

The revolutionary spirit of Minnie Bruce Pratt

written by Bob McCubbin
July 21, 2023



Minnie Bruce Pratt and Leslie Feinberg, Boston. Photo: Marilyn Humphries © 2003

Minnie Bruce Pratt died July 2, 2023, in Syracuse, N.Y. See minniebrucepratt.net

It was a cool sunny morning at a La Jolla Shores outdoor café where I first met Minnie Bruce Pratt. Maybe I should more accurately say “briefly met” since, to avoid any possible distraction from an intense personal/political discussion in the offing between revolutionary communist and transgender warrior Leslie Feinberg and this author, Minnie Bruce, with no prompting from either Leslie or me, almost immediately after some brief introductory chat, smiled and moved with her coffee cup to an unoccupied table some distance from Leslie and me. It was only later, as the three of us found occasions when we were in the same city at the same time for precious, if all too brief rendezvouses, that Minnie Bruce’s brilliance, beauty, and devotion to supporting the struggles of the most oppressed among humanity’s billions, captured my heart.

The love of Minnie Bruce’s life was Leslie Feinberg, and, equally, the love of Leslie’s life was Minnie Bruce. In Leslie, Minnie Bruce saw, expressed in each and all of Leslie’s many contributions to the struggle for social justice (as a journalist, novelist, and Marxist theoretician, as an organizer of many of the most significant political mobilizations of the time, and as a political leader in the front ranks, whose inspiring speeches won many a young trans or gender nonbinary youth to the struggle) ... Witness to these attributes, Minnie Bruce saw Leslie as a bellwether of the future of humankind, when, with the return of communal society at a higher level of technology, all of humanity will be able to regain the autonomous patterns of life lived in harmony with the natural world by our pre-private property ancestors.

In Minnie Bruce, Leslie found the profound sensitivity, understanding, and love that had always been elusive in her previous relationships. (See her semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*.) And Minnie Bruce was herself a courageous fighter, had always been a fighter, had fought the homophobic,

transphobic, racist state that took her children from her to punish her for her audacity in coming out publicly at a time and place when and where it was simply outrageous and unacceptable to do so. From the point of view of the racist Southern establishment, she must be punished for being a proud lesbian, a fiercely anti-racist activist, and an outspoken opponent of imperialist war.

I'm unqualified to write about Minnie Bruce's phenomenal achievements as a revolutionary lesbian poet. Our all too infrequent get-togethers were dominated by the exchange of personal snippets from our own lives and serious discussions about current local, national, and world political developments. In what smacks, to me, of blatant, politically motivated misrepresentation, Minnie Bruce's New York Times obituary (NYT, 7/16/2023) conveniently ignored her longtime active membership in Workers World Party and her active role for many years as a contributing journalist to and managing editor of that Party's newspaper. This shameless imperialist mouthpiece focused, instead, only on her many literary accomplishments.

But any obituary celebrating her life would be incomplete without acknowledgment of those well-deserved honors. In the Times' article, Penelope Green writes, "Minnie Bruce Pratt, a feminist poet and essayist whose collection 'Crime Against Nature,' which mapped her despair, anger and resilience after losing custody of her children when she came out as a lesbian, earned one of poetry's highest honors and made her a target of hard-right conservatives." What's missing here and what clearly stood out among Minnie Bruce's many personal qualities was her fight-back, struggle spirit. Minnie Bruce Pratt lived her life as a dedicated fighter for all the poor and oppressed of this tortured planet. Long live her spirit! Long live her revolutionary example!

Bob McCubbin, the author of "The Social Evolution of Humanity: Marx and Engels were right!" (2019) and "The Roots of Lesbian and Gay Oppression: A Marxist View" (1976), is a writer for Struggle-La Lucha and a member of the Socialist Unity Party.

All That Work No One Knows

By Minnie Bruce Pratt

(From "Inside the Money Machine," 2011, Carolina Wren Press)

We're not machines, you know. There's only so much we can take,
Always more than we can, until we can't. Today I hold the weight
Low in my belly and back, guts coiled tight from work at my desk.
Flat on the mat at the gym, I pull my legs open, my hipbones press
Down like knives, slicing pain, my estranged being biding out down
There. Knees up, rocking side to side, the pendulum rhythm, time
Inside me, belly clock, basket of bone. What else have I carried?

Two babies, rattling inside a shaking gourd, little fish in a reed creel.
Each I hauled, both of us, around for months, like an oak-splint
Laundry basket hiked in front of me with both hands, steady balance
Until I could pull out the heavy wet baby and hold it up to dry.
All that work no one knew about but me. I wove sinew, vein, artery,
Eyes and hair. Night and day. All that work no one knew about but me.

I was down south when I carried them. Later I came up north to learn
These cities, these other rivers, the work at the long eddy and curve
Where rafts of timber waited to float down at Basket-Switch,
Where the railroad finally came to pick up blue flagstones piled high
At the dock, the men who mined the mountain ribs by hand and chisel,
The women packing apples into barrels, into baskets, into wooden lugs,
A thousand trainloads from orchards they tended that finally rotted
To the ground, the people gone, the words between gone to the air.

What's left now are pyramids of fruit piled up in supermarkets,
A few saleable kinds, the red of Jonathan, Cortland, Sweet Winesap,
And the grass giving way to other trees, the valley down river
Flowing dense as midnight even in mid-day, growing dark again.

Somewhere, further west, a first woman weaves her Delaware
Basket again. Somewhere a basket is brought to her grave
And the weave torn through, or her last pot brought and broke,
So all her life of work runs out, down and back into the ground,
Past her head and her hands, her belly, her feet, to where it came.
The fumbled load we carry, the jumble, our lives unknown,
We who make and are shaped, we who hold and are held.

