REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
ELIZABETH WARNOCK FERNEA

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, professor emeritus, Middle Eastern Studies, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
ELIZABETH WARNOCK FERNEA

“Guests of BJ,” a conference held over three days in October 2009 to commemorate the life and work – and legacy – of Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, convened several generations of scholars who had indeed been “guests” of BJ Fernea, at her home, in her classrooms, through her books, at film screenings, around conference tables, on editorial committees, and at annual conventions in modern language and Middle Eastern studies. “Guests of BJ” was co-hosted, however, at UT not by BJ herself, who had passed away on December 2, 2008, but by the many University-wide departments, units, and programs that she had variously served, founded, and championed over her decades-long participation in the UT community: Middle Eastern Studies, English, Comparative Literature, Women’s and Gender Studies, South Asian studies, anthropology, history, religious studies, with additional support from the Office of the Vice President for Research. Elizabeth “BJ” Fernea’s influence on the UT legacy remains consequential indeed, even if sometimes still controversial, but her unrelenting collegial renown and intellectual insight and prescience are no less internationally recognized and generationally acknowledged. Participants in the “Guests of BJ” conference, scholars, friends, and family alike, shared in the three days of discussion, tribute, and commemoration; convened from three continents, representing myriad academic disciplines, and displaying multi-media ingenuity, they one and all testified to what it means to be/have been a “guest of BJ.” Such disparity, diversity, and community were only appropriate – because BJ Fernea was herself proficient, prolific, and profuse in her contributions toward expanded and expansive international understandings and interdisciplinary undertakings – especially North American/Middle Eastern – across and around these several academic arenas and geo-political areas.

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s career is not only stellar but exemplary, both for that now legendary collegial hospitality and for her impeccable intellectual integrity. The 2009-2010 Newsletter of Center/Department of Middle Eastern Studies summarized her unparalleled, if peripatetic, trajectory: “A graduate of Reed College in Oregon, BJ’s initial exposure to the Middle East came through trial by fire when she accompanied her husband on his doctoral field study to the village of al-Nahra in southern Iraq from 1956 to 1958. In her bestselling ethnographic memoir, Guests of the Sheik: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village (1965, reprinted in 1969 and 1989). BJ recorded how she was able to navigate the spheres of the village women, areas where her husband was unable to go. After Robert Fernea obtained his doctorate from the University of Chicago, the couple moved to Cairo where two of their children were born.

“The Ferneas arrived in Austin in 1966, when Robert assumed the directorship of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at The University of Texas. BJ was hired as a senior lecturer in 1975 in both the Comparative Literature Program of the English department and the Center Middle Eastern Studies {BJ, yes, we know, there’s a very different version out there!!—bh}. She was later promoted to full professorship in 1990. While BJ retired from teaching in the spring of 1999, she continued to be active as professor emerita for the rest of her life. During her long career, BJ was the recipient of numerous grants, awards, and honors, and also served as president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America from 1985 to 1986.

“Over the course of her forty years in Austin, BJ authored a number of books, some autobiographical – such as A View of the Nile (1970) and A Street in Marrakech (1975) – others more scholarly in nature, including the edited volumes Middle Eastern Women Speak (co-edited with Basima Qattan Bezigan, 1977), Women and the

“In addition to her prolific career as an author, BJ produced several films about the Middle East, including Saints and Spirits (1979), Reformers and Revolutionaries: Middle Eastern Women (1984), The Struggle for Peace Israelis and Palestinians (1992), The Road to Peace: Israelis and Palestinians (1994), and Living with the Past (2001).”

No less tellingly, but more intimately perhaps, BJ’s colleague in UT’s Department of English, Laura Furman remembers in other words what it means to have been – to still be – counted among the “guests of BJ”:

“After Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s death, I searched through Guests of the Sheikh, her first book and an enduring one, for a quote for the memorial card; I found what I had always known but never before articulated.

“As a writer, Fernea, called BJ far and wide, was averse to generalizing, sentimentalizing, and to making life sound either better or worse than it is. A clear statement was what she valued, and if it could be made with humor and imagination, so much the better. She was known for her scholarly work on life in the Middle East, often in collaboration with her husband Bob, and also for her readable and evocative accounts of personal life in that region. She was a respected scholar, filmmaker, editor, and teacher, but above all she was a writer. BJ wrote what she could see, hear, feel, and touch. Though she had powerful intuition and an unblinkered view of humanity, she didn’t write what she didn’t know nor did she guess and surmise. She was a wonderful reporter, but the beauty of her narrative voice and the intelligence and sensible humanity of her observations raised her writing far above reportage.

“She never assumed that she knew the life of another human being or community because she was an educated and (she would be the first to say) privileged observer. Without romanticizing lives led by people very different from herself (another form of condescension), she maintained a respectful attitude rooted in courage, both in her life and in her writing. Courage is a word that BJ would pooh-pooh about herself, but that’s what it takes to uphold such a firm sense of what is right and to accept that one does the right thing — and writes the true thing — however inconvenient or uncomfortable it might make us. She had the capacity in her books to make us care about people very different from ourselves, which is the essential power and magic of literature.

“In retirement from The University of Texas, before illness overtook her, BJ was engaged in writing fiction, which she’d talked about for years, talking about such writing the way a weary traveler says home. She loved reading fiction. Perhaps she admired the freedom involved in being truthful in a different way. The little I read of her fiction promised a different writer, one whose humor and worldly experience would flower into wise and absorbing stories. She was also working on a memoir. Characteristically, the memoir was not to be about herself and her life. The unfinished memoir was meant to contain recipes and to tell about the women and men who had taught her to cook; some had taught her to live, as she taught so many of us by her example.

“In searching Guests of the Sheik for a quotation that would sum up her accounts of her experience and knowledge of the Middle East, I settled on her first paragraph.

The night train from Baghdad to Basra was already hissing and creaking in its tracks when Bob and I arrived at the platform. Clouds of steam billowing from the engine hung suspended in the cold January air as we hurried across with suitcases, string bags and an angel-food cake in a cardboard box, a farewell present from a thoughtful American friend. We were on the last lap of our journey, and I found myself half dreading and half anticipating the adventure we had come ten thousand miles to begin.

Without backtracking, keeping us in the moment of departure for Basra, her writing engaged us in the momentous journey to follow. She was every traveler and she was herself alone. It was the journey of her writing and her life."

In memoriam, BJ, from all of your guests!

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Barbara J. Harlow (chair), Laura J. Furman, and Susan S. Heinzelman.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on June 4, 2010. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.