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“To Ferguson, Love Palestine”: mediating life under occupation

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ABSTRACT

In Ferguson, Missouri, Palestinian activists and black protesters created a transnational collective identity defined by what some scholars call a “community of feeling” following the murder of Michael Brown in August 2014. This paper focuses on the transnational politics of the Ferguson Movement through a textual analysis of digital media discourse and interviews with local community activists. Findings reveal that activists generated a transnational collective identity based on their shared experiences of oppression and resistance, which activists made visible across various digital platforms, including social media, blogs, and livestreaming. Informed by the literature on social movements, collective identity, and affect, the authors move beyond theoretical analyses that emphasize activists’ communicative practices as strategic; instead, this article underscores the affective linkages that led to the development of a transnational collective identity within the movement.

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Introduction

Hours after white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black American male who lived in Ferguson, Missouri (a municipality of St. Louis County), connections between the murder of Brown and violence against marginalized communities abroad emerged within social media spaces. In particular, social media users connected Brown’s death to the loss of life in the Middle East: “It is a sick world so busy murdering children #stl #ferguson #america #gaza #palestine #Iraq.” Following the murder of Brown, a coalition of long-time local activists, organizations, and youth began a movement that would sustain organized daily forms of resistance throughout the fall and winter of 2014, and into 2015. As Ferguson quickly transformed into a militarized space in which riot gear police officers attempted to curtail the rights of activists calling for justice and legal accountability, more activists and witnesses took to Twitter to report from inside Ferguson.1 Quickly, people from across the globe witnessed Ferguson transform into what many activists believed was an occupied space. As images of riot police officers and tear gas canisters appeared across social media platforms, some activists from outside of St. Louis began to note both national and transnational patterns.
Social media users commented on the Pennsylvania-made tear gas canisters used by both St. Louis police officers and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the West Bank. Palestinian activists tweeted thousands of miles away from St. Louis: “Remember to not touch your face when teargassed or put water on it.” These posts highlighted the immediate connection social media users made regarding the news of Brown’s death, and the St. Louis County Police Department’s militarized response. Furthermore, activists from St. Louis also noted that former County Police Chief Timothy Fitch was one of 15 American officials to participate in counterterrorism training in Israel. Such military transnational connections alongside the linkages of violence toward Brown and black citizens re-generated a historical conversation that has long linked US international policy to domestic racial oppression. But while many Palestinian activists wrote about Ferguson from afar, others spoke from the streets of St. Louis.

This study, therefore, examines the connections activists made between Palestine and Ferguson during the immediate aftermath of Brown’s death in 2014. Literature on the history of militarization in the United States has indicated a growing number of paramilitary units and a normalization of these units into everyday policing. Scholars have defined militarization as the “contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence.” Alongside the proliferation of neoliberal economics since Ronald Reagan’s administration in the 1980s, the growth of the military complex has largely contributed to racial violence against Brown and black communities. Recent scholarship on the prison and military industrial complex has provided insight into these linkages of racial violence in the United States to international practices. Here, the authors analyze how activists linked the specific site of Ferguson to a broader global terrain of racism and militarism.

For this study, the authors primarily draw from the literature that intersects digital media studies with social movement scholarship and transnational collective identity processes. Furthermore, the authors are informed by the scholarship on affective publics to provide insight into the various ways activists developed a collective identity shaped by both physical protest activities and online discourses. In doing so, this study explores how activists employed a multilayered approach that linked the Ferguson Movement to the Palestinian struggle for human rights. To further explore how activists infused a hyper-local movement with discourses that linked racial oppression and militarization to broader transnational political patterns, the authors conducted interviews with 21 locally based activists in St. Louis; additionally, they analyzed the discourse of digital media platforms, including websites created by activists and a small sample of tweets specific to #Ferguson and #Palestine posted during the first three days following Brown’s death.

Paolo Gerbaudo and Emiliano Treré argue that the literature on social movements and digital media has marginalized scholarly analysis of collective identification processes. Emphases on theoretical questions that center technological affordances, organizational structures, and networked societies in scholarship on social movements has largely ignored the processes and discourses of collective identity. As such, this study contributes to the scholarship on collective identity in social movements but also previous research on the Ferguson Movement. This manuscript extends scholarly analyses of the various ways activists in Ferguson strategically employed digital media to challenge mainstream mediated representations and to develop a national campaign against police brutality. Primarily, it moves beyond theoretical frameworks that emphasize strategic decision making...
practices within social movements, and instead underscores the affective linkages that led to the development of a transnational collective identity.

By incorporating interviews with activists, the authors do not solely rely on social media analyses that place technology at the center of such movements. In a movement that was simultaneously transnational and local, actors organized in both physical and online spaces to protest shared experiences of oppression and resistance, shaped by their own hyperlocal geographical histories as well as the transnational linkages of militarization. Below, the article addresses the political and historical connections between Ferguson and Palestine, and explores the literature on transnational collective identity, digital media, and affective publics. Drawing from these bodies of scholarship, the authors discuss two primary themes that emerged from the interviews and analysis of activists’ communicative practices. Findings illustrate how activists employed various forms of digital media to develop a transnational collective identity in St. Louis and abroad. In particular, a feeling of community between black and Palestinian activists was captured and conveyed in two primary ways: (1) in its development of a collective identity that highlighted the shared experiences of racial oppression and militarized violence, and (2) in enacting collective action offline and online to further underscore resistance as a cultural practice.

**Occupation in Palestine and Ferguson**

In June 2014, Israel accused Hamas, a Palestinian militant Islamist group, of kidnapping and murdering three Israeli teenagers. The accusation led to IDF’s culmination of Operation Brother’s Keeper, with the intent to arrest the Hamas members responsible. The Operation resulted in Hamas firing rockets into Israel, signaling the beginnings of what would be the 2014 Gaza War or Israel’s Operation Protective Edge. The 50-day war resulted in 73 Israeli casualties and 2,251 Palestinian causalities, with 65 percent of those Palestinians being civilians. IDF had killed more Palestinians that year than they had since the war in 1967. In addition to those fatalities, 17,000 Palestinians were injured, 20,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed, and up to 500,000 Palestinians were displaced by the war. Between 10,000 and 20,000 Palestinians marched in protest against the war crimes Israel committed against them, armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails. They were met with gunshots and tear gas from IDF. These events set the stage for protesters in St. Louis to link Palestinian oppression with black residents’ struggles against Ferguson’s police force.

The link between Ferguson and Palestine manifested in two primary ways: (1) through a conversation about the militarization of both spaces, including the use of military weaponry against citizens, and (2) the ways in which black and Palestinian communities have been subjected to racialized violence. Military presence, furthermore, in Ferguson reminded some people of the daily presence of IDF in Palestinians’ lives. Israelis can move about freely while Palestinians are forced to wait in long lines before they are granted or denied entry through one of 96 checkpoints in the West Bank. While there was no official checkpoint in Ferguson, many activists and residents perceived a link between “Occupied Ferguson” and Occupied Palestine. At the time of Brown’s murder in 2014, black Americans made up 5.6 percent of the municipality’s police force—in a municipality predominantly made up of black residents.
Once activists began tweeting images of police officers employing tear gas in St. Louis, Palestinian activists immediately recognized these weapons as global military tools of repression. In the initial days of the Ferguson Movement, more than 3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter regarding Brown’s death. By the end of August, #Ferguson appeared more than eight million times. Within the larger Twitter discourse, Palestinian protesters initiated the connection between their experience and that of the protesters in Ferguson. Such discourses illuminated the local racial and class politics of St. Louis. Solidarity messages from Palestinians to Ferguson protesters, for example, began with advice on dealing with tear gas: #Ferguson: Always make sure to run against the wind/to keep calm when you’re teargassed … don’t rub your eyes … The tear gas used against you was probably tested on us first by Israel. Love #Palestine. Offline, Palestinians from St. Louis and around the country joined many of the demonstrations. Members of the national Black Lives Matter movement partnered with Dream Defenders to make their own pilgrimage to the Middle East. The two groups collaborated with other grassroots organizations in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Haifa in an effort to better understand the transnational connections between Palestine and marginalized communities in the United States. While the national Black Lives Matter organization was not necessarily representative of the Ferguson Movement, local activists from St. Louis also traveled to Palestine. Such offline activities became visible online, with activists creating alternative media platforms linking the Palestinian movement for human rights to black Americans’ struggles against a growing militarized police force.

Transnational collective identity, digital media, and affective publics

The literature on social movements has substantially examined collective identity as a concept, with scholars primarily drawing from the work of Alberto Melucci who focused on examining how social movement actors came to develop collective action. Less scholarship has examined the ways digital media have served as integral tools in helping actors generate cohesion and commitment over time. As Paolo Gerbaudo and Emiliano Treré argue, much of that scholarship has not moved beyond resource mobilization and strategic approaches to social media activism. Instead, an approach to studying processes of collective identification “reflects the technological affordances of social media, the cultural values associated with the use and the prevailing forms of social experience in a digital era.” For instance, Anastasia Kavada defines collective identity as an “open-ended and dynamic process that is constructed in conversations and codified in texts.” Here, the author demonstrates how Occupy Wall Street activists—who founded a protest movement in 2011 in Zuccotti Park in New York City’s Wall Street financial district to call attention to the growing class inequities emerging throughout the United States—constituted themselves as actors who spoke in a collective voice inclusive of the 99 percent. Furthermore, as social movements manifest online, collective “we’s” allow activists to make claims for recognition.

Digital media serve as one space in which activists create networks shaped by communicative processes. Media studies and social movement scholarship has substantially documented the ways activists have employed nonmainstream media to develop counterpublic spheres. Within these alternative public spheres, activists look to promote awareness, challenge mainstream media representations, and further cultivate the subjectivities
of marginalized individuals. There has been much scholarly debate, however, regarding the extent to which digital media have actual real-world implications for radical social change. While it is not accurate to suggest that social media, for instance, have radically transformed existing social and political hierarchies, some scholarship has suggested that social media platforms have played key roles “in the process of identity construction.” Online communicative practices, thus, have helped forge new collective identities. But efforts to analyze collective identity must move beyond the “techno-determinist urge to derive the logics of political action from the structure of the medium.” Instead, it becomes crucial to examine how historical and cultural patterns of protest activities, discourse, and emotional factors are at the center of digital media activism.

Indeed, digital media have allowed activists to communicate more effectively, organizing across geographic boundaries at rapid speeds. Thus, the employment of social media has encompassed the logics of networking and aggregation. Whereas the “logic of networks” represents the “practices of communication and coordination across diversity and difference on the part of collective actors,” the logic of aggregation involves the “assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds with physical spaces.” Collective identity then “resides in a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity.” In the case of this article, the Ferguson Movement cultivated a physical and an online presence in which actors generated a new transnational collective identity, one that moved across geographic borders and was based on what they believed were shared experiences.

Stefania Vicari defines transnationalism as the “cross-national diffusion of protest ideas and actions.” This process includes utilizing local strategies to defend human rights, reinterpreting “local issues in transnational contexts,” mobilizing local groups to take on transnational problems, and finally, the cultivation of transnational networks. The Zapatistas movement against neoliberalism in Mexico during the 1990s, for example, exemplified the critical relationship between activism and media. The movement’s employment of digital space encouraged a “cross-cultural dialogue,” which garnered global support and captured visibility within mainstream media; all of which “grew out of the deployment of an international communications medium for a project of local resistance.” Similarly, the Ferguson Movement created an identity that stemmed from the local geographical context of St. Louis, but one that became tied to a larger transnational conversation about racial oppression and police brutality.

Thus, to better understand how activists created a transnational collective identity across physical and digital spaces in St. Louis, it also is important to establish the role of affect in social movement networks. More recent scholarship has refocused conceptual examinations of collective identity around the importance of emotions and affective ties, particularly within digital media activism. Social movements do not transpire spontaneously, but rather out of an emotional response to crisis, particularly those involving marginalized populations. Emotions may influence actors to develop or join new and existing networks that offer alternative visions and opportunities for generating collective struggles. Benski et al. explain that “socially constructed constellations of emotions … often provide participants with a number of emotional gratifications such as solidarity, agency, recognition, meaning, and empowerment derived from their ‘encounter’ with others in similar situations.” The recognition of emotions then evolves into “the materiality of emotion,” where these emotions meet and form a collective identity.
These affective publics then often form out of “bonds of sentiment,” though the concept of affect should not be confused with emotion. Affect produces “feelings of community” without actually creating a community. It can be understood as a “form of preemotive intensity” that may translate into a “particular feeling” or “given emotion.” It is the intensity of particular digital publics that makes them affective. Zizi Papacharissi, thus, argues that affective publics utilize digital media to “tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms” within “mediated interactions.” For instance, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #Gaza are signifiers that are “open to definition, redefinition, and re-appropriation.” Furthermore, social media discourses, such as those on Twitter, can be understood as “structures of feeling,” what Raymond Williams referred to as social experiences reflecting culture, mood and particular historical moments. Much of this recent scholarship on affective publics, however, relies on the examinations of the structures of communicative practices via social media (e.g., the discursive tonalities of Twitter). In the case of #Ferguson, activists convened both in physical and online spaces to actively form a transnational collective identity that drew upon specific local experiences of racialized oppression, militarized violence, and resistance. Triangulating interviews with digital media discourse, this study illustrates ways in which actors perceived and expressed a collective sentiment that tied those hyperlocal experiences to a larger transnational structure. In doing so, activists developed a hyperlocal and transnational collective identity, one that moved beyond simple strategic actions of solidarity; instead, the movement’s communicative discourses conveyed a “particular community of experience” that drew upon their own racialized subjectivities.

Methodology

The current study is informed by a larger exploratory mixed method study of the St. Louis activist community. This current study primarily draws from qualitative data, specifically interviews with community activists and digital media datasets. Because this study seeks to expand beyond previous research that has solely focused on social media, the authors analyzed activists’ varied communication strategies. As such, the analysis focused on interviews and digital media discourse that included historical tweets as well as the production of blogs.

While many activists employed Twitter to report and document the movement from the streets of Ferguson, they also employed various media platforms. For instance, several different advocacy groups from both the United States and the West Bank collaborated to create a YouTube video, “When I see them, I see us,” a poetic rendition of the black and Palestinian struggle against oppression in the United States and Israel. This video featured over 60 artists and activists. The video sought to create “black–Palestinian solidarity” by juxtaposing stories of black and Palestinian testimonies of struggle. Other websites, which activists created to further cultivate solidarity between black Americans and Palestinian communities, included blackforpalestine.com and blackpalestinian-solidarity.com (the original housing site for the video “When I see them, I see us”). Furthermore, social media data consisted of tweets retrieved from August 9, 2014 (the day of Brown’s murder) to August 12, 2014. Hashtags #Ferguson, #MikeBrown and #BlackLivesMatter were used for gathering historical Twitter content. For this particular study, however, the authors analyzed #Ferguson or #MikeBrown, which generated
766,501 tweets during the first three days following Brown’s murder. To narrow this sample further, deduplication was conducted via DiscoverText, which was then proceeded by a keyword search for tweets related to “Palestine.” This search generated 182 posts. The authors, therefore, conducted a textual analysis of this smaller subset of tweets as well as the selected blogs mentioned above.

Additionally, this study draws from 21 semistructured, in-depth interviews that were conducted in St. Louis with local activists. Interviews allowed the researchers to record a first-hand account of their experiences following the murder of Brown. Interviewers asked activists to reflect on their lived experiences in St. Louis, their involvement in the movement, and how they employed media to raise awareness. For the purposes of this study, however, the authors focused only on those interviews that explicitly addressed the Palestinian link. It is important to note that more than 200 community activists were involved in the movement. This study, therefore, does not assume that the experiences of a few activists capture the movement in its totality. It does, however, reveal critical components of the movement that are absent from larger academic and mediated conversations.

Naming an identity: shared experiences of racial oppression and militarization

St. Louis’ unique historical legacy of racism and classism emerged as a consistent theme in interviews with activists. This legacy, furthermore, was often placed into context with other struggles, the Palestinian context serving as one important connection. In the days following Brown’s murder, local activists began a movement that activists sustained well into 2015. One of the transnational ties between activists, thus, manifested in the movement’s protest activities. These activities ranged from online production to organizing in physical space. An analysis of Twitter discourse demonstrated that while #Palestine was not necessarily in the top list of hashtag trends during the immediate aftermath of Brown’s death, the use of hashtags like #gaza, #Iraq, #ISIS, #FreePalestine, and #opferguson in combination with #Ferguson indicated an attempt by some activists to highlight the shared experiences of racial oppression and of living under militarized occupation in St. Louis and Palestine. These hashtag communities formed ad hoc publics, where users digitally convened around a particular theme within the larger movement’s discourse. Arguably, the employment of these hashtags in St. Louis, across the United States, and abroad helped to create a transnational collective identity discursively expressed via Twitter and blogs. These discourses relied on the physical forms of violence occurring against black residents in St. Louis, an experience and feeling that Palestinians understood as well. In drawing on the shared experiences of both geographical contexts, activists created a localized and transnational identity that centered Brown and black lived experiences in the movement.

Jason recalled that the connection between St. Louis and Palestine immediately connected the two “racial movements.” Furthermore, he noted that the “pro-Palestinian” message in Ferguson was a “significant fault line” that also “played itself out through social media.” Indeed, during the early protests that occurred in the immediate aftermath of Brown’s death, many Palestinian activists recognized the weapons used in Ferguson when protesters reportedly said to police: “You gonna shoot us? Is this the Gaza Strip?” Consequently, many local Ferguson protesters began to place their own experiences within an international context. One blog post entitled “Towards Justice: Deepening
Black–Palestinian Solidarity & Global Struggle” featured on the Black for Palestine website includes a speech by freelance journalist Kristian Davis Bailey in 2016:

I have never seen Black solidarity with Palestine as a single-focused issue, but rather a gateway for us to both expand our own sense of the global nature of our struggle … Palestine can be a starting point for future engagement and cross-pollination with other global struggles.49

Here, Bailey highlighted a shared (but not exact) experience that set the stage for enacting solidarity with Palestinian activists. The website also featured a solidarity statement that reflected a sentiment noted by activists, which also appeared online: “Palestinians on Twitter were among the first to provide international support for protesters in Ferguson, where St. Louis-based Palestinians gave support on the ground.”50

Top tweets collected from the meta data of Twitter similarly underscored a hyperlocal, yet transnational, understanding of the movement. As one post put it, “St. Louis cops are Israelis.”51 Another tweet also made the connection between Palestinian and black identities: “that’s how the people Palestine feel everyday.” While these tweets made up a small part of the larger Twitter conversation that emerged during the first three days of the movement, #Palestine and #Ferguson became spaces in which activists could disrupt dominant political narratives that rendered both Palestinian and black individuals as disposable: “Brown bodies are meaningless to those in power. No words, look at their actions in #Ferguson #Palestine #Iraq.” But in developing a space in which some Twitter users could participate in telling an alternative story from mainstream media, they simultaneously suggested that the Palestinian linkage manifested in something that was felt, not simply strategic: “Digging this Palestinian genuine sympathy and support for #Ferguson. They get it more than Obama ever could.” This sentiment was further explored in comments similar to this one: “Reporting on #Ferguson reminds me a lot of the corporate reporting on #Palestine—only people on the ground showing the world the truth.” While such sentiments created an online space that discursively tied Ferguson to Palestine, those expressions did not exist outside of the local contexts that created the conditions in which activists sought to resist. Twitter discourse, then, simultaneously underscored how particular geographical spaces (e.g., Ferguson and Palestine) helped to define the shared lived experiences of Brown and black people. This feeling of oppression in what activists called “ground zero,” therefore, placed Palestine squarely into an identity shaped by Ferguson’s historical legacies of racism and violence.

The widely circulated video “When I see them, I see us”—originally created by founders of the black Palestinian Solidarity website—also sought to demonstrate the shared experiences between black Americans in the United States and Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Excerpts from the script speak directly to these experiences:

Every 28 h a black life is stolen/by police or vigilantes in the US/Every two hours, Israel killed a Palestinian child/in its attack on Gaza last summer/When I see them, I see us/Harassed, beaten, tortured, dehumanized/stopped and frisked/searched at checkpoints

administrative detention/youth incarceration.52

Referenced here are the violent encounters black Americans have experienced from police officers in the United States and the subjugation of Palestinians by IDF. Here, the transition from “I” to “us” indicates an attempt to expand individual experiences into a more collective sentiment. The use of “us” arguably connotes the symbolic feeling of a
community, which in turn serves as a call for collective action. The employment of “check-points,” “administrative detention,” “youth incarceration,” and other examples of systemic racism are also underscored. The employment of “us” as a reference to black and Palestinian activists furthermore juxtaposes their use of “they,” which explicitly ties US state violence against black Americans to IDF’s violent acts against Palestinians: They burned me alive in Jerusalem/they gunned me down in Chicago/they shot our water tanks in Hebron/they cut off our water in Detroit/they demolished our homes in the Naqab/they swallowed our homes in New Orleans. As indicated in this quote, events in the United States and the West Bank do not exactly mirror each other; yet they both reflect a shared experience of various forms of racialized oppression. Activists, thus, sought to define their struggles as related to one another. In validating each other, activists generated an affective public manifested in the hyperlocal experience of racism in Ferguson and in the context of Palestine.

The notion that activists and residents lived under occupation also became a sentiment highlighted among activists and through digital discourse. Malcolm, for instance, noted that Ferguson “looked like a war zone… like Palestine.” In linking the Palestinian struggle to Ferguson’s physical “war zone,” Badr reflected on the ways in which mainstream narratives misrepresented or categorically missed the violence happening in St. Louis: “…I go down there with a ‘Free Gaza’ shirt on… We were getting pepper sprayed and tear gassed and hit with sticks. And you go on the news and it was a completely different story. And everyone was shocked.” In Badr’s reflections, we see how an activist expressed anger and outrage toward the local geographic context of state violence as well as distorted national media narratives. Furthermore, such statements from activists contextualized commentaries that linked violence in St. Louis to Palestine. One post on Twitter, for example, reflected the long history of state violence in Palestine, writing that “every kid in Palestine” was a “#MikeBrown.” In this instance, this post did not solely focus on St. Louis; activists arguably employed such rhetoric to promote awareness and outrage about black and Palestinian struggles for human rights and recognition.

One of the most famous images shared throughout the digital media landscape was a New York Times photo that featured a black male holding his hands up while walking toward riot gear police officers. Officers pointed their military-funded weapons directly at him. One Twitter user reacted to this post: “A @nytimes photo of #Ferguson yesterday. #StraightOuttaPalestine.” Many social media users noted the significance of this image, which further ignited activists’ outrage against state violence in St. Louis. Another user asked: “Where do they get all of those wonderful toys? Militarization of US police has Mid East roots.” Additionally, while deadly military weapons raised serious concerns, others noted that “nonlethal” weapons like tear gas also were “insidious bc they relieve the powerful of the burden of proportion despite damage inflicted #Ferguson #Palestine.” Online posts immediately drew the connection between police abuse in Ferguson and military force in Palestine: “But we must also draw the connection between the disproportional use of force in America and Palestine. #Ferguson #Gaza.” In making this connection, another individual posted their experience in learning about Brown’s death: “Reading #MikeBrown story is just sad/it’s exactly what #Israel is doing in Palestine/killing unarmed civilians can NOT be justified #Ferguson.” Here, the positioning of black Americans and Palestinians as “unarmed civilians” helped further articulate a collective identity founded upon the experience of violence. The killing of young black
Americans paralleled the de-humanization of people outside of the United States: “Every kid in Palestine is a #MikeBrownRest in peace Mike Brown.”

The BlackforPalestine website’s solidarity statement also included observations that placed violence at the heart of the Ferguson and Palestinian connection. In highlighting their support for Palestinian liberation, activists tied IDF to the incarceration of black people in the United States:

Israel’s widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians evokes the mass incarceration of Black people in the US ... And while the US and Israel would continue to oppress us without collaborating with each other, we have witnessed police and soldiers from the countries train side-by-side.\(^{57}\)

This statement employed language that collectively identified both movements as struggles against “US and Israeli officials and media” who “criminalized” the existence of Palestinians and black individuals. Furthermore, in naming the Palestinian struggle as one that fights racism and IDF’s militarized brutality, activists generated a transnational identity that centered the experience of racism and state violence within the movement. Such expressions of solidarity served as “public displays of affect” that relied on the feelings of those impacted by both local and transnational structures.\(^{58}\) These experiences served as one mechanism through which activists developed a transnational collective identity built upon localized contexts. In sharing knowledge about life under occupation, Palestinians and black St. Louisans produced a “feeling of community,” enabling a “mediated relationship” that took on “interconnected forms as they [fed] back each upon the other.”\(^{59}\) It is, however, essential to note that the Ferguson Movement’s identity underscored the hyperlocal context that shaped black residents’ everyday lives in St. Louis; yet, a collective voice that moved outside of St. Louis’ physical boundaries and black communities emerged within the early phases of the movement. The movement’s communicative practices drew upon a collective identity that was centered upon the Palestinian experience with violence. Such expressions moved beyond calls for solidarity; these discourses played central roles in defining the black experience within St. Louis.

**“Resistance culture”: from solidarity to enacting collective action**

Activists’ interactions with digital media became one way in which they not only visualized the local manifestations of violence against activists but also move from statements of solidarity to resistance. The connections linking black and Palestinian activists highlighted the important role that resistance played in the local contexts of Palestine and St. Louis. According to some activists, both communities cultivated and lived within a “resistance culture.”\(^{60}\) Resistance became another way in which activists drew upon the Palestinian context to highlight the shared experiences of both Brown and black communities. Zizi Papacharissi asserts that affective publics “support connective action yet not necessarily collective action.”\(^{61}\) While social media platforms allow individuals to express interests in solidarity with certain political positions, they do not necessarily transform into collective narratives. Yet, this study suggests that activists attempted to enact collective practices both online and offline.

Badr’s recollection of feeling “shock” when viewing mainstream media’s distorted portrayals of Ferguson during the aftermath of Brown’s death catapulted him into becoming a live streamer for the movement: “I was randomly going through my app store and I
found a livestreaming app and I was like no way. Seriously. So, I clicked on it and there it was.” Here, the act of live streaming played a role in making visible the resistance culture of both Palestinian and black residents in St. Louis: “I was like this is gonna be perfect for protests, you know. And then I have an alibi. I’m not a crazy terrorist runnin’ around doin’ this, this, and that.” Live streaming, like social media hashtag networks, then presented opportunities for activists to produce their own stories, on their own terms. Another pro-
tester, Constance further affirmed the ways live streaming captured a geographical context in which nonwhite individuals placed themselves on the frontlines of the movement. Live streaming was then a “powerful tool” that helped to “sustain the movement and resistance.”

Live streaming became a way in which activists helped create more witnesses of the movement. For many activists, witnessing challenged mainstream narratives about the movement and also became tied to the act of resistance: “Heard many times in occupied #Palestine: ‘Even if you can’t change it yet, at least if you’re a witness the world will know.’ #Ferguson.” Local activists, thus, perceived live streaming as a tool that visualized the militarized space of Ferguson in the early days of protests as well as a mechanism through which they could enact collective action. In recalling the important role that live streaming played in allowing people to witness and feel the movement, Badr noted: “you’ve gotta make those protests effective. Which means you have to broadcast it. You have to let people see it.” Here, in seeing the movement, activists could also effectively convey those experiences felt on the ground. Constance noted the importance of witnessing: “We’re bearing witness to the violence of capitalism, of white supremacy, of patriarchy, and seeing the way that these stories are told by the people who were … impacted by it and living it.”

Badr further noted how recording demonstrations became an “alibi” for him. For Badr, live streaming allowed him to “protect people on the front lines” from “misinformation.” According to Badr, there were “a lot of stories that were retracted because of those live streams.” More than any other form of digital media, many activists perceived live streaming as the truth-telling device. Badr described his own “security” crew of activists who would protect him from police:

They would take the arrest before I would because I was the only way information was getting out … It was at that point where we were the only source of information … So, when we kept it going, that’s when the mainstream media came back. When they had another story.”

Noting the affective expression that live streaming captured, Malcolm indicated that live streaming “helped in a way when it’s out of the purity of your heart. So you just live streaming for your life …” For some activists, when live streamers such as Badr risked imprisonment and further suppression from the police force, they enacted resistance. Such forms of resistance then resulted in feelings that only those oppressed and marginalized individuals shared.

Outside of live streaming, some noted other affective forms of resistance that further connected Palestine to Ferguson. As one Twitter user located not too far from St. Louis put it: “maybe #Ferguson should start doing #palestine [sic] and begin throwing rocks.” Badr also offered the throwing of rocks as one form of resistance: “What did Palestinians do, they started throwing rocks. And then, what are they gonna do then? There are people throwin’ rocks … They’re gonna run!” Further noting the various politics that took place
within the movement, Badr placed this conversation about resistance in Palestine within the historical debate about protesters’ tactics:

If they’re not gonna let us do our thing then, and get our message across then, we’re gonna have to resolve to different methods and those methods might not be orthodox for other people that don’t even wanna think about doin’ [that] but at the same time, you got no choice. 66

A similar sentiment appeared on Twitter: “if it’s been made plain you have no seat at the table after 67, even 500 yrs, you can’t really be expected to make nice #Palestine #Ferguson.” As both a real and imaginary form of resistance, Palestine signified a departure from traditional US-based protest politics. The infusion of a Palestinian identity helped to shape an alternative discourse of resistance, which was captured in both online and offline spaces.

While the act of resistance became another way in which activists formed a transnational collective identity, the movement was especially careful not to encourage activists to collapse St. Louis with Palestine. Furthermore, the movement’s transnational permeations were not necessarily uncontested. For instance, the Black Palestinian Solidarity website cautioned against transforming the discourse of shared experience and resistance into one that collapsed St. Louis and Palestinian activists into a universal category: Organically, an analysis emerged highlighting similarities, but not sameness, of black and Palestinian life, and more aptly, of their survival. 67 Furthermore, some activists strategically bridged these forms of oppression, arguing that there would be no “Palestinian liberation without Blacks being liberated here first.” 68 But Audrey argued that one experience could not be separated from others. 69 For instance, a local event held in March 2015—which the Missouri History Museum hosted but then canceled—attempted to highlight the connection between Ferguson, Ayotzinapa (the Mexican town from which 43 students had disappeared in 2014) and Palestine. Audrey recalled how activists redefined the now popular phrase that re-emerged after the disappearances in Mexico: “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.” Here, Audrey noted the challenges activists faced when making these connections:

I think that what we notice—like when we did the Ayotzinapa to Palestine to Ferguson people were really freaked out by that because we were starting to knit together those connections. Really there’s more of us than there are of the power brokers. Once we all recognize that it really is the same struggle and stop fighting within, it’ll be on and they know it.70

Here, Audrey highlights not just the strategic purposes of underscoring these transnational connections in Ferguson, but her point also underscores the danger of collective action, and underscores a contention within and outside of the movement. For Audrey, a transition from individual to collective politics met opposition precisely because it would heighten the power of a transnational identity founded upon the very act of resistance.

Malcolm noted these contentions as well. One of the first people Malcolm saw actively protesting online was a prominent Palestinian activist in the St. Louis community: “He had hundreds of thousands, a million, views. A million people around the world watching a Palestinian dude live stream the black struggle.” 71 Here, Malcolm noted that from his perspective the solidarity felt between Black Lives Matter’s national voices and Palestinian activists came after Ferguson: “if you lived in Ferguson at that time, it was instant with the
Palestinian struggle.” Narratives that highlighted the shared experience of racialized oppression arguably shaped this immediacy that Malcolm noted.

The immediate collective sentiment that activists felt during the early stages of the movement was, therefore, grounded not just online but also on the streets of Ferguson. As such, activists attempted to ensure that their participation did not remain “in the air” as Malcolm described. The Black for Palestine website furthered this call by reforming the solidarity movement from one of symbolic unity to tangible action: “We are working on the ground together as evidenced by our common campaign against G4S, a company that provides technologies for ever-growing prisons in the United States and Palestine.” The statement exemplified the movement’s efforts to move beyond expressions of solidarity.

The Black for Palestine blog demonstrates the ways in which this relationship blossomed following the events of 2014. A press release published on the blog’s post on August 20, 2015 documents the pilgrimage that Ferguson activists made to Palestine as well as one made by a delegation of Palestinian students to visit “Black organizers in St. Louis, Detroit, and Florida among other locations.” One post on Twitter indicated what many black American activists have dared to imagine in the many decades of living in the United States: “#JohnCrawford #MikeBrown #EricGarner I’m not proud to live here never really was #PrayForPalestine.” The pilgrimage to the “West Bank” allowed Ferguson activists to “see how [they] live.” Arguably, the pilgrimage also offered activists an opportunity to feel and identify with the Palestinian experience and struggle for human rights. Two events occurring in two separate geographic spaces thousands of miles apart underscored how a hyperlocal movement generated a collective identity, as activists sought “to integrate [their] work around Palestine into the global and domestic struggles for black liberation and human emancipation.”

Conclusion

This study’s findings demonstrate how activists employed various forms of digital media to capture and convey a feeling of community among black and Palestinian activists both in St. Louis and abroad. In particular, this hyperlocal and transnational feeling was defined in two primary ways: (1) in its development of a collective identity that highlighted the shared experiences of racial oppression and militarized violence; and (2) in enacting collective action offline and online, and in underscoring resistance as cultural practice. While it is important to note that the authors do not label the platform of Twitter itself as an alternative medium, this study nevertheless illustrates how activists employed it and other forms of digital media to create an affective public centered on the hyperlocal contexts that shaped their experiences both in St. Louis and Palestine. An analysis of the movement’s discursive practices and interviews with local activists, therefore, revealed how the movement affectively conveyed its transnational linkages. As Jodi Dean writes, the “flow of tweets transmits what exceeds any specific tweet, that is, a broader, less tangible, more general mood.” Furthermore, in the literature on collective identity, scholarship has indicated that the “materiality of social media deeply affects identity building” by heightening the “interactive and shared elements of collective identity.” While the current study did not solely focus on social media practices, it extends previous research by demonstrating how activists varied their discursive strategies to develop an identity
founded upon a collective understanding that positioned particular shared elements of experiences at the center of the movement.

In generating a transnational collective identity that sought to promote outrage about state violence in Ferguson and Palestine, and subsequently call for action against both the United States and Israel, activists developed a “community of feeling” that was not only imagined but felt within the physical spaces of Ferguson and Palestine. Activists did not generate a collective voice that solely existed online; as their communicative practices named a transnational identity centered on the shared experiences of violence, they also attempted to enact collective action. In fact, the emphasis on resistance as a form of cultural practice further highlighted the ways in which Ferguson was tied to Palestine. Live streaming, for instance, became a form of resistance in live, a way in which activists physically and digitally fought against state violence. Furthermore, the act of live streaming became a way to visualize the movement’s collective identity, and thus allowed witnesses to simultaneously see and feel the conditions in which activists resisted. In connecting the literature on collective identity and affect, the authors argue that activists in the Ferguson Movement did not solely seek to generate solidarity simply for strategic purposes; instead, while it was inevitably contested at times, activists sought to define the movement specifically through the felt experiences of being Palestinian and black. Arguably, violence and resistance constituted part of the movement’s identity. As Natalie Fenton suggests, “doing radical politics, then, involves a process of becoming but of never arriving.”

Here, this study focused on how activists’ mediated activities helped to construct this cultural process of becoming, thus emphasizing the affective means through which the movement formed.

What both themes illustrate is how activists employed Twitter, live streaming, and other communicative practices to create a collective identity that moved beyond strategic statements of solidarity. Instead, calls for solidarity and action relied upon a feeling that was understood by Palestinian and black activists, one shaped by their lived experiences of racial oppression and militarized violence, and in their cultural practices of resistance. Fenton argues that scholars often separate “being political” from “the politics of being.”

The “politics of being,” which focuses more on the “subjective, affective and irrational dimensions of the political,” is what is at the heart of this study. Activists are political because of an affective response to dominant structures that impact their lived experiences. As such, this study goes beyond previous literature that focuses primarily on the affective dimensions of social media movements that may act as ad hoc publics to illuminate formations of digitized communities. Instead, a triangulation of interviews with digital media discourse analysis highlights the “politics of being,” in a way that underscores the activities “that confer identity through practice and display.” Such findings also extend previous literature on the various social movements that emerged out of the North African and Middle East regions in 2010. Scholars have highlighted the limitations of scholarly analyses that solely examine activism through digital media communicative practices. By placing certain technologies at the center of the “revolution,” scholars have missed the larger political contexts in which activists find themselves and the varied ways they resist.

Because this study focused on two specific communities, further research that expands upon the cultural and emotional elements of global and transnational social movements is needed. In taking a more global approach to activist communities living under
occupation, future research could further broaden the analysis of affect in creating Western and non-Western transnational networks. Furthermore, since this study only focused on the first three days of Twitter in the aftermath of Brown’s death, future research questions should include a more comprehensive analysis that would follow the affective expressions of the movement’s solidarity networks. Additionally, while a substantial body of work has addressed the transnational components of movements like Occupy, less have addressed contemporary global relationships between state violence, militarization, the processes of criminalization, and racial oppression (and as it is intersected with class). Further investigation would provide insight into both the communicative practices of social movements as well as the actual politics that activists continue to resist. Finally, to expand upon the literature on social movements, identity and media, examinations of the dialectics of violence and resistance as cultural elements of identity would provide further scholarly insight.

Notes

13. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
22. Gerbaudo and Treré, “In Search of the ‘We’ of Social Media Activism,” 867.
27. Gerbaudo and Treré, “In Search of the ‘We’ of Social Media Activism,” 865.
30. Ibid.
32. Vicari, “Networks of Contention.”
34. Ibid.
37. Benski et. al., “From the Streets and Squares to Social Movement Studies,” 546.
41. Ibid., 2.
42. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 36.
47. Jason, personal communication with authors, St. Louis, February 26, 2016.
51. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, we have kept tweets anonymous to protect the authors.
54. Malcolm, personal communication with authors, St. Louis, October 7, 2016.
55. Badr, personal communication with authors, St. Louis, October 7, 2017.
57. “2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine”
60. Badr, personal communication.
62. Constance, personal communication with authors, St. Louis, December 19, 2016.
63. Badr, personal communication.
64. Ibid.
65. Malcolm, personal communication.
66. Badr, personal communication.
68. Badr, personal communication.
69. Audrey, personal communication with authors, St. Louis, May 26, 2016.
70. Ibid.
71. Malcolm, personal communication.
72. Ibid.
73. Malcolm, personal communication.
76. Badr, personal communication.
81. Ibid., 130.
82. Ibid.
83. Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess, “The Use of Twitter Hashtags.”
84. Ibid., 134.
86. Cristina Mislan and Amalia Dache-Gerbino, “Not a Twitter Revolution.”