

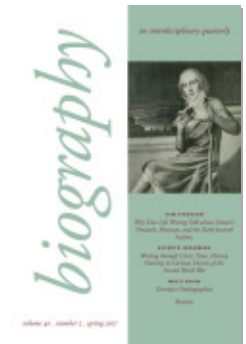


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## Barbara Harlow: A Remembrance via Conferences, Readings, and Questions

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## REMEMBERING BARBARA HARLOW (1948–2017)



Photograph of Barbara Harlow in her home in Austin, Texas. Reprinted by permission of the photographer, Tarek El-Ariss.

**BARBARA HARLOW**  
 A REMEMBRANCE VIA CONFERENCES,  
 READINGS, AND QUESTIONS

LAURA E. LYONS

The task of remembering Barbara Harlow is not easy for many reasons, not least among them that she was both formative and formidable to so many, as an example of a committed scholar and colleague, and most certainly as an exacting teacher. For her former students (like Shankar, John Zuern, and me), Barbara's insistence on a particular kind of historicizing is a critical lesson that undoubtedly marks both our scholarship and our teaching. What she meant by historicizing involved many things. It was not just a matter of what she called "vulgar empiricism"—the who, what, when, and where of history, all of which she felt were the least any scholar could do—but also of tracking how the pressing questions of a given time were registered in different venues, whether those be in written documents like novels, poems, or trade treaties, or in other arenas like conferences or courts. She thought a great deal about how those questions reemerge and change across time or are forgotten. In other words, Barbara had an uncanny ability to correlate academic and political formations, both to see them as critically engaged with each other rather than as separate realms and to imagine their mutual transformation. If people associate her with political readings of literature, a description far too simplistic for what she wrote, it is also the case that she frequently trained her close reading skills on other forms of writing and, in the process, revealed the genres, leitmotifs, reversals, recognitions, and plot twists that define politics.

I want to remember Barbara Harlow by recalling where many of *Biography's* readers might have encountered her for the first time: the IABA 2008 Conference on Life Writing and Translations held in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Even now at other IABAs, we still hear people offering props to Cynthia G. Franklin, Miriam Fuchs, Craig Howes, and Stan Schab for a conference experience in which each element, from papers and keynotes to food and music, elaborated the conference focus on "Life Writing and Translations." Barbara was an excellent choice for one of the keynotes; she was herself a translator of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (*Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*) and the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani (*Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories*),

to name two of the translations she is particularly known for, and her own work often concerned the lives and writing of those in liberation movements. *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* focused, for example, on three writers—Roque Dalton of El Salvador, Ghassan Kanafani of Palestine, and Ruth First of South Africa—who had been assassinated for their activism.

Barbara's keynote at IABA returned to Ruth First, South African communist and anti-apartheid activist, and was in many respects an extension of an article she wrote for a 2002 special issue of this journal titled *Biography and Geography*, edited by Miriam Fuchs. In that article, "Redlined Africa: Ruth First's *Barrel of a Gun*," Barbara offers a reading of First's 1970 book (republished in the United States as *Power in Africa*) as "intellectual history . . . a story that necessarily combines both biography and bibliography" (151–52), one that "proposes a study of coups in Africa, with special reference to the Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana, and provides a chapter in the life of Ruth First and her own contributions to the 'liberation of Africa'" (152).

The relationship between the intellectual histories of revolutionary movements and the individuals within them was a primary point of intersection between Barbara's work and life writing. In the early 1990s, the course packets for her seminars on "Strategies of Theory in the Third World" and "Third World Feminisms" noticeably lacked the kinds of theories popular in postcolonial studies then and now. Rather, these courses primarily focused on the writings of those within resistance movements. Eschewing an international division of labor that would render the writings of those involved in national liberation struggles as the raw material through which privileged, first-world intellectuals could make their arguments, if not their names, Barbara instead favored a way of reading that took seriously the intellectual traditions that contributed to those movements and that understood the history of ideas behind revolutions, like the political ends struggled for, as something not fixed but rather continuously in need of negotiation. Even a text like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (one of the only conventionally identifiable theoretical texts on our syllabi) Barbara scrupulously read as an intellectual memoir.

At that IABA 2008, Barbara's keynote again braided the biography and bibliography of Ruth First. "Tortured Thoughts: From Marshall Square to Guantánamo Bay," later published in the special issue of *Biography* dedicated to the conference, coedited by Cynthia G. Franklin and Miriam Fuchs, revolves around a tight cluster of questions that Barbara poses early on: "Was Ruth First in 1982 a 'legitimate target' for apartheid's politically motivated assassins? Was she ever 'tortured' during her 117 days of detention in 1963? Who cared anyway? And why? Why care now?" (27). The last of these not

entirely rhetorical questions is partially answered in the way that she reads First's account of her detention alongside Moazzam Begg's memoir *Enemy Combatant*. Reading the structures of their different scenes of interrogation, Barbara suggested, can be

instructive perhaps in reconsidering the contemporary issues facing the "humanities" as both academic discipline and intellectual tradition—what might have been, might even now be, indeed might yet become, productive methods towards a renewed politics of response and resistance, the paradoxes and conundrums of living and working in an "age of torture." (27)

Barbara's address resonated with both of the other keynote presentations. Allica Partnoy, whose book *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* often appeared on Barbara's syllabi in the early 1990s, spoke in her keynote about the real challenges that the victims of state terrorism, like her and many of her comrades during Argentina's "Dirty Wars," face when telling their stories. Partnoy talked movingly of the necessity of building a discourse of solidarity and a method of "co/labor/actions" so that those who have survived torture at the hands of the state might offer their expertise to and advocate for other victims in their home and elsewhere.

Barbara's focus on intellectual histories and her insistence that the death by letter bomb of Ruth First still mattered over twenty-five years later also articulated with Kanaka Maoli scholar Noenoe Silva, whose own keynote involved the creation of what she called "bio-bibliographies" of two important Hawaiian intellectuals, Joseph H. Kānepu'u and Joseph Mokuohai Poepoe. Barbara used the term in the published version of her talk on Ruth First and torture, stating "I share this term 'bio-bibliography' with Noenoe Silva in attempting to think through the parameters of intellectual biography, not just 'life writing,' but a 'writing life' as well" (41n1). Ruth First and issues of state violence continued to be at the center of Barbara's "writing life" for several decades, through visiting professorships and research trips to England and South Africa for a manuscript whose publication will unfortunately be posthumous.

*117 Days*, First's memoir of her detention in 1963, was one of the final readings for a course on "Writing and Political Detention" that I took from Barbara in 1991. I remember her lingering over a passage in Albie Sachs's foreword to the Monthly Review Press edition. In it, Sachs relays how although Ruth First was "physically uneasy about her own participation in the singing and dancing at meetings and unable to take part in the banter in African languages," her discomfort "in no way inhibited her activity as a thinker, organizer, educator and writer in the movement" (9). Ruth First was emblematic of the kind of solidarity I think Barbara most respected, neither a

giving up of privilege, nor a preservation of it, but rather a mobilization of resources and access to forward ideas much bigger than one's individual contribution. "However uneasy she might have been," I recall her saying of Ruth First, "she stood there." Barbara herself "stood there" among many different activist groups participating in rallies and protests from Northern Ireland to Austin and in solidarity with people from Palestine, El Salvador, and Iraq, to name a few.

But Barbara also had a remarkable capacity to just be with people, "to hang out" as she liked to say. Between sessions at that IABA, she could be found hanging out on the lanai of the Imin Center sharing cigarettes with younger scholars, mostly from parts of the world that interested her. She would ask them about their work, families, what they were reading, or engage them in friendly banter about the politics of their homes, whether institutional or geographic. Not one for small talk, she had the incredible ability to befriend someone over the course of a couple of cigarettes and to continue such friendships over email. The need for nicotine, she once slyly told me, provides its own form of solidarity.

Barbara Harlow's work has had an important place in the pages of this journal. She, among others, initiated a turn toward human rights that has become particularly prominent in life writing. And yet, her work exists in a somewhat agonistic relationship to this field. Barbara was one of the contributors to the special issue *Life Writing and Corporate Personhood* that Purnima Bose and I coedited. We were delighted that Barbara wanted to contribute a piece on the Israeli occupation of Palestine, particularly since Palestine had always been central to her own intellectual formation and thinking even as her comparativist training meant that she also wrote about many other places. When the participants of the issue workshoped her draft article on the case of *Corrie et al. v. Caterpillar*, Barbara had more material than could fit in this one essay. She was interested in probing the possibilities and limitations of adjudicating the death of the American coed Rachel Corrie, and the "et al." named in the lawsuit, who were the Palestinians, less known in the United States, who all had been killed by Israeli soldiers on Caterpillar bulldozers during home demolitions in the Gaza Strip.

Some participants suggested that the cleanest way through the material would be to focus on life writing, to tell the stories in relation to more information on those unnamed Palestinians. While her analysis was in the service of putting pressure on the relegation of the Palestinians to that "et al." in the legal documents pertaining to the case, Barbara was also concerned about how quick we were to suggest the political efficacy of "giving voice" to the victims of human rights violations, and particularly dead Palestinians. She offered Israeli intellectual and forensic architect Eyal Weizman's critique in



his book *The Lesser of Two Evils* that human rights testimony is often far less effective in courts than forensic evidence. Too frequently, Weizman argues, rather than take the risk of making political claims on behalf of others in the interest of change, such humanitarian projects make giving voice to victims as an end in itself and so knowingly enact a kind of “minimal humanitarianism” that merely sustains those lives. The discussion seemed at first counterintuitive to many, including—I should admit—to me.

That discussion, I realize now, speaks to Barbara’s contribution to life writing, namely her willingness to ask the difficult questions of her own work: “What difference, in concrete, material ways does this project make? Does it effect disciplinary change, and/or work toward, or potentially hinder, needed political transformation?” Doing so for her was not a matter of self-indulgent talk about how limited our reach as scholars is, but quite the opposite, to unsparingly consider the ways human rights work, whether carried out by academics or those in nongovernmental organizations, often backfire and can even work to perpetuate, rather than to stem, state-sanctioned terrorism, of the kind enacted by the Israeli state or the US legal system. The article that emerged is not easy to read because it stages multiple interpretations of the case against Caterpillar. Barbara ends by imagining what a divestment campaign against the equipment company might look like, a campaign that would not disavow testimony but that would put it in the service of “challenging both corporate derelictions and hegemonic disregard for human rights abuses, in the courtroom, in the boardroom, and in the corridors of power, to rebuild Palestinian homes and hopes” (243). Those of us in life writing might take away from that point, and indeed from Barbara Harlow’s scholarship and politics, the difficult but necessary work of comprehending the stakes of what we do and the value of being uncompromising.

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## REMEMBERING BARBARA HARLOW

### RESISTANCE AND LIFE WRITING

S. SHANKAR

Barbara Harlow was not a life writing scholar but she was a scholar of life writing. What I mean by this is that Barbara did not situate her work primarily in the field of life writing. Rather, she located it in Ethnic and Third World Studies—to invoke the name of the concentration she helped found in the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin, where she taught for most of her career. At the same time, a regard for life writing genres is evident everywhere in her work—the book she was working on when she died was a biography of South African radical Ruth First; before that came the book *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing*; and an entire chapter is devoted to life writing in *Resistance Literature*, her first published book. In that chapter, devoted to prison memoirs, she writes: “These memoirs are to be distinguished too from conventional autobiography inasmuch as the narratives are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle” (120). So much of her critical work on life writing espouses the spirit of this statement.

Struggle—first and last, life writing was for Barbara a pathway to politics, more particularly, the politics of the wretched of the earth. Life writing texts have often—that is, not inevitably—played a significant role in bearing witness to the disregarded lives of the marginalized. She was not the first to understand this, but she was among the first to intuit that a literary notion of life writing could and should be expanded to include genres not conventionally regarded as life writing, thus drawing a wide array of texts into the purview of literature and English departments. Barbara was no respecter of disciplinary boundaries, and she understood that life writing texts, much more than the novel or the lyric poem, straddle disciplines. Through them, she reached for research material in non-literary areas while continuing to exercise her considerable powers of reading and literary analysis.

You can see this clearly, for example, in the final chapter of *Barred: Women, Writing and Detention*, which is entitled “Writing Human Rights.” The chapter is anchored by non-canonical life writing genres (human rights reports and survivor accounts of torture). Barbara does not call these documents life



writing, nor is she interested in “theorizing” them in that mode. Barbara preferred to orient her scholarly work through a more practical understanding of politics. She concludes the chapter (and *Barred*) by noting that “the struggle against torture and the opposition to censorship are at once social and political movements, entailing new research imperatives and alternative archives” (256). It seems evident to me that life writing genres are essential to Barbara in this scholarly imperative, in this rethinking of archives.

The argument could be made that of all literary genres, life writing—shorn of the artifice of make-believe—is the closest to a politics in the raw. Yes, life writing is no less composed—artistically designed—than a novel and, yes, it is dangerous to approach life writing with a kind of naïve sincerity best reserved (if at all) for direct experience. Still, life writing promises us something that a novel cannot. It promises an embodied life, or a portion of such a life, and there is no point in pretending that readers do not turn to life writing in the expectation that the promise will be fulfilled in some measure. This is the reason life writing has been at the heart of many political campaigns from the abolition of slavery (slave narratives) to anticaste agitation (Dalit memoirs)—or, to return to Barbara, campaigns for human rights and against torture.

Over the years, Barbara published three essays in *Biography*—one on Palestine and the other two on Ruth First and South Africa. In these essays you find the quality that I have identified above—a recourse to life writing genres to explore political realities. Taken together, the essays also indicate Barbara’s unabashed “internationalism,” her invigorating commitment to social and political solidarity with Palestinians and black South Africans, or indeed some other group elsewhere. Her work ranges over many geographical locations and it does so without embarrassment because there is a sense always of the interconnection of struggles across the globe. There is a broadminded sense of solidarity here, the kind of solidarity she recognized in Edward Said. In her tribute to him on his death, Barbara mourned his passing but also affirmed “the vital and vivid . . . importance of comrades-in-arms . . . reinforcing and rearticulating” what she called “lines of struggle” (4). Barbara’s expansive imagination of political work did not allow her to truncate these lines of struggle, to chop them up into yours and mine. Her comrades-in-arms were everywhere though they were not everyone.

Soon after Barbara died I wrote a blog in her memory (“The Word Is Resistance”). I wrote it not only because she was my teacher but because I admired her, most especially her passionate committed self. As I said in that blog, Barbara was fierce. Because of that fierceness it was easy to forget the basic compassion that underlay her politics. After all, she was not fierce on her

own behalf—solidarity is the fierceness you feel on behalf of others. Barbara understood the role life writing genres could play in such a politics of fierceness, which is why she turned repeatedly to them. Life writing studies could do worse than continue to learn from her the proper stakes of critical work.

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