

*At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on October 6, 2015, the following Minute was placed upon the records.*

## BARBARA JOHNSON

Born: October 4, 1947

Died: August 27, 2009

Barbara Johnson, a renowned thinker widely considered responsible for many of the major innovations in poststructuralism and deconstruction, started life near Cambridge, in Westwood, Massachusetts. A scholar of rare distinction from her earliest years, she was one of three Presidential Scholars from Massachusetts the year she graduated high school and went on to earn her undergraduate degree from Oberlin College in 1969 and her Ph.D. in French from Yale in 1977.

At Yale Barbara's professional rise began: she was a key member of the "Yale School" of literary theory (a group she later referred to as the "Male School"). Her thesis director was Paul de Man, whose place in the poststructuralist pantheon was secure until it wasn't (a fall she addressed head-on in her writing). Her translations of Jacques Derrida's work and her glosses on Lacanian psychoanalysis explicated the complexities of deconstruction for an American readership; through her grace and precision a generation of readers and critics came to understand literature as perpetually shifting ground, whose meaning could never be fixed and was always already multiple. Barbara was a professor at Harvard for 26 years in the departments of Romance Languages and Literatures, Comparative Literature, and English; in 2002, she was named the Frederic Wertham Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society.

She was part of the transformative diversification of Harvard's faculty and arrived at a time when the "eternal" Harvard was being shaken to its roots. She joined a small, growing group of distinguished women faculty, including Alice Jardine, Susan Suleiman, and Marjorie Garber, with whom she worked to found the concentration in Women's Studies. She also chaired Women's Studies from 1991 to 1993 and the Literature concentration from 1994 to 2000. From 1990 to 1991, she served as interim chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies and led the search for the new chair of Afro-American Studies and a new director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, ultimately recruiting Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for both roles and K. Anthony Appiah as a professor in the department.

Barbara built her career on principles, both the upholding and the dismantling of them. When, to keep her, Harvard needed to match offers from Stanford and Berkeley, she requested the interim position in Afro-American Studies so she could

support a department she passionately believed in and wanted to build. When, at a faculty meeting in the 1980s, a member of the opposition spoke vociferously against the establishment of Women's Studies, Alice Jardine reports that Barbara steadied her nerves by whispering, "Sit down. Let him do our work." Her faith in language as constitutive and transformative was sustaining.

Barbara's books and translations were numerous and influential: *Défigurations du langage poétique: La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (1979); Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination* (1981); *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (1980); *A World of Difference* (1987); *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994); *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race and Gender* (1998); *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (2003); Stéphane Mallarmé's *Divagations* (2007); *Persons and Things* (2008), and *Moses and Multiculturalism* (2010). These last three she produced even as the final stages of her illness robbed her of her abilities to walk and speak. She wrote heroically almost to the end, completing the essay "Mary Shelley and Her Circle" six weeks before her death. It was collected by Judith Butler and Shoshana Felman, her literary executors, along with her other writings on Shelley, and published posthumously in *A Life with Mary Shelley*.

Barbara's literary readings were models of subtlety of reasoning and strength of expression, a difficult combination for most to muster. Her essay on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a foundational text of black feminist criticism: a field of literary study has Johnson to thank for its emergent complexity. But in all of its specificity and careful attention to Hurston's black vernacular and feminist imaginings, the essay also demonstrates the general principle that undergirds all of Barbara's writing. Her essay on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of many in which she combines the explication of a single text with stunning reflections on literary language in general. Her rhetorical analyses, moreover, often led to astute insights into contemporary issues, abortion and the legal debates over personhood. In her view language has the endless potential to express meaning, and to re-build and reconfigure not only meaning but also life.

A reflection on Barbara's career must take into account her teaching. Her ability to listen was second to none. Anyone who sat with her in a lecture or seminar remembers the look on her face as words flew about her: thoughtful and inquisitive but also serene. She *waited* to respond. This scholar who took such great care with her critical meditations was the most patient interlocutor. Her quiet was a presence itself: participating in any conversation, any lesson, by making other speakers hear themselves and take care with their own language. As a testament to her teaching, Judith Butler and Shoshana Felman established the Barbara Johnson Memorial Prize

in Literature in the Department of Comparative Literature for the most outstanding junior essay each year in that department's undergraduate program.

Colleagues and students were delighted by her wit, enriched by her generosity, and mesmerized by her grace. And when she received the diagnosis of cerebellar ataxia, which slowed her body and undid her speech but left her mind sharp until the end, she faced it in the way she had scores of literary texts: she wrote her way through it, never letting go of language even as she had to develop new techniques to gain access to it.

Barbara Ellen Johnson is survived by her mother, Pat, and three brothers, Peter, Bruce, and Christopher, as well as a family of colleagues and students whose words would fail to capture their grief were it not for the gift given them by Barbara Johnson, the deeply held belief that language is a tool of endless and necessary expression.

Respectfully submitted,

Joaquim Coelho

Alice Jardine

Marc Shell

Susan Suleiman

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chair