

## COMMENTARY

# Writing urban security

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In our forthcoming book *Trapped: Life Under Security Capitalism and How to Escape It* (Maguire & Low, 2024), we revisit the tragic death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, a critical incident in modern urban security in the United States. On a dark, rainy February evening, 17-year-old Martin was walking on the grounds of Retreat at Twin Lakes, Florida, a gated community he was visiting when a neighborhood watch volunteer gunned him down. Initially, before the trial and acquittal of his killer, when the world first heard the cry “Black Lives Matter,” this tragic death provoked no outcry. Instead, newspapers reported on the tragedy of life in the gated community.

Twin Lakes' residents once dreamed of middle-class prosperity and safety from the chaos of ordinary life, but the 2008 recession brought a nightmarish property crash, foreclosures, and eroding exclusivity. The security measures installed to protect residents amplified their fears. In 2012, the gated community had plenty of cameras and fences but few shared spaces and no sidewalks. Walking while Black was structurally suspicious, and so a fatal shooting was entirely foreseeable. We revisit this incident in *Trapped* because it illuminates the pervasiveness of privatized residences and spaces, surveillance technology, and private security. We spotlight the people who shape, support, and sometimes struggle with security capitalism in their everyday lives, from the residents of gated communities like Retreat at Twin Lakes to the international experts who sell “solutions.” Therefore, we share with the contributors to this special issue a concern with how security presents itself in everyday life, how people experience it, and how we write about it.

Writing about urban security is challenging, both ethnographically and theoretically. This special issue contributes significantly to understanding the impact of security practices as they are in the sensory city and in the bodies and emotions of residents worried about their safety. As we all agree, the results are an anxious world that punishes a small, marginalized group of people perceived or, in the case of these articles, “sensed” as bad people or dangerous.

Policing institutions and agents play a major role in this reframing of race and class, but not alone. Bolstered by a media obsessed with the culture of fear and the spectacular and conditioned by middle-class “white” norms of behavior, dress, and movement, this sensing

has grown such that residents are recruited, deputized even, into the operational realm of security agents. This is not the strategic level of urban planners and police nor the tactical level of residents and “locals” but an unevenly distributed operational zone. This discussion reviews this perspective and places it aside our concern with spaces of security capitalism in the hopes of beginning a productive dialogue.

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In this issue, Elisa Fiore describes the framing of Moroccan-Dutch youths as a nuisance or dangerous in a gentrified Amsterdam neighborhood by attending to local talk, rumor, and municipal efforts to encourage residents to be “resilient.” Alana Osbourne discusses the metonymic use of “heat” in security contexts as a substitute for chaos and danger, as in so-called HEAT training, the hostile environment awareness workshops delivered by dubious consultants for NGO staff and others intending to work in dangerous environments. Carolina Frossard is fascinated by how citizens mimic surveillance professionals through the coaching of police and training in the technology (and endurance) necessary to deploy CCTV cameras. Their role is to let the police know about potential or occurring criminality through engaging with the surveillance technology and through WhatsApp-based groups found in wealthier neighborhoods. Rivke Jaffe, on the other hand, is interested in how crime has territorial boundaries such that the use of dogs as a prosthetic species extends a human's ability to “sense” “bad men.” Of course the dog's heightened sensory abilities of sound, smell, and other modes of perception (as compared to humans) have other consequences that include making their owners feel safer—but also reminding them of their species-dependent vulnerability.

These articles focus on how dangerous people and circumstances are apprehended by normal citizens through specific practices. This “how” is revealed through micro-sociological engagements and phenomenological attunements that enable—and encourage—urban residents to identify dangerous people and situations. The articles

read these practices as sensory “skills,” acquired differently in each ethnographic case. However, the underlying principles are the same, that is, through observation, engagement, and participation, the processes by which citizens learn to discern who is safe or dangerous, who is bad or good, and when it is safe to venture out into the city or even talk to a stranger are ethnographically uncovered.

These ways of knowing, sensing, and attuning are the most significant contributions of these articles in that they demonstrate how fear is materialized into specific bodies and places. These criminal bodies can be “sensed” through various forms of “enskilment,” the contributors argue, that heighten a person's ability to identify threat and danger (and we would argue to become even more reactive to fear and anxiety). These case studies are ethnographic research at its most subtle and provide the reader with insights that can be applied to our own everyday lives.

Our concern, however, is even though the authors sketch the cultural, political, and economic context of living in these cities, they focus on the practices of detecting or recognizing criminality, and leave the spaces in which these delicate discriminations take place, and the institutionalized security skills that exist, less interrogated—and at least for the residents it seems taken for granted. Here is where we would like to offer our intervention, to add to this wealth of ethnographic work our own empirical and theoretical understanding of securityscapes.

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The work of Michel Foucault still looms large in theoretical discussion of urban security, especially *Discipline and Punish* (1978), his bleakest yet most accessible text. Library shelves are now overflowing with books about panoptic technology, suspicious categories of persons, and the recruitment of people into urban surveillance regimes. Indeed, skill—including Cristina Grasseni's (2004) valuable concept of “skilled vision”—is already deployed in research on securityscapes and expertise (e.g., Maguire, 2014). However, it is widely acknowledged that power does not glare down at us from above like Nietzsche's cold monster, rather it stands or falls on the ground of everyday life. Despite this acknowledgement, for decades now, research on urban security has either reproduced Foucault's totalizing map or become lost in ethnographic detail.

It is worth returning briefly to Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), a direct challenge to *Discipline and Punish*. Rather than resisting or enduring the strategies of planners and power brokers, de Certeau notices the tactics and creative practices people use to turn urban space into meaningful place. But what exactly is a practice here? He gives numerous examples—walking, telling stories, making do, even *La perruque*, the ancient art of doing your own work during your employer's time, sometimes with borrowed tools. If strategy defines space, and acts upon it, to tame it and thereby make it secure for investment, then the tactical realm of practice is what remains outside and promises something more. Practices may be recruited to fulfill strategic objectives, but they always exceed

their remit, and are not skills. Indeed, across the two volumes of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau is clear that “skill” denotes some degree of institutionalization, whether in “the universe of the technocratic” (1984, p. 18) or the “artisanal” realm (1998, p. 212; see also Grasseni, 2004). This observation is relevant here.

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Many of the cities described by contributors to this special issue are indeed perceived by residents and outsiders as “dangerous,” requiring particular knowledge and practices to navigate them, but often the city is empty of process in their analysis. Perceptions of danger and nuisance in racialized Amsterdam owe much to how gentrification turns quotidian street life into a securityscape that requires monitoring and intervention, including by residents in the moral-political interiority of their homes. Similarly, when we turn to Recife, Brazil, and Kingston, Jamaica, we see the production of security-capitalist spaces striated by class divisions, where suspect populations are targeted for surveillance. The key challenge when writing about securityscapes, which we noted elsewhere, is scale, or “scape shifting” (Low & Maguire, 2019), accounting for how spaces are formatted by security, visibly and invisibly, sometimes by obscure socio-technical interventions and absentee experts. To understand these securityscapes, we must attend to how they are experienced, and the practices characterizing everyday life there, but we must also explain ethnographically the *operational* unfolding of security-capitalist processes. As we point out in *Trapped*, security and capitalism are conjoined twins, and they bring secrecy, asymmetry, and social division wherever they go. The contributors to this volume have done a remarkable scholarly service in pointing directly to where power and practice, strategy, and tactics, intersect today, but their focus on skill obscures the secrecy, asymmetry, and social divisions brought by security capitalism.

Instead of a city of bustling streets, shops, and homes, imagine the city as a casino. Gamblers would say they have skill, and share knowledge, and they may even mimic the croupiers, but the house always wins. Similarly with urban security capitalism, the city becomes a landscape of visible and invisible configurations of technology and architecture, only some of which are knowable by residents, and information asymmetry, sometimes maintained by absentee experts who, crucially, have the capacity to institutionalize skill. Hugh Gusterson coined the term “securityscape” precisely to address “asymmetrical distributions” of security knowledge and resources (Gusterson, 2004; see Albro et al., 2012). We argue that securityscapes can be individually contained (an airport, a stadium, a gated community, a bomb shelter), as well as ethnographically studied, but that they are part of a network of spaces and securityscapes that ultimately provide a cultural code for living as well as a material map of their social and political production. This material map is certainly an aspect of what these authors' research participants are sensing.

For example, a CCTV camera may, at one and the same time, protect private assets while combatting terrorism, it may be a platform

for several moving technological parts and degrees of systems integration; elements of its functioning may be non-local, transparent, occluded, or secret even to its operator. One could argue that any CCTV camera creates a securityscape composed of these contradictions and inconsistencies. Yet if we examine the locations of all the CCTV cameras surrounding Union Square in New York City (about 240 cameras), we could begin to understand how the urban landscape has been crafted and reinforced by policing, legal regulations, corporate financial controls, and specific behavioral rules that are changing New York City public space and civic life—and most importantly how people, particularly strangers—respond to one another.

Thus, the challenge of understanding and writing about security today is both spatial and temporal; it includes the examination of infrastructural interventions and the discursive, symbolic, and embodied practices that make up its paths, links, and trajectories. It includes the learning required to capture the messaging of this volatile environment. That is why we need more scales of involvement to uncover its power. We must understand that there are practices of everyday life, and sites of resistance, at different scales. We must also understand that skill, like expertise, tends to be institutionalized and is therefore asymmetrically distributed.

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The excessively powerful images and concepts in *Discipline and Punish* have not served us well when it comes to the topic of security. Security is more salient in governance more than Foucault would ever have predicted, and he certainly never imagined it shaping an entire way of life (see Bigo, 2008; Foucault, 2007). But de Certeau pulls too hard in the direction of everyday “tactics” and thus fails to engage with the strategic and operational shaping of the city. What goes missing in both is the operation of security capitalism.

To write urban security, we must move from the everyday street-level to the offices of the planners, security designers, and the police, and we must return from there to life in contemporary securityscapes where, indeed, sensory practices are recruited and embodied. The articles in this issue contribute to our understanding of how “worlding” of securitization is created and instantiated in people (and their pets’) lives. We, everyday citizens, resist, accommodate, avoid, and sometimes joyfully participate in security, but we rarely do so under conditions of our own making. Attending directly to security capitalism, with all its asymmetries, allows us to understand the desire for security among significant sections of the population—a desire often shaped by fear of “chaos” and anxieties over status—and the massive burden of security and surveillance disproportionately carried by the marginalized and people

of color. Asymmetries in power and “skill” map onto asymmetries in expectation and violence.

What if we switched from talking about the institution of policing and the spread of surveillance and instead turned to directly examine security capitalism? Would this change the location and meaning of learning new skills to help the police, perceive the environment, or undo prejudicial stereotypes of bad people? We are not sure, but to solve this thorny problematic, we need to work together theoretically and ethnographically.

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