

OBITUARY

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VIE HÉROÏQUE: IN MEMORY OF BARBARA HARLOW (1948–2017)

On 28 January 2017, the field of Middle East studies lost one of its strongest and most vocal advocates—Barbara Harlow. Barbara led a heroic life: writing, resisting, drinking, and smoking, to the end! With the heart of a warrior, she practiced *muqāwama* at every level and in every possible way. Her power of the “No” confronted structures of power, normativity of all kind, and fluff. She was solid, engaged, wise, and infinitely supportive of her students, colleagues, and causes. She was the first to arrive at every demonstration and the last to leave, making sure that the pro-bono lawyers were ready at police stations to work on releasing those arrested. Barbara was real, genuine, and fun to be around. She loved to hear the latest news—and gossip—from Cairo and Beirut as we sat at her kitchen table, sipping white wine and smoking. She read everything, from mystery novels set in Cairo or London to the most recent study on Arabic literature and culture. Browsing her library one finds graphic novels from the Ghassan Kanafani Foundation that she used to learn Arabic; all of Lacan, Blanchot, Artaud, and Derrida from her poststructuralist days; legal and political theory books dealing with South Africa and Palestine; and complete series of journals such as *al-Hadaf* and *al-Karmel*.

Barbara was the Louann and Larry Temple Centennial Professor of English Literatures at the University of Texas at Austin where she had been teaching since 1985. She was also a core member of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, training students, teaching classes, collaborating with colleagues, and advising its publication series. She worked tirelessly to build a community of scholars at University of Texas Austin, organizing and attending talks and events and generously sharing her time and ideas across a variety of academic units. Beyond University of Texas Austin, Barbara helped shape the field of Middle East studies. She was a founding member of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, and served on advisory and editorial boards of journals such as *Middle East Report (MERIP)* and *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Her prolific contribution and unwavering support for Arabic and Middle Eastern studies and for the humanities generally make Barbara’s passing a poignant loss at a time of great need for her generosity, energy, and commitment.

Barbara was beyond *cool*: she had no time for academic fads and trendy politics yet recognized true intellectual innovation when she saw it. Her last project was on drones, literature, and universal justice. Trained in French theory and literature at the University of Chicago and State University of New York Buffalo, Barbara wrote a dissertation

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on Marcel Proust in 1977 and produced an influential translation of Jacques Derrida's *Spurs* in 1979. Her first academic job, which defined the future course of her career, was at the American University in Cairo, where she worked from 1977 to 1983. There she became interested in contemporary Arabic literature, the legacies of empire in the Middle East, and Palestine, which remained in Barbara's heart and in her writing and activism to the end. Her 1984 translation of Ghassan Kanafani's *Palestine's Children* (London/Washington, D.C.: Heinemann/Three Continents Press, 1984) helped introduce English-language readers to the work of a major Palestinian author and thinker. Her groundbreaking and influential book *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), which appeared in 1987, was the first academic study in English of the fiction produced during Third World national liberation struggles. The enthusiastic global reception of *Resistance Literature* established her international reputation. *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1982), which appeared in 1992, engaged with writings by and about women political prisoners in Northern Ireland, El Salvador, Israel, Egypt, South Africa, and the United States; while *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* (London: Verso, 1996) focused on the works of political authors who had been assassinated: Kanafani, the South African Ruth First, and Roque Dalton from El Salvador. In addition to these works, Barbara edited numerous books and authored over one hundred journal articles, book chapters, and review essays during her prolific career.

Situated at the intersection of Middle East and African studies, comparative literature and political theory, Barbara's writing and translation pioneered the investigation of decolonization not simply as a political process but as an intellectual and creative metamorphosis. She developed the linguistic and conceptual tools that allowed a new generation of scholars to examine decolonization as a new human condition. Her ethical humanism, commitment to freedom, and concern for the plight of the weak became the common moral backbone for generations of graduate students who followed her into this comparative and cross-disciplinary field of study. Barbara's work laid the ground for developing an East–East or South–South comparative framework that continues to shape and inform the field. This rethinking of the role and importance of literature and its relation to politics and history translated into program building at University of Texas Austin. In 1986, Barbara cofounded the Ethnic and Third World Concentration, one of the first programmatic attempts to study the literature of recently decolonized nations alongside the literature of ethnic minorities in the United States. Working across disciplines, regions, and national languages, Harlow demonstrated the vitality of the humanities and its necessity for understanding the crises of the contemporary world, and building intellectual foundations for resisting them. In conjunction with the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Social Justice she championed an interdisciplinary undergraduate program on literature and human rights.

Barbara was always at the cutting edge of intellectual commitment, identifying and confronting new sites of power. For her, politics was never a performative gesture or a theoretical articulation but an engagement with history and the material conditions of oppression and disenfranchisement. This she emphasized in her writing and activism, and in her teaching and mentoring of students and colleagues. Though her passing marks the end of an era at University of Texas Austin, her writing and lessons will continue to resonate far and wide.