

**Advancing Community-Centered Understandings of Safety: A Digital Ethnography of #PoliceFreePenn**

In 2015, Black-led student activist groups from 76 U.S. colleges and universities issued demands for reforms to campus policing, largely through the requirement of police to complete cultural competence trainings and student inclusion on police oversight boards (Chessman & Wayt, 2016). At the University of North Carolina, however, Black students specifically demanded the university defund and disarm its campus police department as well as take action to discontinue its criminalization of “working-class, poor, and homeless Black and Brown people ... in Chapel Hill and Carrboro,” stating “Policing as an institution must be abolished, and must be replaced with restorative and transformative justice practices, rather than functioning as a mouth into our penal system.” To be sure, police brutality and state-sanctioned violence<sup>1</sup> against vulnerable Black people is neither unique nor exclusive to municipal police departments. We must not forget the University of Cincinnati Police officer who shot and killed Samuel DuBose in 2015 or the deadly shooting of Jason Washington by Portland State University Police in 2018, both of which occurred off-campus. When considering more than 80-percent of campus police are authorized to patrol and make arrests off-campus (Reaves, 2015), Black people, whether affiliated with institutions or living in proximity to campus, exist in a heightened state of precarity when it comes to their individual and collective safety. When considered together, the aforementioned relationship between student demands, campus police patrolling patterns and involvement in shooting deaths off-campus allude to the inconsistency and erosion of previously conceived boundaries of college and university life. While some institutional boundaries are social and symbolic<sup>2</sup> (Lamont, Pendergrass, & Pechuki, 2015), others are physical or spatial and altogether help reveal the deep structural relationships between postsecondary institutions and policing as a racial project of surveillance, criminalization, control, and carceral punishment. Further, they illuminate understudied dynamics of contemporary activism in college contexts in which postsecondary boundaries are 1) routinely navigated in seamless ways by student organizers mobilizing off- and away from campus, and 2) extended into boundless digital spaces through the use of new and social media technologies online.

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-Black state and state-sanctioned violence refers to specific forms of racialized harm, whether enacted by individuals or institutions, that uniquely target and/or disproportionately impact Black people within or beyond the boundaries of formalized legal systems.

<sup>2</sup> By symbolic boundaries I am referring to what sociologists frame as conceptual distinctions and demarcations intended to 1) identify and categorize insiders and outsiders, and 2) situate them in an ascribed social position laden with expectations for behavior in accordance with ones position. Social boundaries refers more specifically to codified social categories and group affiliations, like a verifiable university affiliation or social identity (e.g., race and gender).

### Purpose and Scholarly Significance of the Study

The purpose of my ethnographic study is to interrogate the permeability of institutional boundaries (i.e., social, symbolic, and spatial), which are often (re)enforced by policing<sup>3</sup>, within which student and community organizing are assumed to typically take place. In particular, my project proposes deep and prolonged study of #PoliceFreePenn, a Black-led campus-community organizing project grounded in its commitment to work collaboratively with and in service to the predominantly Black communities in West Philadelphia, especially those in close proximity to the University of Pennsylvania. Using traditional and digital ethnographic methods (Miller & Horst, 2012) – across multiple digital (online) and physical (offline) contexts – my study examines the following research questions: 1) how does #PoliceFreePenn navigate institutional boundaries in negotiation of its relationships with community-based organizers and collectives?, and 2) what tactical repertoires does #PoliceFreePenn employ in its mobilization of institutional resources, both digitally and offline, in support of its advancement of community-centered understandings of safety?

My study poses significant scholarly contributions to the higher education and social movements literatures by moving beyond the institutional centrality of contemporary research on activism in college and expanding the analytical focus to include online and off-campus venues of activist participation. Most higher education scholars believe activism in college largely, if not exclusively, manifests in on-campus environments and as a response to presumed episodic issues germane to student experiences in classrooms, residence halls, and other areas of student life. However, as my previous ethnographic work has examined, many students (and other university affiliates) engaged in movements have and continue to organize within and across presumed boundaries of campus and community, including online through digital media use (Davis, 2015, 2019). This is especially true in instances where campus and community organizers share common grievances against a common antagonist across contexts, like campus police. Additionally, my study stands to offer deep cultural insights to the collaborative processes by which a campus-community movement may recognize shared interests to reimagine policies and practices. This is particularly useful as safety alternatives to campus policing have few examples of how such a process is facilitated and what such processes yield in reimagining public safety. Finally, as a *digital* ethnographic study, my investigation integrates often ignored but deeply insightful

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term “policing” is used to refer to both the formalized institution of law enforcement as well as the practices of surveillance, control, punishment, and detention undertaken by self-deputized individuals on behalf of police.

data from online organizing that are usually additive or treated tangentially to higher education researchers' studies of contemporary activism.

### **Ethnographic Context of #PoliceFreePenn**

Following months of state and local stay-at-home orders to safeguard against the spread of COVID-19, a series of precipitating incidents of anti-Black state and state-sanctioned violence re-catalyzed a wave of protests, demonstrations, and other direct actions against the persistent strain of policing on Black people in the United States. Namely, news of the killing of Ahmaud Arbery by White vigilantes in Georgia, Breonna Taylor by plainclothes officers executing a no-knock warrant in Kentucky, and the traumatic eight-minute forty-six second video of George Floyd being suffocated to death by a Officer Derek Chauvin in Minnesota were all reported by the national media in the month of May. What immediately followed in June were weeks of mass mobilization by tens of millions of people, including college and university students, under the Black Lives Matter banner. The New York Times has considered it the largest mobilization in U.S. history, with roughly 500,000 people in 550 cities on June 6th, including more than between 50,000 and 80,000 people in Philadelphia specifically. The clarion call from movement workers was clear: divest from the institution of policing and invest in alternative forms of safety (i.e., humanizing resources and community supports) that drastically reduce and eventually eliminate the need for police altogether (i.e., abolition).

Around the same time, an open letter from former Student Body President University of Minnesota, Jael Kirandi, a Black woman undergraduate, referenced decades of misconduct and the documented harassment of Black students by the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD), underscoring their demand for the University to sever its relationship with MPD<sup>4</sup> following the killing of George Floyd. Soon after, the #policefreecampus mediated mobilization (Lievrouw, 2011) campaign initiated by the Scholars for Black Lives collective, which I currently direct, organized nearly 1,000 signatories in support of a national call for colleges and universities to divest from policing. Within this same period, the #PoliceFreePenn project at the University of Pennsylvania emerged as “an abolitionist assembly affiliated (and seeking affiliation) with students, faculty, staff, workers, and local area residents in proximity to the university.” According to their public demands<sup>5</sup>, #PoliceFreePenn’s primary aim is to abolish policing and transform community safety through a divest/invest framework, a

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<sup>4</sup> Following Kirandi’s letter, University President Joan Gabel announced the institutions decision to discontinue the use of MPD for either additional support for “large-scale university events” or specialized services (e.g., K-9 units), although MPD and university police would maintain joint patrols and investigations.

<sup>5</sup> <https://medium.com/@policefreepenn/abolition-now-we-demand-a-policefreepenn-8f6ca2d30f1a>

commitment to community interdependence, and being in right relationship with occupied homelands of the Lenape people (i.e., Philadelphia). Since June, #PoliceFreePenn has worked in collaboration with local communities and abolitionist collectives (e.g., Black Philly Radical Collective) to co-organize a series of online petitions, mass email campaigns to university leadership, issue/position statements, host community conversations on public safety, and launch a community poll of local residents' experiences with UPPD. Most recently the group has contributed to recent mobilizing efforts in response to the afternoon of October 27th killing of Walter Wallace, Jr., a Black man in need of mental health support in West Philadelphia who was instead engaged and shot by Philadelphia Police. Specifically, #PoliceFreePenn organized a donation match for the Philadelphia Bail Fund to support protestors, some of whom were arrested or detained by UPPD well beyond their designated patrol zone. The day after Wallace was killed, in their public comment<sup>6</sup> with the University newspaper, #PoliceFreePenn doubled-down on its commitment critically reflecting upon and taking critical action in resistance to (i.e., abolitionist praxis) the institution of policing, writing:

The fatal violence of policing is sustained. It's not an exception. It's the rule. It's a moral evil that requires our divestment. We stand with all those who fight for abolition, including most urgently in Philadelphia the visionary demands and organizing led by the Black Philly Radical Collective.

### **Reform and Resistance to Campus Policing**

Efforts to reform the institution of policing, including those on-campus, assume the function of policing is primarily benevolent (i.e., protect and serve) and wholly reflective of the interests of the communities<sup>7</sup> under a law enforcement agency's jurisdiction. However, according to a study of national campus law enforcement data, campus police have consistently demonstrated a failure to incorporate community policing (i.e., (re)alignment of structure, policy and practice with community needs, partnership, and preventative solutions) approaches in any meaningful structural change (Hancock, 2016). To be sure, these reforms are relatively conservative pathways for improving policing when considering the predominating demand for departments to be defunded and abolished. Yet, campus police have consistently failed to take up these community-centered reforms in exchange for punitive orientations toward criminalization. Sloan and Fisher (2011) have suggested

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thedp.com/article/2020/10/walter-wallace-philadelphia-police-shooting-penn-students-mourn-reaction>

<sup>7</sup> Consider institutionalized "watch and report" programs (e.g., Kids Watch at the University of Southern California) that deputize local residents to work in conjunction with police to monitor and report suspicious activity to law enforcement. These programs expand and encourage racialized policing practices like surveillance and profiling.

the poor integration of community policing is the result of campus law enforcement's lack of interest in reform while simultaneously relying on government grants for community policing to cover rising costs of campus security during the 1990s. Furthermore, recent research has identified inconsistencies between the institutional justification for the presence of police on campus (e.g., fear of crime, perceptions of disorder, or protection of prior victims of crime) and the lack of support for law enforcement approaches to campus safety among students, staff, and faculty (Kyle, Schafer, Burruss, & Giblin, 2016). Altogether, the literature suggests reform efforts undertaken by colleges and universities – on an administrative level – are ideologically inconsistent and structurally incompatible with the needs and desires of many campus and community stakeholders. This is especially true of Black people on campus as well as those living in close proximity to White-serving colleges and universities, many of whom are consistently over-policed and disproportionately criminalized. As recent studies have posited, Black people on campus are disproportionately subjected to verifying their institutional affiliation (Jenkins, Tichavakunda, & Coles, 2020) while those not affiliated with but in proximity to the university could be engaged by police at rates at least three times their representation in the local population in some instances (Jones, 2020).

In response to the widely conceived failures of police reform among movement workers and those disproportionately affected by policing, the movement for the *abolition* of policing as an institution has grown considerably in recent years. Conceptually, abolition in the United States is historically rooted in the efforts to resist and dismantle the racial project of chattel slavery. However, since the passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which effectively abolished slavery with exception as a form of carceral punishment, abolition has evolved in its application to primarily address systems and structures of carcerality (e.g., police surveillance, detainment and detention, judicial punishment, and related forms of institutional discipline) that replaced the institution of slavery. The basic premise of abolition is its recognition and refusal of carceral approaches to issues of harm, accountability, and restoration, which are deemed both racially discriminatory and ineffective (Mathiesen, 2008). However, abolition is not reducible to projects of removal or absence, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore refutes as incomplete<sup>8</sup>, noting “Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions.” Therefore, abolition as an intellectual and political endeavor seeks to offer alternative frameworks of possibility for thinking about the prevention of and redress for interpersonal and institutional harm outside of the logics of state surveillance, control, and related forms of carceral punishment.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>

In my proposed study, the concept of abolition offers orienting language to situate the organizing work of #PoliceFreePenn, not merely destructive to the institution of policing, but *constructive* in their effort to imagine and create the presence of life-affirming systems and structures of safety and security grounded in community. Furthermore, abolition provides conceptual clarity with regard to the extent to which community-centered understandings of safety are wholly incommensurable with institutional standards of security that routinely criminalize Black people under the guise of safety and security for White people and White-serving postsecondary institutions.

### **Conceptualizing Campus-Community Organizing as Relational**

The higher education literature on community engagement, service-learning, and campus-community partnerships (Boyer, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Enos & Morton, 2003) proffers an understanding of campus-community relations predicated upon longstanding power asymmetries between postsecondary institutions and the communities within which they are situated. In particular, Enos and Morton (2003) note that attempts at meaningful and authentic partnerships are often undermined in the transactional nature of many campus-community initiatives, which Yappa (1999) further conceptualizes as an institutional framing of communities as the domain of problems and the university as the domain of solutions. Epistemologically, these domains re-inscribe the symbolic boundaries of institutions to distinguish and categorize itself as separate and apart from rather than in relationship with local communities. By and large such framing has guided how institutions have been traditionally involved with neighboring communities in ways that have primarily been extractive and exploitative. However, Bringle and Hatcher (2002) have suggested conceiving campus-community partnerships as relational presents an opportunity to flatten hierarchies and develop mutually-beneficial arrangements that better center community needs, a point to which I will return.

The aforementioned perspectives are grounded in how colleges and universities as formalized, hierarchical structures initiate and regulate their partnership with communities. While helpful, the nature of power asymmetry inherent to formalized campus-community partnership limits its sufficiency as a concept for this study. Still, Ganz (2010) theorizes effective movement organizing as also rooted in relationships, especially in the absence of formalized structure. Without formal structure, which is often the case in the early stages of movement building, campus-community engagement requires an alternative set of power-conscious relations in which conjoining parties mutually share interests and exchange resources (Ganz, 2010). These relationships link individuals, networks, and organizations and lay the groundwork upon which subsequent formalized

structure can be built, which in the digitally-mediated movements can be facilitated through alternative and activist new media (Lievrouw, 2011) technologies partially or entirely online (Davis, 2015)

As campus-community partnerships and movement organizing are considered effective when conceived relationally, their conceptual consistency provides clarity to how campus-based organizing may politically differ from campus-community organizing. Specifically, campus-based organizing may have a decidedly narrower scope of concern, typically focusing on issues and appealing to constituencies unique or limited to the institution. As a relational process, however, campus-community organizing may negotiate a broader set of political concerns, have overlapping interests, and exchange sharable resources, ultimately in ways that are deferential to extra-institutional concerns and that seek to mobilize institutional resources to support community endeavors. In either or both domains relationships precede structure, thereby disregarding or diminishing the potential of pre-existing hierarchical formations and symbolic boundaries to shape imbalanced partnerships. Altogether, I conceptualize campus-community organizing to signify the borderless set of relational associations between and among university affiliates (i.e., students, staff, and faculty) and local communities, specifically in the context of their collaborative work to facilitate mobilization, cultivate public legitimacy, build political power, and navigate opportunities and threats to achieve their sociopolitical goals.

### **Methodology and Methods**

My study employs digital ethnography as a methodology of multiple methods in which conventional ethnographic data collection procedures are mediated by digital technologies during the course of investigation. To be sure, “digital” signifies the methodological nature rather than the methodological object of study, which can be used to examine interactions and theoretical relationships between virtual and in-person phenomena under ethnographic investigation (Murthy, 2011). Not to be misunderstood, digital ethnography is distinguishable from “virtual ethnography,” the latter of which is conducted entirely online with no in-person ethnographic work. While such approaches are useful for the study of phenomena that *only* exist virtually, digital ethnography affords the flexibility to traverse online and real world boundaries, similar to the complex movement phenomena operating in multiple contexts simultaneously. Customary to all rigorous ethnographic work, digital ethnography requires extensive periods of prolonged observation, both virtual and in-person, to gain rich insights to the processes, practices, group relations, and political systems associated with social science phenomena under study. Given my study’s focus on boundary permeability of political activities and organizing practices, and the

two-year total duration of my fieldwork – only the second-year of which would be covered by the fellowship – prolonged ethnographic observation is uniquely positioned to provide rich data in pursuit of my research questions. Given the impact of COVID-19 on social engagement, and the health implications of otherwise relying upon exclusively in-person research activities, my use of digital methods as a substantive rather than a supplemental dimension of my investigation is intentional. A digital ethnographic approach affords my study the elasticity to adjust for periods of socially-distanced data collection otherwise limited by current public health risks of gathering in groups.

*Data Collection.* For the last six months I have been undertaking preliminary field work to outline an investigative roadmap and make early empirical choices about *what* is important to understand and how best to understand shared meanings ascribed to various movement events and processes. This has involved the construction of several qualitative media databases using #PoliceFreePenn social media content, developing an event timeline of notable occurrences thus far by the group, and engaging in informal talks with group members about their individual and collective labor. Building on this fieldwork, my proposed study will use multiple collection methods to include digital artifact and documentary archiving, data mining and social media hashtag aggregation, virtual and in-person<sup>9</sup> interviewing (ethnographic, individual, and group), and digital participant-observation (overt and covert) through conducting observations of #PoliceFreePenn social media accounts in real time as well as participating in virtual live streams (e.g., political education events hosted via Zoom) when available. By digital artifact and documentary archiving I am referring to the iterative process of identifying, excavating, documenting, and cataloging digital texts, images, and videos related to #PoliceFreePenn and other movement actors (including UPenn and UPPD). These artifacts help provide sociopolitical and historical context as well as means by which to understand the specific policing problems #PoliceFreePenn is attempting to address and how it constructs its abolitionist vision of public safety. Data mining and social media hashtag aggregation will be used in conjunction with digital archiving to create qualitative databases of online discussions associated with particular topics within local movement discourses (e.g., #walterwallacejr on Twitter and Instagram). As an ethnographer, my participation is a part of the data collection process, which offers me an enhanced opportunity to manage my rapport with participants, engage authentically in

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<sup>9</sup> In-person interviewing and observations will only be conducted if it is safe for both myself as the research and participants to do so based on the ongoing case trends of COVID-19 pandemic.



efforts for organizational solidarity, and deepen my understanding of various cultural logics undergirding the movement. Altogether, and building on the foundation of prescribed digital ethnographic methods, the aforementioned approaches are critical to engaging digitally-mediated social movements and the ways new media technologies are used to achieve social and political change. In addition to the use of digital data, ethnographic and semi-structured interviews with #PoliceFreePenn affiliates will be conducted in iterative phases throughout the study. Interviews will primarily serve as a way to understand participant interpretations and the meanings they ascribe to contested concepts of public safety and security. Additionally, interviews will allow for exploring participants' experiences and modes of engagement with UPPD, both on-campus and in West Philadelphia. Further, I will conduct virtual observations in an attempt to navigate broadening parameters and undefined boundaries of digital media platforms available to campus-community organizers in my study.

*Data Analysis.* Ethnographic work requires multiple points of analysis throughout the course of study rather than merely at the conclusion of data collection. In particular, analyses conducted in the field undertake a three-point sequential process of *inscription*, *description*, and *transcription*. In the early exploratory phase, inscription aids in identifying *who* and *what* are important for ongoing investigation, a critical aspect in later data organization and reduction processes. Following inscription, description involves writing things down through the use of shorthand notes (i.e., jottings) and fieldnotes to produce narratives of digital media behaviors, rhetorical events, activities, interpretations, and explanations. Finally, transcription is the process by which an ethnographer more formally records elicitations from informants and collaborators to include verbatim responses during interviews, taking dictation, documenting stories, and recording what an individual says during a specified period of observation. In post-fieldwork analyses, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) will be used to undertake iterative coding of textual and interview data, as well as Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (Altheide, 1987) of digital documents and artifacts (including textual and graphic images posted online) collected during my proposed study. As a sense-making heuristic, ECA engages the communication of meaning and seeks to verify theoretical relationships within and across the data. Unlike conventional content analysis, in which protocols are instruments used for coding frequencies, ECA centers the role of the researcher in the constant comparison and constant discovery of relationships between data

throughout the inquiry process. Included are the deductive development of conceptual codes and, consistent with ethnographic work, the provision of good, “thick description.”

*Rigor, Trustworthiness, Validity, and Transferability.* Naturalistic inquiry relies on the researcher as the primary instrument of investigation. With regard to the inquirer-respondent relation specifically, I reject the *a priori* assumption of objectivity in favor of accounting for the mutual and simultaneous influences of myself as the researcher and participants in relationship to my study. In particular, working from a power-conscious collaborative approach (Stewart, 2019) will ensure the research process and product(s) are co-determined, deferential to communities in which the research is being conducted, and useful in improving the material conditions of everyday Black people. Furthermore, as a scholar already engaged with #PoliceFreePenn – and as a Black, former West Philadelphia resident and UPenn alumnus – I am uniquely positioned to carry out this study based on an established rapport and ongoing effort to remain in “right relationship” with the local community. My longstanding political commitments to abolition, in West Philadelphia and elsewhere, offer a degree of access to a protective group without compromising the integrity of their political projects to produce consumable research. Additionally, the credibility of the data will rely upon six methodological techniques to include: prolonged engagement, perpetual observation, triangulation, peer-debriefing, negative case analysis, and member-checking. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation are grounded in my commitment to engage the data collection processes consistently for two full academic seasons (only one of which will be fulfilled by this fellowship) of investigation. In the analysis phases, triangulation of multiple sources, debriefing analysis with colleagues, seeking out disproving evidence to adjust my insights, and engaging participants in member-checking interpretations of the data will all be undertaken to strengthen my findings and truth claims.

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