STORY 7. RESISTING DATA COLONIALISM AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE IN A MIDWESTERN CLASSROOM: EXPLORING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN ALTERNATIVES TO AUTOMATED LICENSE PLATE READERS

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'Everyday lived experience is the richest form of data', James Kilgore, the Urbana, Illinois, USA-based educator and activist said in critiquing the persistent growth of electronic monitoring technologies and law enforcement tools across small towns and large cities alike in 2022.[1] The observation underscores the alarming breadth and scale of data capture that social justice advocates in diverse geographic contexts have had to contend with as the processes of data colonialism accelerate around the world, particularly through the expansion of security technologies. This essay explores the growing drive to automate security from the geographic and economic 'periphery' of high-tech and finance capitals[2] on the U.S. east and west coasts. This essay's deliberate focus on micro-urban contexts and 'flyover country' of Central Illinois explores the range of efforts —and the use of class-based engagements specifically— to resist the growth of data-driven surveillance systems outside of large urban metropolises. We further problematize framings of 'the North' as a monolithic construct, and instead acknowledge the long-standing dynamics of value extraction from diverse global peripheries (even within 'the North' itself) to feed the growth of centers[3],[4] that extends into contemporary datafication regimes. While the data politics of 'flyover country' have been largely overlooked in comparison to the nation's coasts and larger Midwestern cities like Chicago or Detroit, we argue that such oversights miss opportunities to attend to the specific dynamics of data colonialism and their resistances as they evolve in diverse geographic zones and local 'peripheries' within the North itself. As critical data scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias posit,[5] today's emerging state of data-driven capitalism has expanded by enabling Northern corporations to profit from data gathered from diverse regions around the world, while undermining the data sovereignty of political bodies and actors in the periphery. This applies not only to national interests in the Global South but also, as we point to here, to the circumvention of democratic oversight in local regions even in 'the North' itself.

1   Haymarket Books, Understanding E-Carceration: A Book Launch with James Kilgore and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 18 January 2022, video. https://www.youtube.com/live/fc2JaRJWcFM?feature=share
2   The use of the term "flyover" in the US context also highlights the notion that these regions are frequently disregarded and bypassed in favor of these centers.
3   Anita Chan, Networking Peripheries: Technological Futures and the Myth of Digital Universalism, MIT Press, 2014.
4   William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, United States: W. W. Norton, 2009.
5   Couldry and Mejias, The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism.

This essay thus underscores the localizing processes of data colonialism through tracking the growth of data-driven security industries —and their resistances— from Urbana, IL —a micro-urban context in the Midwestern U.S. Attention to such contexts demonstrates how marginalized populations, communities of color, and 'peripheral' geographies have been increasingly targeted by data-driven security companies as strategic assets for data exploitation and local market opportunities. This parallels the growth of surveillance technologies in 'smart city' initiatives, where increasingly spatialized and automated forms of management strategies seek to render the population more 'knowable and governable' through data.[6] We also provide a snapshot of our use of a Midwestern university classroom and a Community Data graduate seminar —one of two classes seeded at the University of Illinois in the Spring 2022—[7] that were developed to document and critically refuse such expansions. Our local resistance to data colonialism 'at the periphery' invests in community infrastructures and alternative pedagogies through the use of classrooms as critical technologies that contrast with data-driven security systems. The Community Data class drew attention to varied civic organizations' critique of police and municipal contracts for Automated Licence Plate Readers (ALPRs) as an alleged deterrent to violent crime across the nation, while highlighting groups' work to develop alternatives to commercial surveillance systems in local communities.[8]

While ALPR architectures have been roundly critiqued over the last decade for subjecting minority populations to heightened forms of criminalizing surveillance and for lack of proven efficacy in reducing violent crime, new ALPR vendors like Flock Safety[9] stress their use of predictive and AI-based technologies and expanded data pools to promise enhanced efficacy to local municipalities, despite the lack of empirical evidence on ALPRs' impacts on violent crime.[10] Due to heightened concerns raised by citizens over the lack of evidence-based efficacy surrounding the technology, and reports presented —including by the authors— on the efficacy of alternative community-based approaches, the city of Urbana declined the use of ALPR in 2022.[11] Flock epitomizes the recent explosion of public-private surveillance models, where government and public entities rely on the private sector to produce surveillance information.[12] While Flock pushes their product to local police departments and municipalities, they also sell to large national private groups, enabling the company's extractions to feed into

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6   Chamee Yang, 'Smart Stadium as a Laboratory of Innovation: Technology, Sport, and Datafied Normalization of the Fans', Communication & Sports, 10.2 (2022): 374–389.

7   Chamee Yang, 'IS 594 Community Data Spring 2022', Illinois School of Information Sciences, 15 February 2022. IS594 SP22 Yang Syllabus (revised).pdf

8   Christopher S. Koper and Cynthia Lum, 'The Impacts of Large-Scale License Plate Reader Deployment on Criminal Investigations', Police Quarterly 22.3 (2019): 305–329. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611119828039

9   Flock Safety. https://www.flocksafety.com/

10   Research on the efficacy of ALPRs is very limited and has mainly focused on non-violent crimes, showing a statistically insignificant reduction in case clearance and investigation time.

11   Rachel Gardner, 'Urbana says "no" to license plate readers, but Champaign says "yes" in effort to reduce gun violence', CU-CitizenAccess, 19 January 2022. https://cu-citizenaccess.org/2022/01/urbana-says-no-to-license-plate-readers-but-champaign-says-yes-in-effort-to-reduce-gun-violence/

12   Jay Stanley, The Surveillance- Industrial Complex: How the American Government Is Conscripting Businesses and Individuals in the Construction of a Surveillance Society, New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 2004. https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/FilesPDFs/surveillance_report.pdf.

a large, centralized public-private surveillance network.[13] These surveillance models rely on, and recreate, colonial visions of technological determinism and social control. As Dujuan 'Zoe' Kennedy, a community organizer and violence interrupter with Force Detroit, put it in an interview with students in the course, 'We are targets. Not just as people, but as a social construct'.[14] For these reasons, the American Civil Liberties Union joined local community groups in early 2023, calling for people to oppose Flock in their communities.[15]

In a national context where rising rates of violent crime were coupled with growing challenges for resource provision for public services during the COVID-19 pandemic, the hyped 'techno-logical solutionism' of Flock could gain fast traction in local municipalities.[16],[17] Problematically, the growth of such commercial surveillance architectures not only normalizes the monitoring of citizens' everyday activities but further monopolizes data about minority communities in ways that undermine, silence, and deprive community-led and driven solution-making as alternative responses to local problems.

Following heated public debates in the Fall of 2021 after citizens were notified of the Urbana Police Department's consideration of an ALPR contract with Flock, faculty, post-docs, and students at the University of Illinois' Community Data Clinic[18] came together with Urbana City Council members concerned over the persistent focus on surveillance tech as the 'only pos-sible solution' to crime. Together, we planned to dedicate the Spring 2022 graduate seminar of the Community Data Clinic to the topic of ALPRs. Using the classroom as a participatory infrastructure and transformational technology, we recentered debates around ALPRs to draw focus to the forms of justice-driven alternatives led by community-based initiatives. It should also be noted that our class was part of a broader set of cross-campus consensus and research initiatives around community violence, such as Tariq Khan's Spring 2022 class on Public History: Policing in the United States.[19],[20] Throughout the semester, we zoomed out to focus on violence reduction as a holistic problem and dove instead into enmeshed resistances in local communities across various U.S. contexts. By doing so, we drew from the work of other

13   Jay Stanley, 'Fast-Growing Company Flock is Building a New AI-Driven Mass-Surveillance System', American Civil Liberties Union, 3 March 2022. https://www.aclu.org/report/fast-growing-company-flock-building-new-ai-driven-mass-surveillance-system

14   Jack Brighton, Jana Perkins, and Sarah Unruh, 'More Investing, Less Arresting: A Public Health Model for Reducing Gun Violence in Detroit', White Paper for Spring 2022 Community Data 594 (2022).

15   Chad Marlow and Jay Stanley, 'How to Pump the Brakes on Your Police Department's Use of Flock's Mass Surveillance License Plate Readers', American Civil Liberties Union, 13 February 2023. https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/how-to-pump-the-brakes-on-your-police-departments-use-of-flocks-mass-surveillance-license-plate-readers

16   Techno-solutionism, a concept by Evgeny Morozov, refers to an extreme belief that all social problems can be solved through technological means, which ignores the complex socio-political factors that contribute to the problems.

17   Evgeny Morozov, To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism. United States: PublicAffairs, 2013.

18   Community Data Clinic. https://communitydata.illinois.edu

19   Our work also aligns more broadly with recent critical pedagogic interventions that aim to teach data science differently, such as those outlined in the book, "Data Feminism", which emphasizes the need to incorporate intersectional feminist principles into data education.

20   D'ignazio and Klein, Data feminism.

community-partnered researchers who describe their work as 'centered on understanding and prioritizing how information and information technologies can empower communities, support their development, resilience, health, and well-being, promote self-determination, social inclusion, and social justice, and bridge divides'.[21] One of the crucial premises underlying our efforts has been recognizing community partners as experiential experts whose years of lived experience and knowledge must be centered as pathways toward transformative justice. By centering experiential expertise that is based on lived experiences of community experts rather than just data and statistics, we hoped to challenge the simplified and racialized narratives about gun violence and promote more inclusive and holistic approaches to addressing the issue.

Our class-based research thus explored cases of community work dedicated to resisting data colonialism and the expansion of securitization architectures in a range of U.S. contexts. Using qualitative research methods, we opened up our classroom space to engage community organizations nationwide that have played active roles in advocating for non-surveillance approaches to gun violence. During the course of the semester, we dedicated course time to collecting narratives, conducting interviews, inviting community and Urbana City Council feedback, and building relationships with key actors in a range of justice-based initiatives recognized for deterring gun violence through community-based programs - from Pittsburgh, PA's Mad Dads,[22] to Oakland, CA's Youth ALIVE!,[23] and from West Palm Beach, FL's Inner City Innovators,[24] to Detroit, MI's Force Detroit.[25] Our efforts highlighted the strength of social infrastructures designed by community leaders, and amplified their efficacy in a May 2022 Urbana City Council Meeting where ALPRs were debated.

Among the findings we stressed were that community leaders' long record of work to build public understanding around gun violence as a leading cause of death in communities of color preceded COVID-19's deadly impacts.[26],[27] As these community leaders emphasized, gun-violence deaths in communities of color in Urbana and nationwide are primarily driven by factors such as income inequality, poverty, under-resourced public services, and easy access to firearms. This was so much the case that in 1979 the Center for Disease Control and Prevention declared gun violence a public health crisis. Like COVID-19, gun violence is

21   Sue McKemmish, Frada Burstein, Shannon Faulkhead, Julie Fisher, Anne Gilliland, Ian J. McLoughlin, and Rob Wilson, 'Working with communities: Community partnership research in information technology, management and systems', Information, Communication & Society 15.7 (2012): 985–990.
22   Mad Dads of Greater Pittsburgh. https://www.pittsburghmaddads.org
23   Youth Alive! https://www.youthalive.org
24   Inner City Innovators. https://innercityinnovators.org/
25   Force Detroit, 'Building peace: A vision for a freer, safer Detroit', December 2021. http://forcedetroit. org/build-peace-report-2/
26   For instance, Black men make up 6% of the total US population but over 50% of gun homicide victims.
27   The White House, 'More Details on the Biden-   Harris Administration's Investments in Community Violence Interventions', 7 April 2021. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/07/fact-sheet-more-details-on-the-biden-harris-administrations-investments-in-community-violence-interventions/

contagious and affects distinct populations differently.[28],[29] Our findings further credited the dedication of justice-based advocates who had long worked to build public literacies around public health approaches to gun violence reduction that stressed holistic and integrated solutions to address the root causes of violence and reduce the precarity of people's access to food, shelter, and safety, particularly since these challenges are often result of systemic inequality and the city's historical neglect in poor and Black neighborhoods.[30] Such work highlighted how solutions can thus take many forms, from housing assistance to after-school programs to the distribution of free gun safes. Finally, we stressed how national justice-based organizations' investments around public health models echoed the data politics of local organizers from citizen groups like Urbana's First Followers,[31] and CU Fresh Start.[32] Such groups have maintained that a technology-centered punitive approach is an obstacle to building trust and community-centered forms of safety.

In January 2022, the Urbana City Council voted down the proposal for ALPRs in the city. Given the continued marketing of ALPRs to Central Illinois cities like Urbana, the adoption of ALPRs by Urbana's adjacent twin city Champaign, and the success of Flock in selling its devices in surrounding areas (from Peoria to Quincy and Gurnee, IL - and from Comanche, IA to Wichita, KS in the Midwest alone),[33],[34] local organizers expect new proposals to come. Our work thus continues a second phase of this project to amplify the work of advocates for public health and care-based approaches to addressing gun violence[35],[36] and to resist the pressure to expand surveillance-based solutions. In Urbana, the resistance continues as ALPRs are adopted in surrounding towns and existing installations nearby are lauded as 'successes'. We note the efforts too of other Illinois-based data activists like the Invisible Institute of Chicago,[37] who have likewise begun to recognize the importance of addressing data colonialism outside of large cities Chicago, and who recently launched new civic tools to monitor police abuses (to complement Chicago-based tools they previously developed). Our local resistance to data

28   Brighton, Perkins, and Unruh, 'More Investing, Less Arresting: A Public Health Model for Reducing Gun Violence in Detroit'.

29   Force Detroit, 'Building peace: A vision for a freer, safer Detroit'.

30   For more information on the history of community violence in Chapampaign-Urbana (CU), see Tariq Khan's Spring 2022 website for his class on Public History: Policing in the United States: A Safe CU. https://asafecu.com/?page_id=21

31   First Followers. https://www.firstfollowersreentry.com

32   A Safe CU, Exploring the root causes of gun violence in Champaign-Urbana, both historical and present-day. https://asafecu.com/

33   Enumerating every city that employs Flock would be intractable. That being said, their ALPRs are currently in use in communities near Urbana, including the adjacent city of Champaign, IL; Peoria, IL; and Gurnee, IL. In the midwest United States, they can be found in Comanche, Iowa and Wichita Kansas. Nationally, they can be found in states from California to Florida to Michigan. The Electronic Frontier Foundation maintains an (incomplete) list of contracts in the United States.

34   The Electronic Frontier Foundation. Atlas of Surveillance. https://atlasofsurveillance.org/search?vendor=Flock+Safety

35   Brighton, Perkins, and Unruh, 'More Investing, Less Arresting: A Public Health Model for Reducing Gun Violence in Detroit'.

36   Chinyere E. Oteh and Clara Belitz, 'Care Works: An Analysis of Community Based Gun Violence Prevention in Pittsburgh, PA', White Paper for Spring 2022 Community Data 594 (2022).

37   Invisible Institute. Champaign-Urbana Civic Police Data Project. https://champaign.cpdp.co/

colonialism 'at the periphery' offers a distinct if complementary approach to such tool-based developments around counter data by investing in community infrastructures, alternative pedagogies, and just and equitable approaches to fostering safety communities outside of large cities – where surveillance technologies like ALPRs present growing obstacles rather than solutions.