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by Alisa Bierrria

When activists talk about police violence, we are usually referring to racial profiling or police brutality in the course of formal police work. The term "police violence" is often used to describe events such as the 1997 rape and torture of Abner Louima by police officers in a New York jail precinct, or the pepper spraying and beating of peaceful WTO protesters by the Seattle Police Department in 1999, or the 2002 murder of Robert Thomas Sr. by a King County officer. But when Tacoma Police Chief David Brame brutally shot his wife, Crystal Brame, in the head and then turned his gun on himself, ending his life, we hesitated to also identify this horror as another episode of police violence.

David Brame's perpetration of domestic violence against Crystal Brame was a function of police violence. David Brame used his police-issued firearm in death threats and, ultimately, to kill her. He also used his gun to date rape another woman in 1988. He used tactics he learned and perfected as a police officer, such as constant surveillance, interrogations, and threats to control his wife. He used his identity as a police officer to gain access to her parents' home in a gated community so that he could harass her. He collaborated with the assistant Tacoma police chief to further intimidate Crystal Brame. Also, just as police officers who commit public acts of police violence are protected by government officials and the police union, Brame's police violence was soundly sustained by Tacoma City officials who protected him (including the city attorney who prevented rape allegations against Brame from being disclosed, and the city manager and the mayor who dismissed Crystal Brame's assertions of abuse) and by the head of Tacoma's police union, who blamed the media for David Brame's actions.

Why do activists hesitate to connect domestic violence perpetrated by police officers to the broader problem of police violence in general? There are a few possibilities. One issue is that police violence is a racialized violence, primarily targeting people of color. Because Crystal Brame wasn't a woman of color, one might assume that there were no race politics involved, and therefore not connect her murder to a larger pattern of police violence. However, during the Seattle WTO protests, many folks who felt victimized by the police were white folks, and their experiences were often represented by their attorneys, the media, and themselves as police violence.

Another possibility is that anti-police brutality activists have not yet fully considered the ways in which police violence is engendered. Police violence that targets women does not neatly correspond with the popular image of police violence victims, which seems to usually be men, specifically men of color. Men of color have been and continue to be very much targeted by law enforcement, but so are women, particularly women of color. The critical difference is that police violence against women does not usually occur in public, but in private spaces where women often spend time. Activist Anannya Bhattacharjee writes in her working paper, "Whose Safety? Women of Color and the Violence of Law Enforcement," that "a gender perspective can help us appreciate how law enforcement violence affects our communities overall, by exposing its impact on such areas as reproduction and sexuality, home life, caregiving, and paid work - all social arenas in which women play a central role."

There is no way to separate the domestic violence that Crystal Brame experienced from her husband from the vast institutional power that her husband enjoyed as a police officer. It is startling to imagine the impact of the full brunt of state-sponsored violence in the middle of one's private life. However, as Bhattacharjee notes in her article, the existence of law enforcement violence in the intimate realms of women's lives is a far too common reality for women of color in particular, which can take the form of INS raids, prison rape, or the criminalization of pregnant women. Understanding Crystal Brame's experience of domestic violence as a function of police violence also presents us with an opportunity to investigate other ways in which police violence shows up in our private lives. In this era of Homeland Securities and Patriot Acts, our private worlds are increasingly forced open to more police scrutiny and potential state-sponsored violence. If we develop a more expanded understanding of police violence, we may be better equipped to resist its encroaching persistence into our lives.

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