Rethinking a Movement: A CONVERSATION WITH CONNIE BURK
by Franci Romeo

Connie Burk has been the executive director of The Northwest Network for Bisexual, Trans, and Lesbian Survivors of Abuse since 1997. She is a survivor of domestic abuse.

Franci Romeo: Can you talk a little bit about the domestic violence movement, or where you see that going?

Connie Burk: Well, I think that in the anti-violence movement, generally our visions, our missions, our goals, are stated in terms of what we want to eradicate. We want to eradicate violence, for example. We don't articulate our goals in terms of what we want to build, and the implications of that are significant. For example, in having the goal that we want to eliminate domestic violence, that didn't necessarily inform what we wanted in its place. So if we had asked the question, "How do we want to support loving and equitable relationships that aren't based on domination by class, color, etc., etc.?" then perhaps criminalizing, incarcerating, building more prisons, and creating more laws wouldn't have been our response. [We would be] working on issues of economic justice or creating a different vision of the conditions that support healthy, equitable, loving families. We would recognize more the connections between capitalism and how domestic violence works. So, we're trying now to formulate that kind of thinking.

FR: Was changing the organization's name from AABL [Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians] part of that vision?

CB: The change in our name came from a lot of different sources. The name Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians didn't serve us, we felt, any longer. Really because we were working with a lot of bisexual women and trans folks and that was an obvious first group of folks that were not included. And then also, there's a program in Boston [The Boston Network] and a program in San Francisco [The San Francisco Network]... so the name change also reflected our solidarity in working with them.

FR: So what is the name now?

CB: The name is The Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, and Lesbian Survivors of Abuse.

FR: Do you serve, for example, bisexual men?

CB: Well, we do. And there's another group that does support group for queer men. It certainly seems that we're moving towards expanding who we're working with and who is working with us rather than moving towards having that less expanded. So maybe there will be another name change down the way, I don't know.

FR: What generally are the services you provide? You do advocacy...

CB: We do support groups and individual counseling and different kinds of advocacy—legal advocacy and general advocacy with folks who are trying to figure out housing or other kinds of concerns. We do a lot of community education, and a lot of provider education to other people who are doing domestic violence work. We also work to support community, [to help] folks who are producing events or working in different organizations plan how they will support survivors. And support perpetrators to be accountable.

One thing that [often] happens when somebody is surviving domestic violence is that people get really isolated. Perpetrators make strategies to isolate people, and then it's isolating to be trying to avoid your batterer or avoid conflict or not create a scene. So often survivors drop out and we just don't see them in community activities or being with us. So part of what we do is support organizations or groups or individuals who are looking at how to hold on to survivors.

At the same time, we know that perpetrators are with us everywhere. If you have a room with a hundred people and people are in relationships, there
will be folks there who have battered other people. And we don't have to try to find those folks and ostracize them. What we need to do is be open to—and conscious of and strategize around—the fact that batterers are with us everywhere. And that we can, as a community, be mindful and caring in how we create spaces for accountability, so that we have the value of holding on to everyone within our community. If we have the idea that somehow batterers would just leave and go somewhere else, then they're simply going to another community—another place where people wouldn't know that these are folks that need to be held accountable and need to be supported in unlearning the values of power and control that they're demonstrating in their relationships.

Definitely we see an essential value in having those conversations within our community. So just being places and talking about these concerns and representing them to folks who are making choices about what community is going to look like and what events or support is going to look like. That's one of the things Sara Johnston has been doing with the drag king shows, is really looking at how a drag king show can embody anti-racist values and anti-sexist values, and how to be aware that at the event, survivors are going to be there and perpetrators are going to be there. That we're all going to be there together and somehow find a way to be safer and loving and complicated with each other.

And is that possible? And if it's possible, what could it look like? And, you know, nobody has the answer of what that is yet. It's about supporting the folks that are willing to just start struggling with the question.

FR: What do you think a space that embodied all of that might look like?

CB: Well, I think the first thing would be, as we create those spaces, that folks are talking mindfully. So that when we're thinking, "Okay, we're going to have a party," we plan what the beverages are going to be and what the food is going to be and what the entertainment is going to be and how do we, in all of those choices, be actively anti-racist, actively anti-racist. What does that mean to us, how do we talk about it, how do we start to imagine it? I think that's where the starting point is going to be, is having those conversations. And then, what's it going to look like? It will be something really different than we've ever had before.

I think it will come in small moments—that liberation will come to us not necessarily in a big moment where at one moment we're oppressed and oppressors, and one moment we're not. But we will find times when we've created a space or had an interaction when we were working outside of the privilege we get—by virtue of our skin or gender or what have you—and at the same time, working outside of the internalized oppressions that we're maybe experiencing. That we're having this moment where we're actually functioning outside of what patriarchy, what the complicated face of oppression, would have for us to live in.

Then we'll have to look at what conditions were there. The conditions that were there will have to—in our community—white people actively working to end white supremacy. If that condition's not there, liberation couldn't be there. So that's going to have to be there. What did that look like? What kind of risks were white people willing to take in order to work actively against white supremacy and capitalism, which supports white supremacy? Then we can look at it and see what conditions were there, in that moment, and how to build and strengthen those.

Which is another question [that comes up] when we have all our visions and missions be that we want to eradicate domestic violence. Part of me believes that there will never be a time when we will be able to say that no one in an intimate relationship will hit or hurt their partner, or work to take systemic power and control over them—which is what domestic violence is about...

This is sort of a simplistic example, but there are few survivors that I've met who have not been told by their perpetrator, regardless of their gender or anything, that they're fat and no one will have them. Or that they have too many kids so no one will have them. And there's something really powerful [in that]. There is some way that is being communicated. You know, batterers aren't all going to one school where
they're just learning that this would work. So it's being communicated in our culture that [being fat] is a threat, that to say, “You're fat and no one's going to love you,” works on people who are skinny, and it works on people who are medium, and it works on people who are fat.

One of the things we can do is de-mechanize that saying that [someone is fat] would mean something. So that when a person says, “You're fat and no one is going to love you,” you would think, “What are you talking about? This person is fat and everyone loves them. It's not comprehensible to me what you're saying. It doesn't have meaning.”

Or, when people are kept in line by economic injustice, or we [can work to] take out the racism that means that folks don't have access to health care or jobs and housing. When we de-mechanize that, a batterer doesn't have that power to use to maintain power and control [within their relationship], so their attempts at power and control become much more feeble and much less resilient because people actually will be empowered to make choices. When somebody says, “Well, this is what it's going to be for you,” you can say, “No, actually I have these eighteen other options.”

[For example], you [wouldn't be able to] say that if I don't do what you say, you're going to tell my ex-husband that I'm gay and he's going to take my kids. That wouldn't happen because the judge [would be] a woman who supports [my right] to have my kids and my ex-husband loves my last partner. You wouldn't be able to have those things in place.

So what are the things that are going to support people having those options and choices? [Working towards] that is a piece of what we do. And that gets really big and overwhelming, [thinking of] what that could look like. How do you link with it in a way that's meaningful, and how do you have a piece of it that you can work on that is successful so we're actually doing something?

But I think those are the questions that hopefully, and excitingly, many folks in anti-violence movements are starting to struggle with. Certainly [the anti-violence movement] started out as a political understanding of how... sexism interacted with violence and what that was meaning for women. The kinds of support and responses we created out of that were necessarily limited by white supremacy and heterosexism and classism.

That response is being challenged, and has always been challenged. It's been challenged since before it was started. It's been challenged by women of color saying you’ve got to look at lynching as sexual violence, that when you're looking at anti-violence, you can't talk about rape and not talk about lynching. You can't do that. So people have always resisted the movement's racism.

Alisa Bierria with CARA, Communities Against Rape and Abuse, [is] continuing that analysis and those questions right now in Seattle. So you can see a return to that mandate and then know that it’s folks whose experiences have been marginalized who are going to be bringing us those complex answers. That’s when you see the intersections of race and class and homophobia, and where those intersections lie are our most complicated answers and solutions that can hold the most possibilities for all of us.

FR: How do you think we can foster spaces where it's safe to discuss that sort of thing? Since I've started doing domestic violence work, I've found that when people ask you what you do and I say I work with survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault, it's a conversation killer, so frequently. If you add race and class to that discussion, people tend to be very hesitant to talk openly or without a lot of guardedness.

CB: Well, particularly I'm thinking of, in queer spaces, Continued on p. 36
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there’s been a long history of process, or at least a significant time of process, where folks have discussed and worked and talked about and considered and argued about oppression and liberation, etc. And I think we always have to talk with each other and learn from one another. We’ll never have the luxury where that’s not something we need to do.

But I think that all of that has to be wedded with acting in consistent ways against white supremacy, against capitalism, against classism. When we simply process and discuss it, we just create this—Barbara Smith talks about this—we just create these kind of bubbles where people are really open to each other—but nobody actually lives in that bubble. And that bubble isn’t necessarily doing anything to hold police accountable for brutality against people of color or anything else.

And so my first step would be identifying the places where I’m going to, where you’re going to, where each of us is going to hook in and take a portion of our life and act against white supremacy. And it doesn’t mean we have to be the leader of a new project. I mean, there are lots of groups working to end white supremacy already out there, in Seattle, where we can participate and do shit work for and show up to and whatever. I think it’s from this involvement that we’re going to start to have the important conversations, rather than having the process first. Because I know a lot of folks feel like they’ve already done that [processing].

And I think that’d be another piece... If folks really think about times when they are in a meeting or a group and they have their time to speak, their time to share something, what are they doing with that time? I think often, as lesbian, bisexual, trans, white folks take that time to talk about that experience—what it means to be queer and where they’ve had hardships or pain or experience oppression as a result of that. That’s all well and good, but I think there’s also a question about where we’re willing to talk about what our privilege buys us. Or where our privilege and lack of consciousness around it have added to and perpetuated the misery and oppression of many, many people. You know, people sitting in the room with them, right then. Are we willing to have that conversation?

To me, that’s one of the reasons why the topic of same-sex domestic violence will not stay on the table. Woman to woman abuse, or lesbian battering, has been addressed since the beginning of the domestic violence movement. There have been plenty of dykes involved in the organizing, and the conversation has been raised over and over again and it simply will not stay on the table. People can raise it, then it’s gone. And then, similarly, issues around trans folks, there’s such an incredible resistance that I’ve felt. It’s starting to change a little now, but there’s this just sort of incredible resistance to trans folks in anti-violence movements, looking at trans people’s experience or just being complex about transgender, transsexual issues and concerns. And I think those things are related, or that they have a similar root behind them.

In the anti-violence movement, it would seem intuitive that if people are not willing to talk about same-sex domestic violence it must be because of homophobia. And certainly, we see homophobia playing its part in that kind of invisibilizing and losing the story of it, and it staying undiscussed.

But I really believe, and we have come to believe at the Network, that this homophobia is in service to white supremacy. The real reason why [same-sex domestic violence] stays off the table is white women’s investment in white supremacy, in maintaining as their primary identity their membership in an oppressed group—that is, women. It is really disruptive to that to talk about how women use power over other women.

The analysis of our movement says that when you see something in an individual relationship, you look at the culture, you look at the society, you look at other institutions. You look at how your government and schools are set up, you look at how your churches and communities are set up, and how they reflect or support [that violence] or control. Where are the connections between how power over [someone] is working in that individual relationship and in the society at large?

That’s why in heterosexual relationships, we’re able to see this huge impact of sexism in the fact that in heterosexual relationships, the vast, vast majority of the
I think there is this investment on the part of white women to be defending the borders of what is woman.

FR: How do you feel, as a white woman, you can actively combat those systems of racism and imperialism that you benefit from? How do you feel you can move beyond talking about it in this protected bubble, to doing something more active?

CB: Well, I think that people here in Seattle had a remarkable opportunity in December [during the World Trade Organization meetings] to participate in direct action against the capitalist world globalization and domination of the people of the South by the people of the North. And I think one example of how to participate is going down and being involved and showing up. Also, there were amazing opportunities to learn about how our privilege here causes the oppression of other folks.

The reason why the WTO meeting failed in Seattle was a symbiotic relationship between the people who were organizing in the streets... and a coalition of delegates from African countries that were going to refuse to sign any new round if patents on life were not prohibited [ed: see Vandana Shiva's Biopiracy]. One of the African coalition members spoke at the teach-in the weekend before the direct action, and talked about how they came with the intention to not sign as long as there were patents on life [in the trade agreement]. They were not sure how they were going to be able to stick with that because of incredible pressures that were going to be put on them and the hardships for them and their folks if they stuck with this.

It was making them feel enormously hopeful that so many people were at the teach-ins... And then, when 80,000 people took to the street, it was also helpful to know that there was an organized movement that would be able to stand up and support them as they took these risks. And so, while it was very disruptive to have the eighty thousand of us there, ultimately, it was that coalition refusing to sign that defeated the round.

So that's an example of how you can participate. People being on the street in Seattle actually helped defeat a round of this force that we would think is completely beyond our capacity to impact. In fact, people acting together, people creating the context that demonstrated support, allowed these delegates to take that stand and do it—to have the biggest defeat that globalization has had in forty years. That's one way we had an amazing opportunity to act against racism.

And there are many other ways, too. There's a
lot of organizing that’s happening around police brutality and the recent shooting [of David Walker]. There’s folks right now on the street outside this building that have a petition around a citizen review board for police accountability. So, those are a couple of ways.

FR: If we could back up for a minute, you had started to say something about why you felt that violence involving trans people was not on the table also, or why people aren’t willing to discuss that.

CB: I also think that again what gets behind that is racism, is white supremacy. Like looking at same-sex domestic violence, where if you look at how power over [someone] can be used in an intimate relationship between women, that causes you to look at how that could happen in organizations or how white privilege factors into power-over in groups of women.

Similarly, I think there is this investment on the part of white women to be defending the borders of what is woman. If we’re going to use our experiences with sexism to excuse our responsibility to look at our privilege with racism, then we have an investment in defending the borders of who can say they are women.

For example, I was at a meeting and there was a trans woman who was at that meeting. At some point she left. A woman in the group [believed] that the trans woman was pre-operative, that she still had her male genitalia. So she said, “There was a penis in the room. How do we have safety if there was a penis in the room?” [She] felt really entitled to feel endangered by virtue of a physical organ, based, I’m sure, on her experiences with violence in the past and a permission to equate those things together by the movement. So there’s this idea that the presence of a penis was necessarily dangerous to women, right? And that the fact that this trans person, this woman, was acting perfectly kind and considerate and was not menacing or threatening to anyone was not as significant as this organ.

I said, “You know, it’s interesting that if we’re going to locate violence in an organ, why [do] we all feel so comfortable sitting here with our white skin showing?” The biggest organ on our body . . . connects us just as fully with lynching and rape and murder and theft and brutality, by virtue of white supremacy, as you could possibly say a penis is representative of sexual violence and sexist violence of men against women.

There are many other implications of that interaction. Transphobia was used in that. It’s transphobic to be fascinated by what a person sitting next to you’s genitalia looks like, right? So it’s not that transphobia is not there, but I believe that transphobia was, in that moment, being used in service to racism. The transphobic consequences are still going to be there. The trans person is still going to be treated like shit in that space. It doesn’t make that any better, so it has to be addressed as well. But when we look at what was motivating behind that, I really think that what was motivating in that moment was about racism, was about keeping the borders clear of who can take this word woman and who can therefore ensure that the experience of women of color and poor women were not going to be addressed.

I don’t think people maintain that consciously, but that’s what comes out. I mean, that’s what I see coming out. In the same way, over time you see some kind of transphobic mobilization and then right on its heels, something more overtly attacking women of color’s leadership in those same organizations or other examples of how those things are wedded together. It just becomes more clear that that’s what people are so protective of, I believe. And again, it doesn’t mean that transphobia isn’t there, or that the homophobia that keeps woman to woman domestic violence off the table isn’t there. It’s just looking at what’s behind that, in my opinion.

FR: I think it’s easy to pin those silences solely on homophobia or on transphobia because that is what we see first, without ever really making ourselves accountable to underlying things that may be so deeply entrenched still in our culture that we don’t even see they’re there until we really stop and look for them.

CB: And the thing is, I think people have this sense that if we acknowledge that as a movement, it would somehow be divisive—that talking about this is divisive, not reconciling it. And I think we will not be reconciled, we won’t be effective ultimately as an anti-violence movement, or as any kind of social justice movement, until white women are willing to be accountable to their investment in white supremacy.