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Black Deaths in Custody. Digital Strategies of Indigenous Mobilisation

Abstract: Aboriginal Deaths in Custody has constituted a pressing issue for Indigenous communities in Australia since the 1980s. Yet, despite the constant demands for justice raised by Indigenous leaders and activists, this problem rose to public prominence in June 2020, as demonstrations against police brutality spread around the globe in response to the murder of George Floyd. The events of Minneapolis struck a chord with the many Australian Indigenous families and communities who had lost their loved ones to police violence, sparking a series of protests across Australia's major urban centres. Thus, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, like never before, came together both online and in person to demonstrate solidarity and stand with the Black Lives Matter movement while exposing the very local plight of Black Deaths in Custody. In particular, digital platforms have played a key role in the framing of alternative narratives. Hence, drawing from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Theory, with references to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonising methodologies, this paper examines the online rhetorical and visual strategies adopted by Indigenous activists to protest the loss of 'Blak' lives in police custody. Primarily, I have looked at the website and Facebook page Stop Black Deaths in Custody, along with the digital materials circulated on social media by Indigenous activist groups. Of particular interest is the media work of Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (W.A.R.), a collective of young Aboriginal men and women who have been at the forefront of the BLM protests in Australia. The findings reflect the transnational dimension of the communicative tactics employed to mobilise local and global publics. Indeed, the resources used by Indigenous activists aim to establish affective resonances, gathering national and international support to effect meaningful change.

Keywords: *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, *Black Lives Matter*, *protests*, *online activism*, *multimodality*, *transnationalism*, *affective publics*

1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) has become a well-known and consolidated chapter in the history of human rights and social justice, rising in prominence in the early summer of 2020 after the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis (USA). This event sparked global public dissent as the concerns raised by BLM activists in America struck a chord amongst several other communities in different parts of the world. In Australia, a place with a history of colonial violence and dispossession, the problems addressed by BLM were strongly felt by its First Nations and their allies, who mobilised almost immediately by organising a series of animated protests across the country. State neglect, police brutality, and discrimination against Aboriginal people were not new, but the emotional power of the international uprising invigorated the ongoing fight against Black Deaths in Custody[1] and generated public debate, welcoming new supporters but also critics. Thus, when the protests erupted again in June 2020, prominent Australian Indigenous activists responded to the Black Lives Matter campaigners' call for action by showing support both through social media platforms and by organising very successful offline demonstrations. Simultaneously, the

[1] This work is informed by extensive conversations with *Gunai* Elder, leader and activist Robert Thorpe and the teachings of *Gooniyandi* activist and leader Vivian Podesser Malo, whose legacy will continue to inspire new generations of activists.

American events helped return similar issues to the fore, allowing Australian Indigenous peoples[2] to take advantage of the global unrest to restate that this is also a national problem. Indigenous Activists Tarneen Onus-Williams (*Gunditjmara*, *Bindal*, *Yorta Yorta* and Torres Strait Islander), Crystal McKinnon (*Amangu*) and Meriki Onus (Gunai and Gunditjmara) have explained that: "[a]s Black, Brown, Indigenous people and allies in the United States and across the world collectively rise up to end systemic racism and violent police practices, it was necessary for us here in Australia to also rise".[3] Indeed, thirty years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, almost 500 Indigenous peoples have lost their lives while in custody or incarcerated, as highlighted by two key reports, one from the Australian Institute of Criminology[4] and one from *The Guardian.*[5]

With the protests reaching public attention in Australia, the language adopted by activist groups started to reflect the local vernacular in more specific and dynamic ways, making clever use of the attribute 'Black' through its modified form 'Blak'. Tellingly, in order to shed light on the local aspects of what it means to be 'Black' in an increasingly diverse Australia, Indigenous peoples have historically adopted the term 'Blak' as a way to differentiate the racial from the political. Thus, hashtags such as #blaklivesmatter and #BlakDeathsInCustody, together with #aboriginallivesmatter, #stopblackdeathsincustody, and #indigenouslivesmatter provide local interconnected nodes within a global network of outrage and solidarity.[6]

With the hope to give more exposure to this issue across different scholarly avenues, this paper looks at the online multimodal strategies (mainly linguistic and visual) adopted by Indigenous activists Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR) and Stop Black Deaths In Custody (SBDIC) in their efforts to mobilise publics[7] across national boundaries and through affective resonances. In doing so they are also asserting their sovereignty and right to self-determination. Their social media pages constitute key sites for the organisation and mobilisation of resources and audiences through a plethora of multimodal communicative strategies. A focus on the textual, rather than a direct and sustained engagement with the vast body of work that looks at media activism and protest, has provided a more detailed narrative about the communicative strength, ingenuity, and creativity of the younger generations of Indigenous activists, who are now taking the lead in asserting their right to self-determine.

This work was also inspired by many online and telephonic conversations with long-time activist, *Gunai* Elder and leader Robert Thorpe, who commented on the use of social media for activism by sharing his personal experience:

> For so many years our voice was not heard or it was manipulated by the colonizers, their propaganda about our identity history and culture had been their interpretation and opinion. First people's media organizations are relatively new, many rely on "gov" funding not [the] true voice of the people, social media has changed

[2] I have used the term 'peoples' since the plural form has been accorded self-determination rights within an international legal framework (see Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999], *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous* Peoples, Third Edition (London: Zed Books, 2021).

[3] Tarneen Onus-Williams et al., "Why We Organised Melbourne's Black Lives Matter Rally", *Chain Reaction*, 139 (2021), 16.

[4] Laura Doherty, "Statistical Report 37. Deaths in custody in Australia 2020-21", *Australian Institute of Criminology* (2021), www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/sr37_deaths_in_custody_in_australia_2020-21_v3.pdf, accessed 5 November 2022.

[5] The Guardian Australia, "Deaths Inside: Indigenous Australian Deaths in Custody", The Guardian (2021), www.theguardian.com, accessed 5 November 2022. This report is the most recent and updated source of information on the issue.

[6] See Chiara Minestrelli, "'Black Lives Matter' in Australia. The Perennial Question of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody", *University of Kent. Centre for Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies* (2021), www.research.kent.ac.uk/centreforindigenousandsettlercolonialstudies/2021/02/02/black-lives-matter-in-australia-the-perennial-question-of-aboriginal-deaths-in-custody/, accessed 5 November 2022.

[7] In this paper I use the terms 'public' and 'audience' almost interchangeably, aware that the distinction between the two has been eroded by the convergence of media and (mobile) technologies within an increasingly networked media landscape.

> all that now. The best is yet to come, the younger generations know how to use this media better than anyone, just hope they don't forget the knowledge of the Elders with them, Who have been cut out of the communication game once again.[8]

Thus, while I mainly focus on the positive aspects of social media technologies and their affordances, it is important to keep on identifying the challenges posed by the architecture of such platforms[9] and the real-life consequences of online exposure. Along with negative media representations, Indigenous activists have been strongly opposed by the government and attacked by the police.[10] In other cases, as Robert Thorpe poignantly affirms, the inability to access social media could also lead to forms of 'digital exclusion'. Yet, despite the shortcomings of these digital platforms, the analysed data show that the transnational and affective dimensions that underlie the great majority of the activists' multimodal strategies not only contributed to unprecedented support from national and international publics, but also helped put pressure on the government to address injustices.[11]

1.1 *The transnational and affective dimensions*

In the rhetoric around Black Deaths in Custody and the strategies of mobilisation used by key social actors in Australia since May 2020, two patterns emerge with clarity. The first aspect to consider is the transnational dimension of the discursive and semiotic practices utilised by the protesters and, the second, is the role of affect and emotion in establishing solid networks across racial and ethnic lines. While these two theoretical frameworks are far from being novel ways of looking at social movements and protests,[12] they nevertheless add insight to the analysis of the multimodal texts employed by Indigenous activists in mobilising people and resources in more effective ways. I am here referring to transnationalism as "mode of cultural reproduction … as site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of 'place' or locality'".[13] The notion of 'Glocalisation', in terms of the co-presence of universal and particular aspects,[14] provides another layer for understanding the place of the local beyond national boundaries. Indeed, while the transnational dimension of the phenomenon represents an important tool for very local issues to traverse national borders, it has also enhanced the formation of a network of international recognition and support for the Aboriginal cause.

The transnational framework has also been discussed by Ravi da Costa in his analysis of the transnational dimension of Indigenous activism. As da Costa explains: "The 'Aboriginal predicament' cannot be understood if thought of as a strictly national matter".[15] But, while it has been ascertained that the language and examples of Black activism in the United States have been instrumental in

[8] Thorpe Robert, Online Conversation (3 October 2018).
[9] See Dencik Lina and Oliver Leistert, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest. Between Control and Emancipation* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
[10] Activists Crystal McKinnon and Meriki Onus (co-founder of WAR) were unfairly charged over a BLM rally organised in Melbourne (Australia) on 06/06/20.
[11] Pressing demands to address inequalities led to the launch, in 2021, of the *Yoorrook* Justice Commission in the Australian state of Victoria. This is the first formal attempt to establish a Truth Commission that aims to investigate the ongoing inequalities experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Victoria).
[12] See Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund, eds., *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up. The Global Ascendency of Social Media Activism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Rutgers U.P., 2021); Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Social Media Mob. Being Indigenous Online* (Sydney: Macquarie U.P., 2018); Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, "Yarning Circles and Social Media Activism", *Media International Australia*, 169.1 (October 2018), 43-53; Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2001).
[13] Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.
[14] Roland Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?", *Journal of International Communication*, 1.1 (1994), 33-52.
[15] Ravi Da Costa, *A Higher Authority. Indigenous Transnationalism and Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 3.

inciting political action amongst Aboriginal peoples since the beginning of the 20th century,[16] the BLM movement in Australia is unique as it expresses specific demands while raising the issue of a very domestic problem: Aboriginal deaths in custody. Yet, transnationalism also helps explain the momentum generated by the events in Minneapolis and the success of the protests in Australia, which were further aided by effective local communicative and organisational skills.

The use of 'affect', as that which precedes emotion,[17] and the constitution of affective publics[18] that are generated by a shared sense of frustration and empathy can be seen as the starting point for successful strategies of mobilisation. Looking at the affective economies of Indigenous media activism, Indigenous scholar Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund argue: "the activist potential and reach of social media to support Indigenous art, literature, music, and expressive arts generally, including comedy" provides "ways for Indigenous epistemologies and ideologies to entertain and move people, to trade in the affective economies of empathy and understanding that will lead to action and change".[19] Personal narratives conveyed linguistically and visually have been pivotal in promoting displays of empathy and more active online and physical (in the streets) participation.[20] Affective content can in fact lead to increased mobilisation and possible institutional change, as I have argued above.[21] In this paper, the affective dimension has been explored mainly through the analytical lenses of Appraisal Theory[22] and the ways in which 'affect' and 'judgement' are expressed in the discursive formations around the issue of Black Deaths in Custody.

1.2 *WAR and SBDIC*

Stop Black Deaths in Custody is an Indigenous not-for-profit organisation devoted to raising awareness and campaigning for justice. They have a strong social media presence with popular Instagram and Facebook pages (21,864 followers) and a less known Twitter account. All of these platforms contain links to the SBDIC website[23] and vice versa. On all sites, merchandise and bank coordinates are placed in a prominent position to remind users to support the organisation through donations. On Facebook, the page administrators post several times a week, sometimes more than once a day and, while the website focuses on a few selected campaigns to support the families of people who died in custody, the Facebook page engages with several other cases.

Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance, also known by the clever acronym of WAR, is a collective of young Aboriginal activists from different parts of Australia who "are committed to the cause of decolonization".[24] They also advocate for Aboriginal nationalism, resistance, and cultural revival. WAR have become a prominent social actor within the Indigenous and, increasingly, the Australian

[16] John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom. The Origins of Australia Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).
[17] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari [1980], *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P., 1987).
[18] See Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*; Margareth Lünenborg, "Affective Publics. Understanding the Dynamic Formation of Public Articulations Beyond the Public Sphere", in Anne Fleig and Christian von Scheve, eds., *Public Spheres of Resonance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 29-48; Zizzi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling. Sentiment, Events and Mediality", *Information, Communication & Society*, 19.3 (2016), 307-324.
[19] Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*, 11.
[20] Susan Yell, "Natural Disaster News and Communities of Feeling. The Affective Interpellation of Local and Global Publics", *Social Semiotics*, 22.4 (2012), 409-428.
[21] Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*; Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006); Simon Clarke et al., eds., *Emotion, Politics and Society* (London: Palgrave, 2006); Yell, "Natural Disaster News and Communities of Feeling".
[22] Jim Martin and Peter White, *The Language of Evaluation. Appraisal in English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
[23] See www.sbdicaustralia.com.au, accessed 5 November 2022.
[24] See www.facebook.com/WARcollective, accessed 5 November 2022.

public spheres over the past seven years, demonstrating strong organisational skills and managing to mobilise people from different backgrounds. Yet, despite their notoriety and influence within the activist sector, they have decided to concentrate their digital activism only on Facebook, where they have 61,000 followers. WAR use their Facebook page mainly as a container of information and a space for different users and organisations to benefit from their popularity. When the BLM protests erupted again in 2020, WAR took the lead and engaged in a series of actions aiming to inform the Australian public, condemning the actions of the police and mobilising resources to give the issue international breadth thanks to their global connections.

2. Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the rhetorical and visual strategies employed by WAR and SBDIC in their framing of Black Deaths in Custody and in their mobilisation efforts, I have adopted a hybrid qualitative methodology that draws from various approaches within the Systemic Functional Linguistic tradition.[25] This paper primarily focuses on the interplay between visual and linguistic elements from a social semiotic perspective framed around Multimodality, or Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA).[26] Images are understood as conveyors of representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. Representational meaning can either present events or processes as they unfold (narrative) or identify the participants' qualities (conceptual). Interactive meaning looks at the relationship between the encoder, the represented and the viewer through the semiotic categories of 'contact', 'modality', 'attitude', and 'distance'. Composition works through 'framing' techniques, 'information value' and 'salience'.[27]

From a linguistic perspective, I have analysed written text (as part of multi-layered multimodal social media posts and webpages) through elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which views linguistic structures as ideological tools of social constructions,[28] and Appraisal Theory,[29] which examines evaluations in language. Within the Appraisal system, I have drawn from the domain of 'Attitude' since it is concerned with the way we express feelings, how we react to events emotionally and how we evaluate situations. Attitude is further operationalised through the categories of 'Affect', 'Judgement' and 'Appreciation', which are used to understand how specific texts produce "communities of shared feelings and values".[30]

The reason for selecting the digital material produced and shared by WAR and SBDIC is their visibility, popularity and work as activists and advocates for the BLM/SBDIC movement. Both groups use social media platforms to communicate with different audiences. Social media have been a crucial asset for Indigenous peoples, who have productively integrated social media activities into their daily practices,[31] with Facebook as one of the most popular platforms.[32] Thus, focusing on a limited[33]

[25] See Michael A. K. Halliday and Christian M. Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
[26] Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2006); David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction* (Los Angeles, London and New Delhi: Sage, 2012).
[27] See Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 177.
[28] Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*; Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Theo van Dijik, ed., *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage, 1997), 258-85.
[29] Martin and White, *The Language of Evaluation*.
[30] Ibid, 1.
[31] Bronwyn L. Carlson and Ryan Frazer, "A Global Response to #SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA", in Anthony McCosker at al., eds., *Negotiating Digital Citizenship. Control, Contest and Culture* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 115-130; Carlson and Frazer, *Social Media Mob*; Inge Kral, "Youth Media as Cultural Practice. Remote Indigenous Youth Speaking Out Loud", *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1 (2011), 4-16; Theresa L. Petray, "Protest 2.0. Online Interactions and Aboriginal Activists", *Media, Culture & Society*, 33.6 (2011), 923-940.

selection of online material created, posted, and shared by the two groups, I have examined the most prominent (as determined by online engagement and commonalities) posts published at the beginning of the revolts in 2020. These texts display key features about the ways in which Black Deaths are being communicated.

The notions of affective publics and transnationalism were not applied *a priori* but emerged from the examination of the data. This approach provides a critical angle for the analysis of how Indigenous activists in Australia have built on the communicative and narrative structures provided by broader global movements to establish strong connective and affective resonances with Indigenous and non-Indigenous publics. For example, I have looked at the ways in which the broader Black Lives Matter discourse has been adopted and adapted to fulfil local communicative needs through the SBDIC website and its connected Facebook page. Both SBDIC and WAR use complex texts combining still and moving images, sound, and linguistic features, as well as specific elements such as hashtags, here conceptualised in their interpersonal function[34] as commands (#justiceforAuntySherry; #StopBla(c)KDeathsinCustody; #SayHerName) or declaratives (#BLM; #Aboriginallivesmatter; #blaklivesmatter; #BlackLivesMatter; #ourwomenaresacred).

Overall, my analysis of the data followed a key principle that should support and sustain any academic endeavour that deals with questions of Indigenous relevance, especially if such enquiries are undertaken by White academics. Therefore, my reading of the data was further informed by the principles embedded in Decolonising methodologies.[35] Decolonising methodologies are not merely a method, but can be seen as a philosophy, a personal and academic stance that aims to empower Indigenous voices and viewpoints. For instance, while the article engages with the topic from a social semiotic perspective 'designed' to foreground the researcher's standpoint, my views have been sustained by the guidance, knowledge and example set by activists like Vivian Malo, Robbie Thorpe and his family, as well as the people I have collaborated with over the years.[36] In addition, I hope to be able to 'give back' by discussing such an important issue across various academic avenues, and by paying homage to the Indigenous activists' courage and resilience.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 *Transnational solidarity for a national agenda*

At the start of the protests, transnational solidarity dominated the discourse around Black Deaths in Custody in Australia. Indeed, the theme of transnationalism is constantly invoked not only through visual choices (predominantly still images), but also through linguistic elements that anchor the meaning into a 'glocal' context.[37] Such debates are clearly reflected in the way online conversations are framed. For instance, most Australian Indigenous activists adopted the hashtag or slogan #BLM, together with more specific and local phrases such as 'Aboriginal Lives Matter', 'BlakLivesMatter' and/or 'Black Deaths in Custody'. The use of such tags and their order of appearance in public posts are clear expressions of transnational solidarity, but they also reflect a broader question of the place of (Aboriginal) Australia within the international arena. On 3 June 2020, the website for the Centre of

[32] Bronwyn L. Carlson, "The 'New Frontier'. Emergent Indigenous Identities and Social Media", in Michelle Harris et al., eds., *The Politics of Identity. Emerging Indigeneity* (Sydney: UTS E-Press, 2013), 147-168; Bronwyn L. Lumby, "Cyber-Indigeneity. Urban Indigenous Identity on Facebook", *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 39 (2010), 68-75.
[33] Considering the length and scope of this article, I had to limit my analysis to very few texts.
[34] See Halliday and Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*.
[35] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies.*
[36] A special thanks goes to Patrick Mau, Fred Leone and all the people whose ideas have inspired me over the years.
[37] Robertson, Roland, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?"

Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention published a media release titled "Black Lives Matter. Aboriginal Lives Matter. Black Deaths in Custody Must Stop".[38] This was linked to several posts that circulated on the WAR and SBDIC Facebook pages, confirming the discursive potential of hashtags as a way of "forging and contesting social bonds",[39] promoting affiliation and enacting possible practices of inclusion/exclusion.

A close analysis of the language used on this web page shows a hierarchical order in the way the three short sentences, which are well-known slogans, are organised and appear in sequence. Placed in thematic position, "Black Lives Matter" works as the broader, global signifier that indexes the more popular and pressing issue of African American people being killed by the police. The slogan is followed by "Aboriginal Lives Matter", which helps narrow down and localise the issue. With a change in only the first attribute ("Aboriginal" for "Black"), a closer connection to the first sentence is immediately established, showing the derivational, and yet distinct, nature of the slogan. In third position, in the role of 'new', readers are eventually introduced to the specific problem as it is known in Australia: Black Deaths in Custody. This is phrased as a command, "Must Stop", and with the modal auxiliary used to invoke a sense of obligation. Deontic modality, namely a system "concerned with a speaker's attitude to the degree of obligation attaching to the performance of certain actions"[40] appears with frequency in the rhetoric strategies adopted by Indigenous activists. In addition, the order of elements within a sentence, theme and rheme, or given and new, often bears important ideological and rhetorical implications as it represents a specific perspective[41] and, in this case, the idea that 'Black deaths in custody' is part of a broader movement. Thus, despite it being relegated to the (discursive) margins, there is a pressing need to give more emphasis to the Australian issue. By tapping into the broader rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter movement, Indigenous activists not only demonstrate their support for the cause, but also establish a connection with similar events, while creating awareness amongst international publics.[42] This is clearly visible in the words of WAR activists who assert that, "[t]his is a global movement, and this is an issue that Australia is a part of too. When the footage emerged of the murder of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers, as he desperately pleaded 'I can't breathe', we were all horrified and outraged, but not surprised".[43]

The activists' testimony is further supported by a popular photo collage that circulated on the activists' social media pages in 2020 (Figure 1). The image portrays George Floyd and David Dungay, the Aboriginal man who died in similar circumstances. The two men are framed in a central position and, despite being shot at different distances (a close-up for Floyd and a long-distance shot for Dungay), their eyes constitute the focal point in both pictures. Within a multimodal framework, this image can be considered a conceptual representation[44] as participants are depicted in their 'essence'. In particular, a connection is established between the two men through a process of classification that puts them in the same category through a series of visual and textual (written) resources. Kress and van Leeuwen explain that classification processes have the power to connect participants through a "taxonomy" (79), in which participants stand in a relationship of 'subordination' and 'superordination'. So, the two men, can be seen as 'subordinates' within the established taxonomy. This visual strategy enables a relationship of proximity with viewers through a direct gaze, in line with demand images.[45] A further framing device is constituted by the broader structure created by the

[38] See www.cbpatsisp.com.au, last accessed 5 November 2022.
[39] Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk. Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1.
[40] Paul Simpson, *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 43.
[41] Halliday and Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*; Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images.*
[42] See Da Costa, *A Higher Authority*.
[43] Onus-Williams, McKinnon and Onus. "Why We Organised", 16.
[44] Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images.*
[45] Ibid.

heading "'I can't breathe'" (in quotation marks), mirrored in the expression "BLACK LIVES MATTER" (in capital letters), placed symmetrically at the bottom of the image. Thus, "I can't breathe" and "Black Lives Matter" function as the overarching superordinates that hold the two stories together. The symmetry of the composition is respected not only through the alignment of the photographs, but also through the text that frames the photographs. The expressions also work intertextually in that they reference other notorious cases of African American people who died in a similar way, as confirmed in the text under the two photographs. "I can't breathe" thus becomes a connective discursive formation, as well as being a cry for help, that holds the local and the global in tension.

Fig. 1: Image collage of Floyd and Dungay
circulated on WAR's FB page, Facebook, 2020,
https://www.facebook.com/events/1195037700842024/?ref=newsfeed.

A series of posts published at the start of the protests reflect a similar structure, with the clause "I can't breathe" as the main connective discourse that bridges the local and the global. A Facebook post published by SBDIC on June 6, 2020, provides an effective example of how the transnational dimension of the issue is expressed in a multimodal manner so as to engage users in multiple (sensorial and practical) ways (see Figure 2). This is achieved mainly through the use of the clause "I can't Breathe", positioned at the centre of the image, in white, large and bold, capital letters against a black square which is inserted into a broader red square. The main clause is then followed by the hashtag "#StopBlackDeathsInCustody", which anchors the meaning and localises the issue. Similar signifiers of locality are "@stopblackdeathsincustody" at the bottom of the image, within the red square, and the text in the post. The latter invites users/viewers to take action through a series of requests to share visual footage of the rallies. From a visual point of view, the meaning is once more organised in a hierarchical structure with the squares connoting the interpenetration of the local and global dimensions, indexed by the red/blood-stained human handprint against a black backdrop and the black writing against the red background.

Fig. 2: Post circulated on the SBDIC's Facebook page, Facebook, 6 June 2020, https://www.facebook.com/2Black2StrongTshirts/photos/3145533788859523.

Similarly, a media statement released by WAR on June 5, 2020, builds its arguments around Floyd's last words. This post's only interactive element is given by the hashtag "BlakLivesMatter", which performs a double function. On the one hand, it points to the African American slogan and, on the other, it localises the issue through substitution ('Blak' instead of Black). Once more, the hashtag functions interpersonally, as it helps strengthen social bonds while making the issue visible through circulation by connection (connected issues). From a macro perspective, the language used in the media statement provides a clear explanation of the transnational framework that is often invoked and evoked in support of African Americans and, at the same time, used to gain international attention for the Aboriginal cause. Linguistically, the media release aligns with a series of other texts, where the lament "I can't breathe" is employed to establish transnational links through empathy.[46] Once more, George Floyd is compared to *Dunghutti* man David Dungay. Other parts of the media statement focus on the similarities between the two contexts through declarations such as: "[t]hese deaths are among the latest in a long line of Black deaths in custody in the United States and in Australia" and "Australia and the USA are both violent and racist colonial regimes".

Another media statement released by WAR on July 27, 2020 and titled "WAR supports tomorrow's Sydney Black Lives Matter protest", overtly addresses the parallels between the two movements by stating that: "the Sydney demonstration is part of a global movement". From a semiotic perspective, WAR's posts about the organisation of protests range from plain text and images of their media statements to creative artwork that aims to incite people to mobilise through cross-platform support, serious appeals, and entertaining posts (memes, digital art, etc). Videos of rallies and media conferences provide a more realistic account (high modality) of what happens on the ground, showing commitment and organisational skills. The live function of Facebook is also used to keep various publics up to date with real-time events in various parts of Australia. Live videos of rallies fulfil this function of sharing local events as they happen, while encouraging people to keep the momentum alive by using the provided global and local hashtags: "#BlackLivesMatter" and "#StopBlackDeathsInCustody". Links embedded in social media posts also provide interactive ways to

[46] See also Carlson and Berglund, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up.*

learn more about the issues at stake. Indeed, hyperlinks constitute a resource for promoting social relations and personal research[47], especially on the activists' social media sites, where related online texts are proposed, thus signalling support to other organisations fighting for the same cause.

3.2 *Mobilising publics through affective resonances*

So far, the paper has looked at the transnational dimension of the rhetoric adopted by Indigenous activists, with particular reference to WAR and SBDIC. But, while a distinction has been maintained between the transnational and the affective spheres, such a clear-cut demarcation is not always valid, as they often intertwine. Further, mobilisation achieves its best results when the two spheres collide, as we have seen so far. A detailed analysis of representative and popular posts also helps identify the ways in which different publics are interpellated to gain local and global support. Thus, looking at a media release published by WAR on June 5, 2020, it is possible to notice the interpenetration of these two discourses: the transnational and the affective. From an Appraisal point of view, the use of adverbs like "painfully", attributes such as "racist", "lethal", "rabid (police)" and "violent", together with a highly negative lexicon, namely "(systemic) racism", "negligence", "(colonial) regime", "genocide", "theft", as well as "our own" and "so-called Australia", point to the highly affective dimension of a very negative issue. They also convey judgements[48] about the state, the police, and justice. In the Appraisal system, judgements can be divided into 'social esteem' and 'social sanctions'. These two categories can be further examined from the perspective of how normal or unusual things are ('normality'), how capable ('capacity'), and how resolute ('tenacity'). On the other hand, social sanctions deal with truthfulness ('veracity') and ethical qualities ('propriety').[49] Most of the affective terms used here belong to the category of social sanction with links to the ethical dimension of the issue ("racist", "lethal", "violent").

In addition, a series of material verbs follow the main clause: "he was being murdered", "resonate", "have died". The use of the past continuous passive in "he was being murdered" conveys a sense of length and continuity while pointing to the intentionality of the killing. The action is represented as an event, with the 'actor' placed in the position of 'given' and the 'goal' as 'new'.[50] Within the CDA tradition, passivisation (the use of passive rather than active forms), together with nominalisation (when a verb or clause is turned into a noun) are seen as processes that exclude participants from the action showing a lack of agency for ideological purposes.[51] Yet, in this particular instance, the agent/actor is expressed clearly, but it is not placed in thematic position. Instead, the goal of the action is placed in a prominent position to direct the attention on the victim, who thus acquires more value. Other expressions of overt judgement, such as: "[h]ad all these people been White, we have no doubt they would still be here" are constructed in a way to show "ideological squaring",[52] a structural opposition between White and Black, privileged non-Indigenous people versus persecuted Indigenous peoples. This is flagged by the (hypothetical) structure of the sentence, the use of White that implies its opposite (Black) and the indexical "these" which presupposes a "those". The use of "So-called Australia" also works to discredit the legitimate status of the nation, casting doubts about its foundations and current rule.

[47] Arthur Kok, "Multisemiotic Mediation in Hypertext", in Kay L. O' Halloran, ed., *Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Systemic Functional Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2004).
[48] Martin and White, *The Language of Evaluation*.
[49] Ibid., 52.
[50] Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.
[51] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[52] Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*.

The media statement adopts another communicative strategy in building the case for wide participation in the protests. The use of personal stories is a key strategy when it comes to the mobilisation of emotions and, as a consequence, of heterogenous publics who connect through empathy and resentment. This involves telling the personal stories of the deceased and, in many instances, how they have been killed by the police (for example: "shot to death", "murdered in custody", "negligence"). Similar affective responses are also elicited through the circulation of highly artistic representations of the deceased and, linguistically, through calls to take part in forms of activism to commemorate the dead (by posting digital art, sharing hashtags, supporting causes, etc). Many of the calls to commemoration shed light on specific stories and individuals through digitalised images that use popular phrases borrowed from the BLM movement, as well as the Missed and Murdered Indigenous Women movement (#sayhername), which reinstate the translocal nature of digital mobilisation predicated on community building and belonging.

The importance of single stories, which has been supported by *The Guardian*'s pivotal inquest, is visible in the content published on the website of SBDIC. Indeed, the website, which aims to guide and assist Indigenous peoples in their fight for justice, introduces personal stories through the different campaigns launched by the organisation. The website is designed in a way to convey a strong emotional reaction and inspire feelings that gravitate around pride in Aboriginality and empathy for the deceased. The hierarchical structure of the website presents users with a conceptual image, an artistic rendering of the organisation's name (Stop Black Deaths in Custody), the acronym (SBDIC) with the logo placed on the top left and an introductory sentence at the very top that explains the aims and objectives of the website: "[w]holeheartedly offering Support & Assistance to First Nations Families in their fight 4 JUSTICE. Please, DONATE". The use of the adverb "[w]holeheartedly" in thematic position and the salience of "Justice" and "Donate" show a high degree of positive affect.[53] The logo and the image are connected as the image inverts the colour scheme of the logo by using the colours of the Aboriginal Flag (red, yellow and black) in the background rather than inside the letters (see figure 3).

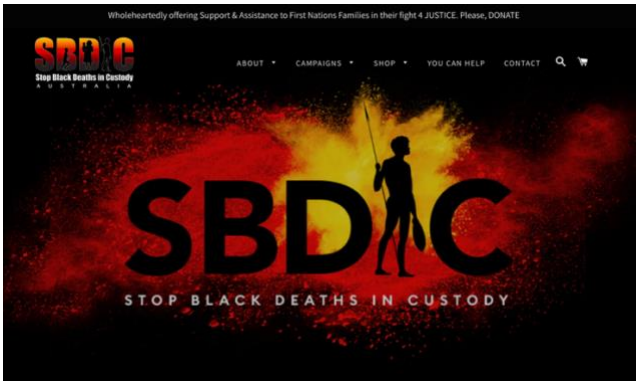

Fig. 3: Banner of the website StopBlackDeathsInCustody, www.sbdicaustralia.com.au.

Under the banner, the website proceeds to engage users through an introductory statement aiming to create a sense of community as evidenced by linguistic choices such as the repetitive use of the possessive "our" in the expressions "for our people", "by our people". In the next section of the site, as indexed by a short separation line under the capitalised heading "OUR CAMPAIGNS 4 JUSTICE",

[53] Martin and White, *The Language of Evaluation*.

the organisation displays the various campaigns they are working on. The use of personal and highly emotive imagery to represent the deceased and the opportunity to learn more about their life by clicking the active link help convey a series of emotive meanings that presuppose affective responses. Specific features of the website (a whole section dedicated to merchandise and donations, links to the donations page, and links to social media sites) suggest different ways of engaging with these messages of support through a series of concrete and symbolic actions. In this case, a resource-based relationship with various audiences is created in the process of mobilisation.[54] Pleas to share the information, donate funds, subscribe to the newsletter, and purchase merchandise are all key strategies used by the organisation to help "Support a Worthy Cause" as the site states. While the language and imagery used across the website suggest the interpellation of mixed audiences, there are specific elements in the architecture of the text that openly address the Aboriginal community as evidenced in the section called "Let's Connect Together" preceded and followed by three hearts bearing the colours of the Aboriginal flag.

The adoption of highly emotionally charged language and images presented through a multimodal approach is characteristic of the rhetorical strategies employed by SBDIC and WAR. In particular, insofar as affective representations of deaths in custody are concerned, both groups have been actively sharing digital artwork not only in the hope of gathering financial resources, but also with the aim to mobilise affective resonances across racial and ethnic divides. Using a social semiotic approach to examine popular imagery that circulated across various social network sites, it is possible to notice a pattern in the way in which 'Black Deaths' are represented. Most images are constructed as demand images because they ask viewers (either directly or indirectly) to engage with both the visual and written text. They convey an interactive meaning since images can create specific relations between viewers and what is represented inside the picture frame.[55] These strategies come to the fore in a digital illustration of Sherry Fisher-Tilberoo (Figure 4). In this image, the *Birri Gubba* woman, also known as 'Aunty Sherry', is depicted in a holy fashion, surrounded by a halo and gumtree leaves that symbolise connection to 'Land' and 'Country'. The artwork, supposedly[56] created by *Wiradjuri* and *Ngiyampaa* artist Charlotte Allingham, has widely circulated across different social media platforms and the overlaid text has been slightly modified depending on specific communicative needs. The use of highly creative digital artwork is another way in which Indigenous activists mobilise transcultural affective publics. On the one hand, they address the global community through intertextuality and a series of visual strategies that draw from a repertoire of images, concepts and discourses highly recognisable within the global sphere (the Aboriginal Flag, natural elements, etc.); on the other, some signs acquire specific meanings if read by Indigenous audiences (the use of the affective kinship title "Aunty", symbols of Aboriginal identity such as eucalyptus leaves and references to Indigenous struggles).

From an interpersonal perspective, the close-up of the face, neck and shoulders, together with the frontal angle, suggest an intimate relationship with viewers who are asked to empathise and, in some cases, even identify with the represented. Aunt Sherry's post (Figure 4) also performs a perlocutionary function, for it can be read as a call to action thanks to the accompanying text and the hashtags embedded in the post. Indeed, even though there is no direct eye contact, audiences are asked to take action through linguistic and affective visual elements, thus turning this into an interactive and demand image. The overlaid white capitalised "JUSTICE" at the top of the artwork is mirrored by the text "FOR AUNTY SHERRY" in a smaller font. The low modality and highly abstract quality of the representation convey a sense of immateriality, which may contribute to enhancing feelings of

[54]Erich Sommerfeldt, "Activist Online Resource Mobilization: Relationship Building Features That Fulfill Resource Dependencies", *Public Relations Review*, 37.4 (2011), 429-431.
[55] Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.
[56] I was not able to verify the author, but the image is characteristic of the artist's style.

empathy. The linguistic elements that accompany the post provide more information about the objectives that the image should help achieve. The verbal indicators of synthetic personalisation[57], which are evident in the direct inclusive address to the audience, "[m]ake this your profile picture", contain specific instructions on how to take part in the protest and pay homage to Aunt Sherry. A series of hashtags are then presented for users to share on their platforms (#Stopblackdeathsincustody, #blaklivesmatter #blacklivesmatter, #BLM, #Aboriginallivesmatter, #ourwomenaresacred). Undeniably, 'hashtag activism'[58] has strengthened international connections, facilitating possibilities for networking and reaching out to new publics in a way that allows activists to profit from the resonances of the BLM movement, while explaining the peculiarities of its articulation in Australia, its differences and similarities.

Fig. 4 Popular post shared by WAR on their Facebook page.
The image represents Sherry Fisher-Tilbero, also known as Aunty Sherry,
www.facebook.com/WARcollective/photos/pb.100051597023069.-2207520000../3264670793628457/?type=.

4. Conclusion

First Nations in Australia have long fought for justice, despite the challenges encountered along the way. Many are the avenues taken by Indigenous activists, scholars, and creatives to assert their agency and demand rights to self-determination. With the digital revolution, new technologies and, more recently, social media platforms have provided old and new generations with the tools to voice their views in direct and powerful ways. Activism has certainly benefitted from these new modalities, thus reconfirming the idea that online engagement has now moved away from being merely performative. Indeed, the recent Black Lives Matter protests have demonstrated the effectiveness of such endeavours at different levels. The success of online forms of communication is due to the high degree of

[57] The term synthetic personalisation refers to the process of addressing mass audiences as though they were individuals through inclusive language usage (see Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989)).
[58]See Sarah J. Jackson, et al., *#HashtagActivism. Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020) and Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk.*

interactivity, intertextuality, and the strong multimodal structure of digital platforms, as well as the activists' ability to communicate important issues 'affectively' and to heterogenous publics.

The rhetorical and visual strategies employed by the two key social actors I have here considered aim to mobilise tangible resources (financial resources, spaces, etc.), especially in the case of SBDIC, intangible resources (the people who support the cause), as WAR have demonstrated, and coalition building strategies (referencing similar groups/organisations),[59] as far as both groups are concerned. This is rendered possible thanks to forms of symbolic power and the counter-cultural capital held by the activists who have managed to attract international attention through a wise use of discourses and imagery that appeal to a generation who are increasingly sensitive to issues of social justice.

While the paper does not do justice to all the creative efforts undertaken by Indigenous activists as I could only focus on a few selected examples, the great majority of the resources shared on the groups' online platforms suggest that mobilisation is mainly conveyed through a rhetoric that evokes and directly addresses affective connections while strengthening international advocacy. This is achieved through a series of creative demand images, moving images, and written texts that use highly emotive language or interpersonal address (imperative clauses) to establish affective translocal relations with diverse publics who are becoming increasingly aware of the Australian emergency.

[59] Maureen Taylor and Shuktara Sen Das, "Public Relations and Advocacy. Stem Cell Research Organizations' Use of the Internet in Resource Mobilization", *Public Relations Journal,* 4.4 (2010); Sommerfeldt, "Activist Online Resources Mobilization", 429-431.