

Transcription: “And the Blood of Children Ran: On the Relation between Words and Action” [Part 2 of 2]

Run Time: 12:23

AH: Allison Hitt (host)
MBP: Minnie Bruce Pratt (guest)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

AH: Welcome back to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives. This episode is the second installation of a two-part keynote address from Minnie Bruce Pratt titled “And the Blood of Children Ran: On the Relation between Words and Action.” I’m your host, Allison Hitt.

Cue music: “On Children” by Sweet Honey in the Rock.

AH: In the first part of this keynote address from Syracuse University’s Conference on Activism, Rhetoric, and Research, Minnie Bruce Pratt discussed shifting definitions of what it means to be an activist and a feminist, considering the rhetoric we use to talk about change and action. In this second part of her address, Minnie Bruce considers what research has to do with change, with the connection between words and action, the connection between symbolic representation and material realities.

MBP: Oppressive power can use words like a shovel—to bury material reality under lies, denial, misrepresentation, prejudiced distortion, deliberate manipulation.

But oppressed peoples can use words to dig out the truth of a shared material reality. And this “digging out the truth” brings me to the last component in the title of our conference. In one version, it’s called reading. In another, research.

I want to reframe that word, those words, that word “research.” It can sound like a very isolated bit of academic activity. Instead, when I say “research,” I mean a never-ending investigation of the context that is the matrix of my action and my words. My never-ending investigation into the struggle between oppression and resistance in the past and in the historical present, looking for the intersection between change, action, language, and what we’re living in the middle of—looking for a trajectory into the future.

So, when I do what I would call *activist research*, which is a lifelong challenge, I do so to have as much integrity as I can in my actions and my words. I am *keenly* aware that I was trained as a child to ventriloquize the words and mimic the actions of white supremacy—and was taught that racism was the only truth, the only context for action. The activism of the Civil Rights Movement broke through that assumption in my life, as well as in the world—and the activist research of the rest of my life has taught me to place myself within larger and larger contexts of struggle and resistance.

Activist research means to dig deep and find the hidden or suppressed contexts that will enable me to act and speak without being made a tool of by forces I do not agree with, forces that perhaps I didn't even know existed.

For instance, Neruda's moving phrase, "the blood of children ran..." What happens if that beautiful statement—or the feeling behind that statement—is removed from the context of the struggle against fascism—which was a fight against a system based on racism, anti-Semitism, anti-worker oppression, hatred of women, hatred of LGBT people, hatred of people with disabilities? Neruda wrote that poem against part of the struggle against fascism. What if the feeling behind the phrase, the *agony* at the loss of children, what if that feeling is used and manipulated in another context?

When I was writing this, that made me think of the national campaign by Anita Bryant called "Save Our Children." Many of you were born way after this campaign. It was launched in 1977 to overturn a Florida law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Bryant *inflamed* unfounded homophobic assumptions that LGBT people sexually prey and abuse children. Her campaign resulted in radio call-in shows during which people said homosexuals should be deported, forced into concentration camps, or executed. Classic fascist demands. Her campaign also resulted in a Florida state law that year, 1977, banning adoptions by gay people. This banning of adoptions by gay people was a law that was not repealed until over 30 years later.

The assumption that we as LGBT people prey on children was deeply embedded in the context of the 1970s—not just in language or in social interactions but in law. Because of those laws and assumptions, when I came out as a lesbian, I lost custody of my own children.

Thus, for me, thinking and speaking—and acting—to stop, for instance, "the loss of children" has meant—even as I prepared this talk!—doing activist research into the complex ways that the loss itself can be caused by oppressive power and sometimes *used* by oppressive power.

As beautiful and moving as Neruda's language is, I must know his words in *their* political and historical context—and then apply *my* activist research to analyze other situations when that "loss of children" is evoked. Take the KONY 2012 campaign and its film, *Invisible Children*, for instance. Even if you know nothing about this campaign, you've probably seen the graffiti on campus. There's graffiti: "KONY 2012." You think, *What's KONY 2012? I must look that up.* Well, on the surface, this film *Invisible Children*, you think one could hardly object to this as it makes a stand against the use of "child soldiers" in the Ugandan guerrilla army.

But activist research, the digging deep, reveals a number of reasons to question the creation, widespread promotion, and factual accuracy of this film given the current geopolitical context. My activist research raises these questions: What does the promotion of the film have to do with U.S. corporate interest fearing Kony, given the recent discovery of oil in Uganda, and the strategic location of Uganda in relation to other areas of Africa

that contain a wealth of strategic minerals especially for electronics production? What about the funding of the video by right-wing fundamentalist Christian groups that also promoted and funded the so-called Ugandan “anti-gay” bill, as well as funding Proposition 8 in California, which is a referendum about gay marriage? How are these rightwing funders of the KONY 2012 campaign connected to other political campaigns in the U.S. and globally, including the ongoing use of women and children in right-wing agendas? Those are the questions that my activist research dug up for me to think about this campaign about the children.

So, without activist research—without taking into account the context for our words and actions—we risk turning over our heartfelt emotions, our eloquent words, and even our actions into the hands of other people—without fully understanding how those words, emotions, and actions might be used.

I’ve made these remarks in an attempt to model the interaction between activism, language, and so-called research, which I call the complex investigation of material reality—the interaction of the components of our conference and the process of change, which I define as the result of the struggle for justice and liberation.

During my “research” for this talk in connection with May Day, I remember that today is Cinco de Mayo, a day celebrated in Mexico as the anniversary of the Battle of Puebla—when a 4,000-person, poorly-equipped Mexican army defeated 8,000 superbly armed French soldiers who had invaded Mexico in a colonial adventure, 8,000 superbly armed French soldiers—an army that had been undefeated for almost 50 years. The Mexican army defeated the French army, and in another extension of context, there is some historical speculation that that battle, the Battle of Puebla, had a decisive impact on U.S. history. Because France was about to throw its weight behind the slavocracy of the Confederacy, and that French support could have tipped the battles of the U.S. toward a Confederate victory, resulting in a completely different history for us in this room as a consequence. So, Cinco de Mayo, a victory that foreshadowed Mexico’s liberation of itself from colonizing Spain and perhaps affected U.S. history decisively as well.

This day, with its histories of resistance to oppression—Cinco de Mayo, the anniversary of the children’s march in Birmingham—contains for me what is most important to add here at the end: The process—the interrelation of activism, language, and research—that this process always takes place in the context of struggle. There is no “neutrality.” There is no “level playing field.” As Frederick Douglass said, “Without struggle there is no progress.”

And the forces that seem the most powerful ultimately cannot prevail over the will and determination of those fighting for their own liberation.

Forty years ago when I was first coming out as a lesbian, I could not have stood before you *here* and even said the word *lesbian*. There was no room for that word, no less that person, anywhere public in the U.S.—not the university, the town board meeting, the soccer field—not even the dinner table at home in private.

Overlapping militant movements created the social space for my existence and in the process opened up space for me to speak to you *at this very moment* about words, actions, and issues of activist research—matters that were completely dismissed inside and outside the university 40 years ago but not by the activists outside the university.

That place for new existence was made, and is always made, through collective social labor, as all reality is created. There is a chance today for us to do some more of that work.

Clapping.

Cue music: “On Children” by Sweet Honey in the Rock

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.