

REVIEW ESSAY

The Boundaries of Twenty-first-Century Policing

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CHENG, TONY. *The Policing Machine: Enforcement, Endorsements, and the Illusion of Public Input*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024

PHELPS, MICHELLE. *The Minneapolis Reckoning: Race, Violence, and the Politics of Policing in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024

SIERRA-ARÉVALO, MICHAEL. *The Danger Imperative: Violence, Death, and the Soul of Policing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024

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Abstract

Three new books by sociologists—*The Policing Machine* by Tony Cheng, *The Minneapolis Reckoning* by Michelle Phelps, and *The Danger Imperative* by Michael Sierra-Arévalo—offer us a view into the state of US policing leading up to and following the racial reckoning of 2020. I read these books together through the lens of boundary work, examining what they tell us about the various projects that seek to maintain, expand, or change police jurisdiction over the production of public safety. Collectively, these books suggest that the police work to preserve and extend their extant role and power. Meanwhile, boundary work through movement mobilization and political systems has aimed to contain policing through law and policy, shrink policing within municipal service systems, and replace policing through community-led models of safety. These projects point us toward important areas of inquiry in efforts to understand whether and how policing can change.

Introduction

During the summer of 2020, the United States saw historic mobilization around the problems of policing. The murder of George Floyd sparked a national reckoning over

The author thanks the authors of the books under review for sharing their important work.

the endurance of anti-Blackness within America's institutions and psyche. Policing, which has long been an emblematic site of state-sanctioned racial violence, received a renewed wave of attention. Calls for police transformation and abolition gained mainstream traction. Abolitionist scholars and organizers argued that racism and violence are endemic to policing, and decades of reform efforts have failed to fundamentally change this reality (Kaba 2020; Vitale 2021). Rather than battling for better training, accountability structures, or community policing, abolitionists held that the key to reducing the racialized harms of policing was to shrink the footprint of the police in communities, while bolstering the capacity of other life-affirming institutions to serve the public (Bell, Beckett, and Stuart 2021; Phelps, Ward, and Frazier 2021). These arguments have widened debates over public safety by troubling the assumption that the work of community protection falls primarily to the police. Organizers, academics, elected officials, and many others have since engaged in ongoing discussions over the future of policing, turning a critical lens on what the institution is and asking what it should be going forward.

Building on insights from the sociology of professions, I frame these debates as struggles over the boundaries of policing—or “sites of difference”—that demarcate a space of work for the police in relation to the public and to other professions (Abbott 1995, 862). Professions and professionals seek to distinguish themselves from laypeople and construct a market for their expertise, often through mechanisms of social closure (Sarfatti-Larson 1979; Weeden 2002). They also aim to establish jurisdiction over social space, competing and cooperating within a broader system of professions (Abbott 1988). Applying these insights to policing, we can examine boundary work or the processes that aim to demarcate jurisdiction and garner resources (Gieryn 1983; Liu 2018). Boundary work includes efforts from within and beyond policing to establish a professional realm and expertise, distinguish police from other actors who may also assert a role in the production of public safety, and negotiate relations with the public. The boundaries of policing have always been in flux. The police have broadened and narrowed their mandate, claiming jurisdiction over crime control and law enforcement at some times and the ability to solve a wide array of community problems at others. They have also brightened boundaries between officers and laypeople through professionalization and blurred them by forging close ties with neighborhood residents. Where do the boundaries of policing stand today?

Three new books by sociologists offer us a nuanced view into the state of contemporary policing. Below, I begin by providing an overview of what these books tell us about the boundaries of policing: what lies within them, how they endure, and whether they can change. Reading across these important texts, we see that the boundaries of policing are relatively durable, though not entirely immutable. Moreover, these books illuminate processes of boundary work from both within and beyond policing. Reading each in dialogue with other scholarship suggests that, as we consider the future of public safety, we are unlikely to find opportunities for fundamental shifts from within policing, including through popular innovations like community policing. Instead, the police generally work to maintain, if not expand, their professional boundaries. Opportunities to shift the boundaries of policing are more likely to be realized externally, through movement mobilization and politics. Boundary work unfolds in efforts to contain policing through law and policy, shrink policing within the urban service system of municipal governments, and replace policing through community-led models of safety. While these external projects of

boundary work face political barriers, they point us toward important areas of inquiry as we seek to understand whether and how policing can change.

The Boundaries of Twenty-First-Century Policing

The symbolic boundaries of policing take an evocative physical form in one of the three research sites featured in Michael Sierra-Arévalo's (2024) book *The Danger Imperative: Violence, Death, and the Soul of Policing*. In Elmont, the glass doors leading into the police academy bear an inscription that reads, in part: "[T]he police at all times should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police" (29). Yet this ethos of police as community ends at the door. Crossing the threshold, one enters a space inundated with military imagery and combat analogies, where the core lesson is "neither compassion nor service—it is survival" (30). Sierra-Arévalo takes us within the boundaries of contemporary policing and shows us a world structured by "the danger imperative," a cultural frame preoccupied with violence, danger, and officer safety. His analysis of police occupational culture is based on over one thousand hours of ethnographic observation and interviews with police that were conducted amid the emergent narrative of a "war on cops." Sierra-Arévalo looks across three urban police departments in the United States—Elmont in the Northeast, West River in the West, and Sunshine in the Southwest—with a focus on throughlines versus variation. He finds a paradox: despite the quotidian nature of routine patrol work and historically low rates of officer mortality, the danger imperative endures as the soul of policing—its "ethos of action" and "governing institutional frame" (9). Sierra-Arévalo goes on to detail how the danger imperative is reproduced through organizational- and individual-level practices and how it generates harms that disproportionately accrue in the structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods where policing concentrates. He argues that the danger imperative is no accident; it finds constant reinforcement within the institutional structures and daily practices of the police.

For those hoping that community policing might transform the profession or the relations between the police and the public, *The Policing Machine: Enforcement, Endorsements, and the Illusion of Public Input* by Tony Cheng (2024) offers a sobering corrective. Cheng centers an important caution: police-community relations are not a mechanism of institutional change; they are strategically deployed by police departments to resist change and reinscribe police power. Cheng illustrates through a study of the New York Police Department's (NYPD) Neighborhood Policing program in two Brooklyn police precincts, combining eighteen months of fieldwork with creative analyses of public materials, social media posts, and other sources. He finds that the police resist transformation through the policing machine, "a political organizational behavior" in which "police cultivate political capital through a strategic politics of distribution—the discretionary distribution of public resources and regulatory leniency toward constituents, alongside coercive force against alternative voices" (7). The policing machine empowers segments of the "community" that support the scope and services of the police, and it limits the capacity of groups calling for police accountability and the redistribution of state power in light of violent and race-based policing. The police accomplish this by sorting public input into different channels and then differentially distributing resources and coercion through them. They reap

the benefits in the form of public endorsements framed as demand for more police presence and formal law enforcement. The policing machine offers a framework for understanding how police engage in maintaining the boundaries of the profession.

Given the violence at the heart of policing and the inability of popular reforms to change its fundamental nature, some have turned to contesting the boundaries of policing. Michelle Phelps (2024) bring us into the recent epicenter of the crises of racism and state violence and the ensuing calls for police transformation and abolition in *The Minneapolis Reckoning: Race, Violence, and the Politics of Policing in America*. The book opens with the murder of George Floyd, which sparked the summer of racial reckoning in 2020. In this midst, nine members of the city council declared their intention to “begin the process of ending the Minneapolis Police Department and creating a new transformative model for cultivating safety in Minneapolis” (x). Phelps traces the pathways to this promise and offers an illuminating account of what has happened since. She shows how contestations over policing swirled around the fraught role of officers in Black communities, where the police represent the “threat of state violence” and the “promise of state protection” simultaneously (5; emphasis in original). Prospects for change were shaped by the “politics of policing,” which included the local political system and its dynamic contestations between the mayor, city councilmembers, movement actors, the police union, voters, and other stakeholders as well as a broader web of local, state, and federal laws, regulations, and policies that enable and hinder police accountability. In Minneapolis, efforts to fundamentally reconfigure the field of public safety through political contests eventually floundered.

Yet, while each of these books offer insights into the durability of policing, they also point to change at the boundaries. Phelps describes three alternative programs that emerged in Minneapolis: violence interruption groups, behavioral crisis response teams, and a radical emergency hotline founded by an abolitionist collective. These alternatives raise new questions about coercion and accountability, but they also “hold the potential to loosen the MPD’s stranglehold on city politics—opening up more space for radical imagination” (Phelps 2024, 17). In New York, Cheng shows how neighborhood residents resist the policing machine by pursuing services from nonpolice providers and by forming nonstate protective services like cop-watch groups. These alternative models of service provision and emergency response, and others like them, decenter the assumption that the police have the singular expertise and jurisdiction over the control of violence, and they broaden the field of actors and processes involved in the production of public safety. Sierra-Arévalo (2024, 241) encourages us to draw from the insights of police abolitionists as we consider the scope of policing going forward: “The vision of a future in which communities are so well resourced, healthy, and safe that police are no longer required provides space to interrogate a policing apparatus that has become the *de rigeur* solution for a host of social problems that police are neither well equipped nor especially rewarded for addressing.” In the face of many dynamics that serve to maintain policing, both on-the-ground practices and acts of radical imagination are chipping away at the boundaries.

Individually and together, the Cheng, Phelps, and Sierra-Arévalo volumes offer several important insights into the state of contemporary policing. First, within the boundaries of policing, jurisdiction and expertise remain firmly rooted in the capacity

for violence. The danger imperative finds constant reinforcement in the institutional logics and practices of the police. Second, the boundaries of policing are relatively durable, though not entirely immutable. Important alternative visions of community care and safety have gained traction, even as popular internal reforms like community policing reinscribe police power, and radical movements for police transformation come up against varied types of political resistance. Third, boundary work that seeks to shape policing and negotiate the meaning of public safety occurs in multiple arenas: the police themselves make claims to jurisdiction, community groups attempt to garner public resources, social movement actors call for alternatives, elected officials determine police funding, and more. In the remainder of this review essay, I draw on these books, in dialogue with other research, to explore whether and how policing might change through boundary work within policing and through politics and mobilization.

Boundary Maintenance Within Policing

The policing profession does have the capacity to change from within; its scope and mandate have expanded and contracted at various points in time, and the relations between the police and the public brighten and blur. These changes are often prompted by acute crises of legitimacy, followed by periods of internal reform led by police executives (Walker 1977; Wadman and Allison 2004). However, internal reform does not always promise a remedy to the problems of policing. Indeed, reform processes have resulted in new techniques of racialized social control, such as when the police professionalization movement incorporated materials, methods, and logics derived directly from what Julian Go (2020, 1200) terms the US “military-imperial regime”—the coercive practices that facilitated conquest and rule over Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and other US colonies around the turn of the twentieth century (see also Go 2024). Investigating boundary work within policing asks what lies at the profession’s core and whether it can truly be internally reconceptualized. It also asks how police agencies and officers make claims to resources and jurisdiction by defining the nature of work. *The Danger Imperative* and *The Policing Machine* offer recent answers to these questions, and neither book gives an optimistic account. Sierra-Arévalo (2024) describes the myriad institutional structures and practices that reproduce a police occupational culture centered on violence, while Cheng (2024) shows the limitations of projects to transform policing through the relations between police and the community. Together, these books give us powerful insights into boundary maintenance—practices within police departments that operate to preserve, if not expand, the mandate and power of the police.

The Ongoing Production of the Soul of Policing

The Danger Imperative builds upon a long tradition of ethnographic scholarship documenting the internal worlds of police departments and officers. Early investigations unveiled common characteristics of “police occupational culture” and the “working personality” of officers. They found that officers valorize crime fighting and draw on simplistic moral distinctions that differentiate between “good”

guys and “bad” guys. They seek excitement and are ready to use force. Their perspectives and practices are informed by suspiciousness, insularity, cynicism, masculinity, and conservatism (Banton 1964; Skolnick 1966; Bittner 1970; Westley 1970). Attributes of police culture are reflected within specific police archetypes. Citing the work of Steve Herbert (2001), William Muir (1977), and Seth Stoughton (2016), Sierra-Arévalo (2024, 10) describes the “hard charger” focused on the pursuit of dangerous criminals, the “enforcer” ready to use violence, “especially when it is against a ‘them’ that threatens the moral ‘us,’” and the “warrior” trained to view members of the public as threats in need of suppression.

Recently, this warrior archetype has received widespread attention in discussions of police reform. Research has documented the harms of the warrior mentality, including officers’ quick reliance on violence and racialized construction of “enemies” (Stoughton 2014; Carlson 2020; Simon 2023),¹ and reform proposals advocate for shifting police culture to a guardian mindset rooted in an ethos of public service and protection (President’s Task Force on Twenty-first-Century Policing 2015; Rahr and Rice 2015). While these characterizations of occupational culture and archetypes have offered valuable insights into the internal dynamics of policing, Sierra-Arévalo (2024) argues that work has been limited by static conceptualizations of culture and an overemphasis on police training that downplays the ways in which police culture is agentically reproduced throughout officers’ careers.

Hence, Sierra-Arévalo (2024) analyzes organizational and individual practices that *actively* recreate the danger imperative *across* the spaces that officers navigate. Organizationally, socialization into the danger imperative begins in the police academy where recruits learn the “warrior” mindset. Instructors show videos of sudden and gruesome attacks on officers, while reality-based trainings and virtual simulations emphasize the risk that an encounter can turn deadly at any moment. Recruits are taught to use force under physical and emotional duress and to justify their decisions in relation to law and policy. Reminders of violence persist long after the academy. Police departments house varied artifacts that pay tribute to fallen officers—from memorial walls and the personal effects of the deceased to “thin blue line” bracelets and tattoos. While artifacts highlight the gravest consequences of danger, routine operations within police departments reinforce the perception that violence is omnipresent. “Danger signals” like gang territory maps and photos of recovered firearms hang on police station walls. Roll calls routinely disseminate hot sheets and officer safety bulletins that compile the most violent incidents from prior shifts and other departments. State-level fusion centers transmit warnings from jurisdictions near and far. Collectively, these myriad practices reinforce the danger imperative at every turn. Moreover, they cohere a unifying occupational culture that transcends jurisdictions. The “soul” of policing binds officers through a singular narrative of violence that bridges space and time, linking officers to each other and to a sense of shared fate.

¹ Samantha Simon’s (2024) book *Before the Badge*, which offers an important account of how violence is systematically cultivated through selection and training in police academies, was published after this review essay was in the production process. Its contributions and connections to Sierra-Arévalo’s work merit future exploration.

Sierra-Arévalo (2024) goes on to detail the harmful and racialized consequences that result as police filter their perceptions through the danger imperative on the street. Officers use their “tactical imagination” to cognitively prepare for the most catastrophic versions of a situation. Attuned to indicators of potential violence amid conditions of uncertainty, they are more likely to use coercion on those who need care. To illustrate, Sierra-Arévalo provides harrowing accounts of police pepper spraying someone amid a mental health crisis, chasing and tasing a man with autism after mistaking him for a suspect, and drawing guns on a car with children in the backseat. Beyond these overt cases of force, the danger imperative’s mandate to establish authoritative control through “command presence” can lead to disrespectful and aggressive treatment of civilians, whether or not they are suspects.

Ultimately, the danger imperative can subvert constitutional policing as officers’ perceptions of omnipresent threat corrupt the legal standard of “reasonableness.” This was the case when Sierra-Arévalo observed an Elmont police officer covertly aim his gun at a group of Latino boys from within his squad car during a “consensual encounter.” As this example suggests, the harms of the danger imperative are not evenly distributed. The danger imperative is ostensibly colorblind, operating without reference to race. Yet officers’ work environments are saturated with signals that reproduce long-standing racialized constructions of threat, like the dozens of mugshots of Black and Latino men lining a wall of a precinct station in West River, and policing will generate racial disparities as long as activities concentrate in structurally disadvantaged communities shaped by legacies of racism across many institutional domains.

Despite these consequences, Sierra-Arévalo (2024, 228) argues, this is “policing working as intended.” By unveiling the connections between the worldviews of officers and enduring structures and practices within the institution of policing, *The Danger Imperative* shows that violent and inequitable outcomes are not aberrant. To mitigate the most egregious harms of the danger imperative, Sierra-Arévalo advocates for enhanced state and local oversight of police academy curricula to remove warrior-style, fear-based trainings. But he also concludes that “history provides ample fodder for skepticism about the long-term viability of police reform” (238). Sierra-Arévalo’s analysis of the danger imperative sets forth an account of rigid professional boundaries that define an enduring core—policing “is, was, and will remain an institution centered around violence” (241). From this perspective, there is little reason to expect fundamental changes to come from within.

The Maintenance of Police Power through Community Policing

Yet many remain hopeful that policing can move toward an ethos of guardianship. This hope is reflected in the enduring popularity of community policing, which has been embraced by police leaders for decades. More a paradigm than a program, community policing is broadly defined as “collaboration between the police and the community that identifies and solves community problems” (Bureau of Justice Assistance 1994, vii). Community policing aims to deconstruct the rigid boundary between officers and the public by forging new flows of information and enhancing police responsiveness to community concerns. In the process, it has the potential to shift the means and ends of policing away from the suppression of crime through

violence and toward the prevention of wide-ranging public safety problems (Cordner 1997; Skogan and Hartnett 1999). Evaluations of community policing initiatives have shown their benefits—they increase citizens' satisfaction, trust, and perceptions of police legitimacy, along with officers' job satisfaction and perceived significance of work (Wycoff and Skogan 1994; Gill et al. 2014). Community policing programs promise to reduce the social distance between civilians and officers, with the goal of enhancing the ability of the police to address local problems.

But past research has also revealed limitations. Even as a majority of police departments enshrine community policing in their mission statements (Reaves 2015), many face implementation challenges including resource constraints and resistance from officers (Mastrofski, Willis, and Kochel 2007). Beyond the problems of implementation, scholars have problematized the paradigm's underlying assumptions and its practical effects. Based on research in Seattle, Steve Herbert (2006) argues that the "communities" envisioned as collaborators in community policing efforts struggle to realize the collective organization, representation, and political responsibility required to effect change; many neighborhood residents lack the capacity to participate in ongoing projects, and those that do soon encounter unresponsive state bureaucracies. Moreover, aspects of police occupational culture—like claimed expertise over crime fighting and differentiation from ordinary citizens—work against the ideals of shared governance. Luis Daniel Gascón and Aaron Roussell (2019) find that community policing in South Los Angeles ultimately expands state power: the police recenter crime control in defining policeable problems, limit civilian agency through the strategic negotiation of partnerships, and reinforce racial and ethnic tensions within neighborhoods.

The Policing Machine adds to these accounts a compelling analysis of how the NYPD's Neighborhood Policing program is implicated in broader institutional efforts to resist change. Central to Cheng's framework is an understanding that the police aim to optimize—not maximize—their legitimacy. The police need public support, particularly following moments of crisis, but accountability to the public cannot come at the expense of organizational independence. Rather than ceding control to external stakeholders, "police seek to develop trustworthy relationships with only the subset of the public *needed* to maintain independent decision-making over departmental operations" (Cheng 2024, 11; emphasis in original). To optimize legitimacy, the police create relationships of patronage and act as political mobilizers: "local entrepreneurs who seek to cultivate constituents by solving local community issues with their organizational capacity" (14). The police use political capital to maintain their social space of work within a broader urban political system.

One aspect of boundary work involves strategically curating public input. In NYPD-controlled department channels—like Build the Block meetings associated with Neighborhood Policing—police control which complaints get recognized and amplified. In an innovative illustration, Cheng traces the trajectory of nearly 300 resident-voiced complaints observed across forty Build the Block meetings. He finds that only a fraction make it into the police department's organizational records; complaints are selectively recorded during meetings, encoded into departmental forms, and reported to the public on Twitter. In this process of curation, officers choose, advance, and frame neighborhood problems as best addressed through the expansion of police presence and law enforcement. A concern about package thefts

gets recorded as a pattern of larcenies, authorizing police to conduct patrols inside and around the building. Officers respond to complaints about loud motorcycles by promising additional arrests, even when residents ask for non-enforcement alternatives. In short, department channels provide opportunities for police to transform public complaints about policing into demands for *more* policing (Cheng 2024, 36).

Beyond managing complaints, the policing machine shapes the landscape of community groups to enhance the capacity of those that call for more police presence and enforcement and to quiet those advocating for police accountability and transformation. The police actively cultivate constituents through partner channels like clergy councils and community councils—precinct-level civilian entities charged with managing community problems and providing public input into policing. Police provide partner channel organizations with direct assistance and resources including meeting spaces, transportation, volunteers for events, and enhanced access to services. They also offer regulatory leniency when these groups hold public gatherings, bypassing requirements for permits and facilitating an event's smooth execution. The policing machine later reaps the benefits of these exchanges by inducing endorsements, as when the police commissioner asked the president of the 80th Precinct's Community Council to publicly defend stop and frisk in 2012. These resources ensure the organizational survival of pro-police groups, which are used to populate department channels and cultivate political capital within the "community."

Meanwhile, those advocating for police accountability find their claims excluded or ignored in NYPD and partner channels; they turn to independent channels to advocate for police transformation. Groups in independent channels must garner their own organizational resources, and they experience aggressive regulation and coercive force when holding events. Cheng focuses on a coalition of two hundred neighborhood groups mobilizing against police violence that he calls RALLY (Reforms Advancing Long Lives for Our Youth). At RALLY events, marked squad cars and officers in uniform surround participants, and officers carry zip ties in preparation for arrests. When planning events, organizers face the dilemma of paying the police for sound permits versus forgoing the permit and risking police shutting down the event. As the police deploy coercive force through independent channels, they stifle resistance and create barriers for groups advocating for police accountability and change.

The consequences of the policing machine are manifold. At the local level, the policing machine enables the police to realign accountability away from democratically accountable institutions and officials—like the mayor and city councils who have the power to appoint police chiefs and determine police budgets—and toward a "community" that has been strategically crafted to support and endorse the work of the police. The policing machine also blurs the boundaries between the police and community groups, enabling the diffusion of state power in the form of influence over sites of informal social control. Reading these effects through the lens of boundary work, we can see the myriad organizational logics and practices that reinscribe the current mandate of the policing. Cheng shows how the policing machine selectively blurs and brightens the boundaries between the police and neighborhood residents in service of reifying the professional core that lies within.

The police continue to claim a crime control and law enforcement mandate, and they garner resources of community support and partnerships that expand their reach.

Through these insights, *The Policing Machine* adds to critical accounts of community policing that interrogate the paradigm's transformative potential (Herbert 2006; Gascón and Roussel 2019). Cheng (2024, 193) suggests that opportunities for change instead lie in de-monopolizing police control over "public safety resources, information, and authority." This is a project of boundary work as well, though one that is undertaken outside the arena of policing. In the next section, I turn to leverage points and limitations in efforts to change policing through mobilization within and beyond the political system.

Boundary Shifting Through Politics and Mobilization

Movement and political actors also engage in boundary work, defining the nature and scope of policing through law, policy, politics, and alternative practices. These efforts have long been a part of Black freedom struggles, which have engaged with legal and political systems to challenge racial state violence, while at other times working outside of the state to cultivate community-based resources (Morris 1999; Joseph 2007; Francis and Wright-Rigueur 2021). In this section, I draw on *The Minneapolis Reckoning* as a critical case study that provides timely insights into the capacity for change through "the politics of policing." Events in Minneapolis reflected the fraught role of the police in Black communities, where officers represent the "threat of state violence" and the "promise of state protection" simultaneously (Phelps 2024, 5; emphasis in original). The racial reckoning of 2020 amplified divergent approaches to reigning in the violence of policing. While some groups advanced long-standing efforts to enhance police accountability, others built on a burgeoning movement for police abolition. *The Minneapolis Reckoning* explores how these varied projects intersected with myriad other interests in the arena of politics. In doing so, Phelps's account highlights the limits and possibilities of mobilization focused on several leverage points: the legal and policy infrastructure of police accountability, the local political system of the city, and models of safety beyond the state.

The Minneapolis Reckoning builds on a tradition of important scholarship that theorizes the crisis of policing in race-class subjugated communities (for reviews, see Soss and Weaver 2017; Kramer and Remster 2022). In marginalized neighborhoods, patterns of over-policing and underprotection, alongside personal and vicarious experiences of police mistreatment, cultivate "legal estrangement"—an orientation of collective alienation from the law and its enforcers that flows from conditions of symbolic and structural exclusion (Bell 2017). At the same time, many residents of race-class subjugated neighborhoods express desires for an "aspirational vision of policing" where the state realizes the duty to protect and serve (Meares and Prowse 2021, 5). In a chapter co-authored with Amber Joy Powel and Christopher E. Robertson, Phelps documents the persistence of this dynamic in the Minneapolis neighborhoods most impacted by policing. Drawing on 112 interviews with residents of the city's predominantly Black Northside, the authors find a "beleaguered and resigned ambivalence" toward the police (Phelps 2024, 92). Black respondents described avoiding and fearing the police based on their own experiences of dismissive, aggressive, or discriminatory encounters, alongside the

specter of lethal police violence in Minneapolis and beyond. Yet Northside residents also navigated the realities of community violence, and some concluded that they need the police for protection, even as helpful and responsive policing remains elusive. Many Black respondents saw the problems of policing as deeply rooted in racism and the systemic neglect of their neighborhoods. They expressed skepticism that politicians and activists would represent their interests when pursuing change. Yet, after the murder of George Floyd, several parties would claim to do just this, positioning themselves as authentic representatives of the “community” in political struggles over the future of policing.

Visions of how to transform policing in Minneapolis had already begun to diverge prior to the summer of 2020. Early anti-police violence activism in Minneapolis sought to alter the relations between the police and the public through reforms focused on police accountability and training. But as officers involved in killings went unsanctioned, and police violence continued, some activists turned to police abolition. Groups like MPD150, Reclaim the Block, and Black Visions began urging the city council to “fund communities, not cops” during city budget negotiations in 2018 and 2019, seeding the ground for proposals that would emerge in 2020. These proposals took on varied goals, strategies, and targets. Many efforts engaged the state, though they diverged in their focus on enhancing police oversight and accountability versus shrinking the footprint of policing within the urban service system. Other projects sought safety without the state. Below, I describe boundary work in Minneapolis that aimed to contain policing through law and policy, shrink policing through local politics, and replace policing through community-led models of safety.

Containing Policing through Law and Policy

One long-standing set of interventions has sought to contain the violence of policing through enhanced oversight and accountability. Movement actors, civic leaders, and politicians who advance these projects aim to utilize or change parts of the complex legal and policy infrastructure that regulates policing. In Minneapolis, efforts to hold police accountable through legal and policy mechanisms continued after the murder of George Floyd. Prosecutors brought state criminal charges and federal civil rights charges against the officers involved in George Floyd’s death. City leaders and the MPD pursued department-level policy changes, while state and federal law makers introduced police reform legislation. Organizers sought a community voice in police union contract negotiations and renewed the scrutiny of state and local civilian oversight bodies. Both the Minnesota Department of Human Rights and the Department of Justice launched investigations into civil rights violations in Minneapolis.

The results of these varied efforts to use legal and policy mechanisms to reign in policing were mixed, and Phelps identifies both successes and challenges in the efforts to regulate the MPD. Some saw a victory in the conviction of the officers involved in George Floyd’s death—a rare outcome given US Supreme Court jurisprudence that gives police wide discretion in the use of force and prosecutors’ usual hesitancy to indict officers (Trivedi and Van Cleve 2020; Fields 2022). The city also agreed to a historic wrongful death settlement with Floyd’s family. State legislators strengthened the Minnesota Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training; as Sierra-Arévalo (2024,

236) describes, these state-level boards are important arenas where the violence of policing might be better constrained through enhanced regulation of training and licensing. A new Travis' Law required the dispatch of mental health crisis response teams to wellness checks where available, a success for activists calling for alternative response models. Yet many efforts came up against procedural and political barriers. The threat of arbitration precluded major revisions to the police union contract. Police reforms targeted use-of-force policies, but officers retained leeway to use controversial tactics like no-knock warrants. Civilian oversight bodies were overwhelmed with complaints or sidelined by city leaders. While some state and federal laws aimed to enhance police accountability, others shielded officers from it. The Department of Justice report documented patterns of unconstitutional policing, racial discrimination, and toxic organizational culture within the MPD, though the reforms that will stem from these investigations remain to be seen.

In describing the myriad projects that sought to enhance police accountability in Minneapolis, Phelps (2024, 145) highlights a key insight: law and policy “both constrain and enable efforts to challenge policing.” Moreover, individual regulatory mechanisms can amplify each other or work at odds. For example, police departments can set standards for the use of force that go beyond the requirements of Supreme Court jurisprudence and state criminal statutes, enhancing civil rights protections. But state law can also prohibit civilian review boards from imposing discipline on officers. Amid a complex regulatory infrastructure, many argue that law and policy remain worthy tools and targets. As Monica Bell (2017, 2131) explains, dismantling legal estrangement requires attention to the “deep-seated laws, policies, and structures that have produced the policing crisis.” At the same time, the limitations of police reform in Minneapolis are not unique. Individual leverage points—like civilian review boards—are embedded in interorganizational fields that tend to uphold the legitimacy and power of the police (Rocha Beardall 2022). Legislative efforts to reform policing are fragmented across levels of government and subject to prevailing political forces (Robinson 2020). In making sense of the potentials and pitfalls of efforts to contain policing, *The Minneapolis Reckoning* reminds us that law and policy define the boundaries of acceptable and accountable policing; using these tools to control the police requires analyses of how individual strategies relate to one another within a complex regulatory web.

Shrinking Policing through the Local State

The rise of abolitionist organizing in 2020 put forward a different vision of police transformation. Rather than improve policing through accountability, abolitionists sought to minimize or eliminate the social space occupied by the police. Many efforts to shrink policing also engaged the state, homing in on municipal governments and local political processes. The movement to Defund the Police was emblematic of abolitionist theories and approaches. As Monica Bell, Katherine Beckett, and Forrest Stuart (2021) describe, the movement's core logics framed public safety as broadly produced by many kinds of social supports outside of policing. Resources like housing, education, and behavioral health services could address the root causes of crime or provide immediate crisis response without the risk of police violence.

By redefining who and what had jurisdiction over producing public safety, the Defund movement sought to reconfigure the boundaries of policing within a larger urban service system. The focus on municipal budgets as a site of such boundary work recognized the significance of the local state. Municipal governments have the power to shape the material realities and outcomes of policing through funding (Beck et al. 2023), and they carry out essential government functions of service delivery and policy development (Peck 2014; Lobao 2016). Hence, many efforts to reconfigure policing during and after 2020 unfolded within local political systems. Phelps (2024) brings us into the local politics of Minneapolis to document how abolitionist efforts fared.

At the heart of *The Minneapolis Reckoning* is a nuanced account of the dynamic contests between political actors, movement actors, voters, and other stakeholders that unfolded in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. While a brief summary cannot do justice to Phelps's careful mapping of this landscape, in broad strokes, the city councilmembers' pledge to end the MPD faltered in the face of a complex nexus of resistance. After the mass mobilization of the summer of 2020, local political contests found expression in the development and fate of a ballot initiative to amend the city's charter. Spearheaded by progressive city councilmembers and abolitionist organizers, the charter amendment proposed to remove requirements for minimum police staffing levels and write in a new Department of Public Safety. By the time the initiative was included on the 2021 ballot, opposition came from many corners. Amid rising violent crime and a shrinking police force, Mayor Jacob Frey resisted the removal of a mandatory minimum for police staffing requirements. As would be expected, he was joined by a coalition of downtown business executives and the police union. But the ballot initiative also faced backlash from Black community leaders, including eight North Minneapolis residents who sued the city for providing inadequate protection, and even Black Lives Matter activists who worried that the charter amendment would weaken police accountability. As the election neared, two divergent visions of public safety cohered. One advocated for a holistic public health approach that would minimize police violence through non-police emergency response. The other suggested that shrinking or replacing the police department would lead to chaos on the city's streets. Ultimately, Mayor Frey was reelected, and voters rejected the charter amendment—56 percent to 44 percent. Efforts to fundamentally reimagine public safety faltered within the local political field.

However, mobilization and political action also generated shifts in the Minneapolis public safety infrastructure. Two alternatives to policing were incorporated into the city government's approach to emergency response, each raising new possibilities and challenges. First, the city's Office of Violence Prevention contracted with existing violence interruption groups as it pursued a public health model of public safety. These groups, often Black led and neighborhood based, reflected a long tradition of community mobilization to steer young people away from violence and connect them to resources. When city officials deployed violence interrupters as protest mediators, their role became more fraught. Cases of coercive force and collaboration with law enforcement raised questions of accountability and implicated interrupters in suppressing mobilization against police violence. Second, the city piloted a Behavioral Crisis Response (BCR) program that dispatched mental health professionals without police to calls related to behavioral health concerns. Responders would de-escalate

situations, connect people to resources, and transport them to care. BCR successfully diverted a notable share of person-in-crisis calls from the MPD. Yet the potential impact of BCR on police killings was limited by dispatch rules requiring police to respond to calls with weapons. Moreover, the future of BCR remained contingent on available funding and political will.

In Minneapolis, alternatives to policing within the city government raised new questions around themes like function, resources, staffing, accountability, and misconduct. These questions will remain salient as cities across the country pursue alternative methods of crisis prevention and response. Momentum for alternatives has grown since 2020. An Associated Press report found that fourteen of the twenty largest cities in the United States had implemented non-police emergency response teams by 2023 (Peltz and Bedayn 2023), and prominent models of violence interrupter programs, like Cure Violence, have been adopted in many local contexts (MacGillis 2023). These alternatives to policing are engaged in their own boundary projects amid the realities of economic and political constraint. As alternatives seek to establish jurisdiction and resources, pressures to empirically demonstrate impacts on crime and safety may be particularly salient (Bell, Beckett, and Stuart 2021). The case studies in *The Minneapolis Reckoning* offer a starting point for considering how alternatives can be institutionalized by local governments, how they might shrink the scope of policing within the urban service system, and how they might falter amid political and structural constraints.

Replacing Policing through Community-led Models of Safety

Mobilization for alternative visions of safety have also unfolded outside of the state as community members turned toward each other to meet basic needs and respond to crises. Community-led models of safety are built on a long history of radical organizing for Black liberation and self-determination (Joseph 2007), alongside practices rooted in Indigenous systems of justice and healing (Hand, Hankes, and House 2012). One such project developed in Minneapolis. As Phelps describes, a team of organizers, including Jason Sole and Signe Harriday, established Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP), an abolitionist collective that included an emergency hotline with responses from trained volunteers and “radical ecosystem pods” that built neighborhood capacity through mutual aid networks and trainings on topics like conflict resolution. REP remained intentionally independent from the city government in its funding and operations, allowing responders to completely eschew police involvement. Instead, responders approached calls for mental health crises, disputes, and nuisance issues with a “radical consent” framework, empowering callers to determine the kind of responses and services they desired. While the scale of REP’s emergency response was initially modest, the collective hoped to expand and evolve. As Phelps (2024, 197) summarizes, organizers understood that “REP’s greatest achievement wasn’t to be measured in the number of calls answered but its contributions to radical imagination.”

Indeed, community-led models of safety can offer inspiring visions for alternatives to carceral state practices. Such projects elevate and further build the capacity of communities that have faced systemic exclusion and oppression. They empower neighbors and peer responders as sources of solidarity, accountability, and care.

Phelps notes that there is an important tradition of social science research on the crime-suppressing effects of informal social control that dovetails with the goals of community-led projects (see, for example, Sampson 2017). Models like REP show that safety can be produced outside of the police and the state. Yet leaving the production of safety to those most impacted by violence risks reproducing the state's abdication of responsibility within marginalized communities (Anderson 1999). As Phelps (2024, 16) describes, the politics of policing also includes "the policies and practices, historic and contemporary, that create and maintain racialized patterns of poverty and violence." The problems of policing reflect deeper problems of racism and inequality that have been encoded onto urban space in part through state action. Hence, Phelps leaves us with a larger question about the production and transformation of social boundaries—how can our politics change to realize the full inclusion of all Americans within a multiracial democracy?

Conclusion

In this essay, I have read *The Danger Imperative*, *The Policing Machine*, and *The Minneapolis Reckoning* through the lens of boundaries and boundary work. Boundaries distinguish the police from other professions and members of the public, and boundary work makes claims to resources and jurisdiction over a social space of work. Collectively, these books give us an important glimpse into where the boundaries of twenty-first-century US policing stand and how they are negotiated in ongoing ways. Within the professional boundaries of policing, we find an ethos of action that continues to revolve around danger and violence. Myriad institutional and individual projects within police departments reinforce the danger imperative, reestablishing an enduring vision of professional expertise and jurisdiction—the police are the thin line between order and chaos, and they hold this line through their use of violence. In this vision, officers are bound together and set apart from a public that is either hopelessly naive or actively predatory. Even projects that blur the boundaries between the police and the public, like community policing, can end up reinscribing traditional police power. As the police selectively cultivate public input and strategically shape the capacity of community groups, they subordinate calls for police accountability and elevate endorsements and demands for their services. Read together, the three books suggest that boundary work from within policing operates to reinforce and strengthen the mandate and resources of the police.

Yet efforts to change the boundaries of policing also unfold externally. Various actors seek to define the nature and scope of policing through mobilization and politics. We witnessed several methods of boundary work following the racial reckoning of 2020. Some groups sought to contain policing via enhanced oversight and accountability. They encountered a web of laws and policies in which regulatory mechanisms can amplify one another or work at cross-purposes. Others targeted the local state with the goal of shrinking policing within municipal service systems. As the case of Minneapolis reveals, calls for radical police transformation face multifaceted sources of opposition within political landscapes of elected officials, business leaders, activists, voters, the police union, and other stakeholders.

Nevertheless, alternatives to policing are growing, both within city governments and independently. These alternatives shape the boundaries of policing as they lay

claim to jurisdiction over the production of public safety. In some cases, alternatives in city governments redirect resources from police departments; however, they also risk reproducing state coercion in new forms. Community-led projects like Relationships Evolving Possibilities eschew police contact and avoid co-optation by operating outside of the state, but their ability to scale may be hindered without access to public resources. Despite the material and political barriers faced by each of these methods of boundary work, they reveal that the boundaries of policing are not immutable. Change may be incremental and fragile, but it is possible. Through careful research across arenas of boundary work, Sierra-Arévalo, Cheng, and Phelps point to possibilities emanating from beyond the field of policing.

As debates over the future of public safety continue, a boundary work analytic will help us identify the processes and discourses that construct policing in an ongoing manner. A focus on boundaries hones our attention to acts of symbolic differentiation—how do police executives, city officials, movement actors, community groups, and others define who has jurisdiction within a field of potential public safety providers? How do they envision and articulate the scope and function of the police, and how do some understandings of the police role prevail over others? When do the boundaries of policing brighten and blur in relation to the public and to other professions? A boundary work analytic also highlights material processes of boundary maintenance and boundary shifting—how are policing resources bolstered through state action? How do they grow through strategic relations with community entities? How are the scope and services of alternatives to policing shaped by dynamics of funding, staffing, training, and infrastructure? *The Danger Imperative*, *The Policing Machine*, and *The Minneapolis Reckoning* offer us a recent history of many of these dynamics, and we can build on these important works by carrying their insights into future work.

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