

By Stephanie Tang and Curt Wechsler, San Francisco Bay Area World Can't Wait

"Berkeley Says No To Torture" Week was one of those special moments people will remember for a long time to come. It began as a local grassroots project, yet it turned into the largest, most diverse gathering of anti-torture experts and activists in one mega-event since the Bush Regime began its 'War on Terror' nine years ago. For seven days straight, this team brought the truth about torture out into the light of day, drawing serious, eager audiences to all our dynamic forums, protests, and cultural events. The Week began last spring, as a problem-solving project by a small group of activists from World Can't Wait and other groups we've worked with against torture and illegal rendition: the National Lawyers Guild Committee Against Torture, local Progressive Democrats of America and Code Pink chapters, Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, and leaders from the Coalition for an Ethical APA and the local Unitarians. Our idea was simple. The ongoing war and the Bush/Cheney torture/rendition program remain a grim nightmare, these many long months into Obama's administration. It's clear that not only is Obama NOT reversing course, but he's presiding over an extension of the same trajectory the world hated so much under Bush. Yet protest has ebbed; the anti-war movement has, in fact, largely collapsed. Among the people who four or five years ago were marching, today there is confusion, and demoralization –and also for some, just plain denial and "ignore-ance." But there is also a section of people, quite widespread, who are feeling a heartsick hatred for what's happening; feeling betrayed by the Democrats, many asking "NOW what can we do?" "Berkeley Says No To Torture" Week was born because some of us still paying attention to torture (activists, writers, lawyers and groups) were clear: this very bad program is continuing, with very bad ramifications. So if the anti-torture movement is scattered and small, why not pull all our strengths together and give it a place to stand up? We would zero in on the torture /illegal rendition established under Bush and its continuation now under Obama. We would bring together a strong, diverse chorus of experts to put all that under a spotlight through a concentrated week of public events. We hoped to model what the political terrain should and can look like, if people come together to raise in one voice their refusal to accept torture and their determination to end it. It is true as World Can't Wait has long said: Silence + Torture = Complicity. But that silence can be broken. Our planning meetings were small. We had no powerful institutional backing or funds. Friends counseled us, "these days you can't do too much . . ." But a couple of highly respected leaders in the fight to stop torture agreed right away to anchor the project (we thank you here for that: British journalist Andy Worthington and former National Lawyers Guild president Marjorie Cohn). Through weeks of outreach far and wide (and not only to political activists) we soon found many more eager to take part. Through conversations that led to a wonderful artists' panel at the Berkeley Art Museum, the Week came to the attention of famed artist Fernando Botero ("The Abu Ghraib Series") who sent his personal statement of support. Al Young, California's former poet laureate, sent voice recordings of three poems. As word began to spread, networks sprang open: Journalist A introduced it to journalist B, who reached out to blogger C. A psychologist took it to the School of the Americas Watch community – we began getting calls from lawyers asking if they could speak – stores wanted posters up in their windows. A well-known Berkeley meditation center announced a series of their own meditations and discussions devoted to the Week. Actors and poets volunteered to perform. Professors told us they loved the concept

and even though there'd be no official support from their departments, they would encourage their students to attend and take part. The "No to Torture" Week was tapping into something vibrant and real: PEOPLE WANT NEW AVENUES OF RESISTANCE TO OPEN UP! The very first program was an author talk/conversation/reading by Andy Worthington and Justine Sharrock, hosted by Revolution Books. Andy is a leading investigative journalist and filmmaker who's become a Guantanamo expert, having documented the stories of these 774 men. Justine came in from a seemingly opposite pole – her book examines the torture story from the vantage point of the low-level soldiers who took part in some way, at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Their conversation was fascinating – but even more so, once they were joined by Lauro Vasquez, a young poet from the new San Francisco writers group, Revolutionary Poets Brigade. Lauro's two poems stilled the room and lifted the evening to a new level. And the week went on like that: deep information, moving presentations, and amazing chemistry between speakers and audience – between young and veteran – between anti-torture experts many of whom have worked together but had never met in person before. A major news story exposing new exposure of the role of medical professionals (including physicians) in the torture machine was "broken" at one of our programs. Speakers delivered passionate arguments connecting Abu Ghraib/Guantanamo torture now to U.S. government-sponsored torture in 1970's Latin America –and to the the Chicago scandal over police torture today – raising the simple question: why is there an unbroken chain of torture over such long arcs of American history, and what does it mean that now this torture is being openly legitimized? And there was the Giant John Yoo Debate on Tuesday that took all this to the very law school where Yoo still teaches . . . This report does not have room to describe all 17 events (they're listed on the website: [www.WeSayNoToTorture.net](http://www.WeSayNoToTorture.net), with YouTubes giving a live glimpse of many of them). Many people commented all week and in the days since on the impressive quality of the entire ensemble of panels, readings, protests, and discussions. \* Our teamwork was made especially powerful by our diversity: here were leading anti-torture lawyers, journalists, and teachers, standing together with law students and activists, and all of us having our hearts lifted by the fierce truth-telling voices of poets and artists. The Week was embraced by Fernando Botero, but also by teachers and students in inner city high schools. It was approved as an official civic week by the Berkeley City Council, and taken up enthusiastically across a political spectrum of civil liberties and human rights groups, religious communities, progressive Democrats, revolutionary communists, legal scholars, peace activists, former California and San Francisco poet laureates and 22-year-old poets, and the local nonviolence/meditation center. Our venues were the UC campus, bookstores, churches, a university art museum, high school classrooms, community centers, and bookstores. The National Lawyers Guild sponsored a professional credit course for attorneys, taught by Marjorie Cohn; a staged reading from the drama "Pedro and the Captain" by Mario Benedetti was professionally directed and performed on our closing night. \* The radio airwaves brought the Week to an even wider audience on KALW (an NPR affiliate), Cindy Sheehan's Soapbox show, and daily in-depth interviews all week with Dennis Bernstein on KPFA's hard-hitting Flashpoints show featuring Andy Worthington, Ray McGovern, Marjorie Cohn, Debra Sweet, Justine Sharrock, and Patricia Isasa. \* The startling irony that many of our programs took place right inside UC Berkeley Law itself – the prestigious Boalt Hall, where John Yoo continues teaching constitutional law and, presumably, serving as a role model for the next generation of lawyers and judges – was noted by news reporters, many of our speakers, and by the outspoken law students of the Boalt Alliance to Abolish Torture (BAAT) and the National Lawyers Guild's Boalt

chapter. BAAT and the NLG/Boalt hosted and spoke at many of the Week's main events, and their representatives were courageous, passionate, and inspiring to all. Watch them in the YouTubes of the Giant John Yoo Debate and the Reckoning with Torture reading. \* As the Week unfolded, John Yoo's presence at Boalt was never far from many of our minds. If you walked along the main Berkeley avenues, all week the lampposts were plastered up and down with "Arrest John Yoo" wanted posters. The Tuesday night "Giant John Yoo Debate" saw his video image projected 20 feet high on Boalt Hall's front wall with well-known lawyers, activists, and law students standing just below, debating his legal arguments point for point. On Friday night, Berkeley's Vice Mayor Linda Maio welcomed the audience to the stellar "Reckoning with Torture" performance with pointed comments about Yoo's presence and his un-qualifications to be on the faculty, challenging the University to "do some work." And: \* The "Reckoning" was an amazing experience as the assembled readers stepped up to the microphones. By this time in the Week, many in the audience were more deeply informed than ever about the damning facts about torture – yet still something different and deeper moved between the stage and the audience as that story came to life in the voices of both perpetrators – and their victims. Thanks to the concerted effort of so many people, we accomplished a statement against torture and in support of accountability for the perpetrators that is being heard far beyond the borders of Berkeley. We've already seen coverage in alternative media based in Italy (reporting on the Giant John Yoo Debate) - [www.uruknet.info](http://www.uruknet.info), and reports from organizations like The Refuge Media Project in the US - [refugemediaproject.org](http://refugemediaproject.org) The blog New Left Project (England) published a reader comment that "Berkeley No to Torture Week was an historical event! May the spirit of you all, and especially the young man who stepped up to the mike to tell the truth at the risk of damaging his education and/or career, continue to infect the conscientious, but fearful." Find YouTube glimpses of many of the events -- plus more news and links to radio interviews and blogs at: [WeSayNoToTorture.net](http://WeSayNoToTorture.net) At this dedicated Website (sponsored and contributed to the Week's coalition by World Can't Wait) we plan to continue posting media reports, links to more video documenting many of the events, and your comments and reflections on this week of one community putting its conscience into action. Friends: in the almost two years since Bush and Cheney left office, we have seen an unbroken continuation of the crimes committed under their regime. In many ways, the crimes of our government are widening, and worsening, under Obama. The torture and rendition; the death of due process, habeas and other basic rights for people abroad and here; the illegal assumption of undue, unjust power by the President (who tells his progressive critics to suck it up and shut up, lest you aid the Tea Partiers) – this is not the change that so many hoped for, and as World Can't Wait continues to insist: "Crimes are Crimes – No Matter WHO Does Them." What made "Berkeley Says No To Torture" Week possible, and then turned it into a reality, was the conscious activism and great volunteer energy that all of us – the coalition of organizers and their respective organizations, the speakers and participants – contributed because we saw a great need for the people in this country to confront the simple fact that torture is never acceptable or legal, it is always illegal, immoral, and wrong, and it is a war crime. And that we are responsible for stopping the war crimes of our government. We give our sincere thanks to all who participated.