

If You Don't Want to Confront Oppression, Your Role as an Intellectual Is Pointless: The Thirty-Eighth Newsletter (2025)



Reading the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) at the grave of Berta Cáceres, August 2025.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

At the grave of Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores (1971–2016) in La Esperanza, Honduras, where she was born and

died, I watched a yellow butterfly flutter around a bougainvillea bush. It flew as if unconcerned, going from grave to grave in the quiet cemetery. Beside Berta's grave is that of her brother, Carlos Alberto López Flores (1958–2004), a communist who studied at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow and was a vital influence on the thinking of his younger sister. The other side of Berta's grave remains empty. It awaits the body of Carlos and Berta's mother María Austra Bertha Flores López – known as Mamá Berta – who buried two of her children. The yellow butterfly hovered above Berta's grave, where there were new flowers from visitors who, like us, came to pay homage to this legendary fighter killed for defending the rights of Honduras's Lenca people and the global struggle for social justice.

I have been to graves and memorials such as this across the world: to the memorial for Lindokuhle Mnguni (1994–2022), the young chairperson of the eKhenana Commune and a leader of the shack dwellers' movement **Abahlali baseMjondolo**, who was murdered in his home in Durban, South Africa, and who regularly wrote responses to these newsletters; to a memorial for Gauri Lankesh (1962–2017), shot at her door in Bengaluru, India, by thugs from the far right Hindutva brigade for her brave work as a journalist of conscience; and to the grave of Chokri Belaïd (1964–2013) in the Jellaz cemetery in Tunis, where he was assassinated outside his home at a point when – as a trade union leader – he was on the threshold of pushing for a secular government in Tunisia. There are the graves and memorials of earlier years that draw me back: the grave of Víctor Jara (1932–1973), who was tortured and murdered by Pinochet's thugs after the coup, in the Cementerio General in Recoleta near my home in Santiago, Chile; the study of Mahdi Amel (1936–1987), which his wife Evelyne Brun Hamdan (1937–2020) kept just as he had left it when he went down to fetch a pair of trousers from the dry cleaners and was assassinated for his Marxist criticisms of religious sectarianism; and the memorial of Chris Hani (1942–1993), the great South African communist, assassinated just when South Africa began its transition from apartheid and just when he – the voice of his country's working class – would have brought a proletarian sensibility to the new government.



Why were these people killed? What was their crime? Each of them believed – in different ways – in the need to expand the possibilities for human dignity in the world. For *Manifiesto* – his last song, released after his death by his wife Joan Jara (1927–2023) – Víctor wrote with the melancholy that comes with knowing how difficult it is to build socialism through the hierarchies of capitalism and the violence that the elites will use to retain their power :

A worker's guitar,
with the scent of spring.
It is not a rich man's guitar,
nor anything like it.
My song comes from the scaffolds,
to reach the stars.

None of these people wished ill for the world. Berta fought to secure ordinary people's rights to decide how their resources should be mobilised for their own advancement; Lindokuhle fought for the right of working-class South Africans to live in a decent home and to control their own destiny; and Gauri fought for the right of the Indian people to reason and to bathe in the truth.

The gunmen who killed them did so for money. Most were professional hitmen, cogs in a vast machine of profit and death. It is often the hitmen who get caught in the investigations, charged, and imprisoned. But the people who put the gun in their hands and point the barrel at those marked for death are often invisible, uncharged, and powerful. They claim innocence. They have clean hands, no gunpowder on their fingers, no blood on their shoes. Who killed Berta? The men who were arrested and charged or more dangerous figures – property owners whose plans for more profit in the Lenca highlands were interrupted by Berta and the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH)? Belaid's assassins might have come from impoverished parts of Tunis like Ettadhamen, but the real killers hatched their plots in the luxurious villas of Les Berges du Lac, as we wrote in a **dossier** co-published with COPINH.

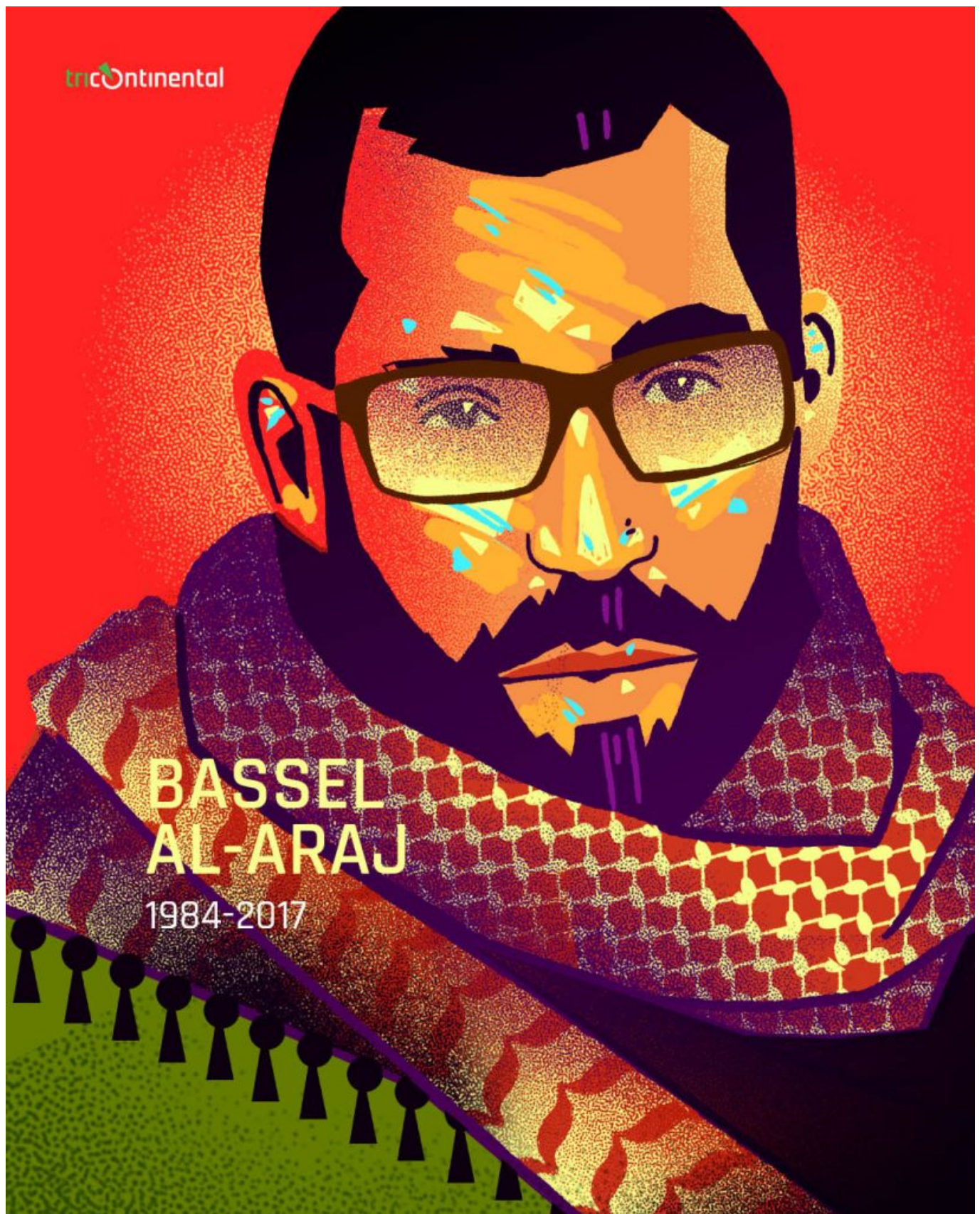


Gelasio Giménez Barrera (Cuban-Honduran), *Sin título* (Untitled), 1986.

A year before he was killed, I met Chokri Belaïd in Tunis, where he regaled me with stories of the fight to overthrow the government of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. He had a way of lyrically talking about struggle and the future, a poetic sensibility carried from his youth and his days as a student in Baghdad. Through his life, he wrote poems of freedom, which were collected by his family and published after his death as *Ash‘ār naqashathā al-rīḥ ‘alā abwāb Tūnis al-sab‘a* (Poems Inscribed by the Winds on the Seven Gates of Tunis). One of these poems, likely written at the height of the political repression in the late 1980s, is called *lā taṭrudūnī* (Don’t expel me):

Don’t expel me.
I am time, an altar in your time.
I am pain, or an ancient hymn.
I am a coming curse.

Belaïd yearned for beauty. Berta’s daughter – Bertha, known as Bertita – tells me that her mother loved joy (and a bit of tequila). Gauri liked to cook and enjoyed rock ‘n’ roll music. Lindokuhle was a voracious reader, devouring Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko as well as *The Communist Manifesto*. The assassins and those who paid them cannot erase the essential humanity of these leaders of our movements. They killed them because the movements and their leaders are ‘a coming curse’, fighting for an exit from a world of profit and violence to build a world of dignity and common humanity.



At Berta's grave, as Israel's genocide escalates in Gaza and famine is declared, I think of Bassel al-Araj (1984–2017), whom I met in Ramallah some years before he was murdered by Israeli police in the West Bank. Bassel turned his brilliant mind to books and ideas, building a body of thought about the Israeli

occupation and Palestinian resistance that made him, to me, this generation's Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1972), the great Palestinian communist intellectual killed by an Israeli car bomb along with his seventeen-year-old niece Lamis Nijem in Beirut, Lebanon. In a music video by the Gaza-based band Maimas, released after Bassel's death, he appears at the end talking about the importance of being an engaged intellectual (the band's singer Haidar Eid wrote *Banging on the Walls of the Tank: Dispatches from Gaza*, **just out** from Johannesburg-based Inkani Books): 'If you don't want to be engaged', says Bassel, 'if you don't want to confront oppression – your role as an intellectual is pointless'. When he was killed, he had two books nearby – one by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the other by Lebanese communist Mahdi Amel ('the man with sandals of fire', as he was known in the Arab world, a 'man who would walk through fire' – *al-rajul dhu al-ni'al al-nāriyah*).

At Berta's graveside, I read part of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Ashes of Gramsci* (1954), where he visits Gramsci's grave and then departs for the world beyond the cemetery:

I'll take my leave of him. I leave you in the evening
that however sad, is almost sweet, falling on
us, living creatures, with its waxen light
that sets the quarter in twilight.
And stirs it up. Makes it larger, emptier
in close, and, at a great distance, rekindles it
a raving life, that of the hoarse
rolling racket of the tram, of human clamour,
dialects, creating a faintly heard
and positive harmony. And you feel like those faraway
creatures that in life shout, laugh
in those vehicles of theirs, those wretched
apartment blocks, where the false and
expansive gift of existence is consumed –
that life is nought but a shiver;
corporeal, collective presence;
you feel the absence of any true
religion; not living, but surviving
– perhaps more joyous than living – like
a nation of animals, within its mysterious
orgasm – there would be no other longing
than that for daily action, work:
a humble ardour which lends a sense of festivity
to humble corruption.

...

It's a cacophony, this life, and those lost
in it, lose it cloudlessly, if their hearts
are filled with it: enjoying themselves,
behold the wretched, the evening: powerful
in them, defenceless before them, the myth

is reborn... But I, with my aware heart,
which is alive only in history,
can I ever again act with a pure love,
if I know that our history is ended?

But our history, as Berta knew, does not end so easily. Our struggles are vital and necessary and, as Bassel knew, infectious.

Warmly,

Vijay