

Transcription: “And the Blood of Children Ran: On the Relation between Words and Action” (Part 1 of 2)

Run Time: 20:53

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

AH: Welcome to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives. This episode is the first 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” sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock

AH: The following audio comes from Syracuse University’s inaugural Conference on Activism, Rhetoric, and Research (CARR). In this keynote, Minnie Bruce Pratt—a lesbian writer and white, anti-racist activist—wrestles with questions raised by Chilean poet and revolutionary Pablo Neruda. How are words related to action and to our moment in history? What do words like “change” and “action” have to do with us if we’ve never thought of ourselves as activists? And if we have been activists for many decades, what happens if we consider again the words we use?

MBP: I do want to underline that I teach here, and I only came here when I was about 60-year-old. And most of my life has been spent as an adjunct teacher, as an activist, as a writer. And it’s those selves that I bring together to talk to you from today. I think it’s very important to acknowledge that we gather together here today under a very broad banner of undergraduate students, graduate students, independent scholars out in the university, activists outside the university out in the community, people who might just be trying to figure out would they call themselves an activist.

We’re here under a very broad banner: Reading, Writing, and Speaking for Change. And so of course that last word can have very different meanings for very different people. For instance, for one person, *change* might be the hopeful slogan of the Democratic Party. To another, longed-for *change* might be the absolute end of racism or of anti-woman or anti-LGBT hatred. To another, the longed-for *change* might mean a revolution that would overturn the global profit-making economic system. I think it’s very likely that we have people from all those places on the spectrum of change here in the room together.

Since we come from these different locations and different longings, I thought that my contribution to the beginning of our time together would be to model the process of interaction between activism, language, and reading or research, to raise some questions that I thought could be part of our discussion, and to do this in part using my own experiences—just to try to put some flesh and blood on those very abstract words:

Activism, Rhetoric, and Research.

For instance, I wonder what image actually comes to each of you at the word “activist.” Perhaps a thought of the recent Occupy movement that spread over the U.S., over the world—Greece, Spain, England, India. I saw signs from Antarctica: Occupy Antarctica. People rising up in response to crushing student debt—I know people in this room can speak to that. No jobs or job loss—I know you can speak to that. Home loss; eviction from your rental apartment; detention of immigrant men, women, and children; hunger—we know the percentage of people in hunger in this country is way up—dislocation; pain resulting from the exploitation of banks and corporations seeking to squeeze profits out of the world’s people. Maybe you think of Occupy when you think of activist.

On May Day this week, May 1st, Occupy Syracuse and other groups rallied and marched in downtown Syracuse’s Perseverance Park, and one passerby had a very clear image of who he thought we were. He yelled at us, “Get a job.” Someone in the crowd yelled back, “I have two.” [*laughter*] So he yells, “Get a job,” and that conveys his definition of the marchers as lazy, shiftless, shirking, complaining people who only had a problem because we wouldn’t step up to our role in the system. In other words, we were the problem. And, if you think this is an unusual view, I refer you to the April 17th, 2012, *Post Standard* editorial “Poverty’s Traps,” in which the editors blame the 30% poverty rate in the city on [pause] poor people.

I’m sure you’ve heard the Occupies condemned in the media in very derogatory ways—accused of dirt, sexual license, violence, flaunting the law on the one hand. Implicated by Homeland Security in its attacks on civil liberties by trying to link them to the War on Terror, which of course is a camouflage for attacks on Muslim Arab people—the racist targeting of those people. You’ve heard the Occupies accused of idealism, ineptness, and lack of organization as flaws or character failings. I’m sure you’ve seen how in city after city on campus after campus police beat, pepper-sprayed, and shot rubber bullets at peaceful demonstrators. New information is now emerging that there was coordinated surveillance nationwide of the Occupies by Homeland Security.

But most relevant to our discussions today is the question: “Why were the activists of this movement seen as so threatening by authorities that the state used police force to suppress them?” That’s considerably more forceful than the person yelling, “Get a job.” I believe the answer is: Because the people who came together in the Occupies were attempting to build and hold a “common space”—a public space for discussion, argument, and planning—but not just for that. They came together to organize, to plan, and to act. They were building a common space where those suffering under the current political and economic system could meet and build a new reality together—not just by talking but by doing—independently and in opposition to the existing power structure. Now, the use of state force to attempt to crush such independent organizing by people attempting to change this unjust system is not unusual. It’s rather a constant in the history of the U.S.

The campaign against the Occupies was meant to stop the organizing and to make

working people in general be afraid to be that kind of activist—to instead encourage us to ridicule, minimize, and dismiss activists, to yell at them, “Get a job.” And to make us think that this particular mass movement has already failed rather than thinking that there has been an attempt to suppress it.

Nevertheless, the Occupies persist, and—to our purpose—today *we* meet together in common space that our conference organizers have cleared for us to come together. To strengthen ourselves against being divided from each other, I think it’s useful for us to reflect a bit on that pattern in the mainstream dominant representation of “activists” who have opposed U.S. power structures—a pattern that is intended I believe to undermine the *hope* that we might find in activism. For instance, this may be a program that nobody here even watches anymore, but the corporate media shows a befuddled, tie-dye-wearing “anti-war activist” in the TV show *Dharma and Greg*. [It] depicts this anti-war activist as someone who says “right on” and pumps his fist but whose past political actions are useless self-promotions and self-delusions.

But in the room right now, there are anti-war activists who have been organizing for decades—some of them for most of their lives, some of whom were arrested just two weeks ago protesting the U.S. drone warfare flown out of Hancock Airport who I’m sure would love to talk to you today about the difference between their lives in organizing and the anti-war activist stereotype!

And what about “feminist”? Recently, women’s talk show host Barbara Walters said she agreed with Rick Santorum about “radical feminists”—efined by her as 1970s women who believed that their liberation came from getting jobs rather than staying home with their children.

(<http://www.feministlawprofessors.com/2012/02/barbara-walters-blames-radical-feminism-emphasizing-work-families/>)

In this historically inaccurate and completely imprecise definition, we can still hear and see the accusations hurled more than 40 years ago at we who fought. We can hear the derogatory word-image of us as women rejecting the heterosexual family and being selfish “bra-less, hairy-legged man-hating lesbians.” [*laughter*] And we can laugh at that, but I can tell you I have recently polled my students about stereotypes about feminism, and those were the words they gave back to me of who they think that feminists are.

Well, what was my first image of “activist”? My first idea of activist was formed in the early 1960s in Alabama where I was born. I was a white teenager living in the heart of death-dealing racist segregation, and I knew nothing about that. Every white authority figure, [my father, my teachers, my preacher, the mayor of the town, the editor of the local newspaper, and the governor arch-racist George Wallace], all of them defined anyone who wanted to act to end segregation as un-American, as a communist, or a tool of communists. They condemned white civil rights workers with anti-Semitic and anti-gay comments. They called those who questioned segregation either “outside agitators” or “pointy-headed intellectuals.”

It took me years and a lot of learning about histories of resistance—which I did *not* get during my segregated undergraduate or graduate study—to understand that, though some in the Civil Rights Movement of course *were* gay or communist or Jewish, the intent of the people using those words as condemnation was to make me and other people afraid to associate *even in our thoughts* with those organizing to *change* the existing unjust system. White authorities delivered these segregationist words—this rhetoric, this demagoguery—especially to stop the white working-class majority from finding and forging solidarity with the people who were valiantly, sometimes at the cost of their lives, leading the struggle for expanded civil rights—Black people of African descent in the South, in Alabama, in Mississippi, in Georgia, Tennessee, in North Carolina—the heart of the struggle. When Ella Baker said, “We who believe in freedom will not rest until it comes,” those were the people leading the struggle.

And—when the governor himself mocked intellectuals, he sought to invalidate the very process of critical thinking.

What broke through this embargo on thought? Not words or debates or discussion about the evils of segregation—not lessons from the history of the U.S. struggle for the abolition of slavery. In my environment, I had no access to these words, those arguments, or that information.

I was put as close as I could get to resistance to segregation through TV footage of bloodied and battered Black and white Civil Rights Freedom Riders who were attacked at many points along their journey, but I saw an image in which they had been beaten by Klansmen in Alabama on May 14th, 1961. And the Greyhound bus in which they were traveling was torched and burning. They were challenging segregationist laws prohibiting integrated interstate travel. And despite the constant media over-voice, the rhetoric of segregation of the announcers and the authorities, despite those words, I saw action. I saw resistance to injustice. I saw people saying *no* with their bodies to the material reality of the system of segregation. This was the beginning of *change* in me—the beginning of my life as an ethical, conscious person. Those actions overrode the rhetoric that was being dinned into my ears, the ears of many people.

This beginning intensified in me, in ways I was not conscious of, with the growing organized resistance of the Black Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, especially the Children’s Marches in Birmingham. Those marches were May 2nd – May 5th, 1963.

And I want to pause here to honor the actions of those children on that May 5th almost 50 years ago—to honor the courage and pride of the hundreds of Black children as young as eight beaten by police—police who were turning snarling dogs and battering water upon the children, the children nevertheless advancing deliberately to liberate themselves.

So if I say, as I do, that *change in the material reality of an oppressive system* comes when oppressed people challenge, through their *actions*, the authority, the inevitably, the laws and assumptions of that system—then what can I say about how *representations of that material reality in language* (and by language of course, the bigger definition of

language: verbal, visual, signed) how do the representations of that material reality in language connect to the process of *change*?

The examples I gave earlier, the descriptive distortions of activists who have changed an oppressive status quo in the U.S., show how a ruling power structure develops, propagates, and enforces certain uses of language to alienate and divide oppressed people from each other—in addition to using laws and acts of oppression to this end.

But actions in material reality—ours and that of others—can break through this misleading language and give us the chance to forge a new language of resistance joined to actions of resistance.

Then comes the question: What *change* can happen to language on the day when I or you look with full consciousness and see the courage of children in the streets, or as the title of my talk today quotes, “the blood of children running in the streets?”

It was this moment at the intersection of language with the force of material reality that the Chilean poet [Pablo] Neruda wrote the line that I just quoted. Neruda—many years later a Nobel Prize winner for Literature—composed a poem after the abduction and subsequent assassination of poet Federico Garcia Lorca by fascist government soldiers. Federico is mentioned and Rafael—Rafael is another left poet, Rafael Alberti. So Neruda wrote:

My house was called
the house of flowers, because it was burning
everywhere with geraniums:

...

Do you remember, Rafael? Federico, do you remember
under the ground,
do you remember my house with balconies where
June light smothered flowers in your mouth?

...

And one morning all was aflame
and one morning the fires
came out of the earth
devouring people,
and from then on fire,
gunpowder from then on,
and from then on blood.

...

and through the streets the blood of the children
ran simply, like the blood of children.”

("Tercera Residencia/Espana en el Corazon/Explico algunas cosas")

Neruda *does not* say “the blood of children ran through the streets like the petals of red flowers.” How neatly that metaphor would have linked the end of his poem with the

beginning, with his “house of flowers”—and yet how that metaphor would have betrayed the children.

Neruda rejects the symbolic representation of metaphor and instead points as closely as he can back to the stark fact: “the blood of the children.”

Now, a *word* is not the same as *blood*. The word is still a representation, but by refusing metaphor Neruda shows us the danger that can come when words point away from material reality, when words move material reality into a symbolic realm, toward something “like” that is farther away than “what is.”

When the “what is” may be almost unbearable, then one may wish to run away from “what is” through symbolic representation.

In his poem, Neruda challenges us to stay as close as possible to material reality in our words. And note that he himself does not meet this challenge in isolation, as an individual, but rather as part of a movement of poets and activists. He invokes them in the poem, living and dead—their words emerging in a collective political activist process out of struggle.

One does not build a new reality alone—the building of a new reality is a socially collective task.

Neruda reminds—with this “rhetorical move” to give it the academic phrase, but it’s more than that—Neruda reminds us with this decision to refuse flowers and name instead “the blood of children,” he reminds us that words are a tool that can have multiple uses with multiple users.

Like a knife, words can be used to kill or be used to cut the ties that bind; like a rope, words can be used to pull someone from an abyss or to drag that person to their death. As Trayvon Martin’s mother said of the racist campaign of defamation against him after his death, “They’ve killed my son. Now they are trying to kill his reputation.”

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

But oppressed peoples can use words to dig out the truth of their shared material reality, and this “digging out the truth” brings me to the last component in the title of our conference.

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 Allison Hitt and Ben Kuebrich with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.