



Minnie Bruce Pratt

5/6/2015

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CTM: So, here we are.

MBP: Here we are.

MBP: I don't have any idea what you are going to ask me, but I'm ready.

CTM: So, first question being tell us a little bit about how you got to the kind of feminist and activist work that you are doing in the world now.

MBP: Well I thought you might ask me that, and so I do have a story about my first political action, but I'll preface it by saying that the moral of this story, or the meaning of this story is—what you gain for yourself if you stick to your principles that seem to be about other people. So I was asked to do a keynote for Creating Change, some while back, this was probably in the nineties I can't remember the exact date, and it was supposed to be about dealing with racism, because this was when Creating Change, which as you know is a LGBT organizational developmental conference, this was when they weren't as thoroughly committed and programmatically committed to dealing with issues of racism and multinationality as they are now. So they had me come and talk, and I decided that I did not want to do that alone as a white woman, that I thought it would be more productive if I did it with an African American lesbian, and so I told them that I wouldn't do it by myself, and I wanted to have a dialogue with someone, and I said I thought Jewelle Gomez would be a good person. And so we set that up, and Jewelle and I started writing back and forth to develop a set of questions we would ask each other. So I had questions I would ask her, she had questions she would ask me, and then we decided we would both—dwindle the list down and we would both answer each question. So one of the questions she came up with was, "What was your first political act?" And I had never thought about that, really. I had never thought about it searchingly. So what I

recovered from my memory of my life, is this: in the fall of 1966 I was eligible to vote for the first time, I turned twenty in September and the elections were in November. This was in Alabama. I was still an undergraduate at the University of Alabama. I became an undergraduate at the University of Alabama a year after George Wallace Stood in The Schoolhouse Door as it's called. The Schoolhouse Door actually was Foster Auditorium, which was where, you go to register, still you went to register for your classes. And that's the door he stood in, you know, the national guard federalized and met him, along with the Attorney General and African American people registered in Foster Auditorium. That was the year before I became an undergraduate. So at twenty, I was still an undergraduate there, and the Civil Rights Movement had been going on for many years, and I had been seeing those actions on the TV. I saw the footage, black and white footage from the assaults on the children's march in Birmingham, I saw black and white footage of the Freedom Riders coming off the burned bus in Aniston, the freedom fighters beaten up. There was a lot of coverage. The audio to the visuals was all white supremacy, the announcers. Because the media was owned by business interest committed to white supremacy. And everyone I heard in authority was a white supremacist: my minister, my preacher, all the preachers in my town, the mayor of the town, the editor of the newspaper, my parents absolutely, all of my teachers, all of my professors were silent and so I didn't know where they stood but they weren't opposing it.

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I had never heard a person raise their voice and verbalize opposition except what I saw on that footage. And I knew it was wrong what was happening, but I didn't have any language at all, or argumentation, or much knowledge. And I didn't have a real political or ethical position, it was just a feeling in response to what I saw happening to the lives, to the people that I saw laying down their lives to oppose it. And sometimes of course their voices were allowed in, but not all that very often. So, at twenty years old, I go to vote in my first election. And that of course was the year that the Lowndes County Freedom Democratic Party was formed, in Lowndes County, with farmers whose political experience dated all the way back to organizing in the '30s and '40s with the CP, and with the Sharecroppers Union, and with SNCC, also in Lowndes County. They organized a separate Democratic Party because of course the white Democratic Party was completely segregationist. And that organizing was also happening at the state level, of course in Mississippi as well. So, I don't know anything about all of that, I don't know—anything—about all of that. I go to vote in the second floor of our courthouse, the courthouse that was named for my grandfather because he was the probate judge for 50 years in our county, so the courthouse was named after my grandfather, and the second floor is this big open room, bigger, you know like four times as big as this room—there were no voting booths. Because there was no privacy in voting, so you just got your ballot and you sat down at a table and you marked your ballot. So I got my ballot, I sat down at the table and I looked at my

ballot, and this is what I remember about it. There were candidates that were marked with the rooster, and that was the emblem of the segregationist Democratic Party, southern Democratic Party, and there were candidates that were marked with a black panther, because the Alabama Freedom Democratic Party had put up candidates. Now I don't remember if that was just for my county, I don't remember if that was for the state, I don't remember anything except there was the black panther. And I don't remember if I'd ever seen the black panther before. Like how would I even have ever seen it? I don't think it was being shown on the TV, but I knew what it was. I—knew—what it was, because the people that were laying down their lives and bodies, I knew it was their symbol. I knew that was what it was, so I picked up my pencil and I started to mark my vote by the black panther. And my father came because he had come with me to vote, and he stood over me and said, “You can't do that.” And I said, “Yes, I can.” And I marked my mark, it's the only thing I voted for, by the black panther. And I put it in the voting box, and I left. I'm sure they went immediately or at the end of the day and tore it up, but it didn't matter. That was my first political act.

LEC: Whoa. Defiance from so young!

MBP: And that I only recovered because—

CTM: Jewelle asked you—

MBP: I had said, I had demanded, that I co-dialogue—have a conversation with an African American lesbian, and Jewelle asked me. I only got my own memory back because of that. Yeah, what a lesson, what a lesson for me to remember.

LEC: So with that great opening and wonderful memory, reflecting on the last two, three, four decades of your life work as a feminist. How would say that your work, how would you reflect on it, seeing how it has changed the lives of women? Whatever capacity, classes or—

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CTM: Or how would you hope?

MBP: Yeah, I think I should speak to how I hope, because it's always very difficult to know, what an impact one has had, especially if it's just difficult. So I'm sixty—about to be sixty-nine, so four decades takes me back to twenty-nine, and that's about right, because I really became political—actively political in my late 20s. Well I do know that the writing that I have done on being an anti-racist white woman has made a difference, and the essay in *Yours in Struggle*, “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart”, I know it was used, not just academically but in organizing groups—

CTM: Absolutely, it's probably been translated—

MBP: Just sort of circulated in ways I don't even know about. And that was the writing. And I—believe it was effective because it did emerge at a particular moment in political—organizing wave, of second wave feminism. And so I would preface saying that it had an effect by saying that my ability to write that essay came, not unlike the anecdote that Jewelle and I having a conversation, my ability to write that essay came because women of color within feminism or Women's Liberation were organizing, writing, producing texts, creating organizations, pushing white women to be accountable around racism not just in their personal life but in organizational ways and so forth. So really that essay came after a lot of work had already happened. And I referenced that in the essay, I mean I talk about people and texts that—Women of Color in specific, whose work had impacted me. So I feel like there is this sort of rolling, wavelike effect that where the essay goes on, in large part, because you and Bidy wrote about it, in your work it gets picked up programatically and in classes, people start using it. So—I feel like that anti-racist work has had an impact, only in conjuncture with this larger framework of organizing. That essay, if I had—well I couldn't have written it without previous work, but even if I had written in relation to that previous work, it still would not have had the impact that it had, if there hadn't have been this ongoing organizing, consciousness raising around racism, I think about the Storrs conference, the NWSA conference—and I don't—I don't want to overestimate the work that it did. I think about that essay, for instance and I think how maybe it's not used as much now, but it's still in use, and I think about how awful it is that it is still needed. I mean, I'm glad that it's still useful, and I also wish that it weren't still useful. I wish that it had fulfilled its historic task, and then we were able to go on to other tasks.

CTM: This is how I think about, "Under Western Eyes". Exactly the same way, written in mid 80s, and I wish it wasn't needed, but it feels as relevant now as it was twenty years ago.

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LEC: There's a 'why' to that. There's a 'why'.

MBP: Well and then I look at the dynamic, incredible, and central organizing that is being done now, under the banner of Black Lives Matter. And I think, well, there we are. So there we are. And I do feel like, within that context, then that essay still has something to offer, even now, even as other issues are brought forward. And I do think that's another contribution that I've made. I do think that as I've been able to move into understanding historical materialism, Marxism, dialectical materialism, as I've studied and educated myself and found my own comrades, I've really worked to integrate the anti-racist work that I've done, and that analysis, together. And I've done, more of that writing has been like writing for *Workers World* newspaper, I

wrote some long essays that are only available digitally, on—there’s one on reconstruction, I wrote a long piece on reconstruction in the South, talking about the material basis for the unfinished revolution there, and the overturning of that. I wrote a more personal creative nonfiction piece called “When I Say ‘Steal’, Who Do You Think Of?” based on a conversation I had with one of my cousins in Alabama about stealing. And who steals, and who doesn’t. And that was an interesting conversation, because he’s a white working class guy, and so when I say things to him like, “We take the profit motive out, then a lot of what you want would be possible,” and he completely gets that, but then there’s this other part of him that is still so imbued with racism. It was an interesting conversation because I saw, on one level, how superficial his resistance to truly radical ideas was, and on the other hand, you know the depth of the racism with which the owning classes have imbued the white working class. And how, and what a deep struggle that is. But that’s winnable, I think, absolutely winnable, but it has to be waged, staunchly. So—that’s my trajectory, and I’m not talking about feminism but of course I see this as like completely, completely, part of my fabric as someone who is part of what I think of as women’s liberation. Cause how can we change any of what happens to us as women, if we don’t also engage with these other oppressions. For me, I saw that early on as an impossibility. My life as a white woman would never be different if I didn’t oppose racism and didn’t oppose class oppression. It would never be different. Because I was trained by a generation—my parents, to identify with the white owning class, as a woman and to perpetuate those values. How would I—

CTM: It’s so interesting, because what you just said, is actually suggesting—because a lot of people have talked about the fact that when you occupy certain marginalized positions then you are able to see the power structure in certain ways, and make certain broad based connections among and between movements, and among and between issues and identities, so that you can understand sometimes, not always, how connected all of these struggles are. But you’re saying something now, a little bit different.

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MBP: Well, I’m not, and this is why. Because how I understood all of this, at the very beginning, was that I began to live as a lesbian and was punished for it. So, my place as a white woman was taken. My privilege—I don’t want to call it that—my relative privilege as a white woman suddenly just shattered because I began to live as a lesbian. I lost custody of my children. I—even just getting divorced, when I tried to rent an apartment I couldn’t rent an apartment as a divorced woman in Fayetteville, North Carolina, at first. I couldn’t get anybody to rent to me. Just, I stepped outside that boundary and then that was that—then that was it. I stepped outside that circle of protection and of course that’s what I explore in the essay what happens when you step outside that circle of protection, not understanding that you’ve been protected,

not understanding what that privilege has been. And of course that could happen at any time for any woman, really. And, but whether or not one can build on the understanding that comes from being punished for stepping outside, depends on what movement is in motion at the time, what kinds of understandings that movement can offer about women and women's oppression. And right now I think there are a lot of women who are suffering, who are being punished, for asserting their autonomy in different ways, sexually, in their work lives, they are being punished, but the movement—the Women's Liberation Movement, is not visible to them. And so they can't access from that movement as I did, an analysis of what is happening to them. But I had access to the Women's Liberation Movement, and I knew what was happening to me as soon as it started happening to me. The moment it started happening, because I was part of Women's Liberation. Tangentially, but I had access to some of the texts, and I certainly had access to the women who were in motion. And I heard them, I listened to them, and I knew immediately. I knew it wasn't me, I knew I was being punished, I knew that patriarchal law and class law were being invoked, I knew what was happening, and then out of that came the connections you are referring to. Not just because as a white woman I understood, but because as a lesbian who was a white woman, I stepped outside those boundaries and I had a movement that gave me the analysis to understand what was happening.

CTM: Wonderful. That's exactly what I thought would come from that question. Thanks.

MBP: Yeah. Good work, Chandra.

CTM: Yeah, because I know that story.

LEC: So I was saying, that was a very interesting history that you gave us—the backdrop is so powerful because it's a very different history for—than most white feminist—

CTM: Or what we now see as white feminist history.

LEC: Because it comes from a space of having always had a conscientization of race, always, and having always worked with women of color, and being in the South and looking around you and seeing race and racism informed your consciousness very differently.

MBP: Yeah, and that's so important, because you were saying, consciousness and of course this is true, consciousness rises out of material circumstances, and so the movements that were happening on the ground, and how they—and I say, the movements saved me. They did, they gave me a life, those movements. And then the question for now is, what's in motion now?

CTM: Exactly. If feminism now is about “lean in”, what is it? What kind of conscientization is that going to bring? Which actually brings me to our next question, which is—

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So, we were talking just now about how your history and your genealogy is so much—in some ways is very generational, because it is about the movements that were on the ground, that were so much a part of your own conscientization. So then I’m thinking if we move to now, 2015 and think about what it is—what are the challenges that are coming up now for feminists of all kinds, across countries, sexualities, race, etc. In thinking about building those kinds of complex analysis and explanations for what is happening in the world, and therefore the struggles that we have to engage in, the multiple struggles, what are the challenges if conscientization is not happening in the same way, because the movements on the ground are not the same movements anymore? And in fact we have a very neoliberal world where certain things are made visible, certain inequities are perhaps more visible now than they were, but we live in a completely different culture where a lot of forms of resistance are appropriated, and immediately consumed, mobilized, and de-politicized, domesticated? So what are the challenges?

LEC: And they make the material conditions seem different—

MBP & CTM: SEEM different. They make them seem different—

MBP: Well you know, I do see things a little differently than that question points. — Because actually what I’m seeing, here, on the campus and, but not just here, really, nationally, is how this neoliberal glaze is shattering for people on the ground. Regular working people—the so called ‘low wage movement’, which is so, not just people of color but certainly the organizing is led by people of color, women of color, all over the world, massive organizing going on around the crushing weight that is on people because of profit making. The reports that I see coming in from all over the US are about solidarity, not easily won solidarity, but growing solidarity, and a kind of dropping of illusions, I would say. The illusions around capitalist democracy, what it’s gonna give people, and then a sort of opening, so then what? If that’s not working, then what? And then a lot of questions and desires to talk about other possibilities, and I see it in the General Body organizing here on campus, an attempt to cross boundaries, to build not a theoretical unity, but an on the ground. Like, they are taking away things that people need, or they are not supplying things that people need. Here, the administration is taking away programs that would support lower income people, people of color; they’re not supplying needs for people with disabilities. So what happens when all of the people who are affected by that come together and try and present a united front to push it back? Which they did, they

pushed it back. Not complete wins, but they pushed it back. They just got through pushing it back again, around the—trying to cut the health benefits. And so, what I'm seeing is that the material conditions that in a public relations, you know, the public relations of capitalism try to make disappear—the austerity, right—but the people who are living it know it's not disappeared, they're living it.

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And the fact that it is worse, it's getting worse, it's not improving, even though the media machine is trying to convince people that it's improving, it's not. The figures that just came out about how many cities are there where people can't last longer than three months if they lose their job, without selling something, this is like people who have something to sell. Buffalo is like, 75% of the people can't survive, Birmingham, Alabama, 65% of the people can't survive. So, that's 65% of the people in Birmingham, Alabama! So what happens when those people start getting together, to push back? And I think that's—Black Lives Matter. You're seeing a direct response to state violence, which is about enforcing austerity. Police enforce property. So there's a pushing back there, and then there are all the people who are saying they're against this also. They're against the state repressing people and harming people. And the very concrete manifestation of that are these huge demonstrations. The state is oppressing and harming people. But then, the implication and the potential—and it's already happening—I'm seeing the hashtags, Black Lives Matter in education, Black Lives Matter in healthcare, and then it extends and extends. Just the fact that the state in Ferguson, Missouri felt that it could target people of African descent and get away with it was the spark, but the potential for people coming together is immense. And we're seeing it around the world. I mean, we're seeing Greece, we are seeing Spain, we are seeing India, we're seeing it happening everywhere. And to me the crisis is really not about, I mean obviously it's, "So how do people bridge those differences to be organizationally together?" but that has to be worked out on the ground. It's not something we can sit here and say, "It should happen this way or it should happen that way," but to me the challenge really is more organizational. Like, how does one build, from the ground up, and from that generational gap of people who've been through this struggle before, how does one build those connections to put together some structures that can endure through the kinds of changes that are necessary for people to affirm each other and still stay together in the struggle? And those organizational, those structures are going to go through many permutations. I think we have no idea what they might be. I think they have to be built by the people that are in motion together with the people who have been in motion, but not just theoretically. And so it's going to look different in different regions. You know, the people in Tennessee who are dealing with things in Tennessee are gonna be—struggling with different things than, say, the people in California, but then how do those connections get put together? And people are trying different things. You know, there's the People's Power Assembly in Baltimore, Philadelphia and maybe there's

some in Wisconsin, but people are trying other things, so—I think—I don't know, I don't know the answer to these questions. Only as people—

CTM: Work on it—

MBP: Come together do people, do these—do the structures emerge. You know, I've been reading Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution—

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—and my mentor, Milt Neidenberg who was a union organizer in the steel mills in Bethlehem Steel Mills in Buffalo, who is in his 90s, I tell him with great enthusiasm I'm reading Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution, I'm all excited about the details. Like, how do they do it? And Mel says to me, rather sternly, that was Russia in 1917 and 1918, and this is the US, and let's talk about what you are going to read next. It's like okay, right, right. So they had the Soviets, but that came out of an existing particular material set of circumstances. And we are in a different set of circumstances, where heavy industry is gone, pretty much, until it starts coming back because the dollar favors it, but right now we're talking about service workers, teachers, we're talking about a different set of organizational demands, unlike how to get things going—

CTM: And also, in terms of women's movements, or feminist's movements, we're talking about incredible exacerbations of violence against women, around the world—

MBP: Yes, this is true—

CTM: Which is also part of the shift in material circumstances, and the rising violence of the state. And of militarization, occupation, a whole bunch of stuff.

MBP: Yes, and I see emerging out of the new wave of labor organizing or worker center organizing, that those concerns that used to be allotted to feminism or women's issues, are now being moved into class-based organizing. So like the Women's Fightback Network that I know in New York, when they put out their list of demands out, it's like every issue is a working woman's issue. Every issue. And that means violence against women in the workplace—rape, beating, sexual harassment, and it means wages that can't support the family of women who have a family to support.

LEC: Okay, so you've done some great looking back and taken us to those wonderful spaces as we remembered with you—now we want you to look forward, and simultaneously, at taking you into the imaginary. Imagining what kind of world would you like to see for women of tomorrow: here, there, internationally,

everywhere, as a wonderful anti-capitalist, as a poet, as a feminist, as a somebody who's been in the struggle for so long, what does that imagination look like?

MBP: So, the imagination. So before I talk about the future, I'll say something about the imagination, because I'm a poet, so I've had to think a lot about the imagination. And one of the things I understood as I was doing anti-racist work, was how profoundly my imagination had been distorted by white supremacy. And you know, of course Toni Morrison has written about this—the imagination, and she's written about language, like, what does it mean to be a writer, and this is your tool, and it's contaminated. It's polluted. You know, your tool is damaged—by racism. And that certainly was true of my imagination. My language, my vocabulary, my images, my metaphors, my idea of what human beings were, everything, everything. And so for me, anti-racist work has been organizing and it's also been—being demanding of myself in relation to my writing that I not replicate that white supremacy in how I do my work. How I do my writing and the only way that has changed is, as I said at the beginning of the interview, is in collective work, in actual on the ground work, with people of color, women of color, anti-racist white people, with people who are opposed to capitalism, opposed to profiting off of other people's labor and bodies.

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You know, as I went through that process, my ability to imagine differently was changed, and other possibilities opened up to me. And even with all of that, I could not have imagined, by myself, for instance, being able to get married to Leslie. I didn't imagine that, in my lifetime, I didn't think it would happen. So it wasn't imagination that made it happen, individually. It was collective imagination. Collective hope, and also the springing from moment to moment of collective work together, so that with each step and each spring forward, another possibility opened up. So it's hard to answer your question, because I know from my own experience, how limited the individual imagination is. So I can think about my hopes for the future, what I hope for, what I believe based on dialectical materialism, is possible, but not because we think about it, but because we look at what is and we try to intervene, with others, into what is. And—so if we were able collectively to make those interventions, what I would hope would be an end to capitalism—an end. So that's very abstract, when you say that to people, and I don't know who's going to be watching this tape, so that means for me, an end to people profiting on the bodies and work of other people.

LEC: And that's the collective imagination.

MBP: And that's a collective imaginary, we're only going to get there together. And by "us" I don't mean the 1%, I mean the "us" who do the work of the world, that's who I mean. And so, an end to that, an end to profiting off the labor of women's

bodies, of the labor of men, too, of children, of people of all nationalities, and the hope that, as that struggle is waged over time that the imagination of what a full life could be, bread and roses, too. I think about it when I teach, because I know, because my training as a teacher came not from the academy, but from the movement, like, with my peers, us doing workshops together, us doing writing workshops. With my peers, teaching me how to teach, I know that the ability to write, for instance, wonderful poetry, is in everybody, if they're given room and encouragement and the encouragement of others, and access to their own life experience without being told it's meaningless—told it's meaningful. And even inside this university, as repressive as the structure is, I see that in my classroom. I see that if a space is made, and collective affirmation is offered, people can just do brilliant work. And then I think what the world would be like, if everybody had a chance to do their own work, whatever their own inclination and their own skills and temperament might lead them toward. What the world could be! What the world could be, without our being limited by this system that tells us to prey on each other, and that the only way that people can be—excel is through this system that tells us that we have to stand on other people to excel.

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MBP: I know that is a lie. It is a big, big lie, because I've seen even in these limited ways, how—what incredible brilliant work people can make. So that's my hope, that's my hope, that's my hope.

CTM: So some of this imagination has to do with finding a way to construct relationships in a way on different grounds with each other too.

MBP: I see it as only happening in the struggle, it's the place I've seen it happen. Or people who are in the struggle, who take that into some other area of their life that isn't liberated territory yet. So really, it's not about constructing new relationships, it's about being in the struggle, and the relationships that are made out of that. And of course that's a very difficult, messy, complicated process, but also, it's where life is.

LEC: But it also has to be work of intent. One has to be conscious enough to work on intent.

MBP: And the real struggle is to be conscious while we're doing it. The real struggle is for consciousness, but as that is given to us out the material moment; how to claim it and hold onto it with each other. Yes, the real struggle is the consciousness.

CTM: I think about the title of the book we didn't do. "At Home in the Struggle."

MBP: Although now, I wouldn't use that.

CTM: What would you call it?

MBP: Well, the reason why I wouldn't necessary call it that—because I'm having to think right now because of some of the work I'm doing, more and more about home and family, and about how family is still, and the family that then is in the home, is still a mechanism of the state. And even the sort of enlarged definition that's being allowed now in terms of LGBT people is just bringing it into a family that is still a mechanism of the state. And that means that that—place is problematic to me in a way that, it always has been problematic since I came to consciousness, but now I think that—that—a new kind of family is only going to come about as part of an anti-capitalist struggle, and that only then will it really truly be you know, love makes a family, family's by choice, because everything that is weighted down on the family now, that is forced upon the family's survival, the buffer against utter destitution, that would be lifted from the family. And it would be a whole different life for women. I mean to me—really, for me, if there is ever going to truly be women's liberation, it will only come if the family doesn't exist in any way in its present form.

LEC: Absolutely, absolutely.

CTM: It's a great place to end. Thanks Minnie Bruce.

MBP: There we are!

CTM: So we talked to Minnie Bruce in Syracuse on May 6th, 2015.

MBP: The day after Cinco de Mayo.

CTM: The day after Cinco de Mayo.

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Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.