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Romancing the Shelter: The State, Activism, and Domestic Violence Funding

Nostalgic Histories and Managing Violence

In May 1997, La Casa de las Madres, San Francisco's oldest and largest domestic violence (DV) shelter, celebrated its twentieth anniversary. At the $80 per plate dinner party, all of the original founders were honored for their work. Those of us in the audience, mostly corporate sponsors, individual donors, survivors, and workers (including myself), heard stories of La Casa's beginnings—stories that characterized little community support amidst a dearth of economic resources. Now La Casa has a budget of over one million dollars per year. The agency receives corporate, state, and federal funding for all operations and just shortly before this celebration, La Casa was offered $1.1 million from the Federal Housing and Urban Development to buy a new shelter.

In the midst of nostalgic stories, a poem read by one child survivor, the screening of a dramatic video, workers who were saluted, and tears of all sorts shed, no one was asking: "What exactly are we celebrating after twenty years? How is it that the shelter came to be romanticized and represented as a place to 'rescue' abused women and their children?" Thinking back two decades when there was little criminalization of domestic violence and virtually no support from different societal institutions, the idea of a confidential location appeared to be the best and only alternative when the women's movement was just beginning to make the issue one of concern and action.

Confining women to shelters does indeed have a long, gendered, and racialized history. Sherrill Cohen (3-10) argues that many scholars ignore the various networks of institutions that have disciplined females since the 16th century in Europe (Cohen particularly names Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*, Katz, and Goffman). She details the evolution of such institutions that constructed and defined problems of women which, through the ages, have been linked to sexualized morality. These institutions included religious penitentiaries for prostitutes, those "at risk" for "looseness," and like the current day battered woman, such penitentiaries existed for those who had "no place to go." Cohen's work shows that "the female gender" was frequently the proving ground for experiments in institution building that reverberated widely. Concerns about gender roles spurred the creation of women's asylums, and those asylums pioneered techniques of correction, education, and assistance that spread

to the population at large (Cohen 169). Similarly, Linda Gordon examines family and domestic violence in the US since the late 19th century. She argues that the definitions of often racialized constructions of violence are linked to state practices and changing political climates. Both Cohen and Gordon trace these institutions to the current existence of the battered women's shelter and its relationship to the state.

For domestic violence activists, I find it important to understand that battered women's shelters emerged out of a history of institutions that had goals of humanitarian reform complemented by attempts to exert social control over women. Much like earlier institutions, the shelter does "institutionalize" battered women in order to address their experiences of violence. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the confinement of women while simultaneously advocating women's empowerment, which was one of the original aims of the 1970s movement. Typically when a woman enters a shelter, depending upon the agency's policies, she is required to perform a number of obligations in order to go "underground" as well as to ensure confidentiality. She is sometimes asked to quit her job and pull her children out of school if they are with her. She is responsible for initiating any legal action she needs or desires such as restraining orders, kick out orders, custody plans, child protective services, divorce, etc. She is responsible for her and her children's physical and mental health, and for securing an income, finding housing and new schools. Most battered women shelters are considered emergency shelters and, in the state of California, this means that she must attempt to accomplish all of these tasks, with the help of an advocate, within the standard eight to twelve week stay.

This is what was running through my mind during the La Casa celebration. The only victory that seemed to be clear was that domestic violence shelters now had financial backing. But these new budgets came with a price. With the beginning of anti-DV organizing in the 70s, many women understandably and justifiably decided to try to fund their work by creating non-profit status for hotlines and shelters. While this enabled much easier solicitation of funds for expanded services, it also put conflictive restraints on what was, more or less, a democratic and grass roots movement that sought to politicize gendered violence (for these histories see Aherns, Schecter, and Bordt). By registering non-profit status with the state, the agency is required to appoint a board of directors as well as create a hierarchical division of labor (as opposed to the movement's former advocation of cooperative labor)[1] that is satisfactory to the state. This means that non-profit DV agencies must organize and/or represent themselves in a certain way, as well as police themselves, to cater to the models of others who have the power to set policy. Consequently DV agencies get molded to deal with changes in larger society which often have little to do with domestic violence activist agendas. Ultimately what is at stake are the ways that agencies deal with and respond to domestic violence.

These points are arguably antithetical to the initial goals of the movement and serve in many ways to virtually end thinking about what could possibly happen beyond the shelter as a site of activism. This is the stagnant result of many dilemmas and contradictions that older and current feminist organizations faced when they sought the solicitation of funds or to redress the state through the criminal justice system (Walker, *Family Violence* 3-4). That is, the shelter became institutionalized within the state apparatus, in a professionalized bureaucratic setting, that stalled or undermined movement politics to the point of losing sight of past struggles, making the form and content of state interventions difficult to trace (Morgan 17-26). As professionalized bureaucracy "replaced" many activist practices, the shelter became a site for the state not to directly deal with the problems of violence, but simply to manage violence in multiple spaces.[2]

The state's management of violence is very complicated. It involves coordination of institutional networks, administration and bureacratization of power relations, and dissemination of ideologies about so-called public and private spaces. Like Anannya Bhattacharjee who argues that public and private spaces are not whole and separate entities, I want to stress that in the realm of our domestic violence activism, we cannot escape various state practices that we either oppose or have come to rely upon. Therefore the point in thinking about the state, not as a monolithic entity, but as a complex set of social relations and networks, is to understand the links that might be made to ineffective organizing, co-optation of grass-roots movements, and the state's own capitalist interests. Using La Casa de las Madres as an example, the rest of this paper considers these issues. To a lesser extent I focus on the relationship between the shelter and the prison in the context of activist work dealing directly with these institutions. Specifically I explore a couple of issues that pose problems to our activist work: (1) since the operations of battered women agencies became bureaucratic and hierarchical, debates on management styles within the agency, and debates on peer support versus clinical models used to work with battered women, often create crisis within organizations; (2) since the state's downsizing of public funds initiated in the Reagan era, DV boards of directors were drastically reorganized and increasingly more stacked with members from transnational corporations. The ties that domestic violence agencies have to corporate monies, and state and federal funding also impact the current representations of the battered woman, as well as discourses on what counts as domestic and what counts as violence.

Although I will not elaborate on this point in this essay, I do want to make it clear that I am not attempting to create a static "grass roots" versus "corporate" binary. It is important to keep in mind that the women's movement, and specifically the DV movement, began and is still fraught with many problems that are rooted in the insistence of treating gender as a singular space of analysis. It should be emphasized that the various legal and linguistic experiences of immigrant and/or queer women in the US, for example, disrupt the assumptions of a heterosexual, racialized citizen—a citizen that the DV movement largely imagines it serves. Such assumptions about the ideal citizen or "normative" battered woman have resulted in the institutional dismissal of the needs of immigrants and queers responding to violence. The corporate reconfiguration of many battered women agencies only exacerbates this problem.

Responding to Crisis: Social Work/Social Justice Forum

On 1-2 November 1997, many ex-workers of La Casa de las Madres organized a public forum called Social Work/Social Justice in San Francisco. The forum emerged out of a number of internal struggles that most line staff and some managers were engaged in.[3] At stake were issues of management styles and questions of a peer model versus a clinical approach to battered women. Organizers and participants in the forum immediately recognized that these issues were not isolated, but in fact many different agencies in the Bay Area and elsewhere in the US engaged similar battles (such is the focus in Aherns and Bordt). The intent of the forum was to talk about the root causes of these struggles.

Bonnie Mann, a domestic violence activist for seventeen years, and a manager who was fired from La Casa for overidentification with line staff, described some of the history that lead to the current state of crisis in DV agencies. Early in the movement, organizers made concessions for a number of reasons. One was that some of the collective based work was not working well because of a lack of funding, and no societal structures were in place that could support equitable decision making. As opposed to the current boom in technical training for managers on how to create better and more efficient hierarchies, there were no centers for training on how to be better collectives (see Mann). Eventually collectives were restructured to look the way funders wanted them to, so that they also mimicked state and federal policies for non-profits. As Mann describes, the move from collective based organizations to hierarchies was sometimes uncritically examined, and hence power and control models[4] were naturalized. Power and control models that were theorized early on by DV activists only made shelter workers experts in the subtleties of abusive dynamics that clients experience as well as the abusive dynamics that shelter workers themselves experience with their bosses. "So the very structure of the DV agency," Mann argues, "is in contradiction to the work that we do, and chaos continues."

The other related thread in the crisis was different philosophical approaches to battered women, namely peer-based vs. clinical counseling and support models. The battered women's movement consciously made a choice in the 1970s to be peer-based because of the misogynist and culturally specific psychosocial and psychodynamic clinical models used to assess patterns of domestic violence.[5] Clinical models which began in the 19th century, and gained increasing legitimacy in the first half of the 20th century, focused on helping the individual by assessing pathological behavior (Morgan 20). To construct and subsequently institutionalize pathology is to depoliticize the issue through medicalization or other practices, disconnecting domestic violence from societal structures and relocating responsibility onto the individual. Of course clinical models have changed, and have been useful, but in many ways still assume homogenized cultural and institutional experiences. In an attempt to move away from this paradigm, the 70s movement looked to the peer support model as an alternative. This model was intended to employ gender as the common experience of oppression and a point of departure to empower both shelter workers and domestic violence survivors to end the "cycle of violence." Yet the peer support model had its own gaps. In its beginnings it was profoundly heteronormative and ignored queer domestic violence altogether. It also did not have a very deep understanding of various racialized social structures and processes, and did very little to address issues of immigrants or transgenders. Despite these problems, the peer-suppport model is flexible to change, which it has done over the years, and is still much more useful and appropriate than clinical approaches.

Margo Okizawa-Rey, a professor of social work at San Francisco State University addressed the concerns of peer and clinical models by asking how we define the problem of domestic violence. The definition of problems (and who defines and directs them) for battered women gets clouded as the ability to assess one's own social needs gets funneled through a state apparatus, never really becoming part of a community but instead becoming perhaps more compatible with the state (Morgan 19-21) and an agency's board of directors. Okizawa-Rey stated that as the board of a DV organization changes demographically, so too does the definition of a problem—one that is often tied to money. Kimberle Crenshaw (1258-62) writes that the purpose of constructing a problem may be to garner support from white elites where white women may be the only ones who come into focus. This is probably a typical scenario in DV agencies, but because La Casa serves

mostly women of color the construction of problems and its relationship to the solicitation of funds may be a bit different.

When the development director at La Casa solicits funds from various corporate foundations, the letter of solicitation provokes the feeling that if the corporation or foundation donates, it can play a vital part in the "rescue" and "saving" of "poor," "passive" women. Upper middle class professionals helping often racialized "downtrodden" women is the image that may get provoked or circulated. This is reminiscent of both 19th century European women civilizing Other women in the colonies and white middle class women's participation in Americanization programs in the US during the early 20th century. "Saving" and "rescuing" strategies become prominent because boards and fund developers frequently imagine pathologized victims rather than issues of power that transcend notions of the individual. Corporate board members often have very little training or understanding of power and control issues, of racist INS and/or police practices that many women need to negotiate, of the complex issues surrounding substance abuse that some women may have, or even the social service system itself where so many people may fall through its cracks. Also as notions of "rescuing" and "saving" are increasingly linked to pathological behaviors in battered women, more advanced degrees in clinical counseling are now required in order to work in many DV agencies. Peer training and counseling are more and more at stake and less validated. And, as with hierarchies, board members can literally see themselves as detached and not invested in domestic violence work in the same way others may see themselves connected to larger grassroots movements. The priority for the board is to manage bureaucracy—the numbers, statistics, personnel, and the connections to money that enable the agency to exist in the way that it does. Consequently when the board has little experience with (or investment in) DV activist work, saving and rescuing are the paternalistic substitutes to empowerment and liberation.

Included in the "you can rescue her too" solicitation letters are individual stories and short biographies of triumph. These narratives mirror, in many ways, American notions of individualism and rising up of the downtrodden. The problem is that individual stories replace a liberatory paradigm that seeks to abolish violence altogether on a collective and community level. Thus the construction of the individual in these narratives makes violence seem like it is a personal anomaly not a huge crisis linked to societal structures. In this way, the glorification of survivors erase those who did not make it through the shelter, who are still out on the streets, who went to prison, or who ended up dead. Such scenarios are also more common than successful shelter entry, representing huge gaps in dealing with DV work—gaps that cannot be addressed by the institution of the shelter alone, despite the ways in which the shelter is romanticized as the site that nurtures and changes lives. Violence, on a societal level, is then left to the management of the shelter and the state, federal and corporate entities that dictate their directions.

Globalization and Activism

In 1981, the Reagan administration passed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act which not only severely cut federal aid programs, such as AFDC, but also cut block grants for a number of social services including domestic violence programs. This impacted women who relied on federally subsidized childcare or other kinds of assistance leaving battered women in particular with fewer resources and fewer places to turn if they needed to leave a dangerous situation. The cuts also had an impact on funding sources as domestic violence programs came to rely heavily on the state for money. Agencies serving different "populations"[6] competed with each other more fiercely for funding and turned more and more to corporate endowments and foundations. For good reason, corporate board members are in place because they may represent and manage the large chunk of money from corporate sponsorship. Frequently they have connections to companies and foundations other than their own. Indeed the last time the board at La Casa attempted to recruit additional membership, one of the requirements was that a potential member have connections to large monies, rather than to other community services and agencies.

About two years ago, La Casa accepted some funding from Macy's department store. One of the workers at La Casa who is a prison activist knew that Macy's contracted labor from US prisons. On the average, prisoners are paid less than $1 per hour or nothing at all. In the course of a discussion with the fund developer she found out that all major big name corporate donors who give money to La Casa were involved in prison labor exploitation. This included Bank of America, Chevron, AT&T, and Shell Oil. For those of us working in both domestic violence agencies as well as in prison activism, this was a conflictual realization because these companies that we do educational campaigns against are the same ones that ensure both our existence as workers and the existence of the shelter itself. This problem was not only about money but also about our organizing efforts. For good reason, prison activists have been very wary of DV workers because they often advocate jail time for batterers on behalf of their clients. While this is true, many DV workers also recognize that jail or prison is no place for rehabilitation, but simply another place where the state manages violence. That is, shelters and prisons are two primary sites for disciplining violence. The fact that very few alternatives exist leaves us with

unending and frustrating work. Unfortunately this has created unnecessary divisions between DV and prison activists who ironically are both dealing with violence, the state, globalization, and various forms of money in different but related ways. And, as many of us working in the shelter were acutely aware, companies such as Shell Oil whose policy of exploiting, killing or driving women off their land in one part of the world (such as Nigeria) and providing housing and services and therefore "saving" women in another part (a shelter in San Francisco) are rather problematic. While the history of philanthropy has drawn attention away from questionable practices of corporate self-interest, this kind of conflict is incredibly overwhelming to activist work.

Moreover, the notion of who is being saved changes with the demographics of boards of directors and upper management. For example, once the board and upper management consist of upper middle class professionals answering to state agencies and corporations, non-English speaking women who were once shelter entry priorities began to drop.[7] Additionally, after La Casa's management reorganization, some higher level workers questioned the legitimacy of Spanish speaking training programs. What is interesting is that US (English speaking) women of color may be imagined as the ones to be saved by paternalistic state and corporate benevolence. In a competitive environment for funds where California state anti-immigrant policies are meant to be managed and directed by many social services agencies, immigrant, non-English speaking women who look to shelters for services may not be viewed as legitimate clients. Indeed Kimberle Crenshaw (1263-65) describes a scenario where a woman was denied services because she was not fluent in English. Immigrant women often have long histories tied to globalization practices and ironically many transnational corporations who donate to shelters may have a part in shaping the history of women who move across borders, women who perhaps attempt to show up at shelter doors in the US, funded by the very same corporations. Although Spivak, and others pay close attention to such movements, these are the kind of globalization and transnational issues that are largely ignored and require more attention. The question remains: how will these issues will direct the future of our activist work?

Sherene Razack has documented the relationship between asylum laws and domestic violence in Canada where she shows how feminist arguments that focus only on gender oppression collude with many imperialist discourses. These discourses impact how the state will decide on asylum cases related to domestic violence. I would like to take a cue from Razack and rethink our feminist paradigms and discourses of domestic violence. As I alluded to earlier in this essay, the rhetoric of gender as a sole category to articulate responses to domestic violence

needs to be problematized in an era of late-capitalism and globalization. In particular, the romanticized shelter needs to be situated as part of a larger discourse that projects non-profits as "saving the world," a task often reserved for international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The incredible proliferation of both US domestic non-profits and NGOs mark various crises of the state (particularly the decline of welfarism in the US) and the complicated maneuverings of global capital itself. It especially marks the emergence of what Gayatri Spivak calls an "international civil society" in which the role or even integrity of the state is completely effaced (249). Therefore, both non-profits and NGOs should be seen as entities that emerge because of such crises, not as solutions to them. Moreover, crises of the state and maneuverings of capital have implications for how the bodies of battered women are interpreted, read, and managed the moment they pass through shelter doors. An uncomplicated notion of gender oppression in domestic violence scenarios enables romantic ideas of saving women from batterers, keeping violence in the realm of individual anomaly, erasing any critical thought about how state structures, transnationalism, and globalization practices impact our work, and keep us working at this issue.

What we are left with are many contradictions, such as the reliance upon the flow of monies or state structures—reliances that often undermine our work. But these contradictions may be the impetus for us to rethink activist politics, including how we may want to restructure or reorganize our work. Specifically, we need to ask how society at large can be held accountable for domestic violence and other categorical constructions of violence, without its management being located solely to prisons and shelters, without fiscal and discursive justifications left to large corporations and the state. Rather we need to rethink responsibility and accountability in very different kinds of terms. I think such terms should be lead by those who "experience" violence in their lives which, of course, is not at all easily assessable. For some communities or neighborhoods this may mean working with police departments to bring homicide down to minimal or zero levels, or it may mean group confrontation of batterers among friends or community members. But the fact remains that more discussion needs to happen in spaces that are not intuitively imagined as being "inside" state and corporate apparatuses. How these spaces get defined (or rethought among current activist activity perhaps in the form of coalition or alliance work) is really yet to be seen, which renders responsibility and accountability entirely up for grabs. But it is going back to these very basic questions of responsibility and accountability that may open up other kinds of responses that do not include prisons and shelters or the reliance upon funding as narrow avenues upon which we look for answers. In our attempts to build more effective organizing

strategies, there will be a need to further examine and assess what the future holds for relationships between DV activism, the state, and corporate money. The current trajectory of DV work may just be understanding the history of how we got to where we are and begin to ask where the vision beyond the shelter should be directed.

Notes

[1]The idea of the collective was heavily influenced by the politics of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For a longer discussion see Bordt.

[2]For good discussions on professionalization and management practices in battered women shelters see Morgan, and G. Walker.

[3]Many of the incidents that took place reflected a dismantling of the feminist and activist nature of the organization. Many workers felt there was an attack on lesbians, mono-lingual Spanish speaking women, and those who had progressive politics. Currently some ex-workers are seeking redress through the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. These incidents are not just about agency infighting. They reflect current politics of domestic violence activism in which there exists competing definitions over the problem of domestic violence, all of which are linked to state, corporate, and feminist activities and practices.

[4]Although the "power and control" model, like the cycle of violence model, focuses on violent dynamics between heterosexual couples, without making any connections to institutions or larger racialized and heteronormative social processes, it has been helpful in contributing to avenues of women's empowerment. However, it may be time to rethink more complex dynamics of power and domestic violence.

[5]Discussions of these clinical models, or the simple rejection of them, appear in Gillian Walker, Schecter, and Bordt. Despite these critiques, most of the academic and some activist literature on domestic violence focuses on psychosocial and behavioral patterns of battered women. Especially well-known are Lenore E. Walker's *The Battered Woman, The Battered Woman Syndrome*, and *Terrifying Love;* and see Dobash and Dobash. In fact much of the literature was unquestioned and accepted as long as it appeared to be "pro-feminist."

[6]The term "population" deserves a longer discussion that I will not pursue here. Briefly, population is used to construct and segment social problems in order to manage the various fiscal and bureaucratic functions of the state. It often is an homogenous misnomer as people deal with multiple issues and identities that can either prevent them or enable them to successfully seek social services.

[7]As of 1997, this was largely due to the fact that the hotline was moved out of the shelter facility and managed mostly by mono-lingual English speaking counselors. As of this writing, this problem may or may not have changed; indeed some of the shelter's funding depends upon this service.

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