

The subversive pencil: writing, prison and political status

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Abstract: The article offers a personal recollection of Barbara Harlow and her impact on the author's intellectual development. Harlow's book *Barred: women, writing, and political detention* (1992) and her later writings on the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay are revisited for their contemporary significance. The author situates Harlow as a unique literary critic whose sustained work was conjunctural reading, translating and writing across geopolitical and disciplinary borders; her interventions being made in commitment to her honed liberatory agendas and visions.

Keywords: Barbara Harlow, *Barred: women, writing and political detention*, Guantánamo, human rights, political struggle, prison literature

I wasn't part of Barbara's everyday life like Neville Hoad, my co-editor of this special issue of *Race & Class*, and Mia Carter, one of our contributors, but she was a friend for many years, a colleague on the Editorial Working Committee of *Race & Class*, and an important person in my intellectual development, as she

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was for so many. In the last few years before she passed away, I was able to see Barbara more regularly because of the time I now spend in London, which she visited once or twice a year. It wasn't my last with her, but we did have a memorable visit in July of 2015 when Barbara spent most of it in hospital and I would visit her every day, sitting by her bed, reporting the news to her and also issuing endless unwanted points of advice about her diet, which she patiently didn't really listen to, until she'd had enough and would send me off to find the nurse or get some more water or change the subject. Two of the subjects more interesting to Barbara than how to eat more fibre that summer were the escalation of the war in Syria and the numbers of people fleeing to Lebanon, Turkey and Europe and the *Guardian's* 'The Counted' project, in which the newspaper began to systematically track police shootings in the US since the government was not keeping comprehensive records. In 2015, it counted 1,146 people killed by the police.¹ Being dismissive of too much focus on her and astute attention, even while quite ill, to state violence in the Middle East and the US, I feel confident saying, were characteristically Barbara. I hope she would be understanding of my focus on her here.

This Barbara province

In Tim Brennan's appreciation of Barbara that was posted on the Institute of Race Relations' website, he describes 'the momentous ... intellectual rebirth' she 'experienced while teaching in Cairo ... She went there a Derridean', he says,

with the world at her feet. She had the pedigree, the linguistic skills, and the positioning to ride the wave of textualism in ... a professional environment that rewarded both opulently ... [She] had only to continue what she was doing to make it big. Instead she headed off elsewhere, creating a field that did not then exist ... It was like ... Joyce had decided to stop trilingual punning and keep a running record of community crimes.

'Perhaps', Brennan speculates, 'it was the Palestinian independence struggle' or her encounter with the afterlives of French colonialism or something that just became 'this Barbara province' 'that was to blame',² or to be credited, as Barbara herself acknowledged, for the turn that led her to write the path-breaking book *Resistance Literature* (1987) and those that followed.

I first met Barbara at the 1989 summer meeting of the Marxist Literary Group (MLG) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which I had been attending since 1986. At that summer meeting, I also first met Wahneema Lubiano and renewed my acquaintance with Ann Cvetkovich, both of whom were then new young colleagues of Barbara's at the University of Texas, Austin.³ That 1989 meeting would produce lifelong friendships I value dearly with these three remarkable women. I was finishing my dissertation in sociology when I first encountered Barbara at the MLG summer institute and she already seemed formidable, completely

settled into the 'Barbara province'. The choice to abandon the lure of the elite academy was not carried by her (or it wasn't visible to me) as a personal sacrifice or as a particularly difficult decision fraught with ambivalence and drama. At the Marxist Literary Group meetings, the Marxist credentials of people, especially the younger women, were routinely questioned primarily by the senior men. The terrain of that suspicion was the ideological and formal elements of culture, especially literature, and though it was slightly absurd that well-situated literature professors and aesthetic philosophers believed themselves the standard-bearers for authentic revolutionary positions many of us seemed always to lack, the antagonism was wrapped up in gender and race politics and positionings that gave it a sting. Barbara was an important presence in this context because she refused to engage the antagonism and side-stepped it altogether. She treated literature as an arena of struggle; her love of it didn't embarrass her (and there was the feeling that for the men it was rather emasculating); literature was not against revolution but was routinely part of it. It wasn't only that Barbara was the coolest 'senior' professor there, a poised authority with her distinctive clothing style and hair cut (exactly the same hair cut and trousers she was wearing the last time you - anyone - saw her) often with cigarette in hand.⁴ It was much more than personal style: she spoke only when needed, quietly and powerfully, dispatching the provincialism of the measuring rod with her erudite knowledge and experience of actual struggles in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, where, as Amilcar Cabral famously put it, culture is where 'we find the seed[s] of opposition'.⁵

At the time, I would watch and listen to her and think: I want to be like Barbara (with better outfits). That wish seemed a silly ambition, young certainly, and also somehow possible, the possibility emerging, I think, from the way she encouraged, rather than competed. It's hard to describe the impact Barbara made on me then, which wasn't contained in a specific book or an article, but had to do with her presence, the way she carried her questions and her positions and herself; her notorious toughness and exactness and also the way she easily gave permission for someone like me to pursue the point that perhaps Luisa Valenzuela's surrealist fiction was more intelligent about the lived reality of political repression in Argentina and the political struggle waged by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo against the military government than the then-existing Marxist analysis.

That way - 'Barbara's province' - was fiercely anti-policing and anti anti-intellectual. It not only took an interest in people and in projects beyond the United States and Europe, it created a connection to a living world of radical, anti-capitalist anti-colonialism. That vibrant non-aligned world was first brought alive for me as an undergraduate scholarship girl in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, a place I did not belong, by the person who most prepared me to recognise the 'Barbara province' and who made survival at Georgetown possible, the distinguished Palestinian historian and philosopher Hisham Sharabi. By the time I started graduate school in 1980, we were told that

world was dead and interest in it old-fashioned. And as Salah Hassan reminds us, Barbara's

commitment to write about Arab World issues occurred when there was little interest in Arabic literature among Anglo-American scholars in the humanities, outside of the guild of Middle East Studies experts, and no public support for Palestinian politics in the US.⁶

Barbara's province was an invitation and a demand to connect to a living world, not a dead one, and, as Sharabi first taught me, it could not be brokered or met without an anti anti-intellectualism, which was grounded in the notion that some of us also got as students from Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, that culture was not something secondary but the very skin and sinew of material society and lived political consciousness.

The subversive pencil

'Paper and pencils are as subversive in the hands of political detainees as weapons, guns, and knives might be', Harlow wrote in the introduction to *Barred: women, writing and political detention*, her 1992 book on the centrality of the prison and prison writings to resistance movements.⁷

The centrality of the prison to revolutionary resistance movements was already signalled in Harlow's groundbreaking 1987 book *Resistance Literature*, where the prison memoirs of political prisoners were treated as a 'special category' or genre of resistance literature, with an entire chapter devoted to them. The overall argument about the genre – 'the prison memoirs of political detainees are not written for the sake of a "book of one's own", rather they are collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle' – sets the groundwork for *Barred*. So, too, do the key themes explored in the prison memoir chapter: the struggle to control and wrest control over reading and writing in prison and the threat the imprisoned writer poses to state authority and the carceral regime; the nature of solidarity within the prison, where division is a mode of governance, and between those inside and those comrades, family members and supporters outside; the consequent, sometimes fraught, relationships between political and so-called common law prisoners; the specific experiences of women; and the role writing plays in creating 'archives of resistance' that constitute an emergent history of the prison itself.⁸

Barred takes up these thematics and it also creates a complicated analytic structure consisting of four sections with eleven chapters that might best be read out of the order in which they are given. This architecture embodies the point made, but somewhat held in abeyance in *Resistance Literature*, that the generic conventions or 'classification' that organise the book 'collapses in the ... chapters on prison memoirs and utopian/dystopian fictions' and are 'obliged to yield to the insistence of ideological and political exigencies' created by both the political

scene in question and the prison regime itself, which has its own classification systems that attempt to organise and manipulate relations among prisoners.⁹

Written between 1988 and 1991 and very much marked by 'the pressure of events at the time', especially in Northern Ireland, the work offers a complex and sophisticated mapping of the terms the title announces: barred, women, writing, political detention. A study of the writings of and about political prisoners, it is also at the same time a study of the 'intimate and historic' place of political imprisonment in the specific struggles in Northern Ireland, Palestine, Egypt, South Africa, El Salvador and the United States. There are two intersecting stakes in this project. One is an 'emancipated literary agenda' with implications both for the academy and for human rights organisations, whose reports were then emerging as a 'critical literature' for literary scholars responding to Harlow's call for a 'relocation of academic inquiry into the global arena of national and international politics'.¹⁰ The second stake, of course, is political emancipation. Here, the term barred reaches for a notion of political status more generally:

'Barred' ... refers to the policies – official and unofficial – that deny political status to women, to organized dissent, and to the literary ... to the practices and practitioners that have been circumscribed, the writers and the works that have been banned, and the strategies, inside and outside of prison ... that contest such denial in their demand for recognition and political status.¹¹

In Harlow's hands, political status is not a 'theoretical unity' but a site of 'conjunctures' and 'linkages', just as the titular term women refers to women *and* men in political organisations and in collective social struggles.

In addition to the impressive and still little-known archive of literary works it reads so meticulously, *Barred* seems especially pertinent today for its accurate warnings about the complicitous role of academic disciplines, especially as something called prison studies is becoming more established. Recall Harlow's response to H. Bruce Franklin's argument that 'the prison and the university provide the contradictory poles defining the field of aesthetics, as well as some other areas'. His point, she wrote,

might be further adumbrated by the writings produced out of the experience of 'political prison' in particular, in such a way that the prison and the university, while representing 'contradictory poles', are also seen to function as complicit parts of the same operational system of dominant state control of dissent and the containment of antisystematic challenge.¹²

The intense and learned intellectual attention that *Barred* gave to the prison as a 'university' for resistance movements, a context and a laboratory for the development of political consciousness and organising, seems also especially pertinent and significant today. In the United States especially, greater public policy attention to the problems, costs and racial injustices of mass incarceration has, in the

main, treated the prisoner not as a political subject, but within the normal juridical terms of legal guilt and innocence, the latter in need of moral outrage and correction, the former in need of moral sympathy and rehabilitation. In the meantime, prisoners, whether in Georgia or Ohio or in California, have been organising labour and hunger strikes within their home prisons and also across them with the assistance of friends on the outside. They have, in addition to creative writings of various sorts, prepared major reports and communiques on due process, cruel and unusual punishment, inhumane living conditions, the torture of solitary confinement, and the function of this prison regime in a racial capitalist state.¹³ There's no doubt in my mind that this literature belongs in the archive Barbara established with the books *Resistance Literature* and *Barred*. It's even possible some who produced this literature might have read *Barred* because it ends where the Pelican Bay Short Corridor Collective (formed by the men in solidarity confinement at Pelican Bay prison in California) begins:

Human rights, yes – but political status as well ... The silence imposed by the torturer is challenged by the demand for political resistance, raising again and again the urgent and critical relation between writing human rights and righting political wrongs.¹⁴

When I first read *Barred*, I had been doing research on the system of political repression and counter-insurgency known as disappearance in Latin America, where the secret prison was the heart of its death-space. In the Argentinian case, the one on which I was focused then, there were a few writings – recognisable literary productions – written by those who had survived prison, but not many. I learned a great deal from Barbara's encyclopaedic knowledge of the larger literature and the scene of political imprisonment, even though I was looking precisely for what those human rights reports, including *Nunca Más* the subject of *Barred's* last chapter, could not and did not say.¹⁵ In the most general sense, what I took away for my own work was an understanding of the varied alternative paths opened when literature was not treated as merely a specimen of an aesthetic genre or simply as sociological data and when critical theory was not treated as something external and superior to it. In *Barred*, Barbara named those alternative paths as:

to map, through [material and historical] specificity, the grounds and terrains for critical redefinitions of the 'literary' and the 'political' and their conflicted intersection and to join ranks with a 'cast of characters' who have been, explicitly and precisely for their intellectual and political work, removed from the premises.¹⁶

That cast of characters, as she called the prisoners, produced writing, thought, theory even; that writing was not 'raw material' for a superior academic or political mind, but rather a subjugated knowledge that 'is itself an articulation of a critical perspective'. That critical perspective had necessarily to be shared – ranks

to be joined or common cause made, she insisted. Barbara's map, which centred on Northern Ireland, Palestine, South Africa, Central and South America and the United States, was a political one and many of the points on it marked my own engagements. Those points constituted a constellation of shared solidarities in the then current geopolitical scene that gave substance and urgency to the exposure and analysis of those critical perspectives. The prisoner was a political subject detained because of, and embedded in, the work of transformative social struggle, she insisted over and over again, not a raw material to be worked over a second time by the well-meaning analyst.

I returned to *Barred* again some years later in 2008 when I was asked to contribute to a special Theories and Methodologies Section of *PMLA* (the journal of the Modern Languages Association) organised by Patricia Yaeger on 'Incarceration, Social Justice and Literacy'. By this time, Dylan Rodriguez had published *Forced Passages: imprisoned radical intellectuals and the U.S. prison regime*, which not only cited *Barred's* influence but might be considered its most important US heir.¹⁷ Rodriguez, too, was studying and translating the radical intellectual 'praxis' of prisoners, some of whom were in prison because they had been politically involved in the Black Panther Party, in AIM or in the Puerto Rican independence movement and others of whom became politically engaged because they were in prison, such as George Jackson. And, like Harlow's work, Rodriguez's study was undertaken in solidarity and in active participation in the larger movement against what he usefully called the 'prison regime', by which he meant the forms of state power and statecraft that imprisonment possesses or articulates. The writings – what Barbara called the resistance literature – on which Rodriguez focused were a political practice, he argued, not what was meant by the institutionalised terms 'prison writing' or 'prisoner literacy' or 'prison education'.

When I returned to *Barred*, I had been writing about the US military prisons in Iraq, including the Abu Ghraib complex, and in Cuba at the base at Guantánamo, where what Rodriguez described as the 'domesticating and delimited' notion of 'prison writing' and 'prison education' was obvious. It's important to remember that for those war captives, as well as the prisoners held in supermaximum or security housing conditions like at Pelican Bay, communication and representation, both aesthetically and politically, are usually quite difficult and practically speaking impermissible.

In this condition, where more recognisable modes of reading, writing, speaking, teaching and organising are unavailable, prisoners must use other means to confiscate the authority to represent themselves and to speak about the power under whose dominion they reside. Barbara's work had shown that, with few exceptions, prisoners everywhere have always had to invent creative means to live and act, to read and write, in prison. That body of subjugated knowledge is what she excavated first as 'resistance literature' and then as what the genre of prison literature could be made to reference and teach us; just as that knowledge is often the very subject of the instruction and teaching prisoners engage in with each other in prison when they make of it a university. I called that subjugated

knowledge a radical methodology of imprisonment, a pedagogy of finding and making a life with political status where civil death and human destruction dominate.¹⁸ Remember what the prosecutor said about Gramsci, which forms the epigraph to *Barred's* first chapter: 'We must prevent this brain from functioning for 20 years.' It was not only Gramsci's fine mind to which this injunction was directed. Indres Naidoo makes a similar observation based on his experience at Robben Island:

The intention of the authorities was to cut us off completely from the outside world to break us down. We, on the other hand, never once gave in. If we spotted a newspaper in the possession of a warder we would be sure to get it into the gaol by hook or by crook.¹⁹

Or, as Victor Serge succinctly described the various prison regimes to which he was subjected in his 1930 fictionalised autobiography *Men in Prison*: 'living is forbidden'. Obviously, the more repressive the prison authorities, the more inventive are the means of political and aesthetic representation. That I knew that prisoners are renowned for making all kinds of things out of the highly controlled residues of the prison, including the remaking of themselves, was due in no small part to what I learned from Barbara's work and what it taught me to anticipate and to look for.

The military prisons and the war on terror itself put pressure also on the category of the political prisoner and on political detention as Barbara had understood and used it. The prisoners at Guantánamo were not exemplary political prisoners in this sense. Most of them were not involved in anti-colonial collective struggles; their language and primary identity were religious not secular; their poetry not terribly compelling and the memoirs and testimonies produced with well-meaning assistance that nonetheless too often, even if unintentionally, de-collectivised them in order to treat them as the individual subject of human rights and to emphasise their innocence. (Indeed, the contradictory significance of human rights advocacy and reporting in the years after *Barred's* last chapter was written – simultaneously its 'documentation' more necessary and its 'intervention' more problematic – has only increased.) Access to the prison records, where always we can find at least some trace of the prisoners' presence, their resistance and those aspirations that exceed the prison regime, was completely closed off. Like Barbara, I was sifting through what the lawyers would and could make available, including curses and suicide letters and pleas for help and statements crafted with a deliberate deference.

This scene of imprisonment and its larger political culture was very different than the one *Barred* and *After Lives: legacies of revolutionary writing* (1996) so tirelessly worked on and through, as Barbara herself grappled with in her 2006 Edward Said Memorial Lecture at the American University of Cairo, 'Resistance Literature Revisited: from Basra to Guantánamo', later published in *Alif*,

the journal she helped to found at AUC. This scene of imprisonment had a very different cast of characters and plot, 'new geographies of struggle',²⁰ which produced a very different kind of resistance literature, one she speculated needed 'literature as a verb' not a noun – 'to literature'. Here, what Barbara said about Ruth First, whom she studied for so long, is true for herself as well: 'At work in each ... volume, historically and site-specific though each is ... is an engaged tension between the politics of period and place on the one hand, and the critically conjunctural interventions undertaken by the writer-researcher on the other.'²¹ Of this post-2001 or 'post 9-11' conjuncture, Barbara wrote:

To attempt to 'revisit' these places now, these sites of resistance from Basra to Guantánamo, to rechart their place in literature, review their location in political histories, is less a project in the nostalgics of recuperation than a renewed struggle to recapture, recall, maybe even relive or revive, the liberatory agendas, strategies, outlines, stories, short and long, visions that once led, could still lead.²²

That nostalgia is not helpful in this profoundly altered geopolitical map is clear in the way it's a struggle for Barbara – and I sense it strongly in the Said lecture – to read Moazzam Begg's memoir *Enemy Combatant* (2006) in the same way she reads Ghassan Kanafani's 1962 novel, *Men in the Sun*, its scene of death and desolation her beginning, its story her reference and political standpoint. The once and future liberatory visions she calls for or recalls us to don't come from either a nostalgic relation to the past or from Begg as an individual authorial agent, they come from how Barbara reads his book into a political history that needs to be remembered, recreated, and activated in the present. They come from the way she remembers, with and through Kanafani, that Basra isn't just a forward operating base for transporting prisoners to Cuba but was an important crossroads for Palestinian migrants trying to steal their way into what she calls a 'dubious future' in Kuwait. They come from the way that memory evokes and makes real the vast movement of peoples under varying conditions of duress and unfreedom across fortified and closed geopolitical borders, all refracting the maps of European and US imperialism. And, of course, the way that memory makes real the ongoing struggle to end the occupation in Palestine, a struggle to which Barbara remained true her whole life.

To claim that those liberatory visions Barbara Harlow called for her entire life came from how she read doesn't mean that they were hers alone or that she held them possessively – quite the contrary. I do mean, however, to credit her as a self-avowed, proud even, literary critic whose sustained work was conjunctural reading, translating and writing across geopolitical and disciplinary borders; solidarity here and everywhere. Barbara's written work and my conversations with her were a constant source of education and inspiration to me because they were interventions made in commitment to the liberatory agendas and visions, the

complicated stories long and short, that we need. She will be missed – I miss her – and we’ll have to step up to work together to protect and nourish her afterlife and the vision it carries forward.

References

- 1 See ‘The counted: people killed by the police in the US’, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>.
- 2 Timothy Brennan, ‘An appreciation of Barbara Harlow’, 2 February 2017, Institute of Race Relations, London, available at www.irr.org.uk/news/an-appreciation-of-barbara-harlow/. It’s worth recalling that before Harlow published *Resistance Literature* in 1987, her first monograph, she had translated Jacques Derrida’s *Spurs: Nietzsche’s styles/Eperons: les styles de Nietzsche* in 1979 for the University of Chicago Press.
- 3 Wahneema Lubiano is Associate Professor of African and African American Studies at Duke University. Ann Cvetkovich is the Ellen Clayton Garwood Centennial Professor of English and Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.
- 4 Barbara’s legacy included something like fifty pairs of billowing hand-made trousers that were her signature sartorial style. As these are likely over thirty-five years old, we might consider them historic items with a place in her larger archive. This might be especially apt given Barbara’s delight at finding that Ruth First listed the dry cleaning, the shoe repair and other domestic chores next to research, writing and political tasks in her ‘To Do’ notebooks. See Harlow, ‘Looked class, talked red’, in this issue of *Race & Class* 60, no. 3 (2019).
- 5 Amílcar Cabral, ‘National Liberation and Culture’, in *Return to the Source: selected speeches by Amílcar Cabral*, edited by Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 43.
- 6 Salah D. Hassan, ‘Radical revisions: Barbara Harlow in the conjuncture’, in this issue of *Race & Class* 60, no. 3 (2019).
- 7 Barbara Harlow, *Barred: women, writing and political detention* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p. 14.
- 8 Barbara Harlow, ‘Prison memoirs of political detainees’, in *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), quotes at pp. 120, 128.
- 9 Harlow, *Barred*, pp. xix, 136.
- 10 Harlow, *Barred*, p. xii. In my view, the ‘late style’ identified by Hosam Aboul-Ela in ‘Methods for a neoliberal order’ in this volume (60, no. 3) begins with *Barred*’s last section and chapter, ‘Writing Human Rights’ with its analysis of the genre of the human rights report, with its particular combination of ‘documentation and intervention’, p. 244.
- 11 Harlow, *Barred*, p. xiii.
- 12 Harlow, *Barred*, p. 12. This precise point has recently been made about the relationship between high school and prison by Damien M. Sojoyner in his compelling book *First Strike: educational enclosures in Black Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 13 For one example, the Pelican Bay Short Corridor Collective, see <https://prisonershungerstrike-solidarity.wordpress.com/>.
- 14 Harlow, *Barred*, p. 256.
- 15 See Avery F. Gordon, ‘the other door, it’s flood of tears with consolation enclosed’, in *Ghostly Matters: haunting and the sociological imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 and 2008).
- 16 Harlow, *Barred*, p. ix.
- 17 Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: imprisoned radical intellectuals and the U.S. prison regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). See Chapters 2 and 3, especially pp. 80, 108–09, 136.

- 18 Avery F. Gordon, 'Methodologies of imprisonment', *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008); 'The prisoner's curse', Herman Gray and Macarena Gomez-Barris, eds, *Toward a Sociology of the Trace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 17-55.
- 19 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, p. 129.
- 20 Barbara Harlow, *After Lives: legacies of revolutionary writing* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 153.
- 21 Harlow, *After Lives*, p. 123.
- 22 Barbara Harlow, 'Resistance literature revisited: from Basra to Guantánamo', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 32 (2012), p. 13.