

Rhetorical Strategies as Rhetorical Affordances

Glen McClish

Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet, Detroit,” April 12th, 1964.

Whenever the Negroes keep the Democrats in power they’re keeping the Dixiecrats in power. This is true! A vote for a Democrat is nothing but a vote for a Dixiecrat. I know you don’t like me saying that. I’m not the kind of person who come here to say what you like. I’m going to tell you the truth whether you like it or not. [applause]

Up here in the North you have the same thing. The Democratic Party don’t—they don’t do it that way. They got a thing they call gerrymandering. They maneuver you out of power. Even though you can vote they fix it so you’re voting for nobody. They got you going and coming. In the South they’re outright political wolves, in the North they’re political foxes. A fox and a wolf are both canine, both belong to the dog family. [laughter, applause] Now, you take your choice. You going to choose a northern dog or a southern dog? Because either dog you choose, I guarantee you, you’ll still be in the doghouse.

This is why I say it’s the ballot or the bullet. It’s liberty or it’s death. It’s freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody. [applause] America today finds herself in a unique situation. Historically, revolutions are bloody, oh yes they are. They have never had a bloodless revolution. Or a non-violent revolution. That don’t happen even in Hollywood [laughter] You don’t have a revolution in which you love your enemy. And you don’t have a revolution in which you are begging the system of exploitation to integrate you into it. Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems.

A revolution is bloody, but America is in a unique position. She’s the only country in history, in the position actually to become involved in a bloodless revolution. The Russian Revolution was bloody, Chinese Revolution was bloody, French Revolution was bloody, Cuban Revolution was bloody. And there was nothing more bloody than the American Revolution. But today, this country can become involved in a revolution that won’t take bloodshed. All she’s got to do is give the black man in this country everything that’s due him, everything. [applause]

Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," December 28, 1977

The women who sustained me through that period were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge—within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior (41).

For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, [Black women] have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid (42).