



The Lit Review Podcast

English Transcript

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Guest/Topic: Bernardine Dohrn on *The Question* by Henri Alleg

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[intro music: "Burton Island" by Tasha]

[fades out]

Page May:

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of the Lit Review. I am one of your hosts, Page May, and my good friend and co-host Monica is here with us as well. How are you doing today Monica?

Monica Trinidad:

Hey Page, I'm good, I'm feeling this warmer weather, it's going to disappear in a few days you know, because it's Chicago. But I'm still really happy about it today.

Monica Trinidad:

I don't know if folks took note in last week's episode, but we have beautiful new intro and outro music by the one and only Tasha! And Tasha is a born-and-raised Chicagoan, singer, songwriter, poet, activist, dear friend, neighbor, and we love her and we're so honored to have her music in our show moving forward. Anyway, back to you Page, we're revisiting this significant conversation with lifelong radical and movement lawyer Bernardine Dohrn. So tell us about this book she chose and what you left this conversation with?

Page May:

Yeah and extra echo for Tasha, the music will give you all the feels, I cry a lot, it's a whole—it's a journey. I'm so grateful to be able to have Tasha's music on this show.

Page May:

This episode gave me so many feels. I remember it quite vividly, this one where I was running late, and the internet wasn't working and I had to sit on my kitchen floor and the oven was on with the door open because it was so cold in my apartment for some reason that day.

Page May:

And Bernardine Dohrn just like -sigh- goodness, I mean consistent to every interaction I've ever had with her, is this whirlwind of kindness and generosity and wisdom and thoughtfulness and just, super eccentric, just like a wonderful, wonderful person. And this, our conversation was about something that I did not expect— when I tell you, when we reached out to Bernardine and was like “Yeah, what book would you want to do?” I did not see this one coming at all. But it's exactly what I think people appreciate about this podcast. Where it's about the book, right, and getting some spark notes of these important books for movement, but it's also about the people. And learning how people have learned. And how people have implemented new knowledge and failure and experiences into their daily practices. And commitment to revolution and struggle.

Page May:

And so this is about a—this episode centers on a pamphlet called *The Question* or *La Question*—I don't have a good French accent—and it's by a French journalist named Henri [Alleg], I'm forgetting his last name right now, who went to Algeria during the Algerian War, and it's about torture. About about his own observations of torture and his own experience of torture, and I think, it's a very short pamphlet, it's 50 pages. It was banned, and Bernardine read this as a high school student, at a time where she didn't really know anything about Algeria and what was going on there, and wasn't someone who recognized herself as a part of movement. But she was at the same time seeing news stories of the Little Rock 9, and she was like I never want to be one of those white women screaming at these Black people going to school.

Page May:

And she talks about how she read the book, and then she wrote a paper about it. She was supposed to for school. And that was kind of it, but the way she talks about how it wasn't that this book immediately changed her life in tangible ways, but that it more that it stayed with her. And then the ways that she talks about that's what's so special about books, it's not always like it gives you an immediate answer or an immediate blueprint for what to do next, but that they stay with you and then the next time and the next time, sometimes it's not even until the next time or even the next time after that, that you see a way to take action. And you see a way to do things differently. And it was really beautiful just hearing her talk about how, what this book planted in her and how her life moved differently as a result of it even though it wasn't—yeah, so it's

wonderful, if you love books, I think this is an episode for the book lovers as well as the people committed to abolition and change. So anyways, those are my feels, what about you, Monica? What were your thoughts on this one?

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah, I like that you called it a pamphlet, and then a book, because it's both, and I'm going to uplift the pamphlet, zine, that this is, we talk about in this episode how it was banned, but then also how people just proliferated it, people don't know about the power of the xerox machine, and how even when the government tries to ban it, it's gonna still get out there.

Monica Trinidad:

So, and I think there's power in storytelling and in books like this, especially ones that unlock stories of torture, because one, it's hard to unhear these stories of dehumanization, and it's very haunting that we will never know all of the stories of individuals being tortured by imperialists across the globe, and two because storytelling saves lives, it brings public attention, right.

Monica Trinidad:

So this was an incredible conversation, you know, we give Bernardine a really hefty bio intro at the top of the episode, I fangirl a lot, but briefly I'll just also name that Bernardine has very deep roots in abolitionist work. From working on abolishing the juvenile death penalty successfully to now working toward abolishing life without parole, and you know, she's part of this lineage of organizers working towards taking down the prison-industrial complex, you know, brick-by-brick, piece-by-piece. And so I appreciated in this conversation, Bernardine talks about torture, both globally and locally in Chicago, as a major tool of quote "every imperialist country time and time again." unquote. Which also reminds me to give folks a listen-with-care note. There will be brief descriptions of torture and violence in this episode, so if you need to ground yourself first, or come back at another time, please just do what you need to do.

Monica Trinidad:

But I really am valuing this conversation and just all of the things Bernardine touches on, both historically as a young person in Chicago, you know around the time when MLK came to town, and many stories that are just like archived now. Lastly, I also want to name that there's a really important exhibit in Chicago at the DePaul Art Museum, so today is April 24, 2022 and the exhibit goes through August 7, 2022. And this exhibit is called *Remaking the Exceptional: Tea, Torture, and Reparations: Chicago to Guantanamo*, curated by my dear friend and fellow movement artist Aaron Hughes and Amber Ginsburg. And, this exhibit marks 20 years since the opening of the U.S. 's extralegal prison in Guantanamo Bay and examines you know, local and international state violence, and the creative resistance that just turns it all on its head. There's

artwork in this exhibition by survivors of Guantanamo, torture survivors, artists, activists, collectives, you know, with long-term commitments to creating visions of justice, there's work by shoutout to Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, Invisible Institute, Sarah-Ji, Damon Locks, and so many more.

So check it out. Think of this episode as a companion piece to this exhibition, or this exhibition as homework after the episode, but either way please check it out. Back to you Page, take us into this episode.

Page May:

Yeah, I mean we're so glad that you're here, and we hope you find some knowledge and wisdom and some new truth in this new episode, and with that, enjoy the show.

[INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music]

Monica: You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

Page: We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

[Musical hip hop beat playing in background from "Chicago" by David Ellis]

Mariame Kaba voiceover: *"I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against."*

Protesters Chanting: *"CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"*

Page voiceover: *"We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"*

Young person voiceover: *"I remember, she was shot by my house -"*

Mariame voiceover: *"In sharing our ideas, we're stronger."*

[Music Lyrics] "Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is a house, a generation filled in Audy homes..."

[Music Fades]

[INTRO ENDS]

Monica Trinidad:

Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of The Lit Review. I am your co-host, Monica Trinidad, and we are sitting here virtually with one of the coolest, nicest, most brilliant women in Chicago, the one and only Bernardine Dohrn. Thank you so much for making time to be with us here today, Bernardine.

Page May:

Yay.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Thank you so much. I'm very excited to be here. My pleasure.

Monica Trinidad:

So I'm going to give our listeners a quick intro to who you are, and then I'll pass the mic to Page and then to you to say a little bit more.

Monica Trinidad:

So for those listening who haven't had the pleasure of learning about the critical work of Bernardine Dohrn, Bernardine is a lifelong radical feminist, a former member of the 1960s antiwar organization, Students for a Democratic Society, arrested dozens of times by the Chicago Police Department for your radical and powerful activism in organizing in the late '60s, followed by co-founding the Weather Underground, a radical militant organization that splintered from SDS in the early 1970s.

Monica Trinidad:

You went underground for several years. I will say you are not the only guest this season who has been on the FBI's Most Wanted List at one point in their lives.

Monica Trinidad:

You came out of hiding in 1980 to turn yourself in, but mostly all of the charges were dropped due to COINTELPRO, which we are all familiar with. Your partner is the wonderful Bill Ayers, who we've also had on the podcast, talking about his book, Demand the Impossible. You are the founder and former director of the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University School of Law, currently a retired law professor and actually somebody that I've really admired since I first learned about your politics when I was in college at UIC in the early 2000s, which is where I first met Bill.

Monica Trinidad:

We've been in struggle together in various capacities over the last several years. I have two notable moments with you that I wanted to quickly share before I pass the mic and we jump into this book. One is probably one you might not remember, but it was maybe 2005. I just got involved in antiwar organizing on my college campus, UIC. Our group, which was part of this revival SDS network, our group's faculty advisor was, of course, was Bill. I guess he invited us over to your house in Hyde Park, your old house, for a barbecue.

Monica Trinidad:

Of course, my younger self, I had already watched the Weather Underground documentary a million times. I had already read *Fugitive Days* by Bill, and so I was super geeked out to even be in your presence.

Monica Trinidad:

But then fast forward to 2019, and we were literally locked arms together, blockading the elevators at City Hall during one of the No Cop Academy city council meetings.

Monica Trinidad:

We were collectively demanding a halt to the \$95 million police academy that the city still wants to build in West Garfield Park, but has not yet. They were trying to build that ... What year was that? 2017? I think it was 2017. It has not been built yet. It's amazing. That's people power. We were basically-

Monica Trinidad:

We were ready to get arrested together, but we didn't. One day though, it could hopefully still happen that we get arrested.

Monica Trinidad:

Page, do you want to add anything to my really long fangirling intro?

Page May:

Yo. I mean I just want to say that I first heard about you or met you when someone was like, "Oh, that's Bernardine Dohrn from ..." I'm like, "Who's that?" "Weather Underground." I didn't know what that was, which was good because it meant that I think I would have been even more in awe and unable to communicate or use words if I had really understood. Instead, I was just struck by how kind you were. From the minute I met you, you were just one of the most

exuberant, happy, generous people that I've ever met and have met in movement work. I remember going to your house. We were about to go to Geneva for We Charge Genocide.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Right.

Page May:

We were going to be arguing about what the police are doing is torture, which I think weaves into this conversation we're about to have. I remember just being in your house and how smart you were and also just what a badass you are. I'm like, "Who is this person? This is amazing." And again, also just a thing that has been consistent throughout my getting to know you has been just your generosity and your love and support of young people and of movement and of struggle. Along the way, I've started to learn more about the work that you've done and, again, it can fill pages and books. That is remarkable.

Page May:

But I also just want to give a shout out to just what a wonderful human you are, a real, real gem in Chicago and in the world. So I'm excited. Is there anything though that we've missed that you want to lift up about the work that you've done? Or otherwise, can you tell us more about why you do what you do? Because we'd love to hear your motivation and what gives you hope.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I just want to tell you something funny right now that you'll both appreciate, I think, because partly the two of you doing this has stirred up memories. I don't remember as well as I used to, so sometimes the memories come at me for strange reasons in the middle of the night. Then I picked a book that is very odd, but I think you said a book that changed your life or influenced your life, so I didn't want to pick what I thought were the obvious ones and others have already done. I picked a very obscure book actually, but that came my way when I was a senior in high school kind of by accident and opened up many doors to me.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Talking with you or thinking that I was going to talk to you and that you would be interested, reminded me that I had this experience right after I turned myself in, and we were living in New York with three little kids where I fell in or I worked my way in to friendship with these three older women who were in very different fields, education, law, and psychiatry. They had worked together over 40 years during the Depression. They met up in high school. Anyway, they worked together around a huge variety of issues. The fact that they were willing to become my friend, I mean, stunned me that you could have a friend across 30 years or 40 years.

Bernardine Dohrn:

You made me think about it just then, because I feel like that it's possible. You can't always predict these things. It's different than a grandma or a family member. But you stirred my memories. That's really what I want to say. And then it happened again when I moved to Chicago because I fell in with two older women. It wasn't a group in the same way, but I just think it's always a great idea to jump across ages and to have somebody that you're talking to and communicating with and looking at views of the world, but also maybe even becoming friends across a generation. So you opened up a flood of memories for me. Thank you for that.

Bernardine Dohrn:

My name is Bernardine Dohrn. I am retired now, but I worked for almost 30 years at Northwestern Law School, quite a lucky turn of events for me because we had just moved back to Chicago after being in New York for a decade. I got to start a center called the Children and Family Justice Center and hired a bunch of people who wanted to represent children. We decided to focus on kids in very serious circumstances. So we started representing kids who were facing the death penalty in the country. I didn't even know these things existed. But of course, once you look, you see.

Bernardine Dohrn:

We spent many years abolishing the juvenile death penalty. The United States was one of the last countries in the world where that was legal, where it was actually the law and okay to execute somebody for something they did under the age of 18. So that threw me into a whole world of criminal justice activism and reform. So as well as representing kids in court, we took on campaigns, really. After successfully in the Supreme Court abolishing the juvenile death penalty, we took on life without possibility of parole, which is another kind of death, as we call it, a way in which people are sentenced to die in prison with absolutely no, no matter who they become or they are or how much the victim families want it or under any circumstance, wrongful convictions, evidence, you are going to die in prison.

Bernardine Dohrn:

So that's been something that took longer than the six years than the juvenile death penalty took. We're still at it. But several thousand people have been released who had that sentence. So we're kind of pulling people out not quite one at a time, but sometimes one at a time. They, of course, have formed their own organization, Incarcerated Children's Action Network, ICAN, which has become just a star and has now merged with the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, which is what I was involved in and is taking over the leadership of the campaign.

Bernardine Dohrn:

So I mainly now, what do I do? I teach one month a year at a small college in Maine. So the students I'm teaching are very young. I teach International Human Rights and Women, Children, and Gender and Human Rights; very long title. So that's been fun, both because then I have to keep up in these areas. So I do more research and find out what's happening and because they're so young.

Bernardine Dohrn:

For me, that's been a challenge. They were born 18 years ago. My references, which mainly were in the last century, don't apply for them. I feel very fortunate that I have a teaching moment now still, and life is good.

Page May:

Yeah. I'm so curious to hear what keeps you in struggle? You have done so much. I'm so tired. It's only been 10 years for me. The intensity of what you have done for so long and so I'm curious to just hear why? What keeps you going?

Bernardine Dohrn:

I don't know the why, but I do know that imperialism and racism are not done. Capitalism is not done. Even though I've certainly thrown myself into the struggle, in that sense, we're going to be handing the struggle off to your generation and others, I'm sorry to say, with some glorious moments and some chipping away, but definitely not being able to turn the tide entirely. I feel that our accomplishments so far have been modest, but are part of a long line, a long thread, a long red ribbon that goes back in time. I'm, myself, honored and proud to be part of that tradition.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I'd like to see a few more serious, solid victories. I'd like to see Cook County Jail closed. That's been one of my dreams for the last four or five years.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Instead we've, not we, but the bigger we, the people who followed me at the Children and Family Justice Center are on the verge of closing the last of the juvenile correctional facilities in Illinois. That's very exciting. We're down to a campaign they call The Final Five.

Page May:

Yep.

Monica Trinidad:

Yes. Yes

Bernardine Dohrn:

Yeah. Isn't it great? But we have so much to do, as you know. The inequalities, the hatred of women that continues or has accelerated in the last five years and the response, which is a fresh, new response and a new start with new people. So I'm very excited about the times we live in. As long as I have the ability, I'm planning to be part of it. I'm waiting for you to call another sit-in, so I can sit next to you on the floor.

Monica Trinidad:

So we can lock arms. I'm so ready for that. So the book we're talking about today is *La Question* by Henri Alleg. I hope I said that correctly.

Monica Trinidad:

Alleg. Okay. Published in 1958, this book is all about torture in Algeria during the war for independence in Algeria.

Monica Trinidad:

This book was censored. This book was banned, and every other repressive tactic you can think of was imposed on this book and its author. So what led you to read this book? You mentioned that you read this book in high school. What did it mean to you at that time, and what does it still mean to you?

Bernardine Dohrn:

Well, I had such an amazing time re-reading it. I had a teacher who only lasted for one year at my suburban high school. He was pushed out by the John Birch Society the next year. His name was John Paul Jones. I was looking for a senior topic to write about, and he suggested this book and the Algerian Conflict. I had no idea. Algeria, a country in Africa, French imperialism, torture, why am I reading about torture? That's one of the most horrible things I can think of to read about. But I have to give credit to him who handed me this book. I wrote a paper, long since lost, thank goodness, about this.

Bernardine Dohrn:

But I'm now reading it and thinking about, of course, the campaigns against torture in Chicago, the fact that I began teaching a class at Northwestern Law School on torture. I called it *Torture: The Paradigm*, and we read about torture by the British of Irish prisoners. We read about Argentina. We read about Chile, South Africa. To me, that was a very exciting part of the anticolonial struggle. I mean the empire does not yield easily, as you know, and one of their

major tools turns out to be torture. Almost every imperial country, over time, uses it again and again and again.

Bernardine Dohrn:

So the fact that we live in a mother country, as the Panthers used to call it, and that, as a white person, I'm a mother country radical, which is what the Panthers lovingly called us, makes you see what your obligation is in a particular light. For reasons that I just re-read and understood in a different light, Henri Alleg was that kind of white person, Frenchman working in Algeria, running a radical newspaper in Algeria, aligned with the Algerian Liberation Forces, but definitely not himself an Algerian, who was seized by the French authorities there and subjected to one month, just one month of extreme physical torture and terror, really.

Bernardine Dohrn:

He had the wherewithal to write about it and to write about it immediately so that it was extremely vivid and detailed as he did. And then it was published because he was a publisher. And then Sartre and others of great international renown seized upon it as part of the struggle against French imperialism. But I think rereading it made me think about not just the grave torture. It made me think about how many people are still at Guantanamo. Why isn't Guantanamo closed?

Bernardine Dohrn:

It made me think about the Chicago police torture victims and their fight for justice and freedom, and still the Chicago Police Department with its evil and secretive methods and, as I say, Cook County Jail. So what the hell is going on there? How can there be thousands of people locked up during this COVID thing? Why can't we close it down? Why can't we stop it? So all that.

Page May:

I really appreciate what you were able to speak to what it meant to you at the time or what brought you to it, but also the ways that the themes have continued to show up and are still very much relevant to what's happening today. Before we dive into the book, can you tell us more about what you know about what happened when it was released? My understanding is that it was banned. It seems like it was a very controversial book or pamphlet when it came out. So can you talk a little bit more about that?

Bernardine Dohrn:

Yes, it was banned. It was definitely banned. Did I hold it up before? Can you see what it looks like? This is a new addition of it. Now, if you take out the two lengthy introductions, it's 50 pages with lots of white around them. So it could be much less than that. It's a very short book or a large pamphlet. I think because it was seized upon by the Communist party and the Left in

France at the time who were opposed to the Algerian War, it was always a war because of this oppression and suppression there. So it was distributed clandestinely. But like those kind of things, it then gets reprinted and reprinted and published and talked about and written about.

Bernardine Dohrn:

When we were underground, I don't want to compare our struggle to the Algerian struggle for self-determination, but we published a book called *Prairie Fire* when we were underground and had it distributed. It appeared simultaneously in 10 different cities. And then other people republished it, and it got bigger and bigger outlet. So that kind of relationship between people working with different methods but agreeing on a core issue is something that I've just always admired. So I learned a little bit more this time around when it had hefty introductions than I knew when I first read it.

Bernardine Dohrn:

A recent book, which I haven't read but I've read about a good bit, by a woman named Zohra Drif, D-R-I-F, and it's called *Inside the Battle of Algiers*. It's late to the party. She wrote it as an old woman now, a survivor of this struggle. But it's about the women who played major roles, not just carrying things into the battle of Algiers, as we think of it from the movie, weapons and bombs and things like that, but actually in organizing and being a leader in the struggle. So just want to mention a recent memoir about this same issue.

Monica Trinidad:

I'm under the impression that this book was also considered a bestseller at the time of its release before it was banned and censored, and it was able to get at least, like you were saying, clandestinely at least 60,000 copies out into the hands of the people. What was the author talking about in this book, and what was the message he was trying to emphasize?

Bernardine Dohrn:

When I first read it, I was shocked to my toes. Now, having lived through and taught torture and read about torture and lived through the victims in Illinois of the Chicago police torture scandals, I know more. But I think it's important to read because torture is, on a micro level, one person touching and putting their hands on another person's body. When you say it that way, it's an intimate relation to violence and to struggle.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Here's the other thing that's astonishing about it. So he's tortured for a month and held in this horrible place. He's passing Algerians, who are the main victims of this torture, as a Frenchman. Some of them recognize him. I'll read you a little passage about it. After the first 24 hours, if you

don't talk ... The first 24 hours he's being tortured is the critical time because that's when they would capture other people because he gave them information.

Bernardine Dohrn:

After that, it's just the torture. It's just the incredible insistence of colonial power and imperial power determined to degrade and practice and overcome resistance right in their very hands and in their very face. So it's got that dimension that's both global and lasts until now and is also very specific and personal. We know this from the Chicago torture victims, I think, in a very powerful way in their telling and retelling of the story of what it meant to them and the combination of giving information or breaking or not being perfect, not being as perfect as you wish you had been.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Anyway, that's all in here in this short book and very, very interesting. It made me furious when I realized when I was thinking about talking to you, not so much when I was reading it, that there's still people in Guantanamo, and therefore hundreds of people working there and therefore millions of our tax dollars going to keeping this hell hole that should just be shut down right now open. Why? Why is it going on? So yeah. My mind wanders around these various horrible things that the United States has been involved in and is still involved in, really.

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah. Just so I'm understanding right, in this book, not only is he talking about torture during the Algerian war, but he's talking about the torture that he experienced himself?

Bernardine Dohrn:

Oh yes. He was seized. He was tortured for 30 days. He goes up and down. I mean the torture is horrible. It's the same things we learned about, but very specific and very low tech, so holding matches to his nipples, burning his eyes, water torture, holding his nose and his head under water, but a lot of electric shock stuff and beatings, just beating him until he collapses. So yeah. When he leaves, he's kind of amazed, and you are, when you end the book that it was just 30 days, just 30 days. It was 30 days. It was every minute and every night of 30 days. The shifts would come in and different people would take over.

Bernardine Dohrn:

And again, he's the one with privilege there. He's the Frenchman. He sees women go by. He sees men and children, just when he's being transferred or thrown into a cell. So you think about other places in the world where this goes on, let's say Israel. I mean we can think of many places where torture is I don't want to say routine because it's almost always partly secret. It's got this great relationship between being flagrantly open and secret. It really did make me think again

about how much of our tax dollars and how much of the US allies and not going far from home, as I said, just in our own prisons and jail cells and police stations.

Bernardine Dohrn:

How much of this continues to go on and how much is it acceptable? People are not fired for it. It's part of the machinery that goes with power and making other people powerless.

Page May:

I'm thinking of two different questions. I guess the first is, I mean to put it simply, is it just him talking about what happened? Or does he, or maybe in the intro, talk about what he thought it meant? It seems like torture is a tool of colonialism. This is being done by colonists. That seems important. I heard you say at one point that it was painful, but also about degradation. Does he speak at all about the larger project of colonialism that this is happening in? Or what did you make of that, about what ... Torture is not just because people are twisted and evil, but it's about power, right?

Bernardine Dohrn:

Yes.

Bernardine Dohrn:

You could say it has connections to the journalists the U.S. has tortured and put in dungeons and silenced and is threatening with charges that lead to the death penalty.

Bernardine Dohrn:

But he's a well-known person, both in France and in Algeria. He's a Frenchman. So he's very aware of the fact that if he resists and if he then remembers enough to tell the story in a powerful way, it could have an impact on the silence of French people in the face of what's being done in their name in Algeria, in another country. This is very important because, at one point, Sartre says in the introduction, "Of course, when France was occupied by the Germans, viva la France. We were willing to be tortured. Many people were tortured to death by the Germans, and we have this great tradition of resistance and fighting back and blah blah blah. That's how we thought of ourselves just 10 years before."

Bernardine Dohrn:

France has become the Germans, and there's silence in the land. That's kind of the global framework in which Henri Alleg and Sartre and Camus and others are all operating, Simone de Beauvoir. They're in a country that they feel is resting on a certain past and not owning up to

what they're spending billions of dollars and thousands of French occupiers suppressing another people's right to independence and freedom.

Bernardine Dohrn:

It, of course, has the color line in it in a very powerful way. So I think that was how they made it an antiwar and an anticolonial, anti-racist pamphlet that became a book sort of, that became a cry that got a megaphone.

Monica Trinidad:

I can just imagine you in high school reading this and then writing a report on this. And then what did you do? Was that when you became like-

Bernardine Dohrn:

No.

Monica Trinidad:

No?

Bernardine Dohrn:

I mean I sat in high school in his class. Did you ever have maps that pulled down in your classroom-

Monica Trinidad:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Bernardine Dohrn:

... big, giant maps of the world and everything? I always was, when I was bored, which was often, I was always looking at the maps and trying to figure out Africa and this and that. Algeria, wow, what a location. Very close to Europe, but not, and completely at the top of Africa. Here's this huge continent, and all I know about it is a little teeny bit about Egypt, and that's way over there. For me, I was very, very, well, naive doesn't even say it. I was poorly educated. I knew almost nothing about politics in the world. I was really just waking up. I had seen on television the Little Rock Nine being met by screaming white crowds.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I would say that was one of the first things that ... I don't think I ever said anything about it. I didn't ask anything about it. I didn't challenge my parents about it. But I thought, "I'm never

going to be that white woman spitting at these kids trying to walk to class." Elizabeth Eckford, my age exactly, trying to walk into a school that she had every right to be in. So I was just really waking up. I have to say I was very, very naive. So I didn't do anything about it. I wrote a paper. Lord knows what it said. But I did remember it. I did remember it. In that sense, it didn't change my life that day. I didn't have a eureka moment, but I think that's what books do sometimes.

Bernardine Dohrn:

They embed themselves in you and the next time and the next time and, finally, you say, "I have to do something." As you might know, it was years later when Dr. King came to Chicago, and I was a law student here. I was like, "Okay." I didn't go South. I didn't have the courage to do it. My boyfriend didn't want me to do it. I yielded. He's coming here. I'm going. So I think people change in complicated ways over a lifetime and sometimes very slowly. Sometimes it takes a set of circumstances. But at some point, if you've missed a few chances to change yourself and change your life, when the next one comes along, you're like, "Dammit, this one I'm doing." You know what I mean?

Monica Trinidad:

Yes.

Bernardine Dohrn:

So for me, that was Dr. King coming to Chicago and I was like, "I'm getting a bunch of law students, and we're going to go meet with him and see what we can do." Not much, but enough to put me on a different trajectory. I think that this book did that for many people in France at the time, not just for the high-powered intellectuals, but actually for the French people. Look what you're doing. You want to say you're the resisters. You're the Nazi fighters. You're the fascist fighters. You're the resistance. And it's true. We paid a terrible price. But now this is being done in our name. Very important for every country in the world to wrestle with this.

Monica Trinidad:

Absolutely. I mean everything you're saying is making me think about the power of narrative and the power of telling stories and telling your own story and telling the story for people who are not able to tell their stories and how critical that is in our organizing and in our daily lives. I'm thinking about so much and especially because I got a lot of my own organizing experience with zines and making zines and telling my stories around identity, putting it out there because I know that I'm not the only one experiencing it. There are other people experiencing things. It's like a snowball effect. Then that narrative is out there, and you can't ignore it. It's out there. You can't ignore these stories of torture. You couldn't.

Monica Trinidad:

That was the power of the fight for reparations in Chicago is these narratives were out there by not only by their survivors, but by their mothers. You couldn't ignore it.

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah. So I'm wondering what has been the role of narrative in your organizing and in your life? I know we don't have a Bernardine Dohrn autobiography or memoir yet, right? But yeah. Just wondering what your thoughts are on how narrative has played a role in your own organizing.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Yeah. I think it's extremely important. In addition to the campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, which I'm involved in, I've been a founding member of Palestine Legal as an organization here. Lucky me. Our kids grew up with the Khalidi family as our close family friends, and we had dinner. Their family and our family moved from New York to Chicago the same year, and we each had three kids. We each had three blonde kids with Arabic names because we had ended up naming our kids Zayd, Malik, and Chesa came to us with his name. So we laughed about that and became good family friends. So our kids grew up together.

Bernardine Dohrn:

For me, being able to play a small role in the development of this organization that is standing up for the right of everybody, Palestinian Americans, but really everybody to oppose the occupation of Palestine and oppose American support for Israel has been one of those kind of issues that I think has similar echoes. Certainly, torture is part of that and incarceration of children and interrogation of children. I don't know. Have either of you ever visited Israel? Have you been to Palestine? Yeah. It's so visual everywhere. It's just so right in front of you, the wall, the separate highways, the separate roads, the checkpoints, what occupation means, just what occupation means.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I have no idea what it really meant in Algeria, but I'm sure that's something like what it means. One thing is how do you organize the resistance there? But the other is how do you bring that reality to other people in the mother countries, say, or in the country that is carrying out the cruelty and the viciousness by its resources, by its money, by its training, all those other kinds of factors, even if not doing it exactly themselves? So I think it's with us from our own prisoners here in the United States and from the continuation of being an imperial power.

Bernardine Dohrn:

You could say the same thing about the United States' role in many other countries. I won't go into them because I'm not good enough.

Page May:

I am surprised at how emotional I'm feeling right now for a lot of reasons. I mean this is hard. We're talking about torture. But also what you had said a question or two ago about how sometimes we learn about a thing and we don't always immediately do something about it. I love books and I love stories. For me, when I was in high school, Invisible Children, which is a very problematic project by these white dudes, I won't defend it. But it was important to me as a high school student and-

Bernardine Dohrn:

Yeah, of course. Of course.

Page May:

Yeah. I think about it a lot and the way you talked about how books, I think you said, embolden themselves in you. I can't remember. I'm going to go back. They change you. These stories change you. Luckily, I fell and stumbled into communities where people were asking me to help and giving me the next step and giving me a next best thing to do. I'm just feeling a lot around that because sometimes I get mad at how we know things are messed up, and there's not enough people doing it now that they know. It's like, "Well, yeah, but ..." I don't know. Anyway, so that's something that is on my mind and heart.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I always think that Brian Stevenson, who I had the great luck of working with in these years when we were trying to abolish the juvenile death penalty and then extreme sentences for youth, but his simple word of saying, "Put yourself proximate to the problem," is another way of saying what Dr. King often said. You don't have to know what to do in order to put yourself close to a problem, and you don't even have to debate the talking heads for hours and hours to think what's the most important of all these various problems that we have? Is it gender violence? Is it racial violence? Does it have to be both at the same time? Can it be violence against ...

Bernardine Dohrn:

You put yourself proximate to something, and then you figure out if you can be useful in any way. I mean picture me at the age of whatever I was, 26, out in Garfield Park where Dr. King's headquarters were and wearing an armband that said, "Legal." I knew nothing. I was of no help to anyone who was in legal trouble, believe me. But they liked the idea, the organizers there, half of them from the South who had been with Dr. King or SNCC in the South and half of them from

the neighborhood in Garfield Park on the West Side of Chicago, working in that office. They weren't saying to me, "Go out and give speeches." No, not at all.

Bernardine Dohrn:

But after they gave speech every night in an apartment building that was substandard living and no hot water and broken windows and no locks on the doors and gouging rents, they meant that I could say with only the authority of my armband on me, "If you all decide together to withhold your rent, we'll help you create an escrow account. And then we'll prevent you from being evicted." Wow, what a strategy. I wasn't doing those other parts, but we had groups of lawyers who wanted to be in the single landlord-tenant courtroom downtown where everybody was being evicted every 30 seconds for nonpayment of rent or doing other pieces of the struggle here, speaking in the churches each night.

Bernardine Dohrn:

But I could make the connection that if you do this, the network of us working here under the leadership of these folks will prevent you from being evicted, and we more or less did. The one eviction I witnessed I've written about since. But as somebody was evicted and we all ran out there to stop it on a hot July day, somebody standing next to me said, "Would you hold my coat?" and walked forward. I looked, and it was Muhammad Ali. Okay. So how did he get there? I have no idea. I'd never seen him before out there in the summer. He walked up. He picked up the kitchen table that the sheriffs had just brought down from this family.

Bernardine Dohrn:

He picked it up, and they had their mouth hanging open. He just picked it up and walked past them up the stairs. So then five more people came and 20 more people came. Everybody picked up clothing or kitchen utensils or a chair or something and put them back in their apartment. I mean you just don't know until you're in motion. And then things happen. I don't know. When Dr. King came to Chicago, did he meet with Muhammad Ali or with the Nation? I have no idea. I still don't know till this day. Everybody's working at making the connections that will matter. Sometimes when you need it, they matter and they're right there and they work.

Monica Trinidad:

I'm thinking a lot about how on The Lit Review Podcast, we have people who talk about books that they would recommend till the end of time. They're like, "Everyone needs to read this book." And then sometimes we have people who are like, "You don't need to read this book. There were some gems in it, and we'll talk about the gems here. But you don't need to read it." And then there's other times where, like you were saying, sometimes a book can speak to us at a time in our lives when we need it and hits us and impacts us in a way that means something to us maybe not at that moment, but way later in life.

Monica Trinidad:

So the question is, do you recommend that organizers today read this book and, if so, is there anything you would also recommend folks read maybe in addition to it or alongside of it or in companionship with it?

Bernardine Dohrn:

I think it is. If it was a real long, heavy, fat book, I would might say no because ... I mean I'm going to read and then I'll tell you after I've read it, the woman who's now published a book, I'm going to read hers. I'm going to do a little bit more about how Algerian independence went off course once it was seized finally, Zohra Drif's memoir, *Inside the Battle of Algiers*. I think it's important to read.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I was thinking that this year I was going to reread Toni Morrison, and I was going to go through one after the other because those books had such a big impact on me as they were coming out. I'd like to read them again because they surely survive as great literature. I think when people say, "Read this or don't read this, but I learned something," I think it's a great gift that you're giving by doing a show like this. I don't know. I'm going to go now back and find out what people are recommending to read because you need to get your sources from lots of different people.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Our kids recommend things to us. That's great, very helpful. I don't know if I told you this, but my oldest son and I decided one year that we'd reread all of Dickens, and we read all of Dickens. And then when I was down after surgery, he came and people were bringing books. He said, "Do something that you'll remember. Don't read all these books that other people are bringing." I said, "Like what?" And he said, "I don't know. Reread Tolstoy." So I did. In other words, I don't think there's exactly a book you're going to miss, certainly, you two won't, that is really important for everybody to read.

Bernardine Dohrn:

But reading all the time as part of your life every day, every other day, it certainly is. I feel very strongly about that. For me, it's sometimes just murder mysteries and fun. So I confess to those kind of addictions, too. But the passion for reading is something I hope you're digging deeply into with your people because it's a lifetime gift. The multiple dimensions of the way books are coming out and the merger of comics and all kinds of art forms and poetry with this kind of book is extremely important, too.

Bernardine Dohrn:

I think of Eve Ewing and people right in our hometown who have written books before this and then finds a huge audience in the world of comics, too.

Page May:

I had a flashback to when I was little and we used to do this thing in elementary school. It was called Stop, Drop, and Read. It was a week where at any point in time there might be this alarm that would go off. Well, you would get a book at the start of the week. That was my favorite thing about it because we didn't have ... I grew up in rural Vermont where there weren't big libraries. I loved books. I got a day. My dad let me skip school one day because he's in construction and they were renovating a library. It was one of my favorite days as a child. I got to spend all day in the library, and my dad brought me muffins and stuff. I felt so fancy. Anyways, it was great.

Bernardine Dohrn:

It is. It is very fancy.

Page May:

Yeah. I want to take what you just said about your love of reading and send that to children. Whoever's doing Stop, Drop, and Read still, I want to be like, "Here's a commercial from Bernardine Dohrn." That was so moving.

Bernardine Dohrn:

That's a great story. My father, who had no higher education, took me when I was six or seven to the public library and asked them to give me a card, in Rogers Park. And then we'd go every maybe it was Saturday morning, something like that, and return the books back in. It would have been horrible for him to know that people don't turn books back in on time or get fined for it and get to take other books out.

Bernardine Dohrn:

So that kind of a thing that you can do with people around you, elders or children or anybody, is another gift and fighting for our public libraries and libraries in every neighborhood as a space where you can do programming and agitate as well as have children reading together and talking about books. So that's something when you cultivate it, it's a lifelong habit. It's very exciting.

Page May:

So then we close each episode with our guest reading a favorite quote or passage from the book. So I'm going to hand it over to you and just close us out however you want.

Bernardine Dohrn:

Okay. I'm reading toward the end of this book, *La Question, The Question*. Toward the end of the month that he spent in prison, he's talking about how he would be pushed down the stairs or kicked down the stairs or taken down the stairs by his guards. And then he says, "I would often pass Arab prisoners in the corridor on the way back to their collective dungeon or cell. Some of them knew me from having seen me at political rallies organized by the paper," the paper he put out.

Bernardine Dohrn:

"Others knew my name. I was always naked to the waist and still marked by the bruises I had received, my chest and hands covered in bandages. They understood that, like themselves, I had been tortured, and they greeted me in the passage, 'Have courage, brother.' In their eyes I read, a solidarity, a friendship, and such complete trust that I felt proud and particularly proud because I was a European to be among them."

[Music fades in, Tasha's "Kind of Love" plays]

Monica Trinidad:

Thanks for listening to another episode of the Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about a book that has shaped their organizing work. We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago-based abolitionists, cultural workers, and cat mamas who love nerding out on books and creating spark notes for our movements. Audio production this season by Benji Russelburg, music by TASHA, podcast theme intro by David Ellis with production by Ari Mejia, and social media support from Alycia KAhmil. If you like this episode, give it a shoutout on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, and if you like our podcast, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts to help widen our reach. Financial support for the production of this podcast season is thanks to the Field Foundation of Illinois, and our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a patron at Patreon.com/thelitreview. Keep reading!