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“Amidst the Chime of the Razor Wire”: Narrating Poetic Justice in Guantanamo Bay

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I. The Poetics of Justice

Amidst a bevy of complicated legal arguments for and against the (il)legal detainment of the alleged enemy combatants in Guantanamo Bay, a poetic strand of narrative has emerged which defies easy interpretation. Seventeen poets give voice to the experience of torture, trauma, prison life, and hope in attorney/editor Marc Falkoff's 2007 anthology *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*. The writers' voices ring out amidst what in former prisoner Mozzam Begg calls "the chime of the razor wire" (301) in his 2006 memoir. While poetry transposes to a new register claims to emotion, politics, and trauma from their baseline articulation in legal terminology, such expression cannot be divorced from the law. Yet poetry presents a polemical challenge to the idea of voice, non-traditional testimony, and narrative both as a genre of literature and a record of events. In particular, voice must be considered in both a political sense (as the opposite of silence) and in a literary sense (as in the author's style and diction). The Guantanamo poets invite readers to explore the ways such aesthetics form perceptions of identity, creating a literary forum which replaces the traditional courtroom. The narrative introduction Falkoff provides of each poet's work suggest interpretations of their words that serve his legal argument. Questions of testimony, aesthetics, and ethics blur together as a result. The multi-voiced collection of poetry as a whole ultimately reaches toward a sense of poetic justice in a world where legal justice might not come to pass. Since he has not had his day in federal court, Marc Falkoff presents his clients' poems as witness testimony in the court of public (literary) opinion.

II. Poetry on the Margins: Reading Through Paratext

As just one representative example of the many poets in the collection, Begg's identity as poet challenges his identity as an enemy combatant, as assigned by the U.S. government. Perhaps it is for that reason that Falkoff writes in his introduction to the 2007 collection that the Pentagon advised him that poetry "'presents a special risk' to national security because of its 'content and format'" (4). While the aforementioned Begg poem does not make it into the volume, twenty-two other poems by seventeen detainees (including another authored by Begg) do. They range in length from three lines to four pages, and feature provocative titles such as "Lions in a Cage," "The Truth," and "Humiliated in the Shackles," as well as "Ode to the Sea," "To My Father," and "Homeward Bound." Whether provocative or meditative, these titles suggest what the poems do: humanize their authors. Yet to assign an identity other than "enemy combatant" to the Guantanamo detainees seriously injures the claim of the U.S. government to work outside the Geneva Conventions to hold prisoners without trial and to impose what many allege is torture as methods of interrogation. It is precisely for this reason that Falkoff solicits, translates, and publishes his clients' work. In

doing so, he also destabilizes the easy identification of a group of imprisoned individuals as enemy combatants.

The poetics of judicial representation intersect with the detainees' poetry in the paratextual elements of the Guantanamo collection, thus challenging the notion that one might consider testimony and aesthetics in cleanly separate realms. Seen from this vantage point, Falkoff's introductory biography notes are paratextual, and as such, fulfill the function of the paratext, as Genette Gerard states it: surrounding and prolonging the main text. Gerard theorizes the paratext, noting it is comprised of ancillary elements of a book outside the main text itself, including notes, title pages, and physical elements like paper, print size, and ink. Falkoff's notes both present the poetry, as Gerard would say, and make it present (261). The notes expand upon the poetry in the collection; without the notes, introduction, and conclusion, the volume would only contain thirty-two pages of verse. The notes—both to introduce the whole collection, and especially to introduce each author—appear drafted to lengthen the book. Falkoff takes great care to manipulate one particular traditional paratextual apparatus: the biography note. These notes extend the traditional biography, which might contain an author's hometown, educational institution, and previously published titles. Their frankness and emotional appeals may appear surprising at first glance; yet they frame the poetry in a way that suggests that audience reception of testimonial truth is key to Falkoff's literary project.

The brisk nature of the notes are almost poetic in their staccato delivery, even as they contextualize and complicate readers' initial perceptions of the poets. For example, Falkoff introduces Juman Al Dossari as "a thirty-three-year-old Baharini national." He goes on to note Al Dossari's "physical and psychological abuses," writing that the detainee has "tried to kill himself twelve times while in prison." However, Falkoff does not merely report that Al Dossari is a father who has been subject to abuse so severe he desires to take his own life. Instead, he layers on additional details which manipulates the reader's sympathy. He amends the line about Al Dossari being a Baharini national by noting in the same sentence that he is the "father of a young daughter." He elaborates on his suicide attempts by saying that "on one occasion, he was found by his lawyer, hanging by his neck and bleeding from a gash on his arm" (33). Falkoff's ad hominem appeal to the reader thus crystallizes: Al Dossari shifts from enemy combatant in the reader's imagination, occupying a more primary role as a human being—and as a victim. Small details about his role in society (as a citizen and a father) and who attempted violence against himself underscore Falkoff's thesis. Thus, brief introductions to each poet change the reading experience, pre-disposing the reader toward sympathy and foregrounding a space for imagined preconceptions to pivot toward new ideas.

Falkoff's introductions provide a threshold to the text. They invite the reader into the poetry in a way that influences its reception. For example, as the reader works through Al Dossari's "Death Poem," he cannot help but recall the mention of a bloody suicide on the previous page as he reads: "Take my blood. / Take my death shroud and / The remnants of my body" (34). As Genette notes in his seminal piece on paratext, these elements of a book are "zone[s] between text and off-text... zone[s] not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that... is at the service of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2). Al Dossari goes on in this poem to command an unknown presence to take photographs of his corpse to show the world so that it can see his "innocent soul," his "wasted, sinless soul," which he notes has "suffered at the hands of the 'protectors of peace'" (34). By the time the reader reaches these lines at the end of this fifteen line poem, he is, in many ways, reading supporting details to a thesis that Falkoff has already presented. Falkoff's provides an interpretive lens for the reader to allow Genette's "more pertinent reading," thus maximizing the "zone of transition" between poems and converting it into a "zone of transaction" (2) between reader and editor.

III. Zones of Poetical Justice

Falkoff's heavy-handed introductory style complicates the notion of aesthetics and witness testimony, as his primary claim is to one of lawyerly argument in a court of public opinion since he cannot represent his clients in a court of law. My position thus differs from that of Elizabeth Weber's, who argues that Falkoff is even denied a sense of "literary justice" since "in spite of (literally) prohibitive obstacles," the collection "tries to testify to cases in which, in the name of the American people, both the articulation of legal justice and the articulation of literary justice were (and in some of them continue to be) denied, silence being imposed on both" (424). By pairing literary—or, what Martha Nussbaum calls poetic—justice (120) with the idea of a trial in the court of public opinion, the "silencing of legal justice" need not go "hand in hand here with the silencing of literary justice" (Weber 425). It is true that in a formal court of law the detainees' arguments have not been heard, and that the Pentagon severely restricts the access to the majority of poems, and to Arabic originals. However, Falkoff's paratextual and rhetorical moves as an editor mitigate some of these disadvantages in a way that allow the poets' voices to be heard, however imperfectly, and for the sense of dissonance they cultivate in their poetry to register on a national—even international—level.

When considering poetic justice, it is important to look at the way the term functions both as a way to reach toward the sort of literary justice that Weber articulates—and as a literary trope that has currency in popular culture. Poetic

justice, as a term, is used broadly as a descriptor for a diluted form of irony, whereby a character in a given literary work gets what s/he deserves after bad behavior. Nussbaum writes that poetic justice requires those in judicial positions to grow a sense of “fancy and sympathy” cultivated through reading literature and thinking in a non-linear way (121). Yet the term poetic justice dates back many years before Nussbaum’s theory; it has a deep history, originating as “poetical justice” in the seventeenth century in Thomas Rymer’s *The tragedies of the last age* (OED). Poetic justice is thus borne out of a theorization of the dramatic form of tragedy and in some ways cannot divorce itself from its tragic implications. Rymer compares what he calls historical justice to the poetical, noting that while historical justice might rest, “poetical justice could not be so content. It would require that the satisfaction be compleat and full, e’re the Malefactor goes off the Stage” (26). In essence, he suggests that where the more general concept of justice stops—or, perhaps, fails—poetical justice takes over, and, as he notes, leaves nothing to “God Almighty, and another World” (26). Thus, embedded in the term are the concepts of tragedy and extra-judiciary reparation.

The implications of arbitrating a sense of poetic justice through a book of verse and its related paratextual elements, including editors’ notes and introductions, is admittedly difficult. The concept of poetical justice becomes more layered as the years pass, and it begins to lose its strict tie to the tragic genre, moving into fiction and digital media. Indeed, the idea of poetic justice has a strong foothold in the realm of story-telling in general. Yenna Wu theorizes the ways in which such work might be considered as a pathway to justice which precludes many prisoners in their lifetimes:

For those who are unjustly detained, incarcerated, tortured, or soon to be put to death, and who might have no recourse to justice in their lifetime, the only vindication they can hope for is that the truth of their suffering will eventually be known to other people, be recorded in history, and not to be forgotten. (20)

Reading the Guantanamo detainees’ poetry through Wu’s understanding of what is forgetting and recording endows the poems of the Guantanamo bay detainees with particular historical and legal value. And it is precisely through a sense of story-telling, in verse, that the Guantanamo poets begin to redefine their own legal identities in the public arena—and also record their suffering, and aesthetic experiences, in ways that both function as witness testimony and a sense of recorded history.

One might consider: what does it mean to tell one’s story through verse, and to what degree does it legally help a Guantanamo detainee to do so? Joseph Slaughter considers a related point when he writes of working through literature to justice: “The right to narration is not merely the right to tell one’s story; it is the right to control representation” (92). Thus, one might likewise consider that

drafting poetry initially has less to do with legal rights and more to do with controlling the narrative of a detainee's own prison experience—and, in a related sense, a detainee's own identity outside the official United States designation of enemy combatant. In this way, through the controlled representation of recorded history—and through the Guantanamo detainees' poetry—there exists a break with what Judith Butler calls a frame of war. Frames of war seek “to contain, convey and determine what is seen” and yet, in their reproducibility, break from context to context (10). Butler concludes that “even though... the poetry can[not] free anyone from prison, stop a bomb or, indeed, reverse the course of the war, they [...] provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice” (11). The paratext of Falkoff's book helps control the representation of the Guantanamo detainees—and, in doing so, breaks with the frame of war the U.S. government assigns the detainees through their enemy combatant status, working toward Butler's sense of a greater national or global call for justice which might transcend the Guantanamo case.

IV. Prison Poetry as Witness Testimony and Identity Marker

Investigating witness testimony via poetry requires a careful parsing of images, metaphors, and literary language. To begin, the “chime of the razor wire,” of which Begg writes, serves as a threshold to the active reading process which allows readers to reframe conventional narratives around the sort of testimony which many of the Guantanamo detainees profess via verse. British citizen and released detainee Moazzam Begg describes the sounds of the razor wires scraping against each other in metaphorical terms as he recalls moments of quiet after sundown in Guantanamo Bay. He writes in his memoir *Enemy Combatant* (2006) that he could see the gold and red sunset through coils of razor wire. But the noise the wire made when the sea breeze pushed it against the nearby barbed wire impacted him most; it sounded like wind chimes. He writes that he listened to it for three months before he was inspired to draft a poem: “Ensnared within this steel quagmire, / Our view holds little to admire, / So to the darkness we retire / Amidst the chime of the razor wire” (Begg 301). The aesthetic experience Begg describes is noteworthy in both its focus and scope. Despite the meager conditions of his holding cell, and the numerous complaints he could allege against his captors, he instead focused on reproducing the emotional experience of mistaking clinking wire for a wind chime. While he feels “ensnared” and has little praise for the view, the juxtaposition of the pleasant sounding “chime” against the words “razor wire” opens a wider discussion of aesthetics amidst traumatic experience. The simple *aaaa* rhyme scheme may be an aesthetic move or a memory device; either way, it underscores the last words in each line: quagmire, admire, retire, wire. The words correspond in pairs: the negative associations of quagmire are

complicated by the positive admire, while the pleasant sounding retire takes on a sharper tone in the context of the word wire. While these four lines only represent what Begg recalls of the final stanza of a longer, presumably lost work, they beg the questions: can one seriously consider the aesthetics of poetry written under duress? And further, is it an abrogation of ethical responsibility to move beyond the testimonial for the purposes of law and politics and to move instead into the realm of art?

The implicit assumption that underwrites these questions is that witness testimony and poetry function on different planes of composition and understanding. Begg challenges this assumption, as do other scholars in human rights and literary arts. For example, Wu raises the question of aesthetics in a chapter of the 2011 volume *Human Rights, Suffering, and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*. She asks, specifically: “Is it appropriate for us to look for ‘aesthetic’ in the victims’ suffering?” (35). Whereas others might cite a sense of perverseness in a reader taking pleasure in a writer’s pain, Wu argues that negating the aesthetic dimension of prison writing subsequently negates the prisoner’s identity as an author. In favor of diverse approaches to prison literature, she notes that ignoring the writer’s voice and literary choices seems to suggest that the writers do not care about stylistic choices, when they may well have meditated on word choice and metaphors (36). The idea of witness testimony and questions of aesthetics cannot be divorced; doing so creates a false dichotomy between the two. Poets such as Begg use a recognized art form to bridge a gap between human experience and linguistic expression which simultaneously blurs together considerations of testimony and aesthetics and also creates a sense of dissonance. Dissonance, like silence, often represents an author’s reach toward a new kind of communication; neither silence nor dissonance close doors. Instead, they open them, often unexpectedly by forcing the reader to reconsider a certain point or idea. In the case of the razor wire and chimes, for example, Begg implores his readers through the dissonance of unpleasant image and pleasant sound to reconsider the aesthetic dimensions of prison life. Falkoff capitalizes on this sense of dissonance surrounding the identities of the detainees in particular, pushing it to its limits as a form of communication and advocacy.

The difficulty of the conditions at Guantanamo are often described in terms of the sights and sounds of the detainees’ past lives, creating a sense of dissonance in the way that torture is described in terms of the everyday objects and experiences of a civilian. In poems such as Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost’s “Cup Poem 2,” which he scratched on the side of a Styrofoam cup with his fingernails, the reader sees such an example of dissonance of detainee life/everyday life within the image of handcuffs and a bracelet in the poem. In its entirety, the poem reads: “Handcuffs befit brave young men, / Bangles are for spinsters or pretty young ladies” (35). The handcuff is immediately recognizable

as a prison symbol and as a method of control, while at the same time, another metal piece which encircles as wrist is presented as a decorative piece of jewelry, potentially worn in high society. The images are in tension with one another. The idea that handcuffs might force a “brave young m[a]n” to recall the bracelet of a “pretty young lady” appears disquieting at first, but the reverse—that a bracelet might hold traces of the idea of handcuffs—presents a much more uncomfortable image. “Cup Poem 2,” deceptively simple in its composition, provides a new way of reading the transition from everyday life to life in Guantanamo in the fluidity of the image of metal a handcuff/metal bracelet. One sort of metal circle is meant for a degenerate, while the other functions as a symbol of femininity. The poem comes to no grander conclusions and leaves the reader to ponder the dissonance of the image. Thus, dissonance becomes the message.

The careful reader’s attention to this call to identify moments of tension and anxiety in the imagery of the poems opens new ways of considering the greater dissonance at hand: the dissonance between the almost egalitarian genre of poetry and the idea that the authors are enemy combatants. Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost also writes “Two Fragments,” one of which is written from the perspective of his son. He imagines his son waiting for him to come home “eating the bread of Eid with [his] tears.” He concludes: “Why am I deprived of the love of my father? / Why am I so oppressed?” (36). Dost presents, through his child’s imagined plea, an image of him as a loving father—one which creates a counter-narrative against the idea of his identity as what Gargi Bhattacharyya would call a “dangerous brown man” (12). The justification that American politicians claim as verisimilar for holding detainees, in general, without trial or judicial due process during the post 9/11 period depends upon the phlegmatic, often passive, adoption of the idea that “the US is under unprecedented attack and that these unfortunate men, women and children are imprisoned to protect America and its citizens.” Condoleezza Rice, for example, exhorts that such detainment for the sense of public safety finds itself “the first responsibility of government”—even as she admits that the actual detainment of individuals, particularly brown men, may be based on facts that are “as much a matter of belief as of knowledge” (Bhattacharyya 120). While the contours of this particular justification may seem, at first, excursive, they provide the perfidious basis for the legal argument that Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions regarding the humane treatment of prisoners of war need not apply to the detainees at Guantanamo. The men at Guantanamo are not protected and instead are regarded as enemy combatants, a label which supports Bhattacharyya’s description of the label of the “dangerous brown man” which Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost’s poem about his father identity challenges.

The sense of identity of the Guantanamo poets relies on the rejection of principles of the Geneva Conventions which would entitle members, or supposed

members, of al Qaeda and/or the Taliban to prisoner of war (POW) status. When faced with a critical decision regarding the determination of potential detainees' identities, and the related protections and rights assigned to them as a result, George W. Bush articulated a rationale which deprives the detainees of their identities as members of consenting states to the Geneva Convention. Essentially, as neither al-Qaeda nor the Taliban are high contracting parties to the Geneva Convention, the president's Office of Legal Counsel determined that the convention rules do not apply to members of these groups (Shapiro 230–231). They are labeled, instead, as enemy combatants. In his 2002 memo, William H. Taft delineates George W. Bush's rationale for determining that both detainees from al-Qaeda and the Taliban "are unlawful combatants" for a variety of reasons which disqualify them from obtaining POW status. Among those reasons, he cites that both groups flout "the laws and customs of war" and that they do not wear uniforms or carry guns openly (315). He further specifies: "The mere act of engaging in hostilities as an unlawful combatant is, without more, a violation of the laws and customs of war" and that "military commissions may try and punish individuals for any war crimes" (316). However, legal scholar Jeffrey Shapiro notes that despite legal loopholes which allow for the exclusion of rights, there might exist an ethical imperative to consider the rights of the detainees that critics of the Bush decision have yet to consider fully (233). In his response to Shapiro, legal scholar Stephen Gillers notes that the primary concern with Bush's decision involves not just legal issues—but the risk of misidentification of members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban (237). In essence, though they disagree on the specificities of the law, the two lawyers present the idea that the United States should consider both the ethical imperatives of detaining both members and mistaken, non-members of al Qaeda and/or the Taliban.

Advocacy and dissonance become important to the project of literary representation when a courtroom is not available because literature appeals to the court of public opinion, and poetry becomes a form of witness testimony which resists easy dismissal. While Falkoff also used several other methods to speak about the detainees—including short videos on YouTube, opinion pieces in newspapers, and a series of one-minute lectures—his efforts were allegedly scorned by the Bush administration (Falkoff 12). Falkoff asserts that poetry provides a unique forum because poems are "tool[s] for bridging space and cultural distance" such that empathy might flourish (3-4). The aesthetic choices that poets make—such as Begg does when describing the chimes of the razor wire—appeal to the senses beyond the intellect, using sight, sound, touch, and taste in a way which invites readers to locate the human experience inside the jail cells that the detainees narrate. Erin Trapp writes that "the uniqueness of [Falkoff's] collection lies... in asking us how to read the writing of the enemy and in the challenge it thereby poses to received ideas about the testimonial function

in both 9/11 and human rights literature.” She goes on to close-read the Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost’s poem “Two Fragments,” and then questions what it means to define the enemy combatant instead as a “lyric subject.” She notes that in redefining the enemy combatant, one begins to “reject common images of the detainee as a victim of torture, on the one hand, or on the other, as a fundamentalist terrorist.” In close-reading other poems and suggesting that all the poets reach toward this goal, this study has considered the ways that Trapp’s claims may be extended. Specifically, the poets invite readers to reconsider their image not only by writing verse but in the way they write it: by evoking a sense of aesthetic dissonance in their lines of poetry.

Several other poems also bring legal concerns to light, illustrating the way that poetry serves as a form of open communication; a way to challenge their identity labels; a form of witness testimony; and a way to cope, through writing, with the conditions in which prisoners are kept without trial. In an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (2005), Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, one of the poets published in Falkoff’s book, for example, says poetry kept him from “losing his sanity” and that he wrote more than 25,000 lines in his cell, scratching lines of verse with his fingernail into Styrofoam cups. His brother, Badruzamman Badr elaborates on his response in the same article: “Poetry was our support and psychological uplift. Many people lost their minds there. I know 40 or 50 prisoners who are mad. But we took refuge in our minds.” Thus, in addition to using poetry to reach out to audiences far from Guantanamo Bay, the prisoners use it to maintain a sense of intellectual vivacity in the prison itself, in much the same way that prison literature, outside the Guantanamo context, has functioned in the United States over several decades.

The Guantanamo poets similarly raise pleas for justice in their verse, which functions as witness testimony in Falkoff’s larger legal and literary argument for their rights to fair treatment. Their poetry also becomes imbued with searing critiques of the socio-political system which detains them in the ways that Shapiro and Gillers suggest. In his poem “The Truth,” Emad Abdullah Hassan writes that his “song will expose the damned oppression, / And bring the system to collapse.” Among the accusations he alleges include the assertion that “A day here is as two months at home,” which suggests that the detainment ages the detainees. He calls the Americans “tyrants” who are “fully-equipped” and who “stand unmoved in the face of Light” (Falkoff 45). He calls the United States “a home for hypocrites” and implies that the country is full of “evil and oppression” (46). As Roland Bleiker writes in *Aesthetics and World Politics*: “...poetry can be a form of socio-political critique... It pierces through worn-out metaphors and ruptures tissues of power. It names what had no name before” (141). Certainly Abdullah Hassan’s words attempt to name what those outside Guantanamo cannot see, hear, or name. Building on this momentum and taking truth as a central tenet,

Osama Abu Kabir protests his own innocence in his poem “Is it True?” His verse brings Gillers’ fear of misidentification to fruition. Falkoff writes in his introduction to “Is it True?” that Abu Kabir is being detained for having worn a Casio digital watch, “a brand supposedly favored by members of al Qaeda because some models may be used as bomb detonators” (49). Abu Kabir writes: “We are innocent, here, we’ve committed no crime.” He goes on to plead with the rest of the world: “Set me free, set us free, if anywhere still / Justice and compassion remain in this world!” (Falkoff 50). In their work, Abu Kabir and Abdullah Hassan both poetically illustrate the problems inherent in classing men as “unlawful combatants” without trial. While they presumably did not know as they wrote whether or not their poetry would be published, Falkoff sees poetic expression as their only recourse or form of protest that is legible to the outside world.

Poetry not only evokes a sense of what it is like to live in Guantanamo; it also, at times, reaches toward legalistic heights, employing expressly jural language. In his poem, Adnan Farah Abdul Latiff uses such rhetoric to challenge Americans, writing three times: “They are criminals.” He also claims: “They are artists of torture / They are artists of pain and fatigue / They are artists of insults and humiliation” (Falkoff 52). In his introduction to Abdul Latiff’s work, Falkoff writes that Pakistani forces took him into custody after 9/11 and that the U.S. paid a \$5,000 bounty for turning him over. He has allegedly been kept in an “open-air kennel exposed to the elements” (Falkoff 51). As a result of what he deems inhumane conditions, Abdul Latiff uses the law to issue a critique of those who detain him: “They do not respect the law... They leave us in prison for years, uncharged, / Because we are Muslims” (Falkoff 52). In his poem “Terrorist 2003,” Martin Mubanga picks up on similar themes—but with more anger. He writes: “American justice, American pigs / American soldiers, American wigs. / Yes I’m feeling angry, yes I’m feeling pissed, / An’ it’s about time that the JIF got dissed” (Falkoff 56). Here, the JIF refers to the joint interrogation facility at Guantanamo, and later Mubanga thus singles out interrogation and American justice as corrupt in his rhythmic verse. He further brings forward his own misidentification as a key reason he is detained, in what Falkoff identifies as his rap-influenced style (55): “Now me’s coming with these lyrics from Guantanamo B, / In my prison cell down by the sea, / For hard-core detainees like you an’ me, / Terrorist 2003, / So called. Yeah that’s me!” (Falkoff 57). Amidst the harsh accusations of American injustice, Mubanga manages to poke fun at his own label (“Terrorist 2003 / So called”) as he adopts an American genre of poetry to carry his words.

When readers reach toward an analysis of aesthetics, they begin to recognize that in its cultivation of images and dissonance, poetry goes beyond traditional spoken or prose testimony in ways that productively advance conversations of human rights. While the image of a poet drafting verse may exist

in tension with the idea of the detainees as criminals so dangerous they must be sent to the highest security prison the United States commands, their role as prisoners writing verse is not unprecedented. Prison literature, generally speaking, has a long history in the United States, while literary critic Sophia McClennan writes that cultural representations of any kind, such as books or photos, are the true “battleground through which communities define themselves and their relationship to others” (37). When readers consider poetry and its dissonance in the Guantanamo verse as a cultural representation, they move beyond testimony in poetry and reach toward a sense of identity for the detainees. Meanwhile, when reader further reach toward the identity of a poet—like Begg, who heard wind chimes instead of the tapping of razor and barbed wire—they begin to see that identity is defined, in some ways, by the literary voice that would choose to express such an experience via such particular words, images, sounds, and syntax.

IV. Conclusions

Among the many points to consider when reading the Guantanamo poems is the currency they have had in popular culture, not just academic and political circles. One must consider if Falkoff’s case is viable, or if poetic justice has any traction as a conceit outside the pages of Falkoff’s edited collection. One measure of popular opinion comes through book reviews, in publications such as the *New York Times Book Review* supplement. Reviewer Dan Chiasson largely rejected any aesthetic consideration of the poetry, writing in a 2007 edition of the supplement that reading Falkoff’s volume “is a bizarre experience,” in part because he was aware that the poems were heavily vetted through censors and translated by non-literary security experts. He also posed a deeper philosophical question, which touches on some of Wu and McClennan’s main points: can anyone really speak through art? He praises Falkoff and his efforts to promote the project but slams the poems, writing that a poem of Mubanga’s “possesses exactly zero literary interest” and that the poems are vague and conventional, mimicking “the kind of things sad or frustrated people have always written.” He accuses Sami Al Haj of writing like “a teenage sonneteer, not the victim of nearly unimaginable cruelty.” Chiasson largely misses the message of Falkoff’s collection, and his reaction may represent a larger set of opinions about the poems: the effort is valiant, but the poems are illegible to the standard American audience. It may be true that censorship and translation affect the quality of the verses in the collection. Yet an equally large part, however, may come in the difficulty inherent in conceiving of and appreciating poetry from an foreign culture and tradition which may not have close ties with Anglo-Saxon, or even Western, poetic tropes or ideas.

Chiasson’s own response to the poems reveals a sense of dissonance within his interpretation: he can praise the messengers but not the message because it does not fit neatly into his script for suffering. There is still work to be

done if Falkoff and/or others seek to reach toward Butler's more global call for justice through the poetry and other forms of breaking with frames of war. Such efforts may come to fruition through dissonance, if readers and critics consider their analysis of the Guantanamo detainees' poetry in a broader context. It is this sense of relationship which Falkoff seeks to establish and which he promotes in his quest for justice for the enemy combatants-cum-poets who complicate the narrative of terror and war with their verse.

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