



# *Conversations about gender, culture, violence & narrative practice*

Stories of hope and complexity  
from women of many cultures

Edited by Angel Yuen and Cheryl White  
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Postscript by Ruth Pluznick

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## *On meeting Dawn*

By Lisa Berndt

It seems to me that every aspect of our work at the Center for the Vulnerable Child has to do with the interface of gender and culture and violence! So much of the so-called 'vulnerability' of the children we are concerned about has to do with historic and current cultures of racism, legally sanctioned discrimination, state-sanctioned violence in terms of discrepancies in law enforcement, and the allocation of resources and respect. And the vulnerability is not confined to people served by agencies. In my solo practice outside the agency, conversations about relationships often occur in contexts where violence has been perpetrated or is threatened.

One young woman, Dawn, is currently very much on my mind. She is fifteen, in the eighth grade, identifies as African American, and as a young woman proud of having 'a mind of my own'. She was referred for therapy by her godmother who, after a long and difficult fight, was granted custody of Dawn, who had been in several foster homes over the course of the past ten years. Dawn had been subjected to ongoing sexual and physical abuse in at least two of these homes.

I am a forty-nine-year old white woman, working in partnership with African American clinicians. Dawn's assigned therapist, an African American woman in

her twenties who was called away on a project of several months, asked me to meet with Dawn. I discussed this change with Dawn and her godmother, who agreed to meet with me. We talked at length about generational, cultural, regional, and religious differences and overlaps. Both wanted Dawn to have time to meet with me on her own.

In our first such meeting, Dawn introduced me to some of her favourite music and her ideas about pressures to dress up and be feminine in narrowly prescribed ways. She described how this pressure comes more from other young black women than from young men, and she was happy to be resisting. While watching music videos, we noticed and talked together about the sexualised images depicted of the young black women and the 'pimping' roles played by the black men in the videos. In the USA, an imagery of urban pimp lifestyle has been taken up in rap and hip hop culture, and popularised by record companies in a way that perpetuates a long history of commercial and cultural appropriation and misuse of African American symbols and art forms.

Before our next scheduled meeting, there was a conflict between Dawn and her godmother, who felt she had to send Dawn back into foster care. Dawn ran away and hooked up with a young man who offered her shelter, companionship, food and sex, and she allowed him to be her pimp. When she came in to see me a week later, she was very excited about the opportunities this life was offering her, and was not ready to leave it. She still felt it was a choice she was making, and returned to the street a few days later. She said she had never felt such a sense of belonging as with this young man and the other girls he was recruiting (she was also helping to recruit). She hoped to have his baby.

Throughout the time of these conversations, I was in touch with a group of counsellors who offer assistance to sexually exploited minors. The counsellors themselves are young women who had in the past been recruited to have sex for money and under threat. They say that Dawn's experience matches their early days on the streets, when they were being groomed for the life. The violence came later and, for them, the first step was sexual violation. They described to me how violence is what keeps the man's power over the women in place. When I asked Dawn about violence, she said, 'No, he's one of the good ones ... If anybody messes with me he'll mess him up'. So the violence 'out there' was a factor in the choices she was making.

## Dilemmas

As I had profound concerns for Dawn's safety, my first dilemma involved how to show up and invite Dawn to reflect on her situation and context and choices without imposing my own worries, values and proposed solutions. The multiple layers of privilege that have protected me are not available to Dawn, so the decisions I have made and solutions I may have come up with for my life have not brought me into the same sorts of danger as those Dawn is facing. Similarly, chances are that any 'solutions' that have worked in my life may not work for Dawn. But I saw the situation she was in as involving kidnapping and rape, and I was alarmed.

So much so, that I wondered (and talked with colleagues and the women who were consulting with us) if we should go to the avenue and scoop her up, or have her taken in when she showed up at the office. This is a dilemma that I face a lot when there's violence in the picture: What is my role in stopping it? What is the worker's role? At what point do we do things 'for someone's own good'? And then another voice says that to call in Police on an African American youth has a lot of historical echoes and numerous repercussions. Is there someone else we could call in? Are other collective responses possible? If they are not now, then what ground work could we be involved with that might generate options in the future?

A big consideration, which Dawn and I talked about, is the overlap of popular culture with the exploitation of young women. When images of violence and 'pimping and ho'ing (whoring) are popularised by those who profit from the image, and when this imagery fits snugly into wider discourses of discrimination, what options are rendered less visible, how does this affect the personal agency of young women, and how can we as workers respond? If popular culture is so much a part of the problem, can our work play a part in generating alternative popular culture? Could our work involve joining with young women who have insider knowledge of reclaiming their lives from the effects of 'pimping and ho'ing' to turn this knowledge into the lyrics of new hip-hop songs?

The shadow of Dawn's previous experiences of foster care was cast over all our conversations. If it wasn't a coincidence that Dawn had hooked up immediately after she learned there was a chance that the welfare system could again become involved in her life and she could be sent back to foster care, then how could the legacies of these histories be addressed?

In working with Dawn, and with many of the women I see who have come into this country with partners who abuse them, the danger they know is less dangerous to them than risking the involvement of 'the system'. While Dawn was not facing deportation across national borders, she feared deportation to a country where the authorities had let her be abused for years. How can we contribute to creating systems (welfare, policing, immigration) which young women who have been through foster care, and women who have migrated, are going to fear less than the violence and control of the men they know?

## **Principles**

I value collaboration, and I value seeing people as part of communities. I believe that these communities can be based on culture, common experiences, shared values and/or shared concerns. I believe that people should have a chance to make informed choices in their lives, and I believe that histories in which some have been systematically oppressed while others systematically privileged, shape the choices and decisions we make. If people are grappling with difficult and significant decisions in their lives, then I will seek to provide a context in which they can speak about their values in ways that (re-)connect them to significant others who have similar commitments. I also hope to find ways that the broader relations of power that are influencing a situation can be named and discussed. These are principles and beliefs which I hold as foundations for my work.

## **The conversations we shared**

I saw Dawn three times, and our last visit was on the eve of her moving to Southern California. Attempts to reach her again have not yet born fruit. In the three conversations we shared, we were finding various ways of talking about her experiences which Dawn was expressing enthusiasm about. These included:

*Trying to locate people's experiences in the context of power relations (of race, gender, class)*

In greeting Dawn, her family, and her peers, I tried to locate people's experience in the context of broader power relations. This included recognising and

acknowledging my position as an older white professional. It also meant asking about Dawn's understanding of the experience of girls being turned against one another and inviting her to consider how this happens, its effects on the girls' lives and on men's lives, and whether these practices tend to support or to undermine white supremacy. An additional avenue of enquiry would have been to look at the commercialisation of rap and the pimp lifestyle, who benefits from this, and its effects on community – this could have involved experts from the local community including young hip hop artists who are standing against violence and misogyny.

*Always holding an awareness of multiple-stories and perspectives*

In our conversations, I asked Dawn and her godmother to speak about what was important to them and to locate these values in their own life histories. Some of the questions I asked included, 'Could you tell me how that became important to you? What else does that connect with? What skills have you developed along the way that support you in living according to this value? This attention to Dawn's values was especially important in listening and responding to the stories of past experiences of abuse. I was particularly interested in the history of Dawn's resistance and responses to previous situations of exploitation and the skills she had honed in surviving. The stories I got to hear included several instances of Dawn standing up for younger children. When talking with Dawn's godmother, I took a similar approach, asking her to speak about what values were important to her and enquiring into the history of these in her life. This made it possible for Dawn's godmother's perspectives to be spoken about and acknowledged without these being placed in direct opposition to Dawn's ideas for her own life.

*Inviting Dawn to name and take a position on the difficulties or dilemmas with which she was grappling*

Early on in our conversations, the main difficulty or dilemma that we discussed was named as 'Trouble', although this externalised definition was more from the viewpoint of Dawn's godmother than Dawn herself. Over time, Dawn named 'trash talking' and then 'living the life' as aspects of her experience that were having mixed effects in her life. Naming these externalised difficulties and then exploring their multiple effects, made room for Dawn to give words to some of the

complex dilemmas with which she was struggling. She described some of the complexities involved in exposing herself to danger while cautioning younger siblings to be careful. She also described the way that prostituting helped her feel closer to some of the women who'd cared for her in the past, while at the same time acknowledging that risking arrest might jeopardise her chances at education and employment in the future. As I asked about the effects of taking this road on her family, friends, and her ideas about herself, she was most saddened about the strain that was being placed on her relationship with her godmother. Dawn expressed concern that her godmother might not realise how much Dawn loved and appreciated her. Throughout these discussions, it seemed very important to keep acknowledging the context of white supremacy, and various twisted ideas of male power, that were robbing Dawn of choices for her life. As we evaluated the effects of various difficulties or dilemmas, I would consistently ask whether these were things that fit with what racism might want for her life.

#### *Curiosity about Dawn's hopes and their social history*

Having heard about some of Dawn's hopes for her life, which included making a better life for children (especially her siblings who had been scattered in the foster care system), I was curious about the histories of these hopes. I was also curious about how the choices she was now making were fitting with these hopes. If we had had time for future conversations, perhaps there would have been opportunities to learn more about the social history of Dawn's plans for her life, for instance, who had kept these hopes alive, who had supported them, who would recognise them. Perhaps there would also have been opportunities for more exploration about how Dawn discerns whether the actions/choices she is making in the present are in accordance with the longer term hopes she holds for her life, and about what hinders and what assists these discernments.

#### *Linking Dawn's insider knowledge with the insider knowledge of others*

I was curious about Dawn's knowledge about ways of keeping herself safe on the streets, and the histories of this knowledge. Asking about this led Dawn to speak about a number of stands she had taken in the past to stop the exploitation of others. It also led to conversations about who else would know about the sorts of skills and knowledges Dawn has in these areas. I was interested to know what

Dawn's friends and her aunt (who has had experiences on the street) would say about some of the things that Dawn was going through and the ways in which she was trying to deal with the complexities she was facing. So I asked Dawn some questions about this. I also tried to get Dawn in touch with the young women who I had been consulting, who knew the experience of 'being turned out' and who use their stories to advocate and to help other young women navigate life on and off the streets. I would have loved to have access to some archived accounts of the skills and knowledge of survival and overcoming of these young women. Perhaps one day I may be able to be involved in collaboratively generating such archives. I'd also love to find ways for family members who feel they have 'lost' young people to the streets to have access to each others' knowledges.

If I had the chance to rewind time, I would have liked to have found a way to show up for Dawn's godmother in ways that offered more choices than either 'accepting' or 'rejecting' Dawn's decisions. She faced such painful decisions about staying true to her values and protecting other children in her home from the dangers of the exploiters. In both Dawn's life and her godmother's life, there are rich legacies of resistance to dehumanisation, of survival in tough times, and of seeking out and loving others. I wish our conversations could have explored these in more detail. Perhaps if these other terrains and stories could have been shared with each other, new possibilities for both Dawn and her godmother, and their relationship, may have become available. Perhaps there'll still be a chance for this in the future.

### **Reflections**

I guess I see my place as working within my communities (social workers, therapists, white folks, adults, women) to continue to expose layers of violence and intimidation as they are practised at every level, and to work in partnership with people who are addressing violence in their own communities. I am very grateful to the young women counsellors who were available to be consulted, and I hope to have continuing consultation from young women and men who can understand the context and experience of young women such as Dawn.