Cryptography as Drag:

Queer Empowerment Through Consent & Control Over External Perception

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Queer in Cryptography
Rochester, NY
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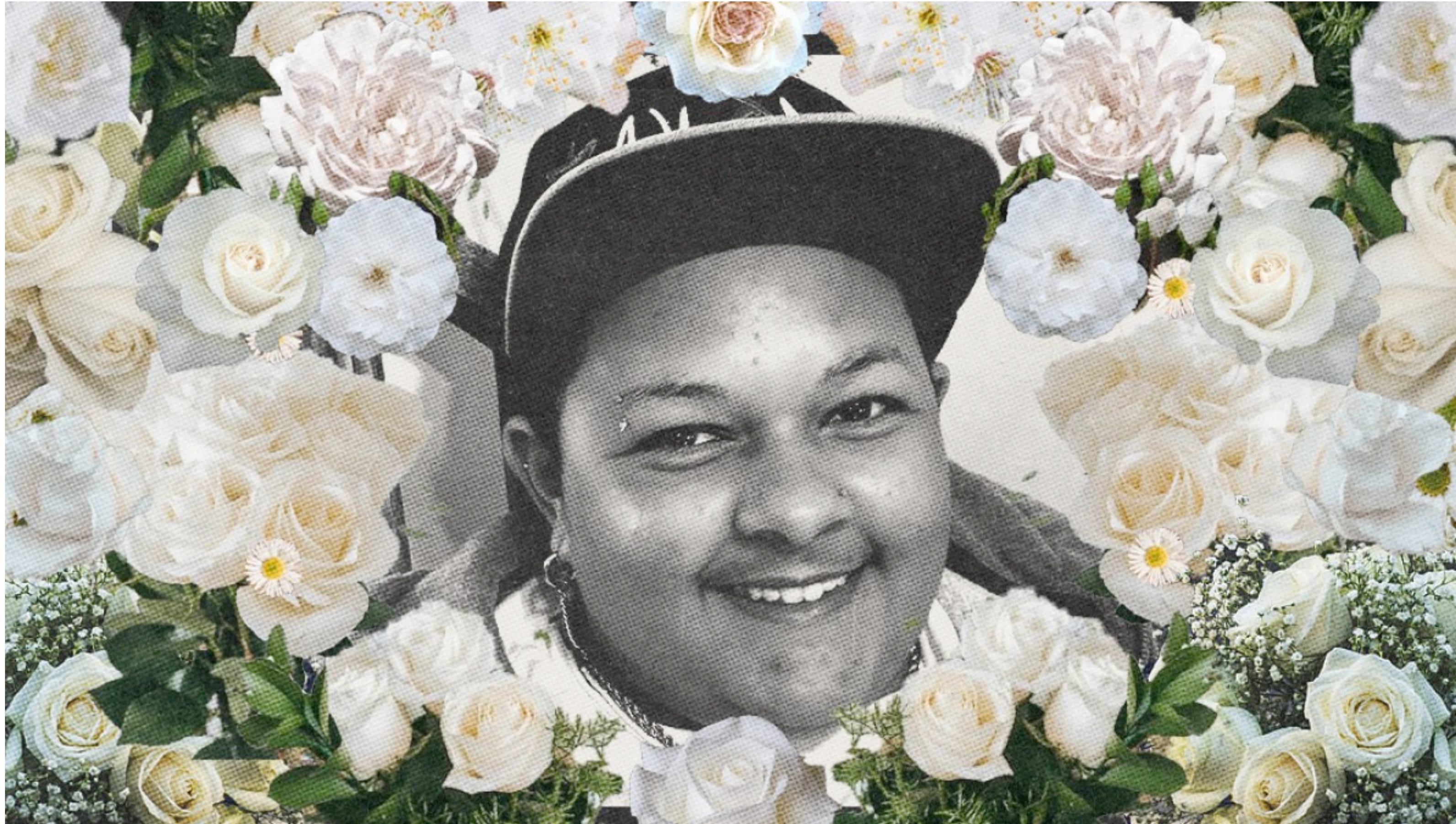# Land Acknowledgment & Dedication

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The RMSC sits on the unceded land of the Onöndowa'ga:' (Seneca) people of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. Gasgo'sagö:h, In the Waterfall, is the Seneca placename for Rochester, NY. The RMSC acknowledges that it was founded on the displacement, exclusion, and erasure of Indigenous peoples, including those on whose land this institution is located. This acknowledgement is one small step in the process of dismantling the unjust legacies of colonialism and honoring Seneca and Haudenosaunee communities, their elders both past and present, as well as future generations.

Nya:weh (thank you) to Jamie Jacobs (Tonawanda Seneca Nation, Turtle Clan), Laticia McNaughton (Mohawk Nation, Wolf Clan), and Felicia Garcia (Chumash) for their contributions in creating this land acknowledgement.

Land Acknowledgment & Dedication

Sam Nordquist (2001–2025)

May his memory be a blessing.

According to Sam's mother, Linda Nordquist, in an early interview after Sam's death was reported by the police, Sam "would give you the shirt off his back. [He was] Very kind, loved his family, loved his nieces and nephew, very outgoing, worked hard." In another interview, Linda said about Sam, "He was the best kind of silly weirdo you could have. He always brought a smile to ya, trying to be a jokester." Along with his mother, Sam worked at a group home for people with disabilities. According to Linda, Sam found "fulfillment" working with "vulnerable adults": "He just had a joy with it," she said. Linda told reporters that Sam loved to dance so much that he would take his clients from the home on outings to go dancing, so they could share in the fun of it together. Linda and Sam's sister, Kayla Nordquist, also described Sam as a "loving uncle" to Kayla's young children, his nieces and nephew." (Rubino 2025)

Grounding Context

Drag is a form of gender expression and empowerment developed by queer Black and Latine folks in the late 19th century.

Cryptography is a tool that people use to control the organization of information, generally for the purposes of access restriction and authentication.

Grounding Context

This talk considers some ways in which cryptography can be seen as drag –

as something that can empower people with marginalized intersections of identity to reclaim consent and creative control over how they are perceived by others.

Talk Outline

○ Land Acknowledgement & Dedication ✔

○ Grounding Context ✔

○ tl;dr A Personal Journey ⬅

○ Safety Mechanisms [Tool Mindset]

○ Safety Mechanisms [Community Mindset]

○ Upcoming Community Events

○ Partner Activity

WebcamGate (2010)

- Administration remotely activated webcams in our school-issued laptops
- Subpoena found over 66,000 images
- Tried to expel 15-year-old over images taken in the student's bedroom
- A Cryptographer's Origin Story

Takeaways at the Intersections of Identity

1. As a queer & neurospicy teen in 2010, feeling safe on the internet/with technology was very important to me
2. Jewish history & dangers of fascism (& at the intersection of tech, e.g. IBM)

Stickers on Webcams: A Story of Solidarity Under Surveillance
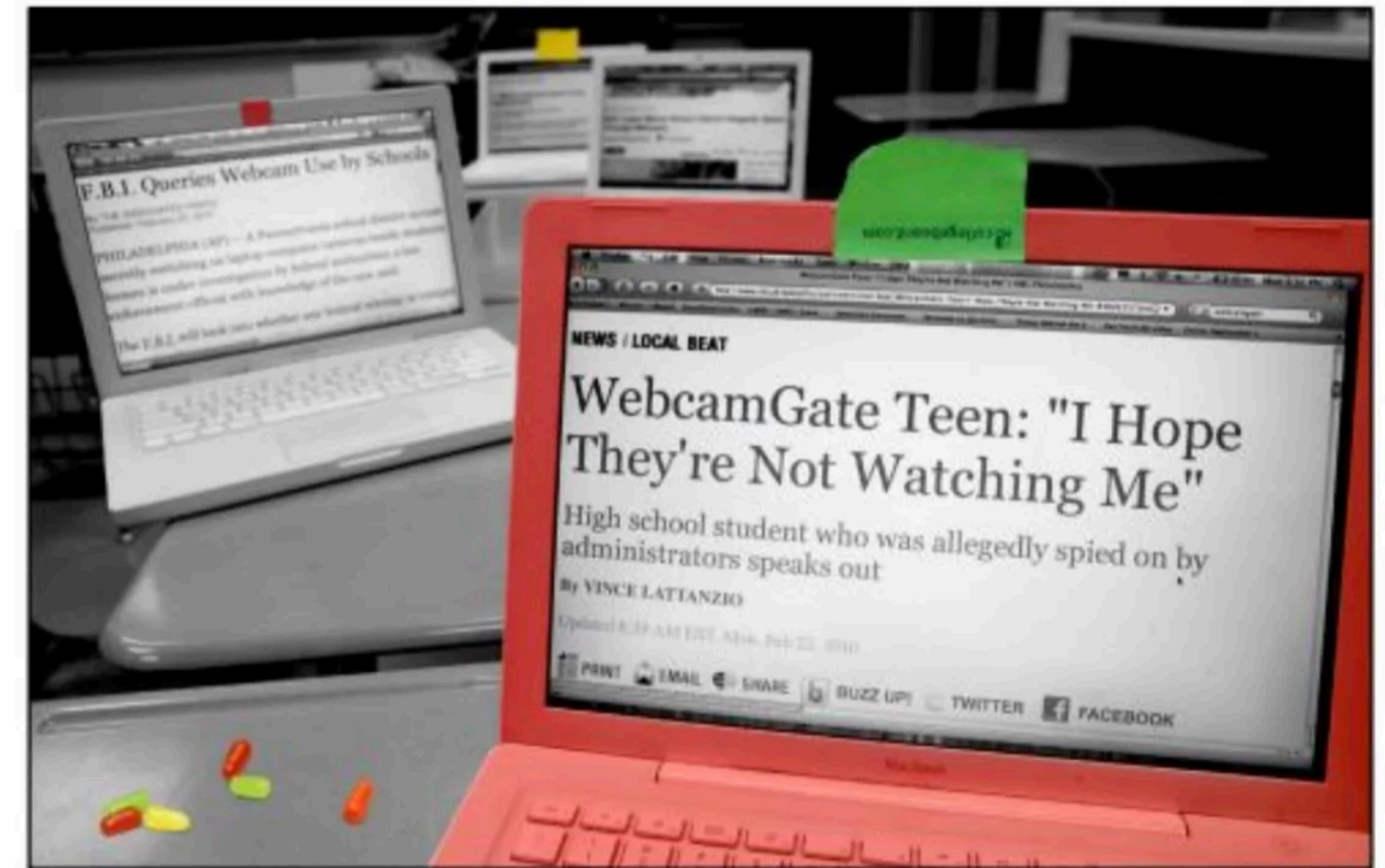
Leah Namisa Rosenbloom
14 min read · Nov 20, 2022

F.B.I. Queries Webcam Use by Schools

NEWS / LOCAL BEAT

WebcamGate Teen: "I Hope They're Not Watching Me"

High school student who was allegedly spied on by administrators speaks out

By VINCE LATTANZIO

Photo illustration by **Madeline Berger**/Staff

Robbins v. Lower Merion School District is a federal class action lawsuit,[2] brought in February 2010 on behalf of students of two high schools in Lower Merion Township, a suburb of Philadelphia.[3] In October 2010, the school district agreed to pay $610,000 to settle the *Robbins* and parallel *Hasan* lawsuits against it.[1]

The suit alleged that, in what was dubbed the "**WebcamGate**" scandal, the schools secretly spied on the students while they were in the privacy of their homes.[4][5]

PhD Thesis (2024): Cryptography for Grassroots Organizing

"Cryptography rearranges power" (Rogaway 2015)

Cryptography, the internet, and technology in general have <u>the potential</u> to rearrange power.

Power for whom?
To what ends?

PhD Thesis (2024): Cryptography for Grassroots Organizing

How do we, as people who create and maintain powerful technologies, understand systems of power?

How does that understanding inform our priorities, threat modeling, and design choices?

How might we work toward building power for communities?

PhD Thesis (2024): Cryptography for Grassroots Organizing

How might this thesis serve to explore the space of cryptography for grassroots organizing within the confines of cryptography PhD requirements, while creating space for more collective and comprehensive, less individually- and technically-focused work?

How might it move toward a theory and practice of cryptography that aligns with the values, cultures, and lived experiences of grassroots organizers?

Drag Debut (2024)

Reclaiming Visibility

- PTSD/Occupational aversion to being observed and documented
- Visibility as power
- Drag: being seen the way I want to be seen by people with a queer gaze

Reclaiming Control

- Deconstructing and reconstructing gender and presentation: face, body, movement

How?

Chosen Family

My drag dad, Jayden Jamison, started the Kingdom workshop and formed an intergenerational network of drag performers. Also pictured is my big brother, Zad Gravebone, my twin Raja Jhal, more brothers & extended fam.

Key Takeaways

Top Priorities: Respect for community, boundaries, consent, & mutual support

Drag is not just entertainment. It is a form of cultural empowerment and should never be appropriative or exploitative.

Deeply intertwined with many struggles: queer/transphobia and (trans)misogyny, racism, ableism, capitalism, etc.

from safety-through-privacy & safety-through-invisibility to safety-through-consent and safety-through-community

Image Credit: Blake Ziti (2024)

Talk Outline

o Land Acknowledgement & Dedication ✓

o Grounding Context ✓

o tl;dr A Personal Journey ✓

o Safety Mechanisms [Tool Mindset] ←

o Safety Mechanisms [Community Mindset]

o Upcoming Community Events

o Partner Activity

Safety Mechanisms [Tool Mindset]

Techno-Solutionism: Technical problems require technical solutions. Surveillance technologies make us unsafe. Cryptography counters surveillance technologies. Therefore, cryptography makes us safe.

Technical problems are enmeshed with wider societal problems; they do not exist in a vacuum. "Big-picture security" (2024): considering safety-visibility tradeoffs in a holistic, intersectional, & trauma-informed manner; readiness to consider solutions with limited technical/cryptographic novelty (or none at all!)

Trickle-Down Techonomics & Property-Centered Protection: Technical tools require immense resources to create and maintain. Therefore, we have to rely on corporate & university resources to keep us safe, even if they are not values-aligned.

"We keep us safe" despite many corporate and university policies which intentionally disadvantage us. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984): recentering the safety of human beings; reclaiming the means of technical production; embracing diversity as a strength

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Safety Mechanisms [Community Mindset]

Lu et al. 2023: Shifting from Surveillance-as-Safety to Safety-through-Noticing: A Photovoice Study with Eastside Detroit Residents

Queer Cryptography, Or: Abolition Cryptography (2024) in Drag:

Community Organizing: Centering the support, wisdom, and power of chosen family

History & Resistance: Drawing on queer tech lineages & the experiences of historical co-conspirators

Intersectional Strength: Demanding our institutions consider queer & gender positionality (confiscation of documents, denial of care), burdensome visa processes (privileging U.S. & Europe)

Against Surveillance Techno-Solutionism, Centering Property: Digital safety and visibility have physical consequences, especially for queer & trans folks – focus on people over property

Cryptography & Creative Expression: Centering queer & trans joy and self-expression!

Queer in Crypto, Decrypting Diversity, The ReCAP Workshop, Criptolatino: Cryptography Futuring

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RE-IMAGINING CRYPTOGRAPHY & PRIVACY

★ WORKSHOP ★

3–4 June 2025

New York, NY (USA) and Online

recapworkshop.online

Decrypting Diversity Summit

decrypting diversity

decryptingdiversity.com

17–20 June 2025

Montpellier (France) and Online

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Partner Activity

1. say hi! names & pronouns

2. discuss these questions:

   What makes you feel safe?

   What makes you feel seen?

3. write some thoughts on stickies & put on the board

Thank you for listening!

Questions Welcome