



## BEYOND POLICING, FOR A POLITICS OF BREATHING

Vanessa E. Thompson

**I**n a global moment defined by the spread of a novel coronavirus that puts large parts of the world on hold and in confinement, slows down time for some but not for others, we (again) see protests against policing igniting the streets worldwide – in the US, in Europe and in many parts in the **Global South** such as Kenya and Nigeria, India and Argentina. The killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson and many others in the US iteratively and brutally lay bare what it means to live, for centuries, at the receiving end of policing. The way the protests have travelled from various US-American cities to other parts of the world further shows that this condition is not confined only to the US. Quite the contrary, protesters and vulnerable communities are standing in solidarity with black people in the US as well as emphasising that policing unfolds as a violent and murderous condition in their various, respective contexts too. Names of black people who lost their lives at the hands of police in the US are

called out and remembered in concert with names of black people who lost their lives at the hands of police in other parts of the African **diaspora**.

The protests also reveal that the ways the pandemic is being policed are just further functions of the **intersectional** injustices – those that unfold from interlocking systems of oppression, exploitation and violence (such as racism, **hetero-patriarchy**, class exploitation, colourism, **ableism**) – and the organisation of violence and abandonment produced by **racial gendered capitalism**.<sup>283</sup> Not only do we currently see a further expansion of policing, which raises the question why a global health crisis is met with further control and punishment instead of solidarity and extensions of care, but **racialised** and intersectionally vulnerable groups experience further brutalisation by police and related regimes of punishment and incarceration. This includes stop and frisk identity checks and pat downs even when social distancing has become a political norm in most countries (especially in the Global North).

On Friday April 10, 2020, Armen Henderson, a black internal medicine physician, was profiled and handcuffed by Miami police as he loaded his car with supplies that he wanted to bring to houseless people in downtown Miami.<sup>284</sup> He and his team at the University of Miami Health System were doing this weekly to support houseless people with much needed supplies such as tents, toiletries, and masks. He was on his way to support people who are especially vulnerable to the virus.

A further ‘case’<sup>285</sup> that speaks to the experiences of being policed on an everyday basis, and the justified fear many black people and people of colour have of wearing homemade or even surgical masks, is the example of two black men who, early on in the pandemic, wore surgical masks and were profiled and followed by a police officer in a grocery store.<sup>286</sup> What is generally considered an act of solidarity in times of pandemic (wearing a mask) risks further criminalising racialised **subjects** and groups.

In the midst of the pandemic in France, various collectives and groups that are active in the underprivileged outskirts of French cities have released several videos of police violence against racialised and working class folks from the so-called *banlieues* – they are urging people to document and film these acts and calling for an immediate end to police violence in these racialised working class districts.<sup>287</sup> In Adana, Turkey, Ali El Hamdan, a Syrian teenager, was shot by police officers while on his way to work under the current restrictions on movement. Various self-organised sex workers’ collectives have called and are organising for an end to further and intensified policing during the pandemic, which renders racialised and migrant sex workers even more vulnerable.<sup>288</sup>

There are many other ‘examples’ and though these contexts differ with regard to their histories, regimes of punishment, legal regulations and so on, we can observe a striking relation between policing, race, and further intersectional dimensions of oppression and dehumanisation (such as migration

status, socio-economic exploitation, mental health, and gender) at work in all of them. That this relation becomes even more apparent – viral, even – in times of crisis, when vulnerable groups are actually in need of more support and solidarity rather than more policing and punishment, urges us to think more deeply about this relation. Nevertheless, it is far from limited to times of pandemic, as Derecka Purnell explains: ‘We are at risk of police violence generally, and now specifically through this pandemic’.<sup>289</sup> Being at risk of police violence *generally*, as a lived experience and condition, stands in stark contrast to an understanding of policing as providing security and safety. This point of view also challenges **critiques** of policing that focus too exclusively on spectacular moments of excessive police violence such as at demonstrations. Experiences of everyday policing, which often go unnoticed and unseen by large parts of society (such as racial profiling in the form of stops, harassment and controls but also related forms of police violence that unfold along intersectional dimensions of power) thus provide a window for an **analysis** and critique of policing that begins from the perspectives of those for whom policing means risk and violence, even death, rather than safety, security and justice.

## CONTINUITIES

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It is helpful here to also look at the historical implications of being at risk of police violence *generally*, and how conjunctures

of racism, colonial capitalism and (hetero-)patriarchy play into this. In the contexts of North America, black, and black feminist abolitionists especially, have delineated the connections between evolving practices of policing and the logics of black bondage and enslavement.<sup>290</sup> In his famous work *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon looks at the role of policing in the colonies and explains that the dividing line between colonised groups and colonising formations of power is demonstrated by the police and the soldier as ‘the official, instituted go-betweens’<sup>291</sup> whose immediate presence and frequent and direct action towards colonised groups is characterised by everyday brute violence (instead of exceptional episodes of violence). Here, I am not aiming at a linear account of colonial continuities or continuities of enslavement. However, looking at the function of policing in the colonies and with regard to plantation economies can teach something about the relation between race, policing and intersectional forms of violence. As Simone Browne lays out in her important book on the relation between surveillance and blackness,<sup>292</sup> observation, routines and self-discipline as forms of **disciplinary power** are not the dominant forms of power blackness is subjected to. Rather, blackness is also subjected to everyday repressive and brute forms of violence, which continue to shape racialised experiences of policing and surveillance in (**formally**) postcolonial times.

## EVERYDAY AND NORMALISED 'EXCEPTIONS'

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Various community organisations and networks – including cop-watch collectives, human rights organisations and legal networks in many parts of the world – emphasise that everyday policing as a form of organised (silent and slow but also fast and loud) violence represents a normalised and, indeed, *everyday* experience for many vulnerable and racialised groups, especially along the intersections of class, gender, sexuality, migrant status and mental health. These experiences are normalised as they are often not seen or registered by dominant parts of society and represent the norm rather than an exception. Further, they are often **legitimised** as policing is embedded in societal forms of criminalisation so that dominant parts of society either do not see the violence in policing, or perceive policed subjects as criminal and hence as perpetrators and never as victims of violence – or both. In fact, what are often perceived as 'exceptions' or as 'individual cases' with regard to policing, such as incidents of police violence, represent an everyday experience for many marginalised people, especially members of multi-marginalised groups. Women and LGBT\*IQ refugees/impooverished black people/people of colour with disabilities and illegalised migrant sex workers are particularly vulnerable – as intersectional and abolitionist feminists remind us – to racist police controls, abuse and their various, sometimes deadly, consequences.<sup>293</sup>

Thus, policing draws on and shapes intersectional forms of violence, which means that subjects who experience interlocking forms of violence simultaneously (such as racism, migration regimes, hetero-patriarchy, ableism and economic deprivation) are particularly vulnerable to policing *and* experience policing alongside these dimensions of violence (such as the criminalisation of poor and racialised communities, sexualised and gendered violence against women and gender non-conforming folks and the pathologisation of **mad** folks and folks with disabilities) as the state produces these forms of violence constantly. Further, policing, as an institutionalised practice of control and punishment, interacts with related coercive institutions in an intersectional way (not only with the prison or the detention centre, but also with the foster care regime, the social welfare and housing system and psychiatric institutions). In her important work based on activism and legal support of black women, indigenous women and women of colour, *Invisible no More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color*, Andrea J. Ritchie shows that policing is an everyday experience for racialised women and gender non-conforming folks in the US, who are brutalised along gender lines, often represented as promiscuous and read as sex workers, policed as mothers and left without protection (police in-action) as well as experiencing sexual assault and violence by police.<sup>294</sup> Jaime Amparo Alves discusses this in the context of Brazil.<sup>295</sup>

Recent scholarly and activist interventions have also highlighted the intersectional dimension of policing with

regard to European contexts and show that being read as a sex worker and policed also manifests in the experiences of black women and queer folks in these contexts. For racialised sex workers, policing also manifests in further criminalisation and often devastating consequences with regard, for example, to child custody rights.<sup>296</sup> Further, fatal police killings also cost the lives of racialised women and **non-binary** folks as racial profiling does not end with stop and search controls.

In the German context, one can think of Christy Schwundek, who was fatally shot in a job centre in Frankfurt am Main on May 19, 2011 while enquiring about her unemployment benefits. The case of N'deye Mariame Sarr, who was shot by police on July 14, 2001 in the house of her white ex-partner, is a further manifestation of how racism, gender relations, migrant status, social class and dis/ability intersect in policing.<sup>297</sup> In both cases, two or more police or security officers as well as one more person were present and Christy Schwundek and N'deye Mariame Sarr were the only black women in these respective situations. Both were in a situation of crisis. Christy Schwundek had been without money for over two weeks as her unemployment benefits had not arrived. N'deye Mariame Sarr wanted to pick up her two-year-old child from her white ex-partner, from whom she had separated. He had brought the child to his parents and applied for sole child custody without letting her know. Both shots were fired shortly after police arrived. Mariame Sarr was one of the first people to be shot by the new *PEP* (*Polizei-*

*Einsatz-Patrone*), a special bullet with a mushroom effect, created to gun down 'very violent attackers', a category that is often already inscribed and tattooed on black skin. In both instances, public prosecutors closed the case on the grounds of 'self-defence'.

## I CAN'T BREATHE

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Multi-marginalised groups experience policing as a condition of *un-breathing* in various but interrelated ways. I conceptualise un-breathing as a **material**, social and physical condition and experience. 'I can't breathe' were the last words of George Floyd. They were also the last words of Eric Garner, while being choked to death on July 7, 2014 in New York. Kwaku Ofori in Finland remembers the last words of his friend Samuel Dolphyne as the following: 'He was shouting and calling my name; Ofori, Ofori they are killing me. I can't breathe.'<sup>298</sup> Wilson A. from Zurich, Switzerland was coming from meeting a friend when he was stopped and searched by police after a ticket control on a tram on October 10, 2009. He was aggressively pushed out of the tram and then brutally beaten after he asked why police had only controlled him and his friend. Wilson A. told the police that he'd just had heart surgery, but the police continued and even insulted him with racist slurs. As stated in the many reports of support groups and his own testimony, Wilson A. could barely breathe. Since 2009, he and his supporters have been fighting for justice. The fierce

refugee activist Sista Mimi, who was engaged in the refugee protests at the Oranienplatz and the Gerhart-Hauptmann School in Berlin, died on December 11, 2014. During her long-term self-organised refugee and migrant activism, she continuously argued that the repression by police absorbed her breath.

Escaping stop and search controls, being on the move and on the run,<sup>299</sup> means to be out of breath. ‘Breathing’ refers to the physical as well as to the social breathing here. I approach these experiences through a Fanonian framework and follow, amongst others, the crucial and material condition of un-breathing, a motif that sticks to the policing of race, especially of blackness, and its intersectional dimensions through time and space. Fanon wrote that the colonial condition is characterised by ‘combat breathing’.<sup>300</sup> Combat breathing is embodied in and through the pant for breath, the gasp for air, the compression of air supply, the chokehold, the panic attack. It refers to the loss of breath when you find out that you have lost a loved one through police violence, and while you struggle for a justice that is rarely achieved through the criminal justice system, as well as to the fear of being policed when going outside, in the grocery store, etc. It refers to the inhalation of water as in drowning as a result of the policing of the Black Mediterranean<sup>301</sup> and the systematic regimes of death-making at state borders. Policing as the condition of un-breathing endangers and renders impossible *life* for vulnerable groups all over the world. Policing as the historical and constant condition of

un-breathing is the stuff out of which modern security and **subjectivity** is made in racial gendered capitalism.

## ABOLITION

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For centuries abolitionists have challenged and resisted regimes of punishment, surveillance, and organised violence by exposing the logics of racial gendered capitalism – from the abolition of enslavement to abolitionist anti-colonial struggles, from struggles against apartheid to struggles against systems of lynching and imprisonment. Policing, and the ways it relates to all of these, has been and is being challenged as a crucial component of abolition. But the various forms in which systems of oppression make us reproduce violence on interpersonal levels are also subjects of abolition. Twenty years ago, the anti-violence and abolitionist organisations *INCITE!* and *Critical Resistance*, both based in the US, wrote a statement that connects interpersonal to **structural violence** and urges us to centre vulnerable women, queer and non-binary folks in abolitionist struggles as they experience interpersonal as well as state violence, and movements that only address one of these levels reproduce violence on the other.<sup>302</sup> They called for social justice movements to address both state and interpersonal forms of violence, which are often closely linked as societal violence and abandonment creates the climate for interpersonal forms of violence to flourish. The statement shows that abolition must be intersectional

in its understanding of, and resistance to, state violence and interpersonal violence, which unfold along intersectional dimensions, *as well as* intersectional in its understanding of institutions of violence, as state violence is produced and affirmed not only by policing but also by other state institutions and even non-state **agents**. These institutions (such as police, courts, job centres, hospitals, schools, private security companies, the foster care regime) often work in complex constellations and in concert in the production of intersectional violence through criminalisation and policing as a relation of control, through punishment or abandonment (or both).

But there are also examples of collectives and groups beyond the US that have developed intersectional and holistic approaches such as *Women in Exile*, *LesMigraS*, the *Transformative Justice Kollektiv* and various cop-watch collectives in Germany, *Sisters Uncut* in the UK, and *Reaja ou Será Morta*, *Reaja ou Será Morto* in Brazil, even if some of them do not refer to the term ‘abolition’ explicitly. Drawing on various methods such as community accountability and transformative justice as politics of care, which challenge all forms of violence, these and other collectives demonstrate in important ways that abolition is not just about getting rid of violent institutions or relations, but about building institutions and relations that stand in stark contrast to the politics of violence and death, as they render possible breathing and life.

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**Vanessa E. Thompson** co-founded an intersectional cop-watch collective in Germany and was active in the Christy Schwundek Initiative. She is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in comparative social and cultural anthropology at European University Viadrina, teaching and working in the fields of black studies, critical racism studies, postcolonial feminism and abolition.