, existing in a state of unquestionable vulnerability. This is evident in Figure 42, where a "heartfelt apology" to an injured Constable is accompanied by a photo of light facial bruising, effectively obscuring the events which preceded the injury, as well as the impact upon other bodies. Through this limiting digital narrative, the structural implications of policing are reduced to a singular injured body, obscuring the endless instances of beaten up and deprived bodies left in the wake of police violence and extrajudicial custody (Chaney and Robertson 483; Embrick 838-9). The terror exercised by the carceral state in everyday life morphs into neat narratives of dramatised pressure, on-the-job stress and performed vulnerability, leading to any expression of politically-motivated anger and distrust (directed at the police by certain communities) to be rendered both unsympathetic and insensitive (even inhumane) as a consequence (Gilmore 42; Cunningham and Reid). Because of these factors, countering law enforcement's affective mimicry of fictive personhood rests on unflinchingly exposing and parodying these emotive forces, highlighting both the "spectral legal identity" (Cunningham and Reid) at the core of this humanisation, as well as the extrajudicial structures it otherwise conceals.

"It's Not Funny": Digital Dissensus through an Interrupted Feed?

When first coined, memes were defined by Dawkins as "units of cultural transmission…units of imitation" (194); capable of retaining fidelity upon being transmitted, copied, and mutated endlessly. This trait of replicability has aligned perfectly with modes of contemporary governance reliant on the repetition and entrenchment of select norms – which, according to Judith Butler, underlie the very materialisation of worlds (*Bodies that Matter* 9). However, the materiality of memes, geared towards postmodern principles, such as "appropriation," "juxtaposition," "recontextualization," "layering," and "hybridity" (Yoon 95), also allows for rich populist engagement and affective investment (Milner 2361) – encouraging participatory forms of meme-play which can lead to unexpected subversions and public dialogue. Indeed, over the past few years, memes have not only provided a means to politically persuade (Andén-Papadopoulos 4) but also to rally together unaffiliated individuals (Mercea 2012) with the "common purpose of creating a sense of community between the victims, the bystanders and the community of viewers" (Bayerl and Stoynov 1023). This is evident in the Occupy protest meme of the "pepper-spray cop," also known as the "casual pepper-spray everything cop" (widely circulated to oppose police violence on US campuses, and band together Occupy supporters). Within the context of Australian policing and their social media presence, meme-edits, as seen in Figure 43 and 44, have become an affectively powerful way to defy the content production of "administrative and control apparatuses" (Negri 19). Meme edits present the incapacity of the police to restrict further modification of their memes, as well as the disruption of intended state messages. Indeed, in Figure 43, the seemingly successful police edit of the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme (warning citizens about unlawful driving

habits), imitating a familiar structure in popular media, is conspicuously interrupted, as the commenter deletes the text and replaces it with a condemnation of the police. By implying that the police not only follow extrajudicial methods, but actively "gaze toward" and target Indigenous Youth, the dissenting meme persistently questions the authority of the police to speak in the name of what is lawful and what is unlawful. The same strategy is found in Figure 44, where a public Twitter user has self-authored a dissenting edit in order to comment on the endemic nature of sexism within the NSW Police Force; highlighting their habitual victim blaming and disregard for sexual assault cases.

Both examples align with Knobel and Lankshear's definition of "counter-meming" – as "the deliberate generation of a meme that aims at neutralizing or eradicating potentially harmful ideas" (86). Because of this potency in engaging with the public on an emotional level, these forms of resistance expand notions of citizenship, highlighting the importance of social agency and "collective dimensions" (Dahlgren 57), alongside merely acting through rights and obligations. In doing so, the memes expose the way "power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds" (Ahmed 12). However, rather than simply allowing people to feel and engage subjectively, it also simultaneously puts them in the role of creators and dissenting producers (Knobel and Lankshear). This activeness defies political passivity by hijacking paths of circulation and introducing new possibilities in affect (Bratich 66). Whilst the humour found in police memes may initially appeal to members of the public, the subsequent disruptive memes raise points of intervention, where individuals can be rendered vulnerable to reconsidering their feelings and position (Milner 2360). In addition to this, the memes also expose the structural and material violence behind an emotive image, highlighting the complexity of apparatuses (Negri 20). Both Figure 45 and 46 aptly presents this gesture of digital excavation, highlighting the multiform function of the police dog, as not only a cute, benign mascot of the police force (Fig. 45) but also a means of intimidating and injuring resistant members of the public (Fig. 46). The very body of the canine is entangled in a long historical lineage of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and extrajudicial policing (Campbell et al. 536-7).

Alongside dissenting memes, the role of "unaffected affect" – with commenters replying "It's not funny"/ "I don't get it" – serves as a potent way to counter affective governance. It provides a method by which individuals can digitally boycott these projects of engagement and community interaction. This not only refutes police subjectivity, but also effectively denies the legitimacy of police presence within intimate spheres. At the same time, another mode of dissensus is highlighted by the extralegal nature of the absence of moderation of the comment sections by the NSW police, who host the page. Despite Facebook being a third party platform, through the refusal to remove, or even censor these posts, NSW police explicitly fails their duty of care to the public. Section 474 of the Criminal Code Act of 1995 outlines that it is a criminal offence to use "a carriage service to menace, harass, or cause offence" in a way that is "menacing, harassing or offensive." By failing to moderate the comments sections, the police not only expose individuals to traumatising vitriol and neglect their

presumed responsibility to the public, but also allow criminal activity to be carried out on their very own platform. Taking into account the fact that a NSW man was recently given an eight-month suspended jail sentence for calling former senator Nova Peris "a black c***" on Facebook (Butler, "It's Actually Illegal"), NSW Police's Facebook account presents endless comments and responses which could warrant arrest on the grounds of hate speech – furthermore, a large chunk of these comments belong to both off and on-duty officers themselves.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is not to dehumanise officers who find themselves mired within police apparatuses. Such a pursuit would wilfully ignore questions of individual agency, non-compliance, and moments of envisioning alternative forms of public-police relations. Indeed, it appears that many officers have stakes in the very communities that bear the brunt of unjust judicial and extrajudicial processes (see Hosking's 2017 discussion of the palpable historical reforms achieved by black officers within the US police force). What it does aim to do, however, is to draw attention to the inseparability of historical and socio-material contexts from the means by which state apparatuses engage with their citizenry; the affective, ideological, and discursive modes of this engagement; and the very ways in which these discrete apparatuses, and those embedded within them, self-reflexively understand their role and function. Indeed, in the quickened time and "smoothed terrain" (White 118) of the digital, historical and social asymmetries are not only echoed, but appear reified. This has been occasioned through the rise of social media and its associated, innocuous discourses of familial intimacy and friendship, as well as via the solidifying and enduring nature of digital data more broadly. Data has exponentially proliferated with increased online surveillance and cannot be deleted, functioning as a criminalising paper-trail, a memorial and final resting place. In developing novel structures of governance in tandem with the rise of digital technologies, the police force has been granted a means of becoming more human; more like us. Indeed, with increasing social media presence, law enforcement has not only burrowed into our feeds and homepages, but also our friend lists. A legal identity now overflows into the very spaces of our intimate exchanges, mimicking a closeness which would otherwise form through community care, accountability and dialogue. Essentially, affective shortcuts, in the form of a few funny memes, and culturally relevant posts, have allowed the police to grow not only into an accepted presence in our lives, but a likeable one. Yet, in all their success, the histories as well as current realities, of brutality, death in custody, and police violence, continue to stir and unsettle – circulating alongside sanitised fantasies of police power.

The digital space is one of congestion. A multitude of personal voices, political strategies, affective agents, as well as contested histories, rush toward our clicks and momentary attention, resulting in the necessity of a particular order of things. This paradoxical materiality to social media – whereby a wider-array of emotions are available for use and circulation, but a firm hierarchy of legitimacy still remains – has provided fecund matter for

policing to engage with, matter which has facilitated the retreat of ideology into the departicularised terrain of the intimate. It is now up to us to choose whether to like or to refuse; befriend or resist; join or delete.

Acknowledgments

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Fig. 1. Meme combining "Keep Left" notice and Howbow Dah girl reference. Courtesy of the NSW Police Force (Facebook page).

Fig. 2. Appropriation of Migos lyrics in order to warn drivers about wet road conditions. Courtesy of the NSW Police Force (Facebook page).
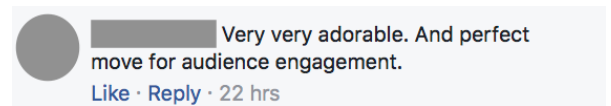

Fig. 3. Two officers holding rainbow flags during Pride Week. Courtesy of the NSW Police Force (Facebook page).

Fig. 4. Graffiti Removal Day poster, depicting an officer forming a heart shape with his hands. Courtesy of the NSW Police Force (Facebook page).

Fig. 5. Shared post (public) by a Facebook user. Courtesy of the Western Australian Police Force.

Figs 6 & 7. Public Facebook user comment on dog meme/photo posted by the Western Australian Police Force.

Fig. 8. Officer alongside police service Labrador "PD Belle". Courtesy of the NSW Police Force (Twitter).

Fig. 9. Melbourne Cup post featuring sports betting. Courtesy of the Western Australian Police Force (Twitter).

Fig. 10. Meme featuring a black Labrador, alongside visible, as well as covert, text-based directives. Courtesy of WA Police Force (Facebook).
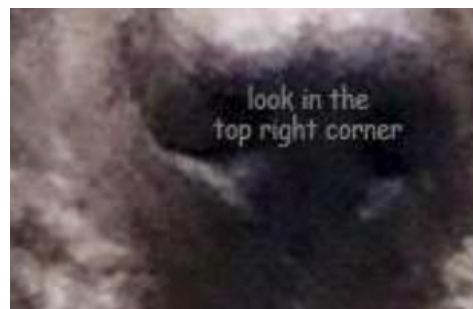
Fig. 11. Covert, grey-coloured text found on the nose and right paw of the black Labrador. Courtesy of the WA Police Force (Facebook).

Fig. 12. Image of Indigenous toddler blowing into a breathalyser, accompanied by caption intending to humour the fact that he 'blew zeros'. Courtesy of Broome Police Facebook. (*The child's face has been blurred by the author to ensure privacy*).
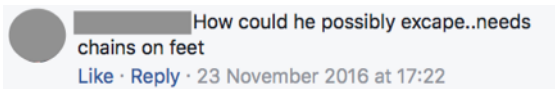
Fig. 13. Public comment left by an anonymised Facebook user, underneath image of an Indigenous man wanted for "escaping lawful custody" (NSW Police Force Facebook).
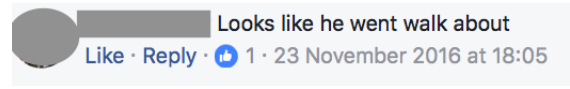
Fig. 14. Public comment left by anonymised Facebook user on same post (NSW Police Force Facebook).
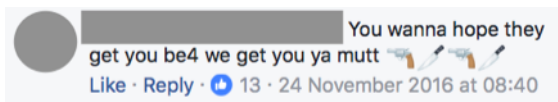
Fig. 15. Public comment left by anonymised Facebook user underneath image of an Indigenous young man wanted for burglary (NSW Police Force).

Fig. 16. Public comment left by anonymised Facebook user underneath same post (NSW Police).
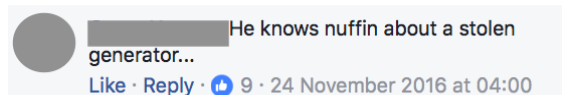
Fig. 17. Public comment left by anonymised Facebook user underneath same post (NSW Police).

Fig. 18. Twitter post of Young Indigenous man, wanted for an "outstanding warrant." Public anonymised comment visible below referencing the recent murder of Elijah Doughty (ran over by a white farmer). Courtesy of NSW Police Twitter. *(The face of the man has been blurred out by the author to ensure privacy).*

Fig. 19. Anonymised public comments left on Facebook image depicting 2 men of Middle Eastern appearance (NSW Police FB).
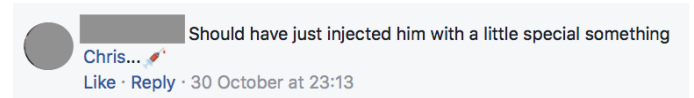
Fig. 20. Anonymised public comment underneath Facebook image of wanted suspect, Aboriginal in appearance (NSW Police).
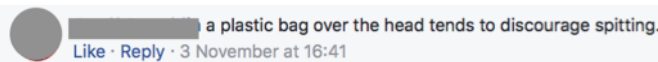

Fig. 21. Anonymised public comment underneath Facebook image of wanted suspect, non-White in appearance (NSW Police).
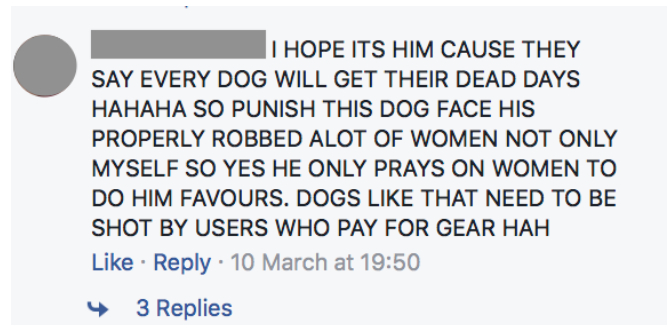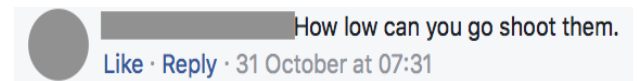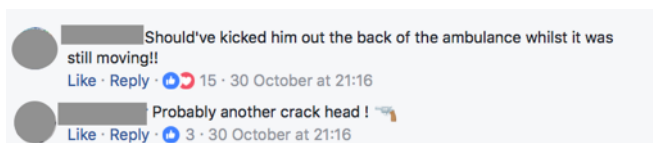

Fig. 22. Anonymised public comment left underneath Facebook image of wanted suspect, Middle Eastern in appearance (NSW Police, Facebook).

Fig. 23. Anonymised public comment underneath Facebook image of wanted suspect, Aboriginal in appearance (NSW Police).

Fig. 24. Anonymised public comment left underneath Facebook image of two wanted suspects, Middle Eastern in appearance (NSW Police, Facebook).

Fig. 25. Anonymised public comment underneath Facebook image of wanted suspect, non-White in appearance (NSW Police).

Fig. 26. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of wanted suspect, Middle Eastern in appearance (Victoria Police).

Fig. 27. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of wanted suspect, African in appearance (Victoria Police).

Fig. 28. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of wanted suspect, Middle Eastern in appearance (Victoria Police).

Fig. 29. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of wanted suspect, African in appearance (Victoria Police).

Fig. 30. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 31. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 32. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of young African man, wanted for theft (Victoria Police).

Fig. 33. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 34. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 35. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 36. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 37. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 38. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of three young African men, wanted for robbery (Victoria Police).

Fig. 39. Anonymised public comment underneath Twitter image of a group of young African men, wanted for theft (Victoria Police).
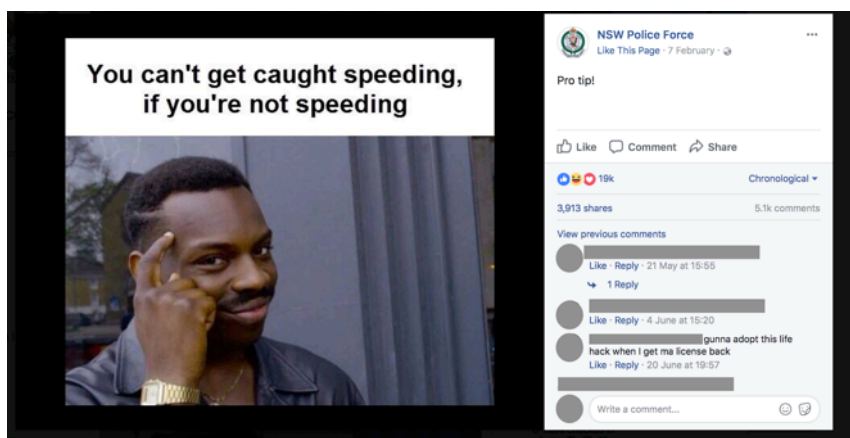

Fig. 40. R.S. (aka Roll Safe) Guy meme, edited by the NSW Police Force to contain a warning about driving over the speed limit. Text imitates the structure of the original caption, but with different content. Courtesy of NSW Police Force. (Facebook).
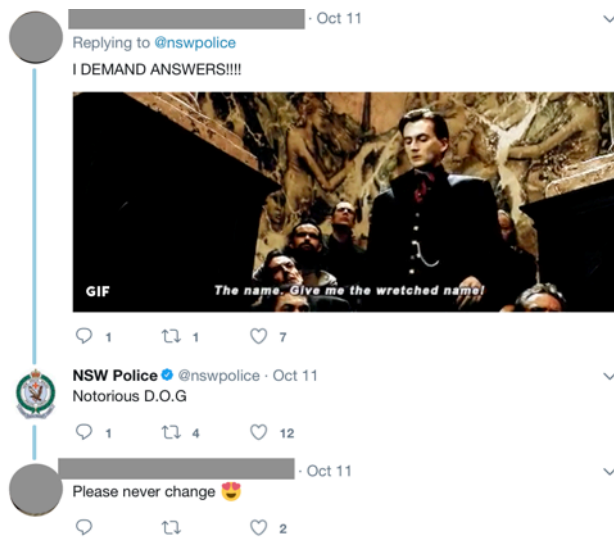
Fig. 41. Comment left by the NSW Police under a Twitter post, replying to a young commenter with a play on Notorious B.I.G. (otherwise known as Biggie, or Biggie Smalls): one of the most prominent African American rappers of the last century – known for his politically tinged lyrics. Courtesy of NSW Police (Twitter).

Fig. 42. Twitter post of a screenshot featuring the bruised cheek of a "young Constable," attached to a video of the culprit's apology. Courtesy of Victoria Police (Twitter).
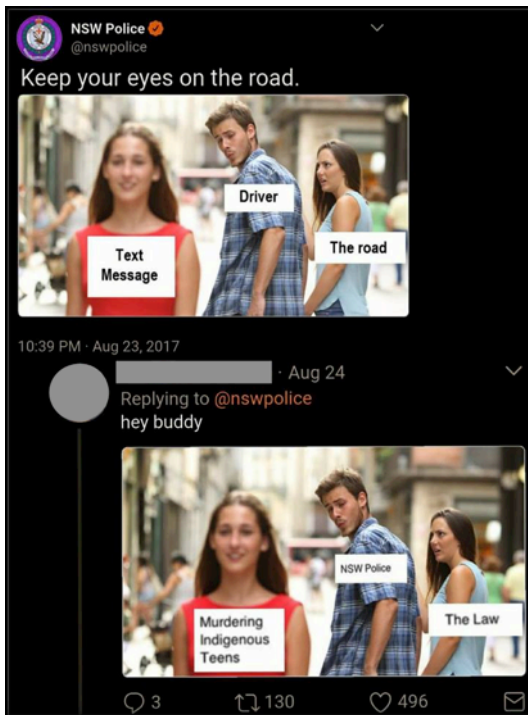
Fig. 43. Twitter post featuring an edit of the 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme by NSW Police, warning citizens about behind the wheel mobile usage. This is accompanied by an anonymised commenter reply, modifying the police's edit to include text relating to Indigenous death-in-custody and police brutality. Courtesy of NSW Police (Twitter).

Fig. 44. Anonymised public comment on NSW Police's "Distracted Boyfriend" meme post, replacing text to address victim blaming and sexism within the NSW Police Force – especially in regards to reporting sexual assault and rape. Courtesy of NSW Police (Twitter).

Fig. 45. Twitter post by NSW Police featuring memefied images of cute dogs in police gear and captions mimicking "doggo" speech. Courtesy of NSW Police (Twitter).

Fig. 46. Anonymised public comment, responding to NSW Police's "cute" police doggo meme, suggesting that the "attac" mentioned in the original post relates less to innocuous puppy bites and more to the use of mature police dogs to intimidate and harm alleged culprits/activists/rioters/etc. Courtesy of NSW Police (Twitter).