

Martín-Baró Initiative for Wellbeing & Human Rights at Grassroots International
A Partner of Boston College Center for Human Rights & International Justice

Furthering Liberation Psychologies and Mutual Accompaniment: A Conversation with Mary Watkins

By *Lai Lai Liu and Ivana Wijedasa*

Professor Mary Watkins is a psychologist at the Pacifica Graduate Institute, and has worked with marginalized communities in numerous settings. This September, she joined us for a conversation about her work in furthering liberation psychologies and mutual accompaniment, the significance of the Martín-Baró Initiative, and her advice to those hoping to make a difference in ongoing struggles for wellbeing and human rights.

During our conversation, we were struck by the evolution of Watkins' work, realizing almost immediately it would be impossible to capture the breadth and depth of her research and advocacy in a short article. Nevertheless, the following topics and stories stood out to us and are summarized here to introduce our readers to some of the many ways of rethinking wellbeing and liberation psychology in the 21st century.

Watkins has been involved in psychology for nearly fifty years, and the central questions she's asked herself are about understanding psychology's limitations, "having been constructed in Europe and America." Her work to understand the discipline's history and change its future has taken many forms, notably through her creation of the "Community, Liberation,

Indigenous and Eco-Psychologies" program at the Pacifica Graduate Institute, her participatory research with marginalized communities, and her efforts in grassroots and advocacy organizations.

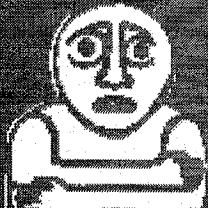


She was particularly driven to address the issues of forced migration at the U.S.-Mexico border, and spoke to us about how her relocation to Santa Barbara, California in the 1990s shaped this focus for her. In California, she said, "I was confronted with a whole other set of dynamics, which I was unfamiliar with, [coming] from New York and Boston. And that had to do with the intensity of the way in which forced migration was affecting my community, and I really wanted to learn more about it."

This confrontation led to involvement with organizations like New Sanctuary Coalition, and more recently, her work conducting forensic psychological evaluations of asylum-seekers in immigration detention centers. These developments came from a place of "figuring out how to use my psychological background to be of some help."

We also spoke about what it meant to conduct research

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Our Mission & Values

Through grant-making and education, the Martín-Baró Initiative fosters psychological well-being, social consciousness, active resistance, and progressive social change in communities affected by institutional violence, repression, and social injustice.

OUR VALUES

- ◆ We believe that the scars of such experiences are deeply seated both in the individual and in society.
- ◆ We believe in the power of the community collectively to heal these wounds, to move forward, and to create change.
- ◆ We believe in the importance of developing education and critical awareness about the oppressive policies and practices of the United States and of multinational corporations.

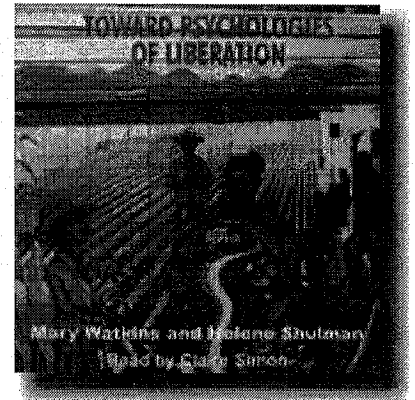
OUR GOALS

- ◆ To support innovative grassroots projects that explore the power of the community to foster healing within individuals and communities that are trying to recover from experiences of institutional violence, repression, and social injustice.
- ◆ To promote education and critical awareness about the psychosocial consequences of structural violence, repression, and social injustice on individuals and communities, while educating ourselves and the wider community about the community-based responses of grantees in their pursuit of social reparation and a more just and equitable world.
- ◆ To build collaborative relationships among the Initiative, its grantees, and its contributors for mutual education and social change.

Contributing authors and editors: Roy Eldelson, Elizabeth Hargraves, Cat Hoff, Timothy Karcz, Lai-Lai Liu, M. Brinton Lykes, Carol Schachet and Ivana Wijedasa. PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK. Contributions can be made on-line at: grassrootsonline.org/mbi-gift or by check made out to Grassroots International, noting on the memo line that it is for the Martín-Baró Initiative and sent to Grassroots International, 179 Boylston Street, 4th floor, Boston, MA 02130. Checks payable to Grassroots International are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by the IRS code. For questions or comments, please email us at info@martinbarofund.org

FURTHERING LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGIES AND MUTUAL ACCOMPANIMENT: A CONVERSATION WITH MARY WATKINS *continued from page 1*

using a model of mutual accompaniment. Professor Watkins took us back further than her own work, saying she began to track the word “accompaniment” in psychology scholarship from writers like Paulo Freire, and that she felt like “it was the missing half of what I had been taught... his work led me into liberation theology and liberation psychology” in the 1970s. To her, accompaniment is a “beautiful word... to describe an essential change in the way that psychology was being conducted.” Meaning literally to *take bread with one another*, it is a powerful and hopeful aspiration for psychologists.



Traditionally, American and European psychology casts the researcher as an expert and “prematurely disavows” pre-existing lived knowledge in clinical and research domains. However, accompaniment challenges this framework and models what Professor Watkins called a “much more dialogical, much more participatory way of being with other people.” To her, mutual accompaniment represents “an ethics of respect and humility” that props up not the researcher’s expertise and control, but the importance and beauty of creating relationships and discovering a deeper sense of belonging through working alongside people.

Watkins also spoke to us about the particular significance of Ignacio Martín-Baró and the Martín-Baró Initiative in her discipline. During the late 1970s, Martín-Baró played a large role in one of the most important shifts in psychology, creating language and programs to address communities affected by “psychosocial trauma.”

In contrast with the paradigm of individualism in Euro-American psychology, Watkins commended Ignacio Martín-Baró’s utter clarity in challenging the social psychology he had studied at the University of Chicago. Once in San Salvador, he felt that entire communities’ suffering met with inapplicable, inadequate help and care. He pushed psychologists to critically evaluate oppressive systems that “place undue burdens on particular communities.” He fought for people to live without visible or invisible forms of violence. In this, Watkins believes the Martín-Baró Initiative is “a beautiful way to keep alive” his vision for a very different type of society by linking together people from around the world.

Toward the end of our conversation, we asked Watkins if she had any advice for young students and advocates who hoped to enter a similar field such as hers. She paused, telling us after a moment of reflection,

“There are a lot of roles that are needed in the world that have not yet been created and formalized. Do not restrict yourself to the roles that are already ‘givens’ if you feel they adversely and severely limit how you can work to embody your ... visions for the future that you hold with others.”